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WITCHCRAFT [020-142-066-4.9]

By: JAYNE ANN KRENTZ

Category: Fiction Mystery

Synopsis:

The rose with the needle thrust into its heart... arrived on Kimberly Sawyer's doorstep that morning. Darius Cavanaugh, the man with the emerald eyes, arrived that evening. Both events shook her to the core. There was nothing unusual at first about the rose, other than the fact that it had been left without a note. Kimberly discovered it as she opened the door to walk down to the beach. Startled and mildly intrigued, she picked the blood-red flower and stuck it into an old wine bottle. Not until midmorning, when the petals began to open, did Kimberly look up from her work and see the vicious shaft of the steel needle spearing the center of the rose. Kimberly froze at the subtle deliberate violence. She sat very still, staring at the wicked needle, and tried to chase away the frisson of fear that flashed down her spine. Then she remembered Darius Cavanaugh.

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It would look nice sitting on the window sill in front of her typewriter. Not until midmorning, when the petals began to

open, did Kimberly look up from her work and see the vicious shaft of the steel needle spearing the center of the rose. It had been carefully insinuated between the folded petals so that it would be revealed only when they gradually opened. Kimberly froze at the subtle, deliberate violence. She sat very still, staring at the wicked needle, and tried to chase away the frisson of fear that flashed down her spine. Then she remembered Darius Cavanaugh. The image of his savagely hewn features and the gleaming emerald depths of his strangely compelling eyes appeared with shattering intensity in her mind. Her gaze never leaving the needle in the rose, Kimberly reached out a trembling hand

and picked up the receiver of her chromium-yellow telephone. She found herself searching blindly for the little card Darius Cavanaugh had given her two months ago, her fingers shuffling awkwardly through the file on her desk. And then she was dialing the number without even pausing to think. Halfway through the process, Kimberly suddenly realized how foolishly she was behaving. This was ridiculous. Someone was playing a joke on her, nothing more. But the phone had already started to ring. Before she could slam down the receiver a woman's voice answered.

"Hello?" Frantically Kimberly tried to retreat. "..... I'm sorry, I have the wrong

number."

"This phone is unlisted," the woman said coolly. "May I ask who's calling and where you got the number?"

"I'm sorry, I misdialed." Kimberly hastily replaced the receiver. Stupid. What on earth was she thinking of to call Cavanaugh's residence just because she'd had a small, but rather jolting experience? She was back under control now.

Kimberly frowned at the offending rose and tried to imagine which of her few neighbors might have played such a bizarre trick on her. There was gruff and dour Mr. Wilcox who lived farther

down the beach. Then there was Elvira Eden, the aging flower child who had never quite evolved mentally beyond the era of the 1960's. She had a huge garden, Kimberly reminded herself.

But it was hard to picture the perpetually serene and smiling Elvira doing something like this. And old Wilcox, while admittedly not possessed of a charming personality wasn't really the type, either.

Restlessly, Kimberly got to her feet, shoving her hands into the rear pockets of her snug, faded jeans and went to stand in front of the huge window that faced the ocean. This was a particularly desolate and rugged stretch of

California's northern coast. Few people lived here year-round, although the tourists would be pouring in from San Francisco and the Bay area when summer arrived. But it was early spring right now and there was only a handful of residents strung along the craggy coastline this far north of Fort Bragg. None of the ones whom she'd met seemed the type to pull this little stunt with the rose. "You're going soft in the brain, Kim," she lectured herself as she filled a teakettle and set it on the stove. "It's got to be someone's crazy idea of a joke." Once again Cavanaugh's image flashed through her mind. She couldn't help wondering about the woman who had answered his phone. It could have

been any one of his relatives or someone who worked on the estate. The Cavanaugh winery undoubtedly employed several people. As far as relatives went, there was his sister, Julia, Julia's son Scott, an aunt whom Kimberly vaguely remembered being named Millicent and who knew how many others?

Kimberly shuddered at the notion of so many people intimately involved in one's daily world. Extended families were not high on her list of life's pleasures. In fact, families of any size tended to make her wary. That thought made Kimberly remember the buff-colored envelope that had arrived in her mailbox yesterday. It

was still lying, unopened, on the kitchen counter. That envelope wasn't the first she had received, bearing the discreet address of a Los Angeles law firm. After opening the first several months ago, Kimberly had determined not to open any more. Still, for some obscure reason, it was

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difficult for her to just toss it in the garbage. The kettle came to a boil and Kimberly poured herself a huge mug of tea. She needed to get back to work.

Her fictional characters were making

more pressing demands on her than the silly incident with the rose. With a frown of concentration, she sat down to finish chapter three. She worked for an hour before thinking again of the pierced rose. Kimberly looked up, gazing absently into the middle distance beyond her window, and found herself staring at the crimson flower instead of untangling the intricacies of her current plot. That needle had been placed inside the petals deliberately. There was no point telling herself it had happened accidentally. And no mere accident had brought the flower to her doorstep.

A spark of sunlight glinted on the needle, illuminating it harshly.

Then one of the storm clouds rolling in from the ocean blotted out the brief ray of light. The steel needle continued to gleam dully. She ought to throw the rose into the garbage along with that letter from the lawyer, Kimberly told herself uneasily. But the unanswered questions surrounding the rose's presence on her doorstep seemed to make it impossible to just dismiss the incident. Thoughts of Darius Cavanaugh brushed through her mind again, and before they had disappeared she found her eyes sliding toward the yellow telephone. Without stopping to think she picked up the receiver, dialing the number on the small card quickly, as though something beyond her own will drove her to do so.

"This is ridiculous," Kimberly muttered as she listened to the phone ringing a hundred miles away on the estate in the Napa Valley. She took a deep breath and hurriedly disconnected herself before anyone could pick up the receiver.

But all afternoon as the storm began to gather itself out at sea for the assault on the coast, Kimberly's thoughts kept ricocheting back and forth between the rose on her windowsill and the image of Darius Cavanaugh. Twice more she found herself reaching for the phone as though an outside force were prompting her. Twice more she slammed the receiver back into the cradle with an exclamation of disgust. She could not

call Cavanaugh. Not over something as trivial as this damned rose business.

Chapter three.

grudgingly ended

shortly before

five o'clock. With a feeling of relief Kimberly covered the typewriter. It had been terribly difficult to keep her mind on her work. Outside, the sky was already quite dark and the wind was beginning to howl demandingly around the small beachfront cottage.

Turning on a few more lights to ward off the pressing storm-driven darkness,

Kimberly built a small fire in the old stone hearth. It was not uncommon for the electricity to go off during a storm, and she didn't want to find herself without heat or light later on this evening. A feeling of tension, real restless uneasiness, began to work on her nervous system as she lit the fire and went into the kitchen to see about dinner. Long accustomed to eating alone, Kimberly normally viewed the prospect with a certain quiet pleasure.

She poured herself a glass of Cavanaugh Merlot wine and sipped it slowly as she prepared a baked potato and a green salad. This evening would be a good time to finish that wonderfully trashy

adventure novel she had started reading last night. As usual she set a neat table for herself, preparing the baked potato exactly as she liked it with loads of sour cream and salad dressing, grated cheese, chopped black olives, a sprinkling of peanuts and some sliced hot peppers. Setting out the bottle of hot sauce to which she was pleasantly addicted, she poured a bit more of the Merlot into her glass. Kimberly had bought the Cavanaugh wine on a whim earlier that week when it showed up on the

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shelves of the tiny market in the nearby town. It had been an expensive whim, and not one she would indulge frequently. Writers living from one royalty statement to the next tended to become connoisseurs of wine that came in large bottles with screw tops. She'd actually had to dig out a genuine corkscrew for the Cavanaugh Vineyards bottle. The wine inside had proven to be excellent, but that didn't really surprise her. Anything Darius Cavanaugh did would be done well. No, she thought absently, more than just well. It would be done right. With all the loose ends tied up.

She wasn't certain why she knew that on

the basis of only having spent a few hours with him, but she didn't question the knowledge. She had been hoping the extra half-glass of wine that she'd allowed herself tonight might dispel some of the strange tension she was experiencing, but it didn't seem to be working.

Kimberly was just about to sink a fork into the elaborately decorated baked potato when the lights flickered and went out. "Well, damn. There goes my chance to finish that novel tonight," she murmured with a sigh. Across the room the fire crackled.

Picking up her plate, the hot sauce and the remaining glass of wine, Kimberly

started toward it, intending to finish her meal while sitting in front of the hearth. The purr of a sophisticated car's engine in her driveway captured her attention when she was halfway across the small room. The sound rose briefly above the increasing howl of the wind and rain and then suddenly fell silent.

Someone had chosen a miserable night to come visiting. A moment later came the knock on her door.

Kimberly had already set down her dinner and was peering through the tiny window set in the door panel. It was impossible to see who stood on the step because the porch light was not working.

"Who is it?" she called with a trace of unease. Except for that incident two months ago, crime was not a real problem around here. Nevertheless, Kimberly was instinctively wary tonight.

That business with the rose had unsettled her more than she had realized.

There was no answer. Perhaps whoever it was couldn't hear her over the roar of the storm. Taking a deep breath and telling herself not to be so skittish, Kimberly unlocked the door, leaving the chain on, and opened it a couple of inches. "Who's there?" she inquired coolly, peering through the small opening.

The man on her front step turned his head in that moment, and the faint light from the fire flared briefly on his roughly etched features. His gaze flicked over her shadowed face; a gaze that Kimberly knew would be emerald green in the full light of day. Cavanaugh." he said. Kimberly closed her eyes with an odd sense of relief at the succinct answer.

"Cavanaugh," she repeated. The rough texture of his voice brought back memories of the last time she had seen him. It also brought an indescribable wariness that she had never been able to properly identify or understand. As she stared up at him the wind screamed

eerily, just as it had that night two months ago when she had gotten herself involved in the incredible situation that had led to her meeting Darius Cavanaugh.

She realized abruptly that he must be getting chilled out on her porch.

Without another word she closed the door, undid the chain lock and then allowed him inside. She stepped back as he moved into the firelit room, her eyes moving over him, trying to accept the fact he was here. "What a coincidence that you should show up tonight." she finally managed politely as she motioned him to a comfortably overstuffed chair in front of the fire. "I was thinking about

you today. What are you doing here?

Have you come on business regarding that mess two months ago? Let me have your jacket. The electricity went off but the fire should keep the place warm. I was just about to eat. Have you had dinner?" When he simply looked at her as he shrugged off the suede jacket he was wearing, Kimberly realized belatedly that she was babbling and wondered why. It wasn't at all like her. Annoyed with herself she hastily closed her mouth and silently accepted his jacket. It was still warm from the heat of his strong, lean body and the leather seemed to carry a trace of his scent. As soon as she caught the hint of the unique

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masculine essence, Kimberly knew she had never forgotten it. How odd to have that surprisingly intimate realization about a man whom she barely knew; someone whom she'd had no relationship beyond the quite limited association brought on by the events of two months ago. "I think," Cavanaugh said calmly as he sank down into the old chair, "that you did more than think about me today." Startled, Kimberly finished hanging up his jacket and then started back across the room. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"That was you on the phone this morning, wasn't it?

When Julia mentioned that a woman had called and then claimed to have misdialled I had a feeling-", He broke off with a faintly slanting smile.

"And later on the phone rang again but the person on the other end of the line had gotten cold feet by the time I picked up the receiver.

That was you too, wasn't it?" Slowly, her amber brows knit together in a small frown, Kimberly walked over to the kitchen and poured another glass of the Cavanaugh Merlot wine. "How did you know?"

"A hunch. The number's unlisted and people rarely misdial it. Two or three such hangups in one day were a little suspicious. Something told me it had to be you. Offhand I can't think of anyone else I know who would have hesitated to make the call." His mouth moved briefly, wryly. "Everyone else seems to have no qualms at all about contacting me for just about any reason."

"You didn't even call me back to make certain," she pointed out quietly as she walked back to her chair in front of the fire. He reached up to accept the glass of wine she offered. Almost idly Cavanaugh held the glass so that the deep ruby liquid was lit by firelight. He

perused the color with an expert's eye and then took a cautious taste. "Very good," he pronounced, watching Kimberly over the rim. "It should be. It's a Cavanaugh wine," she murmured dryly. "Cost me half a royalty check."

"I know." He swirled the wine in the glass and smiled faintly. "You must have known I was arriving tonight." She blinked, mildly surprised. "How could I know that?"

"Beats me. The same way I realized it was you on the phone today, I suppose."

He took another sip of the wine and continued to watch her. "Coincidence," she assured him roundly. Kimberly

found herself having to quash an unsettling sensation of intimacy caused by his words. She'd had that bottle of wine in the kitchen cupboard for several days along with a few others. It was odd that she'd opened it tonight. Then

"Well, maybe it was more than sheer coincidence," she admitted. "I did think about you several times today and you're right. It was me on the phone. I suppose I had Cavanaugh on the brain, and when I chose a wine tonight it was automatic to reach for the name."

"Automatic," he agreed blandly.

"Subliminal advertising. I'll have to talk to my public relations consulting firm about the technique."

"That doesn't explain why you didn't try to phone me back to find out whether or not I was the mysterious caller," she pointed out. Kimberly reached for her plate. "And did you get any dinner?"

"No, I didn't get any dinner. I drove straight through."

"Want to split a baked potato and salad?"

"Is that what that is?," He eyed the heavily decorated baked potato as if it were some alien life form. "Well, I'm hungry enough to risk it." She got up again to find another plate and then she carefully divided the still hot potato. "So?"

"So what?" He took the plate and fork from her and then watched, fascinated as Kimberly sprinkled hot sauce liberally over her own share of the food. "Why

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didn't you call to find out if it had been me on the phone?"

"Because I'd been planning to drive over here for a week. Deciding it had probably been you on the phone just pushed me into making the trip tonight instead of this coming weekend." He forked up a chunk of potato warily. "What all have you got on this thing?"

"Everything I could think of."

"Well, it's interesting."

"A highly personalized baked potato," she said with a grin. "One of the many advantages of living alone. You can eat anything you want and have it fixed any way you like. Want some hot sauce?" He considered the matter for a few seconds and then accepted the bottle. "Why not? In for a penny, in for a pound."

Cavanaugh gave her an assessing glance. "You're very content living by yourself, aren't you? I realized that when I met you two months ago. You're quite self-contained. Have you always been alone?"

Kimberly shook her head with a small smile of amusement. "I don't really think of myself as being isolated. I'm just independent and used to doing things exactly as I like to do them; that's the way I was raised. When I was growing up there were only my mother and me. It must seem strange to you because you're always surrounded by family and all those people who work at the winery. From my point of view that kind of constant pressure would drive me crazy!"

"Pressure?" She nodded.

"Where there is a lot of family, there are a lot of demands. And in your case, you have the additional pressure and

responsibility of supervising the winery staff. Many of them must be almost like family by now. You told me that the Cavenaugh winery had been around for a long time so I imagine many of the workers have, too." Cavanaugh nodded slowly, emerald eyes appraising her features in the firelight. "You're right. There are certain demands in my situation. "Well," Kimberly pointed out thoughtfully, "at least you're at the top of the pile instead of at the bottom. If one is going to have to live with so many other people it's probably best to be the one in charge."

"It has its moments," he agreed coolly. "But I get the feeling you wouldn't want

to trade places with me." Kimberly gave a mock shudder. "Not for the world. I'm afraid I've grown very accustomed to the freedom of being alone."

"But perhaps you wouldn't mind sharing your life with one other loner?"

Kimberly hesitated. "What makes you say that?"

"I've read the first two books in the *Amy Solitaire* series. *Vicious Circle* and *Unfinished Business*." She smiled slowly. "You surprise me. I wouldn't have thought they would appeal to you."

"Being in the author's debt is bound to give me a certain curiosity about the

author herself," Cavanaugh said sardonically. "Reading your books is a natural extension of that curiosity."

"Did you learn anything?" she quipped, wishing he wouldn't bring up the subject of being in her debt. Yet if she were perfectly honest with herself his promise of repayment had been on her mind today. She had thought of it the moment she had seen the petals of the rose unfolding to reveal the needle.

Kimberly could remember very clearly Darius Cavanaugh's last words to her two months ago. They had flickered in and out of her head along with his image all

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day long. I want your word of honor that if there is ever anything I can do to repay you, you will call me. Anytime, anywhere. Do you understand, Kimberly Sawyer? I'll come to you wherever you are. She'd understood the shattering intensity of his gaze two months ago. Understood that he meant every word. But it had never occurred to her then that she might actually call on him. In fact, a part of her had warned that it would be very dangerous to call on Darius Cavanaugh for repayment of the debt.

That warning had caused her to hang up the phone repeatedly today. "I learned in Unfinished Business that Miss. Solitaire is quite capable of passion even while she's got her hands full trying to defeat a homicidal corporate executive. And since you didn't kill off her lover, Josh Valerian, at the end of the book I presume he's going to reappear in the next one?" Kimberly's mouth twisted in rueful humor as she finished her potato and put aside her plate. "I rather liked him."

"So did Amy Solitaire."

"Umm." Deliberately she kept her answer noncommittal.

"Because he's so much like Amy herself? Another loner? You're going to make him your heroine's soul mate, aren't you? Two lovers united against the world, completely self-contained, independent and totally in tune with each other.

They will live life on their own terms, having various and assorted adventures together, saving each other's necks occasionally. And they will not be bogged down with the demands and pressures of families, of real life."

"A perfect relationship, don't you think?" Kimberly retorted, thrusting her jeanied legs out toward the fire and leaning back into her chair. "The way I see it Amy Solitaire and Josh Valerian will have a

rare degree of mutual understanding. Two people who know each other so intimately that they're aware of what the other is thinking without having to put it into words."

"Do you really believe that kind of perfect communication is possible between a man and a woman?" Cavanaugh asked quietly. "Why not?"

"Men and women are fundamentally different, in case you haven't noticed. And I'm not talking about just the obvious biological differences. We.. well, we think differently." She slid him a sharp glance, wondering at the certainty in his words. "Perhaps in real

life it's unrealistic to expect that kind of total understanding. But that's the great thing about being a writer of fiction, isn't it? I'm free to work out my fantasy of total intimacy with a member of the opposite sex to my own satisfaction." Cavanaugh's hard mouth lifted in mocking amusement. "You see? There's a good example of why there can't be perfect communication between a man and woman in real life. You say the words

'intimacy' and the first image that comes into my head is being in bed with you; having you completely nude and lost in passion. But that's not what you meant at all, is it?"

"No," she snapped, annoyed at the feeling of warmth that was flowing into her cheeks. She concentrated intently on the fire. "That's not what I meant."

"By total intimacy you mean something resembling telepathy, don't you? Being able to read each other's minds. And more than that; being in perfect agreement with what the other is thinking."

"I admit it's an ideal, not a realistic goal.

As I said, I'm lucky to be a writer of fiction."

"Aren't you afraid of missing something good in real life while you pursue

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your fictional love affairs?"

"I choose to live alone, Cavanaugh. That does not mean I spend every moment alone," she informed him coldly. "But until you find your soul mate, you don't intend to allow a man into your life on a permanent basis, right?" She'd had enough of this insane conversation.

"I think it's time we changed the subject. Why are you here?"

"Because you almost sent for me today," he said. "And because I want to be here.

A week ago I decided I wouldn't delay matters much longer." Kimberly shifted uneasily. "What matters?" "You and me," he told her simply.

"I've thought about you a great deal during the past two months, Kim."

His eyes never left her face. The message in those emerald depths was very plain to read. Kimberly stared at him, fiercely aware of the primitive light flickering on his coal-black hair. It illuminated the silver at his temples, making her think of moonlight on a dark ocean.

Darius Cavanaugh was somewhere in his late thirties, and the years were

heavily etched on his harsh features. His body was lean, toughened by hard work in the Cavanaugh Vineyards, Kimberly imagined. But there was more to him than physical strength. The toughness went all the way through him, was a part of his emotional and intellectual makeup as well as the physical side of his nature. Briefly she wondered why a man who had made his living creating fine wines should have developed such a thoroughgoing, almost arrogant strength.

The white shirt, jeans and well-worn boots in which he was dressed tonight gave no indication of the financial resources she suspected he commanded, but the clothes did emphasize the

fundamental impact he made on her senses. "What are you thinking?" he asked when she didn't say anything for a moment. "That somehow you don't come across as a jolly little old wine maker," she remarked dryly. His eyes narrowed for an instant. "Maybe that's because I haven't always been a wine maker. But that's another matter. Let's get the business side of this out of the way first. What happened to make you think of calling me today?" She sighed, unable to see the rose hidden in shadows on her windowsill when she automatically glanced in that direction. "It was silly, really."

"I doubt that. You may have some weird

notions about the basic relationship between a man and a woman, but you're not silly. My family owes you more than it can ever repay, and I am more than willing to give you anything I can against that debt." Kimberly stirred uneasily again. "I wish you wouldn't talk about it in such terms. I only did what seemed logical in the circumstances."

"You saved my nephew's life. He sends his best, by the way. When I told Scott I was going over to the coast to see you he asked me to tell you he'd like to play the " game again some dark night." Kimberly groaned and lifted her gaze heavenward in mocking supplication. "You can tell him he'll have to play it alone next time.

I was scared to death!" She remembered all too vividly that night two months ago when she had looked out her window and seen the lights in the normally closed cottage a few hundred yards from her own. The old, two-story house on the bluff above her cottage was used primarily as a summer rental so the fact that it was occupied in winter had mildly interested Kimberly. Other things had interested Kimberly about that house for three days preceding that fateful night. She had seen the car arrive with the woman and the small, dark-haired child. The little boy had been wearing a bright orange windbreaker. But after they had disappeared inside the old house they had not emerged again. It made no sense

to come to the coast and stay locked inside a shack of a cottage for three solid days. People who came to this part of the country wanted to walk on the beach, hunt for shells and generally immerse themselves in the stark

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drama of winter on the coast. On the third day, Kimberly had decided to pay a visit to her neighbors. She had been rudely turned away at the door by a strikingly beautiful woman who had made it quite clear that the family did not want to be bothered. It was as she was

walking back to her own cottage that Kimberly had happened to glance up at the second-story window and seen the face of the seven-year-old boy staring down at her. In that moment she realized she had never seen such an expression of emptiness on any human's face, young or old. It had stunned her. As she had stood there looking up at the boy he had abruptly been yanked away from the window, presumably by one of the adults inside the cottage. Instinctively alarmed but at a loss as to what might be happening, Kimberly had gone back to her own place and located the phone number of the real estate firm that handled rentals in the area. When she asked the agent if he had rented the

house he told her that he hadn't.

Kimberly had explained there was someone staying there and the agent had agreed to check with the owners to see if they had rented it out on their own.

When the word came back that the owners were in Jamaica and couldn't be reached, the agent had said he'd drive by his client's property the following day when he got a chance and see what was happening. Possibly some freeloaders had broken in to use the facilities. That evening Kimberly had found herself watching the other cottage almost constantly. Something was wrong and she wasn't sure how to handle it. After all, she had no real evidence of any sort

of criminal activity taking place. The only thing she had to go on at all was the strange look on the face of the child in the window and the fact that she was almost certain there should be no one staying in the cottage at this time of year. And then she had turned on the radio to catch the evening news and heard the bulletin about the kidnapping. It had taken place three days earlier but the family had tried to keep it quiet while they handled the situation.

Someone had leaked the news to the press. As she listened to the description of the missing boy, Kimberly had gone very, very still. He had dark hair and he had last been seen wearing a bright

orange windbreaker. BY the end of the news broadcast she knew that the child she'd seen in the upstairs window was little Scott Emery whose wealthy uncle, Darius Cavanaugh, had just received a ransom note. There had been a storm brewing that night, just as there was tonight, Kimberly recalled. When she'd tried to call the local law enforcement authorities she'd found her phone was out of order because of the high winds.

Her next thought had been to take her car and drive into the nearest town, which was several miles away. She'd pulled on a waterproof jacket and a pair of boots and stepped outside, keys in her hand. Instinctively she'd glanced over at the

other cottage and seen the lights in the upstairs window go out.

Perhaps, she remembered thinking, the boy had just been put to bed for the night.

She decided to take the risk of climbing up onto the porch roof of the old cottage. It wasn't such an outrageous idea. After all, the storm would muffle any noise she might make as she approached the house under cover of darkness and climbed up on the shaky railing of the porch. It was easy enough to swing herself up onto the porch roof, and from there she made her way to the darkened window where she had last seen the child. Peering through the window she was able to make out the

shape of a small boy lying quietly on the bed. He was alone in the room. He'd been startled by Kimberly's soft knock on the window but he didn't cry out. Instead he simply stared at what must have been only a dark, shadowed face. Gently Kimberly knocked again. With a bravery that exceeded his years, Scott Emery came slowly toward the window until he could see Kimberly smiling encouragingly at him. And then he recognized the lady he'd seen earlier that day. Once the recognition was established Kimberly had no trouble at all getting Scott to cooperate.

Together they raised the old window. The child's movements were slow and

unusually awkward. It wasn't until the window had been forced open and Kimberly had gotten a whiff of the strange odor in the room that she realized he might be drugged. The penetrating fragrance of a burning herb stang her nostrils and she held her breath as she guided Scott out the window. He

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crawled out wearing a pair of cheap pajamas and nothing else. There wasn't time to search for the orange windbreaker. Following Kimberly's whispered instructions he kept very

quiet as they made their way over the porch.

Kimberly balanced precariously on the railing, lifting Scott down and then they ran through the storm toward her car.

For once the temperamental vehicle started relatively easily and Kimberly drove straight to the local authorities. During the drive Scott Emery told her how his kidnappers were really witches. One good thing about the drugging effects of the herbs, Kimberly had reflected privately, was that they seemed to have mitigated the emotional trauma most kidnap victims suffered. Scott didn't appear to realize just how much time had elapsed since he'd been taken.

He simply looked forward to seeing his uncle. After that there was a time of confusion and chaos capped by the appearance of Darius Cavanaugh when he arrived to claim his nephew.

Whatever drugging influence Scott had been under evaporated quickly in the fresh air. He began to perk up almost at once and started chattering quite cheerfully about the "witches" who had held him captive. His uncle listened intently. The authorities arrived at the cottage to find it abandoned with virtually no clues as to the identity of the kidnappers. Scott's tale of being held prisoner by witches had been dismissed as a child's fantasy, possibly induced by

the drug. Only Darius Cavanaugh refused to dismiss Scott's story as an embroidery of the facts. He'd held his own counsel on the subject. Kimberly had spent several hours with Cavanaugh that night. The paperwork and the questions had gone on seemingly forever.

Cavanaugh had handled it all with a cool, relentless patience and efficiency that said a great deal about him. During that time she had sensed the strength, the total reliability of the man. No wonder little Scott was convinced his uncle would ultimately take care of things. Cavanaugh was the kind of man who fulfilled his responsibilities, regardless of what it took to do so.

The kidnappers, as far as Kimberly knew, were still at large. "Why did you almost send for me today, Kim?" Cavanaugh asked again. She took a deep breath.

"You won't believe this but I tried to call you because someone gave me a rose." He was silent for a moment. "A rose?" Without a word Kimberly got to her feet and went over to the windowsill.

Gingerly she picked up the wine bottle and brought the flower over to where Cavanaugh sat watching her. "Remember what Scott kept saying about being held captive by witches?" she whispered. Cavanaugh contemplated the needle in the rose. "I remember." Kimberly sat

down again, her fingers lacing together tensely between her knees. "Do you think I'm letting my imagination run away with me?" Cavanaugh met her eyes across the short distance separating them.

"No. I think this little gift could quite properly be interpreted as a threat." He considered the rose once more. "That's why you called me, wasn't it? Or rather why you considered calling me. You're scared."

"Yes." It was a relief to admit it aloud. Then something struck her about the way he had asked the question. She gave him an uncertain glance. "Why else would I have gotten in touch with you?" He

smiled whimsically in the firelight. "It occurred to me that you might want to see me again for the same reason that I wanted to see you." Kimberly felt the electrical charge that seemed to be coiling around her. It was a culmination of the growing tension she had been experiencing all day. "Why did you want to see me again, Cavanaugh?"

"I've never been sure how much of Scott's story I should take at face value,"

Cavanaugh said slowly. "But I do know one thing for certain. I did meet a real live witch that night I came to collect him from the local sheriff's office. I haven't been able to get her out of my head for nearly two months. But I told

myself it would be wise to wait until she called in the debt owed her. I was just about to give up and come to see you, anyway, Kim. Our timing was just

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about perfect, wasn't it? Almost like telepathy."

CHAPTER TWO.

Cavanaugh had anticipated a variety of circumstances under which Kimberly Sawyer might conceivably ask him for help. Most of the scenarios he had imagined involved money. He was used

to people asking him for money. It wouldn't have mattered to him if she'd needed money.

After seeing the rather battered old Chevy in the drive and noting the general condition of the worn furniture, he would certainly have understood such a request. And since he had only been looking for an angle that would bring her to him, he'd decided that money was as good as any other reason. After all, Cavanaugh acknowledged, the main goal was to bring her back into his life long enough for him to explore the strange attraction he'd experienced the first time he'd met her. He was thirty-eight years old and he knew damn well the curious

hunger to see her again should have faded rapidly after he'd returned to the Napa Valley. But it hadn't. Something in her called to him and he wasn't going to be able to get her completely out of his mind until he'd satisfied the need to see her again. It hadn't occurred to him that what Kim might ultimately ask for in repayment of the debt he owed her would be something as basic as protection. Now that she was tentatively raising the issue, Cavanaugh was startled at the rush of fiercely protective instincts he felt. By now he had freely admitted to himself that he wanted her. He just hadn't been expecting the force of that desire to spill over into other areas of his basic instincts. The sudden,

compelling need to protect her put a new light on what should have been an essentially simple situation. After all, Cavanaugh reminded himself, he knew what it was to want a woman. He also knew how quickly superficial desire could burn itself out. Sexual attraction was a compelling, if frequently short-lived drive. That was something he could handle. But when the attraction became enmeshed with other emotions and instincts such as this strange protectiveness, it threatened to metamorphose into something much stronger and infinitely more dangerous. Watching Kim now in the firelight, Cavanaugh admitted to himself that he wasn't quite certain why this particular

woman held such fascination. He hadn't really been joking when he called her a witch.

Amber was the word that came into his head whenever he had conjured up her image in his mind. For example, there were the warm amber curls that she wore in a delightfully straggly knot at the back of her head.

It was understandable that several of the twisting tendrils had been loose the night he had met her. She had been through a hectic adventure in a storm. But tonight the suggestion of disarray was present again and he sensed the style was simply part of her personality. All Cavanaugh knew for certain was that he felt a strong

urge to unpin the amber knot and watch her hair tumble around her shoulders. Amber described her eyes too. Golden brown and quick to reflect emotion.

More than once during the past two months Cavanaugh had wondered what that gaze would look like shadowed with passion. There was nothing extraordinary about the rest of her features. There was strength in her face, intelligence in her glance. Cavanaugh sensed the willpower beneath the surface as well as an innate wariness, and he wondered idly what had caused the latter. He guessed that she was in her late twenties, perhaps twenty-seven or twenty-eight. Her body was pleasantly

rounded and softly shaped with breasts that would perfectly fit the palm of his hand. He could see the outline of them beneath the butterscotch-and-black plaid sweater she wore. And that sweetly curved derriere so nicely revealed in the snug jeans made him want to reach out and squeeze. While everything went together in a reasonably attractive package it didn't explain the compulsion he had been experiencing to see Kimberly Sawyer again. Something else was at work. "Witchcraft," he

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murmured. "Ridiculous," Kimberly declared, assuring herself Cavanaugh was no longer alluding to the glimmering tension that had sprung up between them. "I overreacted to that damn rose. I'm sure it's someone's idea of a sick joke."

"But you called me today."

"I almost called you," she corrected firmly. "I kept changing my mind because I kept realizing how foolish it was to take that thing too seriously!" He sent her an assessing glance. "I'm here now." "I told you two months ago that there was absolutely no need for you to feel you owed me anything!"

"I rather thought it would be money," he

said musingly. She glared at him. "I beg your pardon?"

"I somehow assumed that when you decided to collect on the debt, it would be money you'd want."

"I certainly don't need any of your money!" she exploded tightly. "The Amy Solitaire books do all right?"

"They do just fine, thank you. "I couldn't be sure," he explained gently, examining the inside of the beach cottage. "After all, you live way out here in the middle of nowhere, drive a ten-year-old car, dress in jeans that look about as ancient as the car--" He broke off with a shrug. "How was I to know your financial

status?"

"I live out here because it suits me. Writers need lots of privacy and quiet, in case you didn't know. As for the car, well, I realize it's not exactly a late model Cadillac, but then I never did like Cadillacs. And the jeans happen to be very comfortable.

Writers like comfortable clothes," she added far too sweetly. "You're getting annoyed, aren't you?"

"Sharp of you to notice."

"You're also scared," he reminded her flatly. "Which brings us back to the issue at hand." He lifted the rose to examine it

once again. "They haven't found the kidnappers, you know." Kimberly licked her lower lip a bit nervously. "I'd been rather hoping something had turned up."

"Not a thing. No leads, no clues, no descriptions other than that one you gave of the woman and Scott's insistence that he was being held by witches.

Nothing." She heard the hint of controlled savagery in his voice and drew in her breath. "it must be very frustrating," she suggested uneasily. The emerald eyes lifted from contemplation of the rose, and Kimberly found herself staring into the remorseless gaze of a predator.

In that moment she almost pitied the kidnappers. The realization of just how implacable this man would be when the people who had dared to threaten a member of his family were found was almost frightening.

"Frustrating is a mild term for what I feel whenever I consider the matter,"

Cavanaugh informed her very evenly. Kimberly swallowed. "Yes.

I can see that."

"Sooner or later I'll have them."

"The kidnappers? I certainly hope so. But if the authorities have nothing to go

on ... "

"I have my own people working on it."

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"Your own people! What on earth do you mean?" she asked, startled. "Never mind." He set down the wine bottle with the rose and reached for the glass of Merlot he had been drinking. "At the moment we should be discussing your situation. I don't think we'll take any chances. Someone may be out to punish you for having gotten involved. It's possible they know or have figured out who it was who rescued Scott that night.

Regardless of what's going on you'll be safest at the estate. Can you be packed and ready to go early in the morning?" Dumbfounded at the suggestion, Kimberly nearly choked on her own sip of wine. "Ready to go? That's impossible. I'm not going anywhere. I have eight chapters left to write on Vendetta and a deadline to meet. Furthermore, this is my home. I'm not about to leave it. I can't just pack up and move in with you until the kidnappers are found! For heaven's sake, this business with the rose is probably a totally unrelated incident."

"You can't be sure of that. If you had been sure you wouldn't have almost

called me today. Even if the rose isn't related to the kidnapping, it's still quite deliberately vicious.

You'll be safest at the estate."

"No," Kimberly answered with absolute conviction. "It's kind of you to offer, but-"

"This is hardly a matter of kindness. I owe you, remember?" he shot back harshly. "Well, consider the debt canceled!"

"That's not possible. I always pay my debts."

"I haven't asked that you pay this one,"

she protested violently. "You no longer have any choice in the matter."

"What on earth are you saying?"

Kimberly leaped to her feet to confront him.

"No one invited you here tonight. And no one is going to tell me what to do.

