

HEATHER GRAHAM

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

"...once again displays
a mastery for the mysterious..."
—*Romantic Times*

NEVER SLEEP WITH STRANGERS

Heather Graham Pozzessere
Never Sleep With Strangers

«HarperCollins»

Pozzessere H.

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She almost looked as if she slept, except... The trident had pierced through her. And the snow-white gown was turning ever more crimson. Four years ago, while vacationing at their country estate in Scotland, Jon Stuart watched his wife plummet from the balcony to a horrific death. Although cleared of any involvement, he's endured years of public suspicion—losing friends and his good standing in the community. But this was no accident, and now he's determined to prove it was murder. Orchestrating a dangerous plan, Jon has gathered the prime suspects at the scene of the crime. The stage is set as past and present collide, old lovers reunite...and a killer plots another perfect crime.

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Praise for New York Times Bestselling Author Heather Graham

“Graham shines in this frightening tale. Paranormal elements add zing to her trademark chilling suspense and steamy romance, keeping the pages flying.”

—Romantic Times on *Haunted*

“Graham’s tight plotting, her keen sense of when to reveal and when to tease...will keep fans turning the pages.”

—Publishers Weekly on *Picture Me Dead*

“An incredible storyteller!”

—Los Angeles Daily News

“Demonstrating the skills that have made her one of today’s best storytellers, Ms. Graham delivers one of this year’s best books thus far.”

—Romantic Times on *Hurricane Bay*

“A suspenseful, sexy thriller...Graham builds jagged suspense that will keep readers guessing up to the final pages.”

—Publishers Weekly on *Hurricane Bay*

“A roller-coaster ride...fast-paced, thrilling...Heather Graham will keep you in suspense until the very end. Captivating.”

—Literary Times on *Hurricane Bay*

“The talented Ms. Graham once again thrills us. She delivers excitement [and] romance...that keep the pages flipping quickly from beginning to end.”

—Romantic Times on *Night of the Blackbird*

“With the name Heather Graham on the cover, you are guaranteed a good read!”

—Literary Times

**HEATHER GRAHAM
NEVER SLEEP WITH STRANGERS**



NEVER SLEEP WITH STRANGERS

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Prologue

Cassandra Stuart was beautiful, and she knew it. She could manipulate others, and she knew that, too. If she could just make him turn around and look back at her...

“Jon! Jon!”

She knew that he’d heard her, but he didn’t stop. He was really furious with her this time. As she watched, he continued down the gravel path that led to the loch. Maybe she had overplayed it this time, but she didn’t want to be here in the back of beyond, in this godforsaken, remote patch of Scotland. Despite his famous guests, despite his famous charity game. They were his guests; it was his game. She hated the country; she wanted to be in London.

But she knew her husband, knew what he was thinking now. He’d known the day would go badly, that she would be rude and impatient and ruin it for them all. But damn him, he still wouldn’t give it up! He’d hosted this event every year for the past decade. He’d made his plans; he had a life to live. The week was already underway. Besides, no matter how damned marvelous his wife might be, he’d told her—sounding awfully damned sarcastic—he would be damned if a woman was going to lead him around by the nose. Any woman.

“Jon!”

She knew that he didn’t want to look back, didn’t want to see her.

Because he knew what she was planning. And he had planned ahead himself. He wasn’t going to let her play him, wasn’t going to let her manipulate him the way she intended to.

She meant to leave. Today. It was the last disruption she had up her sleeve. She hoped her departure would get through to him the way her pouting and petulance had not.

But she wanted him to come back to her first; she wanted to make love, to be passionate and exciting, to remind him that he couldn’t exist without her. She would tell him that she needed him, remind him why he had married her. She could make him happy, could make him laugh, and she was damned good in bed, even if she had just taken a lover because she couldn’t bear the look in Jon’s eyes sometimes, knowing that he might on occasion be thinking of someone else. Come back! she thought furiously. Let me seduce you just one last time so you don’t forget, so maybe...

She would wait until he had slipped away, and then she would pack, leaving behind a letter addressed to “My Dearest Darling,” explaining that she would be at the London Hilton, waiting for him when he could escape his dreary associates. And maybe, just maybe, he would come. He could be such a fool! She knew so much more about his guests and household than he did! Who was sleeping with whom. And why. Actually, she thought, and almost smiled, she knew a number of them very well. Intimately, one might say.

And still there was such a wretched hole of jealousy in her heart.

“Jon! Come back!” she called again. She experienced a strange new fear beyond the sense of powerlessness and loss she had been feeling so much lately. “Jon! Please come back! Or I’ll make you pay!”

Her voice was both provocative and irritated. But he was still walking. So tall, hair so dark, shoulders broad and muscled. He was a beautiful man, and she was losing him.

Panic seized her. He had guessed she was having an affair with someone here. Did he know that she was trying to goad him, get even with him? Because she was certain he was having an affair, as well.

“Jon! Jon, damn you!”

Her tone was growing more petulant. She stood on the master bedroom’s second-floor balcony, overlooking the rear courtyard. The rooms had been handsomely enough appointed, “remodeled” at the end of the seventeenth century and modernized by Jon himself just a few years ago. The balcony was a sweeping, curved affair that boasted views of three corners of the property. Here, in the rear,

it looked over an elegant fountain with a priceless marble Poseidon, complete with trident, as its centerpiece. Despite the fact that winter was rapidly approaching, roses still bloomed around the tiled path that encircled the fountain. The path turned to gravel as it passed through the rose arbor and headed toward the loch. In the master chambers themselves, the walls were covered with antique tapestries, and there was a massive fireplace, as well as a state-of-the-art hot-water heating system with generator backup. A four-poster king-size bed sat on a dais, and one level down from the main section of the bedroom, just beyond a medieval archway, was a huge whirlpool bath and sauna. She had a huge dressing room and closet, as did he.

“What’s not to like?” Jon had asked her impatiently, offended.

The decor was fine. She just hated the country. No excitement, no sense of life. It wasn’t London, Paris, New York or even Edinburgh, for God’s sake.

That was exactly why he liked it so much, he’d told her.

He was walking away. Still walking away.

She was amazed to feel tears stinging her eyes. How could he care more about this pile of stones and his imbecilic friends than her? “Jon, Jon! Damn you, Jon!”

He’d talked about divorce; he’d said that things just weren’t working out. But, he couldn’t divorce her. He just couldn’t! She’d already told him that she would make it impossible. She would drag him through the mud, give away a million filthy secrets about him and his associates.

“Jo—”

She started to say his name, then realized that someone was behind her.

She spun around to see who had slipped in. “You, damn you! Get out! Did he send you? Get the hell out of my room. Our room! I’m his wife. I’m the one who sleeps with him. Get out!”

She spun back to stare out from the balcony. “Jon!”

She heard a rush of movement, like a whisper of air, and she turned back.

For a moment she stared into the eyes of her killer, and she knew.

“Oh, God!” she breathed, and, desperate, she began to cry out again.

“Jon! Jon! Jon!”

She felt the pressure of the rail at her back. And she screamed.

Because she was falling.

And she could see her own death.

Jon Stuart had been angry, really angry. He’d intended to make good his escape. But something in Cassandra’s voice gave him pause that time, and he swung around.

And there she was.

Falling...

It looked as if she were sailing. In this, as in all other things, she was elegant. She was wearing a white silk dressing gown, and it billowed out around her. Her ebony hair was caught by the golden glory of the sun and shone with blue-black lights. It struck him that she even fell with dramatic grace and beauty.

And only after a split second of the mindless realization that he could do nothing at all to stop it did he realize that she was already in the act of dying. Screaming, crying out, shrieking his name, plummeting to earth.

She died in Poseidon’s arms. Cradled within them, like a wayward goddess. Eyes closed, ebony hair and snow-white gown caught by the breeze. She almost looked as if she were sleeping, except...

The trident had pierced through her.

And the snow-white gown was turning crimson.

His heart hammering, he began to shout, running desperately, as if he could reach her, help her, despite the fact that he knew...

He cried out.

Cried out her name.
Reached her, and held her.
As her blood spilled over him.
While her eyes stared into his with an ever silent reproach.

1

Three years later

The scene was definitely a chilling one. A beautiful woman in medieval dress, her long blond hair waving over the workings of the mechanism, was tied to the implement of torture, with a dark-haired, bearded and mustachioed man standing over her.

The Earl of Exeter's Daughter, also known as the Rack, proclaimed the sign overhead. Named after the Man Most Proficient in the Art of Extracting Confessions from his Victims.

The artist who had created the wax figures had been proficient, as well. The blonde stretched out on the wicked wooden rack was exquisite, with fine, classically molded features and huge blue eyes widened by her fear of her tormentor. Any sane man would long to rescue her. While the fellow standing above her—his features were pure evil. His eyes gleamed in sadistic anticipation of the pain he was about to inflict.

Many of the exhibits in the hall were excellent, retelling ancient tales of man's inhumanity to man. This particular display outdid them all.

So Jon Stuart thought as he stood silently in the shadows, leaning casually against the stone wall, his presence obscured by the darkness of the dungeon. He stared watchfully, contemplatively, at the exhibit—and at the flesh-and-blood blonde now standing in front of it.

She was nearly—in face, coloring and form—a mirror image of the poor beauty stretched out on the rack itself. She was a young woman with a glorious mop of blond hair that cascaded freely over her shoulders and down her back. She was slender and beautifully shaped, doing incredible justice to the jeans and fitted sweater she wore. Her features were very feminine: fine, straight, slender nose; high, chiseled cheekbones; beautiful blue eyes; and full, lushly shaped lips. She was surveying the display with a certain amount of interest—and wariness. She looked as if she wanted to laugh ruefully, reminding herself that she was looking at wax figures, but the scene was scary, and she was alone in the shadows. Or so she thought.

Sabrina Holloway.

He hadn't seen her in more than three and a half years now, and though he was somewhat surprised by her presence; he was glad she had decided to come. She had politely declined his invitation to the last, fateful Mystery Week. The occasion when Cassandra had died.

Whether Sabrina realized it or not, she had most certainly been Joshua's model for the beauty on the rack; she was the victim's spitting image, and Joshua always enjoyed using people he knew in his art. He had mentioned to Jon that he had met Sabrina Holloway in Chicago, and he had sounded entirely infatuated, so Jon had refrained from telling Joshua that he, too, was acquainted with her. It was easy to understand Joshua's head-over-heels reaction; he'd experienced something quite similar when he'd met her himself. Before...

Well, there was a lot to admire—or covet—about Ms. Holloway. Jon hadn't been the only one to fall victim to her charm; she had attracted the attention of Brett McGraff, as well. Jon shook his head. She'd gone off and married McGraff. Whirlwind courtship, whirlwind marriage—scandalous divorce.

Jon watched her now, glad of the distance between them. He stared at her in simple assessment. She possessed a rare grace and beauty. Even though he'd been something of a recluse over the last few years, he'd kept up with her career, reading about her in the papers and tabloids. Reporters had leaped wholeheartedly on Brett McGraff's last, noisy divorce from such a beautiful young creature.

She had been stunning when Jon met her. So innocent, eager, fascinated. He was certain that the rose-colored blinders were gone from her eyes now. She had matured. And now she was...

Spectacular. More elegant than ever. She looked thoughtful, even wise.

And how would you know? Jon taunted himself.

She might well have matured into a hard, ambitious bitch, he reminded himself dryly. Life often did that to people. After all, she'd walked away from him with a will of steel. And she'd been able to stand her ground during the media blitz after her divorce, even in the midst of a shocking situation. Still, she now maintained a strange, compelling air that combined sophistication and innocence, although, God knew, he'd learned the hard way that the most delicate, fragile females could be the worst black widows.

She was a Midwestern farm girl, Jon remembered, and he had to smile. She possessed both warmth and reserve, and yet there had been moments when she'd let down her guard and he'd felt that he had known her forever. He had found her to be both captivating and as down-to-earth as her natural beauty. She'd been twenty-four, fresh from the country, when they met. She'd turned twenty-eight last month. Plenty of time to learn, to harden, to change. If only...

