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Vintage INTRIGUE

Murdock's Last Stand

BEVERLY BARTON

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Аннотация

A MAN OF HONORAnd honor was the only reason well-muscled former mercenary Aloysius Murdock agreed to be Catherine Price's bodyguard. For Murdock owed Catherine's father his life. But once Murdock laid eyes on his best friend's beautiful daughter, he realized he would do anything for her….A WOMAN IN LOVECatherine knew better than to succumb to the passion Murdock clearly offered, for she believed in love–and Murdock had given up on love long ago. Still, something in his heated gaze made her believe that the battle-worn bachelor needed her. Maybe just as much as she needed him&#133.

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“Don’t you know the more you fight a man, the more determined he’ll be to conquer you?”

Murdock arrogantly raked his eyes over her. “And, Cat, honey, you have a knack for verbal sparring that can really turn a man on.”

That was it! Catherine had had it with this big, smart-mouthed wise guy! With her hands balled into tight fists, she took that one step that separated them, then lifted her gaze to make direct eye-to-eye contact. That’s when she realized she’d made a mistake. A huge mistake. Murdock was looking at her as if she were the last drop of water in a sweltering, dry desert.

“What the hell,” he said as he reached out and jerked her into his arms. “We might as well get this over with.”

Dear Reader,

Happy New Year! Silhouette Intimate Moments is starting the year off with a bang—not to mention six great books. Why not begin with the latest of THE PROTECTORS, Beverly Barton’s miniseries about men no woman can resist? In Murdock’s Last Stand, a well-muscled mercenary meets his match in a woman who suddenly has him thinking of forever.

Alicia Scott returns with Marrying Mike… Again, an intense reunion story featuring a couple who are both police officers with

old hurts to heal before their happy ending. Try Terese Ramin's A Drive-By Wedding when you're in the mood for suspense, an undercover agent hero, an irresistible child and a carjacked heroine who ends up glad to go along for the ride. Already known for her compelling storytelling abilities, Eileen Wilks lives up to her reputation with Midnight Promises, a marriage-of-convenience story unlike any other you've ever read. Virginia Kantra brings you the next of the irresistible MacNeills in The Comeback of Con MacNeill, and Kate Stevenson returns after a long time away, with Witness…and Wife?

All six books live up to Intimate Moments' reputation for excitement and passion mixed together in just the right proportions, so I hope you enjoy them all.

Yours,

Leslie J. Wainger
Executive Senior Editor

Murdock's Last Stand
Beverly Barton

MILLS & BOON www.millsandboon.co.uk

To Connie,
whose mind is filled with fanciful,
magical and intriguing ideas.
This "protector" is for you.

BEVERLY BARTON

has been in love with romance since her grandfather gave her an illustrated book of Beauty and the Beast. An avid reader since childhood, she began writing at the age of nine and wrote short stories, poetry, plays and novels throughout high school and college. After marriage to her own “hero” and the births of her daughter and son, she chose to be a full-time homemaker, aka wife, mother, friend and volunteer.

When she returned to writing, she joined Romance Writers of America and helped found the Heart of Dixie chapter in Alabama. Since the release of her first Silhouette book in 1990, she has won the GRW Maggie Award and the National Readers’ Choice Award and has been a RITA Award finalist. Beverly considers writing romance books a real labor of love. Her stories come straight from the heart, and she hopes that all the strong and varied emotions she invests in her books will be felt by everyone who reads them.

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Prologue

Sweat dripped off his forehead and down into his eyes, blurring his vision. Using the back of his hand, he swiped away the moisture. The oppressive heat coated his body, filled his lungs and dulled his senses. He had been in some bad situations before, endured sweltering temperatures just as deadly and lived to tell the tale. But his gut instincts warned him that this time was different. From the minute he and Lanny arrived in Zaraza, he'd had an uneasy feeling that their luck had finally run out. He'd known that sooner or later fate would catch up with them and they'd wind up paying with their lives. He just hadn't thought it would be this soon. Hell, he was only twenty-six. He was too young to die. Besides, wasn't there an old adage that said only the good die young? If that were true, he'd live to be a hundred.

"No way we're both going to get out of this alive, Bubba," Lanny said.

Murdock lifted his gaze from the tip of his M-16 to his old buddy's dirt-streaked face. Lanny McCroskey was a good ol' boy from Tennessee, who had lost his soul back in Nam and had been searching for it ever since.

"We've been outnumbered before. We'll figure a way to get out of this one." Even as the denial came from his mouth, Murdock knew Lanny was right. They were trapped! And even for a couple of highly trained mercenaries like them, it would

take a miracle for both of them and Sabino's troops to all escape.

"The information has to get back to Burdett." Lanny opened his canteen, then lifted it to his lips. After taking a hefty swig, he recapped the canteen. "One of us has to hightail it out of here, while Juan and his boys keep Ramos's men occupied."

"Whoever stays is a dead man," Murdock said.

"You go. I'll stay." Lanny chuckled. "We both know that I've been living on borrowed time ever since Nam. You're different. You're a young man. You've still got a chance to have a normal life, if you get out of our line of work."

Before Murdock could reply, before he could protest leaving his former army sergeant behind, a barrage of enemy gunfire exploded around them. As the ragtag band of rebel soldiers retaliated against the Zarazaian troops, Juan Sabino crawled through the thicket and eased up beside Lanny.

"We can hold them off for a while longer," Juan said in his native Spanish. "One of you must go now, if there is any hope of getting that information to Burdett."

"Murdock's going," Lanny said.

"Sì. He is younger and stronger than you and has the best chance of getting through." Juan's large, dark eyes gazed directly at Murdock, the look a mixture of fear and hope and pleading. "Vaya con Dios, amigo."

Murdock opened his mouth to protest, but stopped short of uttering a word. He knew that Lanny and Juan were right. And he didn't have time for long farewells. No time to tell Lanny what

the man already knew—that he cared for him like a son cared for his father.

While Juan's battered and bruised teenage soldiers held the mighty Zarazaian army at bay, Murdock slipped into the thicket of vines and gnarled trees that led into the jungle. He didn't think, didn't feel and didn't look back. On his belly, he made his way over the rough forest floor until he knew he was out of sight and out of range. Just as he rose into a crouching position, a thunderous explosion rocked the earth beneath his feet. He froze to the spot. His heartbeat drummed in his ears. His blood ran cold.

Murdock retraced his path, racing toward the men he'd just left. Pausing briefly as he neared the site, he breathed deeply and pleaded with God. But it was a prayer he already knew wouldn't be answered. Finding shelter and a modicum of safety behind a stand of massive carnauba palms, Murdock forced himself to face the truth. Billows of black smoke rose into the sky where the explosion had hit. Pieces of trees mingled with body parts. There was nothing he could do to help Lanny and Juan or the boy soldiers.

Lanny! Murdock cried silently. Lanny was dead!

Murdock's eyelids flew open. He shot straight up. Moisture coated his body as if he'd just returned from the Zarazaian jungle a few minutes ago instead of twenty years ago. Kicking the wrinkled, tangled covers off his feet, he slid out of bed. He padded on bare feet across the wooden floor as he made his way

out of the bedroom, down the hall and into the living room. What he needed was a shot of whiskey.

He retrieved a bottle of Jack Daniel's from the makeshift bar on the sofa table by the windows that overlooked Locklin Street. After pouring himself a liberal amount of the liquor, he flopped down in his favorite chair, a brown overstuffed leather seat. As he lifted the glass to his lips, he stretched out his long legs and rested his feet on the huge leather ottoman.

Why the hell had he dreamed about Lanny? About Juan and his soldiers? After twenty years, why couldn't he forget the past?

Liking the taste of the whiskey, he savored it in his mouth a few seconds before swallowing. The liquid burned a trail down his throat and hit his stomach like a ball of fire, warming his insides.

For the first five or six years after his escape from Zaraza, he'd had the dream on a regular basis, but as time went by, the dream had become less frequent. This particular nightmare hadn't awakened him once during the past ten years. So why tonight?

An uneasy feeling gnawed away at him. Something was wrong. But what? He was a man who had survived by taking heed when his gut instincts warned him. When he'd been a green kid of eighteen, he had come through the final days of the fighting in Nam without a scratch. He had survived over twenty-five years as a mercenary and a freelance CIA operative by a combination of good instincts and being a damn lucky son of a bitch.

There had to be a reason why he'd dreamed about the last day he had seen Lanny McCroskey alive.

Murdock's hand accidentally brushed the television remote control. His nerves zinged. That was it! On the world news he'd watched right before going to bed last night, there had been a report about the twenty-year war in Zaraza and how the rebel army had grown in size and strength over the years. The journalist had said that the old regime, controlled by General Ramos, was in a panic. For the first time since the beginning of the civil war, the rebels had a real chance to take over the government.

Murdock downed the last drops of whiskey, set the glass aside and closed his eyes. Lanny, Juan and a bunch of teenagers masquerading as guerrilla soldiers had sacrificed their lives that day—for the cause. And by dying, they had saved Murdock. Saved him to deliver a message to their CIA contact, Rick Burdett.

In the dark, lonely moments when a man questioned what his life had been worth, Murdock asked himself why he'd been the one spared. What made him so all-fired special that God had let him live when better men had died? But he'd never found the answer.