I've been on my own a long time, Cavanaugh, and I like it that way. I like it very much. The last thing I intend to do is move into a crowded, busy household such as yours and stay indefinitely. It would drive me crazy and I'd never get any work done." He stood up slowly, the light from the fire playing over the bluntly carved planes of his face. The

shifting, golden shadows alternately revealed and veiled the visible signs of the force of his determination, but Kimberly could feel the impact of it on another level altogether and it made her shiver.

She wished with all her heart she hadn't made that phone call today. "It made little difference. I would have been here within a day or two, anyway," he assured her calmly as if he could read her mind. Kimberly didn't care for the ease with which he seemed able to interpret her thoughts. "Look, Cavanaugh, don't you understand that what you're suggesting just isn't practical?"

"You can bring your typewriter and anything else you need. There's plenty of room." She gritted her teeth.

"I don't want to go with you."

"I can see that." He reached out a hand to touch one of the curling tendrils of hair that had escaped the amber knot. "Are you more afraid of me than you are of whoever sent the rose?" he asked very softly. Mutely Kimberly stared up at him, aware of the controlled desire lying just below the surface of that green gaze.

She felt the answering response in her own body and shook her head

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wonderingly. "You want me, don't you?" she asked very carefully. "Is that why you're afraid of me?" Cavanaugh released the curl of amber hair to let his fingertips gently graze the line of her throat. Kimberly flinched at the intimate touch. "Yes." His gaze narrowed. "You're an adult, self-confident woman. Why does my wanting you make you afraid?"

She answered starkly as the fundamental truth came into her head.

"Because you can't have me. And I think you could be very dangerous,

Cavanaugh, in a situation where you can't have something you want." His hand fell away but even though he was no longer touching her, Kimberly could feel the faint menace in him. It was controlled but nonetheless formidable. It made her want to flee. Until today she had never known such an instinctive desire to run, least of all from a man. "Why can't I have you, Kim?" The words were spoken with a deceptively silky edge.

She tried to keep her own voice calm and very matter-of-fact in an attempt to diffuse the stalking threat in him. "How about the trite, but true reason that you and I live in two different worlds?"

Kimberly swung away from him, turning to face the hearth. "You are a man of property, community status, family responsibilities, commitments. You are tied to that winery and the people who live and work there just as much as they're tied to you. I understand how the demands of family and status and business all have to mesh for a man in your situation. I operate differently. I'm free. You're not. Whatever we might have together would, of necessity, have to be short-lived and unsatisfying.

At least from my point of view. Of course, from your angle a brief, passionate little affair with no future might be just what you'd like.

But I'm not willing to play the role of casual mistress for any man."

She could feel the intensity of his gaze burning into her as he moved silently up behind her. His nearness made her tingle faintly. The knowledge annoyed her.

"You are afraid of me, aren't you? And you have the nerve to call yourself free? I don't think you know the meaning of the word." Nervously Kimberly stepped away from him. "Please, Cavanaugh, this has gone far enough."

He hesitated and then shrugged.

"Perhaps you're right. For now. We have a more pressing issue at hand."

"The rose?"

"I was referring to the little matter of where I'm going to sleep tonight," he retorted dryly. "Or did you intend to send me out into the storm?" The wind howled with increased ferocity, and rain hammered against the windows as if to impress upon Kimberly what a cruel female she would be if she actually drove Darius Cavanaugh from her home on a night such as this. He gave her a small, crooked smile and all of a sudden her sense of perspective returned. "I wouldn't throw my worst enemy out on a night like this and you're hardly in that category, are you?" He shook his head, but the faint expression of amusement disappeared and he gave her a surprisingly serious look. "No. I'm not

your enemy. Never that. We're bound together in some way, you and I."

"Because you feel you owe me something because of what I did for Scott."

"That's part of it. But who can always say why a man and a woman find themselves linked? There are other ties that bind," he reminded her softly.

"Uh-huh. Ties of family and responsibility and status. I've already mentioned them. And none of those ties exist between you and me." Cavanaugh raised heavy black brows in sudden enlightenment.

"You're looking for a real life Josh Valerian, aren't you? Another self-sufficient, self-contained loner with no emotional ties or responsibilities to anyone other than you and himself." Kimberly was silent for a moment, mildly astonished at his perception, then she inclined her head austerely. "Every woman has a right to her fantasies."

"And your particular fantasy is of a man who will need and want only you,"

Cavanaugh hazarded roughly. "A man whose loyalties are always one hundred percent with me," she agreed simply. "A man who is free to give me as much as I can give him." Kimberly shook off the assessing intent of his gaze and

summoned a brisk smile. "And now about this little matter of where you will

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sleep tonight." Cavanaugh looked as though he was going to pursue the discussion of her "fantasy" man but the forbidding expression in her amber eyes must have stopped him. He bit back whatever words had been poised to attack and nodded once. "As we've already decided, I don't fall into the category of enemy. And as I'm not yet your lover-" Kimberly flushed at the easy way he began that last sentence and

found herself rushing to interrupt.

"I'll get some blankets from the closet. You can use the couch. I'll want your word of honor, however, that I'm not going to have to kick you out of my bedroom at any time during the night."

"Your hospitality overwhelms me."

"Sorry, but you're a little overwhelming, yourself," she confessed wryly. "And I've had an unsettling day." Humor flashed in the green eyes. "I take it you don't have many unsettling days?"

"Hardly. Another advantage to living alone, Cavanaugh. My days usually go exactly as I wish them to go."

"I think you're really quite spoiled, Kim."

"Thoroughly spoiled," she said with a quick laugh. "Believe me, I treasure the luxury of my independence. Now, back to your word of honor. Do I have it?"

"About not invading your bedroom? I would much prefer to be invited." She let that pass, assuming it was as close to a promise as she was going to get and fully aware of the fact that she wasn't about to force him back out into the storm tonight. He was not her enemy even though he represented a very ancient form of danger. Walking to the hall closet she opened it and began pulling down sheets and blankets. "One

pillow or two?"

"One will do." He caught the pillow she tossed at him, his hand moving in an almost negligent gesture that betrayed an easy sense of coordination.

"Kim, about your coming home with me in the morning," he began quietly.

"In the morning you'll be on your way back to the Cavanaugh Vineyards.

Alone. How many quilts do you want?"

"One," he ordered, sounding irritated.

"Kim, you were right to be nervous about that damn rose.

We're going to take precautions."

"I'll take them."

"You called on me to protect you" he reminded her grimly. "No, I did not call on you. I considered calling you, and at a few points during the day I almost did call you. But in the end I never actually asked for any help, did I, Cavanaugh? You keep forgetting that. You're here because you decided all on your own to drive over to the coast, not because I yelled for help."

"You're being unreasonable about this and with any luck by morning you'll have calmed down enough to realize it." Cavanaugh shoved his hands into the

back pockets of his jeans and regarded her with ominous warning. Kim refused to be browbeaten. She had been taking care of herself too long to allow herself to be intimidated by any man.

"That expression may be very effective on little Scott or on one of your employees who is late for work, but that's the limit of its usefulness, I'm afraid. It doesn't have any effect on me at all."

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"I keep asking myself how Josh Valerian would handle this," Cavanaugh

murmured just as Kimberly swept past the counter where the buff-colored envelope from the Los Angeles law office had been lying. "He'd know when to stop pushing,"

Kimberly advised. The trailing corner of the quilt she was carrying in her arms caught the envelope and nudged it over the counter edge. "He'd know when to stop because of this uncanny communication he shares with Amy Solitaire, I take it." Cavanaugh watched the envelope drop to the floor and moved forward to retrieve it. "You don't have to sound so scornful. The relationship between Amy and Josh is going to help sell a lot of books."

"Not to men," Cavanaugh predicted as he studied the return address on the envelope. "Women are the largest segment of my readers," Kimberly informed him grandly. "And I'll tell you right now they're going to love the sense of complete emotional and mental intimacy I'm building between Josh and Amy."

"Well, if you put enough sexual intimacy in the books, maybe you'll hang on to your male readership, too. "I use the violence to keep my male readers interested," Kim gritted. "Men are really big on violence. Maybe it's a substitute for genuine intimacy for them. What are you doing with that letter?" She glanced

up from preparing the couch and frowned as she saw the envelope in his hand. "Wondering why you haven't opened it.

Most people open letters from lawyers fast. Kimberly's mouth curved grimly.

"Not in my case. I've already had two letters from that law office. I know what's inside." Cavanaugh eyed her intently. "Trouble, Kim?" he finally asked softly, tossing the envelope gently into the air and catching it absently.

"Have you got other problems besides receiving roses impaled with needles?"

"No. The folks who employ those fancy

lawyers are the ones with the problem.

They created it themselves, however, and I have no intention of helping them solve it."

She stepped back from the couch, examining her work. "There, that should do for tonight. It's going to be a bit cramped but it's better than sleeping on the floor."

"The floor is the only alternative you're offering?"

"I'm afraid so," she said cheerfully. "And since you're sleeping out here, you're in charge of the fire. I don't know how long the electricity will be off and it could get

quite chilly by morning."

"I'll take care of the fire," he agreed, glancing down at the letter in his hand.

"Are you sure this isn't something I can help you with, Kim?"

"What's inside that letter has nothing to do with you. It has nothing to do with me, either. That's what I told the lawyers after they sent the first one.

You can toss that envelope into the garbage." He set it back down on the counter instead. "You can be amazingly stubborn at times."

"Something tells me you can be just as stubborn," she retorted humorously.

"But I think stubbornness in men is generally referred to as willpower."

"In the morning we'll have to see whether my willpower is stronger than your feminine stubbornness, won't we?" he queried easily.

"Thanks for the bed, Kim."

"You're welcome. I'm sorry I don't have any extra toothbrushes or razors or whatever it is men need when they stay overnight."

"It's all right. I've got everything I need in the car."

"I see. You came prepared?" she asked a

bit caustically. "Going to hold it against me?" he challenged gently. "Good night, Cavanaugh. Don't forget to keep an eye on the fire." Head held regally high, Kimberly swept past him to

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her small, comfortable bedroom. Damned if she was going to get into a useless argument about where he had originally intended to spend the night. Half an hour later the house was quiet and Kimberly lay in bed under her huge feather quilt studying the ceiling.

This had definitely not been one of her

normal, pleasantly predictable days.

She wasn't quite certain how to react to today. No doubt about it, she was accustomed to having the unpredictable and the potentially dangerous confined within the pages of her manuscripts. She turned over on her side, fluffed her pillow and considered the man in her living room. It was strange that he had shown up on her doorstep even though she had never actually summoned him.

Darius Cavanaugh must be very anxious to pay off his debt to her. Or else he was very anxious to get her into bed. Kimberly glowered into the darkness.

Men, in her experience, rarely pursued

women quite this far, at least not ordinary women such as herself. She couldn't help wondering what it was that had brought Cavanaugh all the way from his vineyards to her front door. She could understand that a man such as Darius Cavanaugh would be very conscious of the bonds of the debt he felt he was under. After all, he had undoubtedly grown up imbued with the notion of obligation and loyalty and family honor.

The noble-sounding virtues were stamped all over his hard face. Kimberly remembered little Scott solemnly telling her all about the generations of Cavanaughs who had been in the wine

business. The boy had chatted quite freely while they had waited together in the sheriff's offices for the arrival of his uncle. Scott was, even at his young age, quite aware of the importance of family heritage. "That's why the witches kidnapped me," he had explained with a touch of pride. "They knew my uncle would pay anything he had to, to get me back. Uncle Dare wouldn't let anyone keep me."

"Dare?" Kimberly had questioned, wondering about the mysterious uncle who was on his way to collect his nephew. "His real name is Darius. But we all call him Dare." For some reason Kimberly had not felt sufficiently at ease

with the tough, powerful man who had arrived later to call him by the shortened version of his first name. He had remained Cavanaugh in her mind. And after tonight, that hadn't changed. "Do you have an uncle who would pay lots of money to get you back?" Scott had demanded interestedly, kicking his feet as he sat on the wooden chair beside her.

One of the men in the sheriff's office had bundled him up in an old leather flight jacket, which Scott had loved on sight. "No, I'm afraid I don't have anyone who would shell out cold cash to get me back," Kimberly had told the boy, unprepared for the way it had upset him.

"How about your mom and dad?"

he'd Pressed anxiously. "I never knew my father," Kimberly had said carefully,

"and my mother died a few years ago."

"And you don't even have an uncle like mine?" Kimberly had gently denied the existence of any such useful uncle in her life. Later, after meeting Darius Cavanaugh she'd privately decided there were very few like the kids in the world with uncles like Cavanaugh. She had thought the topic of who might pay her ransom should she ever be kidnapped had been closed. Certainly Scott's attention had been totally diverted the moment Darius Cavanaugh had walked

through the door. The child had rushed forward with excitement and confidence in his greeting. Cavanaugh had swept him up and examined every inch of him with eyes of green ice. At last, satisfied that the boy was all right, he'd allowed Scott to make the introductions. Eagerly Scott had explained who Kimberly Sawyer was and how she had come to his window that night. "We went across the top of the porch and down the side and the witch never even knew we were gone, did she, Kim?"

"No," she agreed, smiling affectionately at the Youngster. "She never even knew. Rather like Hansel and Gretel." "I told Kim you would have paid anything to get

me back, isn't that right, Uncle Dare?"
Holding the hand of the man

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with happy possessiveness, Scott looked up at his uncle for confirmation.

"Anything," Cavanaugh had agreed. Kimberly had seen the grim protectiveness in the depth of the man's gaze and had known he spoke the truth. Cavanaugh would have done more than pay a ransom to get Scott back. He would have killed to save the boy. The stark realization of just how far this man would go to fulfill his obligations had

sent an odd shiver down her spine. "Kim doesn't have anyone who would pay to get her back if someone took her away," Scott went on before Kimberly realized what he was going to say.

"But we would pay, wouldn't we, Uncle Dare?" Cavanaugh had looked straight into Kimberly's embarrassed gaze and had said with absolute conviction, "We would do anything we could for Miss. Sawyer. She has only to ask." later, after the long talk with the authorities, Cavanaugh had taken Kim aside and reiterated that vow. Recognizing the powerful sense of obligation by which Cavanaugh had felt himself bound, Kimberly had quickly promised to call

on him should she ever need help. At the time, of course, she had never anticipated such an occasion. Yet his face was the first thing she had thought of when the arrival of the rose sent a shaft of fear through her. And now he was here. But there was a new element in the situation. In addition to the sense of obligation he felt toward her, there was no mistaking the fact that Cavanaugh wanted her physically. When it came to dealing with the sensual tension he evoked in her, Kimberly knew she was trying to handle something just as strong as any witchcraft. But it was a comfort to know he was out there in her living room tonight. Normally she did not mind spending the nights alone. Tonight, she

realized, would have been an exception. The knowledge that Cavanaugh was close by soothed the lingering fear the arrival of the rose had caused. She soon fell asleep. When she awoke several hours later the storm had slackened somewhat but the wind continued to hurl rain against the windows behind the drawn shades.

Kimberly heard the sounds of the storm only vaguely. Her main awareness was of being thirsty. Too many salty black olives on the potato tonight. Hovering in that floating region between wakefulness and dreams, she wondered if she could get back to sleep without making a trip out to the kitchen for a glass of water.

But the growing thirst finally had its way. Still half asleep, Kimberly pushed back the quilt and padded barefoot to her bedroom door. Dimly she wondered why she had closed it tonight. She never closed her door. After all, there was hardly any need. She was always alone in the house. Wrenching it open in annoyance, she continued on down the hall to the open kitchen. There was a faint flow of light from the fireplace and Kimberly vaguely remembered that the electricity was off. It was getting cold, she realized. The oversized man's cotton T-shirt she habitually wore to bed barely covered her derriere.

One of these days she was going to

remember to buy some real pajamas. There was a robe hanging in her closet but it had seemed too much bother to drag it out just for a short trip to the kitchen. With comfortable familiarity she found the cabinet door in the darkness and groped inside for a glass. Then she shuffled over to the sink and ran the water. The shade on the kitchen window had been left up this evening, and as she stood barefoot in front of the sink, drinking her water, Kimberly stared disinterestedly out into the darkness. If she was careful she could stay in this half-asleep state until she crawled back into bed. She had almost finished the contents of the glass when something moved outside the window. Startled by

shifting shadows where there should be nothing but open expanse between her and the view of the ocean, Kimberly belatedly began to come awake. As her eyes widened, lightning crackled across the sky, obligingly illuminating the scene in front of the kitchen window. In that split second of atmospheric brilliance Kimberly stared in horror at the figure in a cowl who stood outside staring back at her. She had no time to discern a face in the shadowy depths of the cowl.

Kimberly's entire attention was riveted on the silver dagger the figure was holding up right in front of himself. In that moment she knew the dagger was meant for her. Although the scream that

echoed through the small house was

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hers, Kimberly felt dissociated from the sound of unadulterated terror in her voice. She was more conscious of the glass sliding from her fingers and crashing into the sink. "Kim!" Cavanaugh. She had forgotten all about him.

Half turning she saw him as he leaped over the back of the couch, rushing toward her. "What the hell ...?"

"Outside the window," she managed to

gasp. "Someone outside the window with a knife.

I, oh, my God!"

"Get down." The command cracked violently through the air. He was right, Kimberly realized, stunned. She was standing silhouetted against the kitchen window. But she couldn't seem to move.

Then movement on her part became unnecessary. Cavanaugh reached her a second later, driving into her with the full weight of his half-naked body. He dragged her violently down onto the floor behind the protection of the counters and out of sight of anyone who might still be standing at the kitchen

window.

CHAPTER THREE.

"Stay down," Cavanaugh gritted, sprawling along the length of Kimberly's body.

Crushed against the cold vinyl tile of the kitchen floor, Kimberly gasped for breath. "I can't do much else with you on top of me like this. You weigh a ton, Cavanaugh!" He ignored that, his features a rigid mask of concern in the shadowy light. "Tell me exactly what you saw out there," he whispered roughly.

He lifted his head so that he could meet

her wide-eyed gaze. "I told you.

There was a man, at least I think it was a man. He was wearing a hooded robe or something.

I couldn't see his face. But when the lightning flashed I saw a knife.

A big silver dagger. It was horrible. I had the awful feeling he meant me to see it."

"Given the fact that the bastard was outside your window and not someone else's on the block, that's a fair guess," Cavanaugh mocked grimly. He shifted his weight and she realized he was going to get up off the floor. "Lie still.

Don't move until I get back, understand? No one can see you down here behind the kitchen counters."

"Until you get back!" Kimberly repeated, horrified. "What's that supposed to mean? Where on earth do you think you're going?"

"I'm going to have a look around outside." He rolled off her, uncoiling easily to his feet. "No, you can't go out there!" She grabbed for his jean-clad leg.

It was like trying to hold on to a breaking wave. He slipped from her grasp as if he hadn't even been aware of it. "Cavanaugh, this is stupid," she

hissed as she watched him stride across the room to find his boots. "You can't go out there. Who knows what might be waiting?"

For Pete's sake, come back here." He didn't bother to answer. The golden afterglow of the fire flickered on the sleek planes of his bare back as he bent over briefly to shove his feet into the boots. And then he was at the door, slipping off the chain. "Don't move," he ordered once again as he stepped cautiously outside. He shut the door softly behind himself.

"Cavanaugh, wait!" She was appealing to an empty room.

Angrily Kimberly sat up on the chilly floor, hugging her bare knees to her chest as she stared at the door. For what seemed an unbearably long time she

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continued to sit where she was, visions of the cowed figure holding the knife repeating themselves endlessly in her head. Suddenly, startingly aware of her own near nudity as the icy vinyl finally made its presence known against her backside, she started to get to her feet.

Halfway up she remembered Cavanaugh's injunction to stay where she

was.

Astonished that she had allowed the force of his command to keep her there on the floor for even a few seconds, Kimberly stood up completely and peered cautiously out the kitchen window. She could see nothing, and the thought that Cavanaugh was out there somewhere, facing who knew what on her behalf, finally jolted her into action. Turning away from the window, Kimberly started toward the hall to her bedroom. She needed to find her jeans and some shoes and a shirt before following her guest out into the stormy night. She was nearly across the room when the door opened again and

Cavanaugh stepped back inside.

Whirling, she halted to demand anxiously, "Are you all right? I was terrified!" He stood staring at her, eyes deep and unreadable in the dim glow of the firelight. The rain had dampened his shoulders and hair and the jeans rode low on his hips. Kimberly saw the glistening drops of moisture caught in the curling dark hair on his chest and was violently aware of the lingering hint of anger emanating from him. "I told you to stay down on the floor."

Cavanaugh fastened the catch on the door and then started toward her. "I decided sitting on a cold vinyl floor wasn't doing anyone much good,"

Kimberly retorted, injecting a measure of irritation into her words. She found herself increasingly uneasy now and the sense of anxiety wasn't caused by what she had just seen through the window. "You didn't answer my question. I take it you're all right?"

"I'm fine." He stopped beside the couch and pried off his wet boots. "Got a towel? I'm soaked."

"Of course." Grateful for the small diversion, Kimberly reached into the hall closet nearby and yanked down a towel. She stepped forward to hand it to him and then remembered the short T-shirt she was wearing. "Here," she said

quickly, tossing him the towel. "I'll go find my robe." She hurried to her bedroom door.

"Did you see anything out there?" Opening the closet she pulled out the red terrycloth robe. "No, I couldn't find a trace of anything or anyone.

Hardly surprising with this rain and wind." His voice came from her bedroom doorway. Startled that he had followed her down the hall, Kimberly fumbled with the robe. The darkness wasn't providing much privacy. She knew the pale length of her legs must be quite visible beneath the incredibly short hem of the T-shirt. Cavanaugh stood watching her as though he had a right,

idly drying his hair and the back of his neck. "Perhaps in the morning we'll be able to find some signs," she suggested hesitantly, wondering why it was proving so difficult to get into the robe. Her fingers didn't seem to want to function properly. Although she had been quite chilled a few minutes ago her whole body now seemed unnaturally warm. "I doubt it." He didn't move from her doorway and the vividness of his gaze seemed to burn over her.

"Who owned that T-shirt originally?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I just wondered what man left that T-shirt behind for YOU to wear to bed.

Will he be coming back to collect it or you in the near future?" Kimberly felt herself flushing and was glad he couldn't see the change in her skin color here in the darkness. Distractedly she managed to knot the red robe around her waist. "I always sleep in T-shirts. I buy them myself in packages of three. No one left it behind. Now, if you've finished commenting on my lingerie, I suggest we go back to the living room and talk over this situation." He didn't move. Kimberly drew in a deep breath and decided on a firmly aggressive

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approach. She walked straight toward the door, giving every indication that she fully expected him to step aside. When he didn't, she was forced to halt a foot away. "Excuse me," she said very politely. "You seem to be blocking the door." Cavanaugh slowly lowered the hand holding the towel.

"Why didn't you stay on the floor in the kitchen?"

"Because the floor was damn cold!" she exploded. "And because I didn't know what you were doing outside. I was worried, Cavanaugh. I've had something of a shock this evening." He searched her face in the darkness, his own gaze brooding and watchful. "Pardon me,

Cavanaugh, but you really are in the way."

She put out a palm, flattened it boldly against his chest and shoved with all her strength. The situation was slipping out of control, and she was woman enough to know it. She might as well have been pushing against a granite wall for all the good it did. Realizing belatedly that the forceful approach wasn't going to have much effect, Kimberly hastily tried to pull back her hand. She didn't move quickly enough; he managed to snag her wrist. "You realize, of course, that what happened tonight clinches tomorrow's plans." He didn't move, just stood there chaining her wrist. "You're coming back

to the estate with me in the morning." Kimberly swallowed, violently aware of his strength and the absolute certainty with which he spoke. Her need to rebel was more of an instinct than a reasoned act. After all, she had been literally terrified tonight. Staying alone here in this house was about the last thing she wanted to do at the moment. But giving in to Darius Cavanaugh seemed almost as dangerous. "I make my own decisions, Cavanaugh. Don't ever forget that," she asserted, lifting her chin defiantly. "I've been doing it a long time and I'm quite good at it."

"From now on," he grated softly as he pulled her closer, "you're going to get

used to having a little help in the decision-making department. I'm responsible for you because of what you did for Scott two months ago. I have every intention of carrying out my duty."

"I'm sure you do. You're the kind of man who would always do what was expected of him, aren't you? And you're accustomed to being in charge of other people.

But I don't expect you to protect me, Cavanaugh, and I most certainly don't intend to take orders from you. I'll handle this in my own way." She was trembling now and not just from anger. Cavanaugh was too close, too big, too overwhelming dressed in nothing but a

pair of jeans. Her earlier fears of the robed figure holding the dagger were being swamped with a new and altogether different type of trepidation. "Don't be afraid of me, Kim," he said quietly.

She narrowed her eyes, angry that he had perceived her new nervousness. "If you don't want to frighten me any more than I've already been frightened this evening, I suggest you release my hand," she ordered coolly. "I might be more willing to do that if I hadn't seen you running around in the firelight dressed in that skimpy little T-shirt," Cavanaugh told her in a husky voice as he dragged her half an inch closer. "And if I hadn't felt

you lying half-naked under me Out there on the floor. And if I hadn't just gone hunting for that bastard with the knife." He tugged her another half inch toward him. "Or if I hadn't been wondering off and on for two months what it would be like to take you to bed-"

"No!" But her protest was a breathless squeak of denial that held no real power. Mesmerized by the Sensual tension crackling in the air around them, she found herself crushed against his bare chest, her fingers splayed wildly on his shoulders. "Come here, witch," Cavanaugh growled softly as he lowered his head to find her mouth. "Let's find out just how strong your spells are."

Kimberly had an impression of emeralds that gleamed with a thoroughly dangerous fire and then her own eyes closed beneath the impact of Cavanaugh's mouth.

The kiss was not a gentle, tasting caress. Her lips were captured and parted;

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her inner warmth exploded with a hunger that astounded her. As his hands slid down her back, sensing the shape of her through the robe, Kimberly felt a tantalizing heat flare to life in her body. She had been honest with herself earlier

this evening when she'd privately admitted the effect his politely controlled desire had on her. She would be less than honest with herself now if she tried to deny that Cavanaugh's unleashed passion was devastating. She heard the soft, feral groan deep in his throat and her pulse raced. His mouth was warm and marauding, unbelievably exciting. Kimberly cried out with stifled regret when he finally freed her lips. But almost immediately he was searching out the delicate skin of her throat and his hands slipped around her waist to find the sash of the red robe. "Do you have any idea what you look like in that T-shirt?" Cavanaugh demanded hoarsely as he untwisted the knot of the sash. "What

you felt like out there on the floor?"

"I felt cold," she tried to say, struggling for some self-control. "You felt soft and warm and silky. Not cold at all. And you feel even warmer now. I knew it was going to be like this. For two months I've known-"

"Cavanaugh, wait," she managed on a thread of sound and then she caught her breath as his hands moved inside the parted edges of the robe. "Why should I wait? You want this as much as I do."

The classic male reason provoked her as nothing else could have done.

Kimberly slapped at his hand, trying to

step away from his compelling touch.

"No, I'm not at all sure I want it. Everything's happening much too fast. I've been through a great deal this evening. I want time to think."

"If I give you time to think, you'll come up with a thousand reasons why you shouldn't get involved with me."

Kimberly gasped, both at the accuracy of his muttered analysis and at the feel of his palm as he pushed his hand up under the T-shirt to find her breast. "Ah, Cavanaugh, please ... " But the words were on a fine line between surrender and resistance and she knew instinctively that he realized it.

Dimly she tried to tell herself that her strong physical reaction to this man was the result of the scare she'd had. Heaven knew she'd used that rationale often enough to introduce a sex scene in her novels.

After a scene of action or violence adrenaline and excitement were flooding the nervous systems of her characters. It seemed natural to channel it into sex on occasion. But only within the confines of a book, she thought frantically. Surely that sort of thing didn't happen in real life! But how else could she explain her explosive reaction to Cavanaugh's touch? And then the electricity was restored without any warning.

Cavanaugh lifted his head abruptly as lights blazed around him. Kimberly saw the flash of impatience and irritation in his gaze.

"You must have had every light in the house on before you lost the electricity," he complained brusquely. "Another advantage to living alone,"

Kimberly tossed back a little breathlessly. "There's no one around to lecture me about my electricity bills. Or anything else." But the mood had been broken and they both knew it.

Reluctantly, Cavanaugh let her slide from his grasp, the emerald fire of his eyes lingering on her flushed face. Kimberly busied herself retying the sash

of the robe.

He studied her trembling fingers and understood how shaken she was. After hesitating a moment he decided to give her the out she needed. If he didn't, matters were going to be a lot more difficult in the morning.

"I shouldn't have assaulted you like that," he told her quietly. "Hell, I was supposed to be the one protecting you, wasn't I?"

"These things happen," she surprised him by saying in a very distant tone. "Do they?"

He controlled the flicker of amusement

her words caused. "Oh, yes. I use this sort of scenario all the time in my books. Scenes of action often precipitate scenes of ... of ... "

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"Passion?"

"Exactly. All that pent-up adrenaline and stuff. Very useful. I just hadn't realized it worked that way in real life, too." Her smile was rather forced but it was there as she faced him with casual challenge. Cavanaugh felt a little stunned. "You've already got the whole thing neatly rationalized, haven't you?" "As I said, it

was just one of those things.

Chalk it up to an odd quirk in human nature." He struggled to restrain himself from taking hold of her and tossing her down on the bed.

Cavanaugh was astonished at the force of the urge he felt to do exactly that.

He'd show her the difference between one of her books and real life! Almost immediately, he realized the stupidity of that course of action. He had other, more immediate goals to work toward, he reminded himself grimly. After all, the most important matter at hand was to get her into the car without opposition in the morning. Humoring her now might make

that task simpler. He smiled crookedly. "I'll accept your analysis of the situation. From my point of view, I can truly apologize for my actions. I appreciate your understanding." There was an odd look of relief in her eyes as if she knew she had just come perilously close to an infinitely dangerous confrontation. A confrontation with herself or with him, Cavanaugh wondered fleetingly. "Yes I

well, it's been a hectic evening, hasn't it?" she remarked condescendingly.

Cavanaugh wanted to shake her. He'd like to show her just how "hectic" he could make her neat, self-contained world. Instead he said politely, "Yes, it has. I think I'll recheck all your locks

before I go back to bed. And it might be a good idea if you left the door of your bedroom open."

"So that you can hear me if I get carried off by witches?"

"It's not really all that funny," he murmured. "I know," she said with a sigh, toying nervously with the end of her red sash. "I was scared to death earlier.

glad you were here, Cavanaugh. Very glad." Wisely he decided to let that ride without following up with a demand that she let him continue to protect her.

Given a few more hours alone in her

room to think about the situation, she would come to her senses. "Get some sleep, Kim.

Everything will be fine. Whoever was out there knows you're not alone now."

"Good night, Cavanaugh," she nodded, sounding vaguely wistful. He looked down at her, aware of the fierce restlessness in his body. She looked so intriguing with her amber hair in tumbled disarray. Her bare feet beneath the hem of the robe made her somehow charmingly vulnerable and he found himself wanting to pull her nervous fingers away from the sash that kept the old terry cloth robe close to her body. Taking a resolute grip on his senses,

Cavanaugh stepped out into the hall. Then he thought of something. "There's just one thing, Kim."

"What's that?"

She frowned curiously. "The next time I give you an order in a situation like the one we had tonight, I'll expect you to obey it." Instantly he knew he'd made a mistake. The small frown on her face turned into a mask of feminine hauteur. "Since I don't expect too many more situations such as the one we experienced tonight, I don't see that as a problem. Good night, Cavanaugh." He decided he'd better get out of her room before he said anything further to annoy

her. Without a word he stalked down the hall, turning off lights as he went. Stopping in front of the fire, he poked at the embers, listening as Kimberly turned off the light in her own room and climbed into bed. A moment later the house was silent again. There was one more light still blazing, the one in the kitchen area. Cavanaugh walked over to flip the switch and his eyes fell on the buff-colored envelope from the Los Angeles law firm.

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Idly he picked it up, wondering why Kim

hadn't opened it. Perhaps she had trouble on her hands from another source besides Scott's "witches."

Long accustomed to dealing with trouble, Cavanaugh made his decision.

He unsealed the envelope and lifted out the stiff, formal stationery.

Then standing barefoot in Kimberly's kitchen, he read the letter without any compunction whatsoever. When he was finished he had even more questions about Kimberly Sawyer. Thoughtfully Cavanaugh refolded the letter and stuffed it back into the envelope. Then he turned off the kitchen light and walked to the uncomfortable couch. In front of the fire

he stepped out of the slightly damp jeans and spread them out so that they would dry by morning. As he slid under the blankets Kim had given him earlier he propped himself on his elbow and stared intently into the glowing coals of the fire. Kimberly Sawyer was an intriguing woman. She was also proving to be something of a mystery. Above all, Cavanaugh reminded himself, he had an obligation to protect her. He owed her that much in return for what she had done two months ago. But it wasn't the sense of responsibility he felt that stayed on his mind as he allowed himself to go back to sleep. Nor was it the questions engendered by that letter in the kitchen. The last, disturbing thought he had of

Kimberly was a memory of the way she had begun to respond to him when he'd held her in his arms. If he'd had a little more time or a more appropriate set of circumstances, he decided, he could have had her in bed. That realization was deeply satisfying. Kimberly awoke the next morning with a decidedly grim realization of her own. She knew she didn't want to face another night alone in this isolated house. Someone was deliberately trying to terrorize her. The man in the living room was offering shelter. She really had no logical choice but to accompany him back to the wine country until this business was all cleared up. No sense fooling herself, she thought as she climbed out of bed and

headed toward the bathroom. It wasn't going to be easy living in a house full of strangers. But handling figures in hooded robes who walked around carrying large silver daggers wasn't much more inviting. She could just imagine what the authorities would say if she tried to tell them what had happened last night. They would think she'd gone off her rocker. At least Cavanaugh hadn't questioned her story of what she'd seen through the window.

The closed door of her bathroom and the sound of running water inside brought her up short. "Cavanaugh, are you in there?"

"Were you expecting anyone else?" he

called back provokingly. "Don't dawdle,"

she warned. The door opened a minute later and he stood in front of her wiping the last of the shaving cream off his neck. He was naked from the waist up and it was obvious he had made himself quite at home. Emerald eyes glinted as he took in the disapproving way she peered around him into the interior of the bathroom. "Your trouble is that you're simply not used to having a man in the house. Or anyone else for that matter.

Don't worry, I'm fully trained. I won't leave my towels lying on the floor."

"Are you finished?" she demanded

frostily, wondering if there would be any hot water left. "Just about."

"Good. Then you can start breakfast," she informed him triumphantly, sweeping past him to commandeer the small bathroom. He allowed himself to be pushed out into the hall, but not before she'd caught sight of the half-amused twist of his mouth. "A man would have his hands full teaching you the fine art of household compromise," he observed. "When it comes to having enough hot water for my morning shower, I don't believe in compromise. Go start the eggs, Cavanaugh. I like them on the well-done side." She started to close the door and then stopped. "Oh, by

the way, I've decided to take you up on your offer.

At least for a few days." He raised one dark brow. "No more arguments about returning to the estate with me this morning?"

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"Is the offer still open?"

"It was never an offer, Kim," he explained gently. "It was more of a requirement. I can't stay here with you because I have too many other responsibilities at home. But I can't

leave you alone here, either; not after what's been happening.

