

MADELINE SLOANE *West Wind*



BOOK THREE IN THE *WOMEN OF EATON* SERIES

MADELINE SLOANE

WOMEN OF EATON SERIES

WEST WIND

A CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE

BY MADELINE SLOANE

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Madeline Sloane is a writer with more than 25 years experience in communications. With ten published history books under her belt, she is new to the world of romantic fiction but finding it just as fun to research. In addition to writing, she is a college instructor whose interests include traveling, history and boating. Rounding out her list of Top Five interests are reading and cooking. On the web at www.MadelineSloane.com

ABOUT THE SERIES: WOMEN OF EATON

The first novel in the “Women of Eaton” romance series, “Distracted” introduces readers to Eaton, a fictional, idyllic town tucked away in the mountains of Pennsylvania. Several of the characters in “Distracted” are featured in other books such as “East of Eaton,” “West Wind” and “Deadline.” Look for many citizens of Eaton to return in new stories that explore and celebrate romance.

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MADLINE SLOANE

To Ivan

CHAPTER ONE

James Weaver tilted a brass watering can over the small garden at his property line. "How am I supposed to know if she's okay?"

Standing on their neighbor's front porch, his wife, Ida, had alternately rang the bell, knocked on the door and tapped on the window for the past five minutes.

"Well, she never goes anywhere," Ida said, keeping her voice low so the elderly woman inside wouldn't hear. "She hasn't driven the Cadillac for at least a month."

"Just try the door then. Doubt if she locks it." His sage advice delivered, James went back to tending his flowers.

Ida visited Rose Windham a few times a week, getting as close as any neighbor could to the reclusive old lady. It was mid-morning, so she shouldn't be in bed. She twisted the knob and slowly opened the door of the Victorian mansion.

James Weaver dropped the watering can on his toe at the sound of her scream.

* * *

Sabrina's heart pounded as she groped for the telephone.

"Sabrina?" Her mother's husky voice still carried a slight Portuguese accent.

"Are you awake?"

"I am now," she said, swinging her legs off the side of the bed. "What's wrong? Is Daddy okay?"

"Yes, he's fine. It's Grandmother Rose."

"What's happened?" Sabrina rubbed her face, wiping sleep from her heavy lids.

"She's in the hospital. She fell. Daddy's on the cell phone with her neighbor now. Doctors say she may have had a stroke."

Sabrina had limited experienced with illness. Her parents were healthy and Rose seemed invincible. These three made up her small family.

"We need you to go to Eaton."

Sabrina exhaled. Here it came. "Isn't Daddy going?"

"We're leaving for Tibet in two days, Sabrina. We can't change our plans now. We've got our visas and tickets and our itinerary isn't flexible." Her mother's voice rose, no longer husky.

Sabrina heard the threat of tears. She wondered if they were for Grandmother Rose, unconscious and injured in a hospital on the East Coast, or if they were for Marta, herself, busy with yet another trip to the Orient.

Her parents, Norman and Marta Windham, were bohemian writers, renowned more for their eccentric personalities and fantastic destinations than for the quality of the books they wrote as a team. For more than twenty years, their popular series of “Tread Lightly” travel guides sold well. They wrote about backpacking the Himalayas, rafting the Amazon, floating across Africa in a hot air balloon, and snowshoeing through British Columbia. They retained the “eco-friendly” attitude that attracted them to each other as young college students, sipping green tea, dining on hummus and lentils, favoring Birkenstock shoes and all-cotton clothing.

Sabrina, the daughter of aging hippies who smoked who-knows-what in their Hookah, mutinied in her youth. At the age of thirteen, fighting her way out of a lifestyle embellished with the exotic artifacts of her parents' travels, Sabrina begged to enroll in an all-girl, Catholic preparatory school in Maryland. At the time, the family still lived in northern Virginia, close to Washington, D.C., where her parents worked as freelance writers and co-hosted a show on public radio. They now lived in Boulder, Colorado, a bastion of aging “free spirits.”

Norman and Marta were amused by their young, conservative daughter, who rebelliously dressed in plaid skirts, knee-high socks, leather loafers, white shirts and cardigan sweaters. They understood her need to “buck the establishment.” The same need drove them into finding their destiny as teens, albeit with tied-dyed T-shirts and hemp sandals.

As the daughter of ramblers, Sabrina grew up self-reliant and reserved. She spent most summers at Grandmother Rose's home in Eaton, Pennsylvania, while her parents rode elephants in India and Land Rovered through the Australian outback. If anything, Charles and Marta were relieved that Sabrina wanted to attend a boarding school. It freed them of one more item on their checklist when traveling: Where to put Sabrina.

She sighed, pushing a weary hand through her dark, rumpled hair. “Alright; calm down. I'll go,” she said.

“Good girl. I'll have Daddy text message you the details. Which hospital ...”

“There's only one hospital in Eaton, Mom,” Sabrina said, recalling the summer she broke her wrist. It prevented her from swimming at the community pool just when she learned how to dive. After the cast came off in August, her grandmother enrolled her in tennis lessons to build her wrist muscles. For the next few weeks, until she returned to Virginia for seventh grade, she swooned over Robert Hall, a pre-law college student who taught tennis at the rec center during summer vacations.

“Fine. Let me take care of a few things and I'll be there tomorrow.”

“You mean tonight,” her mother said.

Sabrina looked at her clock. The red digital numbers clicked to six a.m. and the alarm buzzed. Reaching out to slap the snooze button, she groaned. “Yes; I mean tonight. Good bye, Mom.”

* * *

Sabrina worked from her apartment, the second floor of a 19th century row house remodeled into three levels of living. The landlord lived in the basement apartment, and an elderly married couple rented the first floor. The property owner's hobbies including gardening. He kept the small front yard blooming nearly year round. Instead of landscaping the backyard, he built small decks for each unit and filled them with potted trees, container gardens and patio furniture.

Renters appreciated the airy feel inside each apartment, thanks to the ivory walls and French doors opening onto the deck patios. Built-in oak shelving glowed, six-foot windows filled the