

Uneasy Alliance

Jayne Ann Krentz

"I'm not leaving without the truth," Torr stated quietly.

"And if you don't happen to like the truth or believe it?" she retorted.

"Then I probably won't leave at all. At least, not without taking you with me."

Her mouth went dry. "Torr, you can't do this."

"Do what? All I'm asking for is an explanation."

"I've given you one! As well as an apology for breaking our date. What more do you think you're entitled to, anyway? Torr, I don't owe you anything!"

"Are you in love with him?"

"In love with who?" she yelped furiously.

"The man in the photograph."

"No, I am not in love with Ward!" Abby shut her eyes in self-disgust as she realized how much she'd been goaded into saying.

"Ward?"

"Never mind. Just leave, Torr. Please. I have to get out of here."

"I'd like a last name to pin on him," Torr remarked placidly, studying the photo.

"Well, you can wait until hell freezes over."

He glanced up, his gaze still and strangely frightening. "Don't you know," Torr uttered very softly, "that the outer reaches of hell are already frozen? Hell is a very cold place, Abby. Not a warm one. Cold and infinitely lonely."

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UNEASY ALLIANCE

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ONE



It was during the third class in the art of Japanese flower arrangement

that Torr Latimer finally permitted himself to acknowledge exactly what it

was about Abby Lyndon's designs that stirred his curiosity. They made

him wonder if she would bring the same impulsive, warm abandon to a

man's bed that she brought to her floral creations.

More than that, he reflected wryly as he carefully added a thistle stalk to

his own spare design, Abby's arrangements made him wonder about other

things too: such as how she would look sitting across from him at the

breakfast table the morning after he had made love to her. His instincts

told him she would appear as charmingly cheerful and disarrayed as that

design of ferns and jonquils she had put together the week before.

He eyed the long honey-colored hair that was loosely arranged in a

topknot. The fact that she was wearing sleek black jeans and a black

sweater vaguely amused him. She had worn the black leather trench coat

again this evening and the entire outfit was reminiscent of military

commando attire. But nothing Abby wore could camouflage the bright,

vividly impulsive woman beneath. He wondered why she bothered to try.

Hell, he thought grimly. It had been too

long since he'd been with a
woman. But that wasn't the real problem.
The real problem was that it
seemed like forever since he'd actually
been thoroughly drawn in,
mystified by a woman. When a man was
facing forty he had no excuse for
not knowing the difference between a
passing attraction and something
far more risky. Torr knew the difference.
And to think he'd signed up for these
classes in flower arrangement

because the discipline and austerity of the Japanese way with flowers had

appealed to his controlled, severe way of dealing with life. It had been a

philosophical whim to take the course.

Who could have guessed that the most interesting aspect of the class

would be the least disciplined, least austere student in the room, he asked

himself. Abby Lyndon would never master the highly formal floral design if

she repeated the four-week class all year long. It had first amused and

then fascinated Torr to watch Abby's chaotic, blithe arrangements grow

and grow until there was nothing of simplicity or moderation left. She was

the despair of the instructor, Mrs.

Yamamoto, but Torr found himself

enthralled and recklessly captivated.

Tonight he wanted to take Abby Lyndon home and do all sorts of

intriguing, foolhardy things. The realization made him strangely restless.

He eyed the exuberant design of Queen Anne's lace and daffodils taking

shape under her hands as she worked industriously at the table next to

his. She had exciting hands, Torr thought. Long, delicate fingers tipped with graceful, oval nails that had been painted the color of carmine tulips.

He watched her add a daffodil at an unstudied angle and lifted an eyebrow in silent surprise.

There was something different about the way she was creating her arrangement tonight. Something too intent and almost desperate about

the way she was stuffing the flowers into the plastic holder. If he hadn't

been watching her so closely for the past few classes he might not have

noticed.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw a daffodil stalk break as she stabbed

it too quickly into the plastic.

"Oh, nuts." The exclamation was a hiss of disgust as Abby tossed aside

the broken daffodil. Her brows drew together in a fierce frown as she

contemplated the unbalanced creation in front of her. She shot a

surreptitious glance at the beautifully simple design taking shape at the

next table. Torr Latimer's materials never accidentally snapped or broke

under his careful, precise fingers. She chewed her lip morosely as she

studied his work.

He looked up as if he knew she were watching him and a cool, reserved

smile curved the corner of his rather grim mouth. Everything about Torr

Latimer was a bit grim, Abby decided abruptly. Perhaps that was what

had been bothering her about him for the past few weeks. There was a

remote, reserved aura about him that made her wary. It hinted at strength

and willpower, she told herself. Not bad qualities in a man. It was just that

she was always going to be careful around strong, self-willed men. She'd

had enough of masculine resoluteness and aggression to last her a lifetime.

"I have some more daffodils if you'd like

a replacement," Torr

murmured gently in the dark, gravelly voice that always made her think of

a riverbed.

"You always seem to have extra materials and I never have enough,"

Abby observed regretfully. "Mrs. Yamamoto says I still haven't learned

restraint." She surveyed the conglomeration of daffodils and Queen Anne's

lace in front of her gloomily. "It's just that my arrangements always seem

to run out of control."

"They have a charm all their own."

Abby smiled in quick gratitude before frowning once more at her

flowers. "That's very kind of you, but it should be obvious by now that I

don't seem to be getting the hang of this particular style of floral design.

You're a natural at it, though. How can you resist the temptation to add

more and more materials?"

Torr shrugged, his eyes on the elegantly

simple and vital design he had created. "Perhaps I'm just not as naturally adventurous as you are. Do you want another daffodil?" He picked one up from the small pile of floral materials on his table and extended it to her.

Abby looked at the flower lying across his palm and experienced an unexpected wave of curiosity and uneasiness. The hand that held the flower was a strong square one, capable of crushing far more than a

daffodil. But the flower appeared quite at home and protected by the blunt

fingers. Why did she hesitate to take it from him?

Annoyed with herself for the odd reluctance, Abby reached out quickly

and snapped the small gift from Torr. As she did so, she found herself

meeting his remote amber gaze. It wasn't the first time she had met his

eyes but the small confrontations didn't get any less disturbing with

repetition. That grim watchful

expression aroused her sense of caution at

the same time as it fascinated her. Abby wondered what secrets lay at the

bottom of the intelligent amber pools. A man like this would have a few

secrets.

She was getting fanciful, she chided herself angrily. Her own little secret

was probably making her oversensitive to nonexistent secrets in others.

"Thanks," she said. As she turned back to her arrangement, she

continued with a determined chattiness,
"I'm sure Mrs. Yamamoto will

say the last thing I need is another
daffodil in this thing, but it seems to

me it's just crying out for one extra bit of
yellow. What do you think?"

"What you do with flowers looks like
you," he said calmly. "And

therefore I'm inclined to give it what you
think it needs. By all means, add

some more yellow."

"Very diplomatic," Abby shot back dryly
as she eyed her design,

wondering where to position the daffodil. "You know very well Mrs.

Yamamoto is going to shake her head over my creation and then tell the

whole class that you've created another masterpiece!"

He shrugged, not bothering to deny the remark. They both knew it was

true. "Mrs. Yamamoto understands and appreciates discipline and

restraint. She's naturally going to be biased in favor of my arrangements."

Abby's mouth curved wryly. "Meaning I

lack those things?"

"Perhaps. I think I envy you."

She glanced up, surprised. "You're serious, aren't you?" She shook her

head quickly as if to negate the question.

"Scratch that. Of course you're

serious. You're always serious."

"You seem to understand me rather well," he said ruefully.

"I've been watching you work with flowers for three weeks now," Abby

said, smiling. "I suppose I've learned

something about you."

"Really?" He looked genuinely intrigued. "What have you learned?"

Across the busy classroom Mrs. Yamamoto was occupied with other students. It was obvious to Abby that the instructor wasn't going to appear out of nowhere to provide an opportune interruption. Abby was going to be stuck answering the question she had elicited. Torr was watching her with a cool expectancy that made it impossible to retreat.

How had she gotten herself into this?

"Oh, not all that much, to tell you the truth. I was just being a bit

flippant. Don't take me seriously."

"As you've already pointed out, it's impossible for me to take things any

other way. Tell me what you think you've learned about me, Abby."

"Fortune-tellers get paid good money for this kind of work, you know!"

"I'll pay you."

"For heaven's sake!" she exclaimed,

startled at the deliberate way he

said that. "I was only kidding. Look, I really haven't learned all that much

about you. It's just that I get the impression you're, well, rather cautious

and conservative about life in general.

You probably don't take a lot of

senseless risks or go crazy on weekends or do wild, undisciplined things.

That's all." He was just like his designs, she thought privately.

Concentrated, elegant, restrained. But darned if she was going to say that

part aloud!

Torr nodded his head as she rattled off her description. His black hair

with its faint trace of gray suited the dark, controlled strength she sensed

in him, Abby thought. The thickness of the black lashes, which framed the

amber eyes, were the only soft touches amid the harsh angles and planes

of his face. He was dressed, as he usually was, in a manner as reserved and

dark as his personality. A conservatively cut shirt in a somber pattern of

dense gray and indigo stripes, and a pair of expensive well-cut gray

trousers outlined a solidly built, utterly masculine body.

He would crush a woman in bed, Abby found herself thinking suddenly

and then knew a fierce, highly uncomfortable awareness as her

imagination insisted on visualizing what it would be like to be the woman

Torr Latimer overwhelmed in bed. Good grief! What was the matter with

her? She had more than enough problems

of her own tonight without

indulging in flights of erotic fantasy.

Beneath her agitated fingers, the daffodil snapped.

She sighed and said, "Mrs. Yamamoto is probably going to kick me out

of class."

Torr watched her curiously as she hastily deposited the second broken

daffodil into a brown paper bag, the same bag into which she had stuffed

the first. "Do you think you can hide the

remains that way? Mrs.

Yamamoto is the kind of instructor who can account for every missing

daffodil."

"I know and now I've got two bodies in the bag," Abby replied. "Oh,

well, there's only one more class session. She probably won't do anything

more drastic than shake her head in that sad little way she has. I think

she's accepted the fact that I'm not going to make it big in the art of

Japanese flower arrangement. I heard her encouraging you to show one of your designs at the festival next month, though. Going to do it?"

"No."

Abby stared at him. "Of course you are. How could you refuse? Your

work is fantastic," she went on with impulsive warmth. "Mrs. Yamamoto

wouldn't be encouraging you if she didn't think you'd do very well."

"I'm just not interested, I suppose. I took the class more out of curiosity

than anything else. I don't intend to take up flower arranging as a full-time hobby."

Abby's shock was reflected in her blue eyes. "That's ridiculous. How can you say that? Why should you turn your back on something you do so well? You have a talent and I refuse to let you ignore it."

His expression of sardonic inquiry made her realize how recklessly she had spoken. It certainly wasn't any of her business whether or not he

pursued his flower-arranging skills. She ought to have learned by now that

her natural streak of impulsiveness was not one of her greatest virtues.

"You're going to refuse to let me ignore it?" Torr queried interestedly, as

if the notion of another person telling him what he could or could not do

was entirely new to him.

"It would crush Mrs. Yamamoto if you didn't enter the competition,"

Abby pointed out.

"She'll survive." He waited, clearly expecting further arguments.

"You'd probably get a lot of personal satisfaction out of winning a prize for your talents," she added brightly.

"I doubt it." He continued to wait.

The fact that he fully anticipated another push from her annoyed Abby.

That waiting, patient quality in him could be unsettling. He was probably

just giving her a chance to try dictating to him so that he could smoothly

squash the small act of feminine tyranny.
Something told her that Torr

Latimer was not the kind of man any
woman would ever successfully

dominate. But the acceptance of his
obvious strength of will was not

nearly as intimidating as it probably
should have been. Try as she might,

it was difficult remaining wary of the
man. It was more fun to tease him.

Her rashness was going to get her into a
great deal of trouble someday,

Abby told herself and then promptly

forgot the warning, just as she always did. Her mood turned to one of mischief.

"I have an idea. Why don't you design the arrangement and I'll enter it under my name?"

"You'd cheat?" He didn't sound disapproving, merely intrigued.

"Oh, for pity's sake. You really don't have much of a sense of humor, do you? It was a joke."

"I'm sorry. I'm a little slow on the uptake sometimes."

She cast him a disparaging glance.
"Don't try the humble, self-effacing

bit with me," she advised heartily. "I
know very well you're not at all slow
on the uptake. You're just more
interested in the subtle than in the
obvious."

"Something else you've learned from
watching me design flower
arrangements?"

"I suppose so."

There was a pause. "Abby, I know you

came to class on the bus tonight.

"Will you allow me to drive you home?"

Abby blinked, startled. For a split second she let herself think about how

pleasant it would be to have this strong, solid man beside her tonight

when she opened the door of her downtown apartment. Then she pushed

the thought aside. She was not going to let herself succumb to fantasy!

"That's very kind of you, but I..."

"Abby, kindness really doesn't enter into

this. I'd like to take you home."

"It's thoughtful of you, but I don't need..."

"Are you nervous about me, Abby?" He sounded genuinely concerned.

"Of course not! Who could be nervous about a man who takes Japanese flower-arrangement classes?" Abby shot back bracingly, just as Mrs.

Yamamoto materialized beside her with a distressed frown on her

pleasant middle-aged face. Instantly Abby turned her full attention to

apologizing for the out-of-control design
of daffodils and Queen Anne's

lace.

"I know, Mrs. Yamamoto," she began
hurriedly, aware that Torr was

listening quietly as he lounged against
his own worktable. "I went crazy

again. I just couldn't seem to get it
balanced. I kept adding more bits and

pieces of leaves and flowers and things,
thinking I could sort of even up the

overall design, but it ran away from me
as usual."

"Abby," the older woman sighed, "you should have stopped a dozen

daffodils ago. Look at this. It wanders all over the place. I thought that

perhaps working alongside Mr. Latimer might help you control your

impulsive design streak. Just look at how he limits himself to the barest

essentials to convey the feeling of harmony and proportion." Mrs.

Yamamoto turned toward Torr's design with pleasure and deep approval.

As the diminutive instructor moved to

admire her star pupil's

handiwork, Abby met Torr's eyes over Mrs. Yamamoto's head. Her sense

of humor rose to the surface and unthinkingly she made a face at him—a perfect ten-year-old's grimace.

"Teacher's pet," she mouthed silently and knew he had caught the

words just as he politely turned to discuss his creation with the other woman.

"You'll be pleased to know, Mrs.

Yamamoto," Torr said smoothly, "that

Abby has decided to let me give her some outside instruction this evening

after class. I'm hoping that working on a one-to-one basis I may be able to

explain some of the basic principles more clearly to her."

"Excellent." The instructor approved with a gentle nod. "You will make

a very good teacher for her. All she needs is a little guidance and

discipline."

Abby rolled her eyes beseechingly toward heaven as Torr nodded seriously.

"I'll do my best," he said.

Forty minutes later Abby found herself seated in Torr Latimer's gray

BMW, her mood hovering between amusement and exasperation.

"Guidance and discipline," she mocked reproachfully. "Honestly, Torr,

even you can't be serious about trying to teach me the fine art of Japanese

flower arrangement! I don't know why I let you talk me into taking me

home tonight. The bus would have been just fine."

"I wanted to take you home," he said simply, slanting her a quick glance

as he piloted the car sedately through the drizzly April Oregon night.

"Besides, it's raining."

"It does that a lot here in Portland in case you haven't noticed."

"I've noticed," he countered.

"You say that as if you're a native," she said, smiling.

"No. I've only lived here for about three years." The words held a certain

crispness, as if further questions in that direction would not be welcomed.

Perhaps he wasn't the type to want to waste time discussing what he

considered trivial matters, Abby decided. She began to wonder what one

did discuss with a fellow flower-arranging student.

"Nice car," she tried brightly. "I've

always wanted to buy a foreign car.

But one has to worry so much about getting them properly serviced." She

decided not to add that if she had been able to buy such a car it would

have been something a bit more dashing than a BMW—say a Jaguar or a

Lotus. But this car seemed to fit the man: solid, well-built, durable and

tough.

"It's okay, Abby," Torr responded in quiet amusement, "you said

yourself that you could hardly be nervous around a man you met in a class on flower design, remember?"

"I'm not nervous. But I guess I am a little curious about why you wanted to take me home tonight."

"Because you're like the flower arrangements you create," he told her whimsically.

She shot him a sharp glance. "Is this where I get my free analysis?"

"If you like."

She tilted her head in a challenging manner. "Okay, let's hear it."

He didn't hesitate. "You're interesting, impulsive, imaginative and intriguing."

"Amazing. You have a talent for alliteration as well as flower design."

"You even look a little like the flowers we've been arranging in class,"

Torr went on evenly. "A waist as slender as the stem of a daffodil, hair the color of clover honey, eyes like—"

"Don't say cornflower blue," she broke in, chuckling. "I hate cornflowers."

"Gentian?" he offered politely.

Abby's chuckles turned to outright laughter. "You're grasping at straws now!"

"You're right. No point carrying analogies to extremes. Actually, your eyes are sort of a smoke blue. Very unusual."

"Well, you've hit the high points. Better

stop there."

"You're not taking me seriously, are you?" he inquired softly.

"Should I?"

He nodded once, no hint of humor in the craggy lines of his bluntly

unhandsome face. "Yes, I think you'd better."

Abby shifted uneasily as she caught the certainty in his voice. It

occurred to her that she didn't know much about Torr Latimer except that

he had a talent for flower arrangement. It also occurred to her that he

seemed to occupy a large portion of the interior of the BMW. His presence

in the car was almost intimidating. He wasn't quite six feet tall but there

was no denying the sense of potent strength in him. Still, she *had* met him

in a flower-design class, Abby reminded herself resolutely.

"I live in the apartment house on the next block. You can park in front,"

she said quickly, infusing her voice with

brisk friendliness. She didn't want to think about whether she really reminded him of a flower. It brought disturbing images to mind of being *arranged* by him. Perhaps arranged on a bed.

The BMW was brought to a purring halt beside a parking space that appeared much too small to Abby's eyes. She experienced a sense of relief at the thought that if he couldn't find a place to park on the street, Torr

might simply be forced to let her out on the sidewalk and take himself home.

But the BMW fit into the tiny slot as if the car had been designed for it

and Abby stifled a small sigh. Now he would walk her to her door. She was sure of it. Then what?

"Would you care for a cup of tea?" she heard herself ask weakly as he

guided her through the main door and into the elevator of the handsome

brick building. The apartment house had been built during the first half of

the century, but it had been meticulously restored and it retained the

spacious, high-ceilinged rooms that had been part of the original design.

Abby's apartment was a comfortable one-bedroom plan on the fifth floor

with a large kitchen and oversize windows to let in plenty of light.

"Tea might be a bit much on top of an evening of flowers and art," Torr

said calmly. "Have you got anything

stronger?"

"Well, yes, there's some cognac—"

"That will be fine," he interrupted positively, as they stepped from the

elevator. Taking the key from her hand as they paused in the hallway

outside her apartment, he opened the door with a cool familiarity that

somehow managed to disturb her again. What was it about this man that

kept sending mixed signals? One moment she was certain he was

reassuringly polite and manageable; the next she was reacting with an

almost primitive disquiet to his presence.

"I'll get the cognac," she said quickly as she stepped through the

doorway

into

the

eclectically

furnished

room.

The

cheerful

vanilla-and-papaya color scheme,
underscored with accents of black,

reflected Abby's love of light airy colors
and her occasional taste for pure

drama. The overall effect of the style
would have been one of witty

sophistication if it hadn't been for the
stacks of boxes standing in the hall,

piled in every corner of the living room

and filling the closet just inside the door.

"What the...?" Torr's muttered exclamation of surprise came as he accidentally struck one of the boxes with the toe of his Italian leather shoe.

"Sorry about that," Abby said, stooping down hastily to shove the pile of boxes to one side. "It's just that I'm rather short of storage space, you see."

"What's in them?" Curiously he glanced around at the endless stacks of

boxes.

"Vitamins," she said succinctly,
discarding her gutsy black leather

trench coat. Abby had always liked the
coat. She felt it gave her a certain

bold cachet. The kind of casual
aggressiveness that warned men not to
try

to encroach on her private space.
Unfortunately, as far as she could tell,

Torr hadn't appeared to notice this
statement of hers. Maybe it was

because he came by a state of quiet

assertiveness so naturally. Ah, well, perhaps the coat wasn't the most effective method of making such statements, Abby decided. After all, she'd bought it the way she'd bought most of her clothes: impulsively.

"Vitamins?" Torr picked up one of the green-and-gold boxes and

examined the label. "You must take a lot of them. 'MegaLife Vitamin

Supplements, for the person who insists on living life to the fullest extent,'

" he read. "You must live a very full life, judging by the thousands of vitamins stored in this room."

"Don't be ridiculous. Even I couldn't take this many vitamins. I sell

them. Or rather I distribute them to people who sell them for me. Door to

door." In the kitchen Abby located the cognac bottle and pulled it down

from the cupboard. "It's amazing what people will buy on impulse when

you show up at their door with a well-designed display."

"I would imagine you'd be fairly good at understanding impulse

buying," Torr remarked behind her.

"Was that a nasty crack?" she demanded suspiciously.

"No, a joke. A poor one. It would appear that the business is a thriving one," he added with innocent interest.

"Very," she informed him dryly. "What's more, I believe in my own

product." She poured him a glass of cognac and then reached for a

green-and-gold bottle sitting on the counter. Casually she unscrewed the

top and popped two of the tablets into her mouth.

"What's that?"

"B complex and vitamin C. Good for stress." She resealed the jar, her

mouth full of vitamins, and poured herself a glass of cognac. She downed

the tablets with an overlarge swallow of the potent brandy and wound up

trying to stifle a choking cough.

"Water might have been more effective than cognac," Torr observed as

he politely stepped forward and thumped her between the shoulder blades.

"Thank you," she gasped unevenly. "I, uh, was just trying to save a little time."

"Are we in a hurry?" he asked mildly.

"Well, no, I guess not. I tend to cut corners occasionally. Shall we go

into the living room?" she added with determined politeness. How

embarrassing. She should have taken the time to run a glass of water.

"Why are you taking tablets for stress? Are you under a great deal?"

Torr asked pleasantly.

"Isn't everyone these days?" she retorted, wishing she'd kept her mouth

shut. Taking a seat on the papaya-colored sofa, she waved him airily to the

black armchair. It was time to take a firmer grip on the conversation.

"What about you, Torr? What do you do when you're not arranging

flowers?" There, that sounded casual and brisk.

"I buy and sell," he said quietly.

She arched an eyebrow. "What do you buy and sell?"

"Stress." He smiled faintly as if surprised to realize he might have made a small joke.

"You'll have to be a bit more explicit, I'm afraid. I'm not big on subtlety, remember?" Abby said crisply.

"Sorry. It wasn't really all that subtle or

clever. I only meant that in a

sense I deal in other people's stress. I buy and sell commodities futures."

Abby's eyes opened very wide. "Like pork bellies?"

He permitted himself another small smile. "And gold and wheat and

corn and several other products. I made the remark about dealing in

stress because so much of the buying and selling that goes on is done

under great stress. People panic, people despair, people get far too excited.

In short, they often go nuts buying and selling commodities. Lots of stress."

"Sounds like a good market for me. Want to buy some vitamins?" Abby asked hopefully.

Torr shook his head. "I'm afraid I don't have much use for them."

"No ulcers? No hypertension?"

"No."

"You don't fall victim to all this buying-and-selling stress?" she

demanded dubiously.

"No."

"Why not, if it's so common?"

He hesitated, lifting his amber eyes to meet hers in one of the direct,

disturbing glances she was coming to dread. "Possibly because I don't get

excited about the action. It's just a way to make a living. I'm good at it,

but I don't get emotionally involved the way so many people do."

"Mr. Cool, hmmm? Well," she began in

her best sales tone, "it just so

happens that MegaLife makes a basic, high-potency formula that is

designed to meet all the daily needs of the cool, healthy male in his forties

—"

"In that case, I've got a year's grace before I have to start in on them,"

Torr interrupted calmly.

"Oh, sorry. You're not forty?"

"Next year." He sipped his cognac, not appearing unduly upset by her

assumption of his age. "What about you, Abby? Which daily formula are you taking?"

"The one for the healthy female in her thirties," Abby replied, sighing.

"I would have said you'd need the one for the woman in her twenties."

"Thanks." She grimaced. "Actually, I'm twenty-nine but I decided to

advance to the higher potency formula a year early."

"Plus a few supplements such as that B complex you downed out there

in the kitchen?"

"Can't be too careful. Now that we've exhausted that topic, what would

you like to discuss?" She gave him a bright, aloofly inquiring glance as she

took a sip of her cognac. It was getting late and she was beginning to

wonder how she was going to get rid of Torr Latimer. He didn't show any

signs of finishing his drink and making a polite exit.

"Us."

Abby choked on her cognac and Torr got to his feet in concern as she

began to cough. An instant later she felt a solid thump on her back that

nearly sent her sprawling across the smoked-glass coffee table.

"Are you all right?" he asked, his hand in readiness to strike again.

"Yes, yes, I'm fine, thank you!" she gasped, battling to regain her breath

and her equilibrium. "Uh, Torr...Mr. Latimer, it's getting awfully late.

Don't you think you'd better be heading

home? I know you commodities

people must get up very early. The markets are back East, aren't they?"

"Tomorrow's Saturday. The market's closed on Saturday."

"Oh." She frantically searched her brain for another excuse.

"Abby, I'm sorry if I disconcerted you," he said gently as he sat down

again in the black armchair and reached for his cognac. His face was set

in a faint frown and his eyes watched her with the intensity of a hawk.

"Torr," she said, grabbing for her self-control, "I think this is a very

good time to tell you that I'm not looking for a relationship of any kind at

the moment. My life is very busy just now. I have my business to attend to

and...and several other matters of a personal nature that I won't bore you

with. If you're thinking of suggesting that we, uh, become involved, then

I'm afraid I must regretfully decline."

"Regretfully decline?" There was a sudden trace of something that

might have passed for humor in his
amber eyes.

"That did sound a bit stilted, didn't it?"
she admitted.

"It sounded as if you were turning down
a formal invitation to a garden
party."

"I'm sorry. Frankly, you've caught me off
guard. I really do have a lot of
things on my mind tonight."

"I'm not inviting you to a garden party,
Abby. I was about to invite you

to bed."

Abby closed her eyes and tried again to catch her breath. This man had

a way of knocking it out of her, even when he didn't lay a hand on her.

"Since you insist on being very forthright about your invitation, then I will

try to show you the same courtesy," she finally managed icily. Regally she

got to her feet. The jeans and black sweater she was wearing didn't detract

a bit from the cool, dismissive air she was attempting to project. "The

answer is no. Good night, Torr."

He watched her a moment longer as if debating his next move. Then he

too got to his feet, a strangely rueful expression on his face.

"I rushed that a bit, didn't I? Not like me, really. I'm usually rather slow

and cautious. Especially when I'm dealing with a particularly fragile sort

of flower. Abby, I won't push you. But I'd like us to be clear about our

relationship and where it's going. Right from the start. Things will be

simpler that way."

"Simpler?" she uttered, unable to collect her thoughts. His heavy

strength was intimidating on some levels, but oddly alluring on others.

She must be out of her mind to be fascinated with this man. She ought to

be sending him home at once in his elegantly staid foreign car. She should

never have allowed him to drive her home in the first place.

"I didn't get a chance to finish telling you all the ways you remind me of

a flower," Torr went on huskily, moving closer, putting out a large hand to gently cup the nape of her neck.

"Torr..."

"I told you that your waist was as slim as the stem of a daffodil," he

murmured, lowering his head to her throat. "But I didn't get around to

explaining that your breasts make me think of two very delicate, very

luscious orchids."

Abby felt his strong fingers skim lightly

down the front of her black

sweater, seeking the shape of her small rounded breasts. This was where

she should be getting nervous, she told herself. She was a fool not to push

him away. Or was it even possible to push a rock of Torr's size and

density?

That thought caught at her imagination and her fingertips came up to

shove almost experimentally at his broad chest. Nothing happened. He

didn't appear to even notice the cautious, testing push she gave him.

Abby drew in her breath and waited for the uncertainty and the hint of

fear that ought to be materializing in her brain. Neither came.

She had a few seconds to realize that the tendrils of flickering emotion

curling deep in her body were not the first questing thrusts of fear but of

an unfamiliar excitement, and then she felt Torr's hands gliding down to

her waist and over the contours of her

hips.

Torr uttered a deep, thick groan as he found the curves of her lower

body. "And your sweet, soft little rear makes me think of a gladiolus."

"Not a Venus's-flytrap?" Abby managed tartly as she struggled to find a

way to deal with a situation that she sensed could easily get out of control.

"Never," he vowed and then his mouth moved up along the line of her

throat to hover just above her uncertainly parted lips. "I've been aching to

taste you all evening." His lips closed on hers with an urgency and a

hunger that Abby realized instantly were only just held in check. The

thought that this man, who seemed in such possession of himself, wanted

her this much was unsettling and intoxicating.

There was no cautious sampling of the nectar he clearly expected to

find. Instead, just as Abby had distantly sensed earlier that evening, Torr

Latimer overwhelmed and claimed her

mouth as if it were his by right.

Abby knew that if she had been lying beneath him instead of standing on

her feet she would have been crushed exactly as she had imagined.

What shook her was that the prospect didn't hold the fear it should

have held.

She felt his hands slide heavily down her back again to cup the curves of

her derriere and then he used the intimate grip to urge her against his

thighs. Abby moaned as she felt the evidence of his arousal and knew he wanted her to be aware of it.

"I've been thinking about this since the first night of class. Tonight I

decided I couldn't wait any longer. You intrigue me so, sweet Abby. You

make me want you. And it's been so long..." The words disappeared into

her mouth as he thrust his tongue deeply inside.

If that was all this was about, Abby decided in sudden anxiety, she

would end it now. If Torr Latimer had simply been so long without a

woman that any woman would do, she was certainly not going to be

accommodating. The thought gave her the strength to push much more

fiercely against his broad shoulders.

He didn't release her, but one of his hands moved to soothe the back of

her neck, holding her with gentle firmness as she attempted to wrench free

her mouth.

Still there was no fear, only the unexpected tantalizing excitement.

Abby could feel it pulsing through her now, knew that Torr undoubtedly sensed it. She trembled against him and he muttered something that sounded very male and very satisfied. Then slowly, with a reluctance that left her mouth damp and tremulous, he raised his head.

His amber eyes were flaring with the force of his desire and Abby saw the deep intent at the bottom of the

golden pools. Her body throbbed with the sensual awareness he had created and her mind spun with unasked

questions and an unnamed need. Both the awareness and the need were so

foreign that she didn't want to bring herself to face them directly.

Everything was moving much too fast.

And then everything came to a screeching halt with Torr's next words.

"Abby, honey, I have to know now if there's anyone else. Are you free to

be with me tonight? Is there any other man in your life? *Tell me!*"

For the first time since she had let him into her apartment, her initial

tendrils of uncertainty were colored with the fear that had been strangely

absent. "What are you asking, Torr?" she whispered.

"You know what I'm asking. I'm not nearly as subtle as you seem to

think," he ground out as his hand moved through her honey-shaded hair

and dislodged the loose knot that held it

at the back of her head. The thick mass tumbled to her shoulders and he watched with fascination. "Just tell me the truth, Abby. That's all I ask. I won't share you."

"Nobody asked you to share me! Torr, my private life is my business. I

do not make explanations to anyone, least of all to a man I barely know."

"I'm not involved with anyone else," he said simply.

Abby's blue eyes narrowed as she looked up at him. "What's that

supposed to mean?"

"That I'm being honest with you. I'm free to be here with you. All I ask

is the same assurance in return. Do you belong to another man?"

She felt caught, trapped by the apparent desire for honesty, which she

could not fault, yet made uneasy by the implicit possessiveness that lay

buried in his question. Ultimately it was pride that governed her answer—

pride and innate self-defense.

"Torr, I do not belong to any man." She saw the satisfaction move deep

in his eyes and continued quickly, "And I want it made very clear that I'm

not interested in belonging to a man. I'm accountable only to myself."

"As long as you're free now, I'm willing to wait to discuss the rest of the

matter," he murmured. His mouth curved faintly as his thumb worked

along the side of her jaw.

"Then you will wait a very long time," she snapped. He released her as

she twisted out of his arms, but his eyes followed her every movement. She

occupied herself by picking up the empty cognac glasses and carrying

them into the kitchen. Tidying up gave her an excuse to stay out of his

reach.

He followed her, coming to stand in the kitchen doorway. His dark grim

presence fed her unfolding anxiety. She wanted him gone and the sooner

the better. It had been a mistake to let him bring her home.

"Good night, Torr."

"You're afraid of me, aren't you?" he demanded wonderingly.

"Let's just say I think it's time I exercised a little caution," she retorted.

"I wouldn't hurt you."

"I only have your word on that, don't I?" she observed laconically. "It's

been my experience that men are quite capable of hurting women,

especially women they think they own. I have no desire to get involved

with anyone right now, Torr, but if I did, it wouldn't be with a possessive

man. And, frankly, I'm getting the impression you might be the possessive type."

His mouth hardened and she could see the calculating intent in him as

he stood there so solidly in her doorway. "Will you tell me about it, Abby?"

he finally asked quietly.

"No." She smiled icily. "It's none of your business."

"How can you say that when it's affecting what happens between you and me?"

"Good night, Torr. Thank you for the ride home."

He didn't move. "I'll see you tomorrow."
It wasn't a question, it was a statement.

"I'm going to be busy tomorrow."

"Abby, you're judging me without giving me a chance. There's no need to be afraid of me."

His sureness melted some of the ice in her smile. "I don't think you

realize quite how overwhelming you are, Torr."

"You weren't afraid of me in class or when I kissed you. Don't make

snap judgments, Abby. Give us both some time. Let me take you out to

dinner tomorrow night." He stepped forward as she started to shake her

head and caught her face between his large palms with surprising

gentleness. As her lips began to shape

the word no, he lowered his mouth to hers and kissed the negative back into her throat.

Abby tensed, waiting for the fear to surge to the surface. But all she felt was the heavy warmth of Torr's body reaching out to cloak her. His kiss was no less forceful or enthralling than it had been the first time, but she still didn't respond with outright tension or anxiety. Instead, she realized wryly, she merely responded. Period.

The sensation was captivating.

"Dinner?" he whispered urgently, his mouth poised just above hers.

"Please?"

"I... "

"Please, Abby."

She closed her eyes and did a quick rundown of all the reasons why she

shouldn't and then she heard herself saying hesitantly, "All right, Torr.

Dinner. Nothing else."

"Thank you." The gratitude in his deep voice made her feel awkward, as

if she had overreacted. "I'll pick you up at seven. We'll go to that new place

downtown near the Benson."

She nodded, not knowing what else to say as he named the new

continental restaurant that had just opened near the landmark hotel in

Portland.

"Good night, Abby," he said softly.

"Good night, Torr."

He dropped his hands from her and she felt cool. It made her realize

how enveloped she had been by the warmth of his body when he had been

standing close. Without a word he turned to go and then his gaze fell on a

colorful brochure lying on the kitchen counter.

Abby bit her lip as he picked up the pamphlet advertising a resort on

the Oregon coast.

"Planning a vacation?" he asked mildly.

"No!" she answered quickly, too quickly. "No, I stayed there for a weekend a couple of months ago. They sent out some advertising, I guess, and I was on their mailing list."

"You went to the coast during the winter?"

"It's very lovely in winter," she told him flatly.

"I agree," he nodded, dropping the brochure back on the counter.

"Perhaps we—" He snapped off the words quickly, apparently realizing he

was about to go too far. "I'll see you tomorrow evening at seven, Abby."

"Yes." Abby stared at the brochure as it fell from his fingers. "At seven."

She locked the door very carefully behind him and then she went back

into the kitchen and picked up the brochure. The Misty Inn. Enjoy the

spectacular Oregon coast at any season. Open all year round, the pamphlet

advised cheerfully.

With grim care Abby tore it in several tiny pieces. It would be a long

time before she returned to the Misty Inn. Probably never. She stuffed the

pieces into a trash can under the sink.

The only logical explanation for that advertisement arriving in her mail

this afternoon was that the resort was sending out such brochures to all

former guests.

But even as she gave herself that argument for the thousandth time

since the mail had arrived, Abby knew a sense of dread. She had been

pushing it to the back of her mind all evening, but now it emerged to

haunt her.