The only alternative is for you to go home with me." She tilted her head to one side, studying him coolly through narrowed lashes. "If I have a few things to learn about sharing the bathroom, allow me to inform you that you have a hell of a lot to learn about diplomacy."

"Meaning I ought to learn how to make commands sound like requests?" he drawled.

Disdaining to answer that before she'd even had her morning coffee, Kimberly slammed the door in his face. Half an hour later when she strode into the

kitchen dressed in a fresh pair of jeans and a peach-colored shirt, she sniffed appreciatively at the aroma that greeted her. "Not bad, Cavanaugh. Not bad at all." She examined the eggs he was scrambling at the stove. A stack of toast was keeping warm in the oven. "I do my best to please," he murmured.

Kimberly grinned.

"Something tells me you just happened to be hungry yourself. Not that I'm complaining. I can't even remember the last time someone cooked breakfast for me. I'll enjoy it while I can." She opened the refrigerator. "What do you want on your eggs?"

"Anything but hot sauce." She tossed him a disapproving glance. "You don't know what you're missing. I love it on my eggs." Pulling the huge bottle of pepper sauce from the refrigerator she carried it toward the counter.

Actually, having Darius Cavanaugh around was rather interesting, she decided privately. What would it be like living in his house for a few days? Setting down the hot sauce, Kimberly leaned across the counter to collect a couple of napkins. It was then her eyes fell on the opened envelope from the lawyers.

Instantly the good mood she had been indulging evaporated as she realized that

Cavanaugh must have read the letter. "What's this all about?" she demanded softly, holding up the opened envelope. Cavanaugh didn't pause in the act of dishing out the eggs. "That's what I was going to ask you."

"You opened this!" He nodded, putting the frying pan into the sink and picking up the two plates. She stared at him in stunned amazement. He didn't even appear mildly embarrassed. "You deliberately opened a private letter!"

"I was curious."

"Curious! My God, Cavanaugh, what gives you the right to be curious about my personal correspondence?" she flung

furiously. He still appeared unperturbed.

"In my experience letters from lawyers often spell trouble. Since you didn't seem interested in opening it I thought I'd better." She sat down weakly on the stool beside him, feeling more amazement than anything else. "I can't believe you had the nerve to do something like this." He slanted her a glance.

"Who are the Marlands, Kim?"

"To blithely open someone else's private mail. It's incredible. There are laws against that sort of thing." she went on, ignoring his question. "Kim, who are the Marlands? Why have they hired that law

firm to contact you? Why are they asking you to meet with them?"

"Are you this high-handed with all those people you have working for you and living with you? If so, I don't see how you keep your employees. Your relatives must find you absolutely infuriating."

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"Kim," he interrupted patiently. "Just answer my questions."

"Why should I?"

He muttered something short and explicit

under his breath. "Because if you don't answer my questions, I'm liable to contact that law firm myself and find out what's going on. "First invasion of privacy and now threats," she gritted.

"Kim, just be reasonable about this, all right?

I'm only trying to find out if you've got real trouble. Maybe it's got something to do with that character at the window last night. Maybe we're way off base thinking he was connected with the kidnapping."

Kimberly was too startled at his conclusions to restrain her answer.

"Good Lord, no! I assure you that Mr. and Mrs. Wesley Marland would never dirty their well-manicured hands in something as nasty as kidnapping."

"So who are they?" he persisted gently. "Why do they want you to get in touch with them?" Kimberly decided it really wasn't worth the battle. Besides, she reasoned, it wouldn't do any harm to tell him the truth. "My father's parents."

"Your grandparents?"

"Technically."

She shrugged and began lacing her eggs with hot sauce. "I don't really think of myself as being related to them except in

a strictly biological sense. I've never even met them."

"From the sound of that letter they want to meet you."

"It's a little late for them to play the role of loving grandparents."

"What happened?" Cavanaugh asked quietly.

"Breakfast is hardly the time to drag family skeletons out of the closet,"

Kimberly parried brightly. "I've learned there aren't any good times to do it.

Might as well be over breakfast," he

retorted dryly.

Something in his tone caused her to send him a questioning glance.

Whatever lay beneath the surface of the remark was destined to remain a mystery for now, however. Cavanaugh was on the trail of her secrets and had no intention of being sidetracked into revealing any of his own.

Still, she found herself wondering suddenly about his past. What was it he had said last night? There had been some remark about him not always having made his living making wine. "Tell me, Kim," he broke into her reverie to prod softly. "It's short and sordid. Actually,

given your own family background, you'll probably understand the Marlands' position completely. My father was their only son and heir. The Marlands own a big chunk of Pasadena, California, and have sizable investments throughout the state. The family goes back for generations. All the way back to Spanish land grant days. Lots of pride of heritage and lots of money. They had raised my father to be a worthy inheritor of the money and the name. He had been perfectly groomed for his role in life, as I understand it. Private schools, the best of everything money could buy.

And then one day the noble son and heir committed a serious judgmental error.

He fell in love with my mother."

"Let me guess" Cavanaugh inserted coolly. "Your mother didn't come from the right background?"

"My mother was an underpaid, overworked nurse. She lacked any sort of background at all, let alone the right one. She was an orphan. She met my father when he went into the hospital for some minor surgery. You know what

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they say about men falling in love with their nurses."

"No. What do they say?" Cavanaugh inquired. "Never mind.

Apparently it's a regular nursing syndrome. It usually wears off as soon as the man is discharged from the hospital. Only in my father's case, it didn't.

He knew he'd never get his parents' approval to marry my mother so one night in the heat of passion he ran off with her to Las Vegas."

"Hoping to present his parents with a fait accompli?"

"Umm," Kimberly said, nodding. "It didn't quite work out that way. The

Marlands were infuriated and demanded an immediate divorce. I gather my father tried to resist at first but they worked on him, pointing out his responsibility to the family name and fortune, forcing him to consider where his true loyalties lay. And then they cut off the money. My parents were divorced shortly thereafter," Kimberly concluded dryly.

"What happened when you were born?"

"Absolutely nothing. There was no contact from the Marlands."

"You don't even bear your father's name?"

"I refuse. I took my mother's." "Scott

said your mother died a few years ago,"

Cavanaugh said gently. "She was killed in a car accident on an L.A. freeway,"

Kimberly explained bleakly. Cavanaugh was silent for a while as he thoughtfully munched toast. Kimberly decided he had abandoned the topic but a moment later he asked, "Why do the Marlands want to contact you now after all these years?"

Kimberly allowed herself a savage little smile. "Because the noble son and heir, my father, never had any more children. He married well, mind you, but his wife proved unable to have children. My father was killed in a sailing accident a year after my mother died, according to those lawyers."

Fleetingly she remembered the odd sensation of loss she'd had when she'd learned that the father she'd never known had died. "So now the Marlands have no one except you. "They don't have me," Kimberly said with cool finality. "As far as I'm concerned they made their bed twenty-eight years ago. Now they can sleep in it. They chose to wield all that family power and pressure then and they can damn well live with the results. I'll never forgive them for what they did to my mother."

"That letter from their lawyers implies there would be a large settlement for you if you'll agree to a meeting with the

Marlands."

"I don't need or want their money."

"How about the sense of having family ties?"

Cavanaugh pointed out. "You're just as alone now as your grandparents are."

"I'm not a big fan of strong family ties," Kimberly told him wryly. "Not after what family ties did to my mother."

"Is that why you're so intent on finding a man who's as free as you are?"

Kimberly blinked. "Full marks for analysis. You've got it in one. If I ever

decide to marry it will be to a man whose loyalty is one hundred percent with me. I won't share him with several generations of responsibility and clout and money."

"And of course he must share this deep sense of nonverbal communication with you, too."

"You find it humorous?" she asked coldly. "I think you're living in a fantasy world. You want a man who will materialize out of nowhere with no ties to anyone but you, and who will think the same way you do."

"It's a pleasant enough fantasy," she returned negligently. "You might like the

real world just as well," he suggested.
"Not a chance."

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"Are you sure there won't come a time when you'll need a real flesh-and-blood man?"

"Not on a permanent basis," she tossed back caustically. "Would you please pass the jam?"

"Is that a way of telling me you want to change the topic?" He handed her the jar of strawberry jam. "I am continually amazed at your perceptive abilities,"

She gave him a brilliant smile. "I have a few other abilities, too, but you have so many built-in prejudices against men in my position that you're not going to give yourself a chance to test them, are you?"

"If you're talking about the way you seemed to read my mind yesterday." He shook his head impatiently. "There was no telepathy involved yesterday. I just put a few facts together and realized it must be you calling the house. Since I had intended to drive over to the coast to see you soon, anyway, I decided to arrive sooner rather than later. No, Kim, I'm not referring to any supernatural abilities. I'm talking about more concrete ones. I'd like a chance to prove my

ability to satisfy you in bed, for example." Kimberly drained her coffee in a single, hot swallow and set the cup down with a sharp clatter. "Don't hold your breath. If you think that I'll sleep with you in exchange for your offer of protection, you might as well leave now. I'll take care of myself." Cavanaugh's emerald eyes glittered with sudden proud fury.

"When I decide to sleep with you, witch, it will be on my terms, not yours.

And you can bet my terms won't include exchanging sex for protection. You're not the only one who has a few ironclad rules in a relationship but I definitely will not resort to buying a woman, with

either money or protection or anything else. Do we understand each other?" Kimberly caught her lower lip briefly between her teeth as she considered the arrogant anger in him. "I didn't mean to insult you, Cavanaugh," she apologized aloofly. And it was the truth, She hadn't meant to antagonize him. It was just that he had pushed her a little too far. "Terrific," he growled sardonically as he reached for the coffeepot. "Maybe we do share some mystic al channel of communication. At least you understand me well enough to know when to back down."

CHAPTER FOUR.

The Cavanaugh Vineyards and winery could have served as a picture postcard of a Napa Valley wine estate. Gently rolling hills of neatly trimmed vines surrounded the chateau-style buildings in the center. A tree-lined drive led from the highway through the vineyards to the winery. Kimberly sat in the passenger seat of Darius Cavanaugh's well-bred Jaguar as he turned off the highway and headed toward the main house. She was feeling very wary as she approached his home--more so than she had expected to feel. "It looks as though it's all been here a couple of hundred years," she finally remarked, studying the vaguely French country house architecture of the two main buildings. "Not quite," Cavanaugh

said. "My father had the winery building constructed in the 1960s. It's open to the public three days a week. I had the main house built two years ago. So much for family history."

"But your family has been in the wine business here in California for several generations, hasn't it?" "Off and on," Cavanaugh said cryptically.

Kimberly's brows came together in a small line. "Well, right now it looks like it's definitely on." The grounds appeared sleek and prosperous, well cared for and undoubtedly quite profitable. Cavanaugh allowed himself a remote expression of satisfaction. "Yes. Right now, it's on." The Cavanaugh home was set on a hill

above the winery building, protected from tourists by a gated drive and a deceptively casual-looking low rock wall. "I've had electronic equipment installed along the entire perimeter of the wall," Cavanaugh

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explained as he used a small gadget to open the gate automatically. "No one can get past without Starke knowing."

"Who's Starke?"

"A friend of mine. He's in charge of security around here. With all the

tourists we get on weekends we've always had to exercise some controls. After what happened to Scott, we've really tightened things up." He threw her a grimly compelling glance as he halted the Jaguar in front of the house.

"As long as you stay on the house grounds you'll be safe, Kim. I don't want you going beyond that wall without someone accompanying you. Is that very clear?" Kimberly glanced uneasily around at the perimeter of her new jail and wondered what she'd gotten herself into. A trapped sensation began to nibble at her awareness. She wasn't certain how she should respond to Cavanaugh's orders and was therefore grateful for the

distraction that came banging through the main door of the house. "Uncle Dare, Uncle Dare, you brought her!

i knew you would!" Scott Emery's delighted face appeared at the window of the car on Cavanaugh's side.

He looked past his uncle to examine Kimberly. "Hi, Miss. Sawyer," he said, his voice lowering under a sudden attack of shyness. "Do you remember me?"

Kimberly grinned. "Believe me, Scott, I will never forget you!"

"Kim's going to be staying with us for a while," Cavanaugh began, opening his car door and pushing a hand

affectionately through the youngster's shaggy black hair. "Oh boy, I can show her my new train setup!"

"Miss. Sawyer, we're so glad to have you. I told Dare he wasn't to return without you!" Kimberly was sliding out of the Jaguar, not waiting for Cavanaugh to open the door for her when the new voice interrupted Scott's excited chatter. she looked up to see an attractive, black-haired woman with Cavanaugh's green eyes coming down the front steps. There was no doubt about who she was. Julia."

Kimberly held out her hand politely to Darius Cavanaugh's sister. "I've been wanting to meet you since the night Dare brought Scott home and told us what

happened. I'm sure he told you how very, very grateful we all are for what you did. I'm delighted he was able to talk you into visiting us!"

"Thank you," Kim began awkwardly, wondering how long she would be welcome when Cavanaugh's household discovered that she was there for an unspecified duration. Before she could think of anything else to say to the pretty woman who was Scott's mother, Kimberly became aware of yet another person standing at the top of the steps. ' , Starke," Cavanaugh said calmly as he nodded at the newcomer. "I'd like you to meet Kimberly Sawyer. We'll be looking after her for a while."

Kimberly managed a polite smile as the man came slowly down the steps.

It wasn't the easiest task she had ever set herself. The man they called Starke suited his name. A forbidding face that Kimberly guessed rarely knew the tug of a smile was outlined in awesomely blunt planes and angles. There was a sense of restrained menace about the man, as if the layer of civilization was rather thin. Kimberly could see a raw, potentially violent intelligence deep in the dark pools of the brooding gaze under which he pinned her. She hid a shudder and wondered where on earth Cavanaugh had found him.

"It's about time you got here, Miss.

Sawyer," Starke said in a graveled riverbed voice as he inclined his iron-gray head austerely. "Cavanaugh needs you." Before Kim could find a response to the outrageous remark, Starke had already turned and stalked back into the house. "Don't mind Starke," Julia Emery exclaimed cheerfully as she urged Kimberly up the steps. "He's a little



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weird but he's nice."

"And no one will ever get past him to get at Scott again," Cavanaugh observed softly as he carried Kimberly's suitcase inside the house. "You can say that again," Julia whispered confidentially to Kimberly. "Poor Starke took it very hard when Scott got kidnapped. I think he felt it was his fault, which of course it wasn't. Whoever took Scott got him on the way home from school. We used to let him ride his bike, you see. Not any more, naturally. Starke drives him back and forth now."

"I see," Kimberly said, glad that everyone was going to let Starke's nutty remark about Cavanaugh needing her

slide by without comment. To make certain nothing more was said on the subject she hurried to exclaim over the beautiful interior of the house. "What a lovely home, Julia. It looks like an elegant old chateau."

"But fortunately has all the modern conveniences," Julia said, chuckling.

"Including plenty of room. I'll take you upstairs to the bedroom you'll be using. We had it prepared just in case Dare succeeded in getting you to agree to stay with us for a while." Another figure bustled forward as Julia guided Kimberly through the wide hall toward a large, curving staircase. "This is Mrs.

Lawson. She takes care of us. Don't know what we'd do without her. The house would probably fall apart. Mrs. Lawson, this is Kimberly Sawyer." The plump housekeeper held out her hand with a cheerful smile and a crinkle of genuine humor in her gray eyes. She was probably in her late fifties, Kimberly estimated, as she greeted the woman. Privately she wondered how many other people there were in the household. The sense of being surrounded grew. She and Julia had reached the second floor of the house and were halfway down the hall toward the bedroom Kimberly was to use when two other figures popped out of a sunny sitting room with loud exclamations of pleasure. "Ah, this must

be Kim," the first declared. "So glad you could come, dear! I'm Dare's aunt, Milly Cavanaugh." Kimberly smiled at the charmingly stately woman in her mid-sixties who swept up to her. Milly Cavanaugh had the now-familiar green eyes of the family but her once black hair had silvered quite elegantly. She wore it in a regal bun at the back of her head. The queenly style suited the woman. Milly was tall and proudly built. Her eyes sparkled with animation and an unquenchable curiosity.

Cavanaugh had mentioned his aunt had lost her husband years ago and now divided her time between whatever projects happened to take her fancy.

Kimberly knew she was going to like the older woman, but she also knew she was going to thoroughly enjoy the creature in the purple turban and lime green dress who stood behind her. For an instant she just stared at the brightly dressed woman. The robust, vividly attired lady was about the same age as Milly, but where Cavanaugh's aunt had an air of elegance about her, her companion appeared wonderfully eccentric and not a little scatterbrained. A good character for a book, Kimberly found herself thinking. "Kim, this is my aunt's friend, Ariel Llewellyn," Julia said, making the introductions quickly.

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"Ariel and my aunt are inseparable."

"Rubbish," Ariel announced grandly, shaking Kimberly's hand with brisk enthusiasm. "Milly and I amuse each other and spend a good many afternoons together but we certainly aren't inseparable, are we, Milly?"

"Vile slander," Milly agreed lightly. "How long will you be staying, dear?"

"A few days, I think." Kimberly felt decidedly uneasy under the questioning.

It was anyone's guess how long she

could bring herself to stay in this energetic, well-populated household, even under the best of circumstances.

Already she felt a wave of panic at the notion of having so little privacy.

She realized she had become accustomed to privacy, living by herself most of her adult life.

Vaguely she wondered how Cavanaugh stood having so many lively people surrounding him. But then, he had grown up in this environment, she reminded herself. And he was a man who carried out his responsibilities. "Is that everyone in the house?" Kimberly asked Julia hesitantly as Scott's mother swept her on

down the hall to the room assigned to her. "For the moment,"

Julia assured her breezily. "We get a lot of people in and out during the day, of course. Mostly employees who come to see Dare or visit with Mrs. Lawson.

Then there are the visits from Scott's friends. And Milly and Ariel are very fond of tea parties so they frequently entertain."

"It sounds rather, uh, hectic," Kimberly noted cautiously. "You get used to it." "Oh." Kimberly said nothing more as Julia ushered her into a warm, sunny room that looked out over the vineyards. She headed at once for the window,

peering out at the view. "I hope you'll like this room," Julia remarked. "Dare will bring your suitcase up soon. He's busy talking to Starke down in the study at the moment." Kimberly suddenly realized that Cavanaugh had not followed his sister and Kimberly up the stairs. "That's fine. I'm in no rush.

I'll need to get my typewriter out of the car, too, and my supplies." "Don't worry. Starke will take care of it." Julia smiled warmly. "You know, we really are glad you decided to come and visit for a while. We'll never be able to thank you enough for what you did two months ago."

"Please, don't keep mentioning that,"

Kimberly begged. "It really wasn't that big a deal."

"You'd feel differently if it were your son who had been taken," Julia assured her in heartfelt tones. "I was a nervous wreck during those three days. When the ransom note arrived I really went to pieces. Up until that point I had been telling myself that the kidnapper was probably Scott's father, and at least, being his father, Tony wouldn't have hurt Scott. After the note arrived we knew it had to be a real kidnapping. It was terrifying." "You thought Scott's father might have taken him?" Kimberly asked in disbelief and then realized the full implications. "Oh, I a custody

dispute?" "Not really,"

Julia said wryly. "The last thing Tony would want is to be burdened with a child. He was furious when I got pregnant. But he was also furious when he left." He divorced you?"

"Not willingly." Julia's gentle mouth curved bleakly. "He wasn't about to divorce the tie to the Cavanaugh money. Then Dare informed him that there really wasn't any money except what Dare personally controlled."

Kimberly stirred uneasily as Julia confided the information. She wasn't at all sure she wanted to know too much about the Cavaughns. "I see," she said

again, a bit weakly, but Julia plowed on without any sign of hesitation. "My father filed for bankruptcy three years ago. Then he and mother were killed in a light-plane crash on the way home from Tahoe. A few months later Dare came home and rescued the winery and the family."

"Came home from where?" Kimberly asked blankly. She had assumed Cavanaugh had

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always lived here. "He had a business of his own. An import-export company that

he operated out of San Diego. He spent a lot of time traveling abroad in connection with the business and we saw very little of him for a long time.

But when he finally showed up in our lives again he was quite successful in his own right. He had the capital it took to get the Cavanaugh Vineyards back on its feet. He also sized up the situation with Tony, my husband, and kicked him out."

Kimberly stared at her. "Did you love Tony?"

"By the time he left I was more than glad to get rid of him," Julia admitted calmly. "He had been using me for years, hoping

to inherit my father's money.

I thought he cared about me, though.
That's how completely he had me fooled.

It took Dare to see through him. Dare and Starke are very good judges of human nature, by the way," Julia added lightly. "They've been together for years and they seem to have an instinct for people like Tony Emery.

It was all very traumatic but I'm glad it's over." Kimberly considered the absent Tony and wondered what had really happened. She couldn't help wondering if Tony Emery had found himself in the same situation in which her mother had found herself so many years ago.

Kimberly wouldn't put it past Darius Cavanaugh to get rid of someone he deemed no more than a conniving gigolo who was unworthy of a member of the Cavanaugh family. But even as she accepted the fact that Cavanaugh could probably be quite ruthless, she also found herself realizing that he must have had legitimate grounds for his actions. She didn't want to believe Darius Cavanaugh would have done something as traumatic as throwing out Julia's husband unless there were real reasons. Julia herself seemed content with the situation, Kimberly had to admit. The remainder of the afternoon was a hubbub of unfamiliar activity for Kimberly. She was taken on a tour of Scott's train land,

introduced to Julia's new fiance, Mark Taylor, the owner of a small winery nearby, shown around the grounds by Milly and Ariel and generally kept in constant motion by one member or another of the Cavanaugh household. A number of winery employees came and went from the study Cavanaugh used for an office on the first floor of the house. She didn't see Cavanaugh himself until dinner. By then she was so tired she could barely hold up her end of the conversation. Ariel Llewellyn stayed for dinner, as did Mark Taylor. Scott was wound up with excitement and managed to dominate the conversation. By the time Mrs. Lawson had cleared away dessert, Kimberly was frantic for an

excuse to escape. There seemed to be no letup of activity or conversation in the house and she simply wasn't used to being surrounded by so many people. And there had been no hot sauce on the table at dinner.

Depressing. When she pleaded a headache and tiredness, she was allowed to flee up the stairs to the privacy of her own room. But not before Ariel had produced a special herb tea and given her strict instructions on drinking it before going to bed.

Kimberly's sense of relief as she closed the door was overwhelming. In that moment she decided she would willingly accept a few more glimpses of people in

cowled robes carrying silver daggers If it meant she could be alone again with unlimited quantities of hot sauce.

Wearing one of her comfortable T-shirts, Kimberly sank wearily onto the bed and sipped the tea Ariel had prescribed for her headache. It was bitter and unpleasant but for some reason she felt obliged to finish it. Ariel had been so anxious to help her. The knock on her door startled her so much she nearly spilled the contents of the cup. Sighing, Kimberly pulled on her robe and went to answer the summons, half expecting Scott or Julia to be standing on the other side of the door. But it was Cavanaugh who stood there. "Think you'll survive?" he asked wryly, stepping into her room

without waiting for an invitation. He turned to run his eyes over her tousled figure. She drew a breath and said carefully, "Cavanaugh, I'm not used to so many people and so much activity."

"I know. How do you think it was for me when I came back two years ago? I

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thought I'd go nuts." Kimberly blinked in amazement at the unexpected confession.

"You did?"

"All I can say is, you get used to it"

"That's what Julia says." She smiled.

"Well, personally I'm looking forward to the day Julia marries Mark and she and Scott move in with him," Cavanaugh said firmly. "And Aunt Milly and that wacky Ariel travel a bit. They're often gone for several days at a time. I'm more than happy to foot the bills for those trips, believe me." He hesitated and then said deliberately, "But even when a few of them are gone, it's never really quiet around here. The business side of things alone keeps everything in motion."

"I can imagine." She had the strangest impression he was trying to tell her something else, something oblique, but she was too tired to figure it out. He

prowled around the room, absently checking the windows. "I suppose you're tired."

"Very," she mumbled in forceful tones.

"Scott seems to have my entire day planned out for tomorrow. I suppose I'd better get prepared for it." Cavanaugh stopped his restless prowling, coming to a halt in front of her. "You realize they all assume we're sleeping together."

"What!" He nodded. "I'm afraid so."

Except for Scott, of course, who hasn't gotten around to thinking about things like that in great detail yet."

"But..I.. you .. we hardly even know

each other." Kimberly exploded. "How could anyone assume ... "

Words failed her. "They know I've been planning on seeing you again. I didn't make any secret of it. There have been occasional business trips I've made during the past couple of months that I think they've interpreted as slipping away to find you. And since they know we spent last night together, it's natural for them to think we slept together.

I just thought I'd warn you."

"Oh, gee thanks," she said furiously.

"Did you know everyone was going to assume that when you came over to the

coast to collect me?" He dismissed the question as unimportant.

"There's no harm done, Kim. Relax. Is it really so terrible? The whole family is very anxious to see me married, I'm afraid. It's just harmless fantasizing on their part."

"Harmless for whom? I'm going to look like a fool!" His mouth hardened and the green eyes flared dangerously for an instant. "Why should you look like a fool?"

"How else can you describe a woman who appears to be sleeping with a wealthy man in hopes of marrying him?"

"But you don't have any wish to marry someone like me, do you, Kim?" He moved toward her, catching her chin with his palm and studying her infuriated features broodingly. "Just as you wouldn't wish to marry someone like me," she flung back tightly.

"But in a situation like this, I'm the one who will look foolish, not you."

"Because you're a woman?"

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"I doubt that has much to do with it.

Being a man didn't protect Julia's first husband, did it? It's more a question of money and power and sheer clout. You have it, I don't." He released her chin and thrust his hands into the back pockets of his jeans. "What do you know about Emery?" "Nothing much. Julia just explained that you got rid of him a couple of years ago." Wishing fiercely that she'd never raised the subject, Kimberly chewed nervously on her lower lip. This was family business. Not her business. "Tony Emery had been cheating on my sister for years. He couldn't have cared less about her or about Scott. Furthermore, he was swindling my father who had been soft enough to give him a job in the

accounting department.

He was garbage, and when he found out I controlled the financial side of things in the family, he left quite willingly. He knew I'd never support him the way my father had."

"I understand," she said stiffly, refusing to meet his hard gaze. "Do you? I doubt it. You think poor old Tony was in the same position as your mother was when she found herself confronting your grandparents. But it wasn't like that at all.

I'd have made sure Emery had a job and a future if I'd thought for one minute that he cared about Julia and Scott. But he

didn't."

"So you got rid of him." "As I said, it wasn't hard to convince him to go,"

Cavanaugh reiterated bluntly. "Kim, there's no similarity at all to your mother's position."

"Right," she agreed with unnatural briskness.

"Well, it's getting late, Cavanaugh. I'm sure that even if your family thinks we're sleeping together occasionally, they won't be expecting us to do so under the family roof. Please don't feel obliged to stay any longer just for appearances' sake!"

"You're a sarcastic little witch at times, aren't you?" he growled. "Only when I'm feeling pressured."

"And you're feeling pressured now, aren't you?" he asked with a gentleness she wasn't expecting. "Kim, everything's going to be all right. You'll be safe here. I swear it." She heard the underlying vow in his words and nodded mutely. She would be safe enough here from people carrying silver daggers but that didn't guarantee her any safety at all from Darius Cavanaugh. And both she and Cavanaugh knew it. Their eyes clashed in sudden, mutual understanding and in that moment Kimberly would have sworn that they really could read

each other's minds. Slowly Cavanaugh shook his head. "No promises on the situation between us, Kim. Only that I'll protect you from others." He walked out the door, closing it softly behind him before Kimberly could think of anything to say.

Two days later Cavanaugh stood at the curving window of his office study and watched Kimberly as she surreptitiously left the house and made her way through the huge garden. She glanced back over her shoulder two or three times, her amber hair gleaming in the wintry sunshine. He knew she was checking to see whether or not she was being followed. At the far end of the garden

she unlatched the gate and stepped outside. He knew exactly what was going through her head in that moment. Freedom.

She was escaping, he realized. Two days of constant, even if well-meant, attention from everyone in the household had finally taken their toll. He had watched her deal politely with Julia's eager hospitality, Scott's excited efforts to entertain and the invitations to Aunt Milly's zany afternoon

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tea-leaf reading activities with Ariel. In

addition, everyone on the estate from Mrs. Lawson to the gardener had displayed unabashed interest in her. They all knew the role Kimberly had played in retrieving Scott from his ordeal. And they all thought they could guess the role she was destined to play in Cavanaugh's life.

Cavanaugh's mouth hardened a bit at the edges as he followed her escape route.

She was on the other side of the garden now, striding briskly toward the low, electronically wired rock wall that was supposed to be the farthest she could wander from the house without an escort. He had a grim feeling that she

wasn't going to follow the rules today. She wanted some peace and quiet and privacy and she'd go beyond the rock wall to get it. Glancing down at the manuscript pages he had picked up from the desk in Kimberly's room a few minutes before, Cavanaugh skimmed over the lines of fast-paced dialogue and equally swift action.

Vendetta was undoubtedly going to be another highly successful novel in the Amy Solitaire series. Cavanaugh rather liked Amy. It was Josh Valerian he wanted to have dumped into one of the huge fermentation tanks over in the main production building. It was damn tough competing with a fictional "other man."

Especially when that other man was probably Kimberly's secret fantasy. He was pondering Valerian's excellent timing, both in the matter of coming to Amy's rescue and in bed when Starke entered the room. "She's left the house, Dare."

"I know."

"Want me to go after her?"

"No, I'll go and get her. She's a little desperate at the moment." Cavanaugh turned away from the window and smiled bleakly at his friend. "I don't blame her. At times I know how she feels. Any leads on that business of the dagger?"

Starke shook his iron-gray head. "I wish we had a better description of it.

This whole thing keeps getting screwier by the minute. I have a couple of possibilities to check out, though. There aren't that many sources for handmade silver daggers in this part of California. It's beginning to look as though we may be dealing with a pack of real crazies."

"Scott's witches?"

"Yeah. The authorities aren't interested in that line of reasoning at all, however. Cranston prefers his own more straightforward theories. "We'll have to keep following this one on our own." Cavanaugh nodded. He and Starke were

accustomed to doing things in their own way. "Have you got enough people working on it?"

"Three.

But they're all good," Starke assured him. "All right." Cavanaugh tossed down the manuscript pages he had been reading. "I'd better go bring back our wandering house guest." Starke eyed him thoughtfully. "You didn't stay with her last night." Cavanaugh glanced up sharply. "Your job is to keep an eye on this household, but that doesn't mean you have to turn into a voyeur!" Starke lifted one brow with mocking politeness.

"Sorry."

"About what?" Cavanaugh growled. "About overstepping the line between employer and employee," Starke said calmly. Cavanaugh swore grittily and ran a hand through his hair. "Don't give me that. You know very well you're hardly an employee." Starke relented. "I know.

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Dare, you've been as tight as a compressed spring ever since you brought her here. The problem isn't that you're sleeping with her like everyone on the estate thinks' the problem is that

you're not sleeping with her."

"Stick to worrying about witches and daggers, Starke. I can do without the psychiatric advice." Back in front of the window Cavanaugh watched Kimberly disappear from sight. Behind him he sensed Starke shrugging.

"Whatever you say, boss."

"Damn it to hell, Starke, what are you trying to do? Make me explode?"

"Not me. I've been with you on a couple of occasions when you've lost your temper. I'd rather you take it out on Kim. Something tells me she can handle it. Go release some of that tension with her.

Since everyone on the place already assumes you've taken her to bed, you might as well go ahead and do it." Cavanaugh slanted his friend a violent glance. "Your theories on handling a woman like Kim leave me gasping in amazement." He scooped up the manuscript pages of Vendetta and shoved them across the desk. "Want to find out what women really want in a man? Here, read this."

"What's this?"

Curiously Starke picked up the pages and leafed through them. "Part of the book Kim's working on at the moment. Pay particular attention to Josh Valerian." Starke looked up. "Why?"

"Because he's Kimberly's ideal man." Starke grinned, one of his rare, wolfish grins. "I take it you don't fit the role of Josh Valerian?"

"Valerian enjoys total communication with the heroine," Cavanaugh said dangerously. "He always seems to know what she's thinking, how she's feeling.

What's more, he understands her thoughts and feelings perfectly."

"So? What's so tricky about that? You've always been good at reading other people. Don't you have a pretty fair idea of what Kim's thinking a lot of the time?"

"Yes.

Unfortunately, it doesn't do me a lot of good." Cavanaugh moved around his desk to grab his suede jacket. "Why not?"

"Because I don't always agree with or approve of what she thinks or the way she thinks." Starke gave him a mildly astonished look. "Why should you. You're a man.

She's a woman. How could you possibly react the same way to everything?"

Cavanaugh smiled wryly as he pulled on the jacket. "You know, Starke, you have a way of going straight to the heart of the

matter. You're absolutely right.

Why should I worry about not being Josh Valerian? Kim's an adult female. She doesn't need some mystical other half of herself. She needs a man."

"You."

"Damn right." Cavanaugh paused as something crinkled in his jacket pocket. He removed the folded, buff-colored envelope from the L.A. law firm.

"Valerian isn't the only obstacle in my path right now." He handed the envelope to Starke. "See what you can find out about this situation, will you?"

I want to talk to one of those lawyers."

"You're going after Kim now?"

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Starke accepted the envelope. "Thought I'd work off some of this excess tension you're complaining about," Cavanaugh muttered, striding for the door.

"By yelling at her or by taking her to bed?" At the door Cavanaugh turned, green eyes narrowed in a way Starke had learned to respect over the years. "I thought I'd try a little of each. See which method works best." "Probably the second one," Starke said quite seriously. Cavanaugh slammed the door of the

study and stalked down the hall to the door that opened onto the garden.

CHAPTER FIVE.

The building was nothing more than a storage shed tucked into the base of a hillside full of vineyards. But standing isolated and out of sight of the main house, it made an inviting refuge. When Kimberly spotted the shed after passing the forbidden rock wall she made straight for it. The day was deceptively moderate, considering the season. She'd only taken a light jacket with her when she left the house and after a few minutes of walking through the vineyards she had removed that. Alone at last, she thought

wryly, as she curiously plucked open the shed door and peered into the dark interior. She had realized this morning that if she didn't get away for a while she was liable to say or do something that would definitely border on the rude. And heaven knew she didn't really want to risk that. Although the Cavanaugh household was overwhelming, she liked its various and assorted members, even the perpetually visiting Ariel, who was constantly reading tea leaves, casting horoscopes or prescribing herb teas. She and Aunt Milly made quite a pair, Kimberly decided. Currently they had undertaken to plan a party. Julia was also involved, and when it looked as though they were all going to

commandeer Kimberly, too, she had fled. She had finally reached a point where she needed to be alone for a while. It was pleasantly warm inside the shed. Leaving the door swinging open on its hinges, Kimberly idly poked around amid the odd tools, stacked boxes and assorted equipment. Sunlight trickled through the cracks and chinks in the old wooden walls, providing a fuzzy sort of light here and there.

Kimberly was examining an old leather harness, wondering what had happened to the horse who had worn it, when she became aware of a presence standing in the doorway behind her. She swung around abruptly, Cavanaugh's warning

about not going beyond the rock wall slamming into her head. For an instant as she stared at the figure silhouetted against the sun she couldn't see who it was.