Chapter 1

Catherine Price rose from her chair, smoothed the wrinkles from her blue linen skirt and squared her shoulders. The moment the door to her office opened, she took a calming breath and prepared herself to meet the government official who had telephoned her that morning. Rickman Burdett had identified himself as a CIA Deputy Director.

"I have information about your father," the man had told her. "This is something I prefer to discuss with you in person."

Jane Farr, Catherine's secretary, ushered the gentleman into her office. Mr. Burdett was a tall, slender gentleman with a mane of white hair and a set of piercing brown eyes. Except for those cold, calculating eyes, he looked like any ordinary, grandfatherly businessman.

As Catherine rounded her desk, she extended her hand in greeting. "Mr. Burdett."

Burdett clasped her hand in his. His cool, slender fingers gripped loosely, his handshake reserved. "I appreciate your seeing me, Ms. Price. I realize that I probably made this matter sound mysterious when I phoned you and for that I do apologize. However, the news I have for you is the kind that should be delivered in person."

Catherine had no idea what this man would tell her about her father. After all these years, she didn't really care. Lanny

McCroskey had been dead since she was sixteen and hadn't really been a part of her life even before his death. His military career had sent him to Vietnam when she was a mere child and when he had returned, he'd been a stranger to her and to her mother. Her parents had divorced five years before her father's mysterious death in Zaraza and during those five years, she hadn't seen her father once.

"Won't you sit down." Catherine waved her hand in a well-mannered invitation.

"Thanks."

Burdett waited for her to return to her tufted-leather chair behind her antique oak desk before he sat.

"Now, what is this information you have about my father that prompted you to fly to Tennessee to tell me in person."

"Have you been watching the televised reports on the war in Zaraza lately?"

"Not really. I don't watch much television. I prefer to spend my leisure hours reading."

"Then let me bring you up to date on what's going on there."

"Is that really necessary?" Catherine glanced at her diamond-studded gold watch. Whatever this man had to tell her, she hoped he'd make it quick. She had a busy day ahead of her and she hated the thought of wasting time listening to some old war story about her father.

"Ms. Price, what if I told you that your father didn't die in Zaraza twenty years ago?"

“What?” A nervous unease fluttered in her stomach.

“We have reason to believe that Lanny McCroskey was taken alive by the Zarazaian government and has spent the past twenty years in prison there.”

Catherine laid her tightly balled fists on top of her desk. She had understood Mr. Burdett’s words, but her mind refused to accept their meaning. “What makes you think that my father is a prisoner in Zaraza?”

“We received a letter—” Burdett reached into the inside pocket of his coat and pulled out a tattered envelope “—from General Ramos, the Zarazaian dictator.” Burdett held out the missive toward Catherine.

She stared at the envelope. She didn’t want to touch it. Didn’t want to become involved in whatever game this man was playing. Her father had died twenty years ago. The U.S. government had officially informed her mother of that fact.

“I don’t believe my father is alive and I have no intention of sitting here listening to any wild stories you’ve fabricated about —”

“Lanny McCroskey is alive!” Burdett lifted a photograph from the envelope. “He’s twenty years older and looks like hell, but I recognize the man in this picture. It’s your father, Ms. Price.” He laid the six-by-four-inch color snapshot on her desk.

Catherine fought the urge to swipe the picture off into the trash. But despite her doubts that it was possible for her father to still be alive, she couldn’t seem to stop herself from leaning

forward slightly and glancing quickly at the photograph. Her heart caught in her throat as she looked at the vaguely familiar face. Without hesitation, she snatched the snapshot from her desk and lifted it for closer inspection.

The man's hair was gray, as was his beard and mustache. He was thin, haggard, weary. Slumped shoulders. Hollow eyes. An aura of defeat surrounded him. This was an old man. A pathetic old man. This wasn't the Lanny McCroskey she remembered. Big, robust, intimidating. Gone was the tanned skin and black hair. Gone was the virile, almost swaggering persona that had been a part of her army sergeant father. But the eyes were the same. A pure sky blue. Despite the misery she saw in his expression, she couldn't mistake the resemblance between her own eyes and those that stared back at her from the photograph she held in her trembling hand.

"My God!" She clutched the picture with both hands, then brought it upward to cover her mouth with it as she closed her eyes. Tears lodged in her throat.

Burdett stood abruptly. "General Ramos is asking $100,000 in exchange for Lanny's release."

Catherine's eyelids flew open. "What—what did you say?"

"It seems General Ramos is well aware that his dictatorship is nearing its end, so he's selling his foreign prisoners back to their families for as much cash as possible. The asking price for Lanny's freedom is $100,000 in U.S. currency." Burdett offered Catherine the letter once again.

“Officially, we—the U.S. government—can’t become involved. But unofficially, I want to help you and am willing to put up part of the money, if—”

“I have the money,” Catherine said, her voice a mere whisper. “I can give you a check today.”

“I’m afraid it’s not quite that simple.” Burdett frowned, wrinkling his brow and deepening the lines around his mouth. “If you’ll read the letter, you’ll see that, in Lanny’s case, General Ramos is demanding that you deliver the money in person to the capital city of San Carlos. This holds true for all the political prisoners the governor is selling. By extorting money from individuals and not governments, he stands a better chance of finding a government that will give him asylum when he flees Zaraza.”

Catherine grabbed the letter from Burdett, unfolded the wrinkled page and scanned the message hurriedly. The conditions of the exchange were spelled out quite succinctly. No room for doubt. One hundred thousand dollars, U.S. currency, hand delivered by Lanny’s daughter, Catherine McCroskey Price, directly into General Ramos’s hands.

“I’ll provide the money, Mr. Burdett, but I will not take the money to Zaraza.” Lanny McCroskey was her father, she reminded herself, and she’d never miss the hundred thousand, which was only a pittance in comparison to the ten million Rodney had left her. But she didn’t really owe her father anything. And she certainly wasn’t ready to risk her life entering a South

American country embroiled in a twenty-year civil war. “Surely you can send a female agent into Zaraza. Someone who can pose as Lanny’s daughter.”

“Ms. Price, if General Ramos knows you exist, knows your name, then our guess is he has a way to identify you. Perhaps recent pictures of you.”

Catherine shuddered. The thought that some stranger working for the Zarazaian government might have snapped her picture without her being aware of it both frightened and outraged her.

“Are you saying that the only way I can save my father is by actually going to Zaraza?”

“Yes, I’m afraid that’s exactly what I’m saying,” Burdett told her. “Of course, it’s your call, Ms. Price. We can’t force you to rescue your father. However, if you decide to go, I can guarantee you a professional bodyguard to accompany you on the trip.”

“A professional. Do you mean a government agent?”

“No. As I told you, the government can’t become involved in this.” Burdett cleared his throat. “The man I have in mind has worked for Dundee Private Security and Investigation for over a year now, but before that he was one of the best mercenaries around. If anyone can get you in and out of Zaraza safe and sound, it’s Murdock.”

“Murdock? Aloysius Murdock?” Catherine asked.

A hint of a smile curved Burdett’s lips. “No one calls him Aloysius and lives.”

“This Murdock was in Vietnam with my father, wasn’t he?

And he was in Zaraza with him twenty years ago, too! I vaguely remember my mother mentioning once that Mr. Murdock paid her a visit after my father was killed."

"Will you go to San Carlos and deliver the money to General Ramos?" Burdett asked. "Remember, you'll have Murdock at your side the whole time."

"If Mr. Murdock is a contemporary of my father, then he must be at least in his early sixties. Do you honestly think he's physically capable of—"

"Murdock's forty-six. He was just a green kid in Nam, not a career soldier like your dad. And believe me, I doubt any man half his age is in as good a shape as Murdock. Take my word for it, he's a man of steel."

The last thing on earth Catherine wanted to do was travel to a third world, war-torn country to rescue the father who had deserted her and her mother long before he'd been reported killed. Why should she risk her life for a man who'd walked out on her without a backward glance? Christmas and birthday presents didn't really count as far as she was concerned. The fact that he'd sent gifts up until he'd supposedly died in Zaraza hardly made up for his absence.

"I can withdraw the money from my bank this afternoon," Catherine heard herself saying, despite her uncertainty. "When can you arrange for me to meet Mr. Murdock?"

Dinner had been on the Dundee Agency tonight. Once a year, Sam Dundee dragged himself away from Le Bijou Bleu, his

island retreat in the Gulf Coast, to come to Atlanta and inspect the troops. Or, at least, that was the way Murdock thought of the big boss's visit. The rest of the time, Ellen Denby, Dundee's CEO, was in charge. Ellen had been the one who had hired Murdock, as well as most of the other current employees, and she was the one who made the decisions. But Sam still owned the agency, despite his retirement several years ago.

A private room at Peaches, a local downtown Atlanta bar and grill, had hosted the crème de la crème of private security agents. Murdock glanced around the table as Sam handed his credit card to the waitress. Over a year ago, after deciding he was getting too old for a life of constant danger, Murdock had retired from his career as a soldier of fortune and come to work for Dundee. The men congregated here tonight were cut from the same cloth as he. Former mercenaries, special forces members, lawmen and government agents. And not a guy under thirty-five in the bunch.

One man—Egan Cassidy—was Murdock's age and a former Nam vet. Their paths had crossed more than once in the years they'd both been mercenaries. The youngest of the bunch was Joe Ornelas, a former Navajo policeman who had just turned thirty-five.