Well, it had been a different time, a different place, a different life. No one had ever been the wiser. He hadn't told tales.

She hadn't wanted any told.

Still...

Jon suddenly felt a deep irritation. His feelings were totally unjustified, he told himself. Brett McGraff was here, as well. She and McGraff had actually been married. Jon had no right himself. And yet...

Hell, it was his place, his party. And he intended to spend time with all his guests. McGraff's presence would only make it a more intriguing enterprise to attempt to get to know Sabrina again.

But was she in over her head? he wondered suddenly. Maybe he should have left her name off the guest list. But then, he hadn't really expected her to come. And they were all in over their heads. Still, he suddenly wished he hadn't taken the chance of making her, like the others, an unwitting pawn in this dark game.

But he'd set this board into motion; he'd had no choice. It was either this or give up his sanity. And there were others to whom he owed both the truth and justice, if not to himself. He wasn't exactly in this alone. He had promised to do things again, exactly this way.

Maybe he should just stay away from Ms. Sabrina Holloway. Of all the people here, she alone was clearly innocent.

He wondered if he could stay away from her. And he reminded himself that she was here by choice. They'd all come willingly enough, ready to play. Some for the fun of it, some for the publicity. Cassie, the inveterate journalist, had once told him, "Never miss a photo op, darling!" He'd noticed that very few writers, actors, musicians or artists ever tended to do so, and, in a manner of speaking, this week was a major photo op. Even the reclusive types who preferred to remain in the shadows wouldn't dare miss this. The world had gotten far too competitive, and name recognition could mean the difference between starvation and healthy income.

Yet, he mused, Sabrina Holloway had inadvertently garnered enough publicity already. Marriage to and divorce from Brett McGraff had put her squarely in the public eye. But she had maintained a steady course, and though her notoriety had given her popular career a jump start, she'd managed to accrue a respectable amount of critical praise for the writing. He hadn't been in the States for a while now, so he wasn't sure who else was doing the talk-show circuit, but apparently she'd hit just the right chord with her Victorian thrillers. She was also young and lovely, and the media loved to hop on a personality with sex appeal and presence.

He was about to approach her when he realized that another woman was walking toward him. Susan Sharp. He groaned inwardly and considered a fast retreat up the secret staircase behind him. His ancestors had been Jacobites and had filled the castle with hidden doors and passages, a multitude of escape routes.

But Jon didn't escape; he didn't want his secrets known as yet, so he stood still while Susan sashayed closer, delighted with her good luck in discovering that he was literally cornered.

“Well, well,” she said happily. “Darling! So here you are, in the darkness. How delightful. How wickedly delightful. Do give me a kiss, darling. We’ve all missed you so much.”

Sabrina Holloway stared at the disturbing display, marveling at its realism. The woman on the rack looked as if she were about to open her mouth and cry out. Her eyes were glazed, as if she were trying to deny the terror that was threatening her. Sabrina could almost hear the man demanding that his victim confess her terrible crimes and spare herself the agony of the rack.

A strange tremor snaked up Sabrina’s spine.

Whoa. Excellently done. Totally unnerving. There were others ambling around the dungeon displays at Lochlyre Castle, many of them friends, but at the moment she felt thoroughly uneasy in the gloom. Just imagine. If the lights were suddenly to go out...

She would be alone. In the darkness. With him—the dark-haired torturer with the slim mustache and sadistic eyes who looked upon his victim with such pure evil in his heart. The figures were so realistically done that she could easily believe they might come to life in the dark. They would move, walk, stalk, wield their weapons of death and destruction....

Hands landed on her shoulders, and she almost screamed aloud. She jumped, but somehow she choked back the sound that had risen in her throat.

“Well, my love?”

Another little shiver snaked along her spine—she was again unnerved, but not so frightened this time. Brett McGraff moved beside her then, settling an arm easily around her shoulders. She was ashamed to realize that his presence made her feel more secure in the shadowy dungeon, though still far from comfortable.

She was torn between clinging to him and shaking off his arm. As usual, she felt an amazing combination of emotions toward him. Sometimes he made her want to gag. Then again, she wasn’t always immune to the purely sensual charm that had attracted her to him from the very beginning. Most of the time, however, she was only slightly impatient with him and fairly tolerant.

“It’s very real,” she murmured. “It actually scares me a little.”

“Good.”

“Why?”

“I think I want you scared.”

“Oh?”

“Might make you a little clingy.” He tightened his arm around her and lowered his mouth to whisper huskily against her ear. “We’ve each been assigned our own room in the castle—our host doesn’t seem to remember that we were married—but I’d be happy to keep you company during the long, spooky nights.”

“Were,” she reminded him, “is the operative word here. We were married, once upon a time, more than three years ago—for all of two weeks.”

“Oh, it took longer than two weeks to get a divorce,” he said smoothly. “And don’t forget how much we were together on our wonderful honeymoon.”

“Brett, the marriage ended while we were still on that honeymoon,” she reminded him.

He wasn’t to be deterred. “And now we’re getting to be such good friends again,” he added with assurance.

Despite herself, Sabrina felt a rueful smile curving her lips. Brett was tall and good-looking, with unruly brown hair, dark bedroom eyes to match and a laconic charm that had made him a media idol. He wrote medical thrillers, with both commercial and critical success. He’d made a small fortune at his craft and still managed to be annoyingly arrogant only on occasion. Sabrina had met him soon after the sale of her second book before it had even been on the market—which had been soon after his divorce from his third wife. To say that she’d been naive was a terrible understatement. She’d also been healing from a far unhappier situation.

A whirlwind courtship had sent them on a honeymoon to Paris—at a time that happened to correspond with the French publication of Brett's latest thriller. She'd been amused, at first, by the number of women who gave him less-than-subtle hints regarding their carnal interest, then less amused when she realized how many of them he already knew. Carnally. Still, being an optimist who longed for a future, she'd decided she could live with Brett's past. It hadn't even been so bad that the women he'd known hadn't seemed to care that he had a new wife; she hadn't held other people's behavior against them. Ultimately, it had been Brett's indifference to the discomfort of her position that had disturbed her. He was a good lover; he could be amusing, charming. He'd made her laugh and love when she'd felt adrift and unsure.

But Brett could also be self-centered, selfish and downright mean. He'd disappeared with the voluptuous owner of a major bookstore for several hours and been totally impatient with his young bride when she'd demanded to know what was going on. Then he'd informed her that he was Brett McGraff, and opportunities were going to come his way. He'd told her she shouldn't mind; she should just be grateful he had actually married her, had made her his wife.

To Sabrina, his words had been devastating. She'd been stunned. Then furious—with herself. She'd been looking so desperately for someone to make her forget her past, to fill her life. And she'd been so wrong. She'd cared for Brett, believed things could work. But she'd been mistaken. So she was at fault, as well, for not seeing or believing that their visions of love and marriage were so wildly different.

Brett had seen the change, the new awareness, in her eyes, and he'd tried to placate her, to seduce her....

The rest had been hell.

She didn't want to remember. She'd learned some good lessons from that time, and maybe even taught him a few. To this day, he still couldn't believe that she'd left him and filed divorce papers, not asking for one red cent. In the months to come, when they'd met at various publishing events, he'd sought her out. He still referred to her as his wife, and she could actually smile sometimes now at the various lines he deployed to try to get her into bed. She should sleep with him because they had been married; because she'd already slept with him, and it wasn't good to sleep with strangers. Because she already knew him—and as a result there would be no ugly little surprises. Because he was good in bed; and she had to admit that he was good—naturally, because he was so practiced. Because surely everybody needed sex now and then, and since she was capable of being such a sweet, puritanical prude, coming from an apple-pie farm family and all, she was slow to form intimate relationships and therefore should simply indulge in a basic, necessary activity with him.

So far, she'd managed to resist.

She was certain that she wasn't alluring above all others; she was simply the one who had left him, and therefore she remained a challenge.

"Seriously, while we're here, wouldn't you like to share a room with me?" he asked now.

"No," she said simply.

"Admit it, I'm fun to sleep with."

"We have different ideas of fun."

"Look around you. This is a scary place," he urged.

"No, thanks, Brett."

"I can behave."

"That's doubtful. Besides, you remind me of a warning my mother used to give me. Don't play with toys when you don't know where they've been."

He grinned. "Ouch! But if you'd stayed with me, you would know exactly where I'd been."

"Brett, I never knew where you were when we were married, and I really didn't have all that much time in which to misplace you. I realize that it never occurred to you that marriage meant monogamy—"

“Do you think it means that to everyone?” he demanded.

“Brett, I can’t tell other people how to be married. I only know what I wanted myself.”

He sniffed. “If only you knew how many people slept around—people you would never imagine.”

“Brett, I don’t want to imagine.”

“Your own friends!” he persisted.

“Brett—”

“All right, fine. Later you’ll be begging me for gossip, and I won’t tell you a thing. When you need to know, you’ll be in the dark. Unless, of course, you want to forget the marriage thing for a while and just have fun? My intentions are honorable, though. I will remarry you.”

She groaned. “As I said, we have different ideas on fun—and marriage.”

“Fine. Play hard to get. But if things start getting spooky around here, you’re going to want to crawl into bed with me, and it may be too crowded by then.”

“That I don’t doubt.”

“Hey, I’m asking you first. And surely you wouldn’t want to sleep with a stranger.”

“Brett, I’ve slept with you, and I really can’t think of anyone much stranger.”

“Very funny. You’ll be sorry, my pet. You’ll see.” He shook his head sorrowfully, returning his gaze to the display before them. “Amazing, isn’t it?” he murmured, staring at the characters, his arm still around her.

“Yes, very real,” she agreed.

He shook his head. “So real that in this lighting, she could fool even me. And I was married to you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“What do you mean, what am I talking about? You’ve been staring at this tableau.” He sighed with impatience. “Sabrina! Take a good look. That’s you.”

“What?”

“Sweetheart, have you gone blind since you’ve been away from me? Take a look. That woman—she’s you. To a T. The blue eyes, the blond hair, the gorgeous features. Nice body.” He lowered his voice even further. “Great butt, too.”

“You can’t even see her butt, Brett.”

“All right, all right, I’ll concede that. But she’s you. The spitting image.”

“Don’t be silly....” Sabrina protested, but her voice trailed away as she frowned.

Oh, Lord. Brett was right. The wax figure did bear an alarming resemblance to her. So much so that she felt chills begin to sweep up and down her spine again.

“Good!” Brett whispered huskily. “I can feel you trembling. You’re getting uneasy, unnerved, good and scared. You’re not going to want to be alone all night in this spooky old castle. You’re going to want to come to me. Night will fall, you’ll hear wolves howling, you’ll run screaming from your bedroom and into mine, so you won’t have to be afraid.”

It was just a caricature in wax, nothing more, Sabrina told herself. Yet she still felt tremors racing through her limbs. It was her. The artist had executed the figure so well that the muscles and veins in the victim’s arms fairly leaped into animation as she struggled to free herself from the ropes that tied her mercilessly to the rack.

The fear in the eyes was real.

The silent scream on the lips was far too eloquent. It could almost be heard in the air.

Brett whispered warningly in her ear, “You won’t want to be alone.”

From the darkness behind them, a deep, rich, masculine voice intervened. “Well, now, she’ll hardly be alone, will she?”

Sabrina knew that husky voice.

She spun around to meet their host.

2

His eyes were on her, studying her. He smiled pleasantly as he continued, “Seriously, Brett, she’ll hardly be alone, considering the fact that there are ten writers here—including ourselves, of course—along with an artist, my assistant and the castle staff, all in residence.”

He sounded amused. Slipping from beneath Brett’s arm, Sabrina stared at Jon Stuart. It had been a long time.

“Jon,” Brett murmured, an unmistakable edge in his voice. The two were supposedly friends; still, it seemed that Brett was less than pleased with Stuart’s timing.

“Brett, good to see you. Thank you for coming.”