A shaft of fear sizzled through her. And then he moved. "Cavanaugh! It's you."

She smiled in relief. "You scared the daylights out of me." He remained where he was, dark and rather intimidating as he filled the doorway. He had his familiar suede jacket hooked negligently over his shoulder. Dressed in jeans and a blue work shirt he could have passed for one of his own employees except for the air of grim command that emanated from him.

"Let's see how good our nonverbal communication is, Kim," he suggested sardonically. "Why don't you try reading my mind?" Kimberly grimaced wryly.

"Right now I can read you like an open book. You're angry because I disobeyed orders and went beyond the wall, aren't you? Going to yell at me?"

"I probably should. I didn't give those orders lightly, Kim. I gave them for your own protection."

"I know," she said, sighing.

She slowly hung the old harness back on a rusty nail. "You'll have to make

allowances for me. I've never been very good at taking orders from people who thought they knew what was best for me. Go ahead and yell."

He stepped through the door, his face moving out of the shadows and into a ray

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of light streaming through a crack. Green eyes met hers with a flash of genuine understanding. "I have a feeling chewing you out wouldn't do a whole lot of good. Besides, I know why you disobeyed orders in the first place. And I guess that if I'm perfectly honest I can't say I blame

you. It can get to be a bit much." She smiled weakly.

"Your family and your employees are all very nice, Cavanaugh."

"But they drive you crazy at times." She looked at him with gratitude. "I'm just not used to big families."

"You're not used to any kind of family, are you?"

"No, I suppose not. For a long time there was just mom and me and then there was just me."

"And you like it that way."

"It's been pleasant." "Lots of freedom," he observed, taking a step closer so that he could look directly down into her face. "Don't you think I know what that feels like? Not having to worry about anyone but yourself? Not having to solve everyone else's problems? Being free to come and go as you like? Not being on call for everyone from your sister to your aunt's nutty friends?" And suddenly Kimberly realized that she wasn't the only one who craved some time alone. Her stay in the household was only temporary. Cavanaugh, however, was trapped by the responsibilities he had undertaken. And being the man he was he would never walk away from them. "Ah, Cavanaugh," she whispered softly,

lifting a hand to touch the side of his face. "I hadn't realized, hadn't understood how it was for you." Her amber eyes brimmed with comprehension and gentleness. "Kim," he muttered, letting the suede jacket slide to the dusty floor. "Kimberly, I ... " He bit off the words, reaching out to pull her into his arms with a rough hunger that seemed to explode out of nowhere. His sudden passion swamped her. Kimberly felt his arms close around her, his hands sweeping with aching longing over her body as his mouth captured hers. She parted her lips willingly when he demanded the intimacy. And when he cupped her hips, drawing her jean-clad thighs against his own, she moaned

softly. His body hardened violently as it encountered her gentle curves. Beneath the snug fabric of his clothing she could feel the unmistakable evidence of his arousal. The primitive knowledge thrilled Kimberly, filling her with a rush of heady desire.

She had been telling herself for the past three days that she didn't know this man well enough to even think of becoming involved with him.

What she did know about him seemed to indicate that he was all wrong for her, in any event. Yet this afternoon she had finally understood that they weren't so very different, after all. Cavanaugh had been trapped in a situation she'd always

avoided, but that didn't mean his longings weren't the same as her own.

He could never be really free the way she was, but she empathized totally with what his self-denial must have cost him. "Can you read my mind now, Kim?" he demanded huskily as he drew his mouth reluctantly away from her own. His palms slid up under her cotton knit shirt, finding the clasp of her bra. When it came free he groaned and let his fingers glide around her ribs until the fullness of her breasts rested on the edge of his hands. "You must know exactly what I'm thinking. I want you, Kim. I've been wanting you for two months. I need you."

"Yes," she managed breathlessly, answering all the questions he had asked, both implied and explicit. "Oh, yes, Cavanaugh."

"Oh, God, Kim. Come to me, lady, and let me make love to you. I've been aching for you. You don't know what it's been like having you in my house but not in my bed." The ardent plea unlocked the last of her reserve. Kimberly wrapped her arms around him and made no protest when he pushed the cotton shirt up

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over her head. Her loosened bra fell to the floor and Cavanaugh inhaled sharply as he drank in the sight of her breasts. "Firm and ripe." He ran his thumbs over her budding nipples. "Just like my grapes at harvest. I want you so much, sweetheart." Nestling her head against his chest, Kimberly closed her eyes and let the enthralling sensations sweep through her. Vaguely she was aware of Cavanaugh lowering her to the floor. She felt him spread the suede jacket under her before he urged her onto her back. And then he was lying beside her, undoing the fastening of her jeans. "We're all alone," he rasped.

"Just you and me. It's perfect. Absolutely

perfect. You're perfect." She smiled up at him, her eyes glowing with feminine mystery behind her half-lowered lashes. "I didn't think it could ever work between us ... "

"Just let me do the thinking now, Kimberly. I'll take care of you. I'll make it good for you. I swear it." His palms tugged at the tight-fitting jeans until they were forced down over her hips. He dragged the bikini underpants along with them.

A moment later she lay naked. Her body flushed under the heat of the desire she could read in him. Tremulously she put her fingers on the buttons of his work shirt. He rested his palm possessively on

the flat of her stomach as she fumbled with the task of undressing him. "You're shaking like a leaf," he observed with passionate amusement. "I know."

"Are you afraid of me?"

"Do I look afraid?" He lowered his head to taste one of her throbbing nipples.

"You look beautiful."

"Cavanaugh, I'm not the only one who's shaking. Are you afraid of me?"

"I probably should be," he growled, letting his fingers glide down to the juncture of her thighs. "Any sane man is afraid of witches." He seemed

fascinated with the way her body moved instinctively under his hand. She pushed his shirt off his shoulders and then began to struggle with his jeans.

But he grew impatient with her fumbling and sat up to finish the job.

Kimberly took in the sight of his completely nude body, fascinated by his obvious need. Strong and hard and powerful, he gathered her close, letting her feel every tough plane and angle of him. His fingers shaped her curves, exploring the softness of her as if discovering something totally unique. His unabashed delight in her was intoxicating, Kimberly discovered. She'd never experienced such excitement and

anticipation.

It was all swirled into a pervasive warmth that captured her senses. "I want you," she finally choked. "You sound astonished," he murmured as he forced her legs provocatively apart with his hand. "I am. I've never wanted someone like this," she admitted in absolute honesty. As if her words were more than he could resist, Cavanaugh moved, sprawling along the length of her, finding a place for himself between her thighs. The heat of him burned into her skin and the heaviness of his smoothly muscled body was a glorious, crushing weight that seemed to excite every inch of her. Kimberly caught her breath on a sob of

expectation mixed with a strange trepidation as she felt his hardness poised on the brink of her feminine core. His hand moved between them briefly, teasing the exquisitely sensitive region until she cried out and sank her nails into his shoulders. "You're so sweet, so ready for me," Cavanaugh muttered in tones of masculine wonder. "Do you really want me so much, witch?"

"Yes, ah, Cavanaugh, yes!" And then he was thrusting deeply into her, the impact of him making itself felt throughout her body. Hot, demanding, deliciously overpowering, Cavanaugh took possession of her in a way that made him as much her captive as she was his.

Kimberly clung to the man above her, holding him close with legs that wrapped around him and arms that were silken bonds. Cavanaugh moved into her, claiming her body with elemental passion,

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giving her all of himself in return.

The rhythm of his lovemaking claimed her and she was meshed in perfect harmony with his own pulsating desire. When her body tightened in warning of the impending climax, Kimberly called Cavanaugh's name and he buried his

mouth against her breast. She felt his teeth against her skin and the sensation sent her over some invisible edge. "Oh, my God, Cavanaugh!"

"Now, Kim. Give me everything now. I'll keep you safe."

She shimmered beneath him and before the delicate convulsions had rippled completely through her body he was following her, huskily shouting his own release. Kimberly sank down into a gentle oblivion, unaware of the hard floor beneath her, unaware of the unromantic surroundings provided by the old shed.

She knew only that she had shared the

most profound sense of intimacy that she had ever experienced. It might prove a fleeting thing, but while it lasted it was incredible. And in that warm, vulnerable moment she was certain that Darius Cavanaugh had felt everything she had felt. The relationship between them was changed for all time. Cavanaugh slowly released himself from her body, moving onto his side so that he could gather her against him. His cradling arm felt warm and comfortable and strong. "Are you going to be furious with me later?" he asked evenly, green eyes poring over her love-softened face. Mutely she shook her head. "For making love to me? No, Cavanaugh. It felt ... right." His mouth crooked gently. "I knew it was going to

be like this."

"Did you?" She twisted lazily in his arms. "You should have told me."

"I think I tried to on a couple of occasions but you weren't listening."

"Ah, Cavanaugh. How was I to know?" she asked simply. He leaned down and brushed his mouth against her lips. "In the future you'll just have to trust me to know what's best for you." She smiled mischievously. "I wouldn't dream of putting so much responsibility on your shoulders. You've already got more than enough to worry about."

"More than enough?"

"Ummm." She ran her fingers through his silver-tinged hair. "I've seen the way everyone in the household and on the estate turns to you for advice and help on even the most trivial matters. And you always stop and give it. It's a wonder you have time to get any of the winery's real business done." He exhaled slowly, as if enjoying the lingering moment of total relaxation.

"I suppose you're right in a sense. When I arrived two years ago everything was in such chaos that I had no option but to become totally involved both with what was left of the family and the business. People had been floundering. Julia's marriage was in a mess, Scott was

having emotional problems because of his father's rejection of him, Aunt Milly was distraught over my father's death, the employees feared for their jobs and the wine wasn't doing well in the markets. On top of that, the estate was going into bankruptcy."

"So you stepped in and took over responsibility for everything and everyone.

You did your family duty, and now you're trapped by that duty." The brackets at the edges of his mouth tightened slightly. "I don't see myself as trapped, Kim. I chose to do it." Instantly she was sorry she'd phrased her words the way she had. "It doesn't matter

whether duty chose you or you chose it. Your life has been completely changed by it. What was it like during the days you ran that import-export business?"

"I'm sure you'd describe my life-style back then as considerably freer than it is now," he said easily. Absently he stroked slow circles on her arm. "A lot of traveling with basically only myself and Starke to think about. And Lord

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knows Starke can take care of himself."

"Where on earth did you find him?"

"In the middle of a street riot in some miserable little country in the Middle East. I was in town making a deal for some rugs and Starke was there to ...

well, another kind of deal. We were both in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Things got nasty and by the time it was over we were partners. Two years ago when I decided to take over the winery after my father died, he opted to come with me."

"You must be close friends."

"Depends how you describe close friends, I guess. I probably know him as

well as anyone, but there's a hell of a lot no one will ever know about Starke."

"Why did you go into business for yourself? How did you escape being groomed to take over the winery?"

Kimberly asked. "I had no interest in the winery when I was growing up.

I wanted to do something more exciting with my life. I wanted adventure and action and the challenge of making my own fortune."

"And you found all that?"

"Oh, yes," Cavanaugh agreed with a cryptic smile. "I found it."

"But when the chips were down, you came back to assume your responsibilities to your family." Some of the warm intimacy disappeared from Cavanaugh's green eyes. "You have a way of making family responsibilities sound like a grim fate to be avoided at all costs."

"Maybe it's just because I know how twisted they can become." Cavanaugh appeared to be sorting through his next words. "Kim, if your father had really loved your mother he wouldn't have given her up to please his family. And he wouldn't have spent the rest of his life pretending you didn't exist. He would have fought to make his parents accept

you and your mother ... Blame his own weakness for what he did to her, not his sense of family responsibility."

Kimberly suddenly became very aware of a certain chill invading the old shed.

"I think we're about to lose our sunny afternoon," she observed with a lightness she was far from feeling. "Clouds are starting to form." Cavanaugh levered himself up beside her, slanting her a speculative glance. "Which, translated, means you don't want to talk about the situation regarding your grandparents, right?" "Cavanaugh, I always said you do have some amazing powers of perception." He finished pulling on his jeans and reached down to

help her to her feet, his eyes lingering on her full breasts as she fastened her shirt. "You have some amazing powers, yourself, witch. I feel like a new man this afternoon." His words halted her emotional withdrawal. Kimberly looked up at him and felt a return of the warmth she had been feeling earlier.

But what she felt for him now, she thought fleetingly, went far beyond warmth or even passion for that matter. Deliberately she thrust the realization aside and smiled brilliantly. "I hope I was a more interesting tonic than some of those concoctions Ariel is always serving up."

"You're much more than a tonic, Kim, and you know it." He took her hand.

"Come on, honey, much as I hate to end this very satisfying idyll, I'm afraid we have to get back to the house. I've got a thousand and one things that have to be done this afternoon."

"Winery business?"

"Right. There's a new marketing plan that I've got to go over and a report from the accountant's office."

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"It can't have been easy pulling the

Cavanaugh Vineyards out of the red these past two years," Kimberly observed slowly as she allowed him to lead her back toward the house. "It's been a challenge," he agreed dryly. He didn't release her hand after they came within sight of the house. Instead he clasped her fingers tightly in his own all the way through the garden and up to the back door. Anyone watching from the house could not have missed the intimacy. And anyone watching would probably be able to guess how she and Cavanaugh had just spent the past hour, Kimberly realized uneasily. A part of her went on the defensive when she saw Julia hovering in the hall. But Julia did not appear to be the slightest bit

concerned that her brother might have just made love to their house guest. She greeted them both cheerfully and glanced at Cavanaugh with obvious relief. "Oh, there you are, Dare. I've been looking for you. Aunt Milly and Ariel want to invite half the world to this party we've been planning, and I said I'd check with you."

"No one gets invited who isn't personally known to either you or me, Julia, you know that. I don't want any strangers in the house until those kidnappers have been caught."

"That's what I told them you'd say."

They're working up a guest list now for

you to go over. Oh, and Scott has been scouring the place for you, too. He wants you to help him add a new section to his train track. And I was wondering if you'd talk to that car dealer for me.

I'm not getting anywhere with him. He simply won't fix that problem in the transmission free of charge. Claims it's not under warranty. I know he'll back down if you deal with him." "Uncle Dare, Uncle Dare," Scott excitedly, tearing around the corner with a miniature train tunnel in one hand. "I've been looking for you. Come and help me set up my new tunnel." Before Cavanaugh could respond, Aunt Milly appeared in the hall, the ever-present

Ariel right behind her. "Here's the preliminary guest list, Dare. Julia said you'd want to go over it. We have to get the invitations out soon so we were hoping you'd get a chance to look at it this afternoon." Cavanaugh reluctantly extended his hand to take the list. "All right, Aunt Milly. Scott, let's take a quick look at that train track. Julia, get me the dealer's phone number and I'll--" It was too much. After two full days in the Cavanaugh household, Kimberly knew things were always like this. It was time to put a stop to it. She stepped forward and removed the guest list from Cavanaugh's hand. When he glanced at her in surprise she smiled serenely and turned to the others. "I'm afraid

Cavanaugh doesn't have time to worry about the guest list or the car dealer this afternoon. He has to go over a marketing report and some papers from the accountant." She glanced pointedly at her watch. "It's only three-thirty on a Wednesday afternoon. A time when every other executive in the country is concentrating on business.

And that's exactly what Cavanaugh is going to do today. Scott, you just got home from school. Go find something else to play with for now.

Your uncle will help you with the train track later. Julia, you can take a look at the guest list, can't you? You will know who's familiar and who isn't.

The car dealer can wait until tomorrow. Aunt Milly, I'm sure you and Ariel can begin filling out the invitations. They can be addressed later after the guest list is approved by Julia." She glanced around at the circle of astonished faces. "There, I think that does it.

Go to work, Cavanaugh. You have a winery to run. The rest of the household can get along without you this afternoon. No one will bother you until five o'clock. Personally," she added firmly, "I'm going to get some writing done."

With a challenging smile she invited objections.

There were none. She shooed the others down the hall, leaving Cavanaugh standing alone. He stood there for a long moment after Kimberly's amber head had disappeared, savoring the memory of her in his arms. And then he walked slowly toward his study, letting himself inside and closing the door behind

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him with a sense of satisfaction. He had an hour and a half of uninterrupted time ahead of him. He could accomplish a hell of a lot. Especially when he knew he wouldn't have to worry about dealing

with every small family crisis that came along. Picking up the copy of the marketing plan, Cavanaugh sat down behind the desk that had been his father's and went to work. It was forty-five minutes later that he heard the knock on the window behind him. Glancing around he saw Starke staring back at him through the glass, hand poised to knock again.

Cavanaugh leaned across and opened the window. "What on earth are you doing out there in the garden?" Starke's somber face twisted in a wry grimace. "Are you kidding?" He glanced furtively to the side, obviously checking to make sure the coast was clear. "This was the only

way I could get to you. If she catches me out here, she'll probably skin me alive."

"Kim?"

"Yeah. She's given strict orders you aren't to be disturbed until five o'clock. No one's allowed near the study unless they can claim a life-or-death emergency. What the heck's going on?"

"I'm working," Cavanaugh said with a grin. Realization dawned on Starke's features. "And she's decided you need more privacy?"

"I'm an executive," Cavanaugh reminded him mockingly. "That means I get to set some rules about interruptions during

working hours."

"Well, I'll be damned. The lady's going to get the household organized, isn't she?

About time. I always did say you put yourself too much at the beck and call of everyone around here." Cavanaugh glanced at his watch. "It's not five o'clock yet." Starke arched one eyebrow. "So you want to know why I'm interrupting?

Two reasons. The first is to tell you I set up a telephone call with one of those lawyers in L.A. for ten tomorrow morning."

"Thanks." Some of the quiet satisfaction

left the emerald eyes as he contemplated the phone call. "What's the second reason you're standing outside my window?" Starke grinned one of his rare grins. "I just wanted to see the results for myself."

"Results of what?"

"Your efforts to release a little tension this afternoon. Looks like it worked, Dare. You look real good. Nice and relaxed." Cavanaugh gave him a sardonic expression and reached out to shut the window firmly in Starke's face. "Get lost, Starke, or I'll report you to Kim." His grin wider than ever, Starke obediently disappeared into the garden.

Upstairs in her room Kimberly sat staring at the blank sheet of paper in her typewriter. She hadn't succeeded in typing a single word for the past forty-five minutes. All her thoughts were on the man with whom she had shared the passionate interlude in the shed. There was no point deluding herself. The white-hot fires of his desire had crystallized her feelings. If she hadn't made love with him perhaps she would have been able to go on pretending that what she felt was only a physical attraction. Now she knew different. The incredibly, shatteringly intimate experience in the old shed had forced her to acknowledge the truth. She was falling in love with Darius Cavanaugh.

No, even that statement didn't disclose the full truth. She was in love with him.

Full stop. Dazedly Kimberly stared at nothing, trying to sort through the ramifications of what had happened. She had been telling herself all along that he was the wrong kind of man for her. Yet at every turn the intimacy between them was growing deeper and more pervasive. There were times when she really did wonder if they were reading each other's minds. And the bonds that

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existed between them now after that

scene in the shed were deeper than anything else she had ever known. She didn't understand how it could have happened so completely or so quickly. But she couldn't deny that it had happened. Love was not a matter of logic or rationality, Kimberly discovered.

With a heart full of trepidation she tried to picture her future. Cavanaugh was inseparable from this house and the wine business. If she became involved with him, she became involved with everything that went with him. After all her years of avoiding anything that even hinted of competing loyalties and inescapable family obligations--two

things that had the potential for destroying love--Kimberly wondered if she could learn to adjust to such a situation. There was no doubt that the Cavanaugh household was a cheerful one.

Cavanaugh himself might make the major decisions yet there was no denying he was also trapped by his role. Just look at the way the rest of the family felt free to impose on his time, Kimberly thought grimly. If she moved in here permanently, she'd certainly do some major reorganizing. And then she realized just how far her thoughts had taken her. Moving in here permanently was an absolutely idiotic notion. No

one, least of all Cavanaugh, had invited her to do so! Just what had he felt after making love to her, she wondered. Some of the warm certainty that she had felt herself returned. Kimberly knew that for Cavanaugh the experience had been more than just a casual interlude.

Surely she couldn't be deluding herself about something as crucial as that.

No, this growing sensation of sureness, of understanding and empathy between herself and Cavanaugh was very much for real. It was, Kimberly decided, almost like the invisible bonds she was building between Amy Solitaire and Josh Valerian. And with that euphoric knowledge blazing in her mind,

Kimberly finally managed to go back to work on Vendetta. No one seemed upset that evening at dinner. It was as though the entire household, including Starke, had accepted her right to rewrite the rules under which they all functioned.

As promised, Cavanaugh disappeared after the meal to assist Scott with his railroad construction. Julia told Aunt Milly that she had gone over the guest list and recognized everyone on it. "Wonderful," Aunt Milly enthused.

"Ariel and I can address the envelopes in the morning. We wrote out all the invitations this afternoon," she added as an aside to Kimberly who was quietly

sipping tea near the fireplace. "Will it be a large party?" Kimberly asked.

"Fairly large. We used to have parties all the time when Dare's father was alive, but since Dare has taken over we don't entertain nearly as often."

"No one felt much like having a party for quite some time after mom and dad died," Julia put in quietly. "And then I was going through that awful divorce." She smiled at Kimberly.

"It's taken a while to put the family back on its feet emotionally as well as financially. You were right to step in this afternoon, you know."

It made me realize how much we've all come to lean on Dare. He's been fulfilling a number of different roles for all of us during the past two years. I don't know how he does it at times."

"I think he finds it all worthwhile," Kimberly assured her gently. "Of course he does," Aunt Milly put in with serene confidence. "After all, he's the head of the family. It's his duty to hold things together." Kimberly said nothing but for some reason she happened to catch Starke's eye as he looked up from the newspaper he was reading across the room. She wasn't certain she could read the message in his quiet eyes but she thought she saw approval there. "A man

trying to hold things together for everyone else," Starke murmured softly,

"needs a woman who can understand him and occasionally protect him from all that responsibility." There was an embarrassed silence among the three women in front of the fire. Starke appeared oblivious to it as he went back to reading his newspaper. "By the way," Aunt Milly announced forcefully, as if to distract everyone from Starke's comment, "Ariel said to tell you that she's

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ready to tell your fortune, Kim. She'll give you a reading tomorrow."

"I'll look forward to it." Kimberly replied ruefully, knowing there was no polite way to escape the promised session. "She's very good at card reading, you know," Aunt Milly went on chattily. "She even predicted you'd be returning with Dare." Julia laughed. "The whole household predicted that. We all know where he'd gone and why. I was the one who answered the phone that day you hung up, Kim. When I told Dare, he seemed to know immediately it was you."

Why didn't you stay on the line?"

"I had a few second thoughts."

"Well, I'm certainly glad you're here now," Aunt Milly intoned. "You're going to be very good for Dare." At ten o'clock Kimberly excused herself and climbed the stairs to her room. Cavanaugh, who had long since returned to the living room to read the paper, said a polite good-night. She felt his eyes on her as she made her way up the staircase. And in that moment she was very certain she knew exactly what was going through his head. He was remembering the passion they had shared that afternoon. Well, Kimberly thought, so was she. An hour later she heard the door to her room open. It was a small sound in the

darkness, a sound fraught with inevitability. Turning sleepily in bed she stared at the shadowy outline of the man who stood on the threshold.

Her voice was a soft, husky whisper as she greeted him. "Hello, Cavanaugh."

Without a word he closed the door behind him and walked across the room to stand looking down at her in darkness. Although she could not make out their emerald color in the shadows, Kimberly could see the way his eyes gleamed. She sensed the hunger in him because it was much the same as her own. Kimberly held out her arms and he went to her with a heavy groan of need and desire.

CHAPTER SIX.

Cavanaugh lay watching the dawn stream through an uncertain cloud cover and lazily contemplated the sense of satisfaction that permeated his body. He felt good. More than that, he felt great. He couldn't remember feeling quite like this ever in his life. It was as though something vital had been missing in his world and now he had it in his grasp. He would be a fool to let it go. But he was also, he discovered, a very greedy and possessive man. He didn't just want to warm himself beside the fire that was Kim. He wanted that fire to engulf him. Beside him Kimberly shifted as she began drifting awake.

Her bare foot brushed against his leg and the curve of her hip was pressing his thigh with unconscious invitation.

Cavanaugh told himself it was probably adolescent or, at the very least, ungentlemanly to wake up in a state of semi-arousal but here he was, doing exactly that. And all because of the woman beside him. With the practical approach of his sex, Cavanaugh had decided to stop trying to figure out why this particular woman exercised such power over him. He wanted her; he needed her. Having possessed her, it was now impossible to even think about the possibility of giving her up. And he could make her want him.

That thought brought a savage satisfaction. She was like hot, flowing amber in his arms, clinging to him as she surrendered to the intimate demands of his body and her own. Yet he lost himself in her even at the moment when he claimed her most completely. It was a paradox which, being male, he decided not to waste time analyzing. It was the way things were and he was content to accept the situation. He was old enough and intelligent enough to realize that a relationship such as this came along once in a lifetime if a man was very, very lucky. Only a fool would question it or analyze it to death. It was far more crucial to spend his time assessing the threats to the relationship. And when it

came to dealing with threats, Cavanaugh was more than willing to spend

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time analyzing, evaluating and ultimately neutralizing them. He had already taken steps to protect Kimberly from the strange hints of physical menace that had cropped up around her. Certainly that battle was the most urgent one. But there were other threats of a more subtle nature and therefore more difficult for a man to analyze and defeat.

Number one on the list was the wariness she had of families and the

responsibilities and pressures that went with them. He had to find a way to show her that the past could not be allowed to dictate how she lived and loved in the present. Once he had shown her that her grandparents were not the personification of callous, selfish arrogance she had always thought them to be, he could remove a large measure of her distrust of men who had family loyalties. And then there was that damned Josh Valerian to deal with.

Cavanaugh felt his body harden into full arousal as Kimberly stirred in his arms. He watched her face as her lashes fluttered open and he smiled slightly.

The momentary confusion in her gaze amused him. It also pleased him. "You're not accustomed to waking up beside a man, are you?" he murmured. He turned on his side, hooking a hair-roughened thigh over her legs. "Better get used to it. There are going to be a lot more mornings like this one."

He bent his head to drop a small, possessive kiss on her warm shoulder.

"Are there?" she asked, looking up at him with unreadable mysteries in her eyes. "Definitely." He let his palm glide luxuriously upward until it covered her breast, and the morning hunger in him escalated. "Most definitely," he repeated, aware that his voice had

roughened. "What's more, I don't intend to share them with that other man." She blinked in sleepy astonishment. "What other man?"

"Valerian."

"Josh Valerian."

"Umm." He pushed his knee between her silky thighs and tasted the dark grape that tipped her breast. "I've been thinking about him."

"Come to any earthshaking conclusions?" she asked uncertainly. "Only the obvious. I think the fastest, most effective way of getting one man out of your head is to keep reminding

you that another, namely me, now possesses your body." He pushed himself forward until his manhood was at the soft gate of her femininity.

"Cavanaugh, are you joking?" He smiled a little grimly as he met her questioning gaze. "What do you think?" The tip of her tongue touched the corner of her mouth as she tried to assess just how serious he was. Cavanaugh didn't mind this evidence of female wariness. It meant she was focusing on him, not some illusion of a perfect man. "I don't think you are joking."

Slowly he thrust into her, taking his time so that he could experience every centimeter of her clinging, velvety core.

She grew hot and damp around him and the soft little gasp at the back of her throat sent ripples of satisfaction through him. "You're right," he growled as she instinctively lifted herself against his loins. "I'm not joking. You see how well we're communicating these days?"

"Cavanaugh, you can be an arrogant beast at times," she managed as her body warmed and tightened beneath him. Her fingers were splayed on his shoulder and her legs twisted around his in growing demand. "But I'm real. And you need a real man, not some fictional wimp who will never be able to hold you like this or make you come alive in his arms."

"Josh is not a wimp!"

"He's no good to you right now, is he? Right now you need me. Admit it,"

Cavanaugh rasped as the delicious tension built between them.

"Tell me you need me!"

"I need you, Cavanaugh. Please. Now. All of you. Ah, Cavanaugh!" A long time

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later Kimberly lay in bed and watched Cavanaugh pull on his jeans and thrust his arms into his shirt. He didn't bother

to do up the buttons. As he had explained, he was only going to duck back across the hall to his bedroom. "Not that there's any hope the entire household won't know where I spent the night," he growled humorously as he came to stand beside the bed. "But it might be easier for you to go down to breakfast if you can pretend that we observed the proprieties."

"That's very, uh, considerate of you," she said demurely, thankful for his understanding of just how awkward this sort of situation could be for a woman.

His emerald eyes gleamed with buried fire. "Lady, if I was only considering myself, I'd move you into my room today

and say the hell with the proprieties.

But I'm not totally insensitive. I also realize that I'm supposed to be protecting you, not taking advantage of you." He bent over the bed, planting a hand on either side of her body. "So I'm going to try very hard to behave myself until we get things sorted out between us. If that's the way you want me to behave, I suggest you don't tempt me too far."

"If you come to my room again in the middle of the night I'll have no one but myself to blame?" she taunted wryly. "Right." He kissed her forehead and then straightened. "See you at breakfast." With a proprietary slap on her hip,

Cavanaugh turned and strode out the door.

Kimberly watched him go, half amused, half enthralled by the self-assured, unabashedly male arrogance in him. He was feeling very good this morning, she decided. Men were probably at their most dangerous when they felt that good.

On the other hand, it gave her an undeniable pleasure to know she was the cause of his wholly masculine satisfaction. Ariel's card reading that morning was far from being a private affair. She arrived complete with a new burgundy turban for the occasion and a wonderfully dashing flowered dress in pea green.

By the time she was ready to deal the deck of ordinary playing cards into a series of numbered squares, Julia, Mrs. Lawson and Aunt Milly were gathered around. Good-naturedly Kimberly sat in front of the inlaid table Ariel was using and waited to have her fortune told. "She's really quite good," Julia confided cheerfully. "A few months ago she predicted Mark and I would become engaged and that's exactly what happened." Aunt Milly nodded enthusiastically.

"And she predicted I'd get sick at the little restaurant in Mexico last summer. She was right."

"Lots of people get ill eating unfamiliar food in foreign countries," Kimberly felt obliged to point out. "And after seeing Mark and Julia together, I think I could have predicted an engagement, too." Julia laughed. "Don't ruin it all by being too analytical."

"Julia's absolutely right," Ariel declared roundly as she shuffled the cards.

"You'll spoil all the fun if you start analyzing the whole thing."

"Okay, okay. I promise not to intellectualize about it."

"Have you ever had your fortune told?" Ariel asked. "Nope."

"Well, once the cards are dealt they all have a relationship to one another in addition to their own independent meanings. It can get very complex. Each of these squares stands for a certain aspect of life. This square concerns prosperity. That one deals with projects you might be thinking of undertaking and that one is your love life."

"I can't wait to see what card turns up on that square," Julia said with a chuckle. "As if we don't know," Mrs. Lawson put in with bland emphasis.

"Ready?" Ariel asked lightly as she began to deal the cards into the squares.

"Ready," Kimberly agreed in

resignation.

Ariel became unexpectedly serious as she dealt the cards. When she began to turn them over and study them she seemed to become completely involved with the task. "Excellent," Ariel murmured as she turned over a heart on the square representing prosperity. "You will enjoy success in your work. Money is no problem for you. This next square represents changes in your life. Here you

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have a spade. Hmmm. That's not so good.

A spade indicates a change for the worse. Perhaps actual danger.

However, it appears to be mitigated by the King of Hearts next to it in the square for happiness." The card reading continued, largely a vague and ambivalent process as far as Kimberly could determine. Whenever a card representing misfortune turned up, Ariel seemed to find one next to it that lessened or canceled out the first. There were good cards for such things as health, ambition, money and travel. "A recent trip may lead to major changes in your life," Ariel noted as she turned over the card on the travel square.

Kimberly resisted the impulse to say "no kidding." But she caught Julia's eye and found the other woman grinning at her. "And now we come to your love life," Ariel finally declared grandly. Her listeners leaned forward expectantly. Kimberly felt a wave of embarrassment and wondered if all the others were aware of how she had spent the night. She watched as Ariel turned over a King of Clubs. "Hmm," the older woman said, eyeing the card. "He'll be faithful, at least."

"Well?" Kimberly pressured. "Is that all it indicates?"

"Not quite. It implies that although you can trust him implicitly, he will not be

without faults."

"What man isn't?" Julia asked rhetorically. "In fact," Ariel went on as she turned up another club, "he might prove quite infuriating at times." "As Julia said," Mrs. Lawson interrupted, "what man isn't?" Ariel bent over the cards, turning up others in the vicinity of the "lover" square. "There is more than that here," she said slowly. "There is danger again. You will know fear, Kim."

"Fear? Of what?" Ariel ignored the question and turned up a diamond. "There is much pain from fraud and deceit."

"Probably refers to some of the royalty

statements I've had from various and assorted publishers. Forget that one. Tell me what I'm supposed to be afraid of." Ariel shook her head slowly. "It is difficult to say, Kim. I see darkness. Darkness and silver." Kimberly froze as an image of the dark, cowed figure holding the silver dagger leaped into her head. "A man?"

Her mouth suddenly felt quite dry. "Perhaps, perhaps not." Ariel frowned and then turned over the next card. She gave a few more vague analyses and then sat back, collecting all the cards into a neat pile.

"Is that the end of it?" Aunt Milly asked cheerfully. "That's it," Ariel said.

"Well, Kim, it sounds as though you'd better be wary of a dark, dangerous lover with silver in his hair," Julia commented, laughing. "But who can be trusted," Aunt Milly put in firmly. "Sounds to me like someone we all know very well," Mrs. Lawson declared happily.

"Yes, well, it's been fun, Ariel," Kimberly said, getting decisively to her feet. "Now, if you'll all excuse me, I really must get back to work. That dark, danerous man sounds like the villain in my latest novel. I'd better go see how he's getting along." The card reading party broke up as Julia and Mrs.

Lawson went back to their own projects.

Kimberly was halfway out the door of the sitting room they had all been using when Ariel stopped her with a small, fluttery hand on her arm.

Kimberly was astonished by the intent look in the older woman's eyes.

"The cards should not be dismissed lightly, Kim. They are not always simply a parlor trick." Kimberly smiled gently. "I'll remember that, Ariel. Thanks. Oh, by the way, how is the party planning going?"

"Wonderfully," Aunt Milly enthused. "The invitations go out today. The party

is scheduled for this coming Saturday night."

"Rather short notice for everyone, isn't it?"

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"Oh, we phoned everyone this morning to tell them about it. The invitations are just a formality," Ariel explained complacently, removing her hand from Kimberly's arm. "As it turns out, Saturday is an especially propitious time for the affair. Run along dear. Milly and I are going to work on the menu today." Aunt Milly nodded in agreement. "We

want everything just right for this particular event."

"What's so special about this party?" Kimberly asked unwisely.

Aunt Milly looked at her in amused astonishment. "Why, because you'll be there, of course. Now do as Ariel says and run along, dear." Kimberly didn't need any urging. She was far enough behind in Vendetta as it was. * * Shortly after ten o'clock on Saturday evening Cavanaugh glanced across the crowded living room and managed to catch a glimpse of Kimberly. He considered himself lucky. It had been difficult keeping track of her tonight. From the

moment the guests had begun arriving she had been the focal point of one after the other.