Murdock had a passing acquaintance with all the Dundee employees, but Cassidy, Ornelas and four others were men whose expertise Murdock knew firsthand and for whom he had the greatest respect. Matt O'Brien, a pretty boy with a mind like a computer. Hunter White-law, the silent, deadly type. Jack

Parker, a deceptive charmer. And David Wolfe, a mystery man, who'd been hired personally by Sam Dundee.

And of course, there was Ellen, who was an enigma. Ultra feminine. Beautiful face. Built like a brick out-house. Yet tough, shrewd and a match for any man.

When Jack proposed a final toast, this one to the lovely Ellen, Murdock lifted his beer mug and joined in the good-natured fun. Despite her knockout good looks, Ellen fit in with the crowd of macho men as if she were one of them. She could outdrink, outcuss and outsmart every last one of them and they all knew it.

Murdock had learned about Dundee's from an old buddy, Gabriel Hawk, who had once been a freelance CIA operative and with whom Murdock had occasionally worked on assignments, especially in the Caribbean and Central and South America. He and Hawk spoke Spanish like natives.

Hawk had left the agency after marrying his last assignment, a former missionary who had tamed one of the baddest of the bad boys when she landed Hawk. Murdock never thought he'd live to see the day a woman would be able to wrap Hawk around her little finger. He'd been wrong.

Murdock had been kicked more than once where it hurt, the first time as a teenager, the last time as a grown man who should have known better. After Barbara, a society beauty who'd used him for "a walk on the wild side", he'd sworn off relationships.

With the check paid and the last round of beers drunk, the agents began milling around the room, shaking hands and saying

their good-nights. Murdock enjoyed a social occasion from time to time, but usually he preferred the solitude of his loft apartment in an old renovated building. Sometimes Cassidy would drop by for a game of pool or several of the guys would come over for poker, but the rest of his free nights, Murdock spent alone. He liked to read, a passion of his since childhood. And sometimes, when he had the urge, he'd find himself a willing woman. One who didn't mind that he'd leave afterward, long before daylight, and probably wouldn't call her for a second date.

As they headed out the door, Murdock laid his hand on Cassidy's back. "I hear you got stuck with teaching the ropes to the new Dundee recruits."

"Yeah, I drew the short straw."

Cassidy grinned, something Murdock had seldom seen the man do in all the years he'd known him. Cassidy was a somber man, with some sort of demon chasing him.

"You on for pool tonight?" Murdock asked.

"Not tonight," Cassidy replied, the smile still in place. "I have all-night plans with a lady."

"A lady, huh? Well, be careful, Bubba. Ladies are the most dangerous kind of female known to man."

"Speaking from experience?"

"A gentleman never gets kicked where it hurts and tells." Murdock slapped Cassidy on the back as the two men chuckled.

The cool autumn air hit Murdock the minute he stepped out onto the Atlanta street. He threw up his hand to wave goodbye

to Cassidy and the others, then headed for his Camaro.

The drive home to Locklin Street took less than fifteen minutes. He parked the Z28 in the tenants' garage that took up the entire ground level of the old building. Besides his loft apartment, there were four other apartments below him, two each on the second and third floors. Using the service elevator, which none of the other residents used, Murdock headed upward. The moment he emerged from the elevator, a sense of unease hit him square in the gut. He lifted his jacket back over the hip holster and unbuckled the flap. He hadn't lived forty-six years, most of it in life-threatening situations, without acquiring a keen instinct for danger.

"No need to draw your weapon," the familiar voice said.

Recognizing the voice, Murdock released a tightly in-drawn breath and turned to face his former CIA contact. "What the hell are you doing here, Burdett?"

After glancing around at the darkened corridor, Burdett nodded toward the door of Murdock's apartment. "I just drove over from Huntington, Tennessee, and I've been waiting for you here nearly an hour. Before we talk, I need to see a man about a dog and then I wouldn't object to a drink or two."

Murdock chuckled as he unlocked the door and ushered Burdett inside the open expanse of his private domain. After flipping a light switch that controlled the recessed wall fixtures and illuminating the huge living room, he locked the door behind them.

“Bathroom’s through those double louvered doors.” Murdock used his thumb to point the direction. “Jack Daniel’s is all I’m drinking these days.”

“Fine with me. Make mine neat.”

While he prepared the drinks and waited for Burdett to emerge from the john, Murdock wondered why a CIA Deputy Director was paying him a nighttime visit. He hadn’t seen or heard from Rick Burdett in nearly two years.

When Burdett came out of the bathroom, he glanced around the apartment, his gaze taking leisurely note of everything from floor to ceiling. “Don’t tell me you decorated this place yourself.”

“All right, I won’t tell you.” Murdock handed Burdett his whiskey. “So, are you going to tell me what you’re doing here or are we going to play nice-nice all night?”

Burdett took a sip of the liquor, then without invitation, sat on the tan leather sofa that rested on the wooden floor, squarely in the middle of the large room.

“Lanny McCroskey is alive.”

“What?” Murdock felt as if he’d been hit on the head with a sledgehammer.

“Lanny didn’t die twenty years ago the way we thought he did, the way you said he did.” Burdett took another sip of whiskey. “We figure he was wounded. Hurt pretty bad. But he lived, God bless his damned soul. He’s spent the past twenty years in a Zarazaian prison.”

“How do you know? Hell, don’t answer that! Just tell me if

you're sure. One hundred percent sure."

Rick Burdett pulled a photograph from his coat pocket and handed it to Murdock. "This was taken less than a week ago."

Murdock studied the snapshot of a skinny, old, gray-haired man. If not for the eyes, he wouldn't have recognized his former sergeant. "God! He'd have been better off if he'd died."

"Have you been keeping up with the latest news on the Zarazaian civil war?"

"Yeah. I know Juan Sabino's kid has taken over where his old man left off and he's whipping Ramos's ass."

"Ramos is preparing for the worst and he wants to make sure that if he has to abdicate his position, he can take as much money with him as possible. He's asking $100,000 in exchange for Lanny."

"Jeez!" A hundred thousand was a lot, but by cashing in some bonds, emptying his savings and, if necessary, selling his new Camaro, he could scrape up the cash. "I can get my hands on that much, but it could take me several days."

"Lanny's daughter has the cash and she's willing to pay for his release."

"Lanny's daughter?" Murdock frowned, remembering. "Oh, yeah. He talked about her all the time. Her and her mother. He really cared about his ex-wife and about his kid, too. So, the girl's all right, huh, if she's willing to help—"

"Catherine Price is no girl," Burdett said. "She's thirty-six, a widow and was reluctant at first to even talk to me about her

father."

"Thirty-six. Damn. Guess I still thought of her as a young girl."

"Here's the deal," Burdett said, as if he didn't want to waste any more time. "Ramos is demanding the money in cash."

Murdock let out a long, low whistle. "That's a lot of money for one of your men to carry around in a briefcase all the way to Zaraza."

"There's a bigger problem. One of my men won't be taking the money. Catherine Price will be."

"Why the blue blazes would you—"

"Ramos's stipulation. He's demanded Lanny's daughter bring it herself. For each prisoner, Ramos has asked that a specific family member bring the ransom money. He's a wily old fox trying to cover his ass by not getting any governments directly involved in the exchange." Burdett paused momentarily, but when Murdock didn't respond, he continued. "I told Ms. Price that you would accompany her to San Carlos for the exchange. She'll arrive tomorrow evening, escorted by one of our agents, who will turn her and the hundred thousand over to you."

"I don't like it. Taking Lanny's daughter into that cesspool. The last thing he'd want would be for that girl of his to put her life in danger to save him."

"She's going to Zaraza to get her father out of prison. She's the type of woman who's doing this because it's the honorable thing to do, not because she loves Lanny. But regardless of her

motivation, she needs a bodyguard. I was sure you'd want to be her protector."

"What time does her flight arrive?"

"Five-thirty." After finishing off his whiskey, Burdett set the glass on a brown marble coaster that rested on the big, square, oak coffee table. "You two will fly straight to Peru day after tomorrow. Arrangements have been made to then take you and Ms. Price, by private plane, directly into San Carlos. One of our contacts will meet you at the airport down there."

"And I suppose since she'll have cash on her, Ms. Price will be under my protection from the moment she arrives tomorrow. Which means Lanny's daughter will be staying here with me until our flight for Peru."

"Yeah. And you better roll out the red carpet while she's here. Catherine Price is the type of woman who expects first-class treatment. She's a thoroughbred. A Southern lady, through and through."

"Just like her mother." Murdock remembered how Lanny had gone on and on about his Mae Beth. She's too good for me, he'd said. Don't know what a lady like her ever saw in an ole Tennessee hillbilly like me. But damn if she didn't love me as much as I loved her.

"You knew Lanny's ex-wife?" Burdett asked.

"I met her once. After I came back from Zaraza. I went to see her, to tell her about Lanny's last day. And about how much he still cared about her and their child. She didn't shed a tear,

but I could tell she was hurting bad. My guess is that she still cared about him, too. Maybe when Lanny comes back, the two of them can—"

"Mrs. McCroskey died nine years ago."

"Then Catherine is all Lanny has left." Murdock sighed. With a look of resolve he said, "You can be damned sure I'll take good care of her."