“It’s always a pleasure. We were all damn glad you decided to do it again. Jon, you’ve met my wife, Sabrina Holloway, haven’t you?”

Sabrina gazed at the mesmerizing owner of Lochlyre Castle, but Jon Stuart had already arched a dark brow Brett’s way as he took Sabrina’s hand. She resisted the odd temptation to wrench it away.

“Sabrina, good to see you again. I hadn’t realized the two of you had remarried.”

“We haven’t,” Sabrina said.

“Ah.”

“Sorry. My ex-wife,” Brett murmured innocently, smiling intimately at Sabrina as if there were still a great deal going on between them. “It’s so easy to forget we ever divorced.”

“Anyway, I’m glad you’re both here. Thank you for coming,” Stuart said politely.

“I wouldn’t have missed it. You know that,” Brett said.

“It was nice to be invited,” Sabrina murmured.

“You’ve been invited before,” Jon said pointedly.

“I...I was on a deadline last time.” It was a lie, of course. An author’s stock excuse for not being somewhere he or she didn’t want to be.

“Well, it must have been worth it, then. Your last book was very good.”

“You read it?” she inquired—too quickly. Instantly she wanted to kick herself. She was blushing, unaccountably pleased that he had been interested enough to read her work. Then she felt her flush darken, wondering what he must have thought of the book’s graphic romantic encounters. And wondering how much her blush was giving away.

“I’ve loved all your recent work,” she said quickly, trying to cover herself.

He smiled a slow, skeptical smile that clearly indicated he had heard the words before but somehow doubted them in this case.

“It’s the truth,” she murmured, wishing she could gracefully end her awkward monologue. Brett was staring at her now with real interest, having picked up on the tension between her and Jon Stuart.

“Really?” Jon murmured, either unaware of her discomfort or amused by it. It was disturbing to realize that he maintained such an edge over her both in maturity and in simple confidence. He had been a success since his first novel, a thriller based in World War II Italy, had been published soon after he’d graduated from college.

She forced a cool smile to her lips. She was not going to be intimidated. “Okay, so I hated it when you killed the priest in your last book—he didn’t deserve it.”

Her words didn’t offend him; he laughed, apparently pleased with her honesty. “Good for you, telling me the truth.”

“The truth is always different through different eyes,” Brett interjected somewhat irritably.

Jon shook his head. “No, there’s only the truth, maybe just shaded a bit differently,” he said somewhat solemnly, gazing at Sabrina. Then he seemed to collect himself and said more lightly, “And the truth is, of course, that I’m delighted you were able to tear yourself away from your busy schedule to be here, Ms. Holloway.”

“She knew I was coming and that she’d be comfortable here,” Brett said proprietarily.

“Great,” Jon responded.

“I have a number of friends here,” Sabrina murmured, wondering why she cared if Jon Stuart did or didn’t think she was still sleeping with her ex-husband. But she kept talking. “You know how it goes. We authors tend to stick together. You have an impressive guest list. I’m flattered to be invited.”

“I very much wanted you to be here,” he said politely. “As you may recall, I wanted you last time, as well.”

Right. He had wanted her. She’d first met him just months before his last Mystery Week party. And in that time, she’d married Brett—and they’d divorced.

And he’d married Cassandra Kelly.

“I had only one book out on the market at the time. I could hardly be ranked among the pros you had here then.”

He arched a brow, cocking his head. “Dianne Dorsey was even more of a babe in the woods at the time, and she was here,” Jon commented.

“But it did turn out to be a tragic occasion, so it’s a good thing Sabrina didn’t come,” Brett said. “Glad to see you seem to be bucking up, old boy,” he added, punching Jon lightly on the shoulder with his fist. “We haven’t seen enough of you lately. By the way, wasn’t Cassie actually the one who told us all what a great book Sabrina had written?”

“Yes,” Jon said evenly, still studying Sabrina. “Cassandra thought you had created superb characters in a compelling setting, then concocted the perfect murder for just the right dramatic twist.”

“That was quite nice of her,” Sabrina murmured uncomfortably. Cassandra was dead—and she felt incredibly guilty, because she hadn’t cared much for the woman when she was alive.

All right, so she’d jealously despised her. The one time they’d met face-to-face had been a horror worse than anything in this gallery.

It was only natural that she had hated Cassandra Stuart.

A hot tremor snaked through her again, having nothing to do with the tableau in front of them. The way Jon was staring at her was unnerving. Despite the ridiculously possessive way Brett was behaving at the moment, Sabrina was suddenly glad of his presence.

For Jon Stuart was imposing. Even intimidating, in a way. Perhaps by simple virtue of his height and hard-muscled build. He was very tall, about six foot three, and strikingly handsome in a rugged way. His hair wasn’t just dark, it was jet black, thick and luxurious, long past his collar though neatly combed back from his forehead. His eyes were a marbled hazel, truly unique, merging blue, green and brown into a compelling, moody mix that could appear golden at times, dark as night at others. His features were strong, arresting: firm, square chin; broad cheekbones; generous, sensual mouth; high, defined brow. At thirty-seven, he was a renowned master of adventure and suspense writing; in real life, too, he had been named by a prominent international magazine to be one of the world’s ten most intriguing men. An American of Scottish heritage, he had never used fame or fortune to shirk duty; he’d served overseas in the National Guard during Desert Storm.

Though Stuart had recently lain very low, remaining in Scotland more often than not, he still appeared in news stories now and then, usually upon the once-a-year publication of his latest book or the reissue in paperback of the previous title. It didn’t matter that he’d been something of a recluse for the past several years—that merely enhanced his reputation.

The mystery surrounding the death of his wife rendered him both fascinatingly dangerous and hauntingly sympathetic. Some journalists claimed he had gone into deep mourning for Cassandra, while others hinted he had retreated into guilt, that he had somehow killed her—even if he had been a hundred feet away from the balcony from which she’d fallen at the time. Some suggested she might have committed suicide, that her marriage had been failing and she had cast herself from the balcony in a moment of dramatic self-pity, putting the blame on her famous husband, creating a scandal that would torment him until the end of his days. Others thought that perhaps the cancer consuming her

beautiful breasts had driven her to despair. Whatever had happened had certainly given rise to endless speculation. And Jon Stuart had endured legal hearings into the matter and been tried by the press, his peers and fans, as well. His annual Mystery Week, a famed writers' retreat orchestrated at his secluded castle in Scotland to raise publicity and funds for children's charities, had been halted.

Until now.

Three years after the death of his wife, he had opened the doors of Lochlyre Castle to the outside world once again.

"Come to think of it, Cassie's praise of Sabrina's work was noteworthy," Brett mused suddenly, "because she wasn't usually so generous. She supposedly liked my work, but she ripped Scalpel to shreds. Remember, Jon? She even blasted your work sometimes, and though I hate to admit it, that's hard to do."

"Thanks. That's quite a compliment," Jon said dryly.

Brett grinned. "I'm feeling chipper. Just got the word that Surgery is number two, the New York Times list, come a week from Sunday."

"Congratulations," Sabrina told him wholeheartedly. He always made the bestseller lists, but his position was rising steadily, much to his delight.

"Great," Jon said. "You can keep everybody's spirits up during the week. Remind them that, dire perennial rumors to the contrary, publishing is not yet dead. So...what do you two think of the chamber of horrors this year?"

"Ghoulishly wonderful," Brett said.

"Too real." Sabrina shuddered.

"Ah," Jon murmured, eyes pure gold with sudden devilish humor. "I wouldn't let your resemblance to the lady on the rack upset you," he said. "An artist named Joshua Valine created the figures for the exhibit. He's also done a lot of cover art—he met you at the booksellers' convention in Chicago and was duly impressed."

"Not very positively, if he has me on the rack," Sabrina commented.

Jon laughed, a deep, husky, compelling sound. "Trust me, his reaction was quite positive. He always uses real people, whether he's painting or working in wax. And if you'll look around, you'll see that there really wasn't a pleasant situation in which he could have put anyone. Look to the far corner," he said, that glimmer still in his eyes.

As hardened as she told herself she had become, Sabrina could still feel the force of his charisma. He had just the slightest hint of a Scotsman's burr in his deep voice, acquired from all the time he had spent here. His features and build—his entire presence—were exceedingly masculine. Even his subtle aftershave seemed intoxicating.

Indeed, Jon Stuart was a dangerous man, she reminded herself. And a stranger, really, though she had once known him well—in a way.

"In the far corner over there," he said now, "Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette are off to face the guillotine, and Joan of Arc is about to be burned at the stake. In the next display, Anne Boleyn is ready to meet her swordsman, and over there, Jack the Ripper is in the midst of slicing Mary Kelly's throat." He shook his head in mock sadness. "Joshua is not fond of Susan Sharp, I'm afraid. Go take a look at Mary Kelly."

"So I suppose I should be grateful to be on the rack? Tortured for endless hours before death?" Sabrina observed.

Jon cocked his head slightly, amused. "Actually, Ms. Holloway, the beautiful blonde on the rack is the only victim in this room to survive. She is Lady Ariana Stuart, and before she could be stretched and broken—accused of an attempt to turn young Charles over to Cromwell's forces when his father was about to be beheaded—her brother brought a plea regarding her innocence before the young Charles himself, who was by then returned to the throne as Charles II, king of England. Charles, being the lusty fellow he was, instantly saw the waste in destroying so fine a damsel, so he ordered

her out of the torture chamber and into his bed. Naturally, being the charming man he was, he made her one of his mistresses. She bore him numerous illegitimate children and lived to a ripe old age.”

“How comforting,” Sabrina said.

“Very romantic,” Brett sniffed. “I bet you made all that up to placate Sabrina.”

“I swear it’s God’s own truth,” Jon Stuart assured them.

“Well, Joshua certainly had a field day with Susan Sharp,” Brett said, chuckling with malicious pleasure. “And what a perfect Ripper’s victim. After all, she has been known to ‘entertain’ men for the rewards she might gain,” he remarked.

“That’s hearsay,” Jon murmured, shrugging.

Sabrina gritted her teeth at Brett’s boorish comment and silently applauded Jon’s refusal to speak ill of others.

“Who did old Josh use for Joan of Arc?” Brett asked, unfazed.

“My assistant, Camy,” Jon said. “She’s actually quite religious herself, I believe, and a good, hard worker.”

“How apropos,” Brett said. “I approve.”

Jon grinned. “So far you do.”

Brett let out a groan. “So there’s something I’m not going to like?”

“Most probably not.”

“He used me?”

Jon nodded.

“As?”

Jon indicated the torturer about to twist the rack with the blond beauty upon it.

“Take away all the facial hair...” Jon suggested with a touch of rueful apology.

Brett gasped. “I should sue!”

Sabrina couldn’t help but laugh, which irritated Brett still further.

“Come on, Brett, be a sport. You were just a model—and with the beard and mustache, no one will guess. And remember, the weekend is all for charity. Have a sense of humor,” she suggested.

“Oh, very funny. I get to torture my ex-wife. So are you in this rogues’ gallery?” he demanded of Jon.

Jon arched a brow. “Yes. Yes, I am.”

“Where?” Brett demanded.

“Come on.”

Brett looked at Sabrina, shrugging. “He’s probably set himself up as a king—or as Gandhi.”

“Gandhi would hardly fit in here, and a number of kings weren’t such great fellows,” Jon reminded him. “But I didn’t have anything to do with Joshua’s choice of models. He doesn’t tell me how to write, and I don’t tell him how to sculpt.”

They followed him down a corridor to another display. A tall man in European dress of perhaps the 1500s stood above the sprawled body of a woman. Her head was turned to the side, hiding her features from them. The man was staring down at the woman with a mixture of anger and confusion on his face. He had long, light brown hair, but he was still quite evidently Jon Stuart.

“Who are they?” Sabrina asked, confused.

“He’s not well-known to Americans,” Jon said, studying the display dispassionately. “His name was Matthew McNamara. Laird McNamara. He was a Scotsman who did away with three mistresses and two wives.”

“How?” Brett asked. “I don’t see a weapon.”

“He strangled them,” Jon said simply.

