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965
April

American ROMANCE

MURIEL JENSEN
That Summer in Maine



Muriel Jensen

That Summer In Maine

«HarperCollins»

Jensen M.

That Summer In Maine / M. Jensen — «HarperCollins»,

A Season of Change
Spending the summer with sexy single dad Duffy March was not exactly what Maggie Lawton had planned for her first vacation in years. Yes, she needed a rest, but sleeping in one of Duffy's guest rooms—with the dangerously attractive man from her past right next door—was certainly not relaxing! Yet that summer in Maine was about to change her life in unimaginable ways. Unexpected kisses on a sunlit beach, entertaining "family" frolics in the surf—all of these magical moments had Maggie rethinking her carefully scheduled life. Her wounded heart yearned for all Duffy and his adorable little boys offered, but could Maggie settle in for a long winter's nap as the wife and mother they so desperately craved?

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Dear Reader,

I celebrate twenty years of writing for Harlequin just as Harlequin's American Romance line celebrates twenty years of publishing books for you. So how appropriate that my latest release, *That Summer in Maine*, is offered as part of American Romance's 20th Anniversary Celebration.

I feel a particular devotion to the line because of its promise to produce books about heart, home and happiness, because—given those ingredients—anything is possible. My life is a case in point.

My mother died when I was four months old, and her sister and brother-in-law extended themselves to give me a home.

In Los Angeles, a city of millions, the one man in the world who could understand my need for kids, cats and chocolate found me and offered me his heart.

And when infertility threatened to deprive us of the children we wanted, we found three of them anyway—and all at once! Happiness!

Everything you want is out there—you just have to believe in love. And read Harlequin American Romance for inspiration.

My best wishes to you!



Dear Reader,

Welcome to another wonderful month at Harlequin American Romance. You'll notice our covers have a brand-new look, but rest assured that we still have the editorial you know and love just inside.

What a lineup we have for you, as reader favorite Muriel Jensen helps us celebrate our 20th Anniversary with her latest release. *That Summer in Maine* is a beautiful tale of a woman who gets an unexpected second chance at love and family with the last man she imagines. And author Sharon Swan pens the fourth title in our ongoing series *MILLIONAIRE*, *MONTANA*. You won't believe what motivates ever-feuding neighbors Dev and Amanda to take a hasty trip to the altar in *Four-Karat Fiancée*.

Speaking of weddings, we have two other tales of marriage this month. Darlene Scalera pens the story of a jilted bride on the hunt for her disappearing groom in *May the Best Man Wed*. (Hint: the bride may just be falling for her husband-to-be's brother.) Dianne Castell's *High-Tide Bride* has a runaway bride hiding out in a small town where her attraction to the local sheriff is rising just as fast as the flooding river.

So sit back and enjoy our lovely new look and the always-quality novels we have to offer you this—and every—month at Harlequin American Romance.

Best Wishes,

Melissa Jeglinski

Associate Senior Editor

Harlequin American Romance

That Summer in Maine

Muriel Jensen



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To the Dinner Dames: Bobbi, Sunny, Dorothy and Susan

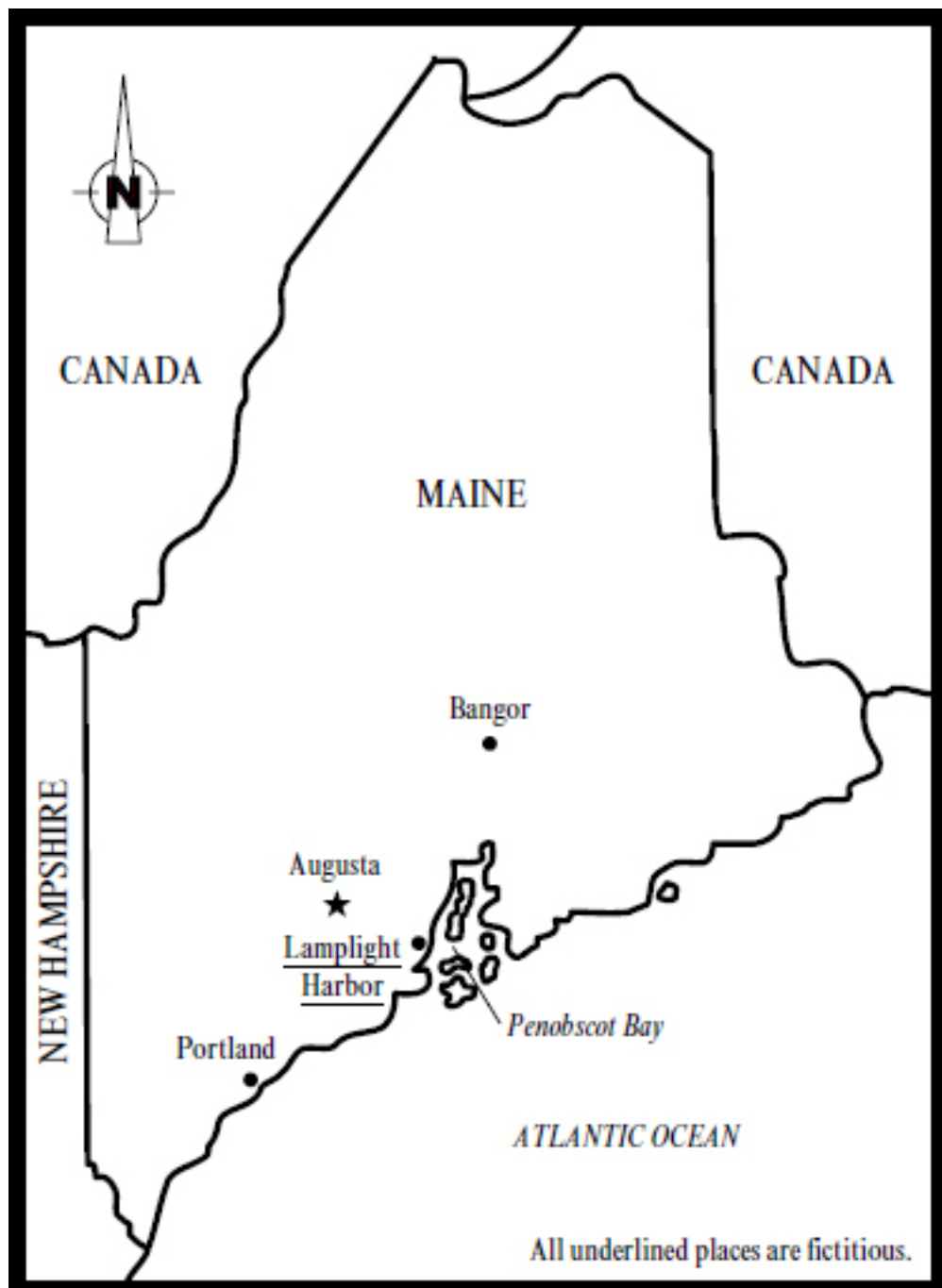
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Muriel Jensen and her husband, Ron, live in Astoria, Oregon, in an old foursquare Victorian at the mouth of the Columbia River. They share their home with a golden retriever/golden Labrador mix named Amber, and five cats who moved in with them without an invitation. (Muriel insists that a plate of Friskies and a bowl of water are not an invitation!)

They also have three children and their families in their lives—a veritable crowd of the most interesting people and children. In addition, they have irreplaceable friends, wonderful neighbors and “a life they know they don’t deserve, but love desperately anyway.”

Books by Muriel Jensen

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176—THE MALLORY TOUCH
200—FANTASIES AND MEMORIES
219—LOVE AND LAVENDER
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267—STRINGS
283—SIDE BY SIDE
321—A CAROL CHRISTMAS
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414—RACING WITH THE MOON
425—VALENTINE HEARTS AND FLOWERS
464—MIDDLE OF THE RAINBOW
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507—THE UNEXPECTED GROOM
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569—THE COURTSHIP OF DUSTY'S DADDY
603—MOMMY ON BOARD *
606—MAKE WAY FOR MOMMY *
610—MERRY CHRISTMAS, MOMMY! *
654—THE COMEBACK MOM
669—THE PRINCE, THE LADY & THE TOWER
688—KIDS & CO. *
705—CHRISTMAS IN THE COUNTRY
737—DADDY BY DEFAULT **
742—DADDY BY DESIGN **
746—DADDY BY DESTINY **
756—GIFT-WRAPPED DAD
798—COUNTDOWN TO BABY
813—FOUR REASONS FOR FATHERHOOD
850—FATHER FEVER **
858—FATHER FORMULA **
866—FATHER FOUND **
882—DADDY TO BE DETERMINED **
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Prologue

June 23, 9:53 p.m.