She would have felt far more certain of her conviction if the brochure

had been contained in an envelope carrying the letterhead of the resort.

But it hadn't. The pamphlet had been stuffed into a plain white envelope

and addressed on a typewriter. There was no return address of any kind.

As she undressed for bed, Abby's thoughts were chaotic, torn between

images of a strong, intense man who
signed up for classes in Japanese

flower arrangement and memories of a
weekend in winter that she wanted

desperately to forget.

TWO

« ^ »

She had accused him of appreciating subtlety but in truth he had been

anything but subtle this evening. As a result he'd nearly ruined everything.

Hell, Torr thought a little savagely as he guided the BMW up the winding

hillside overlooking Portland. You'd think a man his age would have

developed a bit of finesse when it came to handling a woman he wanted.

Actually, he realized, he wasn't altogether certain why he had so

completely abandoned his normal restraint. But something had happened

to him tonight when he'd finally acknowledged that he wanted Abby

Lyndon. It was as if, having accepted the inevitable, he had simply decided

to grab it with both hands.

He'd been a fool, no doubt about it. He should have taken everything

much more slowly. Well, he'd been able to recover enough ground to

salvage another date. That was something, at least, he told himself derisively. But he was very lucky she hadn't panicked altogether. What had made her so nervous of him, he wondered. She'd been quite friendly in class.

It had something to do with his need to be certain she was free. It was after he'd asked the crucial question that she'd really begun to withdraw.

Perhaps it was because she wasn't altogether free.

Had she spent that weekend on the coast alone two months ago? Maybe

she had just terminated a relationship and that was the reason she was

fearful of plunging directly into another affair.

The questions spun around his head as he drove with automatic

precision. The houses perched on the hillside on either side of the road

appeared cozy and welcoming, their windows warm with lights. His own

was going to be dark. Torr hadn't

bothered to leave a light on to welcome himself home.

One thing was for certain, he reassured himself. She couldn't know

enough about his past to be really afraid of him. Not yet. Not ever, if he

had his way. It was something else that was disturbing her. Had

something he said reminded her of another man? The one she'd gone to

the coast with two months before?

His blunt fingers stretched and then

gripped the wheel with a force that

Torr didn't even notice. He would like very much to get his hands on the

man who had made Abby so wary.

It was the mixed signals she was getting from him that were making it

difficult to deal with Torr Latimer, Abby concluded the next evening as

she dressed for their date. The impression of strength, for example, was at

once reassuring and intimidating. She experienced an instinctive

sensation of being protected by it on the one hand, while on the other, her

past had taught her to be distrustful of physical strength.

If he hadn't started making demands, asking about the other men in

her life, wanting to know if she was free, she might have found herself

letting the kiss go much further than it had. Abby faced the reality of that

as she slipped the sleek, body-hugging knit dress over her head.

The dress, a silvery blue, highlighted her

honey-colored hair loosely

arranged in a topknot and her blue eyes.
Not cornflower blue or gentian

blue, Abby decided with a flicker of
humor as she remembered Torr's

efforts to liken her to a flower the
previous evening.

It had been rather flattering, actually,
especially since she didn't

consider her features as a model of
flowerlike beauty. The wide blue eyes,

tip-tilted nose and expressive mouth
went together in a reasonably

attractive fashion, but Abby didn't kid herself that there was any riveting beauty underlying the whole.

There was, however, a vivid animation marking her face of which Abby remained unaware. One seldom smiled, talked to or otherwise visited with oneself in a mirror. Mirrors were for studying an unnaturally quiet version of oneself. As a result the image in the mirror remained, for Abby, at least, merely reasonably attractive. The warmth and intelligent energy that were

a fundamental part of her were usually left for others of a discerning

nature to discover. There had been men in the past who had responded to

the total effect Abby created, but not since Flynn Randolph had she

allowed one to get close.

The night before, her response to the grimly quiet man from the

flower-arranging class had startled Abby. It was part of the disturbingly

double messages she was trying to interpret. She frowned at herself, her

brows knitting into a severe line as she applied a coral lipstick. Torr

Latimer was not the sort of man she would have expected to respond to so

swiftly. On the other hand, as she kept reminding herself, she had met him

in a class on flower arrangement!

That thought brought a reluctant smile to her face as she turned away

from the mirror to answer the demanding clamor of her doorbell. Torr

was right on time, showing a promptness that didn't surprise her in the

least. She had had a hunch he was the precise, punctual type.

He was also, she realized as she opened the door, every bit as unsettling

and intimidating tonight as he had been the night before. The dark suit he

wore was set off by a formal white shirt adorned with a conservative tie

and small cuff links. Real gold cuff links, Abby noted with a flash of

annoyance. Was he rich?

"Something wrong?" he asked politely as she continued to stare up at

him. "Did I use the wrong knot on the tie?"

She shook her head, breaking the small spell, and stood back to let him

inside. "No, of course not. I was just wondering if you were rich. Watch

out for that stack of panthothenic-acid tablets. I just got a new shipment

in today."

"Does it matter?" Torr avoided the uneven stack of green-and-gold

boxes piled just inside the door.

"If you hit the tablets? Not to me. You're the one who'd have to pick

them up and restack them," she answered, grinning wryly.

"I meant would it matter if I'm rich?" he said patiently.

"Well, I usually don't date men who might be a great deal more

successful than I am," she explained honestly.

"If you like, we can compare bank balances over dinner," he murmured,

amber eyes gleaming as he surveyed her

slender figure in the close-fitting

blue dress. "Although, I have to admit the topic doesn't sound particularly exciting."

"It might if it turned out I was a lot richer than you," she suggested

blithely, moving away to collect her black leather trench coat.

"Do you think you might be?"

"No," she replied, sighing.

"You're really wary of rich men?"

"I'm cautious."

"I think you're cautious about every sort of man." He held the door for

her. "Someday you'll have to tell me why."

"You haven't answered my question."

"About being rich?" He lifted one shoulder negligently as he took her

arm. "That's a relative situation, don't you think? How do I know what

you'd consider rich?"

She was silent as they rode the elevator

downstairs and walked through

the lobby. "You're not going to answer the question, are you?" she finally

demanded shrewdly.

"Not now. No."

"Which means you probably are rich," she groaned.

"I asked you not to make snap judgments last night," he reminded her

as he escorted her out to the waiting BMW.

"I'm not the only one who has that

problem," she pointed out as he slid into the seat beside her. "You made some pretty fast judgments yourself last night."

"Deciding that I wanted to go to bed with you wasn't a snap judgment."

He switched on the ignition and pulled away from the curb with efficient skill. "I'd been watching you create those wild hopelessly chaotic flower arrangements for three weeks before I realized that it was the creator of

the arrangements and not the designs themselves which appealed to me."

"I'm not sure I should find that flattering." Abby's mouth lifted

irrepressibly at the corners. "I mean if it took you three weeks to realize it

was me instead of the flowers you wanted to date..."

"I tend to make my mind up slowly and carefully," he admitted.

"I thought people who traded commodities had to make quick decisions

all the time."

"I made the basic decision to get into commodities only after a lot of

deliberation. Once into them I was committed. The trading part is a

combination of skill and luck—just like any other business. I'm relatively

good at business. After the basic decision of whether or not to trade has

been made, the other judgments don't require a lot of meditation. One

just does what has to be done in order to be successful."

"So now I'm a business decision? I think I prefer the flower analogy,"

Abby quipped, beginning to enjoy the sparring.

He shot her a quick, assessing glance before returning his attention to

his driving. "Are you deliberately baiting me, Abby?"

"Perhaps. Does it annoy you?"

"No. I consider it a good sign. If you're trying to provoke me, you must

not be terribly afraid of me."

The serious remark was irritating, Abby discovered. "I'm not sure I like being analyzed."

"There are a lot of things you don't like, aren't there?" he observed

casually as he pulled into another tiny curb-side parking space. The man

had a talent for parking cars in nonexistent spaces, Abby had to admit to herself.

"A woman is entitled to a few opinions," she declared regally.

"And a man is entitled to try to change her mind on occasion," he

responded with a grim little smile that barely shaped his mouth.

"Are you often successful?" she challenged as she allowed him to guide her into the plush, dimly lit restaurant.

"I rarely make the effort to change a woman's mind."

"Should I be flattered?"

"It's not a question of flattery," he explained precisely.

"I had a feeling it wouldn't be." Laughter lit her eyes as she glanced up

at him. "More of a business decision perhaps?"

He stared down at her for a moment before answering. "I told you in the

car that once I have come to a decision—slow and ponderous though the

process may be—I do whatever is required to bring about a successful

conclusion to the project. I've made my basic decision concerning you."

"Is that a warning?" Some of the

amusement died in her eyes.

"No, Abby, it's a statement of fact. Take my advice and don't let it ruin

your evening, though. We have hours and hours ahead of us. I'd hate to

have you sulking through to the bitter end."

"I never sulk," she assured him tranquilly. Then she turned and smiled

brilliantly at the approaching maître d', effectively cutting off the

conversation.

They were led to an intimate booth, the table in front of them laid with

gleaming silver and snowy linen. A low-voiced discussion between Torr

and the wine steward went on for several minutes, and Abby used the

opportunity to rummage about in her small evening bag for a couple of

tablets.

Torr glanced at her just as she was popping them into her mouth.

"More stress vitamins?"

"Calcium. Good for bones and teeth."

"Have you tried drinking more milk instead?" he asked laconically.

"I hate milk." She downed the tablets with several sips from the water

goblet. Then she grinned. "I much prefer wine. What are we having

tonight?"

"There's a new sauvignon blanc I've been curious about that's in from

one of my favorite California wineries. I thought it would go nicely with

the smoked salmon and capers."

"What smoked salmon and capers?"

"The smoked salmon and capers we're having as an appetizer," he

spelled out calmly.

"I don't recall ordering an appetizer. I haven't even glanced at the

menu!" Irritation at his presumption made her glare at him severely.

"Anyone who eats calcium tablets as an appetizer doesn't deserve to get

a look at the menu. How many pills do

you take a day?"

"I haven't counted," she told him frostily.

"Are you your own best customer?"

"Believe me, the various people who sell vitamins and minerals

door-to-door for me have a lot of customers who take far more pills than I do!"

"And you can really make a living off of this, hmmm?" He eyed her

reflectively. "Is that your only source of income?"

She sent him a speculative glance.

"What's the matter? Do you normally

only date rich women? Afraid I won't be able to keep you in the style to

which you would like to become accustomed?"

"You are getting feisty, aren't you? A few more cracks like that and I

might leave you with the tab for tonight's dinner," he advised her blandly.

"More threats?" she asked interestedly as the wine arrived.

"Abby, honey, I've already explained I

don't issue threats or warnings. I

merely make statements of fact." He accepted the sample of wine, taking a

moment to savor it carefully. Then he nodded firmly. "I asked about your

vitamin business because I was wondering if it's full time for you."

"My only source of income," she assured him cheerfully as the waiter

finished pouring the wine and discreetly left. "Unless you want to count

the shares of stock I inherited from my uncle."

"Shares in what company?" Torr lounged back comfortably and sipped his wine with appreciation.

"The one my uncle founded. Lyndon Technologies is based in Seattle.

It's a privately held firm that has something to do with computers," Abby explained carelessly. "My cousin holds the largest portion of the shares.

The rest are scattered around the family. I own about twenty percent, one of the bigger chunks. The only reason I got any at all was because my

father loaned my uncle the money to get started. My father told him to pay

off the loan in shares of stock held in trust for me. I received them a few

years ago when Uncle Bert died. The company has done nothing but lose

money for the past five years, though, so the stock isn't worth anything.

The hope is that my cousin's husband—he's the president—will be able to

salvage things." Abby reached for her wine and took a fair-size swallow.

She didn't want to discuss the subject

any further. Thoughts of her cousin

Cynthia brought thoughts of Cynthia's husband, Ward Tyson, to mind.

And those thoughts led uneasily to the brochure for the Misty Inn resort.

"Your cousin's husband is a good businessman?"

"Supposedly he is," she said with dismissal in her voice as she picked up

the menu. "Let's see. Since you've committed us to the smoked salmon, I

think I might have something along the lines of the veal with morels. And

perhaps a nice romaine lettuce salad," she went on industriously, studying the list of elegant food.

"You can forget the veal and salad," Torr said simply, plucking the

menu out of her hands. "We're having squid."

"Squid!" She stared at him.

"In an herbed wine sauce," he continued. "You'll love it."

"How do you know?" she demanded through clenched teeth.

"Because squid is loaded with vitamins and minerals." He pulled the wine bottle out of the ice bucket and poured some more of the sauvignon blanc into her glass.

Abby leveled a long, considering stare at him as he went through the action of pouring the wine. She found herself aware of something besides the basic, solid strength in him; she also recognized an intrinsic, masculine grace. And that made her remember the elegantly restrained

flower designs he had created in class. Her copper-red nails beat a tiny tattoo on the white tablecloth and her contemplative expression became a frown.

"Anything wrong?" Torr asked politely.

"Do you mind telling me why?" she demanded coolly.

"Of course not, but you'll have to clarify the question. Why what?"

"Why, for a man who can create an impression of an entire spring

garden with just a few leaves and a daffodil or two, you are being so

heavy-handed tonight?"

"Ah, the squid." He nodded complacently.

"Actually, I meant the arrogance, not the squid in particular," she said

sweetly. "You seem to forget that I've seen just how subtle you can be in

class. I know you're quite capable of elegance and finesse and that means

you're probably quite capable of politeness on a date. So why are you

playing the overbearing, domineering male who won't even allow his

companion to select her own meal?"

He thought about that for a moment, as if deciding how to explain

himself. A tiny smile edged the line of his mouth and the amber eyes were

unreadable. But he didn't pretend to misunderstand.

"Because a bit of arrogance with regard to something as mundane as

the food provides you with a convenient target A focal point, I suppose,"

he finally said. "It gives you something to complain about and criticize

and rail against without giving you something to really worry over. Doing

things like choosing food for you without consultation is annoying, but it

doesn't frighten you. And it absorbs your attention so you don't have time

to worry about what's going to happen when I take you home later."

Abby sat very still, taking in the full implications of his words. "My

God," she breathed eventually and not

without genuine admiration, "a red herring."

"Squid," he corrected indulgently, eyes gleaming.

She shook her head. "That was very clever of you."

"Not so clever. You realized right away I was up to something," he

replied sighing, and sitting back as the salmon and capers arrived.

"No, no," she denied firmly, "I'm impressed. I mean, naturally, I was

aware you could be exercising a good deal more in the way of social grace

if you wanted to do so, but I don't think I would ever have guessed exactly

why you were playing the arrogant lord and master. I would simply have

continued to stay mildly annoyed all evening. And I wouldn't have had

time to worry about later."

"But now that you're on to me, you're going to start worrying?" He slid a

paper-thin slice of smoked salmon onto a toast point and added a caper or

two. Then he gravely held it out to her, his gaze intent.

"Should I?" Abby hesitated and then accepted the salmon offering.

"Worry about later? No. You won't have to fight me off at the end of the evening." The words were spoken with sure, steady promise.

Abby paused a moment longer, holding the toast point at her lips. She

believed him, she realized. She wasn't quite certain why she should, but

she did. Making her decision in her

usual impulsive manner she parted

her lips and sank her neat, white teeth firmly into the toast and salmon.

"Okay, Torr. I won't worry about later."

"Just like that?"

She lifted one shoulder delicately. "I'm not nearly as subtle as you, and I

usually make my decisions fairly quickly."

"And you've decided to trust me?" he pressed.

"Yes." She gave him a rueful glance, full

of laughter. "Must be the result of watching you in class for the past few weeks. You were always so careful and gentle with the flowers," she explained wistfully. And the end result had always been that the flowers had done exactly as he wished, she reminded herself with a dash of warning. Her designs had always gone wildly out of control, but Torr's had behaved precisely as he had wanted them to behave.

"Thank you, Abby."

"Now about that squid," she began.

"I told you. You're going to love it."

"But, Torr!" The humor in her was threatening to spoil the royal

protest, however, and she knew he'd seen it.

"Abby, honey, I keep telling you that I'm not nearly as subtle as you

seem to think. I really do think you're going to like the squid and I intend

that you should try it."

"Why do I have the strangest feeling you've never been married?" she

countered, surrendering to the inevitable with good grace. To her

astonishment the throwaway remark seemed to catch him off guard. He

looked up quickly from the slice of salmon he was about to center on a

toast point and there wasn't a trace of amusement in the amber depths of

his eyes.

"I was married," he told her evenly.

Instantly Abby realized she'd overstepped some invisible boundary. "I'm

sorry, Torr. I didn't mean to dredge up any bad memories. It was only a

little joke. I just meant to imply that because of your casual arrogance I

assumed no woman had had an opportunity to, er, whip you into shape..."

Her voice trailed off uneasily as she racked her brain for another topic of conversation.

"It's all right," he finally said quietly. "I was married for two years. My

wife...drowned in a swimming accident three years ago. I don't generally

discuss it."

"No, no, I certainly understand," Abby said hurriedly. "There are things

I don't care to talk about either. Please forgive me?" Impulsively she put

out her long-nailed fingers and touched the dark sleeve of his jacket where

his arm lay casually on the table.

Torr looked down at her fingers and then he folded his own square hand

over hers. Abby felt as if he'd enveloped it but it wasn't an unpleasant

sensation, rather a warm and comforting feeling. Almost a gesture of

protection, she decided, breaking into a smile.

He returned the smile and in the silent moment of communication that

took place between them, Abby knew the tone of the evening had been set.

She relaxed even further and knew that

she was genuinely going to enjoy
her time with Torr Latimer.

Something flickered in Torr's eyes as he
watched her face, an emotion

that might have been either relief or
satisfaction. Abby decided not to

worry about it. She told herself she
wouldn't worry about anything else

that evening, in fact.

The conversation went easily from one
topic to another, bringing

lighthearted arguments, unexpected

agreements and a pleasurable

contentment. The squid was delicious, just as Torr had predicted, and

Abby was feeling sufficiently magnanimous to tell him so.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," he said as he escorted her back out to the car

and assisted her inside.

"What?" she challenged laughingly.

"You're not going to say 'I told you so'?"

"I wouldn't dream of it. I know when I'm

ahead," he added with a hint

of amusement. "And now I'm going to take you home, kiss you good-night

at your door and hope you'll say yes when I ask you out for tomorrow."

Abby held her breath. "Where would you like to take me tomorrow?"

she whispered.

"The rose gardens," he answered unhesitatingly as he pulled away from the curb.

"That sounds wonderful. I'd love to go."

The decision had been made

somewhere during dinner. She wanted to see Torr Latimer again.

Portland's rose gardens were a source of city pride, and although she had

been to them on several occasions, the promised visit with Torr was going

to be very special. She sank back into the leather seat of the BMW and

contemplated the night and the man beside her. Both seemed exciting,

and both contained an element of the unknown, and she realized she felt a

sense of anticipation about both which she hadn't experienced in a long, long time.

"Are you really going to kiss me good-night at my door?" She dared to

tease lightly, goaded by an inner need to explore the anticipation and

excitement that had been building in her all evening.

He threw her a hooded, speculative glance before answering. "Unless

you invite me inside, yes. Worried?"

"No." Then she realized just how true that was. "I don't feel worried

about anything at all tonight," she added with a sense of wonder.

"Good. When I watched you breaking daffodils and running wild with

that flower arrangement last night, wilder than usual, that is, I wondered if something might be bothering you."

Only that brochure showing up unexpectedly in her mail, she answered silently. But she had rationalized that to her own satisfaction. It was

purely a fluke. She had simply gotten on the resort's advertising list.

"Right now the world seems quite perfect," she assured him easily.

"It rarely stays that way for long."

"Spoilsport."

He found another nearly hidden space on the street outside her

apartment house, switched off the ignition and turned to face her in the

intimate darkness. "I'm serious, Abby."

"You're always serious."

"I meant what I said. The world rarely stays perfect for very long," he continued huskily.

"Are you about to give me a lecture on how we must live for today because tomorrow could bring disaster?" she mocked. "Is this a prelude to trying *to* seduce me with that old line about living for the moment and taking our pleasures while we can?" The first hint of frost was coating her words now as she realized the lovely

evening was about to end.

His dark head moved in a clear rejection of the accusation. "No, I'm

only saying that if something is wrong, if your world is less than perfect

when you wake up in the morning, I'll be around to deal with it."

Startled by the intensity in his words, Abby lifted her copper nails to

touch the side of his face. "That's very kind of you, Torr," she murmured

unsteadily.

He caught her fingers and crushed them with a degree of force that was

one step beyond gentle. "I've told you before not to expect kindness from

me and there's a catch to the deal I'm offering."

The softness in Abby's face froze into a distant, aloof expression. She

tried to free her hand and found it trapped where he pinned it to his

shoulder. "There usually is a catch to the most interesting 'deals,' " she

said sarcastically.

"I'm glad you're businesswoman enough to understand that."

"What are you about to imply now, Torr? That I'm going to have to

sleep with you in order to continue to enjoy the pleasure of your

company?"

Again he shook his head in a slow, sure negative. "The only string I'm

putting on this relationship, Abby, is that I want to be sure I'm the only

man in your world. If there's someone else who thinks he has a claim on

you, I want you to tell him goodbye. And I want you to get rid of him before you sleep with me."

Abby wrenched herself free, flung open the car door and leapt lightly

out onto the sidewalk. "You certainly do know how to ruin a lovely

evening!"

He was beside her before she found the key to the lobby door and she

knew she wouldn't get rid of him until he had seen her upstairs to her

apartment. They rode the elevator in silence. Her chin lifted forbiddingly as she swept down the hall.

"Abby—"

"Listen to me, Torr," she gritted. "I've been taking care of matters,

perfect and otherwise, in my world for quite some time. I don't need

anyone to look after me and I'm not about to make any 'deals' to get

protection I don't require. Furthermore, just for your information, I would

never give any man who demanded them exclusive rights over me. Men

who feel they have to ask for them rarely believe a woman who makes such

promises, anyway. Men like that are incapable of trust. They are

possessive and quite willing to make life unbearable for a woman."

"If you've finished with the lecture, Abby," Torr began grimly as she

found her apartment key, "I'd like a chance to talk this problem over in a

civilized fashion."

"There won't be time. You're going to say goodnight here at my door, remember?"

He reached out to catch her wrist as she turned the key in the lock and

pushed open the door. When she would have stepped inside to safety he

pulled her up short.

Quite unexpectedly Abby's right foot slipped out from under her. The

delicate high heel had skidded awkwardly on a scrap of paper lying on the

hardwood floor and the additional impetus of Torr's forceful grasp

combined to send her tumbling heavily against him.

"Oh!" Her surprise was muffled against the fabric of his jacket as she

instinctively clutched for support. Automatically Torr's arms closed

around Abby, steadying her but not releasing her.

"What the...?" He glanced down at her feet in frowning concern.

"You have no business manhandling me

like this!" Rigidly Abby found

her balance and tried to push herself away from him.

"I didn't cause you to lose your balance. You must have slipped on that envelope."

"What envelope?" She pushed aside a pale tendril of hair that had

escaped the loosely arranged topknot and fallen into her eyes. Then she

stared at Torr as he released her to lean down and pick up the white

object on the floor. Wordlessly he straightened and handed it to her.

"I must have dropped it earlier," she mumbled, brows attempting to

knit across the top of her nose.

"It's addressed to you and it looks as if it was slipped under your door,"

Torr pointed out.

He was right, of course. She didn't recognize the envelope and had

certainly not dropped one addressed to herself earlier before leaving the

apartment. Her name and address were neatly typed on the outside.

Quickly Abby tore it open, wondering which of her neighbors had left a message for her.

"It's probably from Mrs. Wilkins down the hall wanting me to water her

plants while she goes off to see her new grandson." Abby lifted out the stiff

piece of paper that was inside the envelope. As she saw what she held, she nearly dropped it.

Stunned to a level of momentary numbness, Abby stared at the color

photograph in her hand. No, it couldn't be! It wasn't possible. Her mind

felt curiously blank.

"What is it, Abby?" Torr moved to glance over her shoulder.

His interest in the photograph broke the short, shattering spell that had

gripped her. "Just a photo I loaned Mrs. Wilkins the other day. She

wanted to see some pictures of my last vacation." In another second or

two, Abby knew, she would be descending into outright babble. She had to

get rid of Torr immediately. She needed time to think, time to assimilate

the full implications of the shocking photograph. Hastily she shoved the

picture back into the envelope and whirled to face him.

He was studying her with the cool, assessing gaze that she had grown

accustomed to during their classes in flower arranging. There were times

when she had found the intensity of that gaze almost amusing. Tonight it was terrifying.

"Good night, Torr. Thank you for a very *interesting* evening."

He watched her a moment longer and she nearly panicked as she

realized she couldn't predict exactly what he would do next. She wanted

him out of the apartment at all costs, but what on earth could she do if he

opted to stay?

"I'll pick you up around one o'clock tomorrow," he finally said.

"Yes, yes, one will be fine. I'll be ready," she answered him far too quickly.

When he reached for her she shrank back nervously, a protest on her lips.

"My good-night kiss, remember?" he prompted very softly.

She didn't argue. It seemed the fastest way to get rid of him. Obediently

Abby turned her face up for his kiss, her fingers hovering against his

shoulders. If he was surprised by her meek behavior, Torr did not

comment on it. Instead he folded her close until she felt overwhelmed by

the heat and strength of him and then he fastened his mouth on hers.

For a traumatic moment Abby was almost overpowered by a dangerous

longing to simply surrender to the virile strength that surrounded her. The

temptation was wholly unexpected and

beyond anything she could have

imagined. His kiss fused her to him,
promising passion and protection,

and she moaned softly far back in her
throat as she realized the danger

and the desire that threatened to take
control.

He held her deeply in thrall for several
long seconds and then,

reluctantly, Torr released her. The
knowledge that she had been on the

edge of belonging to him, even if only
for the space of one kiss, flared

through his awareness, arousing him and urging him to pull her back into his arms.

But there was too much uncertainty in the air, too many unexplained

factors between them yet. He was not a boy, Torr told himself grimly. He

could wait. Rushing things now might well ruin everything.

"Good night, Abby. I'll see you tomorrow. I found our evening together

interesting, too." With a wry smile he let himself quietly out the door and

heard the lock being slipped into place behind him.

The memory of her silvered blue eyes stayed with him as he climbed

into the BMW and started home. Abby had wonderfully expressive eyes, he

reflected coolly. At various times during the evening he had seen laughter

and warmth and even excitement mirrored in the silvery pools.

But when he'd shut the door of her apartment behind himself the

expression in her eyes hadn't been

anything close to laughter or warmth or excitement. Instead, her gaze had been filled with a new and

unfathomable tension. She was probably even now taking one of her

vitamin tonics for the problem.

Torr's face settled into its customary hard lines as he drove through the

city streets. What had that business with the photograph been about, he

asked himself. It had been a picture of Abby and someone else—a man, he

felt certain, although the second figure hadn't been as focused. And the

setting had been title parking lot of a large motel.

Motel? Or a resort? The resort that had been pictured in the brochure

lying on her kitchen counter the night before?

What game was Abby playing and how long would he give her before

yanking her out of the action?

The question kept him awake long into the night.

THREE

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The phone rang in Abby's kitchen at nine the next morning. She glanced

at the clock with a sense of shock as she roused herself from bed, found a

robe and went to answer the imperious summons. Nine o'clock! She never

slept that late. But the previous night had been a restless one and when

sleep had eventually come, it had been filled with nightmares of winter on

the coast and even more disturbing dreams of a man with black hair and

amber eyes—a man who offered passion even as he offered an undefined

sense of menace.

"Cynthia!" The sound of her cousin's voice calling from Seattle only

added to Abby's growing tension.

"Oh, sorry, Abby, did I wake you? You're always such an early riser,"

Cynthia apologized cheerfully. "And now that I've got Laura I've discovered

the joys of early rising myself."

"Most new mothers complain about the upset in their schedules after

the babies arrive," Abby managed to say with a reasonable note of

lightheartedness in her voice. Cynthia was almost the last person she

wanted to talk to this morning. Stifling a groan, she perched on a stool

and propped her elbow on the counter. "How's baby Laura doing?"

"Great! Hungry as a little piglet at the moment. I'm feeding her while I

chat with you. How's the vitamin business?"

"Thanks for reminding me," Abby said with genuine gratitude as she

reached for a nearby bottle. "I haven't taken my iron yet today." She

unscrewed the cap and gulped a couple of the black tablets. Then she

leaned over the counter and ran water into a glass.

"You and your pills," Cynthia said, sighing.

"I need the energy."

"No kidding! Late night?"

"Don't sound so enthusiastic about it," Abby complained, reaching for

another bottle. It wouldn't hurt to take a few more B vitamins. Her nerves

weren't feeling so great this morning.

"But I am enthusiastic. You've been living like a nun for so long—"

"Cynthia, that's not true and you know it." Abby decided to take two of

the vitamin B tablets on the theory that if one was good, two were better.

"It is true. You haven't had a serious relationship since you were involved with that real-estate executive two years ago."

"I date. I'm not living like a recluse." Abby protested more as a matter of form than because she thought it would influence Cynthia. Her cousin had spent the past couple of years growing increasingly concerned about Abby's policy of arm's-length relationships.

"Dating and having a wild affair are two

different things, Abby. It's time
you had an affair."

"Gee, thanks. Got anyone in mind for
me?"

"That," Cynthia announced grandly, "is
precisely why I'm calling today.

I am going to introduce you to a very
interesting vice president whom

Ward just hired. You're going to love
him. About thirty-five, divorced,
good-looking..."

"Oh, Cynthia. Not another one." Abby bit

her lip, her gaze falling on the

damning photograph on the counter near the vitamin C tablets.

"I'm thinking of a small dinner party on the eighteenth. How about it?

We'll keep it casual, of course. Ward won't have any trouble getting John

to come. After all, Ward's his boss. I think I'll fix poached salmon and—"

"Cynthia, please."

"Was the guy who kept you up last night any more interesting than the

one I'm offering?" her cousin challenged spiritedly. "How did you meet him?"

Abby was staring so hard at the out-of-focus image of the man in the

photograph that she almost misunderstood the question. Then she

realized Cynthia was referring to Torr and not the man in the photo. "In a

class I've been taking on the art of Japanese flower arrangement," she told

her.

"A class on flower arrangement! Good grief! Abby, he's probably gay or something. What kind of man takes classes in flower arrangement?"

"An unusual one," Abby admitted dryly. "And I'm pretty sure he's not gay."

"Hmmm." Cynthia broke off thoughtfully and Abby could almost see the wheels turning inside her cousin's beautiful head. "Were you, uh, testing to make sure last night? Is he still there?"

"No, he's not here," Abby heard herself retort irritably. "Cynthia, stop

worrying about me. I'm doing fine, really I am."

"Abby, after you spent so much time worrying about me this past

winter, you must know it's only natural for me to be concerned about you

now."

"People always worry about mothers-to-be," Abby tried to say lightly.

"Especially mothers-to-be whose marriages have suddenly taken a

nosedive, right? It was a little rocky there for a while, wasn't it?" Cynthia's voice held remembered pain and fear.

Abby heard a crinkling sound and looked down to find she had begun to crumple the photograph. Angrily she finished the job. "Cynthia?

Everything's okay now, isn't it?"

"Oh, Abby, I've never been happier," her cousin assured her, sounding

very certain. "It was just that everything happened at once shortly before

the baby was born. Ward had all those problems at work and he was

under a great deal of strain. And I was solely concerned with the baby.

Then, after Laura was born I had my hands full and there just wasn't time

enough to be both mother and wife.

Thank heavens I realized I had to get

hold of myself and the situation before everything went to pieces. Life is

just perfect now. Maybe we owe it all to those vitamin tonics you insisted I

take."

"Can I get your name on a letter of endorsement?" Abby tried to project a smile through the teasing words.

"Always the businesswoman! But I'm serious. Maybe all those pills you fed me did some good. All I know for certain is that I would have been a basket case if Ward had walked out on me. He's the most important person in my world. Even Laura will have to take second place to my husband, I'm afraid."

Abby heard the feminine intent and decision in her cousin's words and

swallowed awkwardly. Ward was the most important person in Cynthia's

life. Her cousin would be crushed if she were standing beside Abby and

looking down at the crumpled photograph on the counter. Tears stung

Abby's eyes. Tears of rage and a nameless fear.

"Abby. Are you still there?"

"I'm here."

"Oh, I thought we'd been cut off for a moment. I've got to hang up.

Laura needs changing and the little devil has just spit up all over me."

"The joys of motherhood," Abby murmured.

"Go ahead and laugh. I've never been happier. I've got it all, Abby. How many women are this lucky?"

"Not many."

"Going to see the man from last night again?"

"This afternoon."

"Good. Where are you going?" Cynthia demanded.

"To the rose gardens."

"The rose gardens! Abby, are you quite sure he's, well, a viable candidate?"

"Believe me, I'm sure! Goodbye, Cynthia. Thanks for calling."

"Have fun! And keep the eighteenth free just in case."

Fun, thought Abby as she hung up the

phone, was about the last thing

on her mind. She climbed down off the stool and started toward the

bathroom for her morning shower. It was then that she spotted the second

envelope on the floor just inside the front door.

Even before she bent to retrieve it with trembling fingers, Abby was

certain it would contain another photograph. With a sense of dread she

clumsily unsealed the envelope and slowly pulled out the color print inside.

In this shot there was no mistaking the identity of the man. His profile

had been clearly caught and held as he walked out of the hotel room

beside a woman. This time the scrap of ocean in the background made it

plain that the location was a coastal one. Abby wanted to cry out with

anger and frustration as she studied the other image in the photograph.

The woman beside the man was herself.

For a long moment she simply stood staring at the print, her mind

reeling with the implications. Someone had taken photos of her during

that weekend she had spent at the beach this past winter. Someone had

followed her and taken pictures of herself and a man clearly sharing a

weekend together. Someone had stood right outside her front door,

literally stalked her. Abby shuddered. Why?

Over and over the question pounded through her brain. Why would

someone do such a thing? In a gesture of

restless anxiety she turned the

print around between her fingers. She was concentrating on it so furiously

that it was several seconds before Abby realized there was another slip of

paper inside the envelope.

The note, she thought distractedly. This must be the note. Wasn't there

always a note with blackmail threats? Oh, God. She was becoming

hysterical. She yanked out the slip of paper and quickly read the

typewritten message.

There are other pictures. Several of them. The kind of pictures that

could ruin a marriage such as your cousin's. But all things are

negotiable, aren't they?

It was unsigned, naturally. Abby's teeth clenched together as she

realized the extent of her helplessness. Fury battled with fear, sending her

nerves into a fragile state. Her pulse raced with adrenaline but there was

no outlet for either of her instinctive responses—fight or flight.

Her mind began to whirl in useless, agitated circles, making it virtually impossible to think straight. Desperately she tried to collect her thoughts, pacing the living room with frantic strides. There was no way to fight the shadowy blackmailer. She had no idea who it was or when he would appear in person. Abby felt like a sitting duck waiting for the bullet from the hunter's gun.

Her steps became more restless. Twice she struck a stray box of

vitamins with her foot. When she almost tripped over the box a third

time, Abby kicked at the green-and-gold package with frustrated panic.

She had to do something more constructive than pace her living room.

This was going to get her precisely nowhere. Wondering wildly what other

people did when confronted with situations like this, she tried to force

herself to outline her options.

The short list that occurred to her was hardly inspiring. In fact, its

meagerness generated increasing panic.

Her world narrowed down to the threat represented by the photos and

the instinctive need to protect Cynthia.

Nothing else mattered. She was a

cornered creature who had to take some decisive action or find herself

being maneuvered by an unknown hunter.

Abby froze at that thought. She

would not sit here and wait for her fate!

There had to be something she

could do to protect herself and Cynthia.

Chewing unconsciously on her lip, she forced herself to go to the

window and gaze unseeingly out at the morning Oregon mist. She would

not remain here and cower. Priorities must be set. She had to find out

who was behind all this. She had to *do* something! But there was nothing,

no one tangible yet, to fight.

Which left only the flight response, Abby decided abruptly. Whirling,

she headed for the bedroom. The blackmailer couldn't do much if he or she couldn't reach the victim. There was always the possibility that he might go straight to Cynthia with the pictures, but that didn't seem entirely logical. There was no money to be had that way.