The fact that some of the people in the crowd had read her books certainly accounted for some of the attention she was receiving, but Cavanaugh was aware there was a lot more involved. The details of the kidnapping had been in the local papers, and Julia had seen to it that everyone knew Kimberly was the woman who had rescued Scott. In addition, everyone in the Cavanaugh household was treating Kim virtually as a member of the family. That last undeniable fact was being interpreted by the vast majority of the guests to mean

that Kim was due shortly to become a member of the family. In the past half hour Cavanaugh had overheard at least three clusters of people discussing when the marriage would be announced. He had done nothing to squelch the speculation.

Just as he had done nothing to stem the gossip that had arisen among his employees after he'd taken Kim on a tour of the wine-making facilities earlier this week. By now Cavanaugh was fairly certain that Kimberly herself had realized just how everyone was viewing her presence. She looked up as he glanced across the room and the wariness was back in her eyes. For an

instant their gazes clashed, and then she took a long sip from the glass of Cavanaugh wine she was drinking and went back to her discussion with a group of local wine makers. They seemed enthralled with whatever she was saying. Cavanaugh retreated to the edge of the crowd and helped himself to another glass of wine. Then he stood quietly and watched Kimberly for a while longer. Other than the familiar wariness in her eyes, she looked good tonight, he thought, wryly aware of a fierce sense of possessiveness. Kimberly and Julia had gone shopping yesterday under Starke's supervision. They had returned with the turquoise and yellow silk gown Kimberly wore

tonight. Tiny, strappy turquoise sandals and a small strand of gold at her throat constituted the remainder of the outfit. Cavanaugh had wanted to pick up the tab for the obviously expensive dress but had prudently refrained from making the offer.

Something told him that Kim would be furious. She had a fierce pride that he respected, even if it did annoy him at times. He studied her amber hair, which was caught high on her head in a deceptively careless cascade of curls. The thought of tearing the concoction apart with his fingers later on elicited a now-familiar, heavy ache in his body.

Deliberately he put the image out of his

mind. There were matters that had to be cleared up before he took Kim back to bed. Or so he kept telling himself.

He swallowed some more of his excellent Merlot wine and let himself fantasize about what it would be like to be able to take Kimberly up to bed after everyone left tonight. He had been savagely strict with himself following the one night he had spent with her.

There was still too much that lay unsettled between them. The talk with the lawyer in L.A. had made that clear. Cavanaugh suspected that Kimberly merely assumed he was staying away from her bed out of a sense of

gentlemanly behavior. He had allowed her to believe that, because he hadn't yet figured out how to tell her there was much more involved. It was becoming increasingly difficult to keep his hands off her. Soon, he promised himself, he would have it all sorted out and Kimberly would be free of her past. He was letting

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himself speculate on the future when Starke moved quietly up beside him.

"She's doing all right," Starke observed, his gaze on Kimberly. "Especially for someone who's accustomed to being a loner." Cavanaugh agreed. Starke shrugged. "Everyone's alone in some ways."

"Why is it you always get philosophical after a couple of whiskies, Starke?"

"Brings out the intellectual side of my nature."

"She's good for you, Dare. I like her." Cavanaugh's mouth twisted faintly.

"Knowing how selective you are about people, that's saying something. As it happens, I agree with you." Starke's eyes

were on Kimberly. "So when are you going to get this other thing out of the way so you'll be free to stop playing games?"

"I've arranged the meeting for the day after tomorrow. "On neutral grounds?"

Cavanaugh nodded. "The lobby of a San Francisco hotel."

"You're sure this is the right way to go about it?"

"You got a better idea?" Cavanaugh challenged grimly.

Starke sighed. "No."

"I want her free of the past, Starke. The only way to do that is to confront it. Besides, they'll hound her until they get to her. They're desperate.

Better to arrange the meeting on our terms rather than theirs."

"You're just going to spring the whole thing on Kim?"

"She'll never agree to a meeting with her grandparents."

"I don't know, Dare. Women don't like surprises."

"Kim will understand why I did it. When it's all over she'll see it was the only

way." Across the room Kim managed to excuse herself from the cluster of people around her and drifted out onto the patio. It was nippy out there, but after the crowded, overheated environment of the party it was a relief to her.

She was experiencing that trapped sensation again. There was no doubt about what people were thinking when they looked at her. They were seeing her as the new Cavanaugh bride, and none of the Cavanaughs was doing anything to discourage the assumption. Not even Darius Cavanaugh.

What was going on in his head tonight, Kimberly wondered as she walked to the edge of the patio. There were times

when she thought she could tell exactly what he was thinking. But there were other occasions when he remained unfathomable. He hadn't been back to her room since that one night they had spent together. For the hundredth time Kimberly considered that fact. Was he truly playing the gentleman or was there more to it? Perhaps he hadn't found her as physically satisfying as she had found him. Kimberly's fingers closed tightly around an awning pole and she stood looking out in the darkness.

Before her was a section of shadowy garden, and beyond that the rock wall she had been forbidden to pass. In the distance the building that held the

fermentation tanks loomed in the darkness. The acres of grapes stretched out on all sides, gliding over gentle hills beneath a pale moon. It was a lovely, prosperous, peaceful setting. Kimberly wondered how it differed from the kind of lifestyle Cavanaugh had lived before he had returned home.

"Isn't it a little cold out here, Kim?" She whirled at the sound of Starke's familiar, gravelly voice and smiled at him. She had decided she liked this strange, aloof man, even though she couldn't quite figure him out. "I needed some fresh air. I'll come back inside in a few minutes," she told him. "Having

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a good time, Starke?"

"I'm not much for cocktail parties," he murmured blandly. "Neither am I. Is Cavanaugh?"

"There's a lot you don't know about him yet, isn't there?" Surprised by the question, Kimberly shook her head. "Sometimes I think I know him.

Other " She let the sentence drift off into the darkness. "He feels the same way about you, I think. Human nature." Kimberly slid him an amused glance.

"You're a student of human nature?"
Starke held up the glass in his hand. "It's the whiskey. Brings out my intellectual qualities, as I was just explaining to Cavanaugh."

"Fascinating. What other observations have you got on the subject?"

"Of you and Cavanaugh?"

Just the obvious, I guess."

"Which is?"

"That you're right for each other," Starke explained. "He needs you, Kim."

"I don't know, Starke," she replied

gently. "He has so many other things and people in his life--the winery, his duty to his family. So much. Why would he need me?"

"You can keep those things from taking over his whole life. You can give him a separate world where he can relax and be alone with someone who puts him first." She stirred uneasily. "Maybe that's what I want, too, Starke. Someone who can put me first in his life."

"You don't think Cavanaugh can do that?"

"How can any man in his position do that?" she asked helplessly. "You still don't know him very well. Give him a

chance, Kim. And-" Starke hesitated and then finished bluntly "-try not to be too hard on him on the occasions when you don't understand him completely. He's only a man." Kim's lips lifted in a teasing smile. "So are you. Are you sure you're qualified to explain the species to me?" Starke took a long swallow of whiskey. "Probably not, but I guess I felt obliged to try." Instantly Kim softened.

"You're very loyal to Cavanaugh, aren't you?"

"He saved my life a long time ago. Later on I was able to return the favor.

That sort of thing builds a certain bond between two people."

"How did he save your life?"

Kim demanded with a slight frown. "It's not important now," Starke said, shifting with an uneasiness that told Kim it was a subject he wished he hadn't brought up for discussion. "I had gotten myself into a messy situation in the Middle East. I was trying to make contact with someone and got caught in the middle of a riot. Cavanaugh had also gotten trapped on the street. All hell broke out and, being the nearest Americans in the vicinity, we got mistaken for devils by the local crowd. I found myself up against a wall, literally.

And then Dare arrived. He knew someone in the neighborhood with whom

he'd done business. That association gave him enough clout to get me free from the mob.

By the time everyone figured out that his connections shouldn't be allowed to stand in the way of a little mob vengeance, we were clear. Dare used his contacts to pull some strings and got us both out of the country about two steps ahead of the full-scale war that broke out a day later." Kimberly drew a

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deep breath. "I had no idea the import-

export business could be so, uh, volatile."

"It had its moments," Starke reflected, lifting his glass again. He stared into the whiskey for a few seconds, as if seeing something Kimberly couldn't.

"Especially the way Dare ran things." Kimberly couldn't be sure she'd heard those last few words. Her voice sharpened. "When did you save his life, Starke?" It occurred to her that there was more to this man than met the eye.

His laconic speech and quiet mannerisms belied the harshness of his appearance. He looked at her and blinked owlishly.

"There was a knife fight in some alley in Hong Kong. Dare was trying to deal with three punks who had waylaid him outside his hotel. I was on my way to see him and found it all going down in the alley a block from the hotel. I'm pretty good with a knife," Starke explained blandly.

Kimberly shivered. "Oh." Starke's brows bunched together in a heavy line.

"Promise me you won't tell Dare I told you all this, okay? He'd have my head if he thought I was out here scaring you to death with those kind of stories."

"Why are you scaring me to death with those tales, Starke?" Kimberly asked

perceptively. "I guess I just want you to understand that there's a lot more to Dare than may seem obvious by looking at Cavanaugh Vineyards."

"I know that, Starke," Kimberly said gently. Starke looked suddenly relieved.

"Sure you do. If you didn't, you wouldn't love him, would you?" Kimberly recoiled, a protest rising automatically to her lips. Her love was still a private, personal matter at this point. She had not dreamed that others knew of it. But before she could find the words to make Starke understand that it was much too soon to make such statements' he was slipping out of his jacket and handing it to her. "Here," he said gruffly. "If you're

going to stay out here awhile, you'd better put this on." Then he turned and strode back into the house. With a sigh, Kimberly walked off the patio and into the garden. She really didn't want to go back into the house just yet. The thought of all those people looking at her, speculating on her relationship with Cavanaugh, perhaps coming to the same conclusion Starke had, was suddenly overwhelming.

She needed some time alone. Not that she would be able to stay out here very long. Julia, Aunt Milly, Ariel, Mrs. Lawson or even Cavanaugh or Starke was likely to miss her and start looking for her. So many people who would

concern themselves over her. She wasn't accustomed to it. Kimberly glanced up as she wandered into the garden. The light in Scott's room was finally turned off. He had been sent to bed a couple of hours ago, but only under protest. It had been his future father, Mark, who had taken on the task of putting Scott to bed. Kimberly had seen the warmth in Julia's eyes as she watched her fiance handle the boy. At the edge of the garden Kimberly came to a halt again and stood staring at the dark winery facility several yards beyond the rock wall.

A few outside lights illuminated the beautiful grounds in front of the building where tourists gathered during the days.

The rear of the large structure was shrouded in darkness. This was as far as she ought to go. In another few feet she would be crossing the low, rambling rock wall. Doing that would set off the alarms, which in turn would certainly put a damper on the Cavanaugh party tonight, she thought humorously. Aunt Milly and Ariel would never forgive her. That was assuming, of course, that Starke hadn't had a little too much whiskey tonight and was able to realize an alarm had been triggered. As for Cavanaugh's reaction, he was more likely to turn her over his knee than make love to her if she pulled that stunt again. Once was forgivable. Disobeying orders a second time probably wouldn't go

down well with the lord and master of Cavanaugh Vineyards. With a wry smile at the thought, Kimberly reluctantly turned to walk back up through the garden to the patio and into the noisy, well-lit house. The statue-still figure in a cowled

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robe was waiting for her, blocking the path through the garden. Kimberly was so stunned by the dark apparition that for a timeless moment she couldn't even scream.

Frozen in the moonlight the two stared at

each other and then the robed figure raised both hands, revealing the ornate silver dagger he held.

Kimberly did scream then but it was the kind of scream one had in a nightmare, a choked soundless cry that reached no one. Fear stifled the first attempt and before she could make another, the cowed creature took a menacing step forward. Kimberly got the scream past her lips this time but even as it echoed through the night she told herself that no one would hear it over the noise of the party. She was at the rear of the garden, much too far from the safety of the house. The dagger flashed in the watery moonlight and the movement freed her.

She picked up the skirts of her silk gown and began to run, attempting to dodge around the hooded threat that stood so obscenely in the beautiful garden. The creature in the robe shifted position, easily blocking her path.

He held the advantage. There was no way she could get past him and back to the house. When he moved toward her again, Kimberly did the only thing she could do; she fled out of the garden toward the low rock wall. Risking a glance over her shoulder she saw the cowed figure pursuing. He seemed to be having some trouble managing the bulky skirts of his robe. Silver from the wicked blade of the dagger flashed in

the darkness and memories of Ariel's card reading chilled Kimberly even more than she already was. As she ran Starke's jacket slipped from her shoulders. It landed on the rambling rock wall as Kimberly scrambled over the top. Her only hope was that the discreet alarms in the house had been triggered and that Starke would not be too deep into his whiskey to know it. Panicked, Kimberly fled for her life toward the only possible protection she could imagine, the winery building. If she could reach it far enough ahead of her pursuer perhaps she would be able to get inside and lock a door behind her. The turquoise sandals proved treacherous on the sandy path that led through the

vineyards. Several times she stumbled and nearly fell, but sheer blind fear drove her on toward the looming building. The cowed figure seemed to be having more trouble running than she was in the heavy robes he wore, and that gave Kimberly hope. Perhaps the flowing garment would hinder his movements enough so that she could get inside the building before he did. Once inside there were phones she could use to call the main house. She had seen them several days earlier when Cavanaugh had taken her on a tour of the production facilities. Her breath was like fire in her lungs as she fled toward the rear entrance of the building. Behind her she could hear the crunch of pursuing

footsteps. For some insane reason the menacing sound came almost as a relief. Surely only a real human being would make such a sound as he ran. At least she was not being pursued by a specter. Out here alone in the darkness it would've been easy to believe she was dealing with a supernatural threat. Gasping for breath, her heart thudding from fear and exertion, Kimberly slammed to a halt in front of the door at the rear of the building. She didn't even hesitate. She'd decided what she would do while she was still several yards away. Whipping off one of the turquoise sandals, Kimberly shattered the door's window. She had her hand inside, reaching to unlock it before the glass had even

struck the floor. A lacerating pain sliced into her arm but she ignored it. The door opened and she was inside, slamming it shut behind her. In the hall all was in darkness.

Kimberly was forced to slow to a walk. Behind her she heard the door open and close again. Then there was silence. The utter darkness must be as much a burden to her pursuer as it was to her. But Kimberly had one advantage. She knew where she was in the building. With any luck the man with the knife would be forced to wander aimlessly, trying to follow her by sound alone. Taking off her other sandal so that she could move as silently as possible, Kimberly groped

her way carefully down the hall toward the huge, high-ceilinged room that held the fermentation tanks and the rows of casks used to age the wine.

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CHAPTER SEVEN.

The gentle hum of machinery and the unique, sharp smell of wine in the making greeted Kimberly as she pushed open the door of the huge room.

Towering stainless-steel tanks and several rows of wooden vats loomed around her. They made her think of dinosaurs dozing in the muted darkness.

At the far end of the room near a short staircase a dull light gleamed. Otherwise all was in shadow. For an instant Kimberly hesitated. The room that she thought might promise some shelter seemed suddenly to be filled with giant, alien machines that were half alive. No, she thought hysterically, it wasn't the tanks that were alive, it was the wine inside them. Hadn't Cavanaugh explained that to her on the tour? The process of fermentation and aging was a living process, a process of constant evolution and change. The vats and tanks around her were the wombs that nurtured the wine while it developed and matured. She listened for sounds behind her and heard nothing. Then, slipping

into the shadowy room, Kimberly darted to the left. She would weave a path through the tanks, using them for cover while she made her way toward the dimly lit stairs at the far end.

Cavanaugh, help me. Hurry. For God's sake, hurry. Halfway toward her goal, unable to hear sounds of pursuit above the hum of the tanks, Kimberly's bare foot came down in a puddle of cold liquid. She gasped aloud and then immediately bit down on her lip, cursing silently. With any luck her pursuer hadn't heard her faint, startled exclamation. She felt her way along the darkest side of the room, staying behind the last row of tanks. While the sound of working

machinery was a cover for her own progress, it also covered the approach of the creature in the robes.

The room at the top of the stairs seemed miles away instead of only a few feet. She had to reach it. It was the tasting room, the last stop on a tour.

In it lay a telephone. There was also a fire alarm, Kimberly recalled vaguely.

She would break the glass cover on it. That should summon help in a hurry. But first she had to get through the jungle of tanks. Every soft sound behind her was a new source of terror.

Kimberly kept glancing back over her

shoulder, expecting to see the silver dagger plunging toward her at any second. Arriving at the last tank in the row, Kimberly eyed the stairs with trepidation. To reach them she would have to make a dash out into the open and the small light on the wall would illuminate her quite clearly. She had no reason to think that the door at the top would be locked, but if it were she would be trapped at the top of the stairs. Cavanaugh, where are you? I need you. There was no point delaying the inevitable. Her only chance was to reach the tasting room and barricade herself inside while she phoned for help. Collecting her skirts in one hand, Kimberly darted out from behind the

shelter of the last tank and ran for the door at the top of the stairs. With the primitive instinct of the hunted, she knew it was too late. There wasn't going to be enough time. The creature was behind her. He must have guessed her goal. Kimberly's hands were on the doorknob, twisting frantically when she glanced over her shoulder and saw him.

The dagger was in his fist as the man in the robes raced toward her down the center aisle between the tanks. He was only a few paces behind. No time, she thought wildly as the door obediently opened inward. There was no time.

Kimberly slammed the door behind her but her pursuer struck it with such force

that it crashed back against the wall.

She whirled and fled behind the ornate bar of the tasting room. The pale glow from the light at the top of the stairs filtered into the dark room, illuminating the rows of glasses and the neatly stored bottles of Cavanaugh wine. Without even thinking clearly about what she intended to do, Kimberly grabbed the nearest bottle. It didn't seem like much against a silver dagger

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but it was all that was available.

Grasping the neck of the bottle as though it were a club she swung the end against the highly polished edge of the bar.

Then she wondered half hysterically if this sort of thing only worked in vintage westerns.

Glass shattered. Wine gushed to the floor, spilling over her bare feet.

Kimberly was left holding a jagged, crystal blade. At the open end of the bar the hooded figure halted, silver dagger raised. He was only steps away and for the first time Kimberly could see the dark gleam of humanity beneath the shrouding cowl. The dim light glinted off the broken wine bottle in her hand as she

held it in front of her.

"Cavanaugh will kill you if you so much as touch me," she bit out. "Your friend Cavanaugh can go to hell." The voice was low and harsh and it had the sound of city streets in it. It didn't sound at all supernatural or sepulchral. She was facing a street punk, not a warlock, Kimberly thought wildly. "He'll see you there first. I can promise you that much."

"I'll worry about him later. You're my job for tonight." He rushed her then, holding the dagger now like a fighting blade, not a sacrificial one. Coming in low and fast, the man in the robe covered the few steps separating him from his victim with a frightening

ferocity. "Cavanaugh!" Kimberly screamed the name as she tried to sidestep the attacker's rush. There was so little room to maneuver here behind the bar. But the punk must have had some respect for the jagged bottle in her hand because when she instinctively lashed out at him with it, he faded to the side. Kimberly swept past him, toward the open end of the bar. He whirled, slashing the dagger through the air in a violent arc.

Kimberly picked up another bottle, still holding on to her first weapon. She hurled the full wine bottle toward the man who, in turn, ducked. The glass cracked on the counter behind him and

liquid poured onto the floor. "YOU

bitch!" Kimberly was throwing every bottle she could get her hands on now and more than one of them found its target. The bulky robes seemed to provide protection, however, and none of the blows proved devastating. With a roar of rage, her attacker sprang forward, intending to throw himself into one final rush that would plunge the dagger deeply into her body. Kimberly turned to run and then heard the scream of fury behind her as the robed figure slipped on the wineslick floor. She heard the thud as he fell to the tile, and without stopping to think, Kimberly picked up one more bottle of wine.

She brought it down on the back of the cowed head with every ounce of force she possessed. "Kim!" Cavanaugh came through the door, a dark lethal shadow in his evening clothes. The glint of metal caught Kimberly's eye as she stood over her victim. Cavanaugh held a gun in his hand. Starke was right behind him, grabbing for the light switch on the wall. Cavanaugh reached her as the lights came on, yanking her away from her prone attacker. She felt the taut violence in him as his hand closed over her shoulder. Then he was bending down beside her victim, turning him over to feel for a pulse beneath the heavy hood. Starke stood tensely, waiting for the verdict. He, too, was armed. Both men,

she thought dazedly, looked very comfortable with a gun in their hands.

Cavanaugh straightened slowly, shoving his weapon out of sight beneath his elegant evening jacket. "He's out," Cavanaugh growled. His hard, emerald eyes raked Kim from her head to her bare feet. "She knocked him unconscious."

"S mells like it took half a case of wine to do it," Starke commented as he examined the situation. "Looks like it took half a case, too. We've got a regular swimming pool in here."

"I didn't know neatness counted," Kimberly managed, her stunned eyes

never leaving Cavanaugh's. "Lady," Cavanaugh grated harshly, "the only thing that counts in a situation like this is who's still standing when it's all over. My God, woman, you've taken ten years off my life tonight!

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"Are you all right?" She nodded mutely, unable to move. Still clutching the jagged blade she had created from the first bottle, Kimberly faced him. Then, with a groan of savage relief, Cavanaugh reached for her.

She dropped the bottle and fell into his

arms. "You're bleeding! If that bastard ...
"

"It's all right. I just cut myself a little on the glass in the door. Oh, Cavanaugh, I thought you and Starke would never get here," she whispered from the safety of his hold. "Doesn't look like you needed us too badly," Starke said. "You seem to have handled things pretty well on your own. The next time we find ourselves in a barroom brawl, Dare, we'll have to make sure she's along to back us up."

"She'll be there if that's where I happen to be. I'm never going to let her out of my sight."

"How did you find me?" she interrupted

hastily. There was still a fierce tension flowing in him. She could feel it as he held her close. "Starke's beeper went off when you crossed the wall. We excused ourselves to go check the control panel, thinking the alarm must have been set off by an animal.

Somewhere along the line we noticed that you were nowhere to be found,"

Cavanaugh explained. Very gently he disengaged himself from her tight hold and turned the water on in the small sink. Then he thrust her bleeding arm under the flowing tap. "I told Dare I'd last seen you on the patio," Starke put in calmly, bending down to yank back the hood of the attacker. Beneath the mysterious

cowl was the face of a dark haired young man in his early twenties.

"Neither of us could believe you'd be stupid enough to actually take a midnight stroll over the wall, of course,"

Cavanaugh went on. "I didn't exactly go strolling over that damned wall, you know. I was in the garden, about to start back to the house when this turkey got in the way. I knew I couldn't run past him. So I tried to run away from him, hoping that when we went over the wall, the alarm would go off. Ouch.

Cavanaugh, that hurts." He ignored her and slapped a bar napkin over the wound. "We found Starke's jacket and

knew it was you and not some deer who had triggered it. But we couldn't figure out where you'd gone at that point. When you broke into the winery you tripped another alarm, though, which pinpointed your location. We were right behind you. And then we started hearing all those bottles you were throwing around with such cheerful abandon." Cavanaugh's mouth twisted wryly. "Some of my best Cabernet Sauvignon, by the way. I may send you a bill."

"Of all the nerve!"

"On second thought," Cavanaugh said consideringly, "I think I'll just take it out of your sweet hide." He released her to bend over the young man in the robes.

Fumbling beneath the flowing garment he retrieved the silver dagger.

"Call the cops, Starke. And see if you can get hold of that Detective Cranston we've been working with."

"Right." Starke picked up the phone and dialed. It was several hours later, nearly two in the morning, before Kimberly finally got to bed.

Julia and Aunt Milly and Ariel had fussed over her while Mrs. Lawson fixed a soothing herbal tea according to Ariel's directions. Aroused by the hubbub, Scott had wandered sleepily downstairs to see what was going on. Cavanaugh and Starke dealt with the

police, while concerned neighbors and guests asked countless questions of one another and of Kimberly. "Maybe you'll be able to work this into one of your plots."

Mark Taylor said lightly at one point. "Mark!" Julia scolded. "Don't joke like that." But ultimately the guests and the authorities took their leave. The man

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in the monk's robes was thrust into the back of a patrol car and taken away, too. He had revived by then but to the best of anyone's knowledge he hadn't said a

single word. Alone at last, aware of her own exhaustion but feeling too restless and wound up to sleep, Kimberly slipped into her T-shirt and crawled into bed. She lay in the darkness and reran the entire episode over and over in her mind. It seemed to her that it would be a long time before she could get the image of that raised dagger out of her head. Every time she closed her eyes it was there, poised and ready to strike. Her body seemed periodically racked by fine shivers. It was just reaction, she knew, but she couldn't seem to control it. She was lying on her side, staring out the window when her bedroom door opened softly and then closed again. Kimberly knew who had entered the room without

having to see his face. "Cavanaugh?" "I told you I wasn't going to let you out of my sight again." She heard him undressing in the darkness and she turned slowly to meet his shadowed gaze. Her amber hair was spilled around her on the pillow, and the sheet was pulled taut across her breasts. Cavanaugh's possessive eyes moved over her as he slipped off his ruffled evening shirt. "What about the proprieties? What about the uh, awkwardness of my position as a guest in your household? What about your concern for my potential embarrassment?" She tried to make the words light and teasing, but the truth was she was incredibly glad to have him here

and she knew it must have shown in her voice. "What about moving over?" he countered as he stepped out of the last of his clothes. "I may not have mentioned it the last time I slept here, but I happen to prefer the left side of the bed."

"I'll keep that in mind." Obediently she moved to the opposite side. But the forced lightness in her words ended as he got into bed beside her. With a small cry she went to him, clinging to his reassuring warmth and strength.

"Ah, Cavanaugh, I was so scared tonight."

"I know how it feels, sweetheart," he rasped thickly. "Believe me, I know how

it feels. God, you were brave." He stroked her hair, twining his legs with hers. "YOU looked like a warrior queen when I came through the door. I wanted to kill that punk on the floor. If you hadn't already knocked him out, I probably would have. It was too close, Kim. Much too close for my peace of mind. That's why I couldn't let you stay alone tonight."

"I would have had nightmares," she confessed. "YOU think I wouldn't have had them, too? That little scene in the tasting room is going to haunt me for a long time." He continued to stroke her, not with passion but with long, soothing motions. "I can't seem to calm down,"

Kimberly whispered tightly.

"All my nerves feel as though they've been plugged into an electric outlet."

"It's reaction, honey, just reaction. Takes a while for your system to settle down after something that traumatic."

"You seem to understand."

"I do." She thought about the way he had come through the door with the gun in his hand. "You've been through this kind of scene before," she said softly.

"No, never quite like this," Cavanaugh denied flatly. "I've never walked into a room and found my woman facing an

armed punk."

"You didn't exactly " into the tasting room. You and Starke came through that door like the U.S. Marines." His arms tightened around her and Kimberly snuggled gratefully into his embrace. Inside she savored the words "my woman."

"Don't ever do that to me again, Kim," Cavanaugh ordered harshly. "Believe me, I didn't set out to do it to you tonight! Or to myself."

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"You shouldn't have gone out into the garden alone."

Kimberly lifted her head. "Cavanaugh," she protested. "No one ever said anything about not going out onto the patio or into the garden.

That electronically rigged rock wall was the only barrier!" He groaned, pushing her head back down on his shoulder. "Technically, you're right.

What I'm really trying to say is, don't wander out of my sight again.

Understand?" She smiled faintly in the darkness, inhaling the earthy, masculine scent of his skin. "I understand. I'm not

sure how practical that will be, but I understand."

"Damn it, Kim, I wasn't going to yell at you tonight."

"No? You were going to wait until morning?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact I was. I still intend to wait until morning. This isn't the time."

"Why not?"

"Because you're in shock. I told you, I know what the reaction feels like."

"How is it you know so much about it?"

she asked softly. "Just what sort of import-export company did you run before you returned to Cavanaugh Vineyards?"

"A perfectly legitimate and profitable one." She sensed him smiling against her hair. "Rugs and trinkets and doodads from all over the world?"

"Something like that," he agreed absently. "Do you still own the business?"

"No, I sold it two years ago when I came back here." "Do you miss it?" she .

"All the travel and freedom and everything?" She felt him hesitate. "No.

That part of my life is over. I'm content making my wine. It's a very satisfying kind of work, Kim."

"I know what it's like to have a satisfying career. I'm very lucky to have my writing." Again she sensed a hesitation in him and then Cavanaugh said quietly, "It won't always be enough for you, Kim. I realize that you think it will because right now your life seems to hold everything you need. But you're a warm, sensitive woman. You weren't cut out to spend your whole life alone."

"I don't intend to spend it completely alone." His hand moved impatiently on her thigh. "I know. You're looking for your real-life Josh Valerian. The perfect

man, unencumbered by family and responsibility. But he's not out there, Kim. He doesn't exist except in your books. And you're far too passionate and real to be content with a fictional lover." Surprised by the vehemence in his voice, Kimberly didn't argue. "I agree with you." she said simply. "What?"

Green eyes narrowing, Cavanaugh rolled her over onto her back and trapped her beneath him. "I said, I agree with you." Smiling up at him, she wrapped her arms around his neck. "Make love to me, Cavanaugh. I need you."



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"Not half as much as I need you," he groaned huskily, lowering his head to taste the sweet skin of her shoulder. "Oh, God.

Not half as much as I need you. But I won't stop trying until you realize you want me more than anything else on this earth!" He slid his hands up along her

sides, pushing the T-shirt out of the way. When her bare breasts were revealed in the shadows he tantalized the tips gently with the palm of his hand until they became firm. Kimberly felt the hardness of his arousal as he pressed himself strongly against her thigh. When he drew one of her hands away from his neck and guided it down to his manhood, she moaned in soft wonder. "Such gentle hands," Cavanaugh muttered achingly. "You drive me out of my mind, sweetheart."

He let his fingers glide teasingly along the inside of her thighs until she was arching against his hand. Then he touched the dampening heart of her and

Kimberly gasped aloud. Cavanaugh lifted his head from her breast to drink in the sight of her parted lips and luminous eyes. She caught at his shoulders, pulling him to her. "love me, Cavanaugh. I love you so much!"

"Kim!" She heard the ravishing hunger in his voice and then he was forging into her, taking her completely. The elemental power of his lovemaking captured her, binding her to him in the most primitive of ways. Kimberly clung, her nails leaving small marks of passion in his shoulders, her legs wrapped tightly around his driving thighs. And then came the moment when her head tipped back over his arm and her body

shuddered delicately beneath him.

Kimberly was vaguely aware of Cavanaugh calling out her name and heard his fierce demand.

"Tell me again, Kim. Say you love me."

"I love you, Cavanaugh. I love you-"
Then the words were cut off as he poured the essence of himself deeply into her body. The long moment of violent, male release drained both of them. It was a long while before Cavanaugh stirred and slowly uncoupled himself from her warmth. Kimberly turned into him, seeking shelter and comfort and empathy. "Did you mean it, Kim?" he asked finally, his hands

moving through the tangled mass of her hair. "I love you, Cavanaugh." He muttered something she couldn't understand and folded her more tightly against him. "Remember that, sweetheart."

"How could I forget?"

"Kim, I have to be certain you know what you're saying," he said after a moment. "Do you understand? I want to be sure you know exactly how you feel. I want you to be completely free to love me."

"Don't worry. I'll give up Josh Valerian. It will be hard on the poor man but I expect he'll survive."

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"Honey, I'm not joking."

Cavanaugh lifted her chin up so that he could study her face. His own was harsh and unreadable. "I don't want there to be any barriers between us."

Kimberly's mouth curved with love.

"Stop worrying, Cavanaugh. I know what I'm doing. You're so good at reading my mind occasionally, can't you read it tonight?"

"I'm not sure." His eyes were hooded and brooding in the darkness. "Kim, the

day after tomorrow I want to take you into San Francisco with me. We'll spend the night there." Kimberly glowed. "A little time to ourselves?"

"There's some business we have to handle but then, yes; we'll have the night to ourselves." He hesitated and then asked carefully. "Would you like that?"

"Very much." A sigh escaped him. "Go to sleep, Kim. You've had a hell of a night." She nestled closer and allowed herself to drift comfortably off into oblivion. The last thought on her mind before she fell into a surprisingly dreamless sleep was that Cavanaugh hadn't told her he loved her. He was saving that for San Francisco, she

decided. At dawn Kimberly awoke to find herself deeply enmeshed in Cavanaugh's embrace. She lay quietly for a time, thinking about the night. "Are you awake, sweetheart?" he murmured into her hair. '.

Cavanaugh, I've been thinking about something."

"Not always a good sign in a woman." She pinched his hip and he growled, nipping her shoulder in sensuous retaliation. "I'm serious. There's something we didn't talk about last night." It seemed to Kimberly that he stiffened slightly at her words.

"What didn't we discuss?"

"Well, the whole point of your alarm system along the rock wall is to keep intruders out."

"True."

"The only alarm you got last night was the one I set off when I ran toward the winery building."

"Uh-huh."

"But the character in the robes who was chasing me was already inside the grounds. In fact, he was inside the garden, near the patio. How did he get there without tripping the alarm when he arrived?"

"That," Cavanaugh muttered, "is a little matter I've been lying awake thinking about for the past hour."

"Did he slip in when the invited guests arrived?"

"I don't see how. Starke was monitoring everyone's arrival through the gates and Julia greeted everyone at the door. After the last guest arrived the gates were locked. Starke is very thorough about these things." Starke. The strange man who shared Cavanaugh's past. Kimberly shivered. But she was afraid to bring up any possible suspicions. Cavanaugh and Starke apparently went back a long way together. Cavanaugh would not thank her for voicing any doubts about his friend.

Besides, Kimberly thought, dismissing her momentary questions, she had no reason to doubt Starke in the first place. His loyalty to Cavanaugh had been proven in the past. "What are you thinking about, Kim?"

"Loyalty," she answered truthfully. "A difficult concept to deal with at five o'clock in the morning."

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"Are you sleepy?" "Want to get up?" He smiled. "Want to tell me you love me again?"

"How about if I show you?"

"I'm at your mercy."

"I've always had this thing for passive, submissive men."

"Witch," he rasped huskily, pulling her down on top of him. By noon that day Starke had a preliminary report on the man who had attacked Kimberly the previous night. He sat with Kimberly and Cavanaugh and told them what little he knew. "This is all unofficial at this point. Cranston gave me the information off the record. The guy's name is Nick Garwood. He's got a record that goes back to his kindergarten days. Questioned twice last year during an

investigation of a stabbing death in L.A. The police down there think it was a contract killing. Right now Garwood is busy demanding his rights and a lawyer but Cranston thinks they can get him to talk."

"Any word on the source of that dagger?" Cavanaugh asked calmly, as if discussing a business matter. Kimberly was amazed at the matter-of-fact way he and Starke were handling this whole thing. As if they had dealt with such things often in the past. "Not yet. But Cranston let me take a look at it.