Somewhere in the Pyrenees Mountains

Kidnapped!

Maggie Lawton offered sincere apologies to Robert Louis Stevenson as she assessed her situation. She watched with a weird sort of disassociation as the leader of the Basque separatists who'd ambushed her party of six on a hiking trail in the Parc National des Pyrenees spoke to his small army of men gathered around the campfire. They all wore the red boina or beret that was a political statement and a badge of pride for the movement.

To distract herself from the nighttime chill, she remembered that she'd played a kidnapped Arabian princess years ago in her one and only foray into musicals. It had run just fourteen months, and she'd been glad when it was over. Her costume had been skimpy and the theater cold.

She tried to remember the lyrics of the number she sang when captured by Bedouins and held for ransom. It had been jaunty and heroic and she'd sung it loudly and with broad gestures, hoping her enthusiasm would disguise the fact that she had a poor voice.

"Why, for God's sake, are you humming?" Baldrich Livingston, her costar in several long runs at London's Old Vic, and the grumpiest man in Europe, glowered at her in the light of the campfire. "There's no audience beyond the lights, dear heart, and no intermission in fifteen minutes! This is real! Our pal le compte has gotten us into it this time!"

Gerard Armand, Comte de Bastogne, leaned around Glen and Priscilla Thicke to defend himself. Maggie and her companions sat side by side on the cold ground, their wrists tied behind their backs. "Oh, certainement! Blame me! Celine and I had plans to go to Monte Carlo for the weekend, but the four of you barge into my villa uninvited!"

Glen, who was Maggie's agent, a practical man in his early fifties, took exception to that. "It was your birthday, Jerry. We came to surprise you and help you celebrate."

"You came," he returned, "because my servants spoil you and you are able to bask in my reflected glory. You theater people have wealth but no style, unless you borrow it from your royal friends!"

Baldy rolled his eyes. "Please don't say bask."

"Yes," Prissie added while adjusting the sleeves of her chic little hiking jacket. "And you know very well you could not have taken your chère aimée to Monte Carlo, Jerry. She may be old enough for your bed, but I'm sure she's far too young to gamble." That observation made, Prissie turned her attention to the Basque leader. "Monsieur! Monsieur! May we have water, please? We have been sitting here in the cold for hours! I'd like something sparkling, not still."

Baldy rolled his eyes again and even Glen said under his breath, "Priss, shut up."

She bristled indignantly. "Why? If they want to hold us for ransom or to make some political point, that's fine. I'm sure the publicity won't hurt. But I don't intend to die of thirst or starvation while we wait for rescue."

"Do you know nothing?" Gerard demanded. "These people are not playing! They are terrorists! Murderers! They would kill us in a heartbeat if—"

"Monsieur le Comte!" The leader of their kidnappers, a muscular man of average height and considerable presence, paced in front of them, an Uzi hooked over his shoulder. He was handsome, but there was a zealot's fever in his eyes.

Maggie felt a chill trickle down her spine as his gaze touched each one of her companions, rested on her a moment, then focused on Gerard. "You malign me," he said in an amiable tone that was eerie for all its gentleness. "I fight for my people, though my French Basque brothers are more passive and peaceful than our cousins in Spain, whom I prefer to emulate. We are descendants of

the original Iberians and have lived here since before the Celts arrived thirty-five hundred years ago, yet every civilization to live here has preferred to pretend we do not exist. They've pushed us higher and higher into the mountains. I am not a murderer, monsieur. I'm simply trying to find a place for my people."

"What do you think we can do for you?" Baldy asked in a voice slightly thinner than his usually commanding center-stage tones.

The man smiled and took several steps to stand in front of Maggie. "Your designer clothes highlight rather than disguise who you are. Maggie Lawton, American-born star of the British stage. Baldrich Livingston, son of a Liverpool dockworker, former star of London Weekend Television and now Miss Lawton's leading man. Glen and Priscilla Thicke, powerful theatrical agent and his Long Island society wife, and le compte de Bastogne, toast of every social affair in Europe, and his lover, the daughter of French businessman Etien Langlois and his fashion designer wife, Chantal."

He paced a little and drew a deep breath.

"I believe the London Mail calls you The Wild Bon Vivants because of your penchant for parties."

"One is here," Prissie said, "to have a good time."

The leader nodded. "Here I have had it all wrong," he said, as though her words were a revelation. "I thought we were here to ease the plight of our fellow man."

"And yet your actions," Maggie said, "have increased our plight."

"It will be over soon, madame," he said genially. "I have just spoken to your State Department. Either your ransom will bring us a small fortune with which to continue our work, or your deaths will make a strong statement about our dedication to our cause."

Prissie gasped, and Celine began to sob. The men subsided in the face of the grim truth Maggie suspected but hadn't been anxious to say aloud.

The leader raised an eyebrow at Maggie's continued calm.

"You doubt my commitment, Mrs. Lawton?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I do not," she replied, thinking how liberating it was to have no fear of death. For two years she'd carried the burden of having to go on living. But now her fearlessness might finally stand her in good stead. "Early in my career I was in a film about Miguel Angel Blanco." He'd been a Basque politician murdered by ETA, a radical group dedicated to securing a united Basque state.

He nodded. "Basta Ya. I saw it." He studied her with sudden intensity. "Was that beautiful blond girl you?"

She had to smile at his sincere surprise. Apparently, the past two years had not been kind to her. "You are no gentleman, sir. That was more than twenty years ago, and my makeup man was not along on this hike."

A subtle change took place in his expression, and he sat down on a flat rock opposite her. "Yes," he said slowly. "You have had a tragedy. I seem to remember the headlines. Something to do with a rail accident just outside of Paddington Station."

The need to curl into the fetal position tried to take control of her. She fought it.

He nodded, as though he suddenly remembered. "My mother," he said with a curiously gentle smile, "thinks you are the finest actress of your generation. She wept as she told me. You lost your husband and your children. Two boys."

"Good God!" Baldy exploded beside her. "Why not just smash her in the face with your Uzi?" He leaned toward her protectively. "You might be able to explain away murder as serving your cause, but torture only proves you a villain."

The man didn't even turn Baldy's way. His dark eyes, compassionate under their fervor, held hers.

“I mean you no pain, madame. I have lost friends and family in this campaign and I mention it only to remind you that life must go on. If we lose heart, we lose everything.”

“Mine was ripped out,” she replied. “I no longer have one.”

He put a hand to her knee and patted gently, the gesture curiously fraternal. “Ah, but you do. It sleeps after great tragedy, but it will stir again. There is still passion in you onstage.”

She shrugged. “When I’m onstage, that isn’t me. I’m someone else. And there’s no one to pay my ransom. I have no family left. I’m afraid I’ll have to be a political statement rather than a continuation of your work.”

He frowned at her. “It alarms me that you would prefer that. I see it in your eyes.” Then he smiled. “I know you have a father who loves you very much.”

She sat up in alarm. “It would be cruel to frighten an old man for nothing. I assure you he has no money to pay a ransom for me.”

One of his men shouted to him and beckoned him with the radio. He rose gracefully to his feet and shook his head at her. “Take a breath, madame. Inhale the wind and the night. There is much to live for.”

“Do not call my father,” she ordered his retreating figure.

He didn’t hear her. Or if he did, his cause was more important than her concerns for a lonely old man.

“It’ll be okay, love,” Baldy comforted, nudging her with his shoulder. “There’ll be a public outcry when the world learns we’ve been taken. The army will mobilize. Citizens will arm themselves with torches and pitchforks and come to our aid.”

“You’re the one lost in a script, Baldy,” she said grimly, stretching gingerly to try to ease the pain in her shoulders. She longed for the moment a little while ago when she hadn’t really cared whether she lived or died.

Now she was worried about her father.

Chapter One

June 23, 7:05 p.m.

Lamplight Harbor, Maine

Duffy March was already formulating a plan as he listened to Elliott Lawton wind up the story of his daughter's kidnapping. Under the professional assessment of danger, and the knowledge that he'd have to argue for a place among the gendarmes responding to the scene, was the awareness that this was the scenario he used to dream about when he was eight and Maggie was his sixteen-year-old baby-sitter. Her father worked for the State Department, while his taught history at Georgetown University.