No, it seemed more probable that the blackmailer would first try to find the intended victim. And if the intended victim were out of town, it might just give Abby the breathing space she

needed to figure out what was going on and who was attempting to threaten her.

The decision to run gave her a sense of taking some action instead of offering herself as an easy target. It was an illusory sense of action. She knew it even as she showered, dressed in jeans and a narrow ribbed-knit red sweater, and began to pack. But instinct told her that the blackmailer would seek her out and if it took a while to hunt her down, she might be

able to use that time to do something constructive. If she could lure

whoever it was out into the open, identify him or her, she might be able to retaliate.

Not knowing how long she would be gone, Abby forced herself to pack

carefully. It was April, early spring in the Pacific Northwest and that

meant the weather was still chilly most days. She piled sweaters and slacks

into her largest suitcase and then selected enough underwear to last for a

week. She could always wash out necessities in a hotel room.

Hotel room. What hotel room? Where was she going to go, she asked

herself. And what about the deliveries scheduled to be picked up during

the week by her salespeople?

More time was spent as she got on the phone and arranged to have her

top saleswoman handle distribution.

Gail Farley was willing, if mildly

surprised.

"Sure, I'll come over right now and collect the boxes. But when will you be back, Abby?"

"I'm not sure. Something's come up and I could be gone a couple of weeks. I'll tell the apartment manager to let you into my place if you need more supplies, okay?"

Then there was the impatient wait for Gail to arrive and collect enough

boxes to last the salespeople for at least a week. By the time the other

woman had driven off with a selection of MegaLife products stacked high in the back seat of her car, it was after twelve.

Abby took a last glance around the apartment and then spotted her own private collection of vitamin bottles. Hastily she gathered them up and dumped them into a small zippered bag. If she'd ever needed vitamins and minerals, it was now! Just before she closed the bag she reached inside, retrieved the bottle of vitamin C tablets

and popped a couple into her mouth. This was no time to leave herself open to the possibility of colds or flu.

Abby wondered if she might have overpacked when she realized she could hardly drag her large suitcase to the front door. But how could anyone guess how long she'd be gone in a situation like this? Better to have overpacked than underpacked. With a great deal of pushing and

shoving she got the case into position by the door and was going back to

the bedroom for her coat when the doorbell rang.

It was then that she remembered the date with Torr Latimer. A

horrified glance at the clock showed that it was ten to one.

"Damn!" Now she was going to have to make up some very hasty

explanations for breaking the date. Why hadn't she thought to telephone

him earlier? He probably wasn't going to

appreciate arriving at her door

and discovering that she was on her way out of town.

"I'm awfully sorry. I was just going to call you," she began firmly as she

threw open the door and found him standing there. He was dressed in his

usual conservative style, wearing a tan long-sleeved shirt and dark brown

slacks. A soft suede jacket was folded neatly over one arm. Abby realized it

must be drizzling rain outside because there was a glistening dampness

about his dark hair.

Torr looked down at her without saying a word for a moment, taking in

the slightly frazzled look of her carelessly combed hair and the well-worn

jeans.

"Call me about what?" he finally asked reasonably.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to go out of town," she said quickly,

struggling for a viable explanation.

"Very unexpected. Just got a call from

relatives. You'll have to excuse me, I'm feeling a little hassled. Been packing all morning and I..."

"Where are you going?" he demanded gently, stepping forward with such implacable intent that she automatically gave ground.

"The, uh, the coast," she answered, thinking that sounded as reasonable as anywhere else. "I'm going to spend a week or two on the coast."

His amber eyes narrowed. "At the resort where you spent a weekend

during the winter?"

Abby paled at the reference to the scene of her present disaster. Torr

couldn't know, of course. He was just taking a guess based on having seen

that brochure lying on the counter.

Deliberately she cleared her throat.

"Actually, I'll be staying a bit north of there this time. My relatives have a

place near Lincoln City."

"How long will you be gone?" He moved away from her as he spoke,

stalking across the vanilla carpet with a seemingly directionless grace.

"Oh, a week or so," Abby tried to say lightly. She frowned anxiously as

he wandered toward the kitchen counter. The crumpled photograph she

had received the night before still lay where she had left it while talking to

Cynthia. He didn't appear to notice it, however.

"A little sudden, isn't it?" He lounged negligently on a stool, one foot

braced against the floor, the other

hooked over a rung.

A cold chill coursed down Abby's spine. She didn't like the laconic

attitude and she didn't care for the casual questions he was throwing at

her. It was time to take a firmer hand. "I just got the call this morning. My

aunt wants to spend some time by the sea and she needs someone to look

after her. It's a great opportunity for me to take a few days off and enjoy

the ocean." Abby made a show of glancing at her watch. "I really should be

on my way. It's getting late and I promised I'd be there by dinner. She's the type who will worry, poor dear."

"I'm the type who worries, too." A strange ghost of a smile touched his mouth.

Abby stared at him, uncertain of his mood. "What about?" she asked flatly.

"Oh, this and that."

"Torr..."

"I might worry, for example, about why you would break a date with no

notice just to rush off to visit auntie. Or I might worry about why you look

so tense and flustered when all you've got planned is a drive to the coast to

stay with a relative." His large hand shifted suddenly on the counter,

closing over the crumpled photograph.

"Then again," he went on

musingly, "I might worry about the real reason you've suddenly decided to

take off for the coast. It seems to be a

popular vacation retreat for you."

"I happen to like the coast," she muttered, experiencing a twinge of genuine panic. Dealing with Torr was taking on overtones of dealing with an unpredictable beast. It wasn't fair! She had enough on her mind.

"So do I. Maybe auntie would like to have an extra houseguest. Why don't you invite me along, Abby?"

Her mouth fell open in shock. "Invite you along?" she squeaked. "Torr,

that's impossible! My aunt's place is very small and she doesn't like

strangers. Besides, I can't just...just invite you to spend a week or so with me! For heaven's sake, I hardly know you."

"I'll stay at a nearby motel if you feel your aunt wouldn't want an extra person in the house."

"Torr, you're being ridiculous!"

"No more ridiculous than you're being trying to convince me you've got

a sudden invitation from an aunt that you have to honor." He paused and frowned at her. "You weren't even going to call me, were you? You were on your way out the door when I arrived. What's the matter, Abby? Do you always jump this fast when he calls? I would have thought you'd have more pride."

"When who calls?" she whispered blankly.

Torr carefully flattened the crumpled photograph and glanced down at

the male figure in the picture. "Him. The guy you go to the coast with so often."

Abby swallowed nervously, her eyes never leaving Torr's hard face. "You know nothing about this. And I'm under no obligation to explain myself to you. It's time you left, Torr."

"I'm not leaving without the truth," he stated quietly.

"And if you don't happen to like the truth or believe it?" she retorted.

"Then I probably won't leave at all. At least, not without taking you with me."

Her mouth went dry. "Torr, you can't do this."

"Do what? All I'm asking for is an explanation."

"I've given you one! As well as an apology for breaking our date. What more do you think you're entitled to, anyway? Torr, I don't owe you anything!"

"Are you in love with him?"

"In love with who?" she yelped furiously.

"The man in the photograph."

"No, I am not in love with him!"

"Then why are you dashing off to spend a week on the coast with the man?"

"I am not going to spend the week with Ward!" Abby shut her eyes in self-disgust as she realized how much she'd been goaded into saying.

"Ward?"

"Never mind. Just leave, Torr. Please. I have to get out of here."

"I'd like a last name to pin on him," Torr remarked placidly, studying the photo.

"Well, you can wait until hell freezes over!"

He glanced up, his gaze still and strangely frightening. "Don't you

know," Torr uttered very softly, "that the outer reaches of hell are already

frozen? Hell is a very cold place, Abby. Not a warm one. Cold and infinitely lonely."

In that moment Abby recognized with great certainty that Torr Latimer knew what he was talking about. They regarded each other across the distance of the room. Abby was aware that she wasn't going to get rid of this man without giving him some answers.

"Believe what you want to believe," she finally said wearily. "It doesn't

really matter, anyway."

"Try telling me the truth. I think I'll believe it when I hear it."

She moved restlessly, going across the room to sink down onto the sofa.

"I don't want to talk about it, Torr. Please. Go away."

He stood up with a smooth, lithe movement that made her flinch. He crossed the room before she could get to her feet and an instant later his strong hands closed around her upper arms. He lifted her off the couch

until she stood facing him, her face stark with helpless defiance.

"Is the man in the photograph your lover?" Each word was delivered with the impact of a body blow.

Fear came to Abby then. The kind of fear she had dreaded experiencing again with a man. With it came a fierce determination not to be crushed by it.

"I've told you he's not my lover."

"Who is he?"

"I don't wish to tell you that."

"Abby, you're going to tell me."

"And if I don't?" The challenge took all of her courage. She could feel his

blunt fingers sinking deeply into the flesh of her arms and the strength of

him made her catch her breath.

"You will." It wasn't a threat. As Torr had explained, he simply made

statements of fact. Quite suddenly Abby believed him.

"My cousin's husband," she whispered.

"Ward Tyson. The man who runs Lyndon Technologies, my uncle's computer firm."

"And you're not on your way to spend the week with him?"

"No!"

"But you spent a weekend with him this past winter?"

"That's none of your business!" she hissed.

He said nothing but his big hands moved up her arms to curl around

her throat. The fear smashed through her in a sudden burst and she

opened her mouth to scream.

He stifled the cry with his lips, crushed them beneath his own with an

intensity that robbed her of breath.

Frozen with panic, she went utterly

still, waiting for the tightening of his fingers around her throat. Her eyes

stayed open and her body was taut under his touch. She would fight, she

vowed silently.

But the big, blunt fingers on her throat never tightened. And while his

mouth took control and coolly dominated hers, the kiss was not one of

violence. For a timeless moment Abby braced herself for cruelty. It wasn't

until she felt his fingers gently massaging the nape of her neck, attempting

to draw a response from her, that she understood Torr was not going to

hurt her. The relief was as enervating as the fear had been paralyzing.

"Abby," he groaned huskily. "Abby, why

are you so afraid of me?"

She recalled the way he handled flowers, and sagged against him, taking in air in huge gulps as he allowed her to lay her head on his shoulder. His palms moved along her spine now, soothing and assuring. Abby began to realize that there could be comfort in a man's strength. The thought was enough to make her head spin.

"Torr, none of this affects you," she got out in a painful voice. "Please

believe me. I have to go."

"Then I'll go with you," he muttered into her hair. "And I'll keep you

with me until you tell me the whole story. Don't you think I know

something is very, very wrong? You've been nervous since the last night of

class. And when that photograph arrived, don't you think I saw the way it

affected you? Abby, what happened this morning? Why were you going to

pack and leave without even remembering to cancel our date?"

"I can't explain. I'm not even sure myself what's going on. I don't want

you involved, Torr," she whispered honestly.

"I am involved. Honey, I'm going to keep you with me night and day

until I find out exactly what's going on."

"You can't!"

"Do you really believe you can stop me? Abby, very soon I'm going to be

your lover. I have a right to protect you."

She shook her head, feeling trapped by

his strength and his intent

perseverance. She had a premonition that it might ultimately be

impossible to deny this man anything.

"You can't say that. You don't know

what will happen between us. Torr, be reasonable. Can't you accept my

word that you shouldn't get involved?"

"No. And I'm being perfectly reasonable because I do know what will

happen between us. I've known since the night I took you home after

class."

"Torr, I won't let you take control of me like this!" The protest was faint

but it carried determination. "I won't be rushed into a relationship I'm not

sure I want and I won't let you assume rights I'm not prepared to give."

"Then we'll just sit here in your living room and talk about it until you

are willing to be rushed into a relationship with me and until you are

willing to give me some rights."

She could hear the lazy amusement in his voice and her head jerked up

as annoyance began to replace some of the hopelessness and anxiety she

had been feeling all morning. But before she could speak, she found herself

tumbled lightly down across his thighs as he seated himself on the sofa.

His golden brown eyes gleamed with a trace of his indulgent humor, but

they also reflected the depths of his inflexible will. Abby felt a kind of

puzzled wonder as she tried to

comprehend the man who cradled her.

"You're serious, aren't you?"

"As you've pointed out, I'm always serious. Abby, I don't get involved in anything I don't wish to be involved in. But once I've made the decision..."

He shrugged with massive finality. The message was clear.

"I used to watch in amazement as you made those flowers do exactly as you wished in class," she murmured, searching his face for answers to

unknown questions.

"Just remember that I never bruised or broke one in the process." He

toyed with several tendrils of her honeyed hair. "Abby, are you sleeping with that man in the photograph?"

"No."

"Did you go away with him this past winter? Did you sleep with him then?"

"Would it matter?"

"No. Not if it's all over between the two of you now. If it isn't, I want it over. And I'm willing to do the job if you're afraid to face him and tell him."

She watched him a moment longer and then she came to a decision.

"I'm not having an affair with Ward Tyson, nor did I ever have one with him. He's my cousin's husband. Cynthia and I were practically raised together. We're like sisters. I wouldn't hurt her for the world!"

He assimilated that, his expression unreadable. "So what's the problem?"

"The problem is that..." She paused, licked her dry lips and tried again.

"The problem is that there was a weekend a couple of months ago. A weekend that could be misinterpreted. It would hurt my cousin very badly if she were to find out about it. And someone else seems to know about that weekend."

"And?"

She couldn't tell how much he believed and how much he was simply

filing away for reference. Without a word she freed herself and got up to

cross the room to where her purse lay on an end table. She opened the red

leather bag and removed the second photo along with the typewritten

message. Silently she walked over to where he sat waiting and handed him

the two items.

He studied them both for a tense moment and then put them carefully

down on the smoked-glass coffee table.

"You're being blackmailed," he said quietly.

Hearing the word said aloud made her shiver. Unconsciously Abby

crossed her arms over her small breasts in a childish gesture of

self-protection. "It looks like it."

"How much?"

"I don't know yet."

"Any idea who?"

She shook her head, squeezing her eyes shut in despair.

"Where were you going when I arrived?" The questions weren't brutal,

merely unrelenting. Abby was already regretting her decision to tell him

the truth.

"Somewhere. Anywhere. I just wanted to get out of town. That second

photo and the note arrived early this morning. All I've been able to think

about for the past few hours is getting away from this apartment. I need

time. Time to think. Time to draw whoever it is out into the open where I can deal with him."

"You're sure it's a him?"

"No, I'm not even sure of that. But I thought that whoever it is would try

to find me and in the process I might discover who was making the

threats."

"Did you think about going to the

police?" he asked calmly.

"No!" She swung around to face him.

"No, not yet. Not until I've had a

chance to deal with it on my own. I don't want Cynthia hurt unless there's

absolutely no alternative. She's going to be crushed if she sees those

pictures and someone tells her I had a fling with her husband! Oh, Torr, I

can't do that to her. We're so close to each other. I don't want her hurt. I'll

do anything to prevent that."

"Including paying off a blackmailer?"

"There must be a way of stopping him!"

"Or her," Torr reminded her mildly.

"Or her," Abby agreed bleakly.

There was silence in the room as Torr contemplated the information

she had supplied. He had his answers now, Abby thought uneasily. What

would his reaction be? For the life of her she couldn't read his hard face.

The amber eyes were clear and steady but as unfathomable as always as he

watched her tense expression.

"All right," Torr finally said.

Abby stared at him blankly. He had obviously come to a decision but

she was helpless to guess what it might be. "All right, what?"

"If you want to make a run for it and see who follows, I'll let you."

She flinched, a little taken aback. Somehow, after demanding all those

explanations, she hadn't expected Torr to simply withdraw and let her

resume her plans. Was he going to abandon her now? Why had she let him

force her into telling him the whole story? Proudly she tilted her head.

"Goodbye, then, Torr. You've detained me long enough."

One of the rare flashes of humor lit his amber eyes. "Detained you?"

Lady, that's only the beginning. My next step is to kidnap you. Since you're

all packed and ready I guess there's no point hanging around. Let's go."

"What? Go where? Torr, what are you

talking about?" she demanded

seethingly, torn between relief and sheer outrage.

"You want to disappear for a while and see who comes looking, right?

Well, I've got a place you can disappear to. I'll be along to help look over

your shoulder so we don't get taken by surprise by whoever's sending you

these." He scooped up the photograph and the note and got to his feet.

When Abby failed to move he frowned warningly. "Don't dawdle, honey.

We've got a long drive ahead of us."

FOUR



Abby sat tense and withdrawn as Torr guided the BMW out of Portland

going east along the interstate that paralleled the mighty Columbia River.

For several miles the river formed the border between the states of

Washington and Oregon, cutting a majestic swath through a spectacular

gorge. The densely forested mountains rose skyward on Abby's right and

the river surged toward the ocean on her left. It was a wonderfully scenic route and at any other time she would have been thoroughly enjoying herself. But today being on the floor of the gorge gave her a sensation of being trapped.

Or perhaps it was the knowledge that she was confined in a car with a man she barely knew, a man who was trying to take over her life, that gave her the trapped sensation.

Then again, maybe being a victim of blackmail always made you feel

that way. Her fingers clenched into a knot in her lap.

"I'd tell you to stop worrying except that I don't think the advice would

do much good," Torr mused as he glanced at her hands.

"You're right. I've never been in a situation like this in my life. I'm

furious and I'm scared and I feel so awfully helpless. What if my idea

doesn't work?"

"Oh, I think whoever it is will follow you. We left enough of a trail.

Between meeting your neighbor in the hall and leaving a message with my answering service, it should be easy enough for anyone to figure out we're at my cabin near the Columbia River gorge. We didn't exactly make a secret of our exit."

Abby chewed on her lower lip, remembering the conversational way

Torr had told her neighbor they were off on a trip. Mrs. Hammond's alert

gaze had flashed to Abby and then back to the solid dark-haired man who

stood by her side holding a suitcase.

"Excellent idea, if you ask me," Mrs. Hammond had volunteered. "I'm

nearly eighty years old and I can tell you right now that if I had the first

thirty years to do over again, I'd make a few interesting memories for

myself. Have a good time, Abby dear. He looks like he can take care of

you." The tiny woman beamed up at Torr. "Don't let her scare you off,

young man. She's really much softer than she makes out at times."

"I'll keep that in mind," Torr had murmured obligingly.

"Lovely day for a drive," Mrs. Hammond had said, beaming.

"We thought we'd head for my place overlooking the Columbia."

"Up near the gorge? Wonderful country!" Mrs. Hammond had enthused. "Whereabouts?"

Torr had smoothly given the name of a small community and smiled

blandly at Abby. "Ready to go?"

"Yes." Impulsively Abby had turned toward the older woman. "Mrs.

Hammond, I wonder if you..."

"Don't worry about your plants, dear. Between Bonny Wilkins and

myself we'll see to them. Run along now."

And Abby had allowed herself to be escorted into the elevator and out to

the waiting BMW. There had followed a quick stop to Torr's house, a stark

modern structure that she'd had no time at all to investigate. Torr had

packed a bag with his usual efficiency and they had been on their way

before Abby had seen anything other than the coldly contemporary

black-and-tan decor of the living room.

"Abby," Torr said, interrupting her thoughts. "The real problem isn't

whether or not the blackmailer follows you and shows himself. The

problem is dealing with him when he does."

"I know," she answered, sighing.

"What did you plan to do then?" Torr pressed gently.

"I don't know! Torr, I can't even imagine what the person could want

from me. I mean, I'm reasonably successful but I'm certainly not rich.

There is no way I could give the blackmailer huge amounts of money."

"If he or she is a small-time sort of blackmailer, the demands will

probably be correspondingly small," Torr asserted, shrugging.

"You don't seem overly concerned about them," she accused.

"The size of the demands? I'm not. You're not going to pay off, so it really doesn't matter how big they are."

"I may have to pay him off until I find a way to stop him."

"No."

"Torr, I have to be logical about this. Paying the guy off for a while will give me time."

"Whatever happens, you won't pay him. I

can't let you." Torr's gaze was

fixed on the highway, his profile set in stone.

Abby drew a deep breath. "You will have nothing to say about it. If I

decide that the best way to handle the situation is to make a payoff, I will

do it. My cousin's happiness is at stake here and I will do whatever has to

be done to protect her. I'm not interested in any of your macho stands

against blackmailers."

"Honey, you can't pay him off," Torr explained gently. "Once he has his

hooks in you it will only get worse. The reason I'm going along with you at

this point is because I think it's logical to try and draw whoever it is out

into the open. Knowing your enemy is always a rational policy. After that

we act."

"We'll see," Abby declared mutinously, not liking the way he was

assuming control of the situation. "Have you had a lot of experience with

blackmailers?" she added tauntingly.

"I've had experience with vicious people. Same difference."

Abby's head snapped around to stare at him. "What vicious people?"

"It's a long story and I really don't feel like going into it at the moment."

"Well, I've had some experience with domineering men," Abby retorted,

"and I've learned a few things in the process, too."

The faint shadow of a smile flickered at the edge of his mouth. "No, you

didn't. If you had, you'd have treated me the way I intend to treat the

blackmailer. You wouldn't have given an inch. But you've already made the

first mistake in dealing with me. You've given more than an inch. So

you're stuck with me."

"That's not very funny, Torr."

"Sorry. You're not the first to complain about my poor sense of humor.

We serious types lead a difficult life."
The faint smile disappeared

altogether. "Someday I'm going to want to know all about him. You do realize that."

Abby tensed, knowing there was no sense pretending she didn't know he was referring to the man in her past who had made her so wary. "It's not something I discuss frequently."

"We won't discuss it frequently. Just once. Completely."

Abby sent him an angry glance. "The only thing I'm going to say about

that mess is that I learned a lot from it."

"Such as?"

"Such as the fact that real dominance, real possessiveness is neither

romantic nor thrilling. I also learned that jealousy is a sickness, not a sign

of passion."

"Go on," he encouraged softly.

Realizing that she had already said far more than she intended, Abby

took a grip on herself. She would not let her impulsiveness push her into

confiding everything to a man she didn't yet know well. No one, not even

Cynthia, knew the full story of Flynn Randolph. "It's over. I try not to think about it and I make it a point never to discuss it."

"Has he ever tried to get in touch with you since you ended the relationship?"

"No, thank heavens!"

"Where does he live?"

"Seattle." She frowned. "Torr, I've said I

don't want to talk about this. I

think we should be concentrating on the real problem at hand."

"The blackmailer? Not much we can do until he or she decides to

pursue you. In a rural area like the one I'm taking you to today, it will be

difficult for a stranger to remain totally hidden for long. To get to you he'll

be forced to ask some questions, make some waves. Sooner or later we'll

have him."

Abby heard the finality in his last words and stared at her companion.

"You talk as if we'll be able to do something permanent about him."

"I'll think of something."

Abby stirred uneasily, wondering exactly what she had gotten into by

allowing herself to be swept out of town like this. As the miles rolled past

she finally settled down and began to think about what she'd done. Her

present position was highly uncertain, to say the least, but on the other

hand, there was something distinctly comforting in the knowledge that

she was no longer facing the problem alone.

There was a strength in Torr Latimer that reassured rather than

terrified a woman. Abby wasn't certain why she seemed to find that true

but she acknowledged it was a fact. Torr was capable of blunt

intimidation—she'd already witnessed that—but somehow it hadn't left

her feeling frightened or anxious.

A woman had to be so careful, she reminded herself for the hundredth time. She must not let herself be confused by passion and desire. And there was an element of both in Torr Latimer's eyes. He wanted her. He'd made no secret about it. How much of his present protectiveness was merely a convenient device to seduce her, she wondered.

"What are you thinking?" Torr interrupted calmly.

"That I'm getting paranoid."

"I'd say you've got grounds. People who are being blackmailed have a right to a degree of paranoia."

She flicked him a speculative glance. "I wasn't worrying about that. I

know I've got a right to be paranoid on that subject."

"You're getting paranoid about me?" he hazarded gently.

"A little."

He thought about that for a moment and then nodded. "You may have

grounds for that, too."

"Must you say things like that?" she stormed. "Can't you see I'm nervous enough as it is? I can do without your weird brand of teasing."

"What makes you think I'm teasing?" He looked genuinely surprised at her conclusion.

"Thanks a lot! Go ahead—make me more nervous, anxious and upset than I already am. I don't know what ever possessed me to run off with

you like this. I must have been out of my mind to agree to let you take me

away. I should have gone ahead with my original plan."

"And wind up facing the whole thing alone?"

"It might have been better than spending every minute wondering

whether or not you're going to pounce on me."

"Is that really what you're worrying about? Or are you afraid you might

not try to dodge when I do decide to, er,

pounce?"

"You're finding this whole thing quite amusing, aren't you?" Abby

accused furiously.

"No. Not amusing. Intriguing, perhaps. A little risky, maybe, but not

amusing," he responded quite soberly.

"Risky! For me or for you?"

"For both of us."

"I never asked you to take any risks on my behalf," she reminded him

righteously.

"I wasn't referring to the risks involved in confronting the blackmailer. I

was thinking about the chances you and I are taking with each other." His

low graveled voice was almost bland in tone, as if he were discussing a

purely academic matter, one of intellectual interest only.

Abby eyed him cautiously. "What chances are you taking?"

"The chance that I won't be able to let you go after I've made you mine,"

he admitted simply. "The chance that I'm going to be caught up in your

crazy, undisciplined, off-the-wall way of doing things. I'm not used to

dealing with a woman like you, Abby Lyndon. I'm feeling a bit like one of

the flowers in your arrangements."

"Of all the ridiculous notions!" she breathed, unable to deny that a part

of her was suddenly, deeply fascinated.

"How do you imagine my flowers

must feel?" she blurted before she could stop the question.

"A little confused, disoriented, but rather intrigued. Part of a chaotic situation that can't be fully understood, but which might be quite interesting."

"You're laughing at me," she groaned.

"No, I'm trying to reassure you."

"Are you, Torr? I don't think you're doing a very good job. I think I'm getting more paranoid by the minute."

"Are you really afraid of me, Abby?" he demanded softly.

She looked at the steady grip of his large hands on the wheel of the car

and thought of how efficiently and smoothly he drove. Then she thought

back to the disciplined, orderly arrangements of his flowers. And then she

considered the effect he had on her physically. "I'll let you know when I

finally make up my mind," she informed him tartly.

He smiled at that but said nothing.

The house on the cliff overlooked the

wide river and an expanse of the surrounding scenery that was quite breathtaking. Somehow the location and the view didn't surprise Abby. She glanced around at the forested grounds before trailing behind Torr to the front door of the cedar cabin.

"You seem to like being up high and having a view," she remarked,

vaguely aware that she was hesitant about following him into the house. It was as if every step she took, every move she made today, was bringing her

closer to Torr's side. The feeling that things were happening much too fast and that the consequences might be irrevocable assailed her. Abby fought the uncomfortable sensation by taking her time surveying the scenery. She was unaware of the hint of defiance in her expression or of the unconsciously aggressive stance she had assumed.

Torr paused halfway to the front door, a suitcase in each hand, and looked at her. With her feet braced

slightly apart, her hands on her hips
and that determined expression in her
eyes, she reminded him of a bright,
brave, slightly arrogant poppy flower.
But night was coming and poppies
needed safe, secure places to fold their
petals when the warmth of the sun
was gone.

"Having a place that looks down on
things gives me a feeling of
security," Torr told her quietly. "I
suppose that's why I made sure my place

in Portland and the cabin here were built on hillsides. Come inside. It's

getting chilly out here. I'll start a fire and we can have something to eat."

Abby swung around on her heel and met his eyes for a long moment.

Going inside that cabin was going to change things, decide matters in

some indefinable way. This man wanted to be her lover. He had already

assumed the role of protector. Tonight she would be eating his food,

sharing his fire, sleeping under his roof.

The web around her seemed to thicken and tighten as she stood assimilating the probabilities of her future.

"It's too late, Abby. Much too late. Come inside, honey. You'll be safe here." Torr's words were soft and deeply persuasive, promising everything she needed.

For an instant longer Abby hesitated and then she shook off the feeling of being caught up in a spell. She was

capable of handling Torr if it came to that. And it would be reassuring to know he was sharing the house with her tonight. His presence, she knew, would help to keep the fears and the worries at bay. The decision made, Abby summoned up a very brilliant smile and went over to the car.

"I'll get the sack of groceries we picked up at that convenience store,"

she called cheerfully, leaning down to lift it off the back seat of the BMW.

A flash of color caught her eye as she glanced inside the paper bag. "You bought some flowers!" she exclaimed in surprise. A small bouquet of tiny yellow roses poked their heads out of a plastic wrapper. They were nestled alongside a bottle of wine and a carton of milk. "I didn't see you pick these up."

"There were a few bunches near the cashier's stand," Torr explained as he turned back to the door to insert a key. "I thought they might add

something to dinner."

"Are you going to fry them or boil them?" she asked, grinning.

"It's not nice to pick on people who take life seriously," Torr

admonished as he pushed open the door and picked up the suitcases. He

nodded for her to step into the tiled hall ahead of him and, traces of the

grin still on her mouth, Abby did so. She gazed around with interest.

The interior of the modern cedar home had a professionally rustic look,

complete with heavy comfortable furniture and area rugs with beautiful patterns. The orderly discipline she associated with Torr was very evident.

There were no leftover ashes in the fireplace, no aging magazines on the slatted coffee table, no unwashed cups on the round oak dining table.

The house had obviously been designed to take full advantage of the view. A wall of glass formed one side of the living room and dining room.

With a woman's unerring instinct, Abby

headed toward the kitchen with
her sack of groceries.

"Oh, lovely! An island. I've always
wanted an island in my kitchen." She

set the sack down on the wooden
butcher-block table, which stood in the
center of the functional room.

"Is that what you call it? I thought it was
some sort of dining table. But

it always seemed the wrong height to eat
off of. I thought of buying some

stools for it but then I decided I still

probably wouldn't use it."

"It's a worktable, not a dining table," Abby informed him with a laugh.

"Didn't you know what it was when you ordered it?"

"I didn't order it. I just told the designer to fix the place up and told her

how much she could spend. This was the result." He vaguely indicated the

handsomely furnished interior. "I haven't used the place all that much

since I bought it."

Abby considered that, not knowing how to respond. Had he not used

the house often because he was too busy working or because he had other

things to do most weekends? To cover her lack of conversation she delved

into the sack and began removing items.

"Who gets to arrange the roses?" she quipped, holding them up for

inspection.

"You can do it while I take these suitcases upstairs to the bedroom."

Abby went still, her head tipped slightly to one side. "Bedroom?"

Singular?"

He shrugged. "Bedrooms, plural, if that's what you want."

"It is."

"I was afraid it might be." He picked up the cases and started toward

the staircase. "I'll be back down in a few minutes."

Abby watched him leave, absently aware of how easily he carried the

two cases up the stairs. A strong man and strong in more than just one

way. With him around she was finally able to relax, even joke a little. After

the last photograph had arrived that morning, she hadn't believed she

would be feeling so much more at ease this evening.

Opening cabinet doors, Abby quickly explored the kitchen until she

found a large glass that looked as if it would hold the little yellow roses.

She threw the flowers at random into the

glass and was standing back to

admire her handiwork when Torr returned.

"Mrs. Yamamoto would be shocked," he remarked, surveying the roses.

"Fortunately I'm not being graded tonight." Abby wrinkled her nose in

mock defiance. "Unless you were planning on assigning a score?"

"Good Lord, no! To do that I would have to understand your style and

intent, wouldn't I?"

"Are you saying you don't understand me?" That information interested her greatly for some reason.

"Not completely. Not yet. But I will, Abby. I intend to devote a lot of time and attention to understanding you." There wasn't a hint of a smile in his eyes now.

Abby turned toward the sink, a head of lettuce in her hand. "You make me nervous when you look so very serious, Torr."

"That's the last thing I want to do. But I suppose I do want you to take

me seriously." He moved to stand behind her, not touching her. "You're in

my care now, Abby. I want you to trust me completely. I want you to know

that you can rely on me." His hand lifted to touch her honey-colored hair

briefly. "And ultimately I want you to give yourself to me."

"Torr..."

"I'm not going to pounce, Abby. It's really not my style. Be honest. Can

you see me actually pouncing?"

She heard the wistful amusement in his voice and felt an answering tug

of humor. "You may have a point. You don't look like the pouncing type."

More like the all-consuming overwhelming type, she amended silently.

Hastily she searched for a bowl, using the small action as an excuse to step

out of his reach. "You know, we're going to have to sit down and talk about

just what I'm going to do if and when the

blackmailer shows his hand

again, Torr. What kind of leverage do I have against him? My first

instincts this morning were to run and give myself some time to think, but

what good is time going to do? The more I think about it, the more

nervous I'm going to get."

"Then don't think about it. Not tonight. We'll talk about it in the

morning." He stood like another island in the kitchen, occupying the

middle of the floor and watching her intently as she busied herself with the meal. "Just remember that whatever happens, you won't be dealing with it alone. In the end, we may have to call in the police. You do realize that, don't you? As soon as we know who it is, have some idea of what he wants, and some proof of what's going on, we'll have to notify the authorities."

"No!" Abby swung around, her blue eyes wide with dismay. "That's the

last thing I want!"

"That's what the blackmailer is counting on, honey. That's why

blackmail works in the first place."

"Torr, you promised you'd help me."

"I will."

"Then that means you don't go to the police. If I can't trust you far

enough to be sure you won't do that, then I'm leaving."

"Settle down, Abby. I wouldn't do anything without talking it over with

you first. You have my word."

There was a quiet arrogance in his voice that told her far more than

anything else that he abided by his word. Abby faced him a moment

longer and then turned back to the salad. The situation was a precarious

one in so many ways—not the least her relationship with this man. She

was beginning to feel as if her world were turning slowly upside down, and

the threat of losing control made her fumble a bit with the knife she had

just picked up to use on the tomatoes.

"Maybe I'd better slice the tomatoes while you start the steaks," Torr

suggested, taking the knife from her fingers. He studied her expression a

moment longer and then smiled. "On second thought, I think I'll pour us

both a glass of wine before we go any further with dinner."

He **had been right** about the wine, Abby decided a few hours later as she

lay in bed and waited for steep to arrive. A couple of glasses had taken the

edge off her anxiety, enabling her to relax and even enjoy the meal. Or

maybe she had managed that feat because of Torr's calm, insistent

manner of handling everything from the conversation to building the fire.

Whatever the reason, she had been able to take his advice and put off until

morning any further discussion of the mess in which she found herself.

But now as she lay alone in the darkness, the fears began to resurface. It

was true that she felt a measure of

temporary safety here in Torr Latimer's home, but how long could that last? And what right did she have to

burden Torr with her problems?

Of course, she had hardly involved him deliberately, Abby reminded

herself wryly. The man had simply taken charge this afternoon and

involved himself. She wondered idly if there was anything that could stop

Torr once he had been put into motion. A flickering smile touched her

mouth as she thought about that, but it faded quickly as other thoughts, more dangerous thoughts, intruded.

Who could have taken those photos? And what could the blackmailer

possibly want for them? Perhaps, as Torr had suggested, he would merely

demand a steady, draining payoff. The image of paying off a blackmailer

for the next several years was enough to make Abby throw back the

down-filled quilt and scramble out of bed in restless anger.

As she wandered to the window to gaze
down on the meandering

swatch of darkness, the Columbia River,
she was glad she'd thought to

bring along her warmest flannel
nightgown. A chill was settling in the

house as the night deepened. Perhaps it
was purely psychological, Abby

told herself grimly. Perhaps the chill
was independent of the environment

tonight. How had other blackmail
victims felt when they had been

confronted with the threats?

Angry, helpless, trapped. All those things and more. When she was near

Torr, she could push the frightening emotions to the back of her mind, she

realized. But when she was alone, as she was now, they began to creep

back out of the dark closet where she had tried to confine them.

This morning her instincts had been to run but now she questioned

what on earth that was going to accomplish. Would the blackmailer really

follow and perhaps reveal himself?
What would she do when he did? And
who could it be? What did he want?

The questions became a flood, driving
her away from the window and

into a tense pacing that took her from one
end of the beige-and-brown

room to the other. Desperately she tried
to focus on her surroundings. The

bedroom had clearly been designed as a
rather neutral guest room,

suitable for either a male or a female
visitor. Abby wondered what Torr's

wife had been like. Had he loved her deeply? There was a sense of relief in

knowing that she had never come to this cabin. She had died, apparently,

before Torr had moved to Portland. Did he have other family or friends?

He was such a quiet, such an *alone* man. She couldn't imagine him

surrounded by chattering relatives or even chattering friends. She could,

however, imagine him with a woman. Only too clearly!