Catherine scanned the airport crowd, searching for Murdock. Although she knew the agent who'd accompanied her would know Murdock on sight, she wondered if she could pick him out from all the other men. A former mercenary. A man like her father, to whom killing was second nature. Surely, that kind of life would show on his face.

Placing his hand under her elbow, the young agent urged her forward. "There he is," Agent Hendricks said.

"Where?" Catherine asked.

"Straight ahead, on the left."

A dozen men waited for disembarking passengers. After surveying several, her gaze halted on one man. She instinctively recognized Aloysius Murdock. A knot of apprehension formed in the pit of her stomach. And a purely feminine unease settled deep within her. He was everything she had expected. And everything she had feared. Big. Burly. Indeed, a mountain of a man, with enormous shoulders and huge arms. He stood at least six foot six, towering over the others. And there was a world-weary look in his hazel brown eyes as their gazes locked.

A shudder rippled through her at his intense scrutiny. And she realized in that one instant that the man who was going to be her bodyguard on a trip into hell had recognized her just as she had him—instinctively.

Chapter 2

He would have known her anywhere. Could have picked her from a lineup of a hundred women. She had class written all over her. Catherine Price might as well have had twenty-two Karat Gold stamped on her forehead. She was the genuine article. He had known enough women in his time to recognize a real lady when he saw one. He remembered Lanny saying his little girl was beautiful, just like her mama, but he hadn't paid much attention to a father's praise of his only child. Murdock had no idea what she'd looked like as a kid, but Lanny's little girl had grown up to be one fine-looking woman.

Her gaze met his and locked instantly. An odd sensation hit Murdock in the gut, as if a hard fist had knocked the air out of him. Her blue eyes, so much like her father's, held him spellbound for a split second. She tilted her head, and he noted an air of snobbery in her expression, as if she'd just encountered something unpleasant and couldn't quite figure out the mannerly way to react. With mixed emotions bombarding him, he shook off the crazy feelings swirling around inside him and marched forward to meet Lanny's daughter.

Agent Hendricks, carrying a briefcase manacled to his wrist, followed Catherine's quick steps as she headed straight toward Murdock. He realized that, without introductions, she knew exactly who he was. She'd recognized him instantly, as he had

her.

When she drew nearer, he noticed how tall she was, a good six feet in her sensible two-inch navy heels. And although she was trim in her simple navy suit, her hips and breasts were rounded nicely, accentuating her tiny waist. Her shiny brown hair was secured in a large, neat bun at the base of her neck. A pair of large gold hoops shimmered in her earlobes and a heavy gold bracelet dangled on her left wrist.

"Mr. Murdock?" she inquired as she paused directly in front of him.

"Just Murdock, Ms. Price."

Agent Hendricks stepped in front of Catherine and extended his hand. "Brian Hendricks," he introduced himself. "As soon as I see your ID, I can hand Ms. Price and her briefcase—" he lifted his wrist to display the brown leather satchel "—over to you. Just standard procedure."

Murdock whipped out his Dundee's identification badge. Hendricks inspected the ID quickly.

"You have the key, don't you, sir?" Hendricks asked.

Swallowing hard as she broke eye contact with Murdock, Catherine watched his huge hand as it delved into his pocket and produced the handcuff key. Then hurriedly, she rummaged in her purse for the key to the briefcase, wanting to make sure it was safe.

"Is that the key to the briefcase?" Murdock asked.

"What?" Momentarily flustered, Catherine hesitated before

she replied. “Yes. Why?”

Without asking permission or making any comment, Murdock took the key from her. His big, callused fingertips brushed over the soft, smooth flesh of her palm. She sucked in a deep breath at the contact.

“Better let me keep that.” He realized that she’d felt it, too. That electrical current snapping between them at a mere touch. Damn! He didn’t like this. The last thing he had expected was to be attracted to Lanny’s daughter.

Catherine glowered at him, but didn’t respond.

Hendricks cleared his throat. Murdock hurriedly uncuffed the man and took possession of the briefcase containing a hundred thousand dollars in U.S. bills.

“Good luck, Ms. Price,” Hendricks said.

“Thank you.” Catherine extended her hand to the agent.

The minute Hendricks took her hand in his, the urge to grab her away from the drooling boy made Murdock act hastily. Without so much as a goodbye, he slid his arm around Catherine’s waist and drew her to his side. She tensed immediately and released Hendricks’s hand. Before she could voice a protest, Murdock maneuvered her around swiftly and headed her toward the baggage claims area.

“I don’t think it’s necessary for you to manhandle me, Mr. Murdock!” Catherine pulled away from him and stopped dead still.

Oh, but that was where she was wrong, he thought. You started

out with a woman the way you intended to go. Catherine needed to realize that, from here on out, he was running the show.

"I didn't realize I was manhandling you. I saw no reason to prolong your goodbyes to Agent Hendricks." Murdock took a couple of steps forward, then paused when he noticed Catherine hadn't moved. "The sooner we get you and this briefcase out of the airport, the better."

She moved then, quickly and straight to his side. "You don't honestly think I'm in any danger here in the Atlanta airport, do you?"

Murdock placed his arm around her again. This time she didn't protest and fell into step beside him.

"You're safe, as long as you're with me."

"Confident, aren't you, Mr. Murdock?"

"Just Murdock, Catherine."

He grinned when he felt her flinch at his use of her given name. Surely she didn't expect him to call her Ms. Price. He wasn't one of her students and he sure as hell wasn't one of the refined Southern gentleman she dated.

He liked the fact that she was tall. Most women barely came to his shoulder, even in heels. But standing only six inches shorter than he, Catherine could look him square in the eye. Close enough to spit, he thought. And something told him that during this trip together, the time might come when she'd do just that —spit in his eye! Catherine might have been raised to be a lady by her Southern belle mother, but there had to be something

of Lanny in her. Some streak of wildness. He'd bet his last dollar that a hot-blooded woman was hidden beneath that cool, controlled facade.

At the baggage claim, she pointed out her black suitcase and Murdock lifted it quickly, then hurried her out of the airport and to his car.

On the drive to Murdock's apartment, their conversation consisted of such mundane matters as the details of their 8:00 am flight to Peru and the weather. When the silence between them reached the awkward stage, Murdock turned on the radio, setting the dial to a jazz and blues station. A mournful voice sang about love, loss and heartbreak.

Occasionally Catherine stole quick glances at Murdock's chiseled profile. Hard chin and jaw. Clean shaven, with only a hint of a light aftershave. Short, neat, dark-brown hair. Confined alone with him in the small quarters of the car's interior, she felt overwhelmed by his massive size. Aloysius Murdock was huge. And every ounce was pure muscle.

He was a much larger man than her father, who, although tall, had been lanky. But the aura of danger and power that surrounded Murdock reminded her of Lanny McCroskey. She had adored her big, macho father, even though she'd seen little of him during her young life. He had called her his kitten and even after the divorce, he had remembered her with expensive birthday presents, Christmas gifts and occasional phone calls. She had tried to hate him, had pretended that she never wanted

to see him again, but when the news came that he'd been killed in Zaraza, she had mourned his death. Even now, after twenty years, she had conflicting feelings about the man who had fathered her. She both hated and loved him. But despite everything, she was willing to pay a hundred thousand dollars and perhaps risk her life to save him.

Something told her that men like her father—and men like Murdock—inspired those mixed feelings in their women. Their wives, daughters, sisters, lovers and perhaps even their mothers. Most women were drawn to big, bold, dangerous men and yet their common sense warned them to flee from the bad boys of this world. Her mother had learned, the hard way, that loving such a man caused immeasurable heartache.

Catherine had avoided men who even vaguely reminded her of Lanny, choosing instead to date the academic types. Rodney Price had been Lanny's exact opposite. A quiet, gentle, soft-spoken gentleman who had enjoyed a night at the ballet as much if not more than an afternoon at a football stadium. She and Rodney had been a perfect match and she had been happy during the four years of their marriage. Her one regret, after Rodney's death, was that he hadn't left her with a child.

"We're here," Murdock said, his voice a baritone roar.

Catherine jumped at the sound. Jerked abruptly from her thoughts, she glanced through the windshield just in time to catch a glimpse of the renovated brick building. Murdock wheeled the Camaro into the ground-level garage and whipped it into a

parking slot.

After lifting the briefcase from the floorboard, he rounded the hood and opened the door for Catherine. She mouthed a thank you, but refused his offered hand. He dropped his big paw, grinned and left her standing by the open car door. She slammed the door shut when he walked toward the trunk, then waited at his side until he'd retrieved her suitcase.

"I've got the loft apartment," he said. "So, I use the old service elevator. Just follow me."

"Have you lived here long?" Making conversation was something Catherine excelled at as a normal rule. Years as a teacher at Huntington Academy before she'd become headmistress of the school had taught her the art of speaking. She had charmed many a student and many a parent.

"I moved to Atlanta about eighteen months ago and found this place about a year ago." He didn't tell her that he'd bought the old building as an investment. "I completely renovated the loft." He opened the iron-bar door of the service elevator and stood back, waiting for her to enter. When she eyed the contraption and hesitated, he chuckled. "I promise it's safe."

Reluctantly, she entered the elevator, then plastered a phony smile on her face, as if to say, See, I'm not afraid. But she suspected that he knew she was leery—of the elevator and of him.