Then nothing had separated them but eight years and a stockade fence between his parents' property in Arlington and the Lawtons', but that had changed considerably since she'd moved to Europe.

She was now the much-adored star of the London stage, and the widow of a prominent banker, while he was the single father of two, who owned and operated a security company. He had a staff of forty who'd helped him acquire a worldwide reputation among the noble and the famous who needed protection. The living was good, with a penthouse apartment in Manhattan and a very large waterfront home on the coast of Maine where he and the boys spent the summers.

"What I fear the most," Elliott confided as he paced the broad deck that looked out on the ocean, "is that...she'll be happy to let it all go bad."

Charlie March, Duffy's father, who'd flown the light plane that had brought them here from Arlington right after the State Department called Charlie with the news, caught his friend's arm and pushed him into a chair. "Sit down, Elliott, before we have to resuscitate you."

Charlie sat beside him and shook his head grimly at his son. "She's had a sort of death wish since she lost Harry and the boys. He's afraid she'll do something reckless and...you know."

"Tell me you can go to France," Elliott pleaded, on his feet and ignoring his drink. "I know the gendarmes will do all they can, but with six hostages and men with guns everywhere, I'm so afraid she'll literally get caught in the crossfire. I can get you clearance to accompany them. And you have your own connections there, don't you? Didn't you work for a member of the French parliament once?"

He nodded. Gaston Dulude, who'd waged war against a band of French drug dealers, had wanted protection for his wife and himself as the case went to trial.

"Of course I'll go to France," Duffy assured him, "but my housekeeper's on vacation. You'll have to stay with Mike and Adam, Dad."

Charlie nodded. "Of course."

"I'll stay, too," Elliott promised. "What can we do to help you get ready?"

"You can get me that clearance, Mr. Lawton," Duffy said, pointing to the phone, "while I get myself a flight to Paris."

"Just get packed," Elliott said. "I'll get you a plane, too."

As Duffy headed for the stairs, the back door slammed and his boys came racing through the kitchen into the living room. They'd been at a birthday party for the Baker twins, boys Mike's age who lived two doors over.

Mike, seven, led the way, stick-straight black hair flopping in his eyes, the red sweater and jeans that had been pristine just a few hours ago now smeared with food or finger paints, or both. Four-year-old Adam followed in his dust, the food and finger paints smeared across his face as well as his clothes. He had Lisa's fair good looks and passionate personality.

The boys ignored Duffy completely and went straight for their grandfather. "I saw your car, Grandpa!" Mike exclaimed.

Wisely, Charlie sat down as Mike flew into his lap. Adam followed, wrapping his arm gleefully around his grandfather's neck. Duffy saw Elliott turn away, holding the phone to his ear and blocking the other so that he could hear, using the call as an excuse to be able to focus his attention elsewhere.

It had to be hard for him, Duffy guessed, to see Charlie enveloped by his grandchildren when he'd never see his own again.

"Are you staying for dinner?" Mike asked.

As Duffy topped the stairs, he heard his father reply that he was staying a little longer than that.

Duffy had packed a small bag, made a call to his office in New York and was ready to go when the boys rushed into his room as though pursued. Mike always traveled at top speed, and Adam was determined that his older brother never escape him.

Duffy sat on the edge of his bed to explain his sudden departure.

"When are you coming back?" Mike climbed up next to him and leaned into his arm, looking worried. "Grandpa said he didn't know."

"I think three or four days," Duffy replied, lifting Adam onto his knee. "If it's going to be longer, I'll call you."

"Grandpa said you're going to help a friend."

"Yes."

"He said bad guys took her and you have to get her back."

"Yes. But I'm going to have a lot of help."

Mike sighed. "You won't get shot, right, 'cause you always know what you're doing?"

Duffy liked to think Mike's faith in him wasn't misplaced. "That's right. I'll be fine. And so will she. I'll be back home before you know it."

"You're friends with a girl?" Adam asked. He screwed up his pink-cheeked face into a ripple of nose, lips and chin, and crossed his bright blue eyes. "We don't have any girls around here 'cause we don't like 'em."

Duffy laughed and squeezed him close. "I like them. I just don't happen to have one. But I would if I could."

That was apparently beyond Adam's comprehension. "They're silly and they're afraid of snakes."

"I thought you were afraid of snakes," Mike needled.

Adam shrugged off the reminder. "That was when I was little."

Mike rolled his eyes at Duffy. "He's a real giant now," he said under his breath.

Adam socked him on the shoulder.

Duffy caught his hand and reminded, "Hey! No hitting, remember? And no giving Grandpa any trouble while I'm gone. He's getting older and he can't chase you down or climb trees to get you when you've gone too high."

"If we're perfect," Mike bargained, "can we go to Disney World before summer's over?"

They'd talked about that a few times during the year, and though Duffy had made no promises, it was on his agenda.

"You think you can be perfect?" Duffy teased Mike.

Mike nodded, then qualified that with his head tilted in Adam's direction. "But I'm not sure he can do it."

"I can, too!" Adam raised a fist to punch him again, then at Duffy's expression, thought better of it and withdrew it. "What is perfect?"

"It means really, really good," Mike informed him. "No mistakes."

Duffy lifted Adam onto his hip and let Mike drag his overnight bag toward the stairs. "Perfect's a little hard to strive for. Just listen to Grandpa, stay in the yard like you're supposed to, unless Grandpa says it's okay to go next door, and eat your vegetables."

Adam made another face as they started down the stairs. “What if Grandpa makes eggplant like Desiree does sometimes?”

“I’ll ask him not to.” Duffy turned to Mike, who struggled with the bag. “Want me to take that?”

Mike shook his head. “I got it, Dad.”

Duffy watched Mike with love and pride, and thought as he had many times over the past three years, that taking him had been one of the best moves he’d ever made.

At the bottom of the stairs, Charlie took the bag from Mike.

“I’m flying you to Kennedy,” he said, “to meet an old CIA pal of Elliott’s who’s taking you to Paris. Elliott’s staying with the boys.”

“Tell him about the eggplant!” Adam whispered loudly in Duffy’s ear.

THE FOLLOWING DAY Duffy lay on his stomach in the grass at the top of a slope in the Pyrenees. A dozen gendarmes were ranged around him, looking down on the Basque camp in the meadow below. The air was sweet with wildflowers, the whispered sounds around him spoken in an unfamiliar language, and somewhere in that meadow, the woman who’d saved his life when she was a teenager waited for rescue. If it weren’t for the glare in his eyes and the itch of grass and insects under his black sweater, he’d think this wasn’t real.

But it was. He peered through binoculars to the scene below and saw men in camouflage and berets—the separatists. Then he noticed two men, hands tied behind their backs, sitting under a tree, and two women, hands also tied, one lying on the ground, presumably asleep, the other walking agitatedly back and forth. She was slender and moved as though she was young. He tried to focus on their faces, but they were too far away.

Maggie was blond, though, and both women were dark-haired. He scanned the camp for some sign of her and the third man. He finally spotted them across the camp, sitting back to back. It looked as though they were talking.

He focused on the woman as closely as he could and saw long, disheveled hair the color of polished gold. The sun picked it out like a mirror and made a halo around it. He couldn’t see her face, just a pair of long legs bent at the knee in camel-colored pants.

He turned the glasses to the man she leaned against and saw that he was about her height, in a baseball cap and glasses also picked out by the sun. They were exhausted, judging by the way they leaned on each other.

It had been almost twenty hours since they’d been taken, and he could only imagine their weariness and fear. It was clearly visible in the woman pacing back and forth.

Instinct demanded that he run down the slope now, a full clip in his Glock. Reason, fortunately, dictated otherwise. Count men and weapons. Memorize positions. Rest and wait for darkness.

That was exactly the order passed on to him in broken English from the young captain lying prone beside him.

His eyes burned with the strain of keeping track of that spot of gold in the distance. Just as dusk turned to darkness, he watched one of the men in camouflage hook an arm into Maggie’s and help her to her feet. Then he did the same for the man. He led them to the fire and ladled them bowls of food.

Then it became too dark to see details. The campfire flickered in the blackness, and finally the moon appeared from behind a cloud to cast a frail light on the camp. He searched it for a glimpse of gold and spotted it near the tree where the two men had sat. He thought he saw the agitated young woman near her, but he couldn’t be sure.