It's not a cheap, stamped out knife, Dare. The handle is genuine silver and it's heavily embossed. Looks like some kind

of ceremonial thing. A collector's item. Not the kind of knife a punk would use to carry out a neat, tidy contract killing. It's-" he slid an apologetic glance at Kimberly. "-it's not exactly an efficient sort of weapon. "Lucky for me," Kimberly tossed back smoothly. "Lucky for all of us," Cavanaugh grated. "Any theories on how he got inside the gate without triggering the alarms?" Starke shifted his gaze to the garden outside the study window. "Dare, the only thing I can think of is that he somehow snuck in with the other guests. I don't see how, but it must have happened that way. I've been so damned careful ...!" Kimberly saw how harsh Starke was being on himself and felt compelled to interject.

"Is it possible someone inside, one of the guests, let him in?"

Cavanaugh and Starke both turned to look at her. "Do you realize what you're saying, Kim?" Cavanaugh finally asked gently. "That someone you know is behind this?" "Yes, I realize it. It's just a passing thought." She smiled bleakly.

"I guess I've written one too many crime novels." Cavanaugh shook his head.

"Don't apologize. It's something that has to be considered. Starke and I went over that ground this morning. We couldn't come up with anything useful, though. Everyone here last night is a good, solid, substantial citizen of the community."

True, Kimberly reflected. In fact, realistically speaking, the newest people on the scene locally were Cavanaugh and Starke. It was getting very involved, she decided. "With any luck the authorities will get that Nick Garwood to talk," she offered firmly. "Perhaps he's the only villain."

"Don't forget the woman. The one who held Scott captive."

"True. But if she's a girlfriend of Garwood's, it should be easy to trace her." Starke fell into a musing silence. "What doesn't fit in all this is the weird part," Cavanaugh put in bluntly. "The rose with the needle in it, the silver dagger, the robe Garwood was wearing."

None of that fits a straight kidnap or murder attempt."

"I know," Starke muttered in dark frustration. Cavanaugh leaned forward in sudden intensity. "Starke, see if you can get Cranston to give you a photograph of that dagger."

"Sure, but why?"

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"You and I imported a lot of odd things during our time, pal. We had to get them appraised occasionally.

I've got a lot of contacts who know a lot about weird items. I want to show some of them a photo of that dagger." Starke was on his feet, heading for the door. "I'll get on it right away, Dare." The man was obviously grateful to have something useful to do. At the door he paused for a moment to glance back at Cavanaugh. "Are you still going to take Kim into San Francisco tomorrow?"

Kimberly wondered at the disapproval in his voice but Cavanaugh ignored it.

"We'll be leaving in the afternoon. As soon as I finish that meeting with the marketing people. Any objections?"

"Would they do any good?" "No,"

Cavanaugh said harshly. "I know what I'm doing." "I'll see you later," Starke said and walked out the door. Startled at the unexpected discord between the two men, Kimberly frowned at Cavanaugh.

"What was all that about?" He switched his emerald-hard gaze to her. "Forget it, Kim. Like I told Starke, I know what I'm doing."

"I never said you didn't, but-" A sudden, bleak thought struck her and she went on in a tight whisper, "Doesn't Starke approve of ... of us? Is he trying to warn you not to get too involved with me?" Cavanaugh's mouth tilted wryly at the corner.

"In case you haven't noticed, I already am involved with you. And if it makes you feel any more comfortable about it, yes, Starke does approve of you. Most emphatically. So does everyone else around here."

"Oh."

A sense of relief went through her. "It's just that I know how demanding families can be in a situation such as this," she began gently. "If they don't approve-"

"No," Cavanaugh cut in with cool deliberation. "You do not know how families are in a situation such as this. You only know how one family was and that was twenty-eight years ago. Before

you were even born!" Kimberly got to her feet, astonished and annoyed at his biting attitude. She had gotten very accustomed lately to being cosseted by Darius Cavanaugh. "Occasionally I forget how overbearing you can be when you choose," she told him as she walked to the door. "I'll see you at dinner."

"Kim, wait!" He was on his feet behind his desk, green eyes urgent and compelling. "What is it, Cavanaugh?" she asked warily, her hand on the doorknob. "Kim, you do know that whatever I do, it's because I want everything right between us? I know there are times when I seem like a tyrant to you, but you do understand that I only

want what's best for you? And for myself," he added dryly. "I can't pretend to be totally altruistic about all this."

She tilted her head to one side. "About all what?"

"Never mind. Just remember what I said. Oh, and Kim, why don't you have Mrs.

Lawson set out a bottle of that new Riesling for dinner."

"Of course," she said politely and closed the door behind her. And while I'm at it, she decided grimly, I might as well tell her I'd like to see a bottle of hot sauce on the table. I may not be sure of my status around here, but I must have some rights!

He came to her room again that night and while he didn't exactly flaunt the relationship to the rest of the household, it was obvious Cavanaugh had no intention of trying to pretend that he wasn't sleeping with her. No one seemed to mind the obvious intimacy.

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In fact, everyone seemed quite pleased about it as far as Kimberly could tell.

But it seemed to her that he made love to her with a kind of fierce energy that night, as if he was trying to imprint himself on her senses. He should realize

by now, Kimberly thought fleetingly, that he had succeeded completely in wiping out her image of a fictional lover.

She would be satisfied now only with the very real love of Darius Cavanaugh.

CHAPTER EIGHT.

Some deep instinct warned Kimberly of impending disaster as Cavanaugh escorted her into the ornate lounge of the elegant Union Square hotel. If she were honest with herself she would have known that the promised trip to San Francisco was not really destined to be the romantic idyll she had anticipated. There had been a tension about Cavanaugh since the day before, when

he had made a point of telling her that whatever he did would be for her own good. When people, especially men, started telling you that what they did was for your own good, a smart woman ran. As fast and as far as she could. But she hadn't been a smart woman lately, Kimberly reflected. She had been a woman in love.

Quite a difference. Cavanaugh's tension had communicated itself to Kimberly until she herself bristled with it. He had been almost silent during the drive into the city that afternoon. There had been an implacable, forbidding aura about him that had squelched her attempts at conversation. When they had checked

into the hotel he had taken her upstairs to the room and brusquely suggested she change for the evening.

Out of a fleeting wish that the atmosphere between them might be explained and mitigated before the night was over, Kimberly had dressed with hope. The sophisticated little black knit dress with its piping of gold at the collar and cuffs had been discovered by Julia yesterday during a shopping trip.

Together with black, high-heeled evening sandals and hair brushed into a chic twist at the back of her head, Kimberly felt as ready as she ever would to face what promised to be an uncertain evening. It had seemed to her

that Cavanaugh had dressed as though he were going to war. He looked formidable and aloof, essentially masculine in the dark evening jacket and dazzling white shirt. She felt the distance between them grow more frighteningly intense with every passing second. Her dreams of an evening of love and promises faded. By the time they were facing the smiling hostess in the lounge, Kimberly knew that something devastating was about to occur.

Beside her Cavanaugh spoke with quiet authority. "We're expected by the Marlands." Kimberly went absolutely still even as the hostess nodded politely and turned to lead the way. "Cavanaugh,

what have you done?"

Kimberly whispered with a bleakness that reached all the way to her heart. She turned vulnerable, stricken eyes up to his unyielding gaze.

"What have you done to us?" His mouth tightened as he looked down at her, and for an instant she thought she read desperation in the depths of his emerald eyes. But it was masked almost immediately by fierce determination. "It had to be this way, Kim. You would never have agreed to meet them otherwise." She shook her head, trying to clear it. "I knew from the beginning that you were arrogant, but I never thought you would do this to me." His hand

closed around her wrist. "Let's get it over with, Kim. It's not going to be as bad as you think it will be.

Trust me." She looked up at him uncomprehendingly. "Trust you? But Cavanaugh, after tonight I'll never be able to trust you again, will I?"

Fury hardened his features even more than they already were. "You don't know what you're saying. Don't fight it, Kim. And don't be afraid.

I'm with you, remember? I won't let anything happen to you."

"What more could happen?" she asked. "Do you know that I thought you were

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bringing me to San Francisco so we could spend some time alone? And I thought tonight was going to be a very special one for us. I always thought I kept my fantasy world confined to the pages of my books but apparently I allowed it to slip over into real life."

"I'm no fantasy, damn it!"

"No. But the man I fell in love with is."

"We'll deal with this later, after you've faced the Marlands and found out that there's no need to deny your heritage."

"Cavanaugh ... " she whispered distantly as he led her through the crowded lounge. But it was too late.

They were confronting a refined looking couple seated at a round table in the corner. Her grandparents must have been in their seventies, Kimberly realized vaguely as Wesley Marland got to his feet and politely extended his hand to Cavanaugh. But even as the older man went through the formalities, neither he nor his expensively dressed, silver-haired wife could take their eyes off their granddaughter. When she looked into Wesley Marland's face, Kimberly found herself meeting eyes the same amber color as her own. Marland must

have been a handsome man in his youth, she reflected as she acknowledged the quiet introductions with the barest inclination of her head. Without a word she took the chair Cavanaugh held for her, refusing to look at him as she did so. He sat beside her, close and protective. No, not protective. Possessive perhaps, but not protective. A man who cared enough to protect her would never have thrown her into deep water as Cavanaugh had done tonight. "Oh, my dear Kim,"

Anne Marland murmured as though she could no longer restrain herself. "You have your father's eyes."

"With any luck," Kimberly said coolly,

"that's all I inherited from him." Mrs.

Marland flinched and withdrew the hand she had been extending tentatively toward her granddaughter. "Kim," Cavanaugh began, softly warning, but Wesley Marland interrupted him. "No, Mr. Cavanaugh, she has a right to be bitter."

Kimberly lifted her chin. "Let's get one thing straight. I will not be patronized. I'm sure Cavanaugh has explained to you that this whole thing has been sprung on me without any advance notice. I would appreciate it if we could keep everything short and businesslike. Let's get this momentous occasion over with as

quickly as possible." Before anyone could respond the waitress appeared at the table, politely requesting drink orders. When the other three hesitated, as though their minds had been anywhere but on drinks, Kimberly smoothly gave her order. "I'll have a glass of your house wine as long as it's not from the Cavanaugh Vineyards."

"No, ma'am, it's not," the waitress said, surprised. "Cavanaugh wines are much too expensive to serve as house wines."

"I'm beginning to realize that."

The Marlands quickly ordered and Cavanaugh asked for a Scotch on the rocks.

When the young woman took her leave, Kimberly faced her grandparents. "Now suppose we get down to business so that we can all be on our way. What do you want from me?" It was Cavanaugh who responded, green eyes gleaming with faint threat. "Kim, the Marlands only wanted to meet you. There's no reason to be aggressive. Just relax." Mrs. Marland said hastily, "Your france' is right, dear. We only wanted to meet you." Kimberly's eyes widened in mocking astonishment. "My france?

Who on earth are you talking about?" Wesley Marland frowned. "Mr. Cavanaugh here has given us to understand that he intends to marry you."

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"Really? First I've heard of it."

Kimberly smiled in a brittle fashion as the cocktail waitress returned with the order. "Marriage is a matter I intend to sort out with Kim after this meeting takes place." Cavanaugh said calmly.

"Another little surprise you were going to spring on me, Cavanaugh?" Kimberly took a deep swallow of her wine. It wasn't nearly as good as a Cavanaugh vintage but it certainly tasted better to her tonight than any of the noble bottles Cavanaugh produced. "Hmm, not bad,"

she offered dryly, holding it up to the light. "It has a clean, honest taste."

"Stop it, Kim," Cavanaugh ordered gently. "You're acting like a child."

"What?" she asked sardonically. "Aren't things going the way you had planned?"

Did you expect me to throw myself into my grandparents' arms after all these years? How terribly disappointing for you." It was Wesley Marland who interceded as his wife looked on unhappily. "Kim, we understand this is difficult for you and that it's been something of a surprise. But we honestly didn't think we could get you to agree to meet with us in any other way. The

lawyers told me that you categorically refused any overtures."

"Categorically," Kimberly agreed. "We had to see you, Kim," Anne Marland whispered. "You're all we have left now. It's taken us so long to find you, dear. Years, in fact. We started looking a long time ago but all we found out was that your mother had died. It took the lawyers forever to trace you. It wasn't until your books started appearing in print that they finally got a lead. They contacted your publisher and your agent, neither of whom would give out your address until we convinced them that we really were your only surviving relations." Kimberly looked into the

aging, once-beautiful face and thought of what this woman had done to her mother. "You're twenty-eight years too late, Mrs. Marland."

"Don't you think we know that?" Wesley Marland asked bitterly. "But we can't undo the past, Kim. We can only work with the present and the future." He drew a deep breath and then announced grandly, "We want you to know that, as our only surviving descendant, you will be inheriting everything we own." Kimberly stared at them, utterly astounded. "My God," she gritted. "Do you really think I'd touch a penny of your money?" The Marlands stared back at her, obviously not prepared for the

vehemence in her words. Cavanaugh quietly sipped his drink and watched Kimberly over the rim of his glass. Wesley cleared his throat. "Forgive me, my dear. It's just that, well, we understand it takes quite a while to become, uh, financially successful as a mystery writer and we thought that ... Kim, our money can be a legacy to your children. Perhaps you should think of them before you allow pride to dictate your answers."

"What children?" she asked politely. Anne glanced uneasily at Cavanaugh.

"Surely when you and Mr. Cavanaugh are married you'll want children?"

"Not only has Cavanaugh failed to discuss marriage with me, he has certainly not brought up the subject of children." Kim flashed a brilliant smile at the man beside her. "Another little example of our failure to communicate, I suppose."

"Kim," he said roughly, "you're making this hard on everyone, including yourself. Why don't you deal with the situation like the warm, sensitive woman you really are?"

"What did everyone expect to accomplish with this dramatic encounter?" she demanded tightly. "A chance to get to know our only grandchild," Mrs. Marland said softly.

"After your father was killed and we realized there was no hope of ... of ... "

"No hope of ever having a properly bred Marland heir?" Kim offered helpfully.

"You don't understand how it was twenty-eight years ago," her grandfather said quietly. "Your father was so young. We were convinced that what he felt for your mother was only infatuation that would wear off quickly. Frankly, we

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believe that's exactly what did happen. John didn't put up all that much of a

battle in the end. He seemed, well, almost relieved when we arranged the divorce for him. I know that's not what you want to hear, but that's the truth."

"Did it ever occur to either one of you that you had no right to arrange his life for him?" Kimberly demanded. "John had certain responsibilities," Anne Marland began firmly. "Or so we convinced ourselves at the time." Kimberly nodded. "I understand completely."

"You do?" Marland looked at her in surprise. "Certainly."

Cavanaugh, here, is a perfect example of how family responsibilities can dictate a

man's entire life. I really do understand the kind of pressure my father must have been under." She met Cavanaugh's eyes and the angry aggression in her began to disintegrate. "All of you have been the victims of that inbred sense of responsibility and loyalty. When I was very young I used to feel I had been denied something important because I had been disowned by my grandparents and by my father. Now I realize that I was very, very lucky. I grew up without the kind of pressure all of you must have endured. I grew up to be independent and self-contained. And I don't need my grandparents now. I don't need anyone." What a joke that was. If only she had never met Cavanaugh.

The words might actually have been true before she'd fallen in love with Darius Cavanaugh. Anne Marland leaned forward urgently. "Kim, my dear, you are on the verge of a very good marriage. The Cavanaughs are a solid, respectable, old California family. By acknowledging your grandfather and myself you can bring something important to that family.

You can bring a solid, respectable background of your own. Kimberly set down her glass with fingers that trembled. "Is that what this is all about?" She looked at Cavanaugh. "Were you hoping to establish a proper background for me before bringing me into the

family?" Grim fury flared in the emerald ice of his eyes. "You know very well that's not why I did this." And quite suddenly Kim knew she believed him. She believed all of them. Closing her eyes briefly she summoned a small sad smile. "I know," she whispered. "I know. You were only doing what you thought was best for me." "For all of us, Kim," Wesley Marland said quietly. "Please believe me. Anne and I don't want to hurt you any more than we already have. We want to make up for what happened twenty-eight years ago. You were the one innocent victim in the whole mess."

"There was my mother," Kimberly

pointed out wearily. Anne flicked a quick glance at her husband and then looked directly at Kimberly. "Darling, your mother was very young and very desperate to hold on to John."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Wesley sighed. "Kim, your mother deliberately got pregnant when the divorce proceedings started. She admitted as much to John. She hoped that a baby would hold the marriage together. We never heard from her after that. In fact, we all assumed ... well, we assumed she'd probably had an abortion when she realized she wasn't going to receive a large settlement." Kimberly shook her head. "I'm not going to argue with you.

You may be right for all I know. Women have done less intelligent things when they're in love."

She was aware of Cavanaugh slanting a cool glance at her but she ignored it.

"There's really no point in rehashing the past, is there? No good can come of it now. What's done is done." She smiled wryly at the Marlands. "But I'm afraid you really will have to find something else to do with your money. Give it to a worthy charity. How about starting a fund for impoverished, unpublished writers?" Wesley looked directly at Cavanaugh. "Don't let her throw away her inheritance, Mr. Cavanaugh."

Cavanaugh shrugged. "I don't care what she does with the inheritance.

I only brought her here today to reestablish contact with you. I wanted her to see that her grandparents weren't monsters and that she doesn't have to be

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afraid of families that are bound by loyalty and responsibility."

"Are we such monsters?" Anne Marland asked sadly. "We did what we thought was best at the time. We were wrong." Kimberly shook her head. Her

grandmother had paid a heavy price for interfering in her son's life so many years ago. "Who am I to punish you now?

You've lost everything that really counted, haven't you? Your son and heir, a granddaughter to spoil, the hope of future generations who will acknowledge you on the family tree. No, Mrs. Marland, you're not a monster. I wish you and Mr. Marland all the best. I truly mean that.

I'm not holding a grudge against you any longer. But neither can I give you back everything you threw away twenty-eight years ago."

"You can give us great-grandchildren," Wesley Marland stated gruffly. "You wouldn't deny us our great-grandchildren, would you, Kim?" Anne asked desperately. "I don't have any to offer you," Kimberly pointed out simply.

"Yet," Cavanaugh interjected coolly. She wasn't going to argue with him now.

Kimberly was feeling emotionally drained. There wasn't enough energy left over for an argument with Cavanaugh. Besides, there was nothing left to argue about. An awkward silence descended on the table as the four people sitting around it confronted one another and themselves. Then Wesley asked cautiously,

"Would it be too much to hope you and Darius will join us for dinner, Kim?"

Too much to hope? These proud, wealthy, influential, eminently respectable people had reached the far end of their lives and found themselves reduced to begging for some time with their granddaughter. Twenty-eight years ago they could not possibly have dreamed that it would all turn out this way.

Twenty-eight years ago they had probably assumed money could buy them anything. They had learned the hard way that it had its limits. It could not buy a meal shared with a granddaughter. They

could only hope that the granddaughter would grant it to them. Cavanaugh waited for her answer along with the Marlands. He made no effort to force her into the next step of the fragile relationship. "Cavanaugh and I will have dinner with you," Kimberly said quietly. The relief and gratitude in the proud eyes of her grandparents were eloquent thanks. But it was the satisfaction in Cavanaugh's gaze that roused some of Kimberly's anger and despair. Who did he think he was to play God with her life like this? Sitting next to her, Cavanaugh felt the immense effort of will Kimberly was exercising to maintain a cool, polite facade, and his own sense of foreboding increased. He had been so certain that

the way he had chosen to handle the situation was the best, so convinced of the rightness of his instincts in the matter. Now he was not so sure.

Starke had warned him that women didn't like surprises. Cavanaugh watched Kimberly as she carefully chatted with her grandparents. She was behaving very civilly now, although there was not yet any sign of her relaxing. There was even an occasional smile. It was almost painful to see how eagerly the Marlands greeted the faint hints of Kimberly's softened mood. They couldn't be any more grateful than he was, Cavanaugh thought as he finished his drink. For a while there he thought he'd set a match to

a powder keg. Now, although the threat of immediate explosion seemed to have passed, he knew he was still dealing with a woman on a very short fuse. She wasn't used to having someone else in her life, he assured himself as they all rose to go into dinner in the hotel dining room. Kim was so damned independent, so accustomed to making her own decisions without any input from people who cared, that it was probably difficult for her to adjust to what he had done tonight. But she was an intelligent, sensitive woman and she would understand that he'd handled this the only way he could. Ultimately, Cavanaugh decided as he ate his trout mousse, Kim would relax and accept the situation.

After all, just look how much progress had already been made. Here she was communicating quite politely, if a little stiffly, with people she had once sworn to never even contact. But even as he tried to cheer himself with that thought, Cavanaugh couldn't shake his own sense of apprehension. He was both thankful and wary as the evening

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drew to a close. "I want both of you to feel free to visit us at the winery soon," Cavanaugh said as he shook Wesley Marland's hand in farewell. "Thank

you," his wife answered gratefully. "We'd like that very much." She looked uncertainly at Kim, obviously not sure how to say good-bye to her newfound granddaughter. Cavanaugh realized he was holding his breath but he needn't have worried. Kimberly hesitated and then leaned forward to quickly kiss her grandmother's pale cheek. Mrs. Marland patted her awkwardly on the shoulder and then turned away with tears in her eyes. "You've made her very happy, Kim," Wesley Marland said quietly. "We shall always be grateful for your generosity tonight."

"Don't thank me," Kimberly said. "Thank Cavanaugh. It was all his doing."

Marland shook his head. "He set things up but you're the one who made it work.

Good night, Kim." He turned away to take his wife's arm. Cavanaugh watched them walk through the lobby to a waiting taxi. Two intensely proud people.

What it must have cost them to acknowledge the mistake they had made twenty-eight years ago, he thought. "Well, Cavanaugh, you pulled it off.

Congratulations. I never even suspected that you had this little scene up your sleeve when you said we were going to spend an evening in San Francisco."

Kimberly collected her small, black

evening bag and smiled at him with the same brittle expression he'd already seen on her at various times during the confrontation. "It's over, Kim," he murmured as he took her arm. "You handled it very well."

"Golly, thanks. You can't imagine how terrific that makes me feel." Warning signals hummed along his nerve endings.

Cavanaugh kept a very tight grip on Kimberly's arm as they made their way out of the dining room. He had the oddest impression that if he didn't physically hang on to her he might lose her tonight. "You're through the hard part, honey. You've made the contact and found out that, while they may be far

from perfect, your grandparents aren't inhuman despots, either. No one is going to make you accept them completely but you needed to face them and understand them." He didn't like the innocently blank look she gave him. "Why?"

Cavanaugh felt his tension increase. This was going to be more difficult than he had anticipated. "Because I wanted you to get over your fear of a certain kind ...

of family relationship. I didn't want you holding the actions of your father's family against me for the rest of your life. I wanted you free of the past.

Can't you understand that, Kim?"

"I was free of my past. I had absolutely

no contact with it. How much freer can a woman be?" she asked with an unnatural calm. "The hell you were.

It was between us constantly. You were wary of me from the beginning because of it. You constructed your Amy Solitaire character to be as unfettered and emotionally free as you wanted to be and then you gave her the perfect mate, Josh Valerian. A man who has no other responsibilities in the world except the ones he has to Amy. Damn it, Kim, I felt I had all these ghosts from your past to deal with before I could have you. She came to a halt in the middle of the lobby, amber eyes cool and fathomless under her lashes. "You've already had me,

remember? The ghosts didn't seem to get in your way." Cavanaugh gritted his teeth. "How long are you going to punish me for the way I handled this whole thing tonight?" She turned away. "I'm not going to punish you, Cavanaugh. I don't have that kind of power." He caught her arm but when she shot him a defiant glance he released her. The last thing he wanted was a major scene here in the lobby. Kimberly was walking swiftly toward the bank of elevators. Lights from the heavy crystal chandeliers dappled the amber of her hair. Her head was high and she carried herself with a pride he had just witnessed in two other people.

Cavanaugh strode forward, catching up to her as she paused to punch the

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elevator call button. "It wasn't just your grandfather's eyes you inherited, Kim. You've got the Marland pride. Just imagine how they felt tonight." To his surprise she inclined her head, not looking at him. "I know it must have been difficult for them. Twenty-eight years ago I'll bet they couldn't have managed it. Time changes everyone, I suppose."

"Everyone, Kim," he emphasized

meaningfully as one of the bronzed elevator doors slid silently open.

"Including you." She shrugged elegantly in the sleek black dress. "Look me up in twenty-eight years and I'll let you know."

"I'm not going to wait around that long for you to forgive me,' Cavanaugh snapped, beginning to feel goaded.

"When you've had a chance to think about it you'll realize I handled this the only way I could."

"Will I?" She stepped inside the elevator and he followed quickly. Cavanaugh drew a deep breath, seeking patience. "I know you're upset, honey, but by morning you'll have calmed down.

You're too intelligent not to realize this has all been for the best."

She didn't answer him, her gaze fixed steadfastly on the closed elevator doors. Kimberly maintained her silence all the way up to the room and by the time he unlocked the door Cavanaugh knew he was more than tense.

He was getting damned scared. She wasn't coming out of it as fast as he had anticipated. When she slipped past him into the room he shut the door and leaned back against it, watching her through narrowed, brooding eyes. Kimberly went immediately over to the closet and began pulling out her small suitcase.

"What do you think you're doing?" Cavanaugh asked harshly. "What does it look like I'm doing?" He came away from the door, moving toward her with such obvious intent that she stepped back a pace. Instantly Cavanaugh halted. "Damn it, Kim, don't look at me like that."

"If you don't want me looking at you like that then I suggest you don't threaten me."

"I am not threatening you. But neither am I going to let you pack up and leave this room," he growled. "Why would you want me to stay?" she asked too calmly.

"Because you belong here." His patience was fraying to a dangerous degree,

mostly because of his growing fear that he'd done something incredibly stupid tonight.

"You belong with me, Kim. Hell, you belong to me. You love me, remember?"

"Ah, Cavanaugh," she whispered hopelessly. "I remember. But the problem is that you don't love me. You proved that tonight. I had fooled myself into believing that you did, you see. That was sheer idiocy on my part, of course.

You never gave me any reason to think that you did. When I told you that I loved you, there was no answering response from you, was there? Do you know I had decided that tonight was the night you

would tell me how much you loved me? I thought that this trip to San Francisco was planned by you to give us a chance to be alone so that you could tell me your true feelings."

"Kim, now that we've gotten through that confrontation with your grandparents we're both free to talk about the future."

"I don't see much future for myself with a man who doesn't love me.' she flung back in a tight voice. "Give me a chance, Kim. This wasn't the way I wanted everything to go, damn it!" He ran a hand restlessly through his hair. His whole body was seething with frustration and anger. Standing with his feet braced slightly apart, adrenaline pouring

through his system, he knew he was poised to reach out and grab her. He wanted to pull her down onto the bed and shut off the flow of her resentment with the kind of lovemaking that would remind her of just whose woman she was. "A man who really cared for me would never have done what you did tonight. He would never have set me up like that.

He would have understood that I had a right to handle my past in any way I saw

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fit. He would have respected the fact I'm an adult and entitled to make my own decisions. He would have empathized with my feelings about my grandparents, even if he thought I should confront them. He might, conceivably, have tried to talk me into a meeting with them but he would never have arranged one behind my back the way you did."

"Kim, I wanted it over and done, can't you understand?"

I had to know you were really free to love me. It's because I want you so much that I had to make certain what you felt was real. I didn't want any barriers between us, and I thought your wariness of families that wielded their power the

way your grandparents once did was standing in the way of our relationship."

"So you decided to wield a little power of your own, is that it? Was tonight's act of sheer, unadulterated arrogance supposed to reassure me? My God, do you realize I had actually begun to think that you could almost read my mind? That we were becoming emotionally and intellectually intimate? That you understood me?"

"Kim, I'm a man!" Cavanaugh gritted, his fists clenching in impotent fury.

"Men see some things differently than women see them. Sometimes we make mistakes dealing with women because

we can't think like them. Maybe I made a mistake tonight. But I didn't intend to set you up. I only wanted you to face your past and deal with it. That's the way I do things, Kim. I face them. I don't pretend they aren't in my life. I don't build a fantasy world for myself as a way of dealing with real life."

"A fantasy world!" she snapped. "You think I live between the pages of my books?"

"Well, haven't you done exactly that?" She stared at him as though seeing him finally for the first time. "Cavanaugh, you don't know me at all, do you?"

"Kim, wait .

." She turned her back on him and disappeared into the bathroom. A moment later she was back with her toothbrush and a handful of other items, stuffing them into her small case.

Yanking the blouse in the closet off the hanger, she dumped it in on top of the rest and closed the lid. "Just where do you think you're going tonight?"

Cavanaugh was almost afraid to touch her, fearing that once he did he would do something drastic. But he had to stop her. He knew his fingers closed much too tightly around her fragile wrist but she disdained any protest.

"I'm going to find a place to spend the night," Kimberly told him simply.

"Alone."

"You're spending the night here. With me." He grappled with that single word.

It would have been easier if she'd yelled something along the lines of "not if you were the last man on earth." He could have dealt with that kind of outrage. But Cavanaugh freely admitted to himself that he wasn't at all sure how to handle Kim in her present mood. He released her wrist as he realized that his hand was beginning to shake with the force of his barely restrained emotions.

As soon as he freed her she turned and started toward the door. "That's far enough, Kim. You're not leaving this

hotel. For both our sakes, don't push me." He heard the lethal threat in his own voice and knew she understood it, because at the door she stopped and turned around to face him. Her head was still held with dignity but he could see the uncertainty in her eyes. Nice going, Cavanaugh. Now you've managed to frighten her. You've really handling

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this whole thing with finesse. "If you're going to threaten me, Cavanaugh, be up front about it. What exactly are you going to do if I exercise my right to

leave this room?"

He closed his eyes in exasperation and then glared at her through narrowed lids. Back off, Cavanaugh, or you're going to blow this completely. Give her time. She needs a little time. He forced himself to speak calmly. "If you're absolutely determined to run instead of staying with me tonight, I'll call the front desk and get you another room in this hotel." Without waiting for her response he picked up the phone on the nearby end table. Kimberly watched him in utter silence.

In fact, Cavanaugh reflected a few minutes later as he escorted her down the hall to another room on the same floor, he got the distinct impression she

didn't quite know what to make of his actions. Obviously getting her a room of her own without further protest was not what she had expected him to do. As he opened the door of her new room, he looked down at her. "This isn't how I wanted it to be between us tonight, Kim. You know that, don't you?"

"It isn't how I wanted it to be, either, Cavanaugh. As you've already taken pains to point out, I live in something of a fantasy world. But the fantasy I was living in was taking place in real life, not in one of my books."

"Damn you," he gritted and reached for her. He pulled her into his arms,

deliberately giving her no opportunity to resist. Frustrated hunger and a large dose of his seething fury combined in the kiss. His mouth closed over hers with a possessiveness he made no attempt to hide. She might choose to sleep alone tonight but she would go to bed with the taste of him on her lips.

Kimberly didn't fight him but that was probably because he didn't allow her to do so. Cavanaugh wasn't interested in a response tonight.

He only wanted to imprint himself on her in a way that would last until morning. He wanted her to lie awake thinking of him all night, he realized.

The same way he was going to lie awake thinking of her. When he finally released her she stumbled back a step, her fingers lifting to touch her sensually bruised mouth. It seemed to Cavanaugh that he had never seen her golden eyes so wide or so unreadable. For a long moment they looked at each other and then Cavanaugh shook off the spell. "Good night, witch. Go to sleep.

If you can." Two hours later the uneasiness became so intense that Cavanaugh knew he had to act. He hadn't slept at all but this restless feeling wasn't from lack of sleep. Something was very, very wrong. Unable to stand it any longer he climbed out of bed, pulled

on his slacks and his shoes and went out into the hall. He was too late. Kimberly had left the hotel.

CHAPTER NINE.

She had been a fool, Kimberly told herself. A fool to think that she had achieved some kind of rare, magical intimacy with Darius Cavanaugh. A fool to let him trick her into that confrontation in San Francisco. A fool to let herself believe that Cavanaugh was somehow different from other men in his position. Most of all, she decided ruefully as she gripped the wheel of the rental car, she was a fool for making the long drive up the coast at one o'clock in the morning. But when you were running from your

own foolishness, home was where you instinctively wanted to hide. And if home lay a hundred and fifty miles away, you just kept going until you got there. In spite of the lousy weather. Kimberly struggled with the tension of fighting the steady rain as well as her own inner anxiety. Refusing to spend the night with Cavanaugh hadn't been enough for her high-strung nerves. She'd needed to be alone, really alone. Kimberly didn't have any misconceptions about what would have happened if she'd stayed in the hotel. Cavanaugh would have been at her door when she opened it in the morning, waiting to see if she had gotten over her

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snit. And he would have continued to haunt her, arguing his case, condemning her own behavior until she finally admitted that he had been right. It infuriated her to think that she had been so blissfully unsuspecting about that trip to San Francisco. She should have paid more attention to her instincts. After all, there had been plenty of evidence that the trip wasn't starting out as a romantic jaunt for two! But she had chosen to ignore Cavanaugh's increasing silence and tension. When you were in love, Kimberly reflected sadly, you saw things the way you wanted to see them, not as

they really were. Cavanaugh had been right about one thing. He was a man and he didn't think like a woman. More importantly, he didn't think the way she, Kimberly Sawyer, did. That was the bottom line. He didn't think the way she did. He might at times be able to almost read her mind, to know what she was thinking, but that didn't mean he shared the same emotions or analyzed those thoughts the same way she did. He wasn't Josh Valerian. How many times had he told her that, Kimberly asked herself wryly. She supposed it had been his way of trying to warn her that the warm, shared intimacy that she imagined was beginning to take shape between them had its limitations. The truth was

she had never confused him for a moment with her fictional male character. It would have been impossible to mistake Cavanaugh for anyone but himself. He was too real, too dynamic, too solid and far too virile to be a stand-in for Josh Valerian or anyone else. Everything about him was unique, Kimberly realized as she slowed the car to compensate for the increasing rain. The taste of his mouth, the earthy scent of his body, the feel of him as he crushed her deeply into the bedclothes. She would never forget the physical side of him. But what she would miss the most were the more intangible aspects of their short-lived affair. Damn it, she thought, there had been moments of

shared understanding.

She hadn't imagined them all. The night he had held her in his arms and told her he knew what it was like to be wired with tension after a frightening confrontation with violence, for instance. He had comforted and soothed her and she knew he understood exactly what she was going through. There had been other times, too, Kimberly remembered. He understood her need to be alone in a busy household. He had been quietly, deeply appreciative of the way she had interceded to establish some rules for his working hours. How could a man who seemed so in tune with her in so many instances do to her what

Cavanaugh had done tonight? The answer was simple enough, Kimberly thought grimly. He'd given it to her himself.

He was a man. More than that, he was Cavanaugh. The basic masculine arrogance in him was an intrinsic part of his nature as was his sense of responsibility.

It was instinctive of him to take charge of a situation and do what he thought had to be done. That part of him would never change. Accepting Cavanaugh as her lover meant accepting the total man.

Tonight had been one of the most difficult in her life. It had been traumatic

facing the grandparents she had sworn never to meet. But on the whole, the confrontation had not gone the way she would have expected. It was impossible to hate the Marlands. Kimberly wasn't sure, yet, exactly what she felt toward the elderly couple who had been forced to beg her to acknowledge them. They seemed like strangers to her--people whom she had heard about from her mother and from the lawyers who had written to her explaining the history of the situation.