“How did he get away with so many murders before he was found out?” Sabrina asked.

“He was never brought to justice. He was considered so powerful among the clansmen that executing his own wayward women was considered his right,” Jon said.

He turned away from the figures to look at her again, and she saw that his marbled eyes had gone very dark and cold. A strange trembling touched her as he slowly smiled. Was he mocking her? Or himself? She was afraid, she realized.

And worse.

She felt like a moth attracted to a flame. Time hadn't changed anything, nor had distance. That Jon Stuart was virtually a stranger to her meant nothing at all. She felt the same fierce and immediate fascination she had felt the first time she'd met him, a little more than three and a half years ago.

The first time...the last time.

"Who's the model for the wife?" Brett asked. Then, as if suddenly realizing that he might not want to hear the answer, he hurried on. "Joshua Valine is good. What an eye for detail."

"Relax, Brett. It isn't Cassie," Jon said, a dry smile curling his lip. "It's Dianne Dorsey. You can see her face if you look at the tableau from the other side."

"Dianne...well, yes, of course. I guess I thought of Cassie because of the black hair, but Dianne is dark, too..." Brett murmured, clearing his throat. He looked at Jon uneasily.

"Cassie's over there, Brett," Jon said, indicating a figure praying in front of mullioned windows. "Joshua used her for his Mary, Queen of Scots, contemplating the morning of the day of her execution."

"Yes, yes, that's definitely Cassandra," Brett said, staring for a long moment. His eyes jerked back to Jon's. "Doesn't that...bother you?"

"They all bother me—they're so real," Jon admitted. "But Josh is an artist, and that's how he works. Besides, I think Cassie makes a good Mary, Queen of Scots."

"They're all women, the victims," Sabrina commented.

Jon smiled. "Well, historically, it seems, lots of men were monsters. But I assure you, we have some lethal ladies here, as well." He pointed across the room. "There you have Countess Bathory, the Hungarian 'blood countess.' Allegedly she sacrificed hundreds of young women so she could bathe in their blood to retain her youth and beauty. V. J. Newfield is the model, as you might notice."

"Oh, you're in trouble there!" Brett warned.

Jon laughed. "V.J. will get a good laugh out of it. Besides, the countess was supposed to be quite beautiful as well as bloodthirsty." He pointed out another tableau. "There you have Lady Emily Watson, who poisoned no fewer than ten husbands to get their worldly goods. So you see, we do try to be an equal-opportunity chamber of horrors."

"Who's the model for Lady Emily?" Brett queried.

"Anna Lee Zane. And her victim is Thayer Newby."

Brett laughed. "Thayer, downed by a woman! He's going to love that."

Jon shrugged. "There's Reggie Hampton as Good Queen Bess, signing the death warrant for Mary, Queen of Scots."

"Who are the others?" Sabrina asked, indicating the rest of the tableaux receding into the shadowy depths of the castle's basement.

"Naturally Tom Heart and Joe Johnston are in here, but I'll let you find them. Joshua used a few of the household staff, as well, so don't be surprised if you find your breakfast being served by Catherine the Great."

"Sabrina," Brett puffed, "we really should remarry, and quickly! Jack the Ripper could arrive for your laundry!"

"Oh, I think I can manage my own hand laundry, and I'll make sure to have breakfast with a crowd," Sabrina told him. She wanted to kick him when she saw that Jon was studying her again.

Jon merely shrugged and seemed to ignore the exchange. "Joshua had lots of people working on this project for more than a year. We'll be donating the sculptures to a new museum in the north country when we're done here."

"You'll need releases from the models," Brett warned him.

Jon smiled. "I think I'll get them. The publicity will be phenomenal, you know."

"Great, I'll go down in history as a maniacal torturer!" Brett moaned, but the word publicity had won him over.

"Don't feel bad. One way or the other, I go down as a wife murderer. Well, if you'll excuse me, I have a few things to attend to. Enjoy yourselves. Brett, you know your way around. Ms. Holloway, please make yourself at home, as well. I'll see you at cocktails."

He turned and walked away with strong strides. In a moment the shadows swallowed him.

Yet somehow his presence seemed to linger, and Sabrina found herself turning to stare again at the wax tableau of Matthew, Laird McNamara.

Very tall, straight, broad-shouldered he was, with hands on his hips as he stood over the woman at his feet. Handsome, proud, merciless, powerful—laird indeed of his domain.

So powerful that he could kill and get away with it?

She forced herself to turn away, to look at the other figures as they engaged in their various dances with death.

The diffuse lighting made everything even more horrible. Shadows filled the room except where each scene stood, looming out of the darkness in eerie purple light, adding to the sensation of everything being real. Sabrina could imagine that the figures breathed. That they twitched, that they sweated. That they might move at any second...

Matthew McNamara stood over his wife, fists clenched.

Jack the Ripper wielded his knife.

And Lady Ariana Stuart continued to scream in terror and chilling silence.

A new wave of chills began a route through Sabrina's bloodstream, and she jumped again when Brett's hands fell on her shoulders.

"Let's get out of here, shall we?" he said.

And she realized that even he suddenly sounded afraid.

3

“Ms. Holloway!”

Cocktails were being served in the library of the castle, just down the grand staircase from the guest rooms on the second floor and opposite the great hall, where everyone would gather for dinner. Sabrina found herself arriving rather late. She’d lingered in the modern bath for a very long time, drawing together the courage to dress and go downstairs. Her brief meeting with Jon Stuart had left her far more unnerved than she’d imagined it would. For once she had to be grateful for Brett’s presence. He kept her from feeling too lost and alone, even if he was annoying.

She’d barely reached the doorway to the library when she heard her name being called. A small woman with short-cropped, shiny brown hair was moving toward her, offering her a glass of champagne. She had powder blue eyes, a pretty, heart-shaped face and a tentative smile that immediately set Sabrina at ease.

“Welcome, welcome, we’re so delighted that you could come. Well, I’m delighted especially, since I’m a true fan.” She pressed the champagne flute forward into Sabrina’s hand.

“Thank you so much,” Sabrina said. “And you are...?”

“Oh!” The young woman said, and flushed, making her appear even prettier and more delicate. “I’m Camy, Camy Clark. I’m Jon’s secretary and assistant.”

“Of course, Joan of Arc!”

Camy flushed more deeply. “Yes, that would be me. Joshua Valine is a good friend.”

Sabrina laughed. “He must be. You look lovely, even being martyred.”

“Well, Josh is a dear. He makes everyone look wonderful. You’re definitely the finest looking victim I’ve ever seen on a rack.”

Sabrina laughed again, lifting her champagne glass. “He’s very talented, certainly.”

“So are you. I love your work. The male writers can be so dry. You know, all action but no endearing characteristics to their people. I just love your Miss Miller. She’s a delight. So real, so sympathetic, brave but not ridiculously so.”

“Thank you again. Very much.”

“Camy, Camy, Camy!”

A slim woman of about five-five, with short, artfully styled dark hair, was bearing down on them. Her off-the-shoulder cocktail dress was elegant designer wear; her shoes matched its soft mauve. Sabrina knew Susan Sharp, because Susan herself made a point of knowing everyone. Most writers both feared and appreciated the literary critic because she had so much clout, especially in the world of the wealthy, and thus, by word of mouth, could help make or break a book or an author. She had written two mysteries herself and done very well with them, since her characters were clearly based on her acquaintances among the rich and famous. But she could also be loud, opinionated and abrasive, drawing mixed reactions from friends and enemies alike. It was rumored that she had absolutely hated Cassandra Stuart, who had often been her competition in talk-show bookings.

“Camy, Camy, Camy!” Susan repeated, reaching out to curl her perfectly manicured fingers around Sabrina’s arm. “You can’t just pin Ms. Holloway down at the doorway—we’re all waiting to see her. Authors get to be such good friends, you know.”

“Yes, of course, Ms. Sharp,” Camy murmured, flashing Sabrina an embarrassed look. Susan had put her in her place. She was just an assistant. The rest of them were authors.

“Camy, it was wonderful meeting you, and I look forward to getting to spend more time together,” Sabrina told the young woman.

Camy lit up with a smile. “Thanks!”

Susan drew Sabrina on into the room. “How have you been? It’s been ages since I’ve seen you.”

“It was just last June, in Chicago,” Sabrina reminded her.

“Yes, of course, you were doing so well. So many people adore that Miss Mailer of yours.”

“Miller,” Sabrina corrected smoothly.

“Yes, yes, Miss Miller. So tell me, what’s up with you and Brett? Are you planning on remarrying?”

“What?” Sabrina demanded.

“Well, Brett does make it sound as if you two share so much passion, both of you being so talented and wild. I’ll never forget how delicious it was when the tabloids ran those pictures of you running naked from your hotel room in Paris.”

“Susan, maybe you’ll never forget, but I’d like to. It was a very painful time in my life,” Sabrina said firmly. “Oh, look, there’s V. J. Newfield. I haven’t seen her in quite some time. Excuse me, will you?”

Sabrina escaped Susan and hurried toward V. J.—Victoria Jane—Newfield. V.J. was somewhere in her fifties or sixties and had been writing forever, or so it seemed. Her work was dark and scary but far more psychological than graphic, always striking a resonant note on the human condition. She was very slim, tall, with silver hair and a graceful carriage. She was a stunning woman and doubtless would be so until the day she died. Sabrina had met her early on in her career at a group autographing, where V.J. had assured her that the nicest thing about doing signings with other authors was that there was always someone interesting to talk to if no one stopped to buy a book.

“Trip the customers as they go by, dear,” she had advised. “When they think you’re sitting at a table piled high with books just so you can direct them to the nearest ladies’ room, trip them! Then apologize to pieces, and you’ve snagged them!” V.J. had been great. Already popular, she had convinced most of her fans that they simply had to buy Sabrina’s book, as well, and Sabrina remained grateful to this day.

“V.J.!” she now said with pleasure, approaching the woman at the buffet table, where she was studying caviar-covered crackers and trying to decide whether or not to indulge.

“Sabrina, dear!” V.J. said, turning with a smile and offering her a warm hug. “I wanted to call and make sure you were going to come. I was so sorry when I learned that you turned down the last invitation, though that did become quite a tragedy. I just got back from a cruise down the Nile—do you remember my telling you how much I wanted to take one of those?”

“Yes, and I’m glad you got to go. How was it?”

“Wonderful. Exhilarating. Awesome. The sense of history is so intense, so chilling. And I do just love a good mummy.”

“I’ve got nothing against loving mommies,” Brett said, slipping an arm around Sabrina’s shoulder and smiling at V.J. “Mommies these days can be just as exciting as the innocent girls. It’s great to see you, V.J. You look splendid. Sexy as ever. A great mommy.”

“My children are all long grown up!” V.J. reminded him.

“Mummies, my boy, mummies. We’re talking about dead women, though from what I hear of your indiscriminate womanizing, that might not make any difference to you. How are you, Brett? A kiss will be acceptable, but just on the cheek. And quit mauling Sabrina. The child has the good sense to be your ex-wife, and if the right man is out there, we don’t want him being put off by your foolishness.”

Brett laughed, freed Sabrina and good-naturedly planted a kiss on V.J.’s cheek.

“I am the right man, V.J.,” Brett protested in a mock-pitiful voice. “One moment’s bad behavior, and she won’t forgive me.”

“My boy, I’m no marriage counselor, but I sense that it might have been a bit deeper than that. Still...” She smiled, lifting her champagne flute to him. “Congratulations, I hear you’re just below Creighton on the list.”

Brett bowed his head in humble acceptance. “Thank you, thank you. Creighton just had to put out another book the same month, huh? I might have made number one.”

“Well, there’s always next year.”

“So there is. And since we’re all together here, a fine assembly of mystery, suspense and horror writers, surely we can come up with some new ways to bump off the competition. What do you say?”

“I say it’s in bad taste, considering where we are,” a masculine voice stated softly, and Joe Johnston stepped into their circle. Joe was an Ernest Hemingway lookalike, a handsome man with a bushy beard and a pleasant way about him. He wrote a series about a down-and-out private investigator, charming and laid-back, who still solved the crime every time.