Damn! Why had that weekend on the

coast ever happened?

What was Torr doing now? Probably sleeping in the master bedroom

down the hall. She'd had a brief glimpse into the room on the way to her

own. Enough to ascertain that in his room the designer had not been

particularly neutral. The woman had obviously had a fairly accurate

understanding of her client. The huge bed was the focal point of serenely

austere furnishings. The color scheme was one of sober blacks and browns,

offset by the finely grained furniture and the red-gold hue of the walls. Yes,

Abby could imagine Torr with a woman in that bedroom, crushing her

softly in that heavy bed.

This was getting ridiculous, Abby decided aggressively. She wondered if

she had brought any tablets of tryptophan along with her. The amino acid

was reputedly good for inducing sleep. It sold like hotcakes for her. But she

couldn't recall having packed any. What else was supposed to work well?

Abby paused, thinking. A glass of milk, perhaps? The hell with that, Abby

told herself resolutely. She distinctly recalled a beautiful little oak liquor

cabinet in the living room. It probably contained a nice bottle of brandy.

And a sip or two of brandy might just do the trick.

Trusting the long-sleeved flannel gown to act as a robe, Abby cautiously

opened her door and listened for a moment before going out into the hall.

The house was throbbing with silence.

She padded quietly toward the staircase. There was no sound from Torr's room as she went past, but the door appeared to be slightly ajar. Reaching out, she pulled it softly shut so that he wouldn't hear her rummaging around downstairs.

The thought of raiding her host's liquor cabinet brought a rueful gleam to her eyes as Abby traipsed down the staircase to the living room. At any rate, the midnight sortie was at least taking her mind off other matters.

But the momentary amusement she felt at stealthily finding her way

through the shadowed living room to the liquor cabinet faded as the same

questions came back to haunt her.

Who had seen her with Ward that weekend at the coast? Why had she

even stupidly gone in the first place?

Who knew enough about her

relationship to her cousin to sense that it could be played upon in a

blackmail attempt?

Yes, she thought grimly as she knelt down and groped about in the

cabinet for a small glass, that last question was a very interesting one.

Who did know her well enough to realize she would do almost anything to protect her cousin Cynthia?

But the question brought no answers—merely more questions. Her

fingers fumbled awkwardly and she realized just how nervous she really

was. What shape was a brandy bottle? Which side of the cabinet would

Torr most likely store it in? He was such a disciplined, methodical person.

Surely the bottles would be in some sort of regimented order.

Unfortunately she couldn't see well enough to read the labels in the dark cabinet.

"I think I have what you're looking for here."

Abby shot to her feet, whirling around as Torr's voice came from behind

her in the darkness. "Oh, Torr!" As she stared, he stepped from the

shadows near the window where he had been standing. Pale light from a

weak moon gleamed briefly on his clothing. It was obvious he had not yet

gone to bed. He still wore the conservative shirt and slacks he'd had on

earlier. "I didn't see you," she whispered, feeling suddenly very shy and

very tense.

"I know. But I saw you. I watched you glide down those stairs like a little

ghost with your golden hair all nicely

mussed. I wondered if you had come

looking for me, but when you went to the liquor cabinet I decided I wasn't

your goal." He held up the bottle in his hand. Abby could just barely make

out the shape of it. "Come on over here and I'll give you what you want."

With sudden irritation, Abby knew the invitation wasn't just for a glass

of brandy. It just wasn't going to be that simple. Nothing with Torr was

that simple. Slowly she moved across the darkened room to stand in front

of him, uncertain of herself and of the man in the shadows.

Without a word Torr took the little shot glass from her fingers and

poured out a measure of brandy. Then he set down the bottle and picked

up a small object that had been lying on the table nearby. He opened his

hand and Abby saw one of the delicate little yellow roses lying on his palm.

"I was just sitting here thinking of you," Torr murmured. He held out

the rose, waiting for her to take it.

Abby glanced down at the pale object cradled in his large hand and

then she lifted her gaze, trying to read the expression in his amber eyes.

She knew there was a gleaming hunger in those eyes; she could feel it

reaching out to surround her.

"I never pounce, remember?" Torr waited with seemingly unlimited

patience for her to accept the rose.

The hunger wasn't just in him, Abby realized. It was in her as well.

Without a word she put out a hand and touched the rose on his palm.

With great strength and sureness, Torr's fingers closed around hers

before she could remove the rose. And then slowly, inexorably, he drew her to him.

No, Torr Latimer didn't pounce, Abby thought fleetingly as she obeyed

the masculine summons. He overwhelmed, cradled and engulfed. And

tonight there seemed to be both passion

and safety waiting for her in his
crushing embrace.

FIVE

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She came into his arms without a whisper of protest. Torr felt his body tighten and harden at the promise of her. She was so very soft. Soft and warm and vibrantly alive beneath the prim little flower-spattered nightgown. For an hour he'd been sitting down here in the darkness, thinking of her, pondering the mystery of her and the depths of the desire

in himself. He could not remember wanting a woman as badly as he'd been wanting Abby Lyndon.

She had been almost silent as she had padded down the hall, but his instincts had leapt into pulsing awareness when he'd sensed her pause outside his door. In that instant his blood had begun to run heavily in his veins. The possibility that she might have been heading for his room stilled his breath.

But she had continued on past his door after shutting it gently and Torr

had forced himself to calm down. Now where would she go? The rose with

which he had been toying seemed to be burning his fingers as he waited

for the next soft sounds. When Abby had reached the bottom of the

staircase and gone straight for the liquor cabinet, Torr had wanted to

laugh. She was within a few feet of him and apparently after the same

thing he'd been after an hour earlier. A

little liquid sleep inducer.

The realization that she was almost within reach undid any of the

sleep-promoting effects of the brandy he'd been drinking. And now she

was in his arms. A heady sense of satisfaction and anticipation threatened

to make him rush. It took all his willpower to slow himself down. This had

to be done right. More importantly, it had to be done thoroughly,

completely.

When it was over she would know that she belonged to him.

"Torr?" Her voice was a bare thread of sound. He could feel her tremble

against him and the knowledge that she wanted him acted like the most

incredible aphrodisiac. "Torr, I didn't come downstairs for this. I only

wanted a little brandy. Something to help me sleep."

He smiled down at her, his hands seeking the contour of the small of her

back. "You have a beautiful back, did

you know that? Sleek and supple and very graceful. Like the stalk of a flower."

"Torr, I don't think this is a good idea. Things could get very

complicated if we...if we do this." Her face was buried in his shoulder and

Torr heard the uncertainty in her voice. She was as wary and nervous of

him as ever, but at least she was no longer fighting it as she had in the

beginning. Tonight she needed him, wanted him—perhaps even desired

the protection he could offer.

"Things will only get simpler when we become lovers, Abby. They won't

get more complicated. Trust me, honey. Let me give you what you need

tonight. I'll take care of you, protect you. Just give yourself to me and

forget about everything else."

Abby shuddered beneath the soothing, enticing onslaught of Torr's

gentle words. They seemed to surround her, offering comfort and pleasure

and security. His arms did the same in a far more tangible way. She could

feel the strength in him, but it didn't frighten her. Instead she sensed the

promise of safety within his embrace and she found herself nestling closer

to the hard, lean planes of his body.

"Put your arms around me, Abby. Let me feel you holding me."

Instinctively she did as he commanded, unable to resist the soft order or

her own wish to comply. She wanted him, Abby thought in wondering

amazement. She really wanted him. The desire in her was unfamiliar and

unsettling. Was it a function of her own fears and her need for

reassurance? If so, it was startlingly vivid and strong. She'd never

experienced such a rush of feminine hunger. The force of her own rising

passion confused her.

"Torr, I can't seem to think straight. I need a little time," she mumbled

into the fabric of his shirt. "Please let me have a little time."

"Time won't make any difference in the way either of us feels. You know

that. Tonight, tomorrow night or next week—it will be the same between

us. It would have been like this the first night I'd met you if we'd allowed

ourselves to step over all the barriers."

She sighed, an awareness as old as time telling her he was right. There

was no point in even trying to resist this man. He offered everything she

needed tonight. What was so wrong or dangerous about accepting what he

had to give?

"Torr, in the morning..."

"In the morning we can talk," he assured her as his fingers sank heavily

into the curve of her thigh.

"Yes."

"Right now I can only think about the way you feel under my hands. I

want you, sweetheart. Can't you feel what you're doing to me?" He caught

one of her hands and trapped it against his chest. When she raised her

head to look up at him with wide, questing eyes, Torr covered her mouth with his own.

As always, his kiss overwhelmed and claimed. Abby felt his tongue

thrusting between her lips before she'd even had a chance to adjust to the

pressure of his mouth on hers. There was a soft sound, tiny and primitive.

The cry of a female animal accepting the advances of her mate.

Torr reacted to it with a heavy answering groan of desire and he pushed

her hand down his chest, over the flat plane of his stomach to the

aggressive shape of his manhood. Abby caught her breath at the

unmistakable readiness of him. Her senses swam as she tried to assimilate

the potential ramifications of what was happening, but all she could think

about was the compulsion she felt to surrender.

Beneath the fabric of his clothing Torr was aroused and ready. Abby

wanted to satisfy that arousal. More than

that, she wanted to be the only woman who could satisfy him.

"Abby, honey, I need you tonight." Torr pulled his mouth from hers long

enough to explore the line of her throat. His fingers moved up her spine to

the back of her head and then burrowed beneath the tangle of honeyed

hair to find the sensitive nape of her neck.

"Oh, Torr, *please!*" Eyes closed against the exquisite pleasure of his

touch, Abby leaned more heavily into Torr's waiting body.

"Just let go, honey. Let go and I'll take care of everything."

Torr feathered her lashes with his warm breath as he let his fingers trail

lightly around her throat. His searching touch found the buttons on the

front of the flannel nightgown and he undid the first with great sureness.

Abby gasped at the knowledge that matters were now drifting well

beyond her control. In a small gesture of

belated denial she covered his hands with hers and in the process dropped the yellow rose, which she had been clutching in the fingers of her right hand. It fell unheeded to the floor.

"Sweetheart, I'm going to make love to you tonight. Don't try to stop me. We both know now that stopping wouldn't be what either of us wants." As if her hands were gossamer, Torr slipped his fingers down to

the next button of the gown, unfastening it easily.

She was acting crazily, she knew, and suddenly ceased her small efforts

at restraint. She wanted him. There was no need to fight any longer. She

felt him find the last button and then he was pushing the flannel gown off

her shoulders, letting it drop slowly to her waist.

Any uncertainty she felt about how he would react to the sight of her

body vanished beneath the heat of Torr's

molten eyes. For a long moment

he gazed down at her as she stood half-naked in the shadows, and then his

fingers went to the tip-tilted crests of her breasts.

"Abby, you make my head spin. I feel as if I'm on fire," Torr breathed

huskily. "On fire." His head lowered, his lips fastening on hers with such

restrained ferocity that Abby shivered in response.

Excitement flared higher in her, making her senses shimmer. Her head

followed the direction of his silent command, drifting back into the cradle of his shoulder as Torr caressed the gentle fullness of her breasts.

She could feel the ripening thrust of her nipples as surely as he must be

able to feel it. Torr's soft growl of satisfaction told her that he was well

aware of her body's response. Abby let her fingers trail along the column of

his throat, slipping inside his shirt collar to find the first curling hairs on

his chest.

For a moment longer Torr's palm grazed the hardening outline of her

nipples and then with a sudden, unexpected movement his hand went

down her stomach, catching the nightgown and pulling it off completely.

"Abby, Abby, honey, you're beautiful."

Torr let his hand hover for a moment just above the triangle of hair

which defined the area of her womanhood and then he boldly pressed his

fingers against her.

Abby cried out softly against his mouth,
her body tensing with

expectation and feminine uncertainty.

"Oh, sweetheart. Let me feel your
warmth. I want you so, darling Abby.

I need to know you want me."

The words poured over her skin and into
her mouth as Torr's tongue

tangled once again with her own. She
could feel the probing roughness of

his hand and the sensation sent ripples of
shocked excitement through

her. Her legs felt suddenly weak, unable to support her weight. When his

foot thrust gently between her bare feet she gave way to his touch

completely.

Instantly Torr explored her with incredibly enthralling intimacy. The

feel of her seemed to release whatever bonds had been holding him until

then.

"Ah, sweet Abby. So warm and welcoming. I'm going to lose myself in

you tonight, sweetheart."

A moment later Abby felt the dark world revolve dizzyingly around her

as Torr swept her up into his arms and started for the staircase.

"Look at you, woman," he teased huskily, "lying naked in my arms, your hair flowing down. You make me feel like some sort of conquering barbarian."

"Perhaps you are," she whispered, her eyes smoky now with the depths

of her own desire and excitement. She felt him take the stairs with strong

easy strides, her weight obviously not slowing him down. He carried her to

the top and then turned unhesitatingly down the hall to the door of his

own room. In another moment Abby was being settled in the middle of the

wide, turned-back bed.

She lay watching him from beneath her lashes as he undressed in the

darkness. Torr removed his clothes with an uncaring impatience,

stripping them off and leaving them on the floor. When he turned to her,

she found herself drinking in the sight of his magnificently aroused body,

his obvious strength not at all intimidating here in the shadows. She

should be wary of it, Abby thought distantly. She ought to be nervous now

at the sight of him. But her arms reached up for him as he came down

beside her and all fears were forgotten. "Torr, I've never felt like this

before," she confessed as he wrapped

her close and snarled her legs with his own heavy ones.

"Neither have I," he admitted simply, and then he was sealing her

mouth, crushing her back into the bedding.

He made love to her with a fiercely checked desire, as if he had to fight

not to take her with sudden, ungovernable excitement. Abby flowered

beneath his touch, turning to him as a daffodil turns toward the sun. The

heat in him warmed her deliciously, making her feel marvelously alive. His

response to her own initially tentative and then eager exploration thrilled

her. She felt recklessly powerful, as only a woman can feel when a man she

wants responds unhesitatingly.

Her fingers drifted tantalizingly over the contours of his strong back

and Torr groaned aloud as she found his solid, muscled thigh.

"You make it so hard for me to do this right," he rasped, trembling

violently as she stroked the inner side of his leg. His own fingers were even

more mercilessly arousing, however, and Abby thought briefly that if

anyone had a right to complain about not being able to slow down, it was

she. "Oh, Torr, touch me, yes, oh yes."

"Here?" he taunted gently. "Or here?"

"You seem to know exactly where. Oh, darling, *yes!*" The pulsating

excitement threatened now to take her by storm. She had to know the

fullness of him inside her. The soft, feminine sounds in the back of her

throat came more quickly and Torr drank them eagerly.

"Please, Torr." Her body lifted pleadingly against his hand.

"I want it to be perfect," he protested softly, teasing her with his touch

until she was reaching out to urge him closer.

"It couldn't be more perfect. Torr, please take me. Take me now. I'm

going out of my mind."

"I think that's how I want you this first time," he growled. "Out of your

mind with needing me. Because you sure as hell have me out of mine!"

As if he'd reached the end of his self-control, Torr moved abruptly,

crowding Abby back into the pillows with the weight of his body. She

knew a sudden unexpected flash of tension, a primitive resistance that was

almost as strong as the desire she felt. This was not merely a night of

passion that could be somehow ignored

in the morning. She was giving herself to this man.

Torr was aware of the brief panic in her almost before she identified it

in herself and he moved to swamp it. "It's too late, Abby. There's no going

back. I'm going to make you mine now."

The words were like sandpaper against the skin of her shoulder and

then Abby couldn't think at all. Torr was lodging himself between her

thighs, forcing her to accept his strong

muscled body against her softness.

Abby cried out in an agony of need, her arms wrapping him close as she

obeyed his urgent summons. He was probing her, testing his strength

against her, and then with a harsh thick groan Torr was inside her.

The stunning power of his possession took Abby by surprise, even

though all her senses had been pleading for it. She felt as if she had been

engulfed by a wave, half-drowned in the raging force of their combined

passion. It was unlike anything she had ever experienced and she gave

herself up to it because there was no alternative. In that moment, Abby

knew she would have done anything to satisfy this man. Giving herself to

him seemed right and perfect. In turn, she found herself taking. Her legs

closed tightly around his waist and her nails left small half-moons in the

flesh of his back.

"Yes, sweetheart, yes!" Torr drove himself into her again and again,

filling her completely as he sought to
quench the fire that flamed in both

of them. He was losing himself, finding
himself. The words that came to

his lips were incoherent yet carried the
most fundamental of meanings.

The liquid velvet of her sheathed him
tightly until he thought he would

drown. He had known from the
beginning that it would be like this.

Unique. Perfect. Unbearably fulfilling.

When the ripples of completion swept
through her, Torr felt them as an

extension of his own pleasure; he knew a violent satisfaction at having

been able to bring Abby to this level of sensation. He lifted his head with

an effort, determined to witness every nuance of her expression in that

moment. But he was too caught up in the final release to spend more than

a few seconds enjoying her wet parted lips, tightly closed eyes and soft

quick breaths. Knowing she was climaxing beneath him sent him over the

edge. He didn't hear the rough

exclamation that came from his own throat, but he was well aware of the fierceness of his release.

It was a long time later before Abby felt Torr reluctantly, slowly, unlock

himself from her body. She opened her eyes to find him propped on his

elbow, looking down at her with an infinitely disturbing expression in the

depths of his amber gaze. She lay still, aware of his palm flattened

possessively on her stomach and of the weight of his ankle chaining hers.

The air around them was thick with the musky scent of their lovemaking

and there was a dampness on both their bodies. The intimacy of the

moment was overpowering.

"I've been wanting you like this for days," Torr said softly. "But even in

my imagination I didn't realize how it would be." He shook his head as if a

little dazed. "Nothing was ever like this."

"No," she agreed, aware that there was no point trying to hide her

feelings in the rawness of the moment.
"Nothing was ever like this. Oh,

Torr, I've never felt...I've never known
anything like this." Her eyes were

wide with the brave honesty of that
statement.

He lifted his fingers from her stomach
and tenderly pushed back a

strand of honeyed hair that lay damply
on her cheek. "No woman has ever

given herself to me so completely. You
belong to me now, sweetheart. Do

you realize that? You're mine. I think you

were meant to be mine all along.

But even if it wasn't ordained, it's a fact now. I'm going to take care of you,

honey. I promise you that."

Abby lowered her lashes slowly, aware for the first time of the way the

coolness of the room was starting to chill her perspiration-damp body.

"Torr, I think I know what you're trying to say and I...I appreciate it,

but..."

"Appreciate it!" he mocked gently,

humor lighting his eyes for a second.

"How gracious of you."

Abby looked up into his face again, her own expression not mirroring

any answering amusement. This was serious for her and she had to make

him understand. "I know that in the aftermath...I mean I understand that

at times like this, people often say things they think are romantic. Men

like to talk about women belonging to them and...and..."

"Considering the fact that I'm quite sure you haven't had a lot of

experience conducting conversations at times like this, I don't see how you

can set yourself up as an authority on what is and is not a common topic."

The lazy amusement in him grew stronger and Abby was about to press

her point when she realized what he'd just said. It sidetracked her.

"What do you mean you don't think I've got much experience in these

matters?"

He leaned down and brushed her lips with vaguely arrogant assurance.

"Have you?" he taunted lightly.

"Well, no, but I don't see how you can be so certain of that!" she

muttered, taken off guard by his unexpected perception.

"There is something about you when you lie in my arms. Something soft

and vulnerable and honest. I don't know how to describe it, but I do know

that you couldn't be in the habit of doing this very frequently. If you were,

you would have learned how to protect yourself emotionally. You would

not be so sweet and giving. And there would not have been that moment of

fear just before I took you," he added. The tightening of his fingers on her

skin told her he had been aware of her emotions at that point.

The fact that he had read her so well was unnerving. It sent a flicker of

apprehension down Abby's spine. Her eyebrows drew together in an intent

expression as she tried to get back to the

original point she wanted to

make. Darned if she was going to lie here and give him the satisfaction of

telling her just how little experience she'd had! The man was arrogant

enough as it was.

"Torr, what I was trying to say before you diverted me is that I wish you

wouldn't talk in terms of possession. It makes me nervous. I know that to

you it's probably just a word, but to me it brings back reminders of how

unpleasant a man can make life for a woman."

"You don't like the idea of being possessed by me? Not even now after

what we've shared?" He drew his hand along the length of her thigh with a

proprietary touch.

"It's sweet of you to talk of protection," she countered placatingly. "But

please don't talk of possession. All right?" She brushed his mouth with a

fingertip, trying to soothe the trace of rigidity that was threatening there.

"Talk to me of flowers and being together and how you want me. I won't even mind if you point out just how much you can make me want you,"

she said with a whimsical smile.

"Not saying the words doesn't change my feelings. You belong to me

now, sweetheart."

Abby shook her head once. "I belong to no one except myself, Torr. If

you can't accept that, then whatever we have between us ends here now."

"Don't be afraid of me, honey. Please don't." The plea was husky and low

as Torr bent to kiss her shoulder. "Just relax. If it makes you so anxious,

we won't talk about it tonight."

"We won't talk of it ever," she said with quiet emphasis, aware of the

stirring in her body as Torr began to trail his fingers slowly across her

stomach. Where had he learned such magic, she wondered fleetingly. He

only had to touch her and she seemed to burn.

"We won't talk of it until later," Torr told her firmly. "When you're

ready to accept our relationship for what it is. But there is something else

we do have to discuss. And I don't think it can wait any longer than

morning."

"What do you mean?"

"I have to know about that weekend. I have to know why you were there

with your cousin's husband in such compromising circumstances. I need

to know what kind of hold the blackmailer really has on you. You can't expect me to keep working without all the facts."

Abby moved restlessly, twisting a little as though to slip out from under his caressing hand. She did not want to talk about what had happened that weekend. Not with anyone. Torr's hand somehow seemed to clamp around her waist, making it impossible for her to slide out of reach.

"Nothing happened that matters during

that weekend, Torr," Abby told

him very steadily. "It was a mistake. It's over and done."

"Did you spend the weekend with your cousin's husband?"

"I've already told you I didn't have an affair with Ward."

"But you did spend that one weekend with him? Does the blackmailer

have something to hold against you? Why were you coming out of a hotel

room with Ward Tyson? What was that weekend really all about?"

The questions came at her like the flicks of a whip, not quite violent but

holding the promise of violence. Abby froze, the incipient passion fading

in her body.

"Oh, honey," Torr muttered, immediately aware of the tightening of her

beneath his hand. "I only want to know the truth. I have to know

everything if I'm going to help you. Can't you understand that?"

"You were the one who insisted on helping me. I never asked for your

assistance!"

He leaned forward, his mouth hovering just above hers. "Whether you

asked for it or not, you've got it. The questions can wait until morning. Put

your arms around me, Abby, and make love to me. I need you tonight."

She hesitated, unwilling to take the risk of surrender now that she knew

he was going to request answers she did not want to give. But Torr allowed

her no further opportunity to resist. He lowered himself along the length

of her, his mouth moving hotly on hers as his hands stroked her body to

readiness. In a matter of moments, she willingly pushed everything from

her mind except the demands he was making on her and the equally fierce

demands of her own body. The magic of their passion consumed them

both.

Abby awoke the next morning feeling a little angry, a little defiant and

very much trapped. And for the first time since the blackmail had begun,

the reason for her feelings wasn't that she had been made a victim of extortion.

She awoke with the knowledge that she owed Torr Latimer some answers. Abby didn't like the idea of owing a man anything, but she felt especially strange about the obligation she now felt to tell Torr the full truth.

How had she gotten herself into this situation? Frowning furiously,

Abby pushed back the quilt and eased herself out of the huge bed. Torr

slept on beside her, apparently oblivious of her uncertain temper. Abby

paused beside the bed, surveying the man who had freed her passions so

easily during the night.

She had admitted the truth when she'd told him she'd never known

anything as extravagantly exciting and enthralling as his lovemaking. She

had never realized just how much pleasure her body was capable of

receiving—and creating. It was true her previous experience had been

extremely limited, but Abby realized with sure intuition that she would

never know with any other man what she had known with Torr the night

before. Not even if she lived to be a lively old lady with a hundred

passionate affairs behind her.

In fact, this morning, Abby thought gloomily, she couldn't even imagine

having a hundred passionate affairs. She could only visualize herself in bed

with one particular man. Torr Latimer.

Her mouth twisted in wry disgust as she stalked to his closet and

pushed back the door to peruse the neat interior. There on a hook hung

what she needed, a short terry-cloth robe. Yanking it down she wrapped it

around her, the oversize garment nearly engulfing her. Then, with one

backward glance at a still-sleeping Torr, Abby hurried out the door and

down the hall to the sanctuary of her own bedroom.

There she sank wearily down onto her rumped bed and contemplated

her situation. Had she really expected to be able to go to bed with Torr,

she asked silently, and not wake up to find herself bound to him.

The fact was, she hadn't given the future much thought at all the

previous night. She had reached out to take the yellow rose from Torr's

hand and found herself chained. From the instant she had grasped the

rose she had been caught. No, perhaps it

had been earlier than that.

Perhaps it had happened the moment she had succumbed to his offer of

protection. Or had it been the night she had let him drive her home from

the class in flower arranging? The first time she had spoken to him?

It was disturbing to realize that she couldn't even pinpoint the moment

when she would still have been free to walk away. Looking back, it seemed

as if her relationship with Torr had been inevitable from the start. And

everything that had happened since that first night in class had been a

continuum of events, each inseparable from the one before, culminating in

last night's ultimate commitment.

Was that what it was? A commitment? Had she really taken such a step

so mindlessly with a man she hardly knew? It was incredible. Impossible

to believe. But Abby couldn't shake the knowledge.

Restlessly she removed Torr's terry-cloth robe, aware of the intimacy

she experienced just by wearing something of his. The garment

undoubtedly fit his solidly muscled body perfectly, but on her it enveloped

and overwhelmed. Just like its owner.

Letting it drop to the floor, Abby padded naked to the bathroom. The

intent scowl on her face reflected severely back at her from the wide

mirror over the washbasin. Her hair was a honeyed tangle and her body

still looked warm and rosy from sleep. Her body didn't exactly *feel* warm

and rosy from sleep, however. It felt alert and aware and just a little sore

in places. Abby groaned to herself as she turned on the shower and

stepped beneath the pulsating spray.

The feeling of being rushed into an affair she wasn't at all certain she

wanted brought on a momentary sense of panic. Last night had happened

much too quickly. She had too many other problems to deal with at the

moment and she couldn't risk getting so deeply involved with Torr

Latimer.

The problem was, Abby thought grimly, she already was involved. She

needed to put some distance between them and give herself some

breathing room.

Down the hall Torr stretched widely as he heard the shower go on in

Abby's bathroom. He'd been aware of her leaving the warm bed a few

minutes earlier, but he'd also sensed her precarious mood. Judging it best

not to confront her first thing with the intimacy of the night, he'd allowed

her to escape. In her usual impulsive, undisciplined fashion she'd fled his

bedroom in order to give herself a chance to think.

That was all right with him. She wasn't going any farther than her own

room and he couldn't deny her a little time to herself. She needed it to

adjust to the situation, he decided, feeling indulgent. Everything had

happened fairly quickly and she had a lot

on her mind.

Not that anything would be changed when she finally emerged to face

him, he added silently as he walked naked into his own bathroom. God, he

felt good. Strong and alive and determined. Abby had made him feel this

way. She was everything he'd ever wanted or needed in a woman. And she

was his.

It was only a matter of time before she acknowledged that

Abby dressed in a pair of faded, skintight jeans with a heavy leather belt

that gave her a reassuring sense of machismo. It wasn't just men who

could experience that sort of thing, she told herself as she tucked in the

tails of a plaid shirt with a button-down collar. This morning she needed

some of her natural self-confidence, and the belt helped for some reason.

Made her feel a little brash and a little tough. Necessary qualities for going

up against a man like Torr Latimer. She

pinned her hair up into a semi
neat knot and headed resolutely
downstairs.

Torr was sitting comfortably at the
breakfast table, gazing out the
window at a barge making its ponderous
way up the Columbia when Abby
walked into the room. He turned at once
with a slow, intimate smile. In
the morning sunlight streaming into the
kitchen, he looked very real and
disturbingly sure of himself, she thought.
His black hair still gleamed from

the shower and Abby remembered the feel of it. The dark slacks and

open-throated white shirt he wore seemed to emphasize the flat clean lines

of his body, rather than conceal them. His amber eyes were full of

possession and memories and Abby suddenly realized that the bit of

swagger she'd tried for with the leather belt was as nothing compared to

the sure masculinity that emanated from this man.

"Coffee?" He got to his feet and went to

the counter to pour a cup

without waiting for her nod of confirmation.

Abby watched his smooth economical movements, aware of the images

flitting through her mind—images of the night before when every

movement Torr had made seemed to provoke a response from her body.

When he handed the cup of coffee to her, she remembered the way he had

offered the rose.

"Thank you," she managed almost formally and could have bitten her

lip. This was ridiculous. She was no tongue-tied teenybopper unable to

deal with awkward situations.

Unconsciously her chin lifted and she met

Torr's eyes with a grim boldness.

"About last night," she began sternly.

"I have a suggestion to make about last night," Torr interrupted calmly,

reseating himself. "I suggest we don't discuss it this morning."

"We have to discuss it."

"Not now. We have other matters to talk about this morning. Sit down,

honey, and tell me about that weekend with Ward Tyson."

"Not before we discuss last night!" Abby exploded. She dropped into the

seat across from him.

Torr gave her a small, surprisingly wicked grin. "Was last night more

important than the weekend with Tyson?"

"Yes! I mean no. Now wait a minute, Torr, you're deliberately trying to confuse me. They're two separate issues and I want to settle last night

first. To begin with, I want to make it clear that what happened last night is not the beginning of a routine affair."

"No affair with you would ever be routine."

"I want it understood that I'm not going to sleep with you on a regular basis," she ground out.

"Meaning you're not going to sleep with me tonight?" he asked

whimsically.

"Exactly!" she shot back triumphantly. Why she should feel quite so

much triumph wasn't clear. "Or tomorrow night."

"Okay. Now about Tyson."

"Torr, you're ignoring me!" She leaned forward, her elbows aggressively

on the table.

"I could never ignore you, Abby. You're

about all I think of these days,"

he countered with unnerving gentleness.

"I'm simply going on to the next

subject on the list."

"No arguments about the first subject?"
she demanded.

"No arguments. I realize you need a little
time."

"That's very gracious of you," she
muttered, not at all certain of his
mood.

"I can afford to be gracious at this stage.

You aren't going anywhere and a couple of days isn't going to make much difference in the long run.

Nothing will be changed. I can be reasonably patient."

"You mean that you're sure I'll come scurrying back to your bed once

I've settled down and had a chance to think it all over?" she challenged coolly.

The whimsy died in his eyes to be replaced by great certainty. "Abby,

you and I belong together. You're mine.
Nothing can change that. Now
about Ward Tyson."

Abby sat staring at him for a second
longer. Suddenly discussing that
horrid weekend seemed far easier than
dealing with the bonds Torr was
trying to place on her.

SIX



That weekend was a mistake," Abby uttered, sitting back in her chair

and sipping morosely at her coffee. Her eyes went to the barge, which was

making steady progress on the river.

Headed for wheat country, she

decided, knowing that the river curved up into the rich wheat lands of

eastern Washington.

"I assumed that from the start"

Abby's head snapped around as she threw him a simmering glare. He

looked at her steadily for a long moment and it was she who glanced away

first. Eyes once more on the barge, she went on carefully. "My cousin and

her husband had been having... difficulties. Cynthia's pregnancy was a

hard one. There were complications and the doctor insisted she take no

chances. She spent most of the last couple of months off her feet.

Unfortunately Ward was under a great deal of pressure at the time. He

had just been named president, and the board was expecting miracles.

The company had been having problems, as I told you the other night.

Ward felt under the gun to provide the miracles expected of him. He was

working sixteen hours a day and coming home to a wife who was under a

tremendous amount of strain herself."

"A situation ready-made for quarrels, accusations and fears," Torr put

in astutely.

"Well, yes. I was spending a lot of time up in Seattle trying to help out.

Cynthia had a housekeeper, but that didn't compensate for the loneliness

and the worry that something was going to go wrong with the pregnancy.

She was spending a lot of time alone wondering what her husband was

doing. She started imagining things."

"Things like other women?"

Abby shrugged. "Yes." She hesitated,

trying to find words to describe

the next part of the tale. "As I said, I was spending a couple of days a week

in Seattle. I would sleep in Cynthia and Ward's spare bedroom when I

spent the night and sometimes I'd still be up watching television or

something when Ward would get home. With Cynthia asleep in bed and

no one else to talk to, he would get a drink and unwind talking to me. It

got to be a little too much of a habit, I guess."

"And then one evening he wanted to unwind with more than a drink

and a little conversation, is that it?"

There was a curious hardness in

Torr's voice but he continued to drink his coffee quietly.

Abby stirred uneasily, remembering.

"Ward is really a very nice man,"

she tried to explain.

"But he's a man."

"He was under a lot of strain."

"You're defending him for seducing

you?" Torr asked far too mildly.

"He didn't seduce me!"

"He made a pass?"

"It...it was an awkward situation," she said sadly. "He'd been out to a

business dinner that evening. Had a couple of drinks. When he got home

he had a few more, saying he wanted to relax. He asked me to stay up and

talk to him. He explained how depressed he was feeling, told me about his

problems with the company and how

hard things were with Cynthia. One

thing led to another and..." Abby moved a hand vaguely in the air to

explain the rest. Torr, however, refused to accept such an explanation.

"And what?"

"He tried to kiss me. Said he needed a woman and that he admired me

very much. Felt I understood him and the strain he was under."

"Poor misunderstood corporate executive."

"If you're going to be snide about this I'll stop right now!"

"Don't stop now. We're just getting to the interesting part."

"Has anyone ever told you," Abby ground out, "that you're inclined to be rude, arrogant and overbearing?"

"You have. On several occasions. Let's get on with the story."

Abby thought of the variety of different responses ranging from pouring

the remainder of her coffee over his dark head to stealing the BMW and

making a quick escape. None of them seemed practical in view of the

intent way he was watching her. And Abby realized she had come too far

with the story to stop now.

"There was an embarrassing struggle. I managed to get to my bedroom

and lock the door. He didn't try to follow and I assumed that was the end

of it. But it made things very awkward the next day. I left for Portland.

That coming weekend I had a long-standing arrangement to spend a

couple of days on the coast."

"By yourself?"

"By myself," she affirmed coldly. "I take a lot of vacations on my own. I

find it's much more pleasant than traveling with some man who expects

me to warm his bed for him even though I'm paying my own way."

"All right, let's not get into that subject," Torr said soothingly. "I take it

Tyson was aware you were going to the coast?"

"Yes, he and Cynthia both knew. I'd talked about it on a couple of occasions." Abby got up to pour herself some more coffee. She thought about not offering Torr any but didn't quite have the nerve to ignore him.

Silently she refilled his cup and then sat down again. "I checked into my room that weekend and a couple of hours later there was a knock on the door."

"Tyson," Torr growled.

Abby nodded. "Ward had followed me to the resort. Claimed he needed

the time away from the demands of a sick company and a sick wife. Said

he knew I understood because of the way I had understood during all

those long conversations we'd shared. I told him I wasn't interested in a

weekend affair with him. Told him to go home to Cynthia and stop acting

like an immature boy. I really read him the riot act."

"Because you were feeling a little

guilty?"

"I suppose so. I began to wonder if I'd been leading him on by playing

the role of confidante so many evenings. I felt terrible that it might be

partly my fault he was acting as he was. It was all very difficult because I

genuinely like Ward. I always have. And I did understand that he was

under a lot of pressure trying to salvage the firm."

"But you sent him on his way back to Seattle?" Abby nodded firmly.

"What's more, by the time he left the following morning, he'd realized

what a bad mistake he'd nearly made. He was regretting the whole thing."

"He stayed the night and left the next morning?" Torr persisted. "Yes."

"He spent that night in his own room?"

"Yes!" she flared, annoyed at being pushed and prodded. "I had

breakfast with him before he left the next morning and we talked it all

over. He was as relieved as I was that nothing had actually happened. He

felt terrible about having made the attempt."

"How did he explain the weekend to Cynthia?"