The air crackled with tension as the order came to move down the slope. Duffy, focused on that glimpse of gold, stayed on the flank so that he could move out in an instant.

“I CAN NOT STAND IT another moment!” Celine whispered in heavily accented English. Her mouth trembled and her whole body shook. She’d been on the brink of hysteria since they’d been ambushed on the hiking trail in the park, and was now about to plunge over the edge.

“It’s going to be all right,” Maggie told her as she’d done a dozen times since this nightmare had begun.

But as the girl continued to whine, Maggie was distracted by something she couldn’t quite define, some subtle disturbance of air she felt rather than heard. She turned toward the rugged slope just beyond their camp, wondering if she was imagining things.

There was nothing to see in the pale moonlight, but she noticed that the leader, Eduard, had sensed something, too. His men seemed unaware of anything, but Baldy came up beside her. With the actor’s gift for feeling what couldn’t be seen, he asked under his breath, “What is it?”

Before she could answer, Eduard shouted something to his men as he shrugged the Uzi off his shoulder and aimed it toward the slope. Two of their captors came running toward the hostages and tried to round them up and lead them into the trees.

But Celine screamed, now clearly in a panic, and ran in the other direction.

One of the soldiers aimed his weapon at her and shouted something that was probably a command to stop.

Maggie, already in pursuit of her, doubted that she heard the order.

“Celine!” she shouted. “Get down!”

But Celine hadn’t heard her, either.

The order was issued again and punctuated with the sound of gunfire.

Maggie ran faster, so close to Celine that she could have touched her had her hands not been tied. Her only hope was to throw herself at the girl and knock her to the ground before a bullet did.

But before she could do that, something struck her from the side and knocked her off her feet. For a surprised instant she simply lay in the cool grass hearing the sounds of chaos in the camp. There were cries, gunfire, shouted commands. She heard Celine’s sobbing.

Then she became aware of the weight stifling her and struck backward with an elbow, certain the Basque gunman had caught them.

“Whoa! I...oof!” She flailed and kicked like a wild thing, the part of her mind not occupied with the struggle wondering why she was doing it when she didn’t care if she lived or died. Then she decided it was probably a matter of being able to decide for herself when and where she gave up.

Her foot had connected with flesh, and she took advantage of her opponent’s momentary surprise to scramble to her feet and run in the direction of Celine’s sobs.

But she didn’t get far. She was tackled around the ankles and went down with a thud. She turned with a scream of rage, flailing wildly in the dark, trying to sit up.

“Maggie!”

A flash exploded just as a hand shoved her back to the grass, and there was a grunt of pain as her attacker went down. Then another flash lit the night right beside her, and a man in camouflage fell across her body.

Even as the horror of the moment chilled her through, her brain was working on what was out of place here.

Then she realized what it was. The man she’d tried to fight off had called her Maggie in perfect, unaccented English. She also realized that the shot intended for her had caught him. God. Had she gotten one of their rescuers killed?

No. An instant later the body of the man who’d fallen across her was dragged off and she was turned onto her face as more gunfire rattled overhead. The man’s weight held her down, and she heard the deafening sound of his weapon and the thump of another body not too far away.

Then everything grew quiet.

“Monsieur March?” a voice with a rolling French accent whispered in the stillness. “You are well?”

“We’re fine,” he replied. “You?”

“Oui. But you were hit, no?”

“Yes. It’s just a scrape. Is the woman all right?”

“She has fainted.”

The man holding Maggie down said wryly, “If only I’d been that lucky.”

Maggie tried to turn, but the hand continued to hold her down. “Lie still,” the man commanded, “until we get the all-clear.”

“I’m sorry.” Maggie spoke into the grass. “But when a man tackles a woman to the ground she presumes she’s not going to like whatever he has planned.”

“My plans were to prevent you from getting shot,” he countered, then added on a note of amusement, “Unfortunately, you didn’t have the same plans for me.”

She sighed and dropped her forehead to the grass. “Again, I’m sorry. It was dark. You were running after me...”

“It’s all right. I’m fine.”

A shout came from the main part of the camp, and the man got to his feet, pulling her with him. “All clear, Maggie. Pretty soon you’ll be home.”

There was her name again, spoken in that familiar way. She stopped as he began to lead her to the main part of the camp, now well lit with flashlights and emergency flares. He had hold of her arm and stopped with her, a dark eyebrow raised in question.

She looked into dark-brown eyes, their expression curiously satisfied and relaxed considering what he’d just been through. His nose was strong and straight, his mouth half smiling, his chin a square line in an angular face. Short, dark-brown hair was ruffled by the night wind.

She shuddered as the cool air rippled through her light jacket. She had the oddest sense of familiarity without recognizing his features. “Do I know you?” she asked.

DUFFY COULDN’T BELIEVE how beautiful she still was. The teenager with whom he’d been infatuated was still visible in the smooth curve of her cheek, the youthful tilt of her nose, and the natural color of the long, straight hair he’d been able to pick out from a distance. But pain had worn away the sparkle he remembered in her dark-blue eyes. The ever-ready smile wasn’t there, either.

Of course, she’d just been through a great trial, but he had a feeling that wasn’t the problem. There was a certain flatness in her glance that had probably been there for a while, a disturbingly even rhythm to her speech and movements that seemed to indicate a lack of interest. Though, when she’d thought he represented death just a few moments ago, she’d fought him like a tiger. He wondered if the lack of interest was something she’d simply decided upon rather than something she sincerely felt.

He ripped off the black sweater he wore and pushed it on over her head, pulling it down over her thin jacket.

She looked surprised and seemed about to protest when the warmth of it apparently penetrated and she rubbed her arms to help it along.

“You once knew me very well,” he replied, drawing her with him toward the group. Eduard’s men had been handcuffed and were already being sent down the mountain with the Gendarmes. “You stayed the night with me many times.”

Now she raised an eyebrow. “I did?”

“You did. We sat up until all hours talking.”

She was staring at him in complete confusion, her pale lips temptingly parted. He had to look away from them.

“You made caramel corn and brownies,” he went on, “and we watched Dallas together.”

He saw realization light up her eyes. Then she gasped and pushed him with both hands. “Duffy March!” she exclaimed, smiling, and shoved him again. Then she wrapped her arms around him and held him tightly.

Her embrace was intense. He was smart enough to know it had nothing to do with him but with the fact that he was a tie to the happy life she’d lived before fame and tragedy had taken so much from her.

“Oh, Duffy,” she whispered, clutching him even tighter.

He winced, a burning pinch on the outside of his upper arm.

“You’ve been shot!” she exclaimed, ripping a scarf from around her neck and holding it to his blood-soaked sleeve.

“Just nicked me,” he said, drawing her back into his arms.

He kissed the top of her head and held her close. “Hi, Maggie,” he said.

Chapter Two

“But what are you doing here?” she demanded, still smiling.

“Your father sent me,” he replied. She’d stopped in her tracks again and he coaxed her forward. “It’s kind of a long story and should probably be saved for the ride home. Right now the police will want to talk to you.”

It was several hours before the police were finished with Maggie and her party, and a doctor took care of Duffy’s shoulder. Duffy called home to tell her father that she was safe.

“Thank God!” he exclaimed prayerfully, then added, “I owe you, son.”

“I was happy to help.”

“Will you ask her to call me when you finally get her home? It doesn’t matter what time.”

“She’s insisting on flying home tonight, so it’ll probably be early morning.”

“I’ll wait for your call.”

Her friends were all going back to the count’s place to recover from the ordeal, but Maggie declined his invitation.

“You’re going to fly to London tonight?” the man she’d introduced as her agent asked. “That’ll be exhausting.”

“I’m already exhausted,” she replied, giving him a hug. “And my friend, here, has gotten us a flight.” Then she hugged the rest of the group in turn.

He blessed her father’s CIA connections as he happily accepted her praise and gratitude.

They caught up on the way home—what she’d been doing, what he’d been doing.

She skipped over the loss of her husband and children with a falsely philosophical “And every life has its ups and downs, my downs were just more abysmal than most people’s.” Then she gave him a phony smile. “But my career’s ongoing, I work all the time, and I like that. When did you go into security?”

“After the Army. I was young and strong and felt invincible.” He reached overhead to adjust the air in her direction. “I guess there just wasn’t enough threat to my life, so I went looking for it in other people’s by going to work as a bodyguard. Went off on my own after a year. Our headquarters are in New York, but we work all over the world.”

“I love New York. It’s like a slightly less dignified London.”