Joe clinked glasses with Sabrina by way of hello and continued, “I mean, who really thinks that Cassandra Stuart threw herself from that balcony?”

“Joe, shush!” V.J. warned. “It was great of Jon to do this again after what happened last time.”

“My point exactly,” Joe said. “And that’s why we can’t talk about bumping off our competition.”

Susan Sharp sidled into their group. “We can’t talk about bumping people off?” she protested indignantly. “Joe, it’s Mystery Week. One of us is supposed to be a murderer and bump off the others until the mystery is solved. That’s the whole point.”

“Right, but that’s all pretend,” Sabrina said.

Susan laughed dryly. “Well, let’s hope that Cassandra’s being dead isn’t pretend. Can you imagine if she were suddenly to walk back into this room?”

“Susan, that’s a horrible thing to say,” V.J. admonished. “If Cassandra were to suddenly appear here, alive—”

“If Cassandra were suddenly to appear here, alive, more than half the people here would be thinking of ways to kill her again,” Susan said flatly. “Cassandra was vicious and horrible.”

“And smart, talented and very beautiful,” V.J. reminded her smoothly.

“Oh, I suppose. And just think—everyone who was here when she died is back again. The guest list is exactly the same,” Susan said.

“I wasn’t here,” Sabrina reminded her.

Susan shrugged, as if her presence were of little importance. “Well, you were invited, and the point is that those of us who were here then are here again. All of us. Ready to defend ourselves if we’re accused.”

“Accused of murder?” V.J. asked.

“Accused of anything,” Susan said blithely. “We all have our little secrets, don’t we?” she demanded, staring hard at V.J.

V.J. stared right back at her.

“Susan, if you’re going to start implying things about the rest of us—” Joe began.

“Oh, come now, Joe, we’re all grown-ups. Everyone knew that no matter how polite and controlled he seemed, Jon was furious with Cassandra. He thought she was having an affair—and she implied to me on several occasions that she was!”

“Susan, ‘Pass me the butter’ has made you think people were having an affair on at least one occasion,” V.J. said impatiently.

“V.J., it’s all in how someone says it. The point is, Jon thought she was having an affair, and she thought Jon was. If they were both right, then you have two other people involved. And God knows, Cassandra nearly destroyed some careers. Any number of us despised her at various points for what she said about our work.”

“You might well have despised her,” a soft voice said. It was shy, retiring Camy, who smiled apologetically at Susan. “After all, Ms. Sharp, you two were often in direct competition, weren’t you?”

Susan arched a brow, staring at the girl imperiously. She didn’t mind the accusation; she minded Camy’s interrupting her. “My dear child, I have no real competition. But just for the record, I did despise Cassandra Stuart. She was an opportunist who used and manipulated people, and you should be grateful that she’s dead, because she would have had you fired by now otherwise. Now please

excuse me.” She turned her back on the girl and spoke to the others. “You mark my words. Everyone here has a secret, not to mention a reason to hate Cassandra Stuart.”

“Except Sabrina,” Joe commented quietly.

Susan stared sharply at Sabrina. “Who knows? Maybe she had as much reason as the rest of us. But you couldn’t have tossed her over the balcony, could you, Sabrina? You turned down the invitation to come here last time. Why? Most writers would kill—if you’ll pardon the expression—for such an invitation.”

“Fear of flying,” Sabrina said sweetly.

Susan kept staring at her. “I’ll just bet,” she said. Then, whirling around, she left the group.

“I think she did it,” Brett said with such simple conviction that they all laughed.

“According to the police, no one did it,” Joe said.

“Cassandra didn’t commit suicide,” V.J. commented. “She loved herself far too much for that.”

“But I thought she had cancer,” Sabrina said.

“She did, but maybe it was treatable,” Brett said.

“Maybe she simply tripped,” Sabrina suggested.

“That’s probably just what happened,” another masculine voice interrupted. It was Tom Heart. Tall, lean, white-haired, handsome and dignified, he was the unlikely author of some of the most chilling horror novels on the market. He smiled, lifting a champagne flute to them all. “Cheers, friends, gentlemen and ladies, Brett, Joe, Sabrina... V.J. Good to see you all. And, Sabrina, you may be right on the money. From what I understand, Cassandra was shouting at Jon, who had simply had it with her mood of the moment and was walking away. Perhaps she leaned over to shout louder and leaned just a little too far. Ah, there’s our host now, with the lovely Dianne Dorsey on one arm and the exquisite Anna Lee Zane on the other.”

Sabrina looked toward the library door. Their host was indeed just arriving—in style.

He was in a tux, and achingly handsome. His height and dark good looks were enhanced by the elegance of his attire. His hair was slicked back, his crystalline eyes enigmatic as he talked and laughed with the two attractive women.

Anna Lee was a writer whose novels were based on true crimes. She was somewhere in her late thirties, very petite and feminine, and rumor had it that she happily chose her sexual partners from either gender.

Dianne Dorsey was considered the up-and-coming voice of horror. She was fond of creating alien beings with a bizarre hunger for human flesh. She was very young, having just turned twenty-two, and had published her first novel as a junior in high school, her second as a senior, and now, just out of Harvard, she was a veteran, with four books on the market. She was considered a genius and already had a huge following. Older writers had a tendency to be jealous of her amazing success at so tender an age, success acquired with what appeared to be so little effort. Sabrina was only envious because Dianne seemed to have acquired such self-assurance at so young an age. She would still give her eyeteeth for that kind of assurance. She had a feeling, though, that Dianne had had a tough childhood, that something had happened to make her a fighter even early on.

As she contemplated Dianne, Sabrina realized that Anna Lee was waving at her, smiling. She smiled and waved back.

Then Dianne spotted her, and she, too, grinned and waved. Sabrina lifted a hand in return. Dianne was into the Gothic look. She always wore black; her hair was jet-black; her lipstick was black; her skin was flawlessly white. She favored huge medallions, medieval-style jewelry and slinky clothing and yet managed her look with a sexy femininity that made her unique and appealing.

Still smiling, Sabrina suddenly became aware that Jon was watching her.

Once again, she was right next to Brett. Brett was, in fact, brushing up against her.

She quickly lowered her eyes. She told herself that she didn’t want to get involved with anyone. She hadn’t come here hoping to find something she had lost. She was a mature woman now, with a

good career, lots of friends and a great family. She was here as a guest, participating in an important charity event, and it was icing on the cake that it might be a boon to her career, as well.

Liar! an inner voice taunted.

“Ladies, gentlemen, dinner is being served in the great hall,” Jon announced. He excused himself from his two companions, and Sabrina bit her lip to keep from taking a step back as he walked purposefully toward her. “Ms. Holloway, you’re the only one here who might not have had a chance to meet everyone. Excuse me, Brett, may I claim your ex-wife for a moment?” he asked lightly.

“Sure—for a moment,” Brett replied in kind.

Sabrina was dismayed by the warmth that filled her when Jon took her by the arm, flashing his smile, and led her across the room to where a tall, slim man with curly blond hair and clean, handsome features was standing. He looked like an artist, impeccable in his dress clothing except for a tiny drop of paint on his tie. “Ms. Holloway, I’m sure you remember Joshua Valine, our sculptor extraordinaire.”

“Oh, yes,” Sabrina said, instantly remembering the man as his warm brown eyes touched hers. They’d met briefly in Chicago, at the booksellers’ convention. She’d been signing books, and one of the sales reps had introduced him. “We’ve met,” she told Jon, shaking Valine’s hand. “How nice to see you again. Your wax work is incredible. But so real and scary! I’m going to have nightmares about being tortured by my ex-husband,” she told him.

Joshua flushed and flashed a smile. “Thank you. Forgive me for putting you on the rack. You do live, though, you know.”

She laughed softly. “So I’ve been told.”

“You’re rescued from the rack on the command of the king.”

She nodded, adding, “I’m glad I didn’t have to be one of Jack the Ripper’s victims.”

Joshua wrinkled his nose, lowering his voice. “Susan Sharp does it well, though, don’t you think?”

“Shh. Susan has exceptional hearing,” Jon teased. “Let’s see, Joshua, is there anyone here that Sabrina might not know yet?”

“Have you met Camy Clark?” Joshua asked.

“Yes, she’s charming. You’re very lucky to have her, Jon.”

“She’s organized and incredibly competent, and I am very lucky,” Jon agreed. “How about...?”

As he turned to look around the room, they were joined by a solid-looking man with his bright red hair in an old-fashioned crew cut. He flashed a smile at Jon and Joshua and extended his hand to Sabrina. “We’ve met, but only briefly, at a conference in Tahoe. I don’t know if you remember me or not, but I’m—”

“Of course I remember you,” Sabrina told him. “You’re Thayer Newby. I went to every one of your lectures. You probably didn’t see me, because the rooms were so full every time you were speaking.”

Thayer Newby flushed to the roots of what there was of his hair. He’d been a cop for twenty years before becoming a writer, and his talks on police procedure were excellent.

“Thanks!” he said, staring at her and still holding her hand. He shook his head slightly. “How did McGraff ever let you get away?” he inquired. Then he suddenly blushed again. “Sorry, none of my business. I did see that picture, of course.”

Sabrina gritted her teeth, trying not to blush herself. But she could feel Jon at her side, looking at her, and she knew that of course anyone who had ever seen that tabloid photo would wonder just what had caused her to go running naked from her honeymoon suite.

“Brett and I have different ideas about marriage,” she said as smoothly as she could manage.

“But you’ve remained friends, huh?” Thayer said, trying to be casual.

Somehow the words didn't sound right. And Sabrina realized that he'd probably seen her with Brett most of the night and, like others, had jumped to the conclusion that they had remained more than just friends.

"Yes, we've managed that," she said flatly.

"Ah, there's Reggie," Jon said, lifting a hand. "Do you know Reggie Hampton?" he asked Sabrina.

Old yet somehow ageless, Regina Hampton might have been seventy or a hundred and ten. She had written scores of books about an amateur sleuth who was a grandmother and solved local mysteries with the help of her cat. Reggie was blunt, intelligent and a great deal of fun, and she had walked straight across to them as she came into the room. "Reggie," Jon began. "Do you know—"

"Of course I know the dear child!" Reggie exclaimed. She was tiny and thin and looked as if a breeze would blow her over, but she hugged Sabrina with an amazing strength that gave proof to the rumor that she was a tough old bird. "How lovely to see you here, Sabrina! Jon, however did you convince this lovely young thing to come visit a morbid, reclusive old man in his decaying castle?"

"The same way I convinced you, you old battle-ax," he teased her affectionately in turn. "I sent her an invitation."

"Well, it's just wonderful that you're here. We need new blood in on these affairs!" Reggie said.

"Ah," teased Susan, striding over to the group, "let's just hope we don't shed new blood, eh?" She smiled wickedly.

"Let's eat—I'm famished!" V.J. called from across the room. "Jon, you did announce dinner, didn't you? If we don't eat soon, we'll all expire, and not so mysteriously."

"Perish the thought!" Joe Johnston quipped.

"Perish! That is the thought," Reggie retorted.

"Right, Jon, let's eat," Brett said. "And by the way, think we could break out some brewskies? This champagne just doesn't cut it for me. How about you, Thayer?"

"There's a full bar in the great hall, with beer on tap and all kinds, domestic and imported, in the bottle. Go on in and help yourselves," Jon said.

He glanced down at Sabrina, his eyes strangely dark. She felt as if he were studying her, assessing her. And he looked as if he suddenly wanted to push her away from him.

"Excuse me, will you, please?" he said quietly. And then he was gone.

4

Reggie Hampton linked arms with Sabrina. “My dear, you are a breath of fresh air. Tell me, what’s been happening with you since July?”

Sabrina tried not to watch Jon Stuart as he strode away from her. She forced herself to focus on Reggie, and replied with enthusiasm, “I’ve been home visiting my family.”

“At the farm?”