The smooth ride up to the loft surprised her, but not as much as the spacious, tastefully decorated apartment that spread out

before them when Murdock unlocked and swung open the double entry doors. The living room, kitchen and dining room were one huge area of painted white walls on the interior and old brick on the exterior side. Gleaming hardwood covered the floor and big wooden beams ran the expanse of the ceiling. An overstuffed leather sofa and twin chairs created a cozy, yet masculine living area in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows. Pleated shades allowed for privacy or sunlight. On the opposite side of the room an oil painting of a clipper ship tossing about in a storm hung on the wall behind the black lacquer table which was surrounded by six brass-and-steel chairs that mimicked Victorian bentwood chairs.

"Your apartment is…well, it's wonderful." Catherine wished she had been able to keep the surprised tone out of her voice. "You didn't do this yourself. I mean, surely you hired someone to—"

Murdock slammed the door. Catherine jumped. Dammit, why was she so nervous? she wondered. Every unexpected sound made her overreact.

"Why do you assume I hired a decorator? Don't you think a guy like me could put together something like this?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to imply that you—"

"Sure you did." Murdock walked past her. "No need to be on your best behavior around me or try to be mannerly. We don't know each other, but you've drawn some conclusions about me, just as I have about you. You figured a former mercenary

who's now a professional bodyguard has more brawn than brains and would probably live in a cluttered dump, with hot-and-cold running bimbos."

"I didn't say one word about bimbos!"

Murdock laughed, the sound like rumbling thunder. "Sit down and make yourself at home. I'll put your suitcase in the bedroom." He caught the startled look on her face and before she could protest, he said, "There are two bedrooms, so don't be concerned that you'll have to share a bed with me. Besides, why would I need you when I keep a bimbo on call twenty-four hours a day."

Catherine's eyes rounded into wide, startled, blue saucers. As Murdock disappeared behind a glass-block partition, she gritted her teeth. Only her strong willpower prevented her from stomping her foot. Damn the man! He enjoyed teasing her—another typical male trait she remembered Lanny McCroskey had possessed. She recalled when her mother had complained about his constant teasing, he'd said a man only teased a woman he liked. Then he'd kissed her mother and said or a woman he loves.

Did that mean that Murdock liked her? What did it matter? her inner voice questioned. He doesn't have to like you to accompany you to Zaraza and act as your bodyguard. And you don't have to like him. As a matter of fact, you'd be better off not liking him.

Just as she sat in one of the leather chairs, Murdock returned,

minus his jacket. He had rolled up the sleeves of his white shirt to his elbows, revealing large, hairy forearms. A bevy of tiny nerves sent off shock waves inside her stomach. The man was so big, so overwhelmingly masculine that he took her breath away. Dear God, he intimidated the hell out of her.

"Want something to drink?" he asked. "Coffee? Tea? Cola? Whiskey?"

"Tea would be nice."

"Hot or cold?"

"Uh-huh." As if entranced in a hypnotic spell, she couldn't take her eyes off him.

"Which?"

Warmth crept up her neck and into her face. Stop this right now! she warned herself. You're acting like an idiot. So he intimidates you. Big deal! There is absolutely no reason to be afraid of him. Remember, he is supposed to be your protector.

"Hot tea, if it's not too much trouble." She deliberately avoided direct eye contact.

"Earl Grey?"

"Yes, that would be lovely." Once again Murdock surprised her. She'd never have thought he would have Earl Grey tea in his cupboard. "By the way, did you put the briefcase in the bedroom, too?"

"I put the hundred thousand in the wall safe in my bedroom."

"Oh."

"You can trust me with the money, Catherine. There's no one

who wants to get Lanny out of that Zarazaian prison more than I do."

"I wasn't implying that you'd—"

"Sure you were, but don't let it bother you. Despite the fact that Lanny is your father and was once my best friend doesn't mean you and I have to be friends. Actually, to accomplish this mission, we don't even have to like each other. All that's necessary is for you to cooperate with me and follow my orders."

"I'm well aware of the fact that you're a professional, with years of experience in matters like this." Catherine's right hand fluttered nervously at her neck as her fingers toyed with the collar on her white silk blouse. "I have no intention of giving you any trouble, Mr. Murdock. I'm perfectly willing to accept your leadership in this matter."

"Well, that takes a load off my mind, Catherine." He emphasized the use of her given name and took great delight in the displeased look she gave him. But instincts warned him that her giving lip service to his leadership and actually following his orders were two different things entirely.

Murdock filled a kettle with tap water, then placed it on the stove eye to heat. Taking two black mugs and a small box from an upper cabinet, he set them on the counter and then removed a couple of tea bags and placed them in the oversize cups.

"I'd like to freshen up," Catherine said.

"Bathroom is to your right, between the two bedrooms. Can't miss it."

"Thank you."

She found the bathroom and hurried inside, then closed the door behind her. She slumped against the wall, letting her head rest on the cool glass-block surface that enclosed the small room. What was she doing here, in this man's apartment, making preparations to fly away with him on a dangerous trip into foreign country? She didn't have an adventurous bone in her body. All her life, she had taken the safe path, avoiding all unnecessary risks. And here she was, putting her life in this stranger's hands, gambling her very existence on his ability to keep her safe. Had she completely lost her mind?

If you don't go to Zaraza, your father will die in prison, her conscience taunted her. You have no choice, but to do the right thing. Somehow she knew that if her mother were alive, her mother would risk anything to save the man she had cut out of her life ages ago— A man whose name Mae Beth McCroskey had whispered with her last breath. If her mother had loved her father that much, then Lanny had to be worth saving.

Catherine wet a washcloth and patted the cool dampness over her face as she gazed into the mirror. She hadn't slept well last night and it showed in the faint darkness under her eyes. After washing her hands, she left the sanctuary of the bathroom and returned to the kitchen area of Murdock's apartment.

As she approached him, she said, "You knew my father very well, didn't you?"

"He was my sergeant in Vietnam," Murdock said. "That's

where we met. And then later, we worked together."

"As mercenaries?" Catherine pulled out one of the round-back metal stools that lined the wide bar which separated the kitchen from the rest of the open space.

Murdock didn't answer her immediately. Instead, he rummaged around in the refrigerator. When he turned to face her, he held a plate of sliced ham, a head of lettuce and a ripe red tomato. "Want a sandwich? It's nearly dinnertime."

Murdock placed the dish on the counter, puzzling over her sudden curiosity. Just what did Catherine want to know about her father? he wondered. How much did he dare tell her about Lanny's life? About the assignments they had shared, the risks they'd taken, the bloodbaths they had been a part of more than once. He didn't think Lanny would want his little girl to know the details of his soldier-of-fortune life.

"I know that after my father returned from Vietnam, he resigned from the army and became a mercenary," she continued. "His job choice was one of the reasons he and my mother eventually divorced."

"Then why ask me, if you already know?"

"Because I never really knew Lanny McCroskey." Catherine eased down on one of the stools and hooked her feet beneath the circular rounds on the bottom. "I was barely eight years old when he came home from Vietnam and in those eight years, he'd been away from us more than he'd been with us. Then three years later, he and my mother divorced. I never saw him again." She

paused, waiting for Murdock to comment. He didn't. Instead he laid plates on the counter and opened a loaf of bread.

"Ham sandwiches okay with you?"

"Why don't you want to talk to me about my father?"

"Mustard? Mayonnaise? Both?"

"Are you deliberately trying to irritate me?"

"All I'm trying to do is fix you some tea and a sandwich."

Catherine stared at the big man. The expression on his face one of total calm, Murdock met her gaze head-on and didn't so much as flinch. What was it that he was determined not to tell her? Why was he being so evasive?

"I'll take both mayo and mustard," she replied. "But please, let me help." She knew there was nothing she could do to persuade this man to talk to her, to tell her about her father. All she could do was cooperate. After all, whether she liked it or not, she needed Murdock to go with her into Zaraza and bring her father back alive. He could well be her father's only hope for survival —and her only hope, too.

"Sit tight," he told her. "I can throw a couple of sandwiches together."

She nodded her agreement. They exchanged brief, hesitant looks. But she understood the significance of his quick yet penetrating stare. And she suspected that he knew exactly what she was thinking. They were strangers, two people joined in a common cause—saving Lanny McCroskey's life. After all, her father was their only bond, the only reason they'd met. Neither

wanted or needed to become better acquainted. Each feared the other, on a purely primitive level. And despite their shared interest in Lanny's welfare, they didn't quite trust each other.

Silence separated them as surely as if it were a tangible wall. Murdock prepared the sandwiches and tea, then placed a plate and mug in front of Catherine. He eased his large frame down beside her on one of the stools, then lifted the thick sandwich to his mouth. She sipped the tea and eyed the man-size sandwich he'd made for her.

"The war messed your father up pretty badly." Murdock laid down the sandwich and lifted the mug in both hands, gripping it firmly. "You know. Mentally and emotionally. It wasn't that he didn't want to be the man he'd been before…he just couldn't be."

"Why didn't he get help? A psychiatrist could have—"

"All the doctors in the world couldn't have put Lanny McCroskey back together. Believe me, Catherine, he wanted to be a good husband and father. And he did try. For a couple of years. But once he realized he was hurting your mother…and you…by being in your lives, he split."

"And became a mercenary?" Catherine nervously circled the rim of her mug with the tip of her index finger.

"He was a trained soldier. It was the only life he knew. And…" Should he tell her? Murdock wondered. It wasn't as if she were still a kid who needed protection from the truth. She was a grown woman. "I think your old man had a death wish."