They compared lives in the big city, she told him she did needlework for relaxation and he told her he loved to prowl garage sales, refinish old furniture, make useful items out of junk and that one day when he retired he would open a shop.

“I’m never going to retire,” she said in the taxi that drove them from Heathrow to Wandsworth Common, a tony part of London. “They’re going to have to drag me off the stage when I die in Baldy’s arms.”

“Baldy?”

“My actor friend. You met him at the police station. The one with the attitude. We work together a lot.”

“Isn’t his wife jealous?” He couldn’t imagine any woman willingly letting her husband kiss Maggie Lawton, whether it was in the script or not.

She shook her head. “After three wives, he’s a confirmed bachelor. And since all his wives were actresses, the fact that I’m a confirmed bachelor girl simplifies his life. Saves him from falling in love with me.” She added as an aside, “He always falls in love with his leading lady.”

“Isn’t it bad for an actor to be so confused?”

“Not at all. Being unable to tell your real life from your stage life is the sign of a good actor.”

“How do you stay sane that way?”

She rolled her head on the back of the cab's upholstery and grinned at him. "Who told you actors were sane?"

Her home was unlike anything he'd ever seen, except in movies. The substantial Victorian she lived in was huge and almost two hundred years old, similar in design to the other residences near the lush park. The grass, the potted flowers in the doorway and the rich vanilla color of the stone walls glistened in the early morning light as she unlocked her door.

Inside, the ceilings were high, the windows long and draped in gold brocade. Off-white silk fabric adorned the walls, which were hung with paintings that he guessed were originals.

The furnishings were formal and elegant, he noted, as he wandered after Maggie through a vast living room with a marble fireplace and up a mahogany staircase to an upstairs flooded with sunlight.

"Eponine is away for a week, thank God," she said as she pushed open a door and gestured him inside. "Or she'd be weeping all over me. She's very emotional."

"Friend? Housekeeper?"

"Both," she replied. "I've tried to talk her into auditioning for a role. I think she'd be a natural. But she says she'd worry about who would take care of me."

He had to meet this Eponine, he thought. And put her mind to rest.

"I promised your father you'd call him as soon as you got home," he said as he walked into a bedroom decorated in brown and gold, with old maps on the wall and a fireplace. Everything required for a small office was at one end, while the other was set up for luxurious sleeping. He whistled softly at the elegance of it.

He wondered if this had been her husband's office but didn't want to ask.

"I sold the house in Devon when...after the accident." She hesitated only an instant, but the quick diversion suggested she still couldn't say, "when they died." He could certainly understand that. He couldn't imagine losing his boys and ever coming to a point when he could accept it.

"I've always loved the city," she went on, going to a door at the far end of the room to show him there was a very elegant bathroom there complete with hot tub. "You can't be lonely here. There's always someplace to go and something to do."

He wasn't sure why, but the words didn't ring true. He was sure there was always someplace to go and something to do, but he didn't think that assuaged her loneliness.

"Have a hot bath and a good sleep," she said, blowing him a kiss, "and I'll take you somewhere wonderful for dinner. Then we can arrange to send you home on the Concorde."

She closed the door on him before he could tell her that he might go home on the Concorde, but he wasn't going alone.

MAGGIE DIDN'T KNOW why she was shaking. She didn't think this was fear. She'd kept her head throughout their captivity—well, except for when she'd mistaken Duffy for one of her captors and that had been an honest mistake—and the danger was over now. Everything that could hurt her had been dealt with effectively by Duffy March and the gendarmerie.

So, why was she shaking? She'd showered, put on her favorite white silk negligee, then found herself trembling like a pudding. She had to pull Duffy's sweater back over her head to try to stop it.

Delayed reaction? she wondered, as she climbed in under the covers. But how could that be when she hadn't really cared what had happened? When she'd simply shut down everything that could make her care?

Then it came to her. It was Duffy. It was that glimpse of life as it had been once, when it all still lay ahead of her full of hope and expectation. It was remembering the heroic little boy he'd been, determined to battle the asthma that plagued him, so that he could live a normal life.

Well, he'd certainly done it, she thought, reaching for her address book and phone. He'd grown tall and strong with the proportions and confidence of a tested athlete. She guessed he'd outgrown the asthma. She remembered that he'd embarked on a regimen to strengthen his muscles—and had been smart enough to know that the plan should include his brain. They'd often done homework together

when she'd stayed with him, she fighting to understand the secrets of geometry that eluded her, and he doing extra reading in the subjects that interested him.

She closed her eyes and thought, with a lessening of the tremors, that it was good she'd had that glimpse of the old days. She could never be that Maggie again, but it was good to remember—though not for too long.

It wasn't going to help to call her father, but she had to. She knew how much he worried about her in normal circumstances; she could just imagine what her kidnapping had done to him. She hadn't seen him since the funeral, had resisted his pleas that she come home for a visit, because she'd have to be herself at home and she couldn't face that yet. She got by only by playing role after role that allowed her to be someone else.

"Oh, Maggie!" he breathed when he heard her voice. "Sweetheart, I was so worried about you."

"I know, Dad. I'm sorry." She was grateful that her voice sounded strong and even. "I'm fine, I promise. And it's such a treat to see Duffy."

"I knew he'd keep you safe."

"That he did."

"Maggie..." He paused and she knew he was building up to something. "I want you to come home for a visit."

"Daddy, I want to," she lied, "but I have eight performances a week and I..."

"Don't you have an understudy or something? I mean, didn't someone else have to go on for you while you were kidnapped?"

She searched her mind frantically for a viable excuse.

"And, you know, I don't like to worry you, but I haven't been all that well since the attack, and I'd like to know..."

She sat up and leaned forward. "What attack?"

He hesitated.

"What attack?" she repeated.

"The heart attack."

Her first thought was that he was putting her on—manipulating her. But he'd never done that before. And since she'd lost Harry and the boys, he tried particularly hard not to worry her.

"When did this happen?" she demanded. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Well...because I was only in the hospital a few days, and the doctor said it was just a sort of warning to be careful. So I've been careful."

He'd been careful, but her kidnapping probably hadn't done much to keep him calm.

"Okay, Dad," she said. "I'll come. But I have to work it out with my director."

"I'd love that, Maggie." He sounded relieved.

She promised to do it soon and let him know her plans. Then she hung up the phone and lay stiffly against the headboard, feeling those curious tremors coming on again.

She couldn't go home—but it sounded as though she had to. God.

She tried to make plans—to organize things in the hope it would make the tremors go away.

In the morning she'd call her travel agent to see about getting Duffy the next flight home on the Concorde. Then she'd call the bank and see about replacing her credit cards, her driver's license, all the things she'd lost when the kidnappers had taken her backpack from her. They were probably still somewhere on the mountain. Life was going to be very inconvenient until everything was replaced.

Then she'd call her director and see about getting a week off in July. Exhaustion overtook her despite the tremors, and she fell asleep, thinking that if she was going to go home, she'd have to do it as a star—not as the real Maggie Lawton. That was the only way she could protect herself.

SHE DREAMED OF EVERYTHING that had happened—of her and Baldy and the Thickets visiting Gerard to help celebrate his birthday. Of the argument over what to do with the Sunday

afternoon, then the decision to go hiking in the park. She saw the remote uphill spot, heard Prissie's whiny remark about the trail being too steep and rocky, then the sudden appearance of men with Uzis.

She remembered very clearly the terror she'd felt that first instant. The absolutely horrifying threat she'd felt to her life and her safety. It had taken her a moment to remember that she didn't care whether she lived or died.

The dream proceeded just as events had happened, except that there was no rescue. The government refused to negotiate, her father never called for the now big and capable Duffy March to rescue his little girl, and the gentle and enigmatic Eduard aimed his Uzi at her and fired.

She awoke feeling the pain in her chest, gasping for air in a complete panic—the last two years of horror distilled into that one moment.

Her bedroom door burst open, and she saw Duffy hesitate in the doorway.

She said his name and reached a hand toward him, caught in a nebulous world somewhere between her dream and reality.

"What?" he asked, hurrying toward her. He sat on the bed beside her and wrapped an arm around her. "Nightmare?"

She put a hand to her stomach and held it up to show him the blood. "I've been shot!" she whispered. "You were...too late."

He put a hand to where her other hand pressed against her middle to stanch the flow of blood.

Damn the shaking! But she supposed if she was about to expire from a chest wound, she had the right to tremble.