But they were people whom she'd never actually met and on some levels they had remained unreal until now. Tonight she had learned that they were two very

human people who were trying to salvage something they had once foolishly thrown aside. It was impossible to hate them. Kimberly bit her lip as she reflected on her own pride. Cavanaugh had been right about that aspect of her personality. Just as he'd been right about the fact that she had nothing to fear in meeting her grandparents.

Cavanaugh was no doubt right about a lot of things. But that didn't mean he was the right man for her to love, she told herself. Unfortunately, telling herself that and learning to unlove him were two entirely different matters.

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In spite of the turmoil of her emotions tonight, she knew that she loved the man. The anger and resentment that had driven her from the hotel in search of solitude had faded into a dull, sad ache by the time Kimberly pulled into the drive of her darkened beach house.

The storm was really raging at this point on the coast, and she was exhausted from fighting it for the past hundred and fifty miles.

Lightning crackled as she stood on the porch, fumbling in her purse for the key.

She had changed into a pair of jeans and the full-sleeved white blouse she had intended to wear on the drive back to the Napa Valley, but she hadn't brought along an umbrella. The rain had almost drenched her just during the short dash from the car. Her fingers trembled slightly as she finally located the correct key and thrust it into the lock. It seemed that every nerve in her body was being delicately probed with a razor. It was no wonder that she was suddenly so shaky. It was nearly four o'clock in the morning. She had been through a great deal tonight and the drive through the worsening storm had not helped. What she needed was a glass of wine and bed. Taking a grip on herself, she turned the key in the

lock and pushed open the door. And saw at once that the last things she was fated to get tonight were a glass of wine and the privacy of her own bed. Panic smashed through her, scattering her senses for a timeless instant. It was the candle burning in the middle of the pentagram that caught her eye first.

The ancient, magical symbol had been drawn on her living room floor and the candle glowed evilly in a low, squat metal holder that sat at the center of the design. The candlelight was the only light in the room but it was enough to illuminate the hooded figure who sat cross-legged on the far side of the pentagram. "Come in, Kimberly Sawyer.

You are expected." Kimberly flinched at the familiar voice but before she could react two other figures stepped out of the darkness and into the faint light of the candle. They were both hooded and robed but one had his hand extended and in it was a gun. "Close the door," a man's voice commanded from the depths of the flowing cowl. Kimberly desperately tried to weigh her chances. He could kill her easily before she could dash back through the door, she realized. She might have been able to outrun a knife but no one could outrun a bullet. Slowly, she closed the door behind her. She felt a distant kind of surprise that her chilled muscles responded to the silent effort. The door seemed very heavy.

"The power is strong tonight, my lady," murmured the second standing figure.

"It has brought her here, right into our grasp." There was awed wonder in the tones and also a touch of familiarity. Kimberly knew she had heard that voice sometime in the past, too. "The power," intoned the woman who remained seated in front of the pentagram, "grows stronger every day. Have I not told you that?" She lifted her head so that her features were illuminated beneath the shadowy hood. "Good evening, Kimberly." Kimberly stared back at her, calling on a kind of pride that only tonight she had learned was inherited from her grandparents. That pride was

all she had to get her through this terrifying encounter.

With an effort of will she forced a measure of cool mockery into her response.

"Hello, Ariel. Graduated from tea leaves to the big time, I see." The sardonic comment startled her because it didn't reflect the panic that seemed to have invaded every corner of her mind. She discovered that managing the cool remark gave her a measure of courage, however. Kimberly seized on that spark of strength. Ariel Llewellyn smiled back at her, but the cheerful, scatterbrained expression of the woman who had been virtually a member of the Cavanaugh

household for almost a year was gone. A hint of madness gleamed in her eyes and there was an unnaturally serene smile on Ariel's mouth, as if she could see into the future and found it satisfying. "You have been incredibly foolish, Kim. And now you will pay." Kimberly concealed the tremor of fear that went through her. Ariel meant it. "Well, I know a one-hundred-fifty-mile drive through a storm probably isn't the brightest thing someone can do at three in the morning, but what can I say? I was bored." Ariel shook her head

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once as if unable to believe such stupidity. ' Foolish woman. You had no option but to make that drive tonight. You were summoned. That was not a matter of choice for you. No, you made your mistake two months ago when you chose to interfere in matters that did not pertain to you."

"The little matter of the kidnapping?" Kimberly swallowed the sickening taste of fear and swung her gaze to the standing woman. "You're the one who was holding Scott in that beach house, aren't you? The one I took him away from so easily that night." She turned her attention back to Ariel. "It seems to me you've got some problems in the

personnel section of your organization, Ariel.

I know good help is hard to get but you've really picked some blunderers. This idiot didn't even hear me the night I came by to fetch Scott. And then there was that turkey with the knife who kept tripping over his Halloween costume.

This guy with the gun probably forgot the ammunition." There was an ominous growl from the armed man and the nose of the gun lifted menacingly. "I assure you it is loaded," Ariel said calmly. "But I do hope you won't force him to use it. We have much more interesting plans for you, Kim."

"Wonderful. Are we going to sit around and read cards?" "I told you the day of the card reading that you should take the omens seriously. Of course, I knew you wouldn't. But you learned a lesson that night, didn't you, Kim?"

"Why did you do things the hard way the other night, Ariel? Why make your hit man use an antique silver dagger, which, I have on the best authority, isn't a particularly efficient weapon? Stylish, yes.

Efficient, no." Ariel's mouth hardened and in the glow of the candle flame her eyes seemed to glitter. "It was important that you die properly. It has been a hundred years since the Dagger has been

blooded. You were chosen as its victim."

"Because I interfered in the kidnapping." Kimberly nodded, as though it all made perfect sense.

"Why did you take Scott two months ago? Was he the original choice for the sacrifice?"

"Oh, no. Kidnapping Scott was purely a financial move," Ariel assured her. "We needed the money. It was decided that Cavanaugh should be the source."

"You mean this magical power of yours can't conjure up something as simple as a credit card?" That seemed to crack

Ariel's unnatural serenity. "It was the power that decided the money should come from the Cavenaugh's."

"But you never got it, did you?"

"We will in time," Ariel declared, calming again. "All will happen as the power said it would happen. In time."

Kimberly glanced at the shadowed faces of the other two people in the room.

"Are you guys as crazy as she is? Do you actually believe in all this inane nonsense? Sooner or later, you know, the whole mess is going to cave in on you and you're going to get caught. That turkey who tried to kill me the other night is probably singing his heart out to the cops now!"

"That punk knows nothing," the figure with the gun assured her. "No names, no faces. It was all arranged very carefully. He knew only that he had to do it in the prescribed manner, using the Dagger, because he would not be paid otherwise."

"You're out of your mind if you think he won't be able to provide the authorities with some clues. The knife alone is a very big one."

"No one but the Select know the meaning and purpose of the Dagger," Ariel put

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in evenly. "There are only a few of us in each generation. The secrets are always guarded most carefully. The authorities will learn nothing from the Dagger."

"Where did you get it, Ariel?" Kimberly couldn't think of anything else to do except keep the conversation going. Ariel seemed willing enough to chat about her "power" and the other two seemed totally under her control. But before Ariel could answer, the phone rang. Kimberly wasn't the only one who flinched at the unexpected, shrill command of the instrument. The guy with the gun must have jumped an inch, she

decided. And the young woman looked momentarily panicked. Without even having to think about it, Kimberly knew who was on the other end of the line. "That will be Cavanaugh," she said quite clearly.

"He'll be checking to see that I got home safely."

"No!" The sharp denial was from Ariel. 'course it is."

Kimberly assured her. "Who else would be calling at four in the morning? Why don't you get out your fortune-telling cards and see if I'm right?" The phone rang again, harshly demanding. "The only problem," Kimberly continued, "is

that by the time you've dealt the cards to determine who's calling, Cavanaugh will have given up and decided something must be wrong. Knowing him, I expect his next move will be to call the Highway Patrol. With his name and clout he'll probably get them to come check on me." The phone rang again and the man with the gun was definitely nervous now. He looked at Ariel for guidance.

"We'd better let her answer it, my lady." Ariel lifted an admonishing hand. "I will decide, Emlyn." Her once-cheerful eyes were full of threat as she nodded brusquely at Kimberly. "Answer it. And be very, very careful what you say, Kim, or I will have Emlyn kill you where you

stand. Tell Cavanaugh you're fine. Then get rid of him."

Aware of the other three watching her with violent intensity, Kimberly moved to answer the phone. She was so certain it would be Cavanaugh that she wasn't at all surprised at the sound of his voice. What did surprise her was the urgent concern in his words. "Kim? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Cavanaugh. It was a long drive, but I'm home. I told you there wouldn't be any problem, didn't I?"

"You didn't have the courtesy to tell me a thing," he exploded softly. "You just did a midnight flit without bothering to

mention the little fact that you were leaving town."

"You know how writers are, darling. They get the oddest compulsions at the oddest hours. I just had to come back here to finish what I started." Across the room Ariel glowered at her, motioning her to get off the phone. "You don't work like that. You work regular hours."

"What the hell are we discussing your writing for, anyway? You know that's not what's wrong between us. Kim, listen to me. We've got to talk about what happened tonight." Kimberly steadied herself, deliberately dropping her voice to what she hoped would sound like a sensuous purr to the three

people watching her so malevolently.
"You know I'll look forward to that. I
always enjoy our pillow talk.

Remember the last chat we had in bed?"

"Kimberly, you're not making a whole
lot of sense. But, yes, I do remember the
conversation," Cavanaugh said roughly.
"You told me you loved me. Are you
trying to tell me that you've realized you
still do?"

"Actually, I was referring to the other
topic we discussed," she murmured
lovingly. Emlyn raised the snout of the
gun in a gesture of warning. "I remember
how you assured me that you understood.
Your understanding would mean a great

deal to me right now, Cavanaugh." There was a taut silence on the

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other end of the phone. Kimberly could almost feel Cavanaugh sorting through her words. When he spoke again there was a new edge in his voice, one she had never heard before. "You were scared that night."

"Yes, darling," she whispered lightly. "And tonight?"

"Oh, I still feel the same way, Cavanaugh. Even more so." He swore

with soft violence. "How much time have I got?". Kimberly swallowed. "I don't know how I'll make it through the rest of the night without you," she said, some of the purring quality draining from her voice. "How many of them?" The question was as hard and cold as a knife blade. Kimberly swallowed.

"I've got three chapters to get done for that deadline. A lot of work so I really must get to bed. It's been a very long, tiring drive. Take care, darling. I'll look forward to seeing you when I've finished Vendetta." She hung up the phone before an obviously nervous Emlyn could get any more restless. The younger woman looked relieved and glanced at Ariel for

direction. Ariel nodded. "Tie her up, Zorah, and put her in the bedroom for now. We have preparations to make." She flung a coldly amused look at Kimberly. "It's a good thing you had the sense to keep Darius out of this.

Loving him as much as you do, I'm sure you wouldn't want him hurt. Take her away, Zorah. Emlyn, give her a hand and then come back here. There is much to be done before tonight." Loving him as much as you do. The words played about in Kimberly's brain as she submitted to having her wrists bound behind her back and her ankles tied. Emlyn supervised the process, his gun never wavering. Loving him as much as you do. The old

witch was right, Kimberly realized as Zorah and Emlyn left the room. Maybe Ariel really did have some power. Kimberly tested her bonds carefully. Her captors had left her trussed up in the middle of her bed. Loving him as much as you do. There was no point in denying it, Kimberly told herself bleakly as she lay staring at the far wall. Self-honesty seemed appropriate when you found yourself in such dangerous circumstances. She loved Cavanaugh. Perhaps when she had run from the hotel tonight she had only been running from the truth. She knew she had made him understand that something was wrong but what would he do next, Kimberly wondered. He was probably still back in

San Francisco. The only thing he could do was call the local authorities and ask them to check out the situation.

Her fate was in his hands, Kimberly reflected. On the whole, she couldn't imagine trusting anyone other than Cavanaugh with her life.

Several miles down the road Cavanaugh hung up the pay phone in the all-night convenience store and went outside to the waiting Jaguar. So the compelling sense of urgency, which had been governing his actions since the moment he knew he had to go to Kim's room, had been based on something more than the uneasiness left by a lovers' quarrel. He had left the hotel a little more than an

hour behind her, but he'd made better time than she had. He was only a half hour from her home.

Cavanaugh yanked open the car door, his mind spinning as he considered the possibilities that lay ahead. Kim had implied there were three people in the house with her. There wasn't much time, but then, there never was in situations like this. He would go into this as prepared as possible. Before starting the engine he leaned down and removed a couple of items from underneath the front seat. The knife he slipped inside his low boot, strapping it to his ankle. He shoved the small, flat, metal box inside the waistband of his jeans so that it lay snug

against his spine. Then he turned the key in the ignition and pulled out onto the rain-slicked road. Given the driving conditions, it should have been a thirty minute trip to Kimberly's beach house. Cavanaugh decided that with a little effort he could make it in twenty.

That was a good deal less time than it would take to try and rouse the local authorities into efficient action. * * * Kimberly was inching her way across

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the bed, trying to get close to the glass-based bedside lamp when the door to

her room opened. The woman called Zorah stood in the doorway. She was holding a small brazier in her hands. "I didn't phone for room service," Kimberly managed. She was very scared now. "You are foolish to mock what you do not understand," Zorah informed her softly.

She set the brazier down on the floor and knelt in front of it. "But soon you will pay the price. Your life will be forfeited to the Darkness, Kimberly Sawyer." Kimberly watched uneasily as the woman applied a match to the small pile of coals in the bottom of the pan.

"Look, Zorah, don't you think this has

gone far enough? Why don't you get out of it before you're trapped? You know it's only a matter of time before Ariel is discovered. She's not clever enough to cover her tracks or yours for much longer. And after I disappear you can bet Cavanaugh won't stop until he's uncovered the truth."

"Darius Cavanaugh cannot deal with my lady's power," Zorah said serenely.

"What power?"

Everything Ariel's arranged so far has been screwed up. The kidnapping went wrong. The attempt to kill me fizzled. What makes you think she'll pull off her next trick successfully?" Zorah glared at

her, some of the assured serenity faltering. "She brought you here tonight with her power, didn't she?"

"Not exactly. I think we can write tonight off as one very large coincidence.

A coincidence she was shrewd enough to capitalize on. Did she really tell you that she would make me appear this evening?" "She said we had to come here to your house in order to discover the best method of dealing with you. The emanations of your essence are strongest here where you live, and the power can be wielded most effectively in such an environment."

"But did she actually promise to produce

me?" Kimberly prodded. "Or did she just say you'd do a bit of hocus pocus and decide on your next course of action?" Zorah sprinkled powder from a small leather packet onto the glowing coals and got to her feet. "You are wasting your time trying to put doubts in my head. I believe in my lady's power. Someday she has promised it will be mine!" Zorah turned and walked out of the room, closing the door firmly behind her. Kimberly lay eyeing the heated coals in the brazier.

A strange scent was beginning to permeate the room. Kimberly inhaled cautiously, wondering what was happening. The fragrance was curiously

tantalizing. An herbal smell that was both acrid and sweet. Perhaps it was some sort of ritual, she decided. Turning back on her side she continued her interrupted worm crawl across the bed. Kimberly had reached the far edge of the quilted surface and was studying the lamp, looking for a way to break the glass base without making too much noise when she began to question her actions. She inhaled deeply, absently enjoying the strange fragrance from the brazier and wondered if this project was worth all the effort she was exerting. It would be so much easier to close her eyes and rest for a few minutes. Perhaps after she'd had a small nap she would be able to think more clearly about the task

of breaking the glass lamp base. In fact, Kimberly thought critically, why should she even want to break such a lovely piece of glass? It had something to do with a vague notion of using the sharp edges to cut her bonds but that seemed highly unrealistic now. The herbal scent was filling the room, drifting into the corners, hanging lightly over the bed.

Kimberly took another, deeper breath and realized she hadn't felt so relaxed in ages. It had been a hard night, she decided. She needed to unwind. There had been that confrontation with her grandparents, the quarrel with Cavanaugh and then the long drive through the storm. The storm. Outside

her bedroom

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window thunder rolled and lightning crackled over the ocean. The momentary brilliance jarred her. There was something she was supposed to be doing, some task that demanded attention. Glass. It had to do with glass. Once before she had used broken glass, Kimberly remembered dazedly. She had been defending herself. There had been a silver dagger and a man in robes.

Glass. She needed a piece of broken glass. Ridiculous. Who had any use for

broken glass? Gazing over the edge of the bed, Kimberly stared at the coals in the brazier. Such beautiful coals. And they gave off such a lovely fragrance.

Too bad Cavanaugh wasn't here so that he could enjoy the aroma with her. But Cavanaugh was safely in San Francisco. Or was he safe? Her mind drifted around that thought. It wasn't like Cavanaugh to keep himself safe while she was in danger. He was a man who understood responsibility. And he had definite responsibilities toward her. He was her lover, Kimberly told herself, and he felt it was his job to protect her. So how could he be sitting safely in a hotel room right now? No, he must be coming after

her. It was the only logical conclusion. Danger. Where was the danger? It was so difficult to keep her mind focused on it. Yet when a person was in peril surely her attention should be riveted on it? Somehow it all seemed like such an effort. Ever since she had begun enjoying the scent of the brazier smoke she had been having a hard time remembering that crazy Ariel Llewellyn was out there in the living room going through who-knew-what nutty rituals. It was even harder to remember that she, Kimberly, was going to play a starring role in the upcoming drama. Ariel.

Ariel and smoke. Ariel knew a lot about herbs. There were those herbal tea

concoctions she was always fixing for people. Certain herbs released their power when heated. Kimberly frowned, remembering the packet of powder Zorah had sprinkled on the brazier. Lightning sparked angrily outside the window, as though demanding Kimberly's attention. For a moment she obeyed, turning her head to gaze out into the darkness. Soon it would be dawn but the storm was raging so wildly it would be a long time before the sky grew light. Herbs sprinkled on the brazier coals.

Cavanaugh making his way through the storm to get to her. Witches and daggers.

A ripple of fear pulsed under Kimberly's unnatural relaxation.

That smoke was doing this to her, she thought, twisting on the bed.

Smoke was dangerous. Desperately she sought for a new focus of attention.

Images of Cavanaugh flashed into her head. Cavanaugh making love to her, holding her, telling her he understood. Cavanaugh forcing her to meet her grandparents. Cavanaugh on the phone tonight, comprehending immediately that she was in real trouble. Cavanaugh, who could almost read her mind at times and who, at other times, infuriated her with his male arrogance. Cavanaugh whom she loved. He was the reason she had to keep trying to break that glass lamp

base, Kimberly realized with sudden clarity. Cavanaugh would expect her to at least try. But that damned smoke was so overpowering. Desperately Kimberly twisted, knocking her shoulder against the end table. The crash of the lamp as it fell to the floor coincided with the opening of her bedroom door. The destruction of the bulb left only the glow of the brazier coals for light. In the sudden darkness Kimberly heard people moving around. "What the hell have you done to her?" It was Cavanaugh's voice, Kimberly realized dreamily. "Ah, Cavanaugh. I knew you'd get here.

What took you so long?" The light from the hall shafted through the haze in the

room, providing just enough illumination for Kimberly to see that Cavanaugh was not alone. Emlyn was behind him. "Oh, dear. They got you, too,"

she whispered sadly. "I'm so sorry, Cavanaugh. I think I made a mistake tonight."

"You've drugged her with this god damned smoke," Cavanaugh said somewhere in the haze. "She'll live until tonight. Just thought we'd give her a little something to keep her quiet. She's the kind who would have made trouble."

Wonder why she pushed that lamp over?

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Oh, well, if she wants to lie here in the darkness, that's her problem.

Get on the bed. Zorah, tie his ankles.
And be careful."

"Do you think it's safe to leave both of them here together?" Zorah asked.

"The smoke will keep them under control. Besides, where else can we put him?

Ariel won't want him watching her preparation rituals." Kimberly felt the bed give beside her as Cavanaugh

obediently allowed Zorah to finish binding him. A moment later the two had left the room, leaving Kimberly and her companion in smoky darkness. "Kim, are you all right?"

"The smoke," she tried to explain sleepily. "Yeah, I know." He was moving, sitting up beside her and shifting around. "Wake up, honey. This will go a lot faster if you help. That smoke will get to me soon."

"Help?"

How?"

"There's a knife inside my boot. Turn around so you can reach down and pull

it out." Kimberly struggled to concentrate as he urged her onto her side. She felt his leg and then the leather of one boot.

Behind her back her fingers fumbled awkwardly. "Why did you let them get you?"

she whispered unhappily. "I didn't want them to get you, Cavanaugh."

"I had to let them take me. I had no way of knowing where you were or what they might have already done to you. So I just walked up to the front door and pretended total ignorance."

"Quite a surprise seeing Ariel, wasn't

it?" For some reason that seemed inordinately funny. Kimberly giggled and her fingers slid off the boot.

Cavanaugh swore. "When I think of harboring her under my roof for the past twelve months.. Kim, stop it," he ordered harshly. "I'm sorry," she mumbled guiltily. "Didn't mean to laugh. Just seemed funny."

"Get the knife!"

The command in his voice cut through her foggy senses. Another moment of clarity returned and Kimberly managed to get her fingers inside his boot. She felt the handle of the knife and tugged. "That's it, honey," he said approvingly.

Then he coughed. "Now hold it as firmly as you can. And be careful, it's very, very sharp."

"I'm not a little kid. I know about sharp knives," she informed him loftily.

But obediently Kimberly held the knife firmly. She was vaguely aware of him turning around so that he could rub his bonds against the sharp blade but her mind was on another matter. "About the mistake I made this evening, Cavanaugh."

"We both made a few. We'll talk about it later," he gritted. "Damn it, Kim, hold the knife still!"

"You're always telling me what to do," she said with a sigh, but instinctively she responded to his orders and tightened her grip on the knife handle.

"You'll get used to it." A moment later something gave and Cavanaugh moved away from her.

She heard him cough again and through the shadows saw him rip the pillowcase off one pillow. Holding the material over his mouth, he quickly freed his ankles. Seconds later he was kneeling on the bed, opening the window behind it. The cold, wet air rushed into the room and into Kimberly's brain, clearing it a little. The strange sense of amusement she had been feeling faded rapidly as the

effects of the smoke subsided. Panic returned. Then Cavanaugh was working on her bonds, slicing through them with efficient ease. "Now what?"

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she whispered, gulping in the fresh air. Her brain still felt very foggy. "Now we get out of here." But even as Cavanaugh pushed her toward the window, the hall door opened. light poured into the room. "They're getting away!"

Zorah screamed.

CHAPTER TEN.

"Let's go, Kim." Cavanaugh ordered.
"She's not armed."

Hurry!" Kimberly tried frantically to obey him, scrabbling over the windowsill. But the smoke seemed to have played tricks not only with her brain but with her body. She felt oddly lethargic still, and her muscles refused to coordinate with her mind. "My lady!" Zorah screamed, "They're escaping!"

"Come on, Kim, move." Cavanaugh reached for Kimberly's arm, trying to push her through the open window, but she was unable to cooperate in her own escape.

Every movement seemed to require

incredible effort. "Cavanaugh, I can't ...!"

"Goddamn it, Kim!"

Cavanaugh grabbed her, trying to forcibly stuff her through the window.

He was interrupted by another voice from the doorway. "You shall not escape the power this time!" Ariel's shrill screech of fury was backed up a second later by Emlyn's uneasy command. "Stop where you are, Cavanaugh, or I'll shoot the woman."

"Which woman?" Cavanaugh asked, sounding vastly annoyed. "Right now all three of them are giving me a headache."

But he reluctantly stopped trying to push Kimberly through the window and stepped down off the bed to face Emlyn's gun.

The smoke from the brazier continued to waft through the room. It was diluted now by the effects of the open window and door but it had not completely dissipated. Kimberly remained on the bed, her legs feeling shaky as she stared at the three people in the doorway.

"Aren't these about the poorest excuses for witches you've ever seen, Cavanaugh?" she muttered.

"Yeah," Cavanaugh agreed, his eyes narrowed on Emlyn's gun. "Pretty poor. Kim, stay right where you are."

"You have mocked the power one too many times," Ariel shrieked at Kim. She lifted her hands high above her head. The full sleeves of her robe fell back revealing a variety of odd bracelets on her wrists. "Uh, my lady," Emlyn began with what Cavanaugh thought was superb diplomacy under the circumstances.

"Perhaps we should wait until later?"

"Let her teach the bitch a lesson," Zorah interrupted fiercely. "Call up the power, my lady! Let the darkness rain on her. Let her see what it is she mocks!" Oh hell, thought Cavanaugh. Looking straight at Emlyn he said coolly,

"This whole scene is getting a little out of hand, isn't it? Maybe it's time for you to split. I think you can write off any money you might have been hoping to see." Emlyn glowered first at Cavanaugh and then at Ariel who was still standing with her hands raised above her head. The older woman had shut her eyes, her face twisted intensely. She was beginning to chant "Let the power that dwells in the depths of darkness come forth to anger the challenge of this foolish creature of light," Ariel intoned while Zorah watched in anticipation. "Let that which lives on the fringes of the universe and in the center of the Earth rise to smash the impudent being."

"Cavanaugh ... " Kim began uneasily and then closed her mouth. This was

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nothing but a crazy woman's act. It was probably just the remnants of the smoke lingering in her head that made Ariel seem so menacing. Cavanaugh ignored the new fear he heard in Kim's voice. Right now the only one who held any real power was the guy with the gun, and Emlyn was looking distinctly unhappy. That didn't make him any less dangerous. "My lady," the male witch tried again, "I think it would be better if we saved this

bit for another time."

"Shut up!"

Zorah hissed. Ariel's voice was rising in intensity now, filling the room as she chanted. "All that answers to me; all that I have chained and bound according to the ancient laws, hear me now!" Ariel called.

"Hear her," Zorah echoed fervently, her eyes glittering with excitement.

"As her handmaiden I, too, call on that which is raw power!" Kimberly shuddered and didn't know if the shiver was caused by the cold night air pouring into the room or Ariel's chanting. But she

obeyed Cavanaugh and stayed very still on the bed. Emlyn moved uneasily.

"Zorah, stop her, we've got to get these two under control. She can use her witchcraft later!" Zorah turned on him violently, her eyes wild. "Hush! You are only a man. You will never understand the depths of the power you serve. Leave my lady alone!" Ariel droned on, oblivious to the conversation. "Out of the bottom of the pit of darkness, gathering the forces of the ancient magic as it rises, lifting up into the surface world, flooding in from the farthest reaches of emptiness ...

" Cavanaugh slanted a glance at Kimberly who was still sitting on the

bed. At least she was staying put although she appeared half-mesmerized by Ariel's chant. When he made his move he didn't want her getting in the way. "The time has come," Ariel shrieked. "Fill this space, oh spirits of the great void, fill it with fire and darkness and destruction ... "

"Zorah," Emlyn snapped, "this has gone far enough. She's nuttier than a fruitcake. Stop her!"

"You, too, shall suffer for mockery and disobedience!" Zorah promised him.

"Only my lady and I will be left alive in this room!"

"Now!" Ariel yelled. "Let it be now!"

"Now!"

Zorah screamed, lifting her own arms high above her head. Emlyn lost patience and reached out to grab one of Ariel's raised arms. "Stop it, you dumb broad!"

"Don't touch her, you fool!" Zorah shouted. "The power is flowing now!" It might as well flow now, Cavanaugh decided, agreeing silently with the woman.

Emlyn's full attention was on Ariel and Zorah. There wasn't going to be a better opportunity. With a quick movement Cavanaugh reached behind his back and

withdrew the flat metal case that he had concealed there. "The moment of power is here!" Ariel cried out. "Let it be now!" Zorah yelled, trying to fend off Emlyn.

"You've got it, ladies," Cavanaugh muttered and hurled the flat case at the feet of the trio in the doorway. An instant later brilliant, blinding light flashed through the room. Screams from everyone except Cavanaugh echoed from one end of the house to the other as each sought to cover his or her eyes.

Cavanaugh had already prudently covered his own eyes with his hand. He counted to five and then opened them. The fiery white light produced by the

exploding chemical compound in the case was still blinding but the initial brilliance had faded. Cavanaugh was careful to keep from looking directly at the case as he leaped across the room. Seconds later he reached Emlyn who was shouting idiotically. The gun lay on the floor where it had been dropped during the first shock of the explosion. Zorah was screaming. "My eyes! My eyes!" Emlyn yelled. "I can't see." Ariel seemed stunned. She fell back, reeling, holding

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her hands protectively out in front of her.

Temporarily blinded, she stared sightlessly at what she must have been convinced she had just unleashed. Kimberly was still on the bed, her palms over her eyes. "Cavanaugh!"

"Right here, Kim. It's okay. You'll be able to see in a couple of minutes."

"Oh, my God, Cavanaugh, what happened?" She lowered her hands to her sides, her head turned in the direction of his voice. Cavanaugh looked at his brave, temporarily blinded witch. "Everything's under control, honey. I've got the gun."

She blinked rapidly a few times. "I can't see!"

"It's just the light.

You'll be all right soon," he soothed as he grabbed Emlyn and began tying the man's hands behind his back with the rope belt that Emlyn had worn. Soon the still-stunned Ariel was secured. He was working on Zorah when Kimberly got shakily up off the bed. She was still blinking rapidly. "That's a hell of an act, Cavanaugh. You should take it on the road," she murmured, still sounding shocked. "You never told me you were into witchcraft, yourself." He smiled grimly as he finished tying Zorah's wrists. "You learn a lot in the import-

export business."

"So I see. I think I've asked this before, but what exactly did you import?"

"I'll tell you later. How are your eyes?" She shook her head as if to clear it. But when she looked at him Kimberly was focusing almost normally. "Okay, I think. Geez, Cavanaugh, what was that stuff?"

"A chemical powder that reacts with oxygen. When the case is broken the chemical explodes in a bright flash."

"Like a small bomb," she said in awe. "I could use that in a book."

"Be my guest. How are you feeling?"

"Odd."

"Yeah, you look a little odd. Get some water from the bathroom and put out the coals in that brazier." Kimberly looked at the still-glowing brazier and then nodded obediently. She walked into the bath and returned a moment later with a drinking glass full of water.

Very carefully she poured the contents over the coals. There was a hissing sound and a small cloud of steam. "Now go call the cops," Cavanaugh ordered distinctly. Kimberly started out of the room and then stopped a moment in front of Ariel. The older woman's eyes were wet with tears. "She's crying, Cavanaugh." "Yes, so she is."

Cavanaugh said gently. "Go make the phone call, Kim." "It's all so sad," Kimberly said several hours later as she reached into her cupboard and pulled out a bottle of Cavanaugh Riesling. "Aunt Milly is going to be crushed when she hears how Ariel was deceiving her." Cavanaugh took the bottle from her and inserted a corkscrew. With a smooth, thoroughly expert movement, he removed the cork and started pouring the wine. "I don't feel so good about it myself. When I think of how none of us suspected what a fruitcake Ariel really was, I get cold chills." He swore softly and took a large swallow of wine from one of the two glasses he'd just filled. "What a fool I was." Kimberly watched

him from under her lashes. This was the first time they had been alone since the authorities had come to collect Ariel and her pals. There had been endless questions and statements and explanations.

But finally everyone had left. "I know how you must feel," Kimberly said softly as she picked up her own glass of wine. "But no one realized what she was really like." He looked at her broodingly. "It was my responsibility to

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protect my family and you. I blew it."

Kimberly picked up a platter of cheese and French bread she had prepared. "Nonsense. You saved us all.

And I for one am extremely grateful." She led the way over to the two chairs in front of the fireplace. "You do realize what was on the agenda for me this evening? Ariel was going to make me the star attraction in her first sacrifice ceremony. Nothing like being a guinea pig in some witch's act." She shuddered and flopped back in one of the chairs. Cavanaugh followed slowly, pausing to stoke up the fire he had started an hour earlier. For a moment he stood staring down into the flames. "Are you sure you feel okay?"

"What? Oh, you mean am I suffering any aftereffects of that herb Ariel used on me. No, I'm fine, really I am. As brilliantly clear-headed as I've ever been."

His mouth crooked faintly in spite of his mood. "I'm not certain that's very reassuring." Kimberly grinned briefly. "Poor Cavanaugh. You've had a rough time of it lately, haven't you? And all because of me."

"I wasn't the only male who was having trouble with females this morning. I almost felt a twinge of sympathy for poor Emlyn."

"Emlyn!"

"Well, he was only playing at being a witch because he really thought Ariel's plan for kidnapping Scott would work. After it fell apart, I guess she convinced him she had another scheme up her sleeve. It must have been a shock when he realized what a real nut she was."

"I wonder how he and Zorah met Ariel."

"The cops are wondering, too. They promised to let me know the whole story when they've finished dredging it out of those three. The first thing they'll have to do is find out Emlyn and Zorah's real names!" "I thought they sounded a bit on the theatrical side," Kimberly noted. "How did Ariel become such friends with Aunt Milly?"

Cavanaugh's face hardened. "They met in a garden club." He winced. "I can still remember Milly telling me what a "magical" touch Ariel had with herbs."

"She does know a lot about them. Probably from studying all sorts of arcane books. Ariel really feels she's this generation's keeper of some sort of witchcraft mysteries. I'll have to work her into a book ... "

"Just as long as you don't feel you have to do any hands-on research,"

Cavanaugh growled forbiddingly. Kimberly's response was a yawn that she barely managed to cover. "My God,

"I'm exhausted. You must be, too."

"I am. In spite of what you may be thinking, this really has been a slightly abnormal day, even for members of the Cavanaugh household," Cavanaugh said with real feeling. Kimberly smiled briefly and then fixed him with a very earnest expression. "But it's all over now. You've more than kept your promise. You've fulfilled the responsibility you felt you had toward me. I want you to know that, Cavanaugh. You don't owe me anything else." It was important to her that he understood he was free in that sense, Kimberly realized. "You've kept your promise. "My promise to take care of you? Kim, I

want to talk to you about that." He walked over to the other over-stuffed chair and lowered himself into it. Kimberly watched him obliquely. She liked watching him, she reflected. There was an easy, masculine grace in his movements, even when he was simply taking a seat. "What's to talk about?" she tried to ask lightly. "It's over. You've done what you said you'd do. And without a lot of help from me, either," she added wryly. "You did your part,"

he interjected. Kimberly took another sip of wine. "Thank you for coming after me, Cavanaugh. You saved my life."

She didn't meet his eyes, her gaze on the fire instead. "I owed you any

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protection I could give you," he returned bluntly. "Why?"

"Why?" He frowned. "For a lot of reasons. Because of what you did for Scott, naturally, and because you're my--"

"No, I mean, why did you follow me from San Francisco?"

"Oh, that." Cavanaugh hesitated. "Well, there are a number of reasons for that, too. I didn't get much sleep last night.

None at all, in fact. And somewhere around two in the morning I had the feeling something was really wrong." "More of your telepathy?" she mused. "It wasn't telepathy. Just the restless brain of a man who knows he's handled something very badly." She flicked him a wary glance.

"You're referring to the way you set up that meeting with my grandparents?"

"I didn't handle it well, Kim. I admit it. My only excuse is that I honestly thought I was dealing with a difficult situation in the most efficient manner.