“Yes. I have an apartment in New York now, but I’ve been staying at my folks’ and my sister’s for a while. She just had a baby, her first, a little boy. Naturally, we’re all just delighted. I spent a few months out there to help when the baby was born.”

“You should be having your own babies soon.”

“Reggie, not every woman has babies these days.”

“But you want children, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do, when the time is right.”

“Are you going to remarry Br—”

“No. Enough about me, Reggie. How is your family?”

Reggie told her briefly about her sons, grandsons and new great-granddaughter as they crossed the entry to the great hall, where dinner would be served. They all milled around the bar first, making drinks.

Brett popped up again to supply Sabrina with a gin and tonic, heavy on the lime, then whispered happily that he’d moved the place cards around at the dinner table and put her next to him. They sat down to a magnificent meal of pheasant and fish. As they ate, they all talked and laughed; it might have been a high school reunion. Then Jon, at the head of the table, rose, thanked them again for coming and reminded them that they were there not only for fun but also for the benefit of children’s charities. Each writer had submitted a favorite cause, and the one who solved the mystery claimed the lion’s share of the donations.

“When do we start?” Thayer called out.

“Tomorrow morning,” Jon replied. “Those with the energy are welcome to catch up on each other’s lives tonight. Those who are too exhausted from jet lag can get some sleep. Things will be pretty much the same as they were previous years. Camy and Joshua have worked out the particulars. I won’t know who the murderer is any more than any of you will. In the morning, you’ll all receive your character roles and a description of the situation. The murderer will discover who he—or she—is, and then he or she will have to get busy before being discovered. The murderer will have been assigned the order in which the victims are to be dispatched. The victims will be ‘murdered’ with a washable red paint, and naturally we’ll take care of any cleaning expenses. Any questions?”

“Sure,” Joe Johnston said, speaking up. “Even if I’m not the murderer, can I shoot Susan anyway?”

Laughter rose, then faded, as Susan stared them all down. “You’re right at the top of my list, too, Joe,” she told him sweetly. She pointed a finger at him and made a popping sound, as if she were pulling a trigger. “And you’ll be covered in something a lot worse than red paint!”

“Come, come, children, behave,” Anna Lee Zane drawled.

“Well, shit, I’m sorry!” Joe said.

Anna Lee shook her head, as if it were as impossible to deal with writers as with unruly children.

Jon rose. “If you all will excuse me, I have a few things to attend to,” he said. “Please, make yourselves at home. We’ll meet here at nine tomorrow morning. For the early birds, coffee will be on the buffet by six.”

He exited the great hall, closing the double doors behind him. Sabrina stared after him, biting her lower lip, wishing suddenly that she hadn’t come.

Brett's hand landed on hers where it rested on the table. "Want to see my room?" he inquired hopefully.

She withdrew her hand, smiling because he could be so much like a child, so eager, so unwilling to admit defeat.

"No. I'm going to bed."

"That will work with me."

"To sleep. I'm one of those guests with jet lag. I got to London late last night and came here this afternoon. I'm tired."

"All right. I'm right next door to you, if you change your mind. If things go bump in the night."

"Thanks. I'll keep that in mind," she told him.

She waved a good-night to the others as she escaped the great hall.

The castle foyer and magnificent staircase were empty. With the doors to the library and great hall closed, she suddenly felt very alone in the ancient edifice.

She hurried up the stairs and down the second-floor hallway with its Norman arches toward her own room.

It was huge, retaining a historical feel yet updated to offer incredible warmth and comfort. The bed sat on a richly carpeted dais, and heavy draperies hung at the balcony doors to ward off cold drafts. The closet and bath were large, and an antique desk sat to the side of a massive hearth. A fire had been built and stoked, and it burned brightly as she entered her room, hesitated, then carefully shot the bolt.

She kicked off her shoes and stripped away her stockings, then found herself wandering to the glass-paned balcony doors that closed out the night beyond. She opened them and stepped outside. From this vantage point she could see rolling fields, the shimmering waters of a small loch and the purple crests of mountains in the distance. The scenery, even by moonlight, was breathtaking. This trip was the opportunity of a lifetime.

She never should have come.

Sabrina drew a long, shaky breath. "So," she asked herself aloud, "did you come to try to convince yourself that your brief, shining moment in his company is completely over and forgotten? Or were you hoping to sleep with him just once more, whatever the consequences?"

She felt her cheeks redden. How humiliating. Would he sleep with her again? She undoubtedly had a reputation for being rather...casual. Just think of the way she had left Brett, running away naked....

Funny. Brett was okay. She liked being friends. It was even flattering that he still pursued her. What he had done was terribly wrong, but what she had done was wrong, as well. She had married him without truly loving him.

Because, of course, she had been in love with Jon Stuart.

A cool breeze suddenly wrapped around her, and she remembered being in New York City for the very first time and winding up at a party for one of her publicist's other clients, who had just had a Broadway opening. Sabrina had had no idea who the handsome party guest was when she met him, other than that his name was Jon. He'd had her laughing, telling her about the terrors of the big city and how it might well be a death-defying feat simply to survive her first experience with a New York cab driver.

Admittedly, she'd drunk too much. She'd been exhilarated with the success of selling her book and excited at being in his company. He had a car, and he offered to drive her back to her hotel.

She'd fallen asleep on his shoulder in the car, and when they'd reached her hotel, she was still drowsy, intoxicated and giddy. She remembered opening her eyes and seeing his face above hers, his eyes dark, marbled, fascinating. "We're here," he'd told her.

And she'd nodded, though she hadn't moved, and then he'd said, "I can carry you up to your room. Which is what I should do. Because if I bring you home with me, I'll take advantage of you. I won't be able to help myself."

Even with the breeze caressing her now on the balcony, she could still remember her reply.

"Please do."

No amount of alcohol could forgive that, she told herself now. She hugged her arms around her chest. Yet it had been wonderful. The best time of her life. They'd driven to his apartment in the city, and he'd carried her upstairs. He had undressed her in his bedroom, and, still dressed himself, he had demanded to know if she was sure....

Then he had kissed her, and for the rest of her life she would remember his touch on her body, his lips, burning, intimate, demanding, everywhere. She would remember him, the feel of his flesh, the touch of his hands, the mole at the small of his back....

The night had been pure magic. The next day they'd cooked breakfast together, wandered through the Metropolitan Museum of Art and gone out for Chinese before returning to spend the evening making love again. Absurdly, after all that, it wasn't until the next morning that she'd asked his last name and learned that he was "the" Jon Stuart, the well-known author.

Jon had been in the shower when his "fiancée," Cassandra, showed up. Sabrina herself had been wearing a terry robe, her hair wet and plastered around her face. She'd been stunned when the door opened. Cassandra had stared at Sabrina, looking her up and down, not appearing angry—just amused. Then she'd made a comment about Sabrina being an annoying little whore, thrown some money at her and told her to get out.

One of the biggest regrets of Sabrina's life was that she had done so—after throwing the money back, of course. She'd come from the farmlands of the Midwest, and even with a college education, a little work experience behind her and a four-year relationship with the captain of her college debate team, she was incredibly naive. Every time she replayed the scene in her head, she was newly humiliated and newly furious with herself. Where had her backbone been? Why hadn't she challenged the woman? She should have—but she hadn't. Maybe she had just been too stunned, or too insecure. She'd grabbed her own clothing and left.

Jon hadn't made any promises to her. He'd been honest, asking about her life, admitting his involvement with Cassandra, saying that they were on and off more often than a water spigot. When Sabrina looked back at the situation, she realized that she had simply been too afraid she might lose if Jon had had to make a choice between the two of them. Life, she'd since learned, meant taking chances. She'd just learned it a little too late.

Jon had tracked her down, all the way to Huntsville. But she'd told her mother to tell him that she'd gone to Europe. He'd written to her, telling her that he wasn't engaged, and that he'd had no commitments whatsoever the night they met. He'd asked her to contact him, since he hadn't been able to convince her mother to quit lying for her.

Sabrina had just reached the point of deciding she was being a worse fool not to respond when she heard that he and Cassie had suddenly done the deed, marrying after a late night in Las Vegas.

Not much later, she'd married Brett.

End of story.

Until she'd run naked from her honeymoon suite. And Cassandra Stuart had plummeted from her balcony into the waiting arms of death.

The wind was growing sharp. Sabrina shivered and looked out into the darkness.

The moon was high, struggling to shine through the clouds. Outdoor lights slightly illuminated the courtyard below. The castle was built in a horseshoe shape, surrounding the courtyard. The maid who had brought her to her room earlier had told her that the far end of the left wing comprised the master suite, with balconies opening to the central courtyard and to the rear.

Glancing in that direction, Sabrina saw the shape of a man standing on the far balcony in the moonlight. His shirt ruffled in the wind; his hair flowed back. He stood tall and still, staring at the moon.

Then he turned, and she knew he was watching her, and she was watching him.

It was Jon. And standing there, watching him, she wondered if he was in pain, if he was missing his wife, if he was reflecting on her death.

He lifted a hand, as if saluting her.

Sabrina backed away, right into the door, and for a moment a scream lodged in her throat as she thought that someone was behind her.

She felt a moment's strange fear. She was standing on a balcony. And whatever the situation, Cassandra had fallen to her death from a balcony not far away. She had plummeted into the arms of a statue of Poseidon below. His trident had torn into her, and she had died instantly, even before her husband had come running back to her. Poseidon still stood below that balcony, though the rosebushes surrounding his fountain were no longer in bloom.

It was so easy to feel that someone was standing behind her now, ready to push....

But when she spun around, no one was there. She went into her room and discovered that the bolt was still thrown.

The rooms were all supplied with brandy.

Sabrina hated brandy, but she poured herself a snifter, wrinkled her nose and swallowed a fairly large portion. "If you're going to survive this week, you're going to have to cool your imagination," she told herself.

She'd claimed downstairs that she was tired. And she was. Shaky, exhausted from the time change and lack of sleep.

But she couldn't seem to get drowsy.

She stayed awake for hours. She sipped brandy, making faces at the taste, and read some magazine she'd brought for the flight.

She had V.J.'s latest book, and after she finished the magazines she began to read, until she realized that she just couldn't concentrate. She finally lay down, determined that she had to get some rest.

But even when she finally slept, she tossed and turned and began to dream disturbing dreams.

In the darkness of the night, he moved down the steps, silent, a wraith. He tried to tell himself that it would all go well, that he didn't need to be afraid.

But he was afraid. Because he loved her.

They had prearranged their meeting, yet even so, he was suddenly, perhaps ridiculously, uneasy. In the ancient dungeon, he suddenly felt as if long-dead murderers had come to life, as if they were mocking him, telling him that he was no better, even if he hadn't actually performed the deed. The lighting was pale, purplish, seeming to cast a ghoulish fog over the faces of torturers, swordsmen and more. Executioners in their dark masks seemed to move, taunting him, warning him.

He came to the tableau of Lady Ariana Stuart upon the rack, and for a moment he paused, forgetting both fear and reason. She was the finest of all the pieces. Something in her eyes was real, a touch of the innocence and sincerity that belonged to Sabrina Holloway. Startled anew by the resemblance to the living woman so nearby, he was tempted to reach out and touch her, to rescue the beauty from the beast who threatened her.

"My love!"

The whisper drew him back to the present, and he spun around. She had come. She rushed to him, and he wrapped her in his arms. "Why are you so afraid? Why did we have to meet in secret?" he queried gently.

She shook her head against his chest. "This is all so dangerous. I know that they know. I know that we're in danger. I just wish..."

"Don't be so afraid. Don't create trouble before trouble appears."

She shook her head and stepped back. "You don't know how vicious, how dangerous, they can be!"

"Our game is dangerous, my pet. We mustn't overreact. We must just wait, listen, watch...and see what comes."

She leaned against him. "I'm so afraid. Hold me."

He did, feeling the movement of her body against his, her touch. He felt her tugging at his clothing. Felt her hands...finding bare flesh. To his amazement, he hardened instantly, a streak of desire flashing through him. He looked around at the ghoulish setting, amazed, somewhat aghast, and all the more excited because of it.