"Maggie," he said, holding her hand up in front of her face. "You've been dreaming. No blood, see? You haven't been shot. You're fine."

"I am not fine!" she screamed at him. "I have a hole in my chest! Right...here!" She put a hand to the terrible burning pain and realized with the sudden clarity of wakefulness that it was an old pain. It wasn't from a bullet at all, but from a two-year-old grief she was not going to be able to survive.

And now that she'd acknowledged it, the pain became more than she could bear. It had barbs and tentacles she'd controlled by suppressing it, but they now beat her and choked her and made her cry out in anguish.

She heard herself sob.

She fought to escape, but the pain was tenacious and no matter how hard she struggled, she couldn't get free.

DUFFY DIDN'T KNOW what to do but hold her. At first she fought him, screaming, then she clung to him and sobbed. She was wearing his sweater, and she felt slight and fragile under its folds. He wrapped his arms tightly around her as she trembled and wept, concluding that the nightmare must have triggered a response to her ordeal that somehow related to the pain of the past two years of her life.

"It's okay, Maggie," he whispered, rocking her in the middle of the bed. "You're going to survive."

"I don't think so," she replied, finally quieting.

"You will," he insisted firmly.

She stopped crying and leaned against him, tired and dispirited. "Most of the time I don't even want to," she said.

"You have to," he said firmly. "You still have a father, you still have friends and, from what I read, you still have quite an audience."

She leaned slightly away from him to look into his eyes. Hers were still filled with tears. His heart bled for her.

"You didn't tell me my father had had a heart attack," she said, her tone mildly accusing. "I'm surprised your father didn't write or call me."

For a minute he didn't know what to say. He saw a pitcher of water and a cup on her beside table and reached for it to cover up his confusion. As far as he knew, Elliott hadn't had a heart attack. He didn't know everything that went on in the Lawtons' lives, but his father usually kept him up on the important things. He couldn't imagine he would have let that slip by.

"Where'd you hear that?" he asked, pouring water into the cup and handing it to her.

"Thank you. From my father! He told me when he was trying to get me to come home." She looked at him with sudden suspicion as she sipped from the cup. "Or, didn't it happen? I didn't want to go home and he might have been..."

"Ah...well, I'm not sure. My father's always trying to protect me, too. I know he's been worried about your dad, so it's entirely possible." That was partly true. His father was always worried about his friend, who, at sixty-four, took off on nebulous missions for the State Department as though he was still a man in his prime. He just wasn't sure he was worried about Elliott's heart.

Duffy was suddenly distracted from that puzzle when he became aware of a subtle tension in the air. The intimacy of their embrace in the middle of the bed, hardly necessary now that she was composed again seemed to be generating it.

He knew she was aware of it, too, when her eyes met his in confused surprise. Using her hands on the mattress for leverage, she pushed herself slightly away from him. He noticed for the first time the tailored white silk nightshirt she wore—and the length of slender leg it revealed.

"I...I'm going to try to get time off," she said a little distractedly, "sometime in July."

He stood, going to the window and pushing her draperies back. The sun was low, long shadows falling across the park. The beautiful setting made him inexplicably homesick.

"Why don't you just come home with me?" he suggested.

She blinked, surprised by the suggestion. "I can't do that," she said.

"Why not?"

"Because I'm the lead in a play," she replied, her eyes a little desperate. "Because all my credit cards are in a gully somewhere in the Pyrenees. Because..."

"I can't imagine your boss refusing you a couple of weeks R and R after what you've been through. And I'll spring for your airfare and lend you some money until you get the credit cards straightened out."

"I can't leave the country without my passport." She looked satisfied with that excuse. Even proud of it. "I've misplaced it in the shuffle of bags and reporters and hurry."

He spotted her things apparently thrown carelessly on a chair when she'd changed for bed last night and saw her passport pinned to her bra strap. He hooked the lacy lavender thing in one finger and held it up, the book dangling.

"I'll make reservations for two, then," he said. "Give your father some peace of mind and you a probably much-needed rest."

That surprised look she'd given him a moment ago registered a little longer, then turned to annoyance. She pushed herself to her feet with a sudden, imperious expression, intended, he was sure, to put him in his place.

"Look, Duffy," she said, tossing her hair. He guessed she probably did that onstage. It was very effective. "I'm so grateful you came all this way to see to my safety. But that's accomplished. I'm free now and our long friendship notwithstanding, your services are terminated."

"Now, don't get in a huff because I caught you in a fib," he said. "I understand why you don't want to go home, but that isn't healthy. And if you're going to get on with your life, you have to get serious about dealing with reality."

"What do you know about dealing with reality?" she demanded, anger igniting in her eyes. "You own a penthouse apartment in Manhattan, and your business has offices in five countries. Your failures and your grief are still ahead of you."

He arched an eyebrow at the deliberate ploy to gain the upper hand.

“Not so,” he corrected amiably. “I know about loss, if not death, and, being a bodyguard, I know that hiding doesn’t defeat your enemy. It just holds him off until the next time he finds you.” Then he smiled. “And while you might have been able to order me around when I was eight, things have changed considerably. Part of the deal when your father hired me was that I take you home. So the job isn’t done until I deliver you to Arlington.”

“I’m not ready to go yet.”

He spread both arms in a gesture of patience. “Then do what has to be done and I’ll wait.”

The room suddenly exploded in heavy perfume and rolling Rs when a very short, very hefty woman hurried in, moving a little like a tank in a blue dress with white polka dots and white tennis shoes. Her permed hair was a brassy shade of red.

“Madame Lawton!” the woman exclaimed. She’d apparently been crying and continued to sob as she rolled into the room and wrapped a very surprised Maggie in her embrace.

Maggie disappeared for a moment, and all Duffy heard was a thin, high-pitched, “Eponine! I thought you were on vacation!”

“Mais oui, but I heard the news!” Eponine said, taking a tissue from her pocket and dabbing her eyes with it. “I knew you would need me! Are you all right? Did they savage you?”

“Of course not,” Maggie replied. “I’m perfectly all right. There was no reason for you to spoil your trip.”

“Oh, but I could not leave you alo—” She stopped abruptly when she noticed Duffy standing bare-chested at the foot of the bed. She looked confused at first, then, after a head-to-toe scan, apparently decided the situation was not all that complicated.

“Oh, monsieur, I’m so sorry. Madame, please forgive me.” She put her fingertips to her mouth and turned in an embarrassed circle.

“No, no, no!” Maggie emphatically denied the woman’s assumption. Eponine took a step back in surprise at her vehemence. Duffy stood his ground. “It isn’t that at all. This is an old friend of mine from home,” she said with a glance at Duffy that suggested the term friend hung in the balance.

Eponine gave Duffy a sidelong glance that spoke volumes. “Friends are the most dangerous threat to a woman’s peace of mind because they become lovers so easily.”

Maggie shook her head. “He’s almost ten years younger than I am.”

Eponine drew a dreamy breath. “Ah, madame. That is even more merveilleux.”

“It’s eight years,” Duffy corrected, “and I’ll wager I’m far more experienced. You settled down with a family while I’ve never been married.”

Annoyed that she was losing control of the situation, Maggie said irritably, “Well, what does that have to do with anything?”

“I didn’t think it had anything to do with it,” Duffy replied, “but it seemed important to you.”

“Are you hungry?” she asked in that same impatient tone.

“Yes.”

“Eponine, you may stay to fix dinner for which I’ll add an extra day on to your vacation, then you must get back to your daughter.”

Eponine winked at Duffy. “Oui, madame.”

WHILE EPONINE PUTTERED in the kitchen and Duffy went off to make phone calls, Maggie took another shower, desperate to clear her addled brain.

Her life was growing more out of control by the moment. For years she’d been experiencing this hole in the center of her world that refused to heal, then she was kidnapped like some cabin boy in a novel, held at gunpoint, rescued by the boy she used to baby-sit more than twenty years ago, and now her maid thought they were having an affair. Her and Duffy March!

And he was turning out to be a surprise. The sweet, cooperative, well-behaved little boy who’d hung on her every word was now a stubborn, autocratic, know-it-all, who seemed to forget she had a mind of her own.

She was drying her hair when there was a loud rap on her half-open bathroom door. Duffy peered around it and handed her the phone. “Picked up this call for you. David Styron?”

She gave him a cool glance and took the phone. “Thank you. David?”