I thought ... I thought that after you got over the shock and had a chance to put it

all in perspective you'd realize I'd done the right thing. I see now that I had no business springing it on you like that."

"Was it so very important that I be made to confront my grandparents, Cavanaugh?" she asked quietly. "Yes," he said flatly. "I saw your relationship with them as the last barrier between us. "You were really that worried about the fact your current bed partner had a mental block when it came to dealing with powerful families?" He looked at her until she was compelled to switch her gaze from the file to his face. The emerald eyes gleamed with a relentlessness that astonished Kimberly. "I was not concerned about my current

bed partner's feelings toward families. I was concerned with how my future wife dealt with the issue."

"Your wife!"

"I'm asking you to marry me, Kim. I was only waiting until we'd gotten the meeting with your grandparents out of the way." She swallowed uncomfortably as her fingers tightened around the stem of her wineglass.

Eyes wide, she stared at him.

"Cavanaugh, you don't have to go that far out of some misguided sense of responsibility."

"I know you're not much interested in

marriage, Kim," he returned softly.

"You've gotten along fine for years without anything that really resembles a family. After pushing you into that meeting with your grandparents, you probably haven't changed your mind much. Especially when it comes to overbearing, arrogant males who happen to be heads of families. But I know that if you'll give us a chance we'll be good together in a lot of ways, not just in bed. I also know that I am not in a position to install a live-in lover in my household. Having you for a guest will work for a while, but quite soon everyone's going to want to know when I intend to marry you. Your grandfather will probably be

at the head of the line demanding explanations."

Kimberly sat very still, totally unable to read his mind at all now. "I don't particularly care what my grandparents think." Cavanaugh sighed. "No, I don't suppose you do." There was a long period of silence. "You said once that you loved me.

I realize you've had some, uh, second thoughts thanks to the way I forced you into that scene with your grandparents."

"I have done some thinking," Kimberly admitted cautiously. She remembered that under the influence of the herbal smoke she had been trying to tell

Cavanaugh that she had made a mistake. He hadn't had time to listen then and so she had not told him that she still loved him, in spite of the scene in San Francisco.

Perhaps it was just as well. After all, she had no real idea of how deep his

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feelings went for her. Except for the fact that he's asking you to marry him, she reminded herself. That didn't mean he was in love with her, of course. He was attracted to her and he felt a strong sense of responsibility toward her.

Cavanaugh might also have found her useful in organizing his household. What was it Starke had said? Something about Cavanaugh needing a woman who could occasionally protect him from his own sense of duty. "Sitting here now reminds me of that evening I came to get you, after you'd phoned the house a couple of times," Cavanaugh mused. "You were just as wary and cautious then as you are at the moment." He was right, Kimberly thought. She was wary.

But for different reasons. Falling in love with Darius Cavanaugh had been a dangerous thing to do. It left her vulnerable in a way she had never been

before. She wished desperately that she really could see into his head. What was he thinking she wondered. How did he feel?

How long would it take him to fall in love with her? Or would his feelings always be limited to a combination of duty, responsibility and attraction? "I think," she began hesitantly, choosing her words carefully, "that we need more time ." To her surprise,, he nodded and lifted his glass to his mouth. "I agree with you. We need time for you to get to know me well enough to trust me again. Unfortunately, time is not something I have a great deal of to spend as I choose. You've lived in my house for

several days. You know what it's like.

Someone or something is always needing attention. It would be hard just trying to get away to see you on occasional weekends. And I don't want to limit our time together to just weekends."

"A life full of responsibilities," she said thoughtfully, more to herself than to him. "It's the life I've chosen, Kim. Or perhaps it chose me. I don't know and it doesn't matter. That's the way it is. That's the way I am." His voice had roughened and it seemed to her that the emerald in his eyes was lit with implacableness. "And you want me to be a part of that life?"

"I think you can be happy in it if you'll give yourself a chance. I know it will be a change for you and I know there will be adjustments. But you've already proven you can handle the day-to-day hassle. You've taken control of it rather than let it control you. Things are so much more organized at home now and they'll be even calmer when Julia and Scott move out. You can have all the privacy you need for your work. I'll make certain the staff understands that. I'm asking you to make changes, I know, but I think that a woman who is brave enough to taunt a witch and face an attacker with only a broken wine bottle in her hand is brave enough to risk a new

lifestyle."

"Cavanaugh ... " He lifted a hand to silence her. "Let me finish, Kim. I said I understand your need for time, and I'm proposing to give it to you." "How?

You've just said you would find it uncomfortable to install me as your live-in lover." she gritted, thoroughly irritated with the description. "I'm asking that you marry me. In return I'll give you the time you want." She looked at him blankly for a second, not comprehending. And then it hit her. "Oh, I see."

She was suddenly, inexplicably embarrassed. "We'll, uh, have separate

bedrooms after we're married?"

Cavanaugh took a very long swallow of wine. Kimberly had the feeling he was nerving himself up for something. "I thought it would take some of the pressure off you," he explained evenly. "I realize that for you the sex is more than just, well, pleasant."

"Pleasant?" she repeated faintly, wondering how going to bed with Darius Cavanaugh could ever be described by such a mundane word as pleasant. "Is that all it is for you?"

"No!" The glass in his hand suddenly appeared very fragile as his knuckles whitened around it.

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"You know damn well it's not just pleasant. Now let me finish!"

Kimberly arched an eyebrow but kept her peace. It was becoming clear that Cavanaugh was straying near the bounds of his normally excellent self-control.

She wondered why. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that he hadn't had any sleep in the past twenty-four hours. "As I was trying to say," he went on, "I am aware of the fact that you give a great deal of yourself when you go to bed with me. To be blunt you give

yourself completely." His eyes locked with hers as if daring her to deny it. Kimberly again kept her mouth shut and covered the uncomfortable moment with another sip of wine. Cavanaugh continued cautiously. "I feel that asking you to share my bed would be putting an added strain on you while you settle down in my household as my wife.

It might make you feel too vulnerable, too committed to something you weren't yet really sure you wanted."

"And you don't think just the existence of the wedding license would put a similar sort of strain on me?" Kimberly inquired far too politely. "Are you trying to tell

me that if I decided I don't like being married to you I will be free to walk out the door? That I will feel free to do so because we're not sleeping together?" Cavanaugh set down his wineglass with an audible snap.

"Don't twist my words, Kim!"

"I'm not twisting them. I'm only trying to figure out what they mean!" He surged to his feet, striding over to stand in front of the hearth. With one hand resting on the mantel he turned to glower at her. "I don't see how I can make the matter much clearer. I'm asking you to marry me. I'm sorry if I'm botching up the job but this is the first time I've tried it."

"You're nearly forty years old and you've never asked a woman to marry you?"

she asked disbelievingly. "Up until two years ago I wasn't particularly interested in marriage. There was no room in my life for a permanent woman.

Since then I've been too busy trying to put the winery back on its feet financially," he explained harshly. "And now you've come to realize that it's time you married," she concluded with a nod of comprehension. "You have, after all, a responsibility to continue the family line, right? People will expect you to marry. You'll need a wife to lend the proper background to your role as an

established, prosperous vintner. And, of course, I now have a thoroughly respectable background myself, thanks to your tracking down my grandparents."

He watched her through narrowed eyes, his lean body dangerously poised. "I warned you not to twist my words, Kim."

"I was just trying to get all the details straight," she flung back, feeling increasingly incensed. "So far I can see what's in it for you, but I'm not sure what's in it for me."

"You need a husband!" he blazed. "You need me!"

"I do?" He moved toward her with unnerving intent, reaching down to pull her up out of the chair.

Cavanaugh's emerald eyes reminded Kim of a bird of prey, and quite suddenly she knew she had goaded him too far. "Cavanaugh, wait ... I"

His hands closed around her waist, holding her securely. "Little witch," he muttered, "you don't know when to stop, do you? Did you think you could just sit there and provoke me indefinitely?" Before she could respond, his mouth was crushing hers. Kimberly stood trapped in his arms and let the storm of his emotion break over her. The frustration and implacable determination

she sensed in him told her more than words could have just how close he was to the end of his tether.

The strange thing was that her instincts were to yield and soothe rather than

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resist. Kimberly parted her lips obediently when he demanded entrance to the warmth of her mouth and she let her body sway against his. Cavanaugh moved his hands up to cradle her head. His low groan of need and hunger reverberated through his chest, touching

her at a deep level of awareness. He wanted her.

She knew that with a certainty that went beyond words. His tongue probed deeply, simulating the primitive rhythm of lovemaking until Kimberly moaned softly in response. Then she felt his teeth nip at her lower lip with passionate care. Keeping one palm wrapped around the nape of her neck, Cavanaugh ran his other hand down her back to her buttocks, pulling her up and into the heat of his lower body. "You have a talent for driving me crazy," he rasped against the curve of her throat. "Cavanaugh, listen to me." Kimberly pleaded with the last remnants of her intelligence. "This is

dangerous.

Neither of us is in any condition to handle a major discussion about our future right now. I'm sorry if I've provoked you. But the truth is both of us need sleep and ... and some time to think. We're exhausted and we've been through some very traumatic scenes in the past twenty-four hours."

"I've tried to reason with you," he growled, his fingers on the buttons of her blouse. "And I've tried to set up an unthreatening situation. But you're determined to resist every inch of the way."

"That's not true!"

"Yes, it is. But I know one way you won't fight me. I said earlier, when you're in my arms, you give yourself completely. I'm going to make love to you until you can't say anything but 'Cavanaugh,' until you're shivering and hot and completely mine." His hands were moving inside the parted edges of her shirt. "Is this what I could expect if I agree to your proposal? If I marry you will you immediately forget your promise to give me some time before demanding your conjugal rights?" There was a moment of lethal stillness.

Kimberly realized belatedly that she was holding her breath. And then Cavanaugh slowly raised his head to look down at

her with eyes that were dark and dangerously enigmatic. "Lady, you sure know how to walk a risky line." His hands fell away from her, and he moved slowly back to stand in front of the fire. "You'd better go to bed, Kim," he went on in an unnaturally level voice.

"I'll sleep out here on the couch. I know where the blankets are." Kimberly trembled with love and emotion. She could feel the leashed emotion in him even though she couldn't be certain just what those emotions were. The intensity of his manner ate at her heart and she longed to comfort him. But there was a self-protective wariness in her, too. Cavanaugh had the power to hurt her as

no one else could. And she was still uncertain of his underlying feelings for her. He was asking her to take all the risks, Kimberly told herself as she watched the rigid line of his back. No, that wasn't strictly true. Whatever he felt for her, it was not superficial. She knew that with her deepest instincts. While she couldn't actually read his mind, she did know that the intensity and power of his commitment was genuine. He would be a strong, dependable, honorable husband. And she loved him. "Cavanaugh," Kimberly whispered, "I'll marry you." He swung around, his gaze piercing in the soft light. But he made no move toward her. A curious tension hovered between them.

"You're sure? Be sure, Kim, because I won't let you change your mind in the morning." She shook her head. "I won't change my mind." He took a deep breath and inclined his head almost formally. "I will do my best to make you happy, Kim." In spite of her tension, Kimberly found herself smiling.

"Yes, I think you will. And I'll try to make you a good wife, Cavanaugh." They stood quietly for a long moment, absorbing the impact of their simple promises to each other. And then Kimberly turned to walk down the hall to her bedroom.

"Good night," she said, not quite knowing what else to say. It was

obvious he didn't intend to follow her.
"Good night, Kim." She was almost at
the door of



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her bedroom when his voice stopped her
once more. "Kim?" Her head came up
quickly. Had he changed his mind about
sleeping with her? She would welcome
him, she thought. She would welcome

him with all her heart. "I think you should invite your grandparents to the wedding, Kim." Kimberly's mouth curved wryly and she lifted silently beseeching eyes heavenward. "You don't know when to quit, do you, Cavanaugh?" She slammed the door of her bedroom behind her.

CHAPTER ELEVEN.

Starke had ignored the wedding champagne and concentrated on whiskey most of the evening. Kimberly decided he'd had enough to put him in one of his philosophical moods, and when she found herself momentarily alone she decided to talk to him. Holding her champagne glass in one hand she lifted

the skirts of her wedding gown with the other and moved quickly across the crowded room.

"Enjoying yourself, Starke?" She smiled. His craggy face cracked into a genuine grin.

"Would you believe this is only the second wedding I've been to in my entire life?"

"When was the first?"

"My own."

"Oh." Kimberly tilted her head, uncertain about whether or not to pry further.

"Somehow, I don't see you married," she ventured. "Neither did I. But I was only nineteen and the girl claimed she was pregnant." He shrugged his massive shoulders. "I thought I ought to do the right thing."

"But she wasn't pregnant?" Kimberly hazarded. "No. And my wife quickly decided that marriage wasn't all it was made out to be. Not when you're nineteen and stone broke. We split by mutual agreement within six months."

"I see."

He gave her a sharp glance. "Hey, you're not drawing any parallels here, are you? Believe me, if you're pregnant, Dare's

going to be thrilled." Kimberly felt the blush stain her cheeks and concentrated determinedly on the cluster of men across the room. Cavanaugh, austere formal in his conservative wedding jacket and ruffled shirt, was the focus of the laughing, jesting group. She was married to him now, Kimberly had to remind herself. Tied to him with vows and a band of gold. But she felt more nervously uncertain about his true feelings and thoughts tonight than she had at any point during the entire time she had known him. It was no wonder she was so apprehensive. For the past six weeks they had seen relatively little of each other. Kimberly had stayed in her beach house working on Vendetta, and

Cavanaugh `=-</' had only come to

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see her on the weekends. When he was there he had slept on the sofa. On the one or two occasions when she had spent a weekend at his home, he had kissed her good night at her bedroom door. She did not fully understand his restraint or the rather cautious, distant way he treated her. Kimberly knew it probably had something to do with Cavanaugh's determination not to "pressure" her. But she couldn't help wondering if he intended to spend his wedding night in

his own bedroom.

There was no telling how far Cavanaugh would let his sense of responsibility and duty take him. "Kim?" Starke's voice held a note of concern. "Don't look so uneasy. Dare won't mind at all."

"Mind what?"

She pulled her attention away from her husband's hard-edged profile. "If you're pregnant."

"That's very reassuring," she said with commendable lightness, "but as it happens, I'm not."

"Oh. Too bad. Dare should have a

couple of kids." "To, uh, carry on the Cavanaugh name?" Kimberly asked dryly. "No, just because he'd make a good father." Kimberly peered at her oblivious husband. "Do you think so?"

"Yeah. Your grandparents would love some, too. They're having a good time tonight, aren't they?"

Starke glanced with satisfaction to the far edge of the crowd where Wesley Marland and his wife were chatting enthusiastically with Aunt Milly and several of her friends. Starke was right. They were delighted with the wedding, embarrassingly grateful to have been invited. And they would adore a couple of grandchildren. "Cavanaugh made me

invite them, you know," Kimberly confided after another sip of champagne. "Or perhaps I should say he strongly advised it."

"Dare wanted to tie up all the loose ends," Starke said bluntly. "He's like that. How are you getting along with the Marlands?"

"With cautious politeness," Kimberly admitted honestly. "Well, look at it this way," Starke advised, "some people don't even have a cautiously polite relationship with their relatives!"

"I suppose you're right." "Do you really hate them?" Kimberly thought about that for a split second and then shook her

head. "No." It was the truth. She still wasn't certain how she felt about her grandparents but she knew she didn't hate them.

Perhaps she was simply too much in love with Cavanaugh to have any emotion left over for something as useless as hate. "I told Dare he was an idiot to force you into meeting them," Starke informed her, sipping his whiskey. "But maybe he was right. Maybe it was the most efficient way of handling the situation. Dare's instincts are usually pretty solid."

"Uh-huh, well, if he ever springs a surprise like that on me again, I'll probably break his neck."

"I don't think you'll have to worry about Dare doing anything so risky for a long while," Starke said consideringly. "He's been handling you with kid gloves for the past six weeks." Kimberly bit her lip, knowing Starke was right and knowing, too, that she didn't really want that kind of cautious treatment from Cavanaugh. Determinedly she changed the subject. "Aunt Milly finally seems recovered from the shock of finding out Ariel was the villain of the

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piece. I was afraid she was going to go on blaming herself indefinitely for what happened."

"Dare wouldn't let her do that," Starke said with a wryly crooked mouth. "He insisted on taking all the blame himself."

"He's big on assuming responsibility." Kimberly sighed. "It's in his blood,"

Starke opined. "Comes naturally to him. Some men are like that." Kimberly slanted him a sardonic glance. "Is that so?"

"Yeah. But there's a price tag attached."

"What do you mean?" Starke hesitated,

as if trying to find the best way of saying what he had to say. "Men who have the guts to handle a lot of responsibility usually have the well, uh, the assertiveness it takes to make sure things get done right."

"Assertiveness?" Kimberly tasted the word. "You mean the arrogance, the overbearing, domineering, stubborn machismo that it takes to railroad everyone into doing things the way said male wants them done?" Starke looked pleased at her understanding.

"Something like that."

"Forget assertiveness. Tell me about the dagger. What did you ever find out about it?" Starke shrugged. "Dare was right.

Some of our old contacts in the import business finally recognized it. The design dates back a few centuries to a style that was used in Europe at one time by people who called themselves witches."

"How did Ariel get hold of it?" Kimberly asked. "This particular dagger wasn't really old.

It's a copy. Ariel apparently found a drawing in one of her occult books and took it to a knifemaker who made it up for her. We would have eventually found the guy who did it. There aren't that many good custom knifemakers around. But we wouldn't have found him in

time."

"Did the authorities ever find out how Zorah and Emlyn came to be involved with Ariel?"

"Zorah's real name is Charlotte Martin. Emlyn's name is Joseph Williams."

Kimberly grimaced. "So much for the exotic names. Ariel's doing, no doubt."

"She ran into them when she was exploring sources for some of the herbs she was always experimenting with. Charlotte ran an herb shop and Joe was her boyfriend. Poor Charlotte really wanted to believe in Ariel's power and the possibility having it passed on to her.

Joe was far more practical about the situation. He's the kind of guy who will always be looking for a fast buck. He thought Ariel's kidnapping plans might work. When they didn't he stuck around because he still thought there was a possibility of getting money out of Dare.

When Ariel said they had to kill you he went along with it because you were the only one who could identify Charlotte. You'd seen her face to face at the house the day you rescued Scott." Kimberly shuddered. "So they hired some street punk to do the job. Ariel was the one who let him onto the grounds that night, I suppose." Starke nodded. "Luckily Ariel insisted it had to be done in a

ceremonial fashion. She's the one who said he wouldn't get paid unless he wore the right outfit and used the proper weapon. The punk is still complaining about the limitations she put on him, according to Cranston."

"All of which probably saved my life that night." Kimberly shook her head ruefully. "What a situation."

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"Going to get a book out of it?"

"You bet!" "I like your books," Starke told her seriously. "That Josh Valerian

guy's a little strange, but I like the stories." "What's wrong with Josh?"

Kimberly demanded. ', he's not exactly realistic," Starke said carefully. "I mean, all that business about being able to understand the heroine isn't so weird. But having him always feel the same way about things, see them in the same way she does. That's weird."

"You think so?" Kimberly asked wistfully.

"Yup. Valerian's supposed to be a man. Men don't see things quite the same way women do. Nearly drove Dare crazy trying to figure out how he could compete with a fantasy."

"He managed." Kimberly shot back dryly.

"Does Dare know that?" Kimberly glanced up at him quizzically. "I think so,"

she said very seriously. "Then why's he acting so carefully around you?"

"You noticed?"

"Who hasn't?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Kimberly said evenly. Then she told herself that now was as good a time as any to ask a question that had been on her mind. She gauged the amount of

whiskey Starke had had to drink and decided to take the plunge. "I've been wondering about something, Starke," she began with deceptive lightness. "What is it exactly that you and Cavanaugh imported and exported?" Starke blinked owlishly. "Stuff."

"What kind of stuff?"

"Junk. Trinkets, jewelry, odd things from different corners of the world.

Cavanaugh bought whatever took his fancy and whatever he thought he could sell."

"Starke, why do I have the feeling you are not being one hundred percent

straightforward with me?"

"Uh, I think Cavanaugh is trying to get your attention."

"Starke ... " She gave up. "I think I'd like more champagne." "What a coincidence," Starke said brightly.

"Here comes Dare and he's carrying two glasses." Cavanaugh's emerald eyes seemed to glitter with a curious intensity as he took in the sight of his wife, but his voice was lacking in expression.

Instead he was as coolly polite as he had been for the past six weeks. "More champagne, Kim?" She smiled equally coolly, setting down her empty glass to accept the full one he handed to her.

"You must have read my mind."

"I do my best. Starke, I just saw Ginny Adams. She's looking for you." To Kimberly's astonishment the normally unflappable Starke suddenly looked slightly nervous. He ran his finger around his collar and then checked his tie. "Was she?" He nodded formally at Kimberly and then muttered, "Excuse me."

Kimberly stared after him as he forged through the crowd toward the attractive, forty-year-old woman near the door. 'Adams?' Kimberly asked. "I think they make a good pair. Ginny needs someone solid and dependable like Starke. Her husband left her last year."

"Oh. I hadn't realized Starke had a, uh, romantic interest in her."

"You haven't been here enough during the past six weeks to keep track of

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what's been going on. Finish Vendetta?"

"No, but I made a lot of progress."

Kimberly gulped the champagne, feeling uncomfortable and shy around her husband. Most of their conversations lately had been like this, polite but rather distant. Kimberly had told herself

everything would be all right once they were married, but now she was beginning to wonder if she'd been deluding herself. "Something wrong, Kim?"

"As a matter of fact, you can answer a question for me," she began assertively. "A question Starke wouldn't answer? Is that why he was looking so uncomfortable when I arrived?"

"I only wanted to know what it was you two really imported and exported. A simple enough question. And don't tell me it was junk." Cavanaugh eyed her speculatively. "A lot of it was."

"But what else was involved?" He

hesitated and then shrugged.

"Occasionally Starke and I handled transactions involving information.

We were sometimes in a position to acquire useful details that regular government agents couldn't get. Does that satisfy your mystery writer's curiosity?"

"Uh, yes, but tell me-" He cut off the flow of her questions with a curious half smile. "That's it, Kim. That's all you get from me on the subject. And I hope I never see anything close to it in one of your books." His expression softened briefly when he saw the disappointment in her eyes. "I really can't talk about it."

"Another responsibility you've assumed?" The softness in him vanished. "Call it whatever you like. Going to hold my silence on the subject against me along with everything else?" Kimberly frowned. "Of course not. I'm sure you've given your word not to talk about your former line of work.

I wouldn't expect you to break it." Not Darius Cavanaugh. He'd see his responsibilities through to the end of his life. Kimberly drank some champagne and considered her own uncertain future. What if she'd made a terrible mistake, Kimberly wondered with a touch of panic. Maybe everything wasn't going to be all right now. Maybe everything was

going to be a total disaster.

"You must be exhausted," Cavanaugh said gently.

"It's been a long day."

"I'll survive," she muttered. He looked at her through faintly narrowed eyes.

"I'm not sure I will." She wasn't certain she'd heard him. It was the first indication of any emotion other than bland politeness she'd caught in his words for weeks. "I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing," he assured her quickly, taking her arm. "Let's go talk to your grandparents. They want to show you off

a bit."

"They're delighted I've made such an excellent marriage," Kimberly said dryly.

"More delighted about it than you are, apparently." Kimberly blinked. Again she sensed the blade of the knife beneath his words.

Cavanaugh's carefully controlled temperament was fraying slightly around the edges. She wondered why. She was still wondering two hours later, when she found herself alone in her bedroom. The last of the guests had left the estate and the various inhabitants of the house had settled down in their own rooms.

Kimberly realized she was pacing the floor in front of the bed and forced herself to stop. This wasn't exactly how she had envisioned spending her wedding night. She was alone and it was clear now that Cavanaugh would not be joining her. He had walked her upstairs, kissed her good night at the door and

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disappeared into his own room. Eyes burning with tears of frustration and dismay, Kimberly sank down onto the edge of her bed and desperately tried to decide what to do next. She was at a

loss. There had been no talk of a honeymoon, not even a trip to the coast to spend some time in her beach house.

This was insane, she told herself. Here she was head over heels in love with her husband of only a few hours and he was spending the night in his own bedroom! It was beginning to appear as though he intended to live by the vow he had made the night he asked her to marry him. She would be given all the time she wanted to get to know him. Somehow Kimberly hadn't really expected him to honor those rash words. Especially since she had never meant him to do so. It was ludicrous to think that they could truly get to know each other as long as they

were fencing emotionally like this. What she wouldn't give for some genuine telepathic talent, Kimberly thought. She would sacrifice a great deal at this moment to know what was going on in Darius Cavanaugh's head.

Slowly she stood up and unbuttoned the delicate fastenings of her wedding dress. Hanging it carefully in the closet, she pulled out the nightgown she had bought for the occasion of her wedding night. Grimly she stared at the frilly concoction of satin and lace and then she put it away again. No sense wasting it, Kimberly told herself. She might as well wear her usual T-shirt.

There would be no one sharing the bed

with her and thus no one to appreciate the horribly expensive nightgown.

Standing barefooted in front of the mirror, she brushed her hair down around her shoulders, studying herself critically in the thigh-length T-shirt. From the beginning she had never doubted the physical attraction between herself and Cavanaugh. He wanted her, or at least he had wanted her. She examined the thrust of her breasts against the T-shirt and licked her lower lip uncertainly. What if even that elemental attraction had faded? No, she concluded, that wasn't the case.

She had seen the barely concealed

possessiveness in those emerald eyes on more than one occasion during the past six weeks. And she was certain she'd felt him restraining himself when he'd taken her in his arms to kiss her good night. Kimberly pulled the brush through her hair one last time and threw it down on the dresser. Cavanaugh was sticking by his plan to "give her time."

That was the only explanation for his odd behavior. But she couldn't figure out what he expected her to do while she waited patiently for him to signal that enough time had passed between them. It had all gone far enough, Kimberly decided with sudden resolution. She was a married woman in love with her

husband. Her husband might not love her but he wanted her and he needed her.

That made for a better foundation than a lot of marriages had, she assured herself. Without pausing to think, Kimberly whirled and grabbed her old terry cloth robe out of the closet. Flinging it on she let herself out into the hall. The house was dark and quiet. She looked at the door of Cavanaugh's room and saw that there was no shaft of light under the door. He must have gone to bed. It took almost as much courage to walk down the hall to Cavanaugh's bedroom as it had to face the punk with the silver dagger. In front of the door Kimberly lifted her hand to knock and then

changed her mind. Taking a long, steadying breath she tried the doorknob. It gave silently and the door swung open with only the smallest of sounds. She stood for a few seconds, letting her eyes adjust to the shadows. If Cavanaugh hadn't moved slightly in the darkness she wouldn't have seen him. He was sitting in a chair by the window, his legs sprawled out in front of him. There was a bottle beside him and the movement she saw was the one he made when he reached for it. She couldn't see his face. "Cavanaugh?"

"You have a talent for it, Kim." His voice was a low growl of sound. "A talent for what?" she whispered, daring

to close the door behind her. "For finding trouble, of course especially at night. Most of your big adventures lately have taken place at night, haven't they?" He poured the brandy with unnatural care. Kimberly clung to the doorknob behind her back. "Are you ... are you

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very drunk, Cavanaugh?"

"Not yet, but I'm getting there.

Don't rush me, Kim. I'm doing my damndest not to rush you, the least you can do is return the favor." She still

couldn't see much of him as he sprawled in the chair; only his arm was visible as he raised the brandy glass to his mouth. The arm was bare though, and Kimberly realized that all Cavanaugh was wearing was a pair of jeans. "Is that why you haven't shown any interest in me for the past six weeks? You're trying not to rush me?" Her voice was a thread of husky sound in the darkness. Her pulse was racing with trepidation and a strange kind of uncertain fear. "What do you mean I haven't shown any interest in you?"

I married you, didn't I? A man doesn't generally marry a woman unless he's at least mildly interested in her." She

wincing. Cavanaugh was definitely beginning to sound surly. If his temper had been showing signs of fraying earlier in the evening it was ragged now. "I can't tell you how reassuring that is," Kimberly managed bravely. "Go back to your room, Kim," he said softly. "Why?"

"Because if you stay here much longer, you won't be going back at all. Is that plain enough for you?"

She stepped away from the door, clutching the old terry cloth robe tightly around herself. "I'm your wife, Cavanaugh. Maybe I don't want to go back to my bed alone ... I have a right to be here with you."

"Don't talk to me about rights!"

"Then let's talk about why you're afraid of rushing me," she flung back, goaded. "What are you afraid of rushing me into? Bed? I'm not trying to resist, in case you hadn't noticed!" He set down the brandy glass with a fierce clatter and came up out of the chair with a lethally graceful movement.

Nude from the waist up, his face carved in harsh, rigid lines, Cavanaugh was a formidable opponent to face in the dark. Kimberly almost lost her courage.

Placatingly she held out one hand. "Cavanaugh, how long do you think we can last in separate bedrooms?"

"Until you trust me enough to let yourself love me again," he told her with barely suppressed violence.

"I don't want you in my bed until you can say you love me the way you did before I mishandled that business with your grandparents." She stared at him.

"I don't think you've been doing your usual hot job of reading my mind lately," she finally said weakly. Her hands were trembling, and she clutched at the tie of the robe in an effort to still them.

"Reading your mind has always been a fairly haphazard business," Cavanaugh rasped. "Maybe it's because you've got a rather haphazard way of thinking. A feminine way of thinking," he clarified

accusingly. "Is that right? And I suppose your thinking processes are more intelligible? Well, let me tell you something, Cavanaugh, I haven't been able to figure out what's going on in ... that male head of yours for weeks! I've been wondering why on earth you even bothered to marry me, for example."

"Because I love you!" he exploded.
"Why else would I marry you?"

"Sex, companionship, to acquire someone who can protect you from your oversized sense of responsibility, because you felt grateful to me: all kinds of reasons!" His eyes glittered and his voice was raw.

"I married you because I love you, Kim." She caught her breath. "Well, that's why I married you. So why are we spending our wedding night in separate

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bedrooms?" she whispered achingly. Cavanaugh moved then, gliding across the floor to scoop her up into his arms. He swung her around with a fierce exuberance and tossed her down on the bed. Then he was lying heavily on top of her, pinning her to the bedclothes. "Kim, are you sure? Are you very, very sure? I was so afraid that I'd ruined everything."

She speared her fingers through his hair, her heart in her eyes. "Cavanaugh, I've never stopped loving you. I was angry and hurt and I was sure you couldn't possibly have loved me or you wouldn't have pulled a stunt like that, but I never stopped loving you."

"I only did it because I thought it was for the best, Kim. I wanted you to be completely free of the past, free to love me. I needed all of you."

"I understand, darling."

"Do you really?" He was studying her with a burning intensity. Kimberly's mouth curved gently. "I didn't say I approved. I said I understood. There's a

difference, I've learned."

"Tell me about it!" he grated hoarsely, and then he kissed her with rough passion. As she began to respond he lifted his head again. "I know I'm not what you thought you wanted in a man. But I love you so very much, sweetheart.

That love is going to get us through the communication problems, I swear it."

"You mean through all the times when you're having trouble comprehending my "

thinking processes?" she teased softly.

"Actually, I've been meaning to tell you that I'm thinking of changing the

character of Josh Valerian slightly."

"Is that so?"

"Umm. I'm going to make him a little more like you. Not quite so comprehensible to the heroine, but maybe a bit more interesting."

"I love the way your mind works," he assured her deeply, bending his head to nibble provocatively behind her ear. "At the moment I'm having trouble thinking at all," she confided, slipping her hands across his shoulders.

"Don't worry about it. I'll do all the thinking for us." He lifted himself slightly away and undid the tie of her

robe.

"You look so damn sexy in a T-shirt."

"I would have looked even sexier in my new nightgown. But when I realized you weren't going to come to my room tonight or invite me into yours, I decided not to waste it," she told him sadly. "So you just put on your usual T-shirt and this old robe and trotted down the hall to confront me, hmm?" He was toying with the hem of the T-shirt, inching it slowly up to her waist. "Thank God you did. I was going crazy in here telling myself I had to be patient, in fact, I've been going crazy for the past six weeks convincing myself I had to give you time to learn to love me again."

"And I've been going crazy wondering if you would ever learn to love me. Ah, Cavanaugh, we've both been fools, haven't we?"

"No. We've just been having a little trouble communicating. It won't happen again."

"You think not?"

"Well, I suppose we're always going to have to work around the fact that you are a woman ... "And you're a man."

"Umm. And in some ways the communication problem will always exist between us." Cavanaugh lost

patience with the T-shirt and stripped it off over her

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head. "But I expect that's why love got invented," he stated confidently. "To help men and woman communicate? An interesting anthropological theory, Cavanaugh." She laughed up at him with her eyes, her body warming under his.

"Do you really love me?" Her hands twined around his neck. "More than anything else on earth." He was suddenly deadly serious. "Don't ever doubt that, Kim.

There will be times when I'll have my hands full with other matters and other people's problems. But there will never be a time when my heart isn't full of love for you. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Cavanaugh. I understand. And there will be times when my haphazard mind will seem full of plots and characters but there will never be a time when I am not completely in love with you."

"Good."

With quick, wrenching movements he unsnapped his jeans and kicked them onto the floor. Then he turned back the

quilt and tucked Kimberly underneath. She went into his arms with a new, serene confidence, her body flowing along his.

"I love you, Cavanaugh."

"You couldn't love me any more than I love you. You've been mine since the first time I made love to you. But tonight you're finally home. You're finally in my bed, where you've belonged all along." He caressed her with wonder, his fingers seeking out the hidden places of her body until she twisted gloriously beneath his touch. When he dipped his fingers tantalizingly into the hot, damp warmth between her legs she gasped. Then, with reverent care he began to

trail a line of kisses from the shadows between her breasts to the even darker shadows at the apex of her thighs.

Kimberly stirred with faint, embarrassed protest but he ignored it. Gently, with undeniable insistence, he parted her legs and gave her the most intimate of kisses. Kimberly cried out softly, lifting herself against him as the excitement rippled through her.

"Cavanaugh!"

"Sweet witch." He worked his way up her body until her questing fingers found the evidence of his arousal and he groaned aloud. "Love me, Cavanaugh.

Please love me!"

"Always." It was a vow, and Kimberly knew in the deepest recesses of her mind that she could rely on it. Cavanaugh was that kind of man. She would be able to trust in him and in his love for the rest of her life. He brought his body into hers, possessing and possessed, and Kimberly clung to him. The witchcraft that swirled in the darkened room was a very ancient kind, and it wrapped the two lovers in the softest of spells. Kimberly and her beloved Cavanaugh gave themselves up to it with delight, united in a passionate comprehension of each other that went beyond words.

One of today's top contemporary romance writers, Jayne Ann Krentz has

an astounding 12 million copies of her books in print. Her novels regularly appear on the New York Times, Waldenbooks and B. Dalton bestseller lists. First published in 1979, Jayne quickly established herself as a prolific and innovative writer. She has delved into psychic elements, intrigue, fantasy, historicals, and even futuristic romances.

Jayne lives in Seattle with her husband, Frank, an engineer, and her bird, Ferd, whom she modestly refers to as "a truly brilliant budgie."



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