"How should I know? Probably told her he had an out-of-town business

meeting. The baby was born soon after that and then everything was all

right again between Ward and Cynthia. But if Cynthia ever saw those

pictures, she'd know he lied about where he was that weekend, and

thinking I was involved too would really

crush her." Abby looked at him

pleadingly. "I can't have her hurt like that, Torr. Even if I could convince

her that nothing happened during that weekend, she'd always wonder

about my true relationship with Ward. It would never be the same

between myself and Cynthia."

"And someone knows that."

Abby took a deep breath. "Apparently so."

"We're going to have to start figuring out

who would know you that
well."

"That thought makes me very, very nervous, Torr," Abby said slowly.

"Who do I know that would do such a thing?"

"I suppose it could be someone you don't really know but who is aware of your close relationship with Cynthia. I wonder if Tyson's getting the same treatment."

Abby shuddered. "Maybe I should talk to

him. Tell him what's going on

and find out if we're both getting the threats."

Torr got to his feet, amber eyes chilling. "If and when we approach

Tyson, I'll handle him for you. The last thing I want is for the two of you to

be drawn together by mutual adversity."

"Are you jealous, Torr?" she couldn't resist taunting. Abby was totally

unprepared for the immediate response her crack drew. Torr, who had

been in the process of opening the refrigerator door, abruptly released it

to stride back across the kitchen. He reached down and pulled her to her

feet, his hands hard on her arms.

"Is that what you want, Abby? To make me jealous?"

Abby instantly regretted her momentary urge to goad him. "You know

it's not." She swallowed uncomfortably.

"A display of jealousy is the last

thing I want from any man." Memories of Flynn Randolph's rages flashed

through her mind and were reflected in her blue eyes.

"Then I suggest you don't try to provoke me. Any man can be made

jealous under the right circumstances and I'm no different than other

men."

That got through to something deep inside Abby. She shook her head

and a faint smile touched her mouth.

"You're wrong, Torr. I think you are

different from other men. If I didn't, I wouldn't have made love with you

last night." She lifted her fingers to touch the rough side of his cheek. That

much was the truth, she realized suddenly. And it made this morning much easier.

"Abby..." Torr caught her questing fingers, crushing them in his palm,

and pulled her close. "Abby, honey,

" please don't fight me. Don't be afraid of me. And don't panic about

what happened last night. I'll give you time, I swear."

She stood on tiptoe and brushed her mouth lightly across his. "Will you, Torr?"

"I think," he whispered huskily, "I'd give you just about anything you wanted except..."

"Except what?"

Your freedom, Torr finished savagely in his head. Fortunately he had the sense not to utter the incriminating words aloud. "When I decide where I'm going to draw the line, I'll let

you know," he replied gently. "In the meantime, feel free to keep asking for whatever you want."

She looked up at him earnestly. "And what about you, Torr? What do you want?"

"Right now I want breakfast." With a smile he patted her tightly

encased rear. "Want to flip a coin to see who gets to make it?"

"I'll make breakfast this morning if you'll do it tomorrow. How's that?"

Abby asked cheerfully, tacitly admitting there would be a tomorrow.

"Fair enough, as long as you don't try to slip any of your vitamins into

the scrambled eggs." Torr reached for the coffeepot.

"Judging from your performance last night," Abby heard herself say

very daringly, "I don't think you need vitamins. Not even my specially

fortified formula designed for the, uh, socially active male."

A slow smile lit Torr's eyes. It evolved

quickly into a laughing, wicked,

blatantly male expression that brought an answering flush to Abby's

cheeks.

"How do you want your eggs?" she demanded, turning away to avoid

the brilliant gleam in the amber gaze.

"The same way I want you. Any way I can get them."

The exquisitely tentative, fragile, budding relationship that had been

initiated between Abby and Torr grew

into an almost comfortable,
surprisingly companionable truce during
the next few days. Abby decided
that the only way she could describe
Torr's attitude toward her was
cautious. He was careful not to make any
references to the night they had
spent together. He was careful not to
give orders. He was careful not to
push her back into bed. All in all, she
realized, he was doing his best to
make her relax around him. And it was
working.

Torr was also doing his best to come up with some answers concerning

the blackmailer. He had sat down with Abby and gone over a list of

everyone she knew in Portland or Seattle who might be likely to blackmail

her.

"Maybe it's someone Ward knows, not me," she suggested at one point,

glowering at the useless list they had drawn up together.

Torr nodded reluctantly. "But then why hit on you? Why not blackmail

Tyson?"

"Perhaps because whoever it is knew I'd be more vulnerable," Abby

replied, sighing.

"Which brings us back to someone who knows you pretty well."

"Torr, I simply don't know anyone who would stoop to this sort of thing."

"Okay, okay, honey, calm down. We'll go back to work on the list later.

What do you say we run down to the

village and pick up some food and maybe a bottle of champagne?"

"What are we celebrating?"

"How about the last night of flower-arranging class?"

"Good heavens, that's tonight, isn't it? Oh well, I was flunking out

anyway. A trip to the store sounds better than working on this list." She

looked at him and smiled. "I get the feeling you're trying to distract me."

"I am." He stood up and reached for her

hand.

"Consider yourself successful," she told him, grinning.

But the distraction proved exceedingly temporary. Torr had barely

walked into the small grocery store that served the community when he

was cheerfully greeted by the owner, Carla Ramsey. Carla, Abby had

learned on her first visit, made it a point to keep track of the comings and

goings of everyone who had a home or a cabin in the area. It was a hobby,

the older woman had explained blithely.

" 'Morning, Torr. Did your friend from Seattle find you?"

Abby felt Torr's sudden tension but his voice was casual. "Apparently

not. Haven't had anyone come calling. Someone came looking for me

recently?"

"Day before yesterday. I gave him surefire directions to your place, but

maybe he couldn't find it after all." Carla winked at Abby. "Or maybe he

just decided he didn't want to bother the two of you. I told him Torr

wasn't alone."

Abby shivered, a thousand questions corning to her lips. Evidently

Torr's own questions weren't far behind. He got his in first.

"What did he look like, Carla?" he asked as he deliberated over the

frozen steaks. "Maybe I can figure out who it was and give him a call.

Abby and I are fairly hospitable, aren't we, Abby?"

"Of course." Did anyone notice how thick the words sounded, she wondered.

"Hard to describe," Carla said. "Nice lookin' man about thirty-five or so,

I'd say. Course, it's difficult to tell about age. Brown hair, I think. Kind of

on the thin side. Wiry, you know." She shrugged. "Sorry, I never was much good at describing folks."

"I see," Torr said easily as if the matter were unimportant. "Could be

anyone. Did you notice the car?"

"Just a Chevy. Nothing special. Light-colored, I think. Does that help?"

"Nope, but don't worry about it." Torr crushed Abby's hand in a

reassuring fashion and then pushed her in the direction of the vegetable

bin. "See what you can find for a salad, honey."

Abby obediently headed for the vegetables, almost unable to focus on

the row of head lettuce. The blackmailer had been here. Right here in this

store! It must have been him. At least they had confirmed that it was a him and not a her, she thought bleakly. But it was frightening to know the man had been this close, that he had tracked her this far. The illusion of safety she had been enjoying for the past few days disintegrated. Now the blackmailer knew about Torr. That realization made her fingers tremble as she blindly selected the lettuce.

By the time she reached the counter, Carla was assuring Torr that she

had not only given the stranger accurate directions, but had really had quite a pleasant chat with him.

"A real friendly guy. Wanted to know how you were doing, how often you got to use the cabin. All kinds of things."

"I see." Torr affected mild interest while he glanced around for anything he might have forgotten. "Probably a business acquaintance who was just passing through. After you told him how to get to my place he must have

decided he didn't have the time to look me up."

"Well, like I said," Carla smiled broadly, "once I told him about your friend Abby he probably decided he didn't want to intrude. Will that be all?"

"Yes, I think that will do it. Anything else, honey?" Torr glanced

inquiringly at Abby, who barely managed a polite expression.

"No, there's nothing else we need for tonight, Torr."

He must have realized she was trembling because he grasped her arm

very firmly in one hand while he scooped up the sack of groceries in the

other. Torr took both of his packages outside to the BMW and deposited

them. Abby didn't know about the grocery sack, but she was extremely

grateful to be set down. Her knees had become distinctly wobbly.

"I think I need some calcium tablets," she muttered. "My legs feel quite

weak. And maybe some more iron, too."

Torr slid into the driver's seat and reached out to grasp her firmly by the shoulders. "We don't know for certain it was him."

"It must have been."

"All right, I'll agree it most likely was him. But that doesn't mean you

have to panic. It just means your plan to draw him out of hiding is

working."

"He knows about you now, Torr," she whispered starkly, searching his

face.

"So? That was part of the plan, remember?"

"Your plan. Not mine. I had no right to involve you in this." Oh, what

had she been thinking of to let him help her? How could she possibly

protect him? The thought of Torr being in danger because of her was

suddenly an overwhelming burden.

"You didn't involve me. I involved myself. I practically kidnapped you, if

you'll recall. Abby, don't you dare start in on a guilt trip because of me. If

you so much as apologize for the situation we're in, I swear, I'll..." He snapped off abruptly.

"You'll what?" She tried a tentative smile and was surprised to find that

it worked. There was something vastly reassuring about having Torr

Latimer here beside her.

"I was going to threaten violence," he explained wryly, releasing her to

start the car, "but then I decided that might not be quite what you need to hear under the circumstances."

Abby watched his controlled movements, vaguely aware of how much pleasure she took now in simply observing him. "I don't see you as the violent type," she decided, relaxing somewhat.

For some reason that drew an almost amazed reaction from him. Torr

took his eyes off the winding road long enough to send her a disturbingly

probing, almost fiercely demanding glance. "You don't?" His voice sounded unnaturally restrained.

"No."

"Remember that in the future, will you?"

"Why? Going to make more threats?" she asked lightly.

He shook his head impatiently, concentrating now on his driving.

"Abby, I told you the other morning that any man could be made jealous under certain circumstances. Well, I

think any man could become violent under certain circumstances, too."

"Human nature, I imagine," she remarked shrugging, wondering why

he sounded so tense. "Male nature."

"Yes. But Abby, I want you to know that I would never hurt you."

She was deeply touched by his attempt to calm and comfort her. "I

wouldn't still be here alone with you if I thought you might be capable of turning violent with me," she said gently.

It was the truth.

That didn't appear to have the desired effect. Torr's strong fingers

tightened on the steering wheel and his mouth hardened. "I want you to

trust me, Abby."

"I do." These past few days had built the foundation of that trust, she

realized. Confidently she reached out to touch his sleeve. When he glanced

quickly down at her hand she withdrew it.

"Do you really, Abby? Trust me completely, I mean?"

"Torr, why the inquisition? I've just told you I wouldn't be here with you

now if I didn't. I wouldn't have let myself be kidnapped from Portland if I

hadn't felt on some level that I could trust you. The only thing I'm worried

about at the moment is dragging you into my problems."

"I'm not giving you any choice on that score. I'm going to take care of

you, Abby. That means I'm involved in

your problems. Speaking of which,

I think we ought to go over that list of yours with Carla's description in mind."

She sensed his desire to revert to a more businesslike topic and was

about to go along when another thought occurred to her. "Torr, what

about your work? How long can you be away from it?"

He appeared unconcerned. "As long as I want. I

have nothing hanging fire at the moment.
I'm not trading any contracts
just now."

"No pork-belly futures going through the ceiling?" she teased.

"Actually, I made my profits in grain futures this past year," he told her.

"The drought in the Midwest gave me an edge. I managed to buy contracts on corn before the prices started to climb."

"And made a bundle when everyone realized the harvest wasn't going to

be so good this year, hmmm? There's something intriguing about that

kind of speculation, but I think it would make a nervous wreck out of me.

I'll stick to vitamins. Maybe I should try selling them to commodities

traders. Sounds like the kind of business where people need to take their

vitamins and minerals regularly."

"Knowing commodities traders, they'd probably try to find a way to

trade them rather than take them. Abby, about that description of

Carla's..."

She sighed and sank back into the depths of the leather seat. "Torr, it

could be almost anyone. Even a couple of my salespeople."

"I thought most of your salespeople were women."

"They are, but I've got a few men, too."

"How on earth did you ever get into the door-to-door vitamin business, anyway?"

"By accident. Someone came to my door

one day selling cosmetics and I

decided that if people bought things that made them look good, they'd

probably buy stuff that made them feel good. Especially here on the West

Coast where everyone's so fitness-crazed. I was looking for a major career

change at the time, so everything coincided nicely."

"I was in the same position myself when I decided to get into

commodities trading," Torr said quietly. "I wanted a career change."

She had an urge to ask him more about that need, a part of her

wondering if there had been personal considerations involved as there had

been with her. But something held her back. There were private depths in

Torr that she was not yet ready to plumb. For fear of being turned away?

Perhaps. Or maybe for some other, unnamed fear. In any event the

moment passed as Torr went back to the subject at hand.

"If Carla's visitor was our blackmailer,

then he now knows where you
are. He'll act on the information.

"Oh, God, what am I going to do if he
comes knocking on the door with
a gun or something?"

"He won't."

"You sound awfully certain of that."

"It makes sense for him to keep his
identity a secret if he can. Why take
the risk of having you possibly hire
someone to get rid of him?"

"That's a thought!" What a splendid idea.
Hire someone to get rid of
whoever was blackmailing her!

"There's a slight drawback to hiring a
professional remover of other
people," Torr said dryly.

"Money? It would be worth the price!"

"For someone who's not big on violence,
you're suddenly sounding
rather ferocious. Do you realize exactly
what you're saying?"

"It's just that for a moment there it

sounded like such a neat plan."

"Not so neat when you consider the fact that you'd be left to deal with a

professional killer after he'd done the job. If you think you've got trouble

now, just imagine what that might be like."

"You're right, I suppose," Abby agreed, albeit slowly.

"Don't sound so forlorn. You've still got me, remember?"

"But we've just decided you're not the killer type," Abby pointed out

ruefully. She waited for his answering smile and when it didn't come she

found herself hurrying into conversation.

"So, we're stuck with a

description of a man who could look like anyone and who drives a car

which could belong to anyone."

"We'll go back through that list of people you know when we get home.

Not everyone on it is male, has brown hair and is wiry and thin. Surely

we'll be able to eliminate a few!"

"We're not even sure the guy's on the list to begin with," Abby protested disgustedly.

"Even if he's not, he'll soon be making another move. When he does we'll

probably have a few more clues with which to work. It's like watching the

commodities market," Torr offered easily. "A couple of hints here and

there, a little speculation and a lot of grass-roots psychology. Apply

everything properly and you'll come out a winner."

"You sound so sure of yourself."

"I was trained to be," he answered, shrugging.

"In the commodities market?" she asked curiously.

"No. Before that. When I had another job."

He was closing up on her again, Abby realized, discouraging questions

he didn't want to answer. This time she persisted. "What sort of job?"

"I worked for a large corporation up until almost three years ago," he

told her shortly.

"And that's where you learned to be decisive?"

"Goes with the territory."

"I don't know about that. I think that with you it comes naturally," she

said thoughtfully. He seemed quietly grateful that she let the subject drop.

The blackmailer didn't make his next move until three days later. Abby

had begun to relax again. She had even gotten to the point of wondering if

the knowledge that she was with Torr had discouraged the extortionist.

Over breakfast one morning she brought up that possibility.

"Maybe he's been scared off now that he knows I'm not alone," she

remarked, spreading red currant jelly on her toast.

"Maybe." Torr didn't appear convinced.

"After all, in the beginning he was only threatening one lone woman.

The whole picture might have changed for him when you came into it."

Torr looked up from the copy of the *Wall Street Journal* he'd gone down

to the village for earlier that morning. Something close to anticipation

flared in his amber eyes. "In which case you'll have to stick close to me,

won't you?"

Abby paused in the act of spreading the jelly and tilted her head to one

side. It was suddenly borne in on her just how very domestic this little

breakfast scene was. The knowledge made her feel uncomfortably warm.

"Don't you think you might grow a little bored with a long-term arrangement like that?" she asked delicately.

Torr folded the *Journal* and placed it neatly beside his plate. Then he picked up his coffee cup and met her eyes over the brim. "No," he said quite simply.

"Oh." She couldn't think of anything else to say. There was a pregnant pause. Then she held out a slice of jelly-spread toast. "Want some more

toast?" she asked with unnatural brightness.

"No, thank you."

She ate it herself in a rather large gulp that nearly choked her. A

swallow of coffee overcame the obstacle.

"Abby," Torr asked gently, "do you really think I could take the thought

of you having breakfast like this with some other man now that we've been together?"

She lowered her lashes uncertainly, aware of the ripple of excitement in

her veins. "It's not as if we're having an...an affair," she pointed out

weakly.

"We've slept together once," he said quietly. "It will happen again. In

fact, it's going to happen on a very permanent basis one of these days. I'm

only giving you a little breathing space at the moment."

"Gosh, thanks!" Her abrupt annoyance at his masculine arrogance

blazed in her eyes. "As it happens, I'm very fond of both breathing and breathing space!"

He grinned unexpectedly. "Then enjoy yourself for the time being. One

of these days you're going to run out of breathing room. And when you do,

I'll be right behind you."

"You said you weren't the pouncing kind!"

"I'm not going to pounce. I'll just be there when you run out of breath."

"Sometimes you annoy me a great deal, Torr Latimer!"

"But I don't frighten you," he pointed out with serene satisfaction. "Not any longer."

He was right, she was forced to admit. He didn't frighten her. At least,

not in the ways she had once been frightened of a man. Which was not to

say she shouldn't remain wary of him, Abby told herself. Torr presented an

entirely different sort of threat from the kind she had previously feared.

Sometimes subtle, often teasingly blatant but always *there* was the

inescapable knowledge that he wanted her, that he was waiting for her.

The relationship between herself and Torr was complex in many ways and

astoundingly simple in others. The attraction between them remained a

carefully banked fire, but it was stronger than ever.

But while he kept the physical side of the relationship under control,

Torr allowed companionship to grow

stronger. She and Torr had become

friends this past week, Abby realized at one point. It was a unique

friendship, however. Not the easy casual association she normally allowed

herself and a nonthreatening male, but a pulsing vital relationship that

blended at the borders into an emotion she was still reluctant to name.

It had dawned on her slowly during their morning walks, which had

become a daily ritual, that there was a growing sense of inevitability

buried in her feelings toward Torr. In the back of her mind was the

knowledge that it could be only a matter of time before good friends

became lovers, especially when the physical attraction simmered so

constantly beneath the surface.

It was during the after-breakfast walk on this particular morning that

Abby found herself finally accepting that sense of inevitability. For the

first time she stopped trying to repress the knowledge that if she stayed

near him she was bound to run out of the breathing room Torr had

promised. And for the first time she didn't allow that knowledge to feed

her habitual caution.

Perhaps it was the serenity of their environment that allowed her to

accept the dangerous situation between herself and Torr. The dark-haired

man beside her seemed a part of that cool serenity. His fingers were laced

with hers, strong and sure, as he guided her along one of the forested

paths behind the cabin. It wasn't that he had the look of a backwoodsman

or a lumberjack, she thought with a small secret smile. Rather Torr

seemed in harmony with his surroundings, a counterpoint to the towering

pinetrees and the crunch of needles underfoot. There was a fundamental

strength in him that reached out to envelop her just as the fresh, clean

morning surrounded her. The temptation to surrender to both the vivid

mountain day and the man who shared it with her was intoxicating.

"Tell me about him," Torr ordered gently as he led her to a clearing at the top of a crest overlooking the river. He wasn't watching her face, because his attention was on the dark swath of water below, but she knew he sensed her startled reaction.

"About whom?" The wariness that had faded to the back of her mind abruptly moved forward again.

"The man who made you so cautious.
The one you say taught you to fear
a man's possessiveness."

Abby sighed. "Why do you want to know
about Flynn Randolph? Believe
me, I do my best not to think about him."

Torr shook his head, sinking down onto
the dry pine needles and

tugging her down beside him. He smiled
bleakly as she drew her jeans

knees up under her chin and wrapped her
arms around her legs. "He's

there in your head all the time.
Whenever I get too close I can sense him.

The only time I manage to drive him away is when I..." He stopped

abruptly, his hand curling around a stray wildflower that had poked its

bright yellow head up amid a patch of greenery.

But Abby knew what he had been about to say. "When you make love to me."

"Yes."

"I should think that would be enough to satisfy your ego." Instantly she

regretted the words. She hadn't meant to snap at him, not on this soft

fresh morning. The breeze lifted the tendrils of her honey-colored hair as

Torr regarded her silently for a tense moment.

Then he leaned forward and brushed the small wildflower he had

plucked against her lips. His mouth followed, taking hers in a short

blatantly possessive kiss.

"It's not my ego that needs gratification at the moment," he told her calmly.

"What, then?" She could still feel the imprint of his hard mouth and the trace of the flower's softness. It left her warm and restless and a little hungry for something she didn't want to put into words.

"My curiosity. My sense of something being hidden.

My need to know you completely." He let his hand fall from the nape of

her neck. "I told you that you remind me of one of your own flower

arrangements. A man has to keep examining you from all angles in order

to figure out exactly what's involved. On one level everything seems

relatively open and straightforward. But it doesn't take long before it

becomes obvious there are a lot of hidden complexities. You fascinate me,

honey. I want to keep peeling away the petals until I find the real you. So

tell me about him."

"And if you don't like what you find?"
she challenged huskily, her gaze

on the traffic winding its way along the
interstate that followed the river.

The cars appeared very small from up
here, just another species of animal

migrating through the forest. The river
and the gorge it had cut had been

here eons before the cars had arrived
and would undoubtedly remain long

after the metallic creatures had
disappeared from the earth. Some things

were enduring and inevitable. In her

world, Abby realized, Torr had

become as much a force as the ancient river.

"I'm not worried about whether I'll like what I find beneath the petals,"

Torr said softly. "I've already satisfied myself about that. I just want to be

sure that I drive out the shadows that other man left. I want to know every

last petal is mine with no reservations."

There was no point trying to delay or lie. Torr had a right to know. Why

he had that right Abby couldn't quite explain to herself, but she didn't

argue further. "We worked for the same real-estate development firm in

downtown Seattle," she began slowly.

"Flynn was an executive. I was in

sales. He was everything women generally find attractive in a man.

Good-looking, successful and incredibly charming. When he took an

interest in me I was thrilled. He made a perfect escort. Headwaiters all

over town knew him by name. He

always had tickets to the ballet or the theater. Going out with him was like going out on a date faultlessly

orchestrated by a fairy godmother. I never had to make any decisions or

even offer suggestions. Flynn handled everything. It took me a while to

realize just how little input I had."

"And when you did realize that, he didn't want any suggestions?"

"He didn't take them well." Abby grimaced. "In fact, he got inordinately

upset whenever I suggested we do something different than what he had planned. At first his masterfulness was rather intriguing. I felt pampered and special. But then it became annoying. He got angry when I tried to tell him what I wanted. He didn't make a joke out of it the way you did that night with the squid. He got genuinely furious. He had a reputation for losing his temper when he was thwarted in business, but because he was a

man, people accepted that. When he started losing his temper with me, I

concluded that there was something more involved than masculine

temperament and I got nervous. There was something irrational about it

on occasion."

"Did he become physically dangerous?"

The words were almost formal

in tone but that very formality told Abby just how intensely Torr was

paying attention.

"There was only once," she whispered.

"The last time I saw him..." She

swallowed and focused very hard on the cars beside the river. "But up until

then he seemed able to get control of himself before things got out of

hand. I knew after a few weeks of seeing him, however, that I was going to

have to get out of the relationship. I was beginning to feel trapped in a silk

net. As long as I was sweet and agreeable and properly docile, Flynn played

the role of Prince Charming. Whenever I strayed from my assigned role, he

got increasingly unpleasant. I knew it had been a mistake to get involved

with him, but I didn't think it was too late to get out of the relationship

without hard feelings. After all, he and I had never...I mean, it hadn't

gotten to the point where we were..."

"You weren't sleeping together?"

"No. We weren't sleeping together."
Torr had a way of cutting to the

heart of the matter, Abby thought wryly.
"At any rate, I told him I didn't

intend to give up my other male friends,
that I intended to keep dating

other men. I implied I'd be seeing less of
him."

"How did he take that?"

"He announced the next day that he and I
were engaged," Abby said

bluntly.

"Engaged!"

"I think he actually believed it. He had a

way of convincing himself of

anything he wanted to believe. As you can imagine, I was furious. I refused

to see him again and made a point of dating other people. That's when I

realized Flynn was potentially dangerous. He made wild accusations,

called me unfaithful. When I pointed out that he had no claim on me, he

went into a rage. It became uncomfortable to go into work. No one else in

the office could figure out what was

happening.

If Flynn said we were engaged, they reasoned, then we must be engaged.

Why would a high-ranking executive lie about a thing like that? When I

denied it, everyone decided I must be playing hard to get. Flynn

encouraged them to think I was just playing games. At work he was

indulgent and charming toward me, as if he were humoring a recalcitrant

female."

"What happened outside of work?"

"He began dropping by my apartment at odd hours, demanding to

know who was in bed with me. When I told him the truth, that there was

no one, he accused me of lying. He kept saying I was unfaithful, a cheat.

Well, actually, he used somewhat more forceful language," Abby corrected

unemotionally.

"So you finally quit your job?"

"In the end I made the mistake of going

to his apartment one evening

after he had made an ugly scene in front of a friend of mine, a man with

whom I was having dinner. I told him to stop bothering me or I'd get some

legal assistance. He lost control completely and struck me." Abby shivered,

recalling that if she hadn't managed to escape through the door she'd left

open, she would have found herself severely beaten, perhaps raped. She

sensed the tension in Torr but her mind

was turned inward, remembering the violence of that last scene. After a moment she continued. "I ran out of the apartment and into the street, found my car and drove back to a hotel.

I was afraid *to* go home in case he followed me. The next morning at work he was back in his Prince Charming role, just as if nothing had happened.

I realized no one would ever believe the way he had acted the night before.

I quit that day and left town for a week to give myself some time to think.

That was when I decided to start over in Portland."

"He didn't try to see you again?"

"No, thank heaven. He just disappeared from my life. Or I disappeared

from his, depending on how you look at it," she tried to say flippantly.

"And there you have it in a nutshell. That all happened two years ago and

since then I've been very, very careful around men who have a tendency to

become possessive."

"Not careful enough, apparently," Torr said coolly, rising to his feet and pulling her up beside him.

She frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're involved with me and I'm going to be a very possessive lover,

sweetheart." Torr lowered his head to kiss away the protest that came

immediately to her lips, not releasing her until she relaxed against him.

Finally he lifted his head and smiled down into her blue eyes. "But I won't

rush you and I would never hurt you.
When you finally trust me completely
and understand my kind of
possessiveness, I'll know that Randolph
is
really out of your life."

Abby tried to think of something else to
say, some further explanation
or protest, but nothing came to mind and
she allowed herself to be led
back toward the cabin. The questions
and uncertainties hovered in her
head until they reached the front door.

Then Torr paused in the act of inserting the key into the lock.

"Well, well," he murmured, reaching down to pick up an envelope that had been half thrust under the doormat. "Looks like we missed someone interesting."

Abby shuddered, her eyes widening anxiously as she reached out to take the manila envelope from his hand.

"Do you want me to open it?" Torr asked softly, watching her with

concern.

"No. I'll do it." She ripped at the tightly sealed envelope, her anger and

fear making her movements impatient and erratic. The truth was, she

hadn't wanted Torr to be the first to see whatever was inside. There might

be more photos. How many more of those could Torr look at before he

began to wonder if she'd told him the whole truth about that weekend?

With a final wrench she yanked open the envelope, spilling the contents

awkwardly at her feet. Instantly she dropped down to collect the fallen

papers. Torr knelt down beside her. He swore with soft savagery as his

fingers closed around one of the items, a photocopy of a newspaper

clipping, the kind made from files of newspapers kept on microfilm.

Available in any public library.

"Abby, wait, let me get these," he ordered, but it was too late. She had

already picked up another of the fallen clippings.

In stunned amazement she simply crouched there staring at the newspaper headline and the photo that accompanied it. The story carried a dateline from a midwestern city three years before.

The photo was of Torr Latimer and the headline announced that he was the brilliant corporate president whose wife had recently been found drowned under suspicious circumstances.

The smaller headline announced that

there was speculation that

Latimer had killed his wife in a jealous rage.

SEVEN

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"Our blackmailer seems to do his homework fairly thoroughly." Torr

ignored Abby's stunned expression, methodically picking up the scattered

clippings and the note that accompanied them. He straightened and

calmly finished unlocking the front door.

Abby, still crouching, stared after him for a timeless moment. He was

acting as if nothing had happened. He was so monumentally cool about the whole thing while she was on the verge of exploding from a combination of fear and anger.

Speculation that Latimer had killed his wife in a jealous rage. Latimer, the brilliant successful head of a large corporation. Latimer, who had told her that he'd wanted a career change about three years before.

Latimer, whose amber eyes had flared with the promise of masculine

possession, who'd claimed that Abby belonged to him now. Had his dead

wife once seen that possessiveness? Been a victim of that claim?

Abby scrambled to her feet and followed Torr into the house. "The note," she managed in a voice that surprised her with its steadiness, "let me see the note that came with the clippings."

Torr carried the envelope and its contents into the kitchen and set them down on the table in a neat pile. The

typed note was on top and he read it

before silently handing it to Abby. She almost snatched it from his hand.

There is no safety with him. Latimer killed once because his woman

was sleeping around. He'll do it again when he finds out what a little

whore you are. You've jumped from the frying pan into the fire.

Better run if you still can.

Shaking, Abby dropped into a chair beside the table. She stared

sightlessly out the window, vaguely aware that Torr was preparing coffee.

How could he do that, she wondered. How could he calmly make coffee

while these clippings hung between them like a time bomb?

"I didn't kill her, you know," he said quietly as he waited for the coffee

to filter into the pot. "The coroner's verdict was accidental drowning. She

took the sailboat out by herself even though the weather reports had been

bad. I wasn't home at the time. I was in

New York on business."

Abby brought her gaze back to his as he set coffee down in front of her

and took the seat on the other side of the table. "Was she...did she have

another man?"

"Oh, yes, she had another man."

Abby stared at him, trying to read the stark shuttered expression in his

eyes. "Did you know?"

"I knew."

"You quarreled?"

"We quarreled. Frequently."

"Why didn't you just get a divorce?"
Abby asked painfully.

"I was going to file after I returned from New York."

"Why hadn't she filed already if she was in love with someone else?"

"She was more in love with her share of my income than she was with

the other man. Money was always very important to Anne. She hadn't had

a lot of it while she was growing up and the lack of it left its mark. She

needed the financial security I could give her. But she didn't need me for much else."

There was no bitterness in his words. There was no emotion at all.

Somehow that made Abby more nervous than anything else could have

done. Torr's calm, cold response to her questions seemed unnatural. She

reached across the table to where a row of her vitamin bottles had been

neatly lined up. Selecting the vitamin B complex, she gulped down a

couple, chasing them with the too-hot coffee.

"If your nerves are shaky, you probably shouldn't be drinking coffee,"

Torr observed mildly. "It would probably be more effective to stop the caffeine than to pop vitamin B."

"You're an expert on vitamin therapy now along with everything else?"

She hadn't meant to snap at him like that. She wanted to stay in control of

herself—as much in control as he was of himself. Hopeless task

undoubtedly.

"I'm trying to become an expert on you. It's not easy." Torr's mouth

relaxed briefly into a shadow of a smile. The expression hardened almost

immediately when she didn't respond.

"Were you an expert on your wife?" Abby heard herself ask and was at

once appalled at the question.

"I was at the end," he replied, shrugging.

He stretched out his feet,
examining the tips of his hand-sewn
leather shoes. "This isn't getting us
very far, is it? You look scared to death
of me. But I'm not the one you're
supposed to be frightened of, honey. It's
the guy who sent the note and the
clippings who should be giving you the
case of nerves. I'm the one who's
going to take care of you. Remember
that."

Abby shook off the cobweb of
conflicting emotions. She had to get

control of herself and of the situation. She had to find out exactly what she

was dealing with before she got any deeper into the mess. "Who are you,

Torr? Who are you really? The man who was once head of this firm?" She

indicated one of the clippings. "Or the man who trades commodities on

his own?"

"I'm the man you met at a class in Japanese flower arrangement, Abby.

No more, no less." He flicked a disparaging glance at the clipping that

had

his picture on it. "I haven't been him for nearly three years. I don't ever

want to be him again. He had a job that demanded eighteen hours a day.

He had a wife who couldn't be trusted. And in the end he had no friends.

They all disappeared when the rumors started."

"The rumors?"

"The ones that suggested I might have killed Anne because she was

unfaithful."

Abby caught her breath, alarmed at the queasiness in her stomach.

"Why did they think you might have killed her?"

"Anne made a point of taking some of our quarrels public." The

unpleasant look in Torr's eyes came and went. "She'd have too much to

drink at a party and start telling everyone within earshot that I beat her,

that she was an abused wife. On other occasions she'd hint to anyone

who'd listen that I couldn't match her lover in the sack. During the last few months we rarely even saw each other. She was busy with her latest conquest and I was busy preparing for the divorce."

"You must have hated her at the end," Abby whispered.

"To tell you the truth, I don't know what I felt at the end. But I do know that she hated me. She disliked the fact that she was tied to me for financial reasons. Strongly resented that

she needed me if she wanted to
go on living the life-style she preferred.
It infuriated her that I wouldn't
tolerate her lovers. She claimed my
jealousy was insane and that there
were no grounds for it. The truth is that
at the end I wasn't even jealous
any longer. I just wanted out."

"You once told me that under certain
circumstances any man could be
made jealous and that any man might
resort to violence."

"I didn't kill her, Abby." Torr gave her a steady glance.

Abby's eyes fell away, going back to the note and the clippings in front

of her. "How did he know about... about all this?" she whispered. "The

blackmailer..."

"An interesting question. One possibility is that he knew about the mess

when it happened. As you can see, there was a lot of newspaper publicity.

Most people would have forgotten but someone in the corporate world

might have remembered because he would have known who I was at the time. Or the blackmailer might simply have done some investigation on his own. I doubt that, though. I think there's every possibility that the man we're looking for has some knowledge of the corporate world—enough to remember my name and a three-year-old scandal. When the payoff demands are finally made, I think we'll have a real handle on who we're dealing with."

Abby looked up questioningly. "What do you mean?"

"If the demands are for a small steady sum of cash, I think we can

assume we're dealing with a petty crook. But if the blackmailer wants

something else, something more sophisticated..." Torr broke off, rubbing

his chin thoughtfully as his gaze went to the window.

"Like what, Torr?"

"We'll have to wait and see. It shouldn't be long. He wouldn't have gone

to all this trouble if he weren't planning to act fairly soon. He's put the

pressure on you and psychologically this would be the best time to make

the payoff demands."

"Your knowledge of criminal psychology amazes me," she muttered.

"It's not a lot different from corporate psychology."

"That's a pretty cynical thing to say."

"And not particularly relevant," he agreed with a curious smile. "The

real issue at hand now is what you're going to do, isn't it?"

Abby stiffened, folding her hands primly in front of her on the table and

studying them as if they contained some answer she badly needed.

"There's not much I can do until I hear what the blackmailer wants."

"You can run."

She looked sharply. "Is that what you think I'm going to do?" she

whispered.

"I think the idea is flitting around in your head. Am I wrong?"

She moved uneasily and then got up to open the refrigerator door.

Hunger was hardly a driving force at the moment, especially given the

unstable condition of her stomach. But the need to do something active

and seemingly purposeful was strong. Fixing lunch, while ridiculous on the

surface, offered a much-needed physical goal. She ignored Torr's question,

deliberately examining a plastic-

wrapped brick of cheddar cheese.

"Am I wrong, Abby?" He didn't move from his chair but she could feel

the intensity of his eyes on her back.

"Are you thinking of running? Did

the clippings achieve their objective?"

"What objective?" She located the lettuce.

"Obviously the blackmailer wants to scare you away from me. He

doesn't want you under my protection. And he seemed to know just what

string to pull to make you very nervous about my company, didn't he?"

The last comment was rather thoughtful, as if Torr had just realized the full implications.

The words caught Abby's attention too, and she let the refrigerator door

close slowly. "Yes. Yes, he did. You're right about one thing, Torr. Whoever is doing this seems to know me well."

Their eyes met across the room. "He not only knows about your

protective feeling toward Cynthia, he also knows you're wary of men who have a reputation for dangerous jealousy and possessiveness."