“Yes, Mags.” The large voice that could be heard from the back of the balcony boomed over the phone. Maggie had to hold it slightly away from her ear. “Glen tells me that you and Baldy are both well, but in need of a break after your ordeal. The devil’s negotiated you a month’s break—with pay—starting today.”

“What?” She turned to Duffy, suspecting his hand in this, but he was gone.

“What?”

“That’s right, my love. A whole month off. You must go to Cap Ferrat or someplace equally decadent and do nothing. But don’t get too tanned now, will you, or Nancy will have trouble making you up.”

“But, David, a month seems—”

“Long, yes I know. But Glen was insistent. He and Prissie are going to Bimini. And you mustn’t worry, Sukie Darwin was really quite good as Lady Bellows last night. She’s learned a lot watching you.”

Maggie didn’t know whether to be happy or upset. The fact that one’s understudy had been “really quite good” was good and bad news. She was very much aware that the theater was filled with younger and probably more talented women who could replace her in a moment. But it was startling to hear it confirmed.

“Don’t worry about a thing,” David insisted. “Just rest and recover, and come back to us in time for the London Women’s Charity night at the end of July. They’ve bought out the house and they’ll want to see you.”

Okay, that restored a modicum of her confidence.

“Thank you, David.”

“Take care, Mags.”

Damn. Now she had to go home. She closed her eyes against images of the three-story house, narrow and tall and happily ensconced in its downtown environment right next door to the Marches’ place.

Her mother had always been home, but Duffy’s mother had been a lawyer in her husband’s firm, and they’d been gone a lot of the time. The bank account Maggie had built up watching Duffy for them had paid all her incidental expenses her first year of college.

Then she’d been discovered by a film agent in her second year. He’d come to watch his daughter perform in *The Rainmaker* and had been impressed with Maggie’s portrayal of Lizzie. He’d offered to represent her, found her a bit part in a small film that was being shot in London.

There she’d met Harry Paget, a banker, and when the film wrapped, she’d stayed to marry him and trade the screen for the stage. She’d never regretted it.

Morgan and Alan had been born eleven months apart when she was in her middle twenties. When they were babies, they’d traveled with her everywhere, and when they were old enough to go to school, the theater had allowed her to spend afternoons with them before her performances.

Life had been good. The boys had been tall and blond like their father, with his tendency to take themselves seriously yet laugh at everything else. She’d found her husband and her boys endlessly fascinating.

Her parents had loved them, too, and when her mother died five years ago, her father had stayed with them for a month, trying to figure out how to go on.

Now that she’d experienced the same loss, she couldn’t imagine how he’d managed.

She looked at herself in the mirror and saw Lady Bellows, the role she’d played for the past eighteen months. She wore designer suits, though at the moment it was a pale-orange peignoir set,

wore her hair in a chignon and held her chin in the air. Her staff adored her, but her butler feared her sexual appeal.

Good. She would hide in character as long as she was able.

She walked into the kitchen to find Duffy and Eponine sharing a bottle of wine and a plate of broiled shrimp. They were laughing together, and she was surprised to feel a twinge of jealousy. Not for the alliance they seemed to have formed, she told herself, but for the laughter.

“Seems I’ve been given a month’s leave from the play,” she said, taking a chair opposite Duffy and smiling blandly at him as she reached for a shrimp. Eponine poured wine into the empty glass at her place. “You wouldn’t know anything about that?”

He met her gaze with innocence in his. “Now, how could I have accomplished that while drinking wine with Eponine?”

“I don’t know,” she replied, then nipped the shrimp in two.

“Though you did manage to find me in a remote spot in the Pyrenees. You appear to be a resourceful man.”

“But I had the French army on my side then.”

She glanced at her housekeeper, who also returned her a look of suspicious innocence. “Eponine has a lot in common with the French army.”

“So, this means we’ll be flying back together?” he asked.

She admitted defeat, if only to herself. She had to see her father, and putting it off until July would have served no purpose anyway.

“I’m not sure I’ll be able to pay my way,” she reminded him. “I’ll go to the bank in the morning, but with all my credit cards missing, and most of my assets in stocks and real estate, I may not be able to get much cash.”

“You can owe me,” he said with a grin.

That was precisely what she didn’t want to do.

Chapter Three

The flight to the States the following afternoon seemed interminable, and was made even longer by the knowledge that she had only seventeen dollars in a purse she hated. According to the bank manager she'd spoken to that morning, her accounts had been frozen because Eduard had escaped capture and had apparently used one of her credit cards somewhere in Spain. In an effort to track him down, they wanted to stop any other activity on her accounts. They regretted the inconvenience. Not enough, she was sure.

She'd spent the next two hours scouring clothing and old purses for money left in pockets or coin compartments. Then, to add insult to injury, she had to put what she found in a brown leather pouch purse she'd never liked because everything sank to the bottom in it. Someday she was going to pummel Eduard herself for tossing her favorite ergonomic bag into a crevasse.

"I can't believe it," she grumbled, not for the first time. "Twenty-two years an actress, high-yield stocks and bonds, carefully acquired real estate, and I have seventeen dollars to my name."

That sounded like a pouty princess talking—or possibly, Lady Bellows. Good. She wasn't having to reach to stay in character.

Duffy wasn't sure what that was all about—residual stress from her ordeal, maybe. As a girl, she'd never been one to flaunt her beauty, her intelligence, her family's comfortable situation or her popularity. She'd been very real and able to lower herself to the level of a child who needed her friendship.

"I'll give you my American Express," he offered, "if you're reluctant to take money from your father."

She rolled her eyes. "Why would I be more willing to take money from you than from him?"

"Because we broke the ice when I bought your ticket," he replied, knowing he was annoying her. He suspected that her life, her determination to live it onstage, was wobbling, and he was going to do all he could to topple it. "It'll be easier the second time." He was going to give her a week with her father in Arlington, then he was going to invite them to Lamplight Harbor to visit. He wanted her to see where he lived, get to know his boys, relax.

Then he was going to do his damndest to seduce her.

She closed her eyes against his candor and shook her head. "I'm going to be happy to say goodbye to you when we reach Kennedy," she said. "You were much sweeter as a boy than you are as a man."

"A man has too much to do to be sweet," he countered. "And sweetness is generally not a favorable trait in a bodyguard, anyway."

She smiled reluctantly at that, then leaned back in her seat and studied him as though she was seeing the child and not the man. He didn't particularly like that. But having her attention in any way was a plus.

"You must have gotten over the asthma," she said. "All your efforts at bodybuilding certainly paid off."

He watched her eyes scan his shoulders, but inclined his head modestly and pretended not to notice. "Thank you. I stayed with it, then learned a lot in the Army. I did outgrow the asthma and am now disgustingly healthy."

"And a little overconfident."

"A bodyguard—like a cop—has to have presence. This time you wouldn't have to save me from the burning vaporizer. I could rescue you."

Her eyes widened and she turned toward him with a slight smile at that memory, forgetting that he annoyed her.

"I'd forgotten that!" she said, her eyes losing focus as she thought back.

He'd been eight years old and just getting over a cold, so his asthma had been very active. His parents were at a dinner meeting with a client, and his mother had placed a vaporizer at his bedside to ease his breathing.

Maggie had been in the kitchen downstairs, preparing dinner, when a short in the vaporizer had caused it to catch fire. It had ignited the decorative quilt that hung over his bed, and he'd barely found the air in his lungs to shout Maggie's name.

She'd appeared in an instant, hesitated only a second before unplugging the vaporizer, draping it with his blanket, and carrying the now smoking device into the bathroom where she dropped it in the tub and poured water on it. Then she ran back to yank the burning quilt off the wall and submerged it in the bathtub, too.

He always looked back on that as the moment he fell in love with her. She'd then put him in his parents' bed, brought him dinner, then cleaned up the mess while he ate.

"Of course, I killed the vaporizer, your blanket and that beautiful quilt," she remembered with a nostalgic smile.

"Maybe, but my father paid you with a hundred-dollar bill that night. You averted what might have been a real disaster."

She nodded, accepting praise with a light laugh. "If I hadn't saved you, you couldn't have grown up to be such a smart aleck."

"There, see. I knew it was all your fault."

The flight attendant arrived with a cell phone. "Miss Lawton?"

Maggie blinked in surprise. "Yes."

"The airport radioed the pilot with a call from your father. We have him on the pilot's cell phone."

She listened, looking surprised, then disappointed.

"What?" she exclaimed. "What about your heart? What about...?" She stopped abruptly, apparently forced to listen again.