Her full, pink lips formed an oblong oval as she gasped softly.

“A death wish?”

“I was with him the day he…well, the day I thought he died. One of the last things he said to me was that he’d been living on borrowed time ever since Nam.”

“You were with him when—”

“We were on an assignment in Zaraza. We were trying to get through enemy lines in order to get a vital message to a contact.” He couldn’t tell her details of the mission or explain that the U.S. government had been playing a part in the ongoing revolution for the past twenty years. “Your father sent me with the message, knowing that by staying behind, he was saving my life and sacrificing his. So you see, if he’s still alive and there’s some way I can get him out of Zaraza, then I’m going to.”

“Because you owe him your life?”

“Yeah. Because I owe him my life.”

Catherine lifted the mug to her lips and sipped the tea. She preferred it with neither cream, sugar nor lemon and apparently Murdock liked his the same way. They ate and drank in silence, each avoiding any eye contact. After Catherine ate half her sandwich and drank all her tea, she slipped off the stool and, with her back to Murdock, made her way across the room.

She paused momentarily and asked, “Which bedroom should I use?”

“The one on the left of the bathroom,” he told her.

“Then if you’ll excuse me, I’d like to be alone for a while.”

He watched her disappear into the small guest bedroom that

he used mostly as a study. Perhaps he should have given her his room, which was larger and less cramped. But the bed in the extra room was an old double bed, which meant his feet would hang over the footboard. One of the drawbacks of being six foot six.

Busying himself cleaning up the kitchen, Murdock started trying to figure out just how to handle Catherine Price. A man would have to be dead not to notice how attractive she was. But a smart man would keep his distance from a lady who so obviously considered him as nothing more than a necessary means to an end. No doubt, she wouldn't give him the time of day, if she didn't need him to get her and her hundred thousand into Zaraza and secure her and Lanny's safety.

He had known her type back in Mississippi, where he'd done yard work for rich families when he'd been a teenager. Sweet little innocent Southern belles liked to flirt and give poor boys ideas. And Barbara had been the society type, too. Rich and pampered. She'd led him on, making him believe she loved him, when all along she'd had no intention of making a commitment to him. That had been years ago, but he'd learned his lesson well. Barbara had been an excellent teacher.

He knew Catherine wasn't Barbara. Physically they didn't resemble each other at all. But her superior attitude, her air of snobbery, the slightly condescending way in which she looked at him reminded him of a woman he thought he'd long since not only cut out of his heart, but exorcised from his soul. Like the demon she had been.

If he didn't owe Lanny McCroskey his life, no amount of money could induce him to spend the next few days with Catherine. She was the kind of woman he avoided, at all costs. The moment he'd seen her, he'd known they would mix like oil and water. He might not be the smartest guy on earth, but he had sense enough to know that dealing with Lanny's daughter was going to be one big headache.

Even though she'd promised to take orders, something told him that if she ever disagreed with his commands, she'd buck him. Before they left for Peru, he had to make certain she truly realized the dangers that confronted them and that one wrong move could cost both of them their lives.

With loud, marching steps, Murdock stormed across the room and into the square hallway that separated the two bedrooms. The guest room door stood open just enough to give him a glimpse of Catherine lying across the bed, the red spread in place beneath her. He paused, his hand hovering in midair. Maybe she was asleep, he thought.

Their talk could wait, couldn't it? She'd be in a better mood once she'd rested, perhaps more willing to truly accept his leadership in their joint venture. If she were a sensible woman, she'd realize that following his instructions could easily mean the difference between success and failure, between life and death —for her and her father.

The moment Murdock walked away from the bedroom door, Catherine opened her eyes. She had sensed his presence and

feigned sleep. She couldn't deal with Murdock. Not now. Later perhaps. She knew it was only a matter of time before they would have to discuss their trip to Zaraza. She suspected she would have no choice but to accept Murdock's being in command. She dreaded the thought of letting him boss her around. She'd been an independent woman all her life. Even as a teenager, she'd made her own decisions and taken care of herself. Her mother had been dear and sweet and kind. But Mae Beth McCroskey had been a weak woman whose life had crumbled into loneliness and misery once she lost her husband. But Catherine was made of stronger stuff. She had sworn no man would ever have that much power over her—enough power to break her heart and destroy her life.

She had never needed anyone. Not even Rodney. Her husband had understood and accepted her need to control every aspect of her own life and he had never asked for more than she'd been willing to give.

Catherine sat up and scooted to the edge of the bed, then let her bare feet touch the polished hardwood floor. Rising from the bed, she stretched, then lifted her suitcase and set it on the arms of the wooden rocker in the corner. The best way to avoid Murdock tonight was to take a bath and go to bed. Tomorrow morning would be soon enough to deal with the big man again.

She removed her toiletries case and set it on the small, cluttered desk to her right, then lifted her pajamas, robe and slippers from the suitcase. As she reached down for the vinyl case, her hand accidentally knocked a manila folder off the desk

and onto the floor. With her clothing draped over her arm and her slippers secured in one hand, she reached down and picked up the folder, intending to return it to the desk. But just as she lifted it, she noticed her name scrawled across the top in a large, bold handwriting that she felt certain belonged to Murdock. Tossing her clothing and slippers on the bed, she flipped open the folder. As she scanned the thick report, her hands tightened around the folder, crushing the edges of the papers she held.

Damn him! How dare he! What gave him the right?

In her bare feet, Catherine stormed out of the guest room and ran into the living room. Murdock sat in one of the big leather chairs, his feet resting on the matching ottoman, a book in one hand. He glanced up at her, his gaze casual.

"I thought you were sleeping," he said.

Catherine held up the crumpled file folder as if she were confronting him with a murder weapon in a trial. Her gaze narrowed angrily on his expressionless face.

"Is something wrong?" He slid his feet off the ottoman and onto the floor, then laid his book on the arm of the chair and stood to face her.

"This is a report on me," Catherine told him, her voice trembling with rage. "You know every detail of my life from birth to the present. You have a copy of my birth certificate, my marriage license, even my dental records. How dare you invade my privacy this way?" She rushed toward him, flung the file folder in his face and screamed, "You had no right to do this!"

“You’re getting yourself all worked up over nothing.”

She hated the calmness in his voice, hated the rational, emotionless way he was acting. “How would you like it if I’d had an extensive report compiled on you? Would you like for me to know everything there is to know about you?”

Murdock moved forward, bringing his body within inches of her. When he looked down at her, she noticed gold specks in his hazel-brown eyes. She stepped backward. He lowered his head a fraction, then reached out and grasped her shoulders.

“All that’s in the report on you are facts and figures.” He glanced meaningfully at the scattered papers lying on the floor. “Those don’t tell me everything there is to know about you. Only you can do that.”

Garnering all her willpower, she forced herself not to tremble at his touch, not to allow his massive size and imposing self-assurance to intimidate her. “Why did you have the report compiled?”

“I’m going to be responsible for you, for keeping you safe, from now until we bring Lanny back to the United States. When I take an assignment, I always do my homework. When I become someone’s bodyguard, it’s my standard procedure to find out as much as possible about them.”

Titling her chin, she glared into his eyes, seeking and finding the truth of his statement. She believed him, and yet she couldn’t let go of her anger. If it was Murdock’s standard procedure to have a report compiled on all of his clients, then why did she still

feel as if his knowing the details of her life was tantamount to his having stripped her naked?

He made no move to release his hold on her. His big, callused hands clutched her shoulders with gentle strength.

Feeling as if they were in a contest of wills, she refused to be the first to break eye contact. “Somehow it doesn’t seem quite fair that you know so much about me and I know so little about you.”

Easing one hand down and around her waist, while the other wound around the back of her neck, Murdock lowered his head farther, until his mouth was a hair-breadth away from hers. “Just what do you want to know about me?”

Chapter 3

The flight from Atlanta to Peru had taken off precisely at eight. Catherine hadn't known that they would be flying on the Dundee private jet—just one of many things Murdock hadn't bothered explaining. Their confrontation last night had ended in a stalemate. He hadn't won the battle. And she hadn't actually lost it. In retrospect she could admit to herself that she'd never been as frightened or as excited by a man as she'd been when Murdock had almost kissed her. If she hadn't withdrawn, hadn't pulled back, hadn't broken eye contact, she wasn't sure what might have happened.

The logical part of her personality felt a great sense of relief that she'd had the good sense not to allow her emotions free rein. But the purely female aspects of her mind and body couldn't forget the way she'd felt and longed to feel again.

"How about some breakfast?" Murdock unhooked his seat belt, then rose and headed toward the galley. "There's coffee and sweet rolls and muffins. What'll you have?"

Catherine released the catch of her seat belt, stood and stretched. She had chosen brown pants and a tan jacket of a nonwrinkle material for the long trip, planning to use the outfit more than once. She had packed light. After all, this was supposed to be a quick trip in and out of Zaraza. All they had to do was pay the ransom money for her father and then bring him

out of the country as fast as possible.

Without replying to Murdock, she made her way to the galley and poured her own coffee, picked up a paper napkin and then chose a sweet roll from the assortment. She didn't bother even looking at her bodyguard. To be honest, she was having a difficult time facing him this morning, after the way she'd run from him last evening. He had to be aware of the way he'd affected her—of the reason she'd run from him.