How many people in the world knew her that well, Abby asked herself. It

was terrifying to think that the blackmailer knew her so intimately. With a

fierce scowl she began to make cheese sandwiches. The blackmailer was

astute. Of all the strings he could have pulled to make her nervous about

the dangers of staying with Torr Latimer, he'd found exactly the right one.

She wondered what the arguments between Torr and his wife had been

like. Violent? Cold and hostile? Torr was a strong man with a strong will.

Crossing him would be dangerous under any circumstances, but even

more so if he were crossed by a woman he considered his own. Abby

shuddered as she sliced the bread, remembering the quiet resolute

manner in which Torr had told her that

she belonged to him. It was true

he had put no pressure on her to return to his bed, but that didn't mean

he wasn't feeling possessive. It only meant he was willing to be patient.

She was letting her imagination run away with her, Abby silently

scolded herself. Just as the blackmailer would have wished. Savagely she

slapped the sandwiches together, carried them over to the table and sat

down. Torr didn't glance up. He was leafing through the pile of clippings.

"This envelope wasn't just meant for you," he remarked softly, drawing out another photo. "I think I was intended to see it, too."

"Another photo from that awful weekend?" Abby reached out to take it from his hand. Torr waited intently. "Oh, my God," she breathed. It was a picture of her again but the man with her wasn't Ward. It was a stranger.

Someone she was certain she had never met. And he was making obscene "love" to her on a sandy beach. The

man's body covered hers and all that could be seen was her face.

Stricken, Abby let the photo drop from her hand as if it were on fire. It

fell face down on the table and it was then that she saw the typed note on the back.

She's a whore, Latimer. She'll go to bed with anyone who has the cash. Just like your wife.

Abby's mouth went dry as Torr reached across to retrieve the photo. He

flipped it back over, studying the scene.
"Torr, I don't even know him. I

swear, I've never been with that man.
He's a total stranger. I...oh, I don't

understand how..." She floundered to a
halt, enraged and scared and
helpless.

"A sandwich," he finally said, still
staring at the photo.

"A sandwich! There are some right in
front of you. What do you expect
me to do—feed one to you?" It was a
stupid thing over which to explode

but Abby couldn't restrain herself. She sat glaring at him furiously as he

glanced up from the photo. He looked first at her challenging expression

and then at the pile of cheddar cheese sandwiches. Comprehension

dawned.

"I didn't mean I wanted to eat one. I meant the photo is a sandwich.

Your face, probably from one of the other shots, rephotographed with this

woman's body and this man. A photographic sandwich. A little

air-brushing would conceal the evidence of lines from the different photos."

Abby heard the explanation but her attention was suddenly on the whiteness around Torr's knuckles. She gazed in morbid fascination at the indication of his fury. Did he believe his own explanation? She licked her lips.

"You think someone deliberately made this photo to get at you?" she

whispered. "To make you turn on me?"

"Who do you know who's into photography, Abby?"

"Oh, for pity's sake! Not more of your crazy detective work! I know a

dozen people who are into photography. And who says it has to be

someone who knows anything about photography? The blackmailer could

have hired someone to do this...this sandwiching!"

"Maybe. Maybe not"

"How do you know it's a sandwich job?" Abby demanded rashly.

"Maybe it really is me in the throes of passion with that...that person!"

He shook his head. "Not the throes of passion. I've seen what you look

like in the throes of passion, remember? You don't gaze up at a man with

a polite, serene little smile on your face as if you'd just been asked to tea."

Abby shot a suspicious glance at her tranquil, somewhat distant

expression in the awful photograph.

Hurriedly she glanced away. It made her almost physically ill to look at that picture and at the savage grip with which Torr held it. How did she look in the throes of passion, she wondered hysterically.

"Totally alive, vividly sensual, exciting, a little primitive. It's indescribable but it's definitely not serenely polite," Torr answered as if he'd just read her mind.

"Oh." She couldn't think of anything else

to say. This man should know,

she thought, exactly how she looked in bed. Anxiously she gnawed her lip.

"Torr, I'm frightened."

"I know. It's working, isn't it?" He tossed down the picture and then

collected the whole bunch of clippings and stuffed them back into the envelope.

"What is?"

"The blackmailer's plan to send you running out into the open like a

startled rabbit. Out where you'll be easy to grab."

"I'm not running anywhere," she grumbled, irrationally glad now that

the photo and the clippings were out of sight. She reached for a sandwich

even though she wasn't in the least hungry. She decided to up her zinc

intake too, and reached for the bottle of tablets.

"But you're thinking about it, aren't you?"

"I can hardly think straight at the moment!" Abby got up and stalked to

the sink for a glass of water. But he was right, she silently admitted. She

was thinking of running. Fear was a tangible sensation coiling around her, impeding her steps and clouding her mind.

The thick inhibiting stuff wasn't even focused on one particular aspect

of the situation. By rights she should have been able to concentrate totally

on the threat to herself from the blackmailer. Instead, other fears were

hammering at her. There was a fear of

having involved Torr in the mess. A

fear of what he was thinking about her
now that he'd seen those awful

photos. A fear that he didn't believe her.
A fear of what she would do if he

decided the photos were real. It was all
getting very complicated. She

gulped the zinc tablets and stood staring
at the faucet for a long moment.

From across the room Torr watched her
narrowly. She looked ready to

explode. High-strung, tense, nervous.
About to run like a frightened

creature.

He sat silent, trying to think of a way to stop her. She wasn't going to

trust him completely—not now that she'd seen the newspaper clippings.

Torr's hand curled into a large fist as he considered the prospect of getting

hold of the blackmailer. Of all the times to have Abby find out about his

past. She was beginning to accept and trust him, Torr thought. Just

beginning to relax with him as a man. Now this. On the surface she might

try very hard to believe his side of the story, but deep down could she fully relax around him again?

If she ran he might have trouble finding her. She could disappear for a matter of days or longer. By the time he caught up with her the blackmailer might already have found her. God only knew what would happen if that son of a bitch caught her first.

But how did you keep a woman from fleeing? Especially one who was

clearly on the ragged edge of uncertainty and fear? If she trusted him

completely, Torr decided, or at least knew for certain that she belonged to

him, she might settle down and let him get on with the business of finding

out who was behind the blackmail attempt. As it was he found himself

fighting two battles—one for Abby's trust and one to track down her

tormentor.

The unstable situation festered between them for the rest of the

afternoon. Torr was careful to lock the photos and clippings out of sight

but they obviously were not out of mind, not for Abby. She made a

pretense of reading several magazines that she had bought at the village

store. Then she silently tried to work on a crossword puzzle, not asking

Torr for any help. He watched her drink a half dozen cups of coffee and

wondered if all the vitamins she took every couple of hours could counter

the caffeine.

How much longer before she tried to leave? he asked himself. Would she

simply announce she wanted to be taken home to Portland? Or would she

grab the keys tonight and sneak off on her own?

Talk about having one's nerves on edge, Torr decided grimly. His own

were rapidly approaching a flash point. He couldn't think of anything

brilliantly reassuring or humorous or thought-provoking to say. The

silence between himself and Abby grew.

With every passing hour it
seemed heavier and more impossible to
breach.

Should he tell her more about his
doomed marriage? he wondered. No,
it seemed best to let that topic lapse.
There was nothing much to say,
when you got right down to it. It had
been a disaster from start to finish.

If he went into further gruesome detail,
Abby might begin to wonder if
there was more to the story than he had
admitted.

If he told her about the frustration and the anger and the

embarrassment he had endured during the short term of his marriage,

Abby might believe that he was building a justification that was not really

necessary if he were truly innocent of murder.

No, scratch that topic. Maybe he should try involving her once again in

some detective work. After all, they ought to be studying the list of people

she knew in light of all the information

they now had. But Abby didn't look as if she were interested in going over that list again.

Somehow they were missing something, though. Torr was sure of it.

Blackmail was a rather intimate crime. It required the perpetrator not

only have highly confidential information, but know just how damaging

that information could be. It required a kind of intimacy that could not be

ignored. Whoever was threatening Abby

was not merely some creep on the street who'd happened to snap a few photos by accident.

All during the silent dinner that he had prepared, Torr's thoughts kept

ricocheting back and forth between the possible identity of the

blackmailer and the very urgent problem of how to deal with Abby's

increasing withdrawal.

It wasn't until they were silently sipping cognac in front of the fire that

Torr decided there were priorities that had to be set. He was going to go out of his mind if he didn't establish the bonds between himself and Abby once and for all.

He glanced at her from beneath half-lowered lashes, noticing the flush on her cheek as she stared fixedly into the crackling flames. She was a million miles away, he surmised. Probably planning her escape. He would wake up in the morning and find her gone.

Torr realized with a sudden wrenching sensation in his gut that he

couldn't allow that to happen. She was his now, whether she knew it or

not. In that moment he could think of no other way to enforce the

knowledge on her than by the most fundamental of methods.

The only way to make certain Abby was still with him in the morning

was to take her to bed tonight and keep her there. It might not say a lot

for his intelligence that he'd been driven

to such an extreme conclusion,
but he knew it was the truth.

Legs apart, Torr leaned forward and carefully set the cognac glass down on the coffee table in front of him. He concentrated intently on the amber liquid in the glass as he spoke.

"How are you going to do it, Abby? Will you try to steal the keys in the middle of the night or will you go upstairs, pack and then demand to be driven back to Portland?"

Her head swung around and he read the guilty amazement in her eyes.

Torr felt himself tighten as he realized he'd come very close to guessing her

thoughts. Didn't she understand? He couldn't allow her to leave. Not now.

Not after what they had shared.

"I might as well tell you that I won't drive you back to Portland. So I

think we're left with the possibility of key theft," he mused, his eyes

focusing on the fire. He could feel the tension in her as she sat at the far

end of the sofa, staring at his profile. He was probably scaring her but it

couldn't be helped. He was extremely scared himself.

"What are you talking about?" she demanded stiffly. "I have no

intention of stealing the car keys."

"No? Then how did you plan on running tonight, Abby?"

"Who said anything about running?"

"It's been written all over your face since that envelope arrived. Do you

think I can't read your eyes? Don't you think I can see the fear in them?"

"It seems to me that I have a right to be afraid," she protested.

"Perhaps. But not of me."

She surged to her feet. "Doesn't it occur to you that I might be afraid

for you rather than *of* you?" She wasn't looking at him, however, when she

spoke, and Torr guessed that she didn't want him to see her expression.

"There's no reason to be afraid for me. I've told you I'm in this with you

by choice. Don't use that as an excuse, Abby."

"I'm not making excuses!" She whirled, confronting him, her head high,

her body rigid with tension. "This is my problem, Torr. I had no right to

get you involved. It's very nice of you to want to help, but I—"

"Very nice of me!" The words came from him in a soft explosion as he

leapt off the sofa in a smooth, taut movement. "Abby, the last thing I feel

toward you is *nice*. I have never felt any

inclination to be *nice* to you. Lady,

I want to take you to bed. I want to protect you. I want you to know in the

very depths of your soul that you belong to me, but none of that has

anything to do with being *nice*!"

She flinched as he challenged her, automatically taking a step

backward. There was no farther room for retreat, Torr saw. The fire

crackled directly behind her. He suddenly realized he was scaring the

daylights out of her. Smoky blue eyes flared at him with desperate

determination. Her soft body was held unnaturally still, poised to flee or

fight. He'd handled this all wrong. He shouldn't have pushed her like this.

But what else could he have done? His own raging uncertainty was eating

at him, forcing him to take some definitive action.

"Don't threaten me, Torr!"

"I'm not threatening you." But he was and they both knew it.

"I don't need anyone else trying to push me around at this particular

moment in my life. I thought you were being kind and...and considerate.

You were willing to wait and let our relationship evolve naturally. It

appears instead that all this week you've been leading me on, making me

think you understood my feelings. But maybe that's because you thought I

was a different kind of woman. Maybe you have behaved nicely because

you thought I was a nice woman. Now

you've seen all the photos, haven't

you? Now you know that my one weekend at the beach with Ward wasn't

just a fluke or a set of circumstances that someone twisted to his own

advantage. Oh, no. Now you've seen evidence that I do that sort of thing a

lot. What was it the note said? I'll sleep with anyone for the right amount

of cash. A whore. How that must grate on you, Torr. How could you be so

unlucky as to get involved with another female like your first wife?"

"Abby, shut up! You don't know what you're saying."

"Of course I know what I'm saying. Don't you think I saw the way your

fingers were clenched around that photograph of me and that other man?

You were uttering all the nice reassuring things, but you were thinking

something entirely different. You were wondering about me, weren't you,

Torr? Wondering if I was going to be just like your wife. Well, you don't

have to worry about it. I'm not about to

get any more involved with you.

For both our sakes it's best if I get out of here. Now. Tonight."

"You're not going anywhere." Torr could hear the deadly certainty in his

own words, and the effect on Abby was instantaneous. She moved, circling

to the right since there was no farther room to retreat. As if he were a

wolf, she tried to put distance between them without making any sudden

moves that might set off his primitive attack instincts.

"I have to leave, Torr. I've been thinking about it all afternoon."

"Don't you think I realize that? I've been watching you drift further and

further away from me ever since that blasted envelope arrived. But I'm not

going to let you leave, Abby. There's no way you can walk back to Portland

and you'll have to get past me to get the keys."

"Why, Torr?" she got out starkly. "Why are you doing this? Because you

can't bear the thought that you've gotten

mixed up with another

unreliable, untrustworthy female? Do you have to prove something to yourself?"

"Maybe. Most of all I have to prove something to you."

"Don't threaten me, Torr!"

"Stop fighting me," he countered, revolving slowly to follow her wary circling movement. "Abby, be reasonable. There's nowhere to run tonight."

Stay here with me where you're safe.
Trust me, honey."

"Do you trust me?" she whispered
tightly.

"Yes."

"I don't believe you! I saw the way you
looked at that photograph," she

wailed. "You looked as though you
wanted to kill someone."

"Not you!" he rasped. "Abby, honey, not
you. Surely you realize that?"

"Do I?"

Torr tried to steady his flaring instincts with a measure of self-control.

It was almost impossible. She was going to run. He had been right. Look

at her, trying to circle toward the door so that she could flee out into the

night. What did she hope to accomplish by that?

"Abby, panic isn't going to solve anything."

"I'm leaving, Torr."

"No."

"You can't stop me."

He smiled crookedly, almost gently.

"Can't I?"

The implied threat was enough to break her last shreds of control, just

as he had known it would be. There was no sense putting off the

inevitable. She might as well make the break that would bring about the

final result.

"Damn you, Torr!"

She swung around and threw herself past

him. Torr caught her easily,

his large hands closing inexorably
around her waist, dragging her back

against his body. She fought with a wiry,
feminine strength he hadn't

expected her to possess. In his grasp
Abby twisted and writhed, her

desperation plain in her silence. She
wasn't wasting any energy in

screaming at him. Every ounce of it was
being spent on the battle.

She didn't stand a chance, of course. She
was ultimately too soft and too

small to defeat him. Torr simply held her wrapped to the length of him,

avoiding her kicking feet while he kept her arms still by pinning them to

her sides.

"Abby, honey, stop it. There's no need
—"

She interrupted his words by jerking herself fiercely to the right. Torr

let the momentum carry them both down, guiding the fall so that they

landed in a tangled heap on the sofa. At the last instant he twisted slightly

so that he came down on top of her and after that there was no way for

Abby to continue the battle. She was immobilized on her stomach beneath his superior weight.

"Abby. Abby, sweetheart, don't cry." Alarmed at the little gasping sounds she was making beneath him, Torr raised himself slightly away from her body.

"I'm not crying. I'm trying to breathe. You weigh a ton!"

"Sorry, darling." He continued to hold himself partially away from her,

his hand automatically beginning to stroke her back down to the full curve

of her hip. "Take it easy. I won't hurt you. I swear I won't hurt you."

Still trapped by his sprawling leg and the firm grip of his hand, Abby

sniffed back the sobs of frustration and anger. She would *not* allow herself

to cry.

"Torr, you have no right to treat me like this. You can't keep me here

against my will."

"I can't let you go," he retorted simply.

His hand continued to move on her back, gentling her until she wanted

to cry out again in protest. He had no right to have such an effect on her.

She should be running for her life. What did she really know about this

man? He could be far more dangerous than Flynn Randolph had been.

After all, the clippings said people had thought him capable of killing his

wife in a jealous rage.

Burying her face in the cushion she inhaled huge, muffled breaths. The

big hand on her body was working a heavy magic, and in silence captive

and captor considered their options.

From Abby's point of view those options were remarkably limited.

She felt totally enveloped by the heat and weight of Torr's body. Even

though he had lifted himself partially off her there was no way she could

have moved. His thigh lay over the back of her legs. With one arm

wrapped under her breast he held her pinned close to his muscular length

and he let her feel just enough of his waiting strength to know that she

was completely outgunned and outmaneuvered. By all rights she ought to

be in a raging panic.

"Torr?"

"Hmmm?" He continued to caress her, his hand moving down over her

tightly jeaned thigh.

"Are you...are you going to force me?"

There was a fractional silence. Then:
"Would it be necessary?"

It was her turn for silence. From out of
nowhere her spirit flared to

counter the masculine intent she heard in
his tone. "If you think I'm just

going to lie here meekly and let you
control me with sex, you're out of your
mind!"

The gentling hand stopped on the high,

firm curve of her buttock. Abby

felt his fingers clench powerfully and she knew a spasm of excitement.

Memories of his previous lovemaking flooded her body. Memories of his

determined concern for her safety flooded her mind. All in all she felt

totally inundated by Torr Latimer.

Slowly he shifted her around until she lay on her back. "Nobody could

control you with sex, Abby," Torr said softly, amber eyes reflecting the

flickering light of the fire. "But I think,
just possibly, a man could control
you with love."

As his mouth came down on hers, Abby
felt a spiraling tension that
combined with Torr's touch to leave her
lying helpless beneath him. *Oh*
God, she thought on a stricken note. *He*
knows. He knows I've fallen in
love with him.

EIGHT

« ^ »

With love came trust. Or maybe it was the other way around. In a

distant corner of her mind, Abby wondered which had come first for her.

Perhaps they had both arrived together in an inseparable knot that now

chained her to Torr Latimer.

But it was impossible to think logically at the moment. Torr's mouth

covered hers with consuming power, leaving her no option but to respond.

As always when he held her, Abby wanted only to succumb completely to the intoxicating warmth of their lovemaking. She felt his hands on her body, aware that he was loosening her clothing, and her determination to flee disintegrated.

Torr felt her enthralling surrender as he steadily unbuttoned the muted

plaid shirt she wore. The softness in her seemed to flow and strain beneath

his hands, inviting and challenging and captivating. He had been right, he

decided exultantly. Right to force the issue tonight. Right to take her into

his arms and show her that neither of them could flee from the magic that

flared between them.

"I shouldn't have given you so much time this past week," he murmured

as he parted the edges of her shirt and slid his hand inside to find her

breasts. "I should have just taken you to bed again and again until you

realized how much I need you. Abby, I've tried to teach you to trust me.

Tried to do things your way and still protect you. But tonight you were

going to run and I couldn't let you do that."

"I thought..." Abby broke off, a soft cry of rising need in her throat. "I

thought it would be for the best. Torr, please believe me. I never should

have let you get involved."

He growled his displeasure as he leaned over to force the words back

into her mouth with his tongue. Hadn't he told her often enough that she'd

had no choice when it came to his involvement? With hunger and a desire

to silence her protests, Torr explored the dark territory behind her lips.

The taste of her there fed his appetite, making him ravenous for the other

delicious parts of her.

Beneath his palm he could feel the budding nipple and he vaguely heard

his own husky groan of response. She came alive for him in a way that no

other woman ever had. Or was it that he came alive for her? With Abby,

Torr knew the full measure of himself as a man. The experience was

primitive, almost savage in some respects. Perhaps she had been right to

fear the possessiveness in him, he acknowledged silently. How could he

explain he'd never been totally aware of it himself until he'd met her? He

only knew now that he could never let her go.

The warmth of the firelight bathed

Abby's skin in gold as Torr pushed back her shirt, baring her breasts completely.

"Abby, honey. You're so soft, so wonderfully soft. How did you ever think

I could let you go? I need your softness, sweetheart. I need it more than

I've ever needed anything else in my life."

She twined her arms around his neck, offering her throat as her head

fell back over his arm. Torr found the

hollow where her pulse thrummed

and kissed it. She moaned, lifting herself against him and he thought he

would go out of his mind.

"Torr, my darling. You make me feel so wild," she breathed against his

neck.

He caught her hand and put her fingers on the first button of his shirt.

She needed no further urging. As she fumbled to open the garment, Torr

found the fastening of her jeans. When he

unzipped the denims he was

unable to resist plunging his hand down
into the moist warmth of her, and

when he found it, he knew that he could
not be the gallant patient lover he

had been last time.

"Abby, honey, I'm going to take you
tonight. Make you mine. Do you

understand? Afterward you won't have
any more doubts. You won't be

able to run. I'll have you chained too
close to my heart."

She stirred against him as he stripped the jeans down her legs and let

them drop to the floor. Her body seemed to be a sensuous trap of golden

skin and shadowy heat. It was a trap he longed to spring.

Torr leaned over her, letting his chest crush her breasts as he yanked off

his trousers. The hardness of her nipples made him catch his breath and

then he was naked beside her.

Deliberately he let her feel the waiting

fullness of his manhood, testing himself

against her thigh.

"When I take you it's like diving into the softest, deepest petals of a

flower," he rasped. "I don't know how I've been able to wait so long. And I

know I can't wait any longer."

"No," she whispered throatily, denying him nothing. "Neither can I."

He slipped his hand between her thighs, glorying in the silken skin

there. Then he was pushing apart her legs, lifting himself to angle her

beneath him. She moved obediently to his touch, wrapping him close as he sank down onto her.

When he felt the heated dampness of her body waiting to sheath him,

Torr drove into her with a husky groan. He had to take his fill of her or

lose his mind. She clung to him, her legs tangling with his, her nails

leaving small savage marks in his back.

She wanted him, needed him, he told himself exultantly. No woman

could fake this kind of soft, clinging need. And even if it were possible,

Abby would disdain such faked passion. For her everything had to be real.

She was too vibrant and excitingly alive to play sophisticated games in

bed. Knowing that was what gave him hope and roused a fierce

determination in him. He would make love to her until she could do

nothing but cry out her need of him, and once he had the words he would

never let her forget them.

"Tell me," he half snarled against the skin of her breast. "Tell me you

want me. Tell me what it's like for you." With controlled, passionate

violence he raided her body, unlocking the treasure of crushed petals

waiting there. Plunging into them again and again with unpredictable

strokes that elicited the soft cries at the back of her throat. Cries he loved

to swallow.

"Torr, Torr. I want you. I've never wanted any man the way I want you.

Oh, Torr!"

He felt the passionate spasm that coursed through her, tightening her

body around his until he was as caught up in the climax as she was. It

pulled at him, seeking to drain him. Torr could no more resist the

primitive tide than he could have ignored the pull of ocean waves. With a

muffled shout of satisfaction he gave himself up to the endless sea of velvet

petals, aware that Abby was already drifting blissfully in his arms.

Torr was not going to allow her to drift all the way into sleep, Abby

realized vaguely as his tongue flickered over the film of perspiration on her

breasts. She came drowsily back to the surface, lifting her lashes to meet

his gaze. There was satisfaction in his amber eyes, satisfaction and a

challenging question. As she looked up at him he touched her faintly

bruised mouth with the tip of one blunt finger.

"You want me, Abby."

"Yes." There didn't seem much point in denying that now.

"You need me."

"Yes."

"I can feel all that when you're here in my arms. You couldn't lie with your body. It isn't possible for you."

"You sound very sure of that."

He moved in the equivalent of a massive shrug. Nothing could have made his agreement more obvious. Abby was torn between a purely

feminine desire to slap him for his masculine arrogance and an equally

feminine desire to submit to it. He must have read the conflicting

thoughts in her eyes because his look softened abruptly and he dipped his

head to brush a small kiss against the tip of her nose.

"Don't be angry. I can't help the truth. It exists for both of us. I needed

to have you admit it, though, because I think only when you've admitted it

aloud will you accept it. And when

you've accepted it you can trust me.

Really trust me."

"That's important to you?"

"It's vital to me, honey. I nearly went crazy this afternoon watching and waiting for you to get the nerve to run."

"I wasn't going to run," she protested quickly.

"Yes, you were."

"I only thought it best to get away. I don't want you hurt by all this,

Torr."

"The only way I can be hurt is if you don't trust me enough to let me help you."

She inhaled deeply, aware of the scent of his damp musky body and of the fragrance of the log fire. She was still lying trapped beneath Torr, her limbs snarled with his. His weight crushed her into the sofa and he made no move to release her.

"I don't want to hurt you, Torr."

"Then you'll have to trust me."

Abby searched his face anxiously. "What about you? Do you trust me? I

saw the way you looked at that photo. I know what you must have been

thinking..."

"I was thinking that I would like to get my hands on the man who's

blackmailing you. And I'll admit that the thoughts were a little violent. But

the violence wasn't aimed at you, sweetheart. That's what you have to

bring yourself to believe. Trust me, Abby. Please trust me."

"I do," she whispered huskily. "I do."

He sighed and lowered his head to her breast. "I didn't kill her, Abby."

"I know that."

"And I would never hurt you."

"I know that, too. I've known it all along, I suppose."

"I kept dreading the day you found out about my past," he admitted. "I

was afraid you'd only compare me with

that man who once frightened
you."

Abby shook her head. "You're nothing like Flynn Randolph."

"How am I different?" he demanded, letting his fingers trail

tantalizingly down her waist to her hip and back.

"A million ways," she replied, smiling above his head. Men. They asked

far more personal questions than did women. The firelight flickered on

Torr's black hair and it made her smile broaden. "For one thing your hair is a different color. His was brown."

"That's an enormous difference, all right," he complained. "Can't you do any better than that?"

"Well, let's see. You're built a lot differently than he was. You're sort of like a rock. He was tennis-player thin."

"Abby, I'm warning you..."

"I'm trying to reassure you," she protested. "Let me see, what else is

different about you? I certainly would never have met him in a class on the

art of Japanese flower arrangement. He was into other kinds of hobbies."

"Something nice and macho like race-car driving?" Torr sounded as

though he might be growing annoyed. The little game wasn't going the

way he wanted it to go.

"No, as a matter of fact, he was into—" Abby shut her mouth with a

snap as the memory flashed into her mind. An image of Flynn with his

camera, irritated with her because she would not pose in the nude for

him. Another image of him in his elaborately equipped darkroom.

"Photography," Abby finally got out unemotionally. "Flynn was into

photography."

Torr was suddenly very still and tense. There was a dangerous silence

while they both absorbed what she had just said, and then he sat up

slowly.

"Brown hair, you said?"

Abby licked her lips. "Yes."

"Thin?"

"Yes, oh Torr, surely—"

"And he's into photography?"

"Well, he was when I knew him, but that was two years ago. Why would

he...? It makes no sense, Torr. Why would he do something like this? After two years?"

"He knows how you feel about

Cynthia?" Torr kept up the questions, pushing himself away from her. He stood up, stalking restlessly over to stand gazing down into the fire.

Abby watched him, acutely aware of the hard muscled maleness of him

as he stood in the glow of the flaring firelight. So strong, so thoroughly

masculine. She could still feel the heavy imprint of his body on hers.

"He knew," Abby admitted slowly, frowning intently. "But, Torr, it

doesn't make any sense. It was all over between Flynn and myself two years

ago. He was glad to see the last of me. Claimed he never wanted to see me

again. Called me a...a..." Her voice trailed off as she remembered the note

on the back of the ugly photograph they had received that morning.

"Called me a whore."

"Hell." Torr ran his fingers through his black and silver hair. "Abby, he's

not on our list." He swung around, amber eyes shadowed and hawklike. "

Why on earth wasn't he on that list?"

Abby flinched from the fierce demand in his voice, coiling her legs

under her and reaching instinctively for her shirt. "Torr, listen to me.

There's no way Flynn could be the blackmailer. It's been two whole years

since I saw him. Why on earth would he pop up now to cause trouble?"

"I want to know why he's not on that list I had you put together. He's

got brown hair, he's into photography, he knows all your vulnerable

points. Lady, did you think I was playing games with that blasted list? I

wanted everyone on it who fit the profile. Everyone. Not just your present friends and associates!"

Abby slipped on her shirt and pulled it around her in a tense, protective

motion. Her eyes were wide and wary now as she watched the man who

only moments before had been making passionate love to her. This was a

side of Torr she had never seen before and it was a revelation. From out of

nowhere she recalled the newspaper clippings that had described him as a powerful, ruthlessly successful corporate president.

Torr might be standing naked in front of a cozy fire but she didn't need

much imagination to picture him dressed in a sleek gray suit and bearing

the natural authority of a corporate shark. There was a controlled power

in the man that was independent of time, place or clothing.

It also didn't take much imagination to

visualize herself in the role of a subordinate who had badly fouled up an important assignment.

Resentfully Abby stirred on the couch, darting a glance at her jeans and

wondering if she could pull them on from where she sat.

"There's no need to yell at me, Torr."

"I am not yelling at you," he bit out roughly, "but if you want to know the truth, I'm seriously considering doing a lot more than that. Right now

I could cheerfully take my belt to that sweet backside of yours. Thanks to your idiotic refusal to follow orders, we've overlooked one of the prime suspects. A man who may very well be a little sick in the head from the way you've described him. A man who fits the profile. How many other possible candidates have you left off the list?"

"None! I haven't left anyone else off except... except—" her voice lowered and became almost inaudible "—maybe

a couple of people who couldn't possibly have..."

"Such as?" Torr demanded.

Abby glared at him, her mouth tight with resentment. He was standing

with his feet braced slightly apart, his hands fitted to his hips. The

controlled aggression in him was so strong she half expected to see it

manifest itself in some visible form.

"Torr, if you start listing every possible candidate, there'd be no

stopping. Good grief! How many brown-haired men do you think I've met in my life?"

"I have no idea. I've asked you to tell me. On several occasions."

"Look, if I started doing that I'd have to include people like Ward!"

"Tyson? Your cousin's husband? He's got brown hair?"

"Well, yes, but—"

"He's into photography?"

"Judging from the number of photos of

the baby I get every couple of weeks, I suppose you could say that," Abby shot back caustically. "Torr, every new father is into photography."

"Who else?" He ignored her angry response.

"I don't know! I can't think of anyone else. Torr, you're acting as though you're conducting an inquisition!"

"You're right," he muttered, gliding forward until he was only inches away from the couch, scowling down at

her. "What's more, you're going to

submit to it. If you'd done things right the first time instead of in your

usual haphazard undisciplined style, we wouldn't be going through this

tonight. I was a fool to go so easy on you. I should have known that unless I

pushed, you wouldn't really give your full attention to that list. From the

beginning I've been far too cautious with you."

"I'm not one of your employees!"

He reached down, his large hands closing around her upper arms. As if she were light as a feather, he lifted her a few inches off the floor, holding her so that she was eye to eye with him. "You can say that again," Torr admonished. "You're not an employee. You're my woman. It is my responsibility to protect you. You will obey clear and reasonable orders from me when your safety is involved. Is that simple enough for you? Do you understand exactly what I'm saying?"

Abby blinked, helpless in his iron grasp, feeling idiotically vulnerable in

her near-nakedness. Somehow Torr didn't seem at all vulnerable in his

lack of clothing. Sheer masculine dominance was more than adequate to

cloak him. She swallowed and then said in a very low voice, "I

understand."

"Excellent," he replied silkily. He lowered her so that her feet found the

floor, then continued to lean intimidatingly over her. "Look at me,

Abby."

Gnawing her lip warily, she obeyed.
"We've played this waiting game long

enough. Tomorrow we act. We've got
enough leads to pursue now. Too

many to justify sitting here like a couple
of clay pigeons. In the morning

we'll head for Seattle. I want to talk to
Tyson."

"Ward? But, Torr, I didn't want to bring
him into this."

"He's already into it. I should have
tackled him in the beginning," Torr

muttered in disgust. "Instead I let myself be persuaded to go along with your plans."

"But Ward can't be the blackmailer! It makes no sense!"

"I didn't say he was. But he's part of this mess one way or another and it's time we informed him of that fact."

"I don't want to handle it that way."

"What you want is not particularly important to me at the moment,

Abby. Getting you out of this crazy

situation is all that matters right now.

Go upstairs and climb into bed. It's late and we'll be leaving here first

thing in the morning. I'll take care of the fire."

He turned away without waiting for her response and began settling the

remains of the flickering logs with a set of brass tongs. Torr heard Abby

move around behind him, silently collecting her clothing and starting

across the floor to the staircase. His hand tightened on the cold brass in

his grip as he waited to see which room she would go to when she reached the top of the stairs.

He'd been a little rough on her, he acknowledged grimly. But he'd had no choice. What had she expected him to do when he realized how severely she had hampered the investigation by not cooperating fully when he had asked for names for the list? Of course she hadn't intentionally refused to cooperate. It was simply that she was used to doing things her own way—

haphazardly, without discipline.

While he approached everything in a far more thorough fashion.

She was at the top of the stairs now. He could barely hear the pad of her

feet on the hardwood floor. She hadn't said a word when he'd ordered her

up to bed. Just turned and climbed the stairs.

He shouldn't have chewed her out like that, he told himself. She was

probably furious. Her anger he could handle. It was having her afraid of

him that worried him. Had he frightened her with his tirade? Undone all

the progress he'd made this past week?

The questions ravaged him as he hung up the tongs and pulled the

screen shut in front of the hot coals.

She'd deserved the tongue-lashing. As

he'd told her, she was lucky that was all it amounted to tonight. If she was

going to run upstairs and cower in her own room he would just have to

follow her inside and yank her back out. From now on she belonged in his

bed and it was time she knew it. Matters were too serious at the moment

to allow her the luxury of taking her time.

The scrape of the screen in front of the fire hid the last of Abby's

footsteps. When Torr straightened and started for the stairs all was silent

on the floor above. Which bedroom had she entered? he wondered.

He stalked up the stairs two at a time, aware of a pounding in his veins

that was composed of equal parts of

desire, irritation and fear. Fear that everything he'd managed to accomplish this past week had come apart in his hands because of those newspaper clippings and because he'd reached the end of his patience.

Which bedroom?

He strode past his own room, which was still dark, and came to a halt in front of the closed door of the room Abby had been using. He would be kind but firm. No, he would be polite

and as gallant as possible. He'd try to repair a few of the fences he'd just ripped apart. He'd try to talk to her, apologize but explain that he hadn't any real choice. There were things that had to be done.

Hell, he'd simply go in there and pull her out of bed, toss her over his shoulder and carry her back to his room. One way or another she was going to learn something important tonight.

Half expecting to find the door locked,
Torr wrenched the handle. It

opened easily and he found himself
gazing through the shadows into a

still-made bed.

Anticipation and an incredible relief
sizzled in him. She hadn't crept

back to the safety of her own room!
Spinning around he paced back down

the hall to his bedroom. Pushing open the
door he stepped inside, letting

his eyes adjust to the darkness.

It wasn't hard to pick out Abby's gentle curves under the quilt.

"You lied to me," she murmured.

"No." His protest was soft, almost anguished. He couldn't move.

"Yes, you did." She held a corner of the quilt back, silently inviting him

into the bed. "You said you never pounce."

Torr closed his eyes briefly in rueful relief and then opened them and

started forward. "Do you feel pounced upon?"

"Very. Physically and verbally." But her eyes were gleaming and Torr

groaned heavily as he lay down beside her.

"How was I to know you would bring out the beast in me?"

"I think it came out naturally."

Torr's mouth moved over hers before she could say anything else. This

time, he promised himself, he would take it slow, warm her with care and

attention to detail until she cried out for more. He wanted to hear his

name on her lips over and over again. He'd never get his fill of that soft demand.

The next morning Abby grudgingly accepted Torr's decision on the subject of confronting Ward Tyson. She did not do so without protest, however. Torr endured the complaints, arguments, reasoned logic and infuriated pleas with stoic patience all during breakfast, the packing of the car and the drive back toward Portland and then north to Seattle. It was a

long trip, several hours in fact, and Abby tried not to waste a minute of the time.

"I see no reason to involve Ward at this point. He can't do anything and he might feel that he has to tell Cynthia the truth about that weekend in order to get me off the hook," she began.

"He might," Torr agreed.

"Well, I don't want Cynthia told. That's the whole object of this exercise!"

"Certainly the blackmailer's logic."