"Dad, I'm sorry, too," she said finally, "but I'll be fine at the house. I don't want to...no, I know you worry, but you shouldn't. I'm fine. I can't impose on him like that."

She said placatingly, "Okay, fine. I'll put him on. But I'm telling you now, I'm staying in Arlington." She put her hand over the mouthpiece and fixed Duffy with a fierce expression. "My father's been called overseas—some problem setting up a new government—and he wants me to go home with you rather than stay alone in Arlington. I'm not doing that. You will tell him that you're very busy and you don't have time to entertain a houseguest. Have I made myself clear?"

"Very," he said amiably and took the phone she held out. "Hi, Elliott."

"Duff!" Elliott said, his voice urgent. "I'm so sorry to do this to you, but I've been called overseas. They're sending a chopper for me in twenty minutes. Would you mind very much taking Maggie home with you? I don't want her to be alone."

"I wouldn't mind at all," he replied.

Her expression darkened, though she obviously wasn't sure what he and her father were saying. She threatened him with a pointing finger to his chest. "No!" she whispered. "Say, no!"

"Yes, of course," he said into her glower. "I'll be happy to take her home with me. Don't worry. Just do your job and know that she'll be safe and sound."

Maggie put both hands to her face and fell back into her chair.

Duffy hung up the phone and handed it back to the flight attendant with a smug "Thank you!"

"You'll like Lamplight Harbor." He held up Maggie's seat belt as the light went on.

"I'm going to Arlington," she said, lowering her hands to put her belt together with an angry snap.

"With what?" he asked. "I'm holding your ticket."

She threatened him with a look. "I'm going, anyway."

“How are you going to get there?”

“Rent a car.” She wasn’t seeing the problem.

“And what are you going to pay for it with?”

“With...” she began, then remembered that all she had was seventeen dollars and no credit cards. That wasn’t going to get her a car.

She straightened in her seat and firmed her lips. She looked magnificent but not as confident as she probably imagined. “You’re going to rent it for me. Or let me have my ticket.”

He smiled. “Guess again, Lady Bellows.” When she looked surprised that he knew the name of her current role, he explained, “Eponine told me you’ve played her for so many performances that you take on some of her qualities when you’re stressed.”

“Look,” she said, clearly clutching her temper in both hands, “I came to the States to see my father, not to visit Lightbulb...what is it?”

“Lamplight Harbor,” he provided.

“Lamplight Harbor,” she repeated, “so that you can get some kind of payback for all the years you had to do what I said, by bullying me. I’m forty years old, Duffy,” she said with a sigh as though it were eighty. “And while some women love the forceful male, I’ve never been a fan. So, please. Lend me money to rent a car.”

“I have no intention of bullying you,” he said. “The deal I made with your father was to deliver you safely, and I...”

“I’m not a girl!” she said a little too loudly. Several nearby passengers turned to look at her. She lowered her voice. “I’m an adult woman,” she said. “Almost middle-aged. No one has to deliver me from one man’s hands to another’s!”

He caught the hand with which she gestured emphatically. “You’re thirty-nine,” he corrected, “not forty. That’s hardly middle-aged, and your father wants to know you’re being looked after, not because he thinks you’re not capable of caring for yourself, but because he loves you and you’ll always be his little girl. So let a man with heart trouble have a little peace about the situation.”

That last statement distracted her as he’d hoped it would. “He does have heart trouble?” she asked worriedly.

“I’m not sure,” he replied, “but do we want to risk worrying him further when he’s in a tight spot as it is?”

She finally fell against her seat back with a groan. “If you hadn’t butted into my life,” she said, “I could be in my bathtub right now, listening to Russell Watson and planning to go to Le Caprice for dinner.”

“What were you going to buy dinner with?”

“Oh, shut up.”

HE CANCELED MAGGIE’S TICKET for the connecting flight to Virginia, then pushed the luggage cart toward the little blue American-made sedan rental at the end of an aisle. She carried his cappuccino and her caramel latte. He always preferred to drive home from New York, enjoying the beauty and peace and quiet. It gave him time to readjust from his work life to his life as a parent.

“I thought you intended to stay only for a week,” he said, indicating her three large bags and train case. “There must be enough clothes in there for a four-hour fashion show.”

“Ha, ha,” she said, holding the cart handle while he unlocked the trunk. “Nice clothes is one of the perks of being in the public eye. Designers court you.”

“Well, they’ll certainly be able to find you. I’ll probably have to rent a horse trailer to get it all home.”

“Or to hold all the horse stuff you’re shoveling.”

He gave her a challenging look over his shoulder as he rearranged her bags several times before making them fit. The cart empty, she handed him the drinks, then pushed it toward a cart rack at a midway point in the aisle and hurried back to the car.

In the front seat he placed their drinks in a caddy between the seats, then backed out of the lot and onto the road that would lead them to northbound traffic.

“How far?” she asked when they were firmly ensconced in rush hour traffic.

“A little over four hundred miles,” he replied.

“So, we’re not going to make it tonight.”

“No. I thought we’d stay over in New Hampshire.”

She didn’t applaud the plan, but she didn’t dispute it, either, so Duffy just drove. She fell asleep outside of Connecticut and he watched the traffic as he reached behind him for his jacket to drop it across her.

She looked troubled, even in sleep, he thought, and hoped he had what it took to pull her out of the past and into a future with him. He’d thought he would have to play it cool, give her time, invite her and her father to his home. But Elliott’s sudden mission had been a fateful intervention forcing her into his path. He had to take advantage of it.

She awoke in northern Massachusetts. It was dusk.

She sat up guiltily and stretched, a gesture he was grateful he couldn’t watch because of the thinning but steady traffic.

“Where are we?” she asked on a yawn.

“Almost to the New Hampshire border. You ready for dinner?”

“I’m starved,” she admitted.

“Okay.” He pointed to a highway sign that promised Good Food and Cozy Cabins. “Looks like a good place to spend the night.”

The cabins were small and rustic, but each boasted a tidy bathroom and a television set. That was all Duffy needed, but after having seen Maggie’s town house, he wondered if she considered the cabins adequate.

He dropped her bag on her bed and watched her perusal of the pine-paneled, plaid-curtained room. She sat on the edge of the bed that was covered in a spread that matched the curtains, and bounced a little.

“It’s been such a long day,” she said. “This feels comfortable.”

He winced at the bold decorating. “The rooms are a little...plaid.”

She nodded. “They’re going for cozy. After all, their highway sign makes the claim. I like it.”

So, Lady Bellows was not offended by her surroundings. He was relieved to know that—and pleased.

She lay her upper body back against the mattress and closed her eyes with a contented sigh. “I should skip dinner,” she said, wriggling comfortably. “I didn’t get any exercise at all today except when we ran across the terminal to catch the plane.”

“Lunch was a long time ago,” he said, glancing at his watch. “And it’s almost seven. You should eat something, then you can sleep.”

She gave him a mildly scolding glance as she sat up. “Tell me you’re not going to try to police my food intake as well as everything else.”

“I’m not policing anything,” he insisted, offering her a hand up. “But if you’ve been given a month off to restore yourself after your ordeal in the mountains, you should take advantage of the opportunity. Good food and lots of rest.”

“Food doesn’t appeal to me. I haven’t expended any energy.”

She’d taken the hand he offered but still sat there, arguing, and he had to concentrate on her words one at a time to distract himself from the feel of her small, cool hand in his.

“The sign says they serve breakfast all day,” he remembered, privately congratulating himself on thinking clearly. “You could have an omelette or fruit.”

She considered those possibilities and used his hand to pull herself up. He had to apply almost no counterweight.

“Maybe I’ll just have dessert,” she said, snatching up her purse and heading for the door.

They talked companionably for an hour over the fruit salad she finally decided upon and the steak and salad that was his reward for a trying day.

They talked about their fathers, about people in the neighborhood both remembered, and encapsulated the past twenty years for each other.

Maggie spoke mostly about her career, about the roles she’d enjoyed and those she’d agonized over, the casts that had been fun to work with and those that had been difficult.

“Did you ever expect,” he asked, fascinated by her stories, “that you’d achieve such success?”

“It’s funny.” She shrugged, studying a section of mandarin orange on the tip of her fork. “I’ve loved the work, and there’s such an excitement in really finding the character and giving it all you’ve got. So I was about ten years into it when I realized that I was a respected actress. People recognized me on the street or in the market. It was flattering.”

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