"Someone could come. Look where we are..."

They seemed to be staring at him. Headsmen in their black hoods, murderers, executioners, rogues. Joan of Arc, so saintly on her cross.

She laughed softly, and the sound washed over his senses. He groaned and slipped down with her, and within seconds they were sprawled out on the cold floor. She was as naked as a jaybird as purple light bathed them. She was insatiable, rising above him, crying out. He tried to hush her, but she laughed, and when they were both spent, she lay at his side and looked up at the faces surrounding them. "It was fun, like an orgy," she teased.

"You worry me."

"Come on. It was as if they were all watching. It was an incredible turn-on."

He hesitated. "You liked to watch...her," he said, suddenly realizing the truth of his own words. She shrugged. "So? That was a turn-on, too."

"But this is dangerous, meeting here, like this," he told her. "Everything we do now is dangerous. The days to come are dangerous. We don't know what people know, what they saw, what they might have suspected..."

"We'll be careful," she whispered. "We'll be okay. But I have to be with you..."

He nodded slightly.

She knew how to move him, how to make him need her. Because he loved her, of course.

He closed his eyes and opened them, then started.

She was looking at him. Lady Ariana Stuart was turned his way, and she was looking at him with her huge, wide, beautiful blue eyes.

She was watching.

He could feel her eyes. Looking at him, seeing him. Watching...

It was a turn-on.

And yet dangerous.

He was both aroused and afraid.

It was as if she knew....

She didn't want Jon Stuart; she'd told herself that time and time again. She wasn't absurdly, naively young anymore; she was older now, wiser. But in her dreams, she was lying in her bed, naked, waiting, wanting...

Because he was there. Tall, towering, dressed in black. Standing over her...

It was Jon.

It wasn't. The tall figure was surrounded by fog and changed with each slight flutter of a purple-gray breeze.

It was a torturer, intent upon her agony and destruction, and she was caught, tied, unable to move, to escape, because ropes bound her tightly, and all she could do was look up into the eyes of death with a silent, wax-cast scream....

She awoke with a start, shaking, drenched in sweat. She sat up wildly, looking around.

Her room was empty. The fire burned low; moonlight filtered in.

She could see plainly that she was alone, entirely alone.

And yet it seemed...

There was a presence, a scent, a feeling, something in the air. A feeling she couldn't shake that someone had been there. Jon? Or Brett? Or an artist's rendering of a medieval torturer in wax?

"Too much time in the dungeon," she told herself softly. But her unease persisted.

She leaped up. The bolt was still secure. She'd been dreaming, and she was alone.

Shaking, she curled back into bed and tried to sleep again. But the moon began to set, and soon daylight was filtering in.

She sat up again. "Oh, the hell with this!" she groaned aloud.

So she rose and showered and was the first one downstairs for the six o'clock coffee.

But not even coffee and sunlight could dispel the strange feeling that she hadn't been alone....

Someone had been with her in her locked and bolted room.

5

Sabrina had a pounding headache and felt so tired and wretched that she could barely sit up. So naturally the first person into the great hall for breakfast was Susan Sharp.

“Good morning! Nice to see you up!” Susan said with a cheerfulness that was doubly irritating. “Don’t you just love this place? I slept like a baby.”

“The castle is beautiful,” Sabrina replied.

Susan drew up the chair beside Sabrina’s at the polished oak table. “Can you believe that Cassandra absolutely hated this place?”

Sabrina told herself that she didn’t want to gossip, but with Susan there was little choice. And despite herself, she wanted to know everything she could about Cassandra Stuart.

“Did she really?”

Susan nodded grimly, stirring sugar substitute into her coffee. “Hated it. I never understood why Jon put up with her.” She shrugged. “Frankly, I never understood why he married her.”

“Well, she really was beautiful. And smart,” Sabrina heard herself comment.

Susan wrinkled her nose. “Yes, but...well, Jon is gorgeous himself. He could have dozens of women. Has had dozens of women. Why marry that one?”

“He must have loved her.”

“Well, maybe he did. But I can tell you this—he was ready to divorce her when she died.”

“How do you know?”

Susan added milk to her coffee. “Because I was here, remember? They were fighting like crazy. Jon has always loved it here. He didn’t grow up with money, you know. The family inherited this place, but it was a disaster, an albatross hanging around his neck when he first came into possession of the property. Cassandra’s family was swimming with cash—she never wanted or needed for anything. Jon’s dedicated to his children’s charities, and these little Mystery Weeks of his make some really big money. Cassandra didn’t like games, hated half of Jon’s friends. She couldn’t bear V.J., because V.J. would never suck up to her. She said whatever she damned well felt like saying—you know her. Cassie tortured Jon every time he held one of these. He’d be in the middle of something, and she’d supposedly be his hostess—and then she’d suddenly decide she simply couldn’t bear it and throw a tantrum or be off. I know Jon had decided that he was done with her when she died.”

“Susan, maybe they had problems,” Sabrina said, “but how can you possibly know their marriage was over?”

“Because I know Jon,” Susan purred. She leaned back, lifting her long-nailed fingers in a casual gesture. “But then again, Jon wasn’t the only one fighting with Cassandra. She and Anna Lee Zane had barely been civil to one another all week. For one thing, Cassandra had given a scathing review of Anna’s last book on national television in the States. And, of course, Anna is stunning, and she and Jon have been good friends for a very long time. Cassandra never understood the concept of friendship, especially not between a man and a woman, even a woman who goes both ways. Then again, I admit, I don’t quite get friendships, either. I mean, it’s hard to like a man and not want to sleep with him.”

Susan shrugged. “But that’s beside the point. Cassie also completely dished Tom Heart in a review that might have cost him a spot in a really important anthology that came out last year. And of course she was also afraid that Jon was sleeping with someone who was a guest here, and she herself was supposedly sleeping with someone else, as well. I don’t know if she really was or wasn’t, since she adored Jon. She really did. She just didn’t know how to be a wife to him. She was always jealous but always taunting him. It was as if she thought she had to let him know at all times that other men found her desirable, that she was a special prize he needed to cherish. Jon never did take well to threats. But then, she threatened everyone all the time—she seemed to need to hold something over the head of every single human being she ever met.”

“And you fought with her, too, of course.”

“Of course,” Susan said, smiling. “I’ve admitted I hated her. She was the worst bitch known to man.”

“Oh, come now!” Brett exclaimed, entering the great hall. He poured himself coffee and sat down at Sabrina’s other side. “Was Cassie really such a bitch? Or was she misunderstood? Maybe it was hard being married to Jon Stuart and giving in to his every whim. She loved cities, glamour, excitement, and he liked to tuck himself away here in the country and watch the wind blow.”

“That’s not true,” Susan said, staunchly defending Jon. “He has homes in London, New York and L.A., as well.”

“Poor fellow,” Brett murmured lightly.

“Poor fellow, indeed!” V.J. announced, sweeping into the room with an audible sniff. She ruffled Brett’s hair. “As if you’re going to be suffering financially after your next contract!”

Brett smiled sheepishly. “Okay, so I’m not a poor fellow, either. I’m a happy one right now. And I’m going to be really, really rich, as well. You truly should remarry me, Sabrina.”

“Not a chance, I’m afraid.”

“Sleep with me, then. Men always buy their mistresses better presents. And we were good together, right?”

Susan and V.J. were both staring at her.

“Brett!” she said, nearly strangling.

He ignored her protest, his eyes suddenly on Susan again. “Here you are, Sue, defending Jon now, but you seemed to be absolutely convinced he killed Cassandra when it happened.”

“Don’t be silly. He was outside when she fell.”

“He could have paid someone to do the deed,” Brett said, wagging his eyebrows.

“Isn’t it rather rude, the way we’re sitting around discussing our host as a potential murderer,” V.J. queried.

“But it is a Mystery Week,” Brett said.

As if on cue, Camy Clark came into the room bearing a stack of envelopes. “Good morning, everyone.”

“Everyone isn’t here,” Susan said snidely.

Sabrina frowned, wondering why the woman was continually so rude to Jon’s assistant. Camy didn’t intrude; she was quiet and tended to stay out of the way.

“Well, it’s still early,” Camy said. “But if you’d like—”

“Ah, you have our character descriptions and our instructions!” Brett said, flashing her one of his devastating smiles.

Camy flushed, smiling. “Yes, I do. Now remember, everyone is to know one another’s character but nothing else. You’ll receive more instructions as we go along. The murderer will, of course, know who he or she is and where to get the murder weapons. And remember, the murderer may have an accomplice. If you’re killed, you’re dead, but you’re a ghost, and you can still warn others of impending danger and help solve the crime.”

“I’m dying for my envelope, darling,” Susan told her, drawling the word dying.

The others laughed. As Camy began handing out the envelopes, more of their number began to arrive: Anna Lee, looking fetching and slim in stirrup pants and a halter top; Reggie in her inevitable flowered dress; Tom Heart, tall and dignified in a smoking jacket and flannel trousers; Thayer Newby in a Jets T-shirt and slacks; Joe Johnston, casual in a golf shirt and chinos; Joshua Valine looking very artistic, with a paint-smudged denim shirt over a plain white T and baggy pants; Dianne Dorsey in a calf-length skirt and sleeveless knit top. And Jon.

Jon, too, was casual, in a navy denim shirt, the sleeves rolled up, and form-hugging jeans. His dark hair was damp, as if he’d just showered, and Sabrina couldn’t help but wonder if he’d slept late... because he’d been up late, wandering restlessly around his castle at night. She reminded herself that

her door had been bolted. And that just because she hadn't forgotten a reckless sexual encounter in her youth, there was no reason to assume Jon might have any remaining interest in her whatsoever. Her reputation wasn't exactly a sparkling one.

She rose for more coffee. V.J. came up beside her, offering her cup to Sabrina to fill, as well.

"Ah, you're watching our host," V.J. whispered to her as Jon greeted Camy and Joshua, listening to some of their last-minute instructions.

"He's an intriguing man," Sabrina said noncommittally.

"And, of course, the question remains—is he a murderer? Does Susan really think so? Except I'm sure Susan wouldn't think of Cassie's death as murder. To Susan, if Jon did kill his wife, it was justifiable homicide."

V.J. shrugged, sipping her coffee. "Honey, to half the people here, killing Cassandra Stuart would have constituted a public service."

"Ladies!" Reggie admonished from behind them. "We're not supposed to speak ill of the dead."

"Even if the dead caused tremendous ills?" Joe Johnston whispered from behind her.

"Sabrina," Camy said, walking across the room to her. She stopped, flushed and corrected herself. "Ms. Holloway."

"Sabrina, please."

Camy flushed again. "Your envelope. You only get to know your character now. You'll get instructions later regarding what you're supposed to do and where you're supposed to go."

"Great, thanks."

"Do you have mine, dear?" V.J. asked.

Camy gave V.J. hers, then handed Reggie her envelope, as well.

"Ouch!" Reggie exclaimed, looking up. She smiled. "I'm the Crimson Lady, a stripper, trying—or pretending—to reform."

"Great," Thayer Newby groaned, flexing his muscles. "I'm the effeminate male dancer, JoJo Scuchi."

"JoJo Scuchi?" Brett said with a laugh.

"Check yours out," Thayer warned him.

Brett read the letter in the envelope and made a face. "I'm Mr. Buttle, the butler. Number two on the New York Times list, and they make me the butler!" he groaned.

Sabrina, reading her sheet, began to laugh.

"And who are you, my dear?" Brett demanded.

"The Duchess. I run the church choir," she told him.

"Oh, now that is apropos. The lady who ran naked from her honeymoon suite," Susan said, staring at Brett. "Neither of you has ever explained that situation," she reminded him smugly.

Sabrina had lived with what had happened for a long time now, but she still felt her temper rising and her cheeks reddening, especially since she realized that Jon had been watching the exchange. Waiting for a reply?

Or perhaps not, because he was the one who responded to Susan. "And I imagine they don't feel they owe you an explanation, Sue," he said.