"Torr, I'm talking about a lifetime relationship with my cousin which will be ruined by all this."

"Just remember that you didn't ruin it. Tyson did."

"Ruining that marriage will be an even more damaging act," she argued. "I don't see why we have to do anything at this point. Give it a little more time."

"Time only serves on the blackmailer's

side. It gives him an opportunity

to work on your nerves, wear you down
and wear you out. Tyson is not the

only man we're going to see. As soon as
an actual extortion attempt is

made, we're going to call in the police.
I'd do it now except for the fact

that all we have are pictures and implied
threats."

Abby stared at him. "You seemed like
such a nice man when I first met

you!"

"What am I now?"

"Domineering, arrogant and overbearing," she declared with a certain

malicious satisfaction. "You've taken over my life and it worries me

because I don't know how to stop you or control you."

"When this is all over I promise you will find me easy enough to manage

again." The assurance was gently given and Abby didn't trust it for an

instant.

"Will you listen to me while I try to explain why I don't want to contact

Ward at this point," she muttered, folding her arms across her breasts

while she sat stiffly in the car seat.

"I don't have much of a choice except to listen, do I? It's a small car."

"But you're not going to pay any attention, right?"

"We're going to talk to Tyson, honey," he said with great finality.

Abby dreaded the meeting for the entire length of the drive. Several

hours later as Torr followed her directions off Interstate 5 into downtown

Seattle, she was wildly considering leading him on a goose chase through

the high-rise office buildings. But something about the grim manner in

which he drove convinced her that might not be the wisest move. With a

sigh she guided him to the underground parking lot of the building that

housed the headquarters of Lyndon Technologies.

She had expected anything from

astonishment to shock on Ward's

handsome face when his secretary showed them into his office. But she

couldn't possibly have anticipated his half-furious, half-relieved greeting.

"Where on earth have you been, Abby? I've been trying to get hold of

you for nearly a week!" He shot up from behind his desk, every inch the

executive in his dark suit and crisp white shirt. "Sit down. I've got to talk

to you. Something important has come up. Who's this?" He swung a

challenging, assessing glance at the silent man who stood by Abby's side.

"The man who's claiming exclusive rights for the privilege of yelling at

Abby," Torr said, with an unmistakable chill in his voice. "So I'd

appreciate it if you would apologize to her and refrain from using that

tone with her in the future. My name's Torr Latimer." He didn't extend his

hand. Instead he made a point of politely seating Abby and then taking

the leather chair next to hers.

Abby winced at the casual aggression in his words. Lately it was

becoming very easy to visualize Torr in his previous role of corporate head.

Ward stared at the stranger, a calculating respect in his eyes telling Abby

more than words could have exactly how Torr was measuring up in the

other man's estimation. One dark-brown brow arched as he inclined his

head with mocking formality.

"My apologies, Abby. Where'd you meet the knight in shining armor?"

"At a class in flower arranging," Abby retorted. "Ward, something

serious has happened. Torr insists you should be involved. I didn't want to

come here today, but—"

"But I overrode her objections," Torr interrupted.

"I see." Ward sat down in his swivel chair and regarded the other two

across the expanse of his desk. "Well, it would seem as though we've all got

news. Suppose you go first."

Abby frowned. She knew Ward well enough to read the genuine concern

in his hazel eyes. "It's not Cynthia or the baby, is it? Are they all right?"

Ward shook his head abruptly. "They're fine. My problem is a business

one. What's yours?"

"Hers is business of a sort, also. Blackmail." Torr let the shock of his

words sink in and then went on bluntly.

"It concerns you too, that's why

we're here."

"Blackmail!" Ward looked stunned. "Is this a joke?"

"Unfortunately, no," Abby answered, sighing. She glanced hastily at

Torr and realized from the set expression on his face that he wasn't going

to let her find a way around the issue.

"Remember...remember that

weekend at the coast, Ward?"

"Oh, not that." Wearily Ward rubbed his thumb and forefinger along

the bridge of his nose, eyes closing for a

long moment. "What is going on,
Abby?"

"Someone took some pictures. Photos of
us...you and me coming out of
a hotel room." Abby felt a flush rise into
her face as she tried to explain
the awkward situation.

"Pictures!" Ward's eyes snapped open,
zeroing in on Torr, not Abby.

"Incriminating photos?"

"They could be. To Cynthia." Bleakness
underlined Abby's words. "I'm

sorry, Ward. I didn't know what to do. Torr saw the pictures and figured out what was going on. He insisted on confronting you. He says you're involved."

"Well, I was, wasn't I?" Ward gave her a laconic glance before returning his concentration on Torr. "How much do you know, Latimer?"

"Everything."

"Wrung the whole sordid tale out of Abby here, huh?"

"It wasn't easy."

"I'll bet it wasn't. She's an independent woman with a mind of her own."

"But inclined to be a bit impulsive in her behavior," Torr observed

gently. "She wanted to handle the whole mess all by herself."

"She would," Ward growled. "Well, what happened? Threats? Payoff demands?"

"No demands, not yet at any rate. Soon, I expect," Torr said, his eyes

cool and unreadable. "I knew you wouldn't want Abby facing an extortionist all by herself."

"Whoever it is has threatened to tell Cynthia about our, uh, illicit

weekend, is that it?" Ward gazed thoughtfully at Abby, who shifted

uncomfortably, her heart going out in sympathy for him.

"I'm afraid so."

"Interesting," Ward mused. "Who knows you well enough to realize

that's a valid threat?"

"That was one of Torr's first questions," Abby grumbled, aware that the

two men were a well-matched pair. Both of them thought along the same

lines and with the same straight-to-the-point logic.

"Any answers?" Ward swung back to Torr.

"A few possibilities." Torr looked at him.

"Fascinating," Ward remarked dryly.

"Fascinating enough that I knew you'd want to know about it," Torr murmured.

"Of course," Ward replied, shrugging.

"Ward," Abby put in, "I still think we can avoid having to tell Cynthia.

Torr believes we ought to pull the blackmailer's teeth by removing the

threat, but I'm sure if we just put our minds to it the three of us can deal

with this. As soon as we know the extortionist's demands, we'll have a

better idea of who and what we're up against. Cynthia doesn't ever have to know about this."

"I think," Torr stated deliberately, "that it would be best if Cynthia

knew everything. It's the only way to free Abby completely."

"No!" Abby snapped her head around, glaring at him. "I agreed to talk

to Ward but that's as far as it goes. I don't want Cynthia in on this."

"You will do as I think best in this situation, Abby," Torr said quietly,

every word utterly calm and utterly certain. "I've had a lot more

experience with the criminal mind than you have. Remember that

corporate mentality we discussed?"

"You're not going to make this decision for me, Torr Latimer!" she

hissed.

"Actually," Ward interjected coolly before Torr could respond, "it's my

decision to make and I've already made it. I made it the day I returned

from that stupid weekend. I told Cynthia everything that afternoon."

NINE

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Abby paled. Eyes riveted to Ward's face, she sat frozen for a moment.

"You did what?" she finally got out weakly.

"I explained everything to her," Ward said evenly. "Told her what a fool

I'd been and how I'd tried to involve you in my foolishness. If you want the

truth, I think she already knew it all, anyway."

"You're joking! But...but she's been as close to me as ever! She never

gave any indication that she knew you and I...that we..."

"We never did anything, did we, Abby? That's the part you're supposed

to remember. What's more, you never would have had an affair with me.

Perhaps subconsciously I realized that all along. In a way you were 'safe'

for me. I'm not proud of what happened, but it wasn't the end of the world

as far as Cynthia was concerned. She

forgave me completely."

"Your wife sounds like a very generous woman," Torr observed.

"My wife is an incredible person and she loves me." Ward spoke simply.

"What's more, I love her. I always have and I always will. I went a little

crazy there for a while. It won't ever happen again."

Abby absorbed the implications of his statement. In the midst of the

turmoil she was experiencing the only thing that stood out clearly was a

sudden, heartfelt desire to have Torr Latimer declare such words of love.

Forever words.

"Well," said Torr smoothly, "that does unmuddy the waters a little."

"What do you suggest now?" Ward seemed quite willing to accept the

other man as an equal. It spoke volumes for the respect he must have felt.

That surprised Abby at first. And then she realized that her cousin's

husband was anything but a stupid man. He would know his match when

he saw him.

"I think we'll just wait for the payoff demand. Then we'll take it to the police together with our suspicions," Torr said flatly.

"There's another possibility," Ward mused.

"A private investigator?" Torr nodded thoughtfully. Abby was beginning to feel very much left out of the conversation.

"Why do we want a private investigator?" she asked.

"He might have more luck finding out who's behind the blackmail

attempt," Torr explained politely.

"Just who is it you suspect?" Ward demanded.

"Oh, Torr has some ridiculous notion that Flynn Randolph might be

behind all this," Abby said dismissively. "He fits the 'profile.' "

"What profile?" Ward pressed.

"One Torr has been compiling from what little we know."

"Randolph is only one of several possibilities," Torr interrupted calmly.

"I rather like the idea of an investigator at this point. Know a good agency?"

"One of the best. I'm using them on something else at the moment. I'll give them a call this afternoon."

Abby looked from one to the other and decided that whatever happened

next was out of her hands. Men. They thought they could run the world.

"Ward, what was it that you wanted to see me about this past week?"

Ward pulled himself back from the conversation he had begun with

Torr, glancing at her quickly. "Business, as I said. Someone's buying up

shares of our stock. Since you hold the largest single block outside of

Cynthia's portion, I wanted to get to you and warn you that you will

probably be approached with an offer."

Abby was startled. "But, Ward, you know I'd never sell. And certainly

not without discussing the matter with you and Cynthia. Besides, the shares aren't worth much."

Ward ran a hand through his brown hair and smiled grimly. "The offers have been surprisingly lucrative. Aunt May and Uncle Harold sold theirs last week without bothering to consult me. Said they had no idea I might be upset."

"But this has always been a family company."

"Well, it's not going to be in a couple of months. I'm taking the firm public, Abby."

"You're going to sell the stock on the open market? Why?"

It was Torr who answered. "Quickest way for a small firm to acquire a

lot of capital. Issue stock and sell it on the open market. Instant cash,

providing there are some willing buyers."

"There will be plenty of those when we unveil our latest bit of

technology," Ward said.

"So someone's trying to get in on the ground floor by buying up what's now in family hands, right?" Torr smiled fleetingly, the expression rather predatory.

"He could acquire enough to give him a tremendous amount of control.

He will also become very rich overnight when the stock goes public."

"Who is it?" Abby interposed quickly.

"I don't know yet. The offers have come

through an intermediary. A

third party who claims he's representing an interested businessman.

Finding out who that 'interested businessman' is is the task I have the

investigative agency on at the moment."

"Hell." Torr's comment was succinct and not unsympathetic.

"Isn't it, though," Ward agreed gruffly. "I feel better now that I've finally

caught up with Abby and had a chance to warn her."

"Are a lot of the other relatives selling?" Abby demanded, infuriated at the notion.

"Unfortunately I haven't been able to convince all of Cynthia's relatives that if they want to sell, they should at least wait until we go public. They'll get a lot more for the stock then. But they're so accustomed to the idea of the company bordering on the edge of bankruptcy that they're welcoming offers. I guess they don't believe I'll pull the firm out of the red."

"Well, you won't lose my stock!" Abby declared forcefully.

"Thanks." Ward grinned. "I needed to hear that. I wasn't sure just how much faith you had in me these days. Especially after what happened two months ago."

Abby leaned forward impulsively, putting out her hand to cover Ward's fingers. "Ward, I've never doubted your ability to handle the firm. What's more, I've always had a lot of faith in you as a man. You've made Cynthia

very happy."

Abruptly Torr got to his feet. He closed his large hand around Abby's

wrist and pointedly removed her comforting fingers from Ward's. "I think

that's about enough family sympathy and support," he remarked. "It's all

very touching, naturally, but for my peace of mind, I'd like to limit just

how touching. Come on, Abby, you and I are going to get a cup of coffee

while Ward calls that investigation agency." He glanced at a wryly amused

Ward. "See if they can get someone over here reasonably soon. I'd like to get back to Portland in the morning."

Ward nodded. "I'll get on it now. And, Abby?"

"Yes, Ward?" Abby was already half out of the office because of Torr's firm grip on her wrist.

"I'm sorry. For everything."

"So am I, Ward." She got no further. Torr was in the act of closing the office door behind them before she

could finish the sentence.

In silence he guided her through the outer office, nodding politely if

distantly at the middle-aged secretary who smiled back in mild

puzzlement. Then Abby found herself in a crowded elevator descending to

the lobby. It wasn't until she was seated across from Torr in the glassed-in

sidewalk cafe on the ground floor of the building that Abby finally got a

chance to free her wrist. She favored Torr with a scathing glance of pure

annoyance.

"You didn't have to manhandle me like that! You know perfectly well by

now that there was never anything between Ward and myself and there

never will be. I was merely being sympathetic. He's under a lot of

pressure."

"Comforting a man when he's in that state can lead to all sorts of

problems. I'd have thought you'd have learned that by now. It was how you

got into trouble last time with Ward, remember?" Torr eyed her

sardonically, stirring his coffee with an absent gesture.

Abby blinked in sudden wariness. "But nothing happened. You know that."

"But you were willing to submit to blackmail to keep your cousin

Cynthia from finding out that nothing happened, weren't you?"

"Torr! Are you saying you don't believe me?" she whispered tightly.

"No. I believe you." His face softened appreciably as he saw the stricken

look in her blue eyes. "But that doesn't mean I'm going to let you run

around comforting every male in the vicinity who happens to be under a

lot of stress. If you want to comfort someone, comfort me. I trust you,

honey, but I'm not about to let your impulsiveness lead you into any more

untenable situations. Clear?"

"You've gotten awfully bossy lately, Torr." Abby's eyes narrowed. "On

second thought, I guess you were all along. Wonder why I didn't notice it right off?"

Torr said nothing, merely smiled gently and plucked the daisy from the

small glass bud vase in the center of the table. He extended his palm

toward her, the daisy lying across it. His amber eyes gleamed with silent

urging.

Abby eyed the daisy and then looked up at the man offering it. There

was no doubt that he was reminding her of the night she had taken the

yellow rose from his hand and found herself in bed with him. A shiver of

love and sensual anticipation gripped her as the memories flooded into

her head.

"Do you think," she began in a tight whisper, "that flowers will get you

anything you want?"

"I only want you."

Abby bit her lip and then made a quick

grab for the daisy. Snatching it

up, she carried it down under the table, cradling it in her lap. She refused

to meet his eyes for some time after that, fully aware that she would find

nothing but masculine satisfaction reflected in the golden pools. She could

do without that for a while, she thought with a small smile.

The interview with the investigator sent over by the agency was not at all

what Abby had anticipated. She'd read enough detective fiction to know

what private eyes ought to look like and this one didn't fit the mold at all.

He was dressed like an executive, spoke in a well-educated manner, and

took notes with a tape recorder. The recorder made Abby uneasy, but the

man's careful questioning eventually drew out everything she knew or

guessed. While her own answers were somewhat hesitant, Torr and Ward

spoke as easily as if they had prepared written reports. Executives, she

thought grimly, right down to their

toenails. They were succinct, crisp, organized and didn't seem fazed by some of the more embarrassing aspects of the situation.

"Not what you expected, Abby?" Torr asked with lazy amusement after the investigator had departed.

"Obviously the man has not read Raymond Chandler," she sniffed.

"Or maybe he has and decided to upgrade the image," Ward suggested.

"Whatever the reason for the style, the

agency's good."

"You said earlier you have them looking into the stock purchases?" Torr

asked curiously.

"Ummm. I want to know who's out there buying up the family stock,

and what's more, I want to know how he knew it was suddenly becoming

available."

"He must have someone inside," Torr observed thoughtfully.

"I'm afraid so."

"A spy? In the company?" Abby asked, horrified.

"Just someone who's trying to make a few bucks on the side peddling

company information," Ward replied, shrugging. "Happens a lot these

days."

"That's disgusting. Thank heavens I don't have to deal with that sort of

thing in my vitamin business."

"There are advantages to being self-employed." Torr chuckled. "I know

how you feel."

"You two seem to have a few things in common," Ward said, grinning.

"More than you will ever know," Torr said.

"So how is business, Abby?" Ward turned to her, leaning back in his chair.

"Judging by the amount of pills she takes every day, business has got to

be booming." Torr stepped in to answer for her.

"Go ahead and laugh," Abby challenged.
"I haven't had a cold in almost
a year."

Ward looked at Torr. "Better prepare
yourself for a lifetime of good
health."

Abby flushed at the use of the word
"lifetime." She and Torr had made
no lasting commitments of any kind, but
she hardly wanted to explain
that to Ward. Torr took the comment
easily enough, however, smiling as

he glanced at Abby.

"The woman's worth a few pills," he said blandly.

"Gee, thanks." Abby rose from her chair disdainfully. "If the two of you

are through playing detective, I think I'd like to do some shopping."

"I'll call Cynthia and warn her you'll be coming over for dinner," Ward

said, reaching for the phone.

"No!" Hastily Abby turned back, an anxious expression on her face.

"No, Ward, I'd rather not. I mean, not this trip. Perhaps another time. I

don't want to have to explain. I mean, it would just be too awkward and

she's got her hands full with the baby and all—"

"Abby," Torr interrupted calmly, catching her restlessly waving wrist,

"calm down. Ward says she knows everything, remember?"

"But I didn't know she knew everything," Abby wailed beseechingly.

"Cynthia and you are like sisters. If she

was going to have any lasting

problems about that idiotic incident, you'd know it by now," Ward

pointed out coolly, dialing his home number.

He was right, Abby realized gloomily. But how could she explain that

she was going to feel strange sitting down to dinner with Cynthia, knowing

that her cousin knew all about that embarrassing weekend? She thought

back to all the phone calls she'd had with Cynthia since the baby's birth,

remembered going to see her in the hospital. Cynthia had known

everything then and yet her affection for Abby had undergone no change.

"Abby, will you stop feeling guilty?"

Torr growled gently. "You did

nothing wrong. Cynthia is aware of that."

He got up and nodded at Ward.

"We'll see you for dinner. Seven o'clock?"

"Fine. Laura will be in bed by then."

Torr escorted Abby out of the office before she could think of any

further arguments. Actually, she acknowledged wryly, both men were right. There was no reason at all why she shouldn't be looking forward to having dinner with Cynthia and Ward. She'd enjoyed dinner with both of them often enough in the past. So why was she feeling so uncertain and upset about it?

"Are you really that nervous about facing your cousin?" Torr led her to the elevator and down to the parking garage.

"I can't explain it," Abby sighed as she let him stuff her gently into the

BMW.

"Can't you?" he asked as he started the car and headed for the exit.

"Will you stop being so cryptic?" she flared, thoroughly annoyed.

"What's that supposed to mean? I should think my reasons for being

anxious about seeing Cynthia are obvious!"

"You just said you couldn't explain them. How can they be obvious?"

Torr paused to pay the parking lot attendant and then pulled out into the stream of traffic.

"You're deliberately trying to bait me," she accused frostily.

Torr shook his head once. "No, I'm only trying to find out something."

"Then ask. Don't use devious tactics."

"Okay, I'll ask. Are you nervous about meeting Cynthia again because

mentally and emotionally you're putting yourself in her place? Are you

imagining what it would be like if you were Cynthia and were fixing

dinner for the woman your husband tried to take to bed a couple of

months ago?"

Abby drew in her breath, glaring out the window at the shops and

buildings along Fourth Avenue. "Your logic is appalling."

"But is it accurate?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Maybe I'd like to know if the reason

you find yourself empathizing with

Cynthia is because you've gotten to the point where you might be capable of a little jealousy."

"About who?" she demanded.

"Me?" he suggested hopefully.

She turned to stare at his unreadable profile. Quite suddenly something

clicked into place, sliding home in her subconscious like a knife into a

sheath. "There would be no need, would there?" she whispered.

"No need?"

"I mean, I might or might not feel jealousy, but there would be no need.

Not with you. Not if you had made a commitment."

He shrugged. "Maybe that's how Cynthia feels about Tyson now."

"But in her case there was a...a problem."

"Maybe they used the problem to resolve some things. Important things."

"Perhaps." Abby began to relax a bit at the thought. "Ward certainly seemed committed this afternoon."

"I don't know why you doubt your cousin's trust. You've certainly shown a lot more trust in me than most women would have under the circumstances."

Abby considered that. "And you've done the same with me."

"We'll have to pursue this interesting discussion to its logical conclusion

very soon," Torr remarked as he pulled the BMW into the drive of one of the big downtown hotels.

"Why are we stopping here?" Abby glanced around, suddenly aware of their destination.

"Because, while I'm more than willing to meet members of your family,

I'm going to want you to myself later." Torr parked the car and opened the

door. "I'm going to check in. Be back in a moment."

Abby chewed her lip thoughtfully, watching as Torr disappeared behind the opulent glass doors of the hotel lobby. There was nothing in particular to be said. Later she was going to want him to herself, too.

She might as well face the fact that she had embarked on an affair. An affair with the man she loved. The only question remaining was how did Torr feel about her. Protective? Certainly. Attracted? Definitely. Committed? Possibly. In love?

There was no answer for that one, she realized. She wouldn't know until

he said it or until he came close to saying it by asking her to marry him.

Torr Latimer had been very badly burned once by marriage. He wasn't

likely to risk it so soon again. What in the world was she doing considering

marriage to this man? A man she had met only a couple of weeks before. A

man who was demonstrating few if any of the characteristics she had once

told herself she wanted in a man. Oh, he

had started out all right, she

thought wryly. Restrained, amenable, polite. But he had certainly shown

his true colors this week and they included a tendency to dominate and overwhelm when the occasion arose.

He also had this thing about flowers.

It was the thing about flowers that Cynthia remembered. She opened

the door of her Mercer Island home to them and stared straight up at

Torr, blue eyes alive with fascination.

"This is the one you met in the class of Japanese flower arrangement?"

she demanded of Abby.

"Yes," said Abby with a smile.

"You were right. He is a viable candidate."

Abby went red in a way she hadn't done since childhood. "Cynthia!"

Torr's arm draped heavily around her shoulders as he flashed an

exceedingly wicked, rather satisfied grin. "I'm flattered. I had no idea I

ranked so high in your estimation. What, precisely, am I a candidate for?"

"Never mind," Abby muttered as she stepped into the spacious hallway

and allowed Cynthia to close the door.

"I've been trying to get Abby interested in someone for almost two

years," Cynthia said. "Seriously interested. It's been a hopeless task. I had

this wonderful vice president in mind. He works for Ward. But I can see

now that it won't be necessary to

introduce him to Abby."

"Not necessary at all," Torr agreed with a thread of steel in his voice.

His grip tightened visibly, although his smile remained bland.

"Dear me, the possessive type." Cynthia chuckled as she led the way into

the step-down living room where Ward was fixing drinks at the bar. "I

didn't think Abby went for that type. Not since she had a rather nasty

experience with someone a couple of years back."

"I'm afraid I haven't given Abby much choice in the matter," Torr confided.

"Can I see Laura?" Abby put in aggressively in a desperate bid to change the topic of conversation.

"This way," Cynthia told her, laughing and leaving Ward and Torr to greet each other.

Abby followed her cousin's blond artfully tousled head as she led the way to the white-and-yellow nursery.

Cynthia had already regained much of her formerly excellent figure and there was a healthy glow about her that had been missing during much of her pregnancy. And the affection in her eyes when she smiled at Abby contained all of the familiar sisterly trust and love.

In silence they bent over the tiny shape in the crib. Baby Laura was sleeping peacefully, her little fingers curled beside her cheek. For a long

moment Abby simply stared down at the infant, a little in awe of the small

life form. There was a strange peace in the shadowy nursery that seemed

to sink into Abby. When she glanced up at Cynthia she saw it mirrored in

her cousin's smiling eyes. All of a sudden Abby was certain everything was

all right between herself and Cynthia.

She was certain of something else, too. Torr had been right this

afternoon in the car. She had begun putting herself emotionally in

Cynthia's place. For the first time in her life she had known the potential

for a woman's jealousy, and the man at its core was Torr Latimer.

Abby didn't kid herself. She knew that what she felt toward Torr was a

form of raw possessiveness. She also knew it was illogical. She had no real

right to feel that way and if she ever did obtain a genuine commitment

from Torr, she would never have to worry about being given a cause for

jealousy. The man could be trusted to the

ends of the earth. Abby knew

that with an instinct that defied description.

But that didn't negate the possessiveness she experienced around Torr.

She understood now what the real thing meant. It was not the sick,

mindless jealousy she had witnessed in Flynn Randolph. Instead it was a

manageable, controlled emotion that was part of her love for Torr. It was

all wrapped up with a woman's pride and passion. Perhaps it was the

same for a man. A matter of pride and passion and love. Not at all the sick emotion of a Flynn Randolph.

"You look as if you've just had a revelation or two," Cynthia whispered with a smile as they stepped back out into the gray-carpeted hall and headed toward the living room.

"Revelations are notoriously difficult to explain," Abby murmured in response. "But I've had more than one while hanging around Torr

Latimer."

"You're in love, aren't you?" Cynthia said with quiet knowledge.

"Does it show?"

"Very plainly to someone who knows you as well as I do. Have you told

Torr?"

Abby shook her head. "I think he knows, though." She remembered the

previous evening when he had told her he thought she could be controlled

through love. He had meant that her love

for him made her controllable.

"Take my advice, Abby. Don't ever depend on a man knowing of your love for him. You've got to tell him. They're a little dense in some ways."

"Men?"

"Charming creatures but not always at their brightest in the bedroom."

Abby stared at her cousin and then burst out laughing. After a moment

Cynthia joined her, and the last of Abby's reserve vanished forever.

Much later that night Torr held Abby while she shimmered like hot gold

in his arms. His raging desire fed on the response he had drawn from her,

just as it always did, and even as she cried out his name in the breathless

manner he craved, he was following her over the edge of passion and down

into the depths of reality.

The pale lights of the city outside the hotel-room window cast magical

shadows on the wide, rumped bed and on the naked body of the woman

he held. Her eyes remained closed for a long moment while she recovered

her graceful strength and Torr gazed down into her face with a sense of

wonder. He had been right when he had speculated that she would be like

one of her own floral arrangements in bed. Wild, feminine chaos and

excitement. Undisciplined and challenging at the beginning, warm and inviting at the end.

"What are you thinking?" Abby murmured from the curve of his arm.

"That I don't seem to get tired of rearranging you."

"You still think of me as a bunch of flowers?" She giggled, stretching sensuously beside him. Her left breast moved against his bare chest and

Torr couldn't resist reaching out to stroke the pink tip.

"A bunch of flowers just waiting for the touch of a master floral

designer," he teased, bending over to put his lips to her throat.

"You do seem to be getting awfully

skilled at it," she sighed, arching her neck for him. Her honey hair fanned out in abandon on the pillow.

"It's becoming a habit," Torr admitted, finding all the warm, vulnerable places on her throat. The scent of her body in the aftermath of lovemaking was enough to arouse him all over again. "And I think we should discuss the matter."

"The habit?"

"Ummm. Abby, when we go back to

Portland, we're not going back to the slow cautious relationship we had there."

He felt her tense at the determination in his voice but he refused to

back off. Some things had to be made clear now, tonight.

"What are you suggesting, Torr?"

He shut his eyes, aware of the delicious feel of her fingers in his hair. It

was now or never. He'd put it off this long but he couldn't put it off any

longer. "I want you to come and live with me, Abby."

As if she had been waiting for another answer, he felt her body stiffen and then go very still beneath him.

"I'll...I'll think about it, Torr."

His fingers tightened on her shoulders as he lifted his head to stare down into her face. "There's nothing to think about," he said, incensed at her hesitancy even though he had half expected it. "You're moving in with

me and that's all there is to it."

She stirred beneath him. "This isn't something you can achieve by sheer force of will. I told you I'll think about it."

"It's not as if I'm asking you to marry me," he rasped.

"No, it's not as if you're asking me to marry you."

Torr stared down at her. If his very soul had depended on it, he could

not have read her expression in that moment. "When we get back to

Portland, I'll be staying with you in any case," he tried to point out

logically. "I'll be living with you until this blackmail mess is cleared up."

"Will you?"

"Yes! Abby, we've been living together for the past week, anyway. Why

the hell are you acting like this tonight? You want me. I know you want

me."

"Yes," she breathed huskily, her nails sliding persuasively around his

shoulders. "I want you." She pulled his dark head down to hers, opening

her mouth for him in a way that forced him to respond. She was like a

handful of flowers. A whole bunch of them. Lush roses, pert daisies, exotic

orchids. Torr couldn't resist losing himself in the scent and feel of the

petals that beckoned.

Tomorrow, he promised himself as he drank honey from her mouth and

ran his hand down her body to find the honey between her thighs.

Tomorrow he would make it clear that she had no choice. She was going to come and live with him.

Long after Torr was sprawled in sleep beside her, Abby lay awake

staring out the window at the gleaming night. Why had she thought that

he would propose marriage? Hadn't she told herself only recently that Torr

had been badly burned in marriage and would not jump into another one?

Why did she want marriage from him in the first place, she wondered.

Because it was a sign of commitment, she realized. A sign that he not only trusted her, but that he loved her.

What on earth had she expected after only a week or so of really being together? What a fool she had been. Of course the man needed time. So did she, if she was realistic about it. Both of them were just starting out on the long road of a serious relationship. Marriage was a hasty move at this point. Torr's suggestion was much more sensible.

He had taken her by surprise tonight.
That was the whole problem. She

had just returned from an evening in
which she'd been pleasantly

surrounded by domestic harmony.
Babies and a home and a commitment

between two people had all combined to
leave her feeling a lack in her own

life.

She had known with sure instinct that
Torr Latimer could fill that lack

and that he was the only man who could.
With him she yearned for a

home and a commitment and a future.
When he had spoken of living

together she had been willing him to
speak of something more definite.

Talk about learning the meaning of
possessiveness! She wanted some sign

that he was falling in love with her, that
he cared for her as much as she

cared for him. That he needed her as
much as she needed him.

He's turned my whole life upside down,
she thought. A few days before

she wouldn't have even wanted to

discuss marriage with any man.

Ruefully, Abby smiled in the darkness.

The thing to remember, she told herself, was that by demanding that

she live with him, Torr Latimer was making a commitment. He wouldn't

have suggested anything so binding as that kind of agreement unless he

was willing to live up to his side of it. His marriage had been a disaster

and it stood to reason that he would be far more cautious the second time

around.

Why was she hesitating? Afraid of giving up her personal freedom for an indefinite commitment? What a fool she was. She loved this man. No

risk was too great. Given time he could fall in love with her. Really in love.

Abby turned on her side and reached out to shake Torr awake. Her nails

bit gently into his shoulder and she heard him mumble a sleepy protest.

"What the...?" He shifted slowly onto his back, gazing at her with lazy,

half-closed eyes. "What's the matter, flower? Do you want to be arranged again?" His voice was thick with affection and sleep.

"I woke you up to tell you that I've decided to live with you when we get back to Portland," she murmured, trying to search his face in the shadows.

There was silence from him but it was a watchful silence. He was suddenly very awake behind those hooded eyes, Abby realized. And even

though he made no move, she knew his body was coming alert.

She never did get a verbal response. The next thing Abby knew she was

lying flat on her back, crushed into the bedding by a familiar beloved

weight. Torr's body covered her with passionate aggression and she gave

herself up to the enthralling depths of his desire.

TEN



To Abby's surprise and wry amusement, Torr was extremely agreeable

the next day. He agreed to begin their new living arrangements in her

apartment when she explained that she ran her business from there and it

would take time to move it. He agreed to take her to lunch on the wharf

before they left Seattle and he agreed to let her drive the BMW part of the

way back to Portland.

"Why?" was all he asked when she made the last request.

"Because I've never driven a foreign car."

"Oh." But he was extremely gallant about the matter, nevertheless. She

knew he didn't entirely relax, however, until they were out of the city

traffic, heading south on Interstate 5.

"What's so amusing?" he inquired several miles down the road.

"I was thinking how amenable you've been today."

He flicked her an assessing glance.

"Satisfied males tend to be

amenable."

"Really? Are you satisfied?"

"Almost."

"Ah, you mean you won't be entirely satisfied until I'm living in your

house, right?" she ventured curiously.

He shrugged. "Where we live isn't all that important. Spending a couple

of weeks in your apartment while you work on transferring your business

arrangements to my house isn't a problem. I like your apartment."

"Do you? Why?"

"Because it has you written all over it, I imagine."

"I know," she said, sighing,
"undisciplined, impulsive, haphazard..."

"And soft and warm and interesting," he finished firmly. "Look, I know

this is going to seem rather staid and conventional of me, but I feel I

should take this opportunity to remind you that there is a speed limit in this state."

"Oh, yes?"

"You're exceeding it," he pointed out very politely.

"A little too much excitement for you?"

"I'm afraid so," he murmured blandly.

"Pull over. I'll drive."

"So much for your amenability," she groaned.

They arrived in Portland in the late

afternoon. The bridges into the heart of the city were jammed with rush-hour traffic and instead of fighting it, Torr pulled into the parking lot of a florist and disappeared inside. Abby watched him go, smiling to herself. What kind of flowers would Torr select this time? When he returned he carried a small bunch sheathed in plastic and a low jade-green bowl. "Knowing your taste in flower arrangements, I doubt if you have anything really appropriate to arrange these in so I

bought a bowl and a frog, too."

They stopped at another point and bought groceries. It was beginning

to feel very settled and comfortable, this business of shopping with Torr,

Abby decided as she selected mushrooms and pea pods. Almost a married

feeling.

But not quite. She realized she was getting possessive. She wanted it all.

By the time they had stored the groceries in the back of the BMW, the

traffic had cleared and they made their way downtown to Abby's

apartment building.

"I don't know how you do it," she marveled as Torr found his usual

parking spot on the street in front. "The odds against finding a place right

here must be a million to one."

"I guess I just live right."

They carried the suitcases and the groceries and the flowers to the

elevator and then down the hall to

Abby's door. As soon as she rounded the corner, Abby saw the sheaf of delivery notices hanging on the doorknob.

"Oh, dear, I hope the vitamins all got delivered okay," she said

worriedly, fishing out her key. They were stacked just inside the door,

several green-and-gold boxes filled with bottles of tablets. There was also a

variety of notes from the saleswoman she had left in charge, explaining

what she had taken to fill the orders of the rest of the sales force.

"Do these boxes arrive all the time? Day in and day-out?" Torr asked curiously.

"I'm afraid so. I need constant shipments to keep up with the demand."

"I should think there would be a more efficient way of handling the deliveries," he pointed out, frowning.

"What could be more efficient than having them delivered to my door?"

she demanded in astonishment.

"At least at my place I have a spare room to stack the boxes in," Torr

said, shoving a carton aside with his foot as he made his way into the

kitchen.

"I should never have been gone so long," Abby said apprehensively,

scanning the notes that were stacked on the nearest box. "Looks like

there've been a few problems."

"You had problems of your own," Torr

reminded her grimly as he

unpacked groceries. "And they're not over yet."

She looked up sharply from the note she was reading. "But that private

investigator will clear it up, won't he?"

"I think so," Torr said reassuringly. "The blackmailer may back off of

his own accord if he realizes we've neutralized his threat."

"I still want to know who it is and why he's doing it. I just can't believe

it could be Flynn. It doesn't make any sense." Abby shook her head as she

started toward the bedroom to change her clothes.

Torr didn't answer her and she knew he had his own theories on the

subject. Instinctively she felt that those theories were inspired by his

dislike of the way Randolph had treated her. Torr's reaction was protective

and very male but not necessarily logical. As Abby pulled off the cream

knit sheath she had worn home from

Seattle and selected a pair of jeans
and a jewel-plaid shirt, she could hear
water running in the kitchen. She
wondered if Torr was starrng dinner.
He had said something earlier
about running up to his house and getting
some fresh clothes. Abby
slipped into a pair of sandals and
padded curiously back out to the
kitchen.

Torr was industriously at work
arranging the flowers he had bought in

the jade-green bowl. He didn't glance up as Abby came to a halt in the

doorway, and she smiled wistfully at his intentness. Watching him

reminded her of the first time she had seen him in class.

"Couldn't wait to start arranging, hmmm?" she teased.

"I didn't want the flowers to dry out while I drive over to my place.

Also," he added gently, "I didn't want you getting your hands on them

first."

"No faith!"