"Giving me the silent treatment today?" Murdock filled his cup, grabbed two rolls and watched Catherine as she sat and crossed her ankles in a demure, ladylike fashion.

Was she upset with him? he wondered. Still angry that he'd compiled an extensive report on her? Or was her attitude the result of something a little more basic? She had run from him last night, as if he'd been a monster ready to devour her.

"I'm more than willing to talk to you." She tilted her nose just enough to imply superiority. "As a matter of fact, I have dozens of questions and I'd very much like some answers."

Murdock sat beside her, then lifted his coffee mug in a salute. "Fire away. What do you want to know?"

Eyeing him suspiciously, she picked up the roll from the napkin on her knee, brought it to her mouth and took a bite. After laying the roll back on the napkin, she took a sip of coffee. "Since we're using the Dundee jet, why aren't we flying directly into Zaraza today?"

"Because only Zarazaian planes are allowed in and out of

the country right now. Even the commercial flights have been canceled temporarily."

"Then how are we going to fly into—"

"Arrangements are being made for us to take a Zarazaian plane. Hopefully, by tomorrow morning, we'll be in San Carlos."

"Hopefully? Do you mean there's a chance we—"

"My contact in Lima should be able to arrange the flight," Murdock told her.

Catherine glowered at Murdock. "Would you mind allowing me to finish one sentence without interrupting? Don't you have any manners at all?"

Murdock chuckled. Manners? Had she actually said manners? "Sorry, ma'am. I'm afraid not spending much time around ladies, I have forgotten my manners."

"I don't appreciate your sarcasm, either!"

"You don't appreciate much of anything about me, do you, Cat?"

"Cat!"

"Yeah, honey, that's what you remind me of—a spitting, hissing she-cat, who has her claws drawn and is ready to fight, even with very little provocation."

"My name isn't Cait or Cathy and it most definitely isn't Cat. It's Catherine. Do I make myself clear… Aloysius?" Her lips curved in a self-satisfied smile. She could tell from the sudden tension in his jaws and the narrowing of his eyes that her use of his given name had accomplished the desired effect.

“Nobody calls me Aloysius.” His voice roared, deep, throaty and harsh.

“Then we have a deal—you don’t call me Cat and I won’t call you Aloysius.”

“So, the lady knows how to fight dirty.” Setting his mug and roll on the tray in front of him, he turned to her. She visibly cringed when he settled his gaze directly on her face. “In case you didn’t know it, that was a compliment…Catherine.”

“Thank you.” She wished he’d stop inspecting her so thoroughly.

His big hand came toward her so quickly that she had no time to withdraw before he wiped the corner of her mouth with the tip of his index finger. She sucked in her breath and held it until her lungs ached for release.

Her startled eyes expressed what she felt. Murdock realized touching her had been a mistake. One he shouldn’t make again. He sensed a hunger in Catherine that could be dangerous for both of them. “You had sugar from the sweet roll on—”

She released her breath and glowered at him. “Next time, just tell me. I’m perfectly capable of wiping my own mouth.”

He stood abruptly. With his back to her, he said, “You’re perfectly capable of doing a great deal, I’m sure.”

Why was she allowing this man to have such a negative effect on her? she wondered. Just because she found herself attracted to him, on some purely primitive, animalistic level, didn’t mean she would ever act on those unwanted feelings. And there was

no excuse for her taking out her frustration and anger with her father on Murdock, no matter how alike the two men were. This man meant nothing to her and never would.

"Murdock?"

His big shoulders tensed, but he didn't turn around. "Yeah?"

"Let's call a truce," she said. "I admit that I've been deliberately difficult, but so have you. Can't we be more pleasant to each other and agree to disagree on certain issues? After all, we have to put up with each other for only a few days. Just long enough to rescue my father."

Hell! She's right, he thought. Just because she pushed all his buttons didn't mean he had to react like an idiot when she irritated him. So what if her superior, lady-of-the-manor persona reminded him of Barbara the Beast. So what if she'd made it abundantly clear that she didn't like him. So what if she was a good-looking woman and when they came into physical contact with each other, sparks flew.

He turned slowly and by the time he faced her, he had a forced smile in place. "No more squabbles. We have a mission to accomplish together, whether we like it or not."

"Do you think we'll run into any major problems once we arrive in San Carlos?" she asked, wanting to focus on their joint venture and not on the man himself.

"Anything can happen once we cross the border over into Zaraza. That's why it's imperative that you don't question any command I issue. If I tell you to jump off a bridge, then by God,

you jump off that bridge without hesitation. Do you understand?"

Every muscle in Catherine's body stiffened. She despised the thought of mindlessly following anyone's lead. But her common sense told her that in this case she needed to make an exception. "I understand."

He eyed her skeptically.

"Really. I do understand. I won't like it," she admitted. "But I will do whatever you tell me to do."

"Without asking me a bunch of dumb fool questions?"

"Yes."

"Then there's a good chance that you and Lanny and I will be on a plane out of Zaraza by day after tomorrow."

The six-and-half-hour flight to Peru seemed much longer. She and Murdock had talked very little, each aware that by not conversing, they were less likely to argue and break their new pledge of cooperation and cordiality. She'd tried to read the paperback novel she'd hidden away in her purse, but had been unable to concentrate. However, Murdock hadn't seemed to have any trouble concentrating on the two action-adventure movies he'd watched to pass away the time.

When the pilot announced their imminent arrival at the Jorge Chavez International Airport, Murdock reached over and secured Catherine's seat belt. Words of chastisement had been on the tip of her tongue. Instead, she forced a smile. After all, he was just doing his job, wasn't he? Just taking care of Lanny's daughter.

“Look out the window,” he said.

“Why?”

When he lifted his eyebrows, she clenched her jaw. Damn the man!

“Excuse me. Was that an order?”

“Just a suggestion,” he replied.

One glance out the window and she realized why Murdock had suggested taking a look at the city. A soft, hazy mist blanketed the entire area with a dreamlike atmosphere.

“What is it?” she asked. “Some sort of fog?”

“It’s the garúa,” he said. “A fine mist that settles over the city from May to October. The residents don’t seem to mind at all.”

“You’ve been here before then?”

“Yeah, I’ve been here before.”

“With my father?”

“Yeah, twenty years ago. And a couple of times since.”

“On mercenary assignments?”

“Catherine, stop asking me about my life as a mercenary. Believe me, you really don’t want to hear any details and if you keep asking, eventually you might irritate me enough that I’ll tell you.”

“Is our truce over already?”

“No.”

“I won’t ask about your past again.”

“Good.”

Although a line of taxis waited in front of the airport terminal,

Murdock steered her toward a waiting rental car. The way he casually carried the briefcase filled with $100,000 surprised her. He acted as if the satchel contained nothing more than easily replaced business documents. He popped the trunk, dumped her suitcase and his vinyl bag inside, then opened the door for her. There was something unnerving and yet reassuring about the way he placed his hand on the small of her back. She glanced over her shoulder at him, but could detect not the least bit of emotion on his face.

Once inside the vehicle, he laid the briefcase between them, then reached across her and opened the glove compartment. She gasped when she saw the gun. He took the weapon into his hand, then lifted his jacket and placed it inside a hip holster.

"How did that gun—" She bit down on her bottom lip. "I know. I know. Don't ask."

"You're learning."

"When do you meet your contact? Or is that top secret information, too?"

"Tonight, at the restaurant," he said. "You'll like Jose. All the ladies do."

"You mean I'm actually going be allowed to hear what the man has to say? Gee whiz, I'm honored."

"Hmph!" Murdock kept his gaze on the road.

"I don't understand why all this cloak-and-dagger stuff is necessary." When he didn't respond, she continued. "I mean it seems fairly cut-and-dried to me. General Ramos wants the

money. We want Lanny. A simple exchange. Right?"

"When it comes to Zaraza, General Ramos and the rebel army, nothing is simple."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning this is a game I've played before. I know the rules. You don't. Why do you think Rick Burdett included me in this little scenario?"

Catherine huffed loudly. "I'm not a complete idiot! I do understand that we're going into a country that's still involved in a twenty-year civil war and I realize how dangerous it could be for me. What I'm asking is why we seem to be taking the long way around. And why are you being so secretive with me? I'm not the enemy."

Gripping the steering wheel with white-knuckled fierceness, Murdock gritted his teeth. "I'm not used to having to explain my actions, but here goes. I suppose by not enlightening you on every little detail, in not exposing you to all the so-called secrets, I feel as if I'm protecting you."

"Protecting me from what?"

"From the rotten, stinking, ugly side of life. The life I've lived for the past twenty-odd years…the life your father once lived. I just figured Lanny would rather his little girl not know everything about the way he made his living."

Strangely enough, Catherine felt duly chastised. She actually believed Murdock meant what he'd just said. Perhaps he was right. Perhaps it was better if she never knew everything there

was to know about the world of the mercenary soldier. After all, why not simply accept Murdock at face value—a professional bodyguard, with an unsavory past. A civilized man. Although not quite a gentleman, not a ruffian either. A man who lived in a tastefully decorated apartment, drove a new sports car and dressed well. There was absolutely no reason why she should ever know anything more about him.

On the drive to Miraflores, the central cultural district, they passed penas—bars—open marketplaces and numerous restaurants. Despite its ancient past, Lima was a metropolitan area, similar to most large cities throughout the world. But uniquely, Lima pulsed with a slower, calmer rhythm created by the more traditional aura of its warm and friendly citizenry.