Susan opened her mouth, then quickly shut it, lifting her chin.

"Ah, but Susan," Joe Johnston said, reading over Sabrina's shoulder, "the Duchess runs the choir by day—and a high-class call girl outfit by night!"

"Hey, it's a dirty job, but someone's got to do it," Brett declared. "Does the butler get to be in on it?" he asked.

"The butler always did it, you know," Reggie teased.

"I mean in on the sex," Brett said.

"You would," V.J. said with a sigh.

"You know I've always wanted to make it with an older woman," Brett stated.

“Older than what?” V.J. demanded tartly.

He smiled innocently. “Older than God, darling. That’s you, isn’t it?”

“Cute, boy, cute!” V.J. sniffed.

Dianne Dorsey suddenly started laughing. Sabrina leaned past V.J. to look at her. As usual, Dianne was in black. Black denim shorts, a ruffled black blouse, black socks and black hiking boots. “You’ll never guess who I am.”

“Who?” V.J. obligingly inquired.

“Mary, the Hare Krishna!”

They all started to laugh.

“Susan, who are you?” V.J. asked.

Susan shuddered and looked up at Camy accusingly. “I’m Carla, the call girl with the clap.”

Another round of laughter followed, but Susan was not amused. She glared at Camy. “You did that on purpose!”

“Sue, chill!” Brett said.

“Camy didn’t make these up, you know that. We hire writers from the game company,” Jon said impatiently. He sighed. “Trust me, mine is worse.”

“Why, who are you?” Susan demanded.

“Demented Dick,” Jon said dryly. “Serial killer, supposedly cured by his cousin, Sally Sadist, the psychologist.”

“That’s me!” Anna Lee called out.

“And I’m Nancy, the naughty nurse, hired by Sally Sadist to look after you. Nancy the naughty nurse!” V.J. repeated with a shudder.

“You think that’s bad?” Joe Johnston said, laughing. “I’m Tilly the transvestite, Demented Dick’s mother!”

“Hey, Mom!” Jon said, and they all laughed.

“Oh, no!” Tom Heart groaned, looking at Joe.

“What?” Joe demanded.

“I’m Demented Dick’s dad—which means you’re my wife. Ugh!”

“Well, baby, you’re sleeping on the couch,” Joe told him.

As they teased, Jennie Albright, the housekeeper, with the help of two younger maids, brought in the food platters, setting them up on the buffet. Jon thanked them and announced, “Breakfast is served. While we eat, Joshua will show you the weapons with which you might be ‘killed.’ We’ll wait until everyone is seated.”

With a lot of talking and good-natured joking, they fixed plates of food and took their places at the table. Sabrina was glad to find herself next to V.J. rather than Susan, but Brett managed to remain on her other side. He was definitely trying to create the impression that they were a twosome.

Jon took a seat toward the end of the table between Anna Lee Zane and Thayer Newby. Anna spoke to him, and he lowered his head, smiling. Sabrina couldn’t help but wonder if something had gone on between the two of them, since it was rumored that Jon and Cassandra had both been having extramarital affairs at his last Mystery Week. Still, so much about the past was speculation. What wasn’t speculation, however, was the fact that Cassandra Stuart had died.

Joshua cleared his throat, smiling. “Ladies and gentlemen, here is the situation. Demented Dick is newly home to take over as heir apparent to the family fortunes, due to the untimely—and unnatural—demise of his older brother, Demented Darryl. Naturally, since he had the most to gain, Demented Dick is a likely suspect in his brother’s murder, but since this is a whodunit, it’s for you to discover who did in Demented Darryl and why. Everyone in the house has a past and is hiding a secret, and it will turn out in the end that everyone had a reason for wanting to do Darryl in. The killer—or killers—are naturally afraid of what everyone else may know, and therefore, one by one, they will begin

picking off the others. Now, there are a number of murder weapons, since the killer is to continue his or her spree until he or she is caught or until the entire household has expired.”

“So shoot,” Joe said. “What are our weapons?”

“Fine, we’ll start with the pistol,” Joshua said, showing them the gun in question. “Shoots red paint.” He proceeded to lift the other toy weapons as he described them. “Rifle, shoots red paint. Bowie knife, complete with ‘blood’ sack. Jackknife, bow and arrow, heavy vase, rope with noose, poison—actually, it’s a grape drink guaranteed to turn your mouth purple for twenty-four hours—and last but not least, a candlestick. So that’s it, ladies and gentlemen. There will be clues left around the castle, and instructions for your characters will be slipped to you at various times as the week moves on. I’ll warn you all, the first murder is planned for sometime today, so everyone take care. Oh, and anyone who chooses—living or dead—can meet at seven each evening for cocktails, to be followed by dinner at eight, and at that time discuss the case. More coffee, anyone?” he asked blandly.

“Only if you drink it first,” Anna Lee replied dryly.

“Sure,” Joshua said. He procured the coffee carafe from the buffet, poured himself a cup, sipped it, then walked around to Anna Lee’s place, pouring her more. Smoothing back his blond hair, he leaned close to her, a teasing light in his eyes. “One can’t be too cautious around here.”

“I’ll take more coffee, too,” Jon said, pushing his cup forward. “Late night,” he explained.

“Death by poison!” V.J. said with a shudder. “Well, I’d been intending to go on a diet anyway. I can live without food, but never without coffee.”

“Never without a good gin and tonic,” Reggie argued.

“No, never without beer,” Brett corrected.

“Well, as far as coffee and food—or even cocktails and beer—go, you can indulge now,” Jon said dryly. “The game doesn’t begin until we’ve all exited the dining room. Everyone is then to go to his or her room for the next hour, while Camy and our master sculptor make sure that the weapons you’ve just seen have been properly hidden. If someone finds the weapon with which he or she was to be murdered, it can be used against the killer. But for now, feel free. Indulge.”

“Well, then, let me have just a wee bit more toast,” V.J. said, adding a touch of a Scot’s accent to her voice.

“I’ll go for the bacon,” Joe said.

“Toast for me, too, V.J.,” Sabrina called to her.

And suddenly everyone at the table was hungry again. They ate like a group of loggers about to head out for hours of hard labor. But, finally, one by one, they began to leave. Sabrina, seeing Brett ahead of her, purposely lagged behind, lowering her eyes as she sipped her coffee. When she lifted her gaze again, she was startled to realize that only she and Jon remained in the room. He was seated across the table, studying her.

“It really is good to see you again,” he told her, voice husky, eyes firmly on her.

To her dismay, she felt a fluttering in her heart. “Thank you.”

He sat back, still watching her. She felt as if his eyes were penetrating her skin, and she groped about quickly for something casual to say.

“So, are you the killer?” she inquired.

He arched a brow. “Are you talking about the game—or real life?”

She flushed. “The game.”

“If I were,” he answered slowly, “I couldn’t tell you. Just as you couldn’t tell me. It wouldn’t be fair.” He leaned forward then, a dry smile curling his lips. “But don’t you want to know about real life?”

She stared back at him, feeling as if her breakfast had suddenly sunk from her stomach to her feet. “Jon, I didn’t come here to question you or to bring back unhappy memories.”

“Why not? It’s why most of the others did, both my friends and my enemies. Don’t you want to know the truth? Or did you really run away from me simply because you didn’t give a damn?”

She wasn't going to answer that, so she stared at him and demanded, "So did you kill Cassandra? What a question! If you had killed her, you couldn't tell me, could you? There's no real difference between the game and real life."

"Oh, there's a difference, all right. As far as the game goes, I can't tell you if I'm the killer or not. As for real life...no, definitely, decidedly, on pain of every torture God or the devil could inflict, no. I did not kill my wife. Do you believe me?"

"Yes."

He arched a brow, sitting back cautiously. "Why? Why should you believe me?"

"Well, I..."

"You what? You know me?" he queried, taunting slightly. He shrugged. "You know me," he repeated mockingly.

"I don't pretend to really know you," she snapped back angrily. "But you were nowhere near her when she fell—"

"She was pushed," he stated flatly.

She lifted her hands. "How do you know?"

"Because I knew Cassandra. Very well. She was far too fond of herself for suicide."

Seated at the huge table, his eyes dark and sharp, he looked like a medieval lord, powerful ruler of all his domain. But there was a touch of bitterness in his voice, and despite his harsh demeanor, she reflected that the years since Cassandra's death must have hurt him very badly. Had he really loved her, despite their fights? Or had there been another woman involved, an affair gone tragically wrong? Had there been another man, and did Jon Stuart still harbor anger deep in his soul?

He was still staring at her, his dark marbled gaze seeming to pierce through her, seeking something, giving nothing. The lines around his eyes had deepened since she'd seen him last; he had aged, and yet he was even more attractive than he had been, and she felt as if she could feel his power reaching out across the table to mesmerize her.

Was she a fool? Even if he hadn't pushed Cassandra himself, he could have been her killer. Plenty of people seemed to think it would have been a miracle if he wasn't the one to murder her....

He was still watching, waiting.

She shrugged. "From what I understand, nothing is certain. You can't be certain of anything, just because you think you knew her. She might have simply slipped and fallen. She might have been reckless. We none of us really ever know one another, do—"

"Cassandra didn't kill herself."

"Maybe that's what you want to believe."

"Maybe it's the truth."

"Jon, she had cancer. She might have felt that—"

"She was already undergoing treatments."

"But she was a woman, and women can be vain. Maybe she was afraid of losing her hair, her looks—or even losing you because of it."

He shook his head impatiently. "She knew about the cancer when we were married. She told me about it, so she knew I was aware of everything we might be going through. She didn't kill herself. And she was very coordinated. She didn't trip."

"Well, then, in your mind, you definitely believe that someone murdered her."

"Yes," he said.

"But who—"

He leaned forward. She could see leashed tension in the pounding of a vein in his throat.

"Someone killed her," he said harshly, "but I didn't. And the matter of who did is not your concern. I don't want you involved in any way."

"But—"

"Why did you run away from me?" he asked abruptly.

“What? I—I—”

“Don’t stutter. And don’t tell me that it was a long time ago, or that you don’t know what I’m talking about.”

She lifted her hands. “Cassandra came. I left.”

“Why?”

Sabrina stared at him blankly. “It really was a long time ago—”

“Why?” he interrupted more heatedly.

“She said she was your fiancée. Apparently, she was.”

He shook his head angrily. “We were broken up. I had no commitments. I told you that.”

She shrugged. “But you married her.”

“Later. Yes, I did marry her. She was beautiful and tempting and all the rest, and we did have a history between us. And she was afraid of facing her illness alone, and she wanted me to be with her, and yes, she was a bitch as well, and yes again, it wasn’t working at all and I was planning on getting a divorce.”

There was a strange anger in his voice, as if he were revealing intimacies under duress, as if the words were spilling from him against his will. Then his tone changed abruptly and he queried wryly, “And what about you? Running naked from your honeymoon suite in Paris?”

“That was a long time ago as well, and it’s really—”

“None of my business? You’re absolutely right. It isn’t. But that doesn’t mean I don’t want to know.” He smiled a little. “Whenever you’re ready to tell me.”

She stared at him, surprised to find that she was not offended. His words might have been blunt, even arrogant, but from the way he smiled, she suddenly realized that he understood a great deal.

“Hey!”

Camy Clark came back into the great hall and put her hands on her hips. “You guys are supposed to return to your rooms for the next hour—and that means you, too, boss!” she said firmly.

“Okay, okay, we’re leaving,” Jon assured her.

He got to his feet with a lithe, easy movement and managed to be at Sabrina’s seat before she could rise. He stood behind her, graciously pulling out her chair. His scent was masculine and subtle—of soap and a hint of aftershave. He remained one of the most attractive and sensual men she had ever met, and even without touching, she could feel him at her back with every fiber of her being. She was tempted to turn around and throw herself at him.

Naturally, she didn’t.

She rose, thanked him and smiled at Camy. And, leaving the great hall, she fairly flew up the stairs.

Yet as she reached her door on the second floor, she felt him behind her again. Knew he was there before he spoke.

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