"Oh, I have faith that you'd create an arrangement, but it wouldn't be

quite the right one for this bowl. The flowers would wind up going every

which way and you wouldn't have enough to work with anyhow, would

you? You were always running short in class. Besides, this is supposed to

be a gift to you from me."

"You know what I think? I think you wanted to create a nice severe sort

of arrangement in an attempt to counter the chaos of this apartment." She

glanced around at all the vitamin boxes and groaned. "I'll try and get some

of those packages off the floor and into a closet while you're gone."

He frowned. "I was going to take you with me while I picked up my

things." Very carefully he adjusted a stately yellow gladiolus so that it

perfectly balanced the low orchid.

"I'd rather stay here and get dinner going and arrange these vitamin

boxes. Don't worry, I won't mess up your flower arrangement."

"Well, I suppose it will be all right. I'll only be gone for an hour or so."

He smiled wryly. "I'm getting used to not letting you out of my sight."

"If you're worried about the blackmailer, it's safe to say that the one

thing he hasn't done is show himself in person," Abby pointed out

logically. "He's not likely to start now."

"No." Torr arranged another little orchid with meticulous care. Then he

selected a tall green leaf and arranged it as a backdrop for the gladiolus

and the orchids. In all he used only three flowers and a leaf. Apparently

satisfied, he stepped back to survey the creation.

"You've still got some flowers left over," Abby frowned.

"The trick is knowing where to stop."

"But what about over there on the right? You could stuff in a couple

more glads and maybe a little daisy or something. It looks a little bare."

"It looks serene," Torr declared. "Mrs. Yamamoto would approve, I think."

Abby narrowed her eyes speculatively. "I still think a little more yellow in that corner would be nice."

"And then you'd want to add a little more gold over there and another leaf or two or three. Here. You can play with the rest of these leftover flowers while I'm gone."

"Okay." She accepted them eagerly.

"But not in my bowl," he added severely. "Find your own."

"I think I could really beef up the arrangement you've started," she argued. "All it needs is a few final touches—"

Torr silenced her with his fingertips across her mouth. Then he bent

down and dropped a kiss on the top of her head. "Abby, honey, there are

only two things I require of you during the next hour. One, you will not

open the door to anyone, and two, you

will keep your hands off my flower arrangement. Understood?"

"You never let me have any fun," she replied. But he didn't look nearly so grim these days, Abby thought contentedly as he picked up his jacket and headed for the door. In fact, with a little imagination, she could say he almost looked like a man in love. Or falling in love. Maybe very close to falling in love. What did a man look like when he was in love? The door

closed behind him.

Abby stood staring thoughtfully for a long moment and then she

became aware of the flowers in her hands. Automatically she glanced over

at the jade-green bowl with its stylized arrangement. Dutifully she

reminded herself not to get any ideas and decided to put temptation out of

the way. She carried the bowl into the living room and set it down on the

smoked-glass coffee table. It really was an elegant arrangement, she

decided. Elegant and strong.

Of course, a bit more yellow and gold on the right side wouldn't be

amiss, Abby told herself. Ah, well, no sense starting off her new domestic

life on the wrong foot. Virtuously she carried her flowers into the kitchen

and stuck them at satisfyingly wild angles into a glass vase. Then she set

about restacking and arranging vitamin boxes.

It was while she was shifting a carton of vitamin C tablets that she

realized she had been recently forgetting to take her daily supplements.

The thought made her smile. Something about Torr Latimer lent strength

and vitality enough to her life. She didn't seem to need so many vitamins

with him around.

She was trying to stack three boxes of multiple vitamins on top of a

high mound of mineral supplements when the doorbell chimed. The boxes

cascaded to the floor and she kicked at them disgustedly as she went to

answer the door.

"Who is it?" Abby wiped her perspiring forehead on her sleeve.

"Consolidated Delivery Service," came back the laconic answer.

"Oh, lord! More boxes. Just what I need." Dismayed, Abby stalked

across the room and yanked open the door.

"You guys are certainly working late this evening. Couldn't you have

saved this delivery for tomorrow? I don't even have enough room to store—

Oh, my God."

The last three words came out very slowly and evenly as she finally

realized who was standing outside her door.

"Hello, Abby. It's been a long time."

Flynn Randolph was inside the apartment before she could even think of

trying to get the door shut. He wrenched her hand off the knob with a

touch of the violence she remembered so well, and then he smiled. It was

the kind of smile she had once thought handsomely sardonic and had

eventually realized hid a menace that was not governed by logic or

self-control.

"Don't scream, darling. My temper is a little short at the moment. You

remember my temper? You used to complain about it a great deal there

toward the end." His fingers slid around her throat and he pressed just

enough to remind her of their last encounter. The one in which he'd lost

his control completely and struck her.

"What are you doing here, Flynn?" With an effort of will Abby kept her

voice calm as she moved out of his grip and stepped back. Staying calm

was the only way she knew to handle him.

"I thought it was time you and I renewed old acquaintances, sweet

whore. Come on, Abby. You were never dumb. You know why I'm here."

"You're the one who's been sending the pictures, aren't you?" She tried

to speak easily, as if they were involved in only a casual conversation.

"Of course." He smiled and there was an unnatural excitement in his

dark eyes. "You thought you could hide out with your latest lover, didn't

you? But he's gone now. I watched him leave. He brought you back home

and dumped you, didn't he? Knowing what you are must have made him

sick. You're lucky he didn't do to you what he did to his wife. I

remembered that story. I remembered it

very well when I found out who

had taken you away to the Columbia River gorge. A little research in the

public library turned up the clippings. Bet that put a scare into you, didn't

it? Finding out you'd sought refuge with a murderer?"

"He's not a murderer and he'll be back soon, Flynn."

"You're lying, bitch." The evil smile disintegrated. "He's dumped you.

I've been watching your apartment for the past couple of days. I knew it

was only a matter of time before he dropped you off. Where were you going to run next?"

Apparently Flynn did not know about the side trip to Seattle, Abby

thought. He didn't realize that his extortion scheme might have been neutralized.

"Your threats aren't worth anything, Flynn. My cousin knows all about that weekend at the beach."

His smile returned. "Abby, Abby. Why

are you lying like this? The last

thing you would want is to have Cynthia find out what a slut you really

are. We both know that. And that's why you and I are going to talk a little

business tonight."

His fingers caressed the nape of her neck in a subtle threat as he guided

her over toward the sofa and pushed her into a sitting position. He stood

close, too close. Abby didn't dare move for fear of provoking real violence.

Perhaps if she just stayed very calm and kept him talking until Torr

returned she could get through this unscathed. Flynn had been

unpredictable toward the end of the period in which she had known him.

She had no way of telling how much more violent or unpredictable he had

become in the intervening two years.

She should never have opened the front door. Torr was not going to be

pleased, Abby decided wryly.

"You haven't told me what you want, Flynn." With an outer coolness

that amazed her, Abby sat primly on the edge of the sofa, looking up at

him.

"Well, I sure don't want you, you little whore," he returned easily. "You

really can't get enough, can you? You put on such an act with me, always

saying you weren't ready for commitment, refusing to go to bed with me

and all the while you were hopping into

bed with anything in pants."

"That's not true, Flynn. You and I were never serious about each other."

"We were engaged!" he ground out.

"No, we were not engaged and you know it. You never had any claim on

me, Flynn." Instantly Abby realized her mistake. He did not want to be

contradicted. His dark eyes hardened dangerously and the face that had

once seemed so good-looking became a mask of hate.

"You think I don't know what you were up to while we were engaged?"

You think I don't know about all the men you were seeing behind my

back? You little bitch! Why don't you admit it?"

"What do you want from me, Flynn?" she repeated steadily.

He stared at her and then seemed to regain control of himself. Abby

concealed a shiver. It had never been this precarious when she had known

him. He seemed far more volatile now.

Looking up at him, Abby could see that the potential for violence that she had begun to sense in him two years before, but had only witnessed once, was now flickering much closer to the surface. The man was very dangerous now.

"What kind of business?"

"Nothing too difficult for you to comprehend." He leaned over with unexpected swiftness, his fingers sliding back to her throat. Dark eyes

burned with an unnatural brightness that was somehow more frightening

than anything else about him. "I want the shares, Abby. The shares you

own in your dear cousin's computer firm. You see, I have given this a lot of

thought. I have hit upon the perfect revenge. You are going to make me a

very rich man, whore."

"You're the one who's been trying to buy the family shares?" she got out

in amazement. "But how did you know that the company's—" She broke

off, not wanting to reveal more if he didn't already know it for himself.

"That Tyson's taking the company public? That he finally got it back on

its feet and that when they do go public they will be announcing a major

breakthrough in graphics programming? I know everything, Abby.

Including how much control I'll have if I have your block of shares. You're

going to sell them to me. For ten dollars," he concluded in satisfaction.

"How...how did you know all that?"

Talking. She must keep him talking.

Torr had said he'd be gone an hour and forty minutes had already passed.

"I've known where you were the past couple of years. Did you really

think I'd let you get away with what you did to me two years ago? Oh, no.

You had to be punished. I knew about your shares from the beginning,

remember? You used to laugh at how worthless they were. You also told

me that all the rest of the family had stock. But you didn't tell me how

little each one held. I soon realized I was wasting my time approaching all the relatives individually. But I remembered that you held quite a chunk.

Enough that, combined with whatever else I can pick up from all the sweet little aunts and uncles and nieces and nephews, will let me gain a seat on the board and a lot of control."

"And if I don't sell them to you for a nominal sum?" she prodded carefully.

"Why then I'll make sure that your sweet cousin Cynthia sees what a

two-faced little bitch you are. I'll let her know how you seduced her

husband. You saw those photos I took while you and he were

rendezvousing at the coast last winter. How do you think she'll feel when

she sees them? No." He shook his head with great certainty. "You'll never

allow that to happen. You're too soft when it comes *to* Cynthia. Hard as

nails when it comes to taking what you

want from a man, but you're soft

on your cousin. I know you, darling Abby. I know you very well."

Desperately she tried to get back to her earlier question. "All right,

Flynn, I'll admit you know me well. But how did you find out about the

firm's financial position? How did you know it was getting ready to go

public?"

"I'm a businessman, remember?" he taunted. "I have a pipeline into

your cousin's firm. I've had it for almost a year. I've been sitting back

watching while Tyson pulled it out of the red. He's good, I'll agree to that. I

have no objection to him staying on as president. But he's going to have to

do things my way once I'm on the board. We're going to make a killing

with that new graphics package. The stock's going to be worth a fortune

on the open market. I'm going to be a very rich man when this is all over.

You should have stuck with me, Abby. I

could have made you the wife of a very rich man."

"You didn't love me, Flynn. You know that. You wanted to own me for

some reason I could never quite fathom, but you didn't love me."

"Of course I didn't love you," he snarled.

"How could any man love a

tramp like you? But I wanted you," he went on seemingly. "You seduced

me into wanting you. It was a deliberate game you played and then when

you'd had your fill you walked off
without a backward glance. Straight into
the arms of a whole string of other men.
But you're going to pay for your
game. You're going to watch me sitting
on Tyson's board, making
decisions that affect your precious
cousin and her husband and everyone
else in the family. That's going to eat you
up inside, isn't it? Knowing that
you were the one who gave me control?"

"Flynn, believe me, I never tried to play
games with you. You and I only

dated for a few weeks. There never was any engagement and I never led

you to believe I was falling in love with you."

"You lied to me! You deliberately toyed with me. But you're going to

make up for it, Abby," he hissed. "You know how?"

"Flynn, stop it!"

"No, no, Abby, let me explain exactly how you're going to make up for

being unfaithful. You're going to become my mistress."

She stared at him, dumbfounded. "Your mistress!"

"That's right," he nodded in satisfaction. "You're going to belong to me,

body and soul. And you're going to be on your best behavior for as long as

I want you because if you aren't, I'll use my seat on the board to ruin your

precious cousin and everyone else in the family!"

Abby drew a shaky breath. "You need help, Flynn. Professional help.

You're letting your bitterness toward me

lead you into doing something

terrible. You can't stoop to blackmail, for heaven's sake! Sooner or later

you'll be—"

"Don't tell me what I can or can't do. I'm the one in charge now, Abby.

I'm the one who gives the orders." He reached down swiftly and hauled her

to her feet. She could feel his fingers bruising her arm through the plaid

shirt, and in spite of her efforts to remain calm, Abby knew that fear was

starting to take over in her body. Panic welled up and it required a

supreme effort of will to force it back under control.

"Flynn, please listen to me," she tried to say in a clear steady voice. "I'm

not going to sell you the shares. Not for ten dollars or ten thousand

dollars."

"Yes, you will." He shook her, eyes cold and not quite human. "You'll do

anything to protect that cousin of yours."

"I might," Abby admitted truthfully, "but in this case it's not necessary.

She knows all about that weekend on the coast. What's more she knows

nothing happened between Ward and myself."

She'd made another mistake with that last sentence. A burning fury

flared in Flynn Randolph's eyes and the hands on her arm dug deeper.

"You're lying!"

"No, it's true. She knows everything."

"If she does, then she knows you went to bed with her husband."

"I didn't."

"You little slut. I know all about it. I've been keeping an eye on you for

the past six months. I know you met Tyson at the coast. I know you spent

the night there with him. Don't try to tell me any different. I won't believe

any more of your lies."

"You've been following me?" she gasped, horrified at the knowledge.

"Six months ago when I realized that Tyson's firm was probably going

to make it and that there was a fortune to be had in the process, it

occurred to me just how I could repay you for the way you treated me two

years ago. Did you think I'd just forgive and forget the day you quit your

job and disappeared? Did you?" He shook her, more viciously this time.

"You're a handsome, successful man, Flynn," Abby tried to point out

reasonably. "You could probably have

any woman you wanted—"

"Except you, right? Who the hell do you think you are to say I can't have

you? I wanted you, Abby. Two years ago I'd have given you marriage. This

time you'll come to me on my terms and you'll be sweet and obedient and

you'll make every effort to keep me happy, won't you? Because if you don't

I'll crucify your cousin and the family."

"You're irrational, Flynn."

"That's what they said to me at work," he

startled her by admitting.

"They said I was becoming irrational, that my decisions were arbitrary.

But I'm going to show everyone. I'm going to have it all, a fortune and the

woman who thought she was too good for me. In fact, little tease, I'm

going to start claiming what's mine right now!"

"Flynn, no!"

He cut off her startled scream with the flat of his hand, slapping it

savagely across her mouth as he pushed her onto the sofa. Abby panicked

as she felt him tearing roughly at her clothing. The plaid shirt was ripped

open with one violent movement, revealing her bra.

"I'll show you exactly what you are, whore!" He had gone over some

inner edge. Abby could read it in his eyes. She was dealing with a man

who was not only insane with fury, but probably insane, period.

Unable to shout or argue because of the

sweating palm across her

mouth, Abby struggled in fierce silence. She felt his hand on her body and

her fear mingled with a rage unlike any she had ever known. She could not

stand his touch and somewhere in the deepest recesses of her mind she

realized suddenly why she had never been really tempted to drift into an

affair with Flynn Randolph. She had known instinctively that he was

wrong for her in every way. The surface charm that had once lured was

now in tatters, and the irrational violent man underneath was all too evident.

The battle was vicious for all its silence. Abby could hear Flynn panting

as he tried to anchor her to the sofa. His hot hand swept painfully over her

breasts, trying to rip off the bra.

"Stop struggling, you little whore. This is what you live for. I'll give it to

you better than you've ever had it. I'll make you beg for it. And when I've

had enough of your begging, I'll take you until you cry out for mercy."

Abby shoved at him, raking her nails down his face and neck, trying to

kick at him with her legs. He seemed oblivious to the pain she was

inflicting, however, and she realized that she was not going to stand a

chance of fighting him off. Wildly she struggled, managing to throw

herself almost off the sofa.

She had lost all track of time now, had no idea when Torr might return.

How long could she last? Flynn was so much stronger and his violence so irrational that she knew there was no hope of escaping.

Her hand flailed across the glass surface of the coffee table. Flynn's fingers were on the zipper of her jeans and she twisted with desperation.

Once again her fingers scrabbled along the glass coffee table but this time they encountered an object. The jade-green bowl that contained Torr's elegant flower arrangement was where

she had placed it earlier.

The bowl felt cool and hard beneath her touch, and all of a sudden Abby knew she held a weapon.

Abby could see the fire of the brilliant flowers out of the corner of her

eye as she grasped the bowl and swung it in a short savage arc. How could

there be such beauty in such savagery as she intended?

The bowl cracked against the side of Randolph's head with frightening

force. Water and flowers cascaded over Flynn and Abby. The shock of the

cold water made Abby catch her breath just as a hoarse primitive shout

came from the doorway.

Abby barely had time to realize that it wasn't Flynn who had called out

so violently before she found herself free of the oppressive weight of Flynn's

collapsing body.

"Torr!"

He didn't even glance at her as he hauled

the unconscious man off her

and slung him down to the floor. Abby saw the way Torr's shoulders were

bunched beneath the white fabric of the conservative shirt he wore. Feet

apart, hands in knotted fists, he stood staring down at Flynn. Abby

grabbed at her shirt, pulling it close around her and tried to catch her

breath. Flowers lay strewn on the carpet and one of them lay crushed

under Torr's heel.

"Oh, my God, Torr." She realized she was trembling, shaking as if she had a fever. "Oh, Torr."

He swung around then, apparently satisfied that the man on the floor wasn't going to move. Torr's amber eyes flared at her as savagely as had Flynn's. But although she was wary of this brand of savagery, Abby knew she didn't fear it in Torr. He was in control. There was a rational, if angry, intelligence governing his actions and she saw the difference between the

two men as clearly as she could see the difference between night and day.

"How did he get in?" was all Torr asked, his voice tight and hard.

"I..." Abby licked her dry lips and tried again. "I thought he was the

delivery man. I thought he was bringing another load of vitamins." Her

voice sounded painfully weak, even to her own ears.

There was a deadly pause while Torr assimilated the vague excuse. "Are

you all right?"

Startled not to be confronted with a severe lecture about having opened the door, Abby nodded mutely.

"Then call the police."

"Yes, Torr."

She was dialing the phone when Flynn groaned from his position on the

floor and opened his eyes. Torr leaned over him.

"Move and I'll break your neck." The words were said with such

dangerous calm that they penetrated even

Flynn's dazed state. He looked up at Torr and then his furiously frustrated gaze sought out Abby.

"She should have been mine. I should have made her mine when I had the chance." Flynn groaned, his hand going to his bleeding scalp.

"He's not all there, Torr. He's sick." Abby spoke quietly as she waited for an answer on the other end of the line.

Torr glanced from the man at his feet to her anxious face. "I can see

that. But sick or not, if he ever tries to go near you again, I'll kill him." He

went down on his haunches beside the fallen man and stared into his

stricken eyes. "Do you understand that, Randolph?"

"She's mine," Flynn hissed.

"No," Torr said evenly. "She belongs to me because she's given herself to

me. Listen to me, Randolph, I will protect what is mine. If you ever go near

her again, I'll kill you. Killing you would be easy for me. I've already killed

in the past, remember?"

Flynn's eyes widened in comprehension.

"Your wife. You killed your

wife. I read about it in the newspaper. I remembered hearing about it at

the time it happened. I never forgot that story. Never forgot it. Women

can't be trusted." He sounded disoriented, his words vague and rambling

as if he couldn't clear his thoughts. "A man can't trust them."

Torr reached down and put his fingers

with awful care around Flynn's

throat. "I trust Abby. I will trust her always. Nothing could destroy that

trust. So if I find you near her again I will know that it wasn't because of

anything Abby did. I will blame you entirely. Remember that, Randolph. I

will blame you. And I will kill you."

Abby sat transfixed by the telephone, awed by the calm even violence in

Torr's words. She felt the menace in him as if it were a tangible force, and

it was becoming clear from the hypnotized expression in Flynn's eyes that

he too felt the danger.

"You'll kill me," Flynn repeated dully.

"Yes."

He shook his head as if trying to clear away some of the pain and

disorientation. "I won't come near her again. She's yours now."

"For the rest of her life," Torr said flatly.

"I won't hurt her. I won't go near her," Flynn promised as if he were a child. "Yours."

"Torr!"

Torr ignored Abby's husky interruption, focusing on Randolph as the man slipped into unconsciousness. Only when it was evident that Flynn was unable to hear him did he glance at Abby.

"Finish the call, Abby."

Obediently she did as she was told, her

eyes never leaving Torr's grimly

set face. When she finally set down the phone she was still struggling to

find the right words. The flaring threat in his eyes was fading now and she

took a deep breath.

"Why on earth did you enact that little scene with Flynn?" she

whispered.

"A little basic psychology," Torr sighed, getting to his feet. "I want him

afraid of me. Just in case the prison

system in this country doesn't

function properly. I want it impressed on his sick mind that coming near

you means coming to his own death."

"More of your criminal psychology?" she demanded, watching as he

bent down to pick up the flowers that had been scattered on the carpet.

He handled each with a heart-stoppingly familiar care.

"I suppose so." He straightened, turning to face her with a bunch of

flowers in his hand. "Abby?"

She saw the uncertainty in him and flew across the room and into his

arms. "Of course I haven't changed my mind." Face buried against his

shirt, she held him tightly around the waist. "I know perfectly well you

didn't kill your wife."

"Abby, I could kill Randolph if I had to," Torr said carefully.

"I know."

"Does that frighten you?"

"No," she said simply. "You will do whatever is necessary in order to protect me."

"You sound as if you understand."

"I should." She lifted her face, her eyes glistening with tears of relief and love. "After all, I'd do whatever I had to do in order to protect you."

She felt him relax with a stifled groan as he tightened his arms around

her. Any man was capable of violence under certain circumstances. So was

any woman. Abby understood that now. But she would never fear Torr.

The only kind of violence she would ever witness in him would be aimed at what threatened her. He would protect her but she would never be in real danger from him.

Perhaps she had subconsciously known that the first time she had seen him construct his serene, controlled masterpieces of floral design.

They held each other in gentle silence until the police arrived.

A long time later, after a talk with the police, a shower and a glass of

wine, Abby sat in her bathrobe, her feet curled under her, regally prepared

to listen to Torr's lecture. She could allow him to let off a little steam now

that the disaster was all over. And she knew that as the situation had

returned to normal so had Torr's temperament.

From across the room Torr watched her compose herself. One dark

brow lifted quellingly. "I have a right to

be a little upset, you know."

"Yes, Torr."

"I told you not to open that door to anyone, didn't I?"

"Yes, Torr."

"Are you going to sit there and say, 'yes, Torr' during this entire scene?"

"Yes, Torr."

"I ought to turn you over my knee," he groaned. There was a taut silence

following that remark. "Aren't you going to say 'yes, Torr'?" he challenged

silkily.

"I don't think so. Not to that particular remark."

"Abby, couldn't you follow one single little order?" he shot back roughly.

"It was a simple enough set of instructions! But you couldn't do it, could

you? Oh, no. You have to blithely throw open the door to the first guy who

knocks. If you'd done as I told you, none of this would have happened."

"I realize that, Torr."

"Don't give me that meek little act," he rasped, beginning to pace up

and down in front of her like an annoyed panther.

"Yes, Torr."

"This isn't a joke." He swung around, glowering at her.

"I know. I'm sorry. I don't know what to say. I just didn't think. He said

he was the delivery service and I get so many deliveries I didn't stop to

question it." Abby licked her lower lip and watched the man in front of

her. Knowing that she didn't need to fear him on a physical level in no way

reassured Abby right at the moment.

Torr Latimer had a temper, even if

he was in control of it.

"That's your whole problem, Abby

Lyndon. You don't think things

through, you just act. You're a creature

of impulse. You let your lack of

self-discipline lead you into all sorts of

dangerous situations. If some man

doesn't take charge of you, you're going

to find yourself in quicksand one

of these days."

"You don't have to yell at me as if I were a stupid little child." She felt

obliged to defend herself.

"I know full well you're no child," he exploded. "That's the whole

problem. You're a woman and you need a man to keep you out of mischief.

It's becoming obvious that your lack of foresight and restraint are going to

land you in trouble."

"That's hardly fair, Torr," she protested

indignantly. "I've survived up
till now."

"Barely!"

"You're overstating the problem," she
returned aloofly.

"It would be impossible to overstate the
problem. I knew from the first

moment I saw you in class that you had a
nasty tendency to follow your

undisciplined impulses."

"You used to think it was a cute habit,
not a nasty one," she reminded

him. "I believe you called me adventurous."

"Don't think you're going to get out of this by distracting me."

"Nothing could distract you, Torr," she grumbled. "I may be

undisciplined, impulsive and reckless but you're just the opposite, aren't

you? It's amazing you can even tolerate me."

"And don't think you're going to escape by pulling that pathetic little

scatterbrained routine," he warned.

"Escape what?" she inquired
interestedly. "Are you going to beat
me?"

"Don't tempt me."

"It might be interesting to see you do
something rash and impulsive,"

she mused.

Torr's lashes came down, narrowing his
amber gaze rather dangerously.

"Abby, at the moment you are skating on
very thin ice. The only reason

I'm not whaling the daylights out of you
right now is because you've

already been through enough violence for one evening."

"That," she declared easily, "was quite different." She took a sip of wine

as Torr stared at her. Then she smiled gently. "You don't have to worry

that I'd ever confuse your temper with Flynn's sick viciousness."

Torr inhaled deliberately, his hands on his hips. "How is it," he asked

grimly, "that you know instinctively how to disarm me?"

"Have I disarmed you, Torr?" she

whispered, eyes gleaming with the warmth of her emotions. She loved this man, even when he was yelling at her. She would always love him.

"You're a dangerous woman, Abby Lyndon. Somehow I've got to

discover a way to get the upper hand in this relationship or I'll find myself

riding the tiger," he groaned just as the telephone rang. As if he was

grateful for the interruption, Torr grabbed up the receiver.

"Hello? Oh, it's you, Tyson. Abby and I were going to call you later. After

I finish tearing a strip off her, that is. Mad? You're right, I'm mad. Not

that it's doing me much good. The woman is a menace. She ought to be

chained to the kitchen sink on a leash that's just long enough to reach to

the bedroom. I plan to invest in some sturdy chains. What? Yes, I figure

you probably had a reason for calling. Who goes first?"

Abby sipped her wine and pretended to

ignore Torr's glare as he stood listening to Ward.

"When did you find out? That's just what we were going to call and tell

you. Randolph showed up here around six o'clock. I wasn't in the

apartment at the time and Abby had strict instruction not to open the

door." There was a pause and then Torr went on gruffly, "How did you

guess? She opened it all right and found herself fighting him off. The

man's over the edge, Tyson. Nuttier than a fruitcake but a lot more

dangerous. I think seeing Abby face-to-face again and finding out she

wasn't going to let him have his revenge finally pushed him over the brink.

He's in custody down at the psychiatric ward in the hospital. Police took

him away a couple of hours ago and booked him for assault, among other

things. Oh, Abby? She's okay. By the skin of her teeth. When I walked in

she was in the process of cracking a

flower bowl over Randolph's head. But that's typical of Abby. Never could resist messing up a perfectly satisfactory flower arrangement."

Abby sniffed disdainfully as Torr paused to listen again. He sent her a silencing glance.

"Right," he continued a moment later into the phone. "He was the one behind the blackmail. He's also the one trying to buy up those shares.

That's what he was going to blackmail

Abby for, by the way. Oh, I see."

Torr nodded, frowning thoughtfully.

"Right. That's that, then. What? Of

course, I'm going to marry her. What else can I do? I was trying to give her

some time. Trying to respect her sensitive, fragile, delicate female feelings

and not rush her, but I can see that it's only inviting disaster to wait. The

woman needs a husband to keep her in line and I wouldn't want to wish

the job on anybody else. So her

sensitive, delicate, fragile female feelings

are just going to have to adjust to the situation a little sooner than

planned, that's all. Besides, any woman who's capable of cracking a bowl

over a man's head obviously can take care of her fragile feelings. Fine. I'll

talk to you later. Good night, Tyson."

Torr hung up the phone and glowered at Abby who was staring at him

with all the wonder and hope she was feeling reflected in her blue eyes.

"Ward just found out from the investigator that Randolph was the one who approached the relatives about buying up their shares. The investigator suggested a link between that action and the threat against you when he found out you owned a sizable chunk of those shares. Too bad that high-priced investigator didn't come up with that conclusion this morning instead of this afternoon. Could have saved us all a lot of trouble."

"Torr, did you mean it?" Abby broke in

to ask.

"Of course I meant it. You think it's pleasant to walk in and find your

woman being assaulted by another man? You think I want to make a

practice of that kind of thing? Abby, if you ever do that to me again I'll

lock you up and throw away the key. Where was I? Oh, yes. Ward also said

that the investigator concluded that Randolph is nuts. A little late with

that analysis, too, if you ask me. Apparently about six months ago

Randolph lost his position as vice president of that real estate firm he was

with. Got a reputation for being unreliable and erratic on the job. The

trauma of being fired was what probably pushed him far enough to start

thinking of revenge. Tomorrow I'll phone Tyson back and see if he's got

any idea who in his firm might have sold information to Randolph.

Randolph must have been bribing someone to tip him off about the

progress of the company."

"He was. He said he had a pipeline into Ward's firm." Abby brushed

that problem aside in her haste to get to the main issue at hand. "Did you

mean what you said about marrying me?" She got to her feet, holding the

ends of her bathrobe sash in both hands. Urgently she regarded him. Her

honeyed hair was knotted in a loose, tousled bun and the robe was rather

ancient. She undoubtedly did not look at all as a woman should look when

she was receiving a proposal of

marriage but, then, this was hardly a normal sort of proposal.

Torr eyed her narrowly. "I never say anything I don't mean. I'm going to

marry you all right. I was going to give you time to get used to the idea of

living with me, but I have decided that more stringent steps are required.

I'm going to tie you to me so thoroughly you won't ever be able to run. I

realize that sort of possessiveness undoubtedly offends your finer

sensibilities," he mocked roughly, "but as far as I'm concerned you had

your chance to do this slowly and you blew it. If you can't be trusted to

obey a lover then we'll see how well you can learn to obey a husband. And

I'm warning you, Abby Lyndon, husbands are not to be trifled with.

Husbands aren't like lovers who have to be gallant and gentlemanly all the

time. Husbands have a lot of rights lovers can't claim."

"You seem to know a lot about the

subject."

Torr stepped toward her and sank his fingers into her shoulders, his

amber eyes almost golden with the intensity of his words. "I know exactly

what kind of husband I will make, Abby. I'm going to be demanding and

possessive and overbearing and possibly even downright domineering at

times. But I will love you for as long as I live and that, my wary little

wife-to-be, will make all the difference."

She smiled tremulously up at him, knowing he spoke the truth. "Yes, with you that makes all the difference."

Torr's expression of grim determination warmed into softer emotion.

"Abby?"

"I love you, Torr. You know that."

He appeared to have difficulty collecting his words. "No. I didn't know

that. Not for certain. How could I have known?"

"You told me that second time we made

love that you thought I could be
controlled with love."

"I meant my love for you," he groaned. "I
didn't realize at the time that
you loved me."

Abby reached up to touch his cheek.
"And here I thought you

understood me so well because you
could seduce me so easily. I decided

you must have known exactly how far I'd
fallen."

He shook his head. "When I asked you to

come and live with me, you

almost refused," he reminded her.

"Only because I wasn't certain of your feelings. I wanted a commitment,

and it took me a while to realize that you had already made one. Oh, Torr,

do you really love me?"

"I think I must have fallen in love with you the first night of class," he

murmured as he pulled her close.

"Everything you did fascinated me. I

could have spent the entire class just

watching you create your wild flower
arrangements. Mine always seemed so
stark and uninteresting by
comparison."

Abby laughed softly. "Yours always
seemed so elegant and strong.

Anything but stark and uninteresting and
you know it. I still think you
should enter that competition Mrs.
Yamamoto told you about."

"We'll talk about that later. Right now
all I want to discuss is you and

me. Abby, honey, put me out of my misery and tell me how long you've

known you loved me?" He crushed her warmly against his chest, his cheek

resting on her hair as she willingly snuggled close.

"I've been sure for several days. I fell in love with you sometime during

the days we spent at the cabin. Probably before that. It was just that

during that time at the cabin I knew for certain."

"Why didn't you tell me?" he ground out,

sounding both vastly relieved

and vastly annoyed. "If you knew what I've been going through trying not to scare you off..."

"I wasn't sure how you felt about me," she admitted. "I thought when

you asked me to live with you rather than marry you it meant you weren't

sure yet of your own feelings. I was going to give you time. All the time it took to make you fall in love with me."

"With both of us bent on giving each

other time we're lucky the whole

problem got resolved so quickly. I'm warning you now, though, that you'd

better not make a habit out of creating a crisis whenever you want

something resolved."

"Yes, Torr."

He grinned with sudden wickedness.

"You're learning. Just keep saying

'yes, Torr' and we'll have a nice long, placid marriage."

"Placid?"

"Ummm. You know me. Reserved, quiet, placid." He turned her halfway

around in the curve of his arm and gently began undoing the sash of the

robe.

"Reserved, quiet and placid," Abby repeated thoughtfully, leaning back

against him. "Sounds wonderful."

"Actually, knowing you, it sounds impossible. I have a feeling my life is

in for something of a change." He slipped the robe off her shoulders,

letting it fall to the floor at her feet. His fingers toyed with the prim,

crocheted collar of the flannel nightgown she wore.

"Will you mind?" she asked as she turned to face him.

"The only thing I could possibly mind is losing you for any reason. Abby,

honey, you're the most important thing in my life. I'm not even sure there

was anything at all important in my life, in fact, until you came along."

Abby looked up at him through her

lashes as she carefully, methodically undid the bodice of the nightgown. "Are you going to make love to me instead of finishing the lecture?"

"Would finishing the lecture do any good?"

"Not nearly as much good as making love to me," she assured him

lovingly. Her fingers curled up around his neck.

"That's what I decided, too." He lifted her up into his arms as the

nightgown fell away. "Sweetheart, I'm going to take you to bed and make

love to you all night long. I need you so much."

"I think you are going to prove more manageable than you realize," she

teased throatily, aware of the exciting roughness of his chest hair against

her bare breast.

He started toward the hall with her in his arms and his amber eyes

gleamed down at her. "If this is your management technique, feel free to

pursue it at any time."

"The only problem with it is that I'm not sure which of us is managing the other," she sighed.

"Just remember that I'm the one who always got praised in flower-arranging class." He paused by the kitchen counter, balancing her precariously for a moment as he reached toward the vase of erratically arranged flowers Abby had put together earlier in the evening. Carefully

he chose one of the orchids and dropped it on her bare stomach.

Without a word he continued down the hall and into her bedroom,

settling his burden in the center of the turned-back sheets. Aching with

love, Abby watched him undress, the sight of his strong solid body

creating an unbearable excitement in her.

"You're just like one of your own flower arrangements," she breathed as

he came down beside her. "Strong and sure and incredibly masculine."

He laughed huskily as he lazily reached out to adjust the orchid between

her breasts. "I wonder how many women would see a man in terms of

flowers." He lowered his dark head and kissed the peaking tip of one

gentle globe.

"For the record, Torr Latimer, let me make it clear that I don't want any

other woman seeing you the way I see you," Abby declared with surprising

fierceness as she fit her palm to the muscular planes of his thigh.

"That sounds suspiciously possessive to me."

"It does, doesn't it?" Abby wasn't particularly concerned by the fact and

it showed. She drew her fingertips up along the inside of Torr's leg with

slow, tantalizing movements that elicited a heavy groan from him.

"Does that mean I'm not going to have to walk on eggs around you in

the future? No more having to be cautious about offending you or scaring

you or making you withdraw?" He

shifted slightly, inserting his leg
aggressively between hers.

"Since when have you ever had to walk
on eggs around me?" Abby let

her head fall back on his arm,
challenging him with love and laughter
in

her eyes.

"I'll have you know I've been
exceedingly careful right from the start.

You can't possibly know what a strain
it's been," he rasped.

"And to think I never realized," she murmured wonderingly.

"There are a lot of things you never realized. But I intend to bring each and every one of them to your attention during the next sixty or seventy years."

"You're going to teach me to control my impulsive, undisciplined approach to life?"

"No. I figure that's an impossible task. I'll just have to be content with

showing you all of the infinite number of ways there are to arrange

flowers."

Abby pulled his head down to hers and the orchid between her breasts

was fragrantly crushed as Torr took loving possession of his woman.

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