The Pacifico Hotel was on the corner of de Julio Avenue and had a wonderful view of the ocean.

Catherine soon learned that everything had been arranged per Murdock's instructions and that the assistant manager, Hugo Mendoza, and her bodyguard were old acquaintances. Although her knowledge of Spanish was minimal, she discovered that Murdock spoke the language fluently. She couldn't help wondering just how many hidden talents this mystery man possessed.

The briefcase containing the ransom money went into the hotel safe before Hugo escorted them to the elevators. Catherine listened intently while the two men conversed. She could make out a few words, but derived as much from their body language

and facial expressions as from what they said. She clearly heard Murdock refer to her as mi mujer, which she was sure meant my woman.

Hugo grinned broadly and slapped Murdock on the back. “Ella es muy hermosa y muy alta.” He whispered something to Murdock that she couldn’t hear and the two men laughed. Then Hugo snapped his fingers for the bellboy, who appeared to be no older than eighteen.

Okay, muy hermosa meant what? she contemplated. Very beautiful? How nice. What a lovely compliment. But what did alta mean? Think, Catherine, think!

Hugo reached out, took Catherine’s hand and brought it to his lips. “I hope your stay at our hotel will be a pleasant one, señora.” His English was on the same level as her Spanish, so she assumed the wishes were a statement he had memorized and recited to all the female guests.

She only nodded and smiled, as her mind continued puzzling over the word alta and also tried to figure out why Murdock had referred to her as his woman and why the two men had exchanged such boisterous laughter. Some macho thing, she supposed. Had Murdock been simply trying to impress another man or had he been placing boundaries around her? She had every intention of asking him, as soon as they were alone.

When they arrived at their suite, Murdock instructed the bellboy in his native language, apparently telling him which bag went to which bedroom. After the young man opened the doors

onto the terrace overlooking the ocean, Murdock tipped him and from the wide grin on his face, she assumed the tip had been a generous one.

"You've got time for a bath and nap before dinner," Murdock told her. "We're meeting Jose upstairs in the Roof Garden at eight."

"What does the word alta mean?" she asked.

"Tall."

"Oh."

The corners of Murdock's mouth quivered, but he didn't smile. "Hugo said that you were very beautiful and very tall."

"What else did he say that you both thought so funny? And why did you refer to me as your woman?" Catherine stuck out her chin and squared her shoulders.

Murdock wondered if she knew how much a defiant woman tempted a man to try to control her. Probably not.

"Dammit, you can ask more unnecessary questions that any woman I've ever known!"

"And you're the most secretive man I've ever had the misfortune of meeting!"

Murdock removed his sport coat and tossed it on the sofa. "Get used to my referring to you as mi mujer, because for the duration of this mission, that's what you'll be—my woman!"

"Now, wait just one minute. If you think—"

"I think, but you don't. You jump to conclusions."

Steam rose inside her, fueled by pure anger. She was doing

it again—allowing Murdock to enrage her and make her feel foolish. “Excuse me. Why don’t you explain the situation, if I’ve jumped to the wrong conclusion.”

“Despite how very beautiful and desirable you are, the only brand I’m putting on you is a verbal brand. Jose and a few people in Zaraza know what our real mission is, know why we’re here in Lima and why we’re going to Zaraza. The simplest way to explain our being together and also to announce that you’re under my protection is for me to say you’re my woman. Understand?”

“I think so.” Okay, so once again she’d been wrong in assuming Murdock was just being an arrogant jackass.

“If that’s settled, then why don’t you—”

“What were you and Hugo laughing about?”

“Good God, woman! Do you have to know everything?”

“Humor me.”

Murdock raked his cupped hand across the faint stubble on his lower jaw. “Hugo made a comment about your long legs wrapping around me when I screwed you.”

Catherine gasped loudly.

“You asked. So I told you. Don’t go getting outraged and giving me hell for telling you what you demanded to know.”

“Are all your friends that crude?”

“Men are that crude, honey.”

“All men aren’t.”

“Oh, just men like me and my friends and your father, huh?”

“My husband would never have made an inappropriate remark

about a woman, especially not in her presence."

"Well, bully for your husband," Murdock said. "But in Hugo's defense, he didn't realize you knew any Spanish. And he assumed you and I were lovers."

"Which we are not!"

"Which we most definitely are not!"

They stood there face-to-face, staring each other down, like two Old West gunfighters preparing for a high-noon showdown. Catherine's chest rose and fell dramatically with each labored breath she took. Everyone who knew her, knew Catherine had a temper. But as a general rule it took a great deal of aggravation to rile her. She had learned over the years to control all her emotions, and seldom allowed anyone or anything to irritate her to the extent Murdock did.

The pulse in Murdock's neck swelled and throbbed. She could tell that he was as upset as she and trying just as hard not to explode. Usually, she was the person others feared, the one in charge, the one who had the power to make underlings shake in their boots. She certainly wasn't accustomed to having some big, overbearing man running roughshod over her and making all the decisions.

"You bring out the very worst in me," she told him. "And I don't like it. However, there's not much I can do about it, but endure your presence until we have my father safely out of Zaraza. Then I hope I never see you again as long as I live."

"Believe me, nothing would suit me better. Your attitude isn't

conducive to winning friends and influencing people. And there's no place in my world for uptight, snobby, prudish women who are out to emasculate every man they meet."

"Conducive. My, my. What a big word for such a small mind." Catherine flashed her adversary a wide, eat-dirt-and-die smile. "And if my aim was to emasculate men in general, I wouldn't waste my time on you. But, I must admit, the thought of dropping a stick of dynamite into your pants and blowing your…your masculinity to smithereens, gives me immense pleasure."

"Ouch, Cat, your claws are not only showing again, they're scratching me." His smile matched hers in sheer brilliance and outmatched hers in pure devilry. "And if you want to drop something into my pants, I have a much better idea."

Gritting her teeth and huffing, Catherine closed her eyes to shut out the blazing red glare that blinded her. The man was insufferable! Was her father really anything like Murdock? If so, how could her sweet, genteel mother have endured being married to the oaf?

"In your dreams," she said, under her breath, then opened her eyes and gasped when she realized that he had silently crossed the room and stood within an arm's length of her.

"Don't you know that the more you fight a man, the more determined he'll be to conquer you? And, Cat, honey, you have a knack for verbal sparring that can really turn a man on."

That was it! She'd had it with this big, smart-mouthed wise guy! With her hands balled into tight fists, she took that one step

that separated them, then lifted her gaze to make direct eye-to-eye contact. That's when she realized she'd made a mistake. A huge mistake. Murdock was looking at her as if she were the last drop of water in a sweltering, dry desert.

"What the hell," he said as he reached out and jerked her into his arms. "We might as well get this over with."

Chapter 4

Catherine didn't know what hit her! Murdock's big arms tightened around her in an embrace that made escape impossible. In that one instant before his mouth closed over hers, a dozen different elements swept through her consciousness. The sexual glint in Murdock's hazel eyes. The faint scar on his left cheek. The musky scent of his masculine body. The sound of his accelerated breathing. And the width of his massive shoulders.

With her mind overloaded by exciting, threatening sensations and her body betraying her by pressing against Murdock's rock-hard frame, Catherine opened her mouth to object. But before she could utter a word, he speared his fingers into her hair and gripped the back of her head solidly in one huge hand. Immobilized by shock and a primitive awareness, she could do nothing more than whimper when he took her mouth in a overpowering kiss. The ravaging attack possessed a tantalizing tenderness that she hadn't expected. And that hint of gentleness was her undoing. All thoughts of protest vanished as she eagerly responded with a fierceness that equaled his. Lost to rational thought, removed from logical action by the all too human instincts controlling her, Catherine reached up and clasped Murdock's shoulders, clinging to him as he deepened the kiss.

He walked her backward, up against the wall, and all the while devoured her mouth greedily. She trembled with expectation

when she felt the thick, swollen hardness of his sex pulsing against her belly. Her short, round nails bit into the cloth of his shirt, trying to draw him closer.

Their tongues plunged, swiped and sampled, participating in a prelude to actual mating. When he buried his face against her neck, his lips searing her flesh, his teeth nipping, she drew in a deep, shuddering breath. Shivers of desire rippled along her nerve endings when his hand covered one breast and kneaded softly.

He thrust himself hard against her mound. Shock waves of fear and longing flooded through her. She gasped audibly, but made no move to stop him.

"Do you want to take this farther?" Murdock asked, his voice ragged with arousal. "If we don't stop now, I'm going to have you right here, up against the wall. Is that what you want?"

Yes. Sweet mercy, yes! That's exactly what she wanted. She wanted him inside her. Pounding. Throbbing. Filling her completely. Loving her as she'd never been loved.

"This is insane!" She loosened her tight grip on his shoulders. "How—how could I have let this happen?" She had been on the verge of having sex with Murdock—a man she neither liked nor respected. Had she lost her mind?

"You didn't let it happen, honey." Murdock eased his body away from hers and took a step back, allowing her breathing room. "I could see this coming a mile off. It's been there, between us, ever since we recognized each other at the airport in Atlanta

yesterday."

Catherine shook her head as if to dislodge irrational thoughts and better comprehend what he'd just said. "I don't know what you're talking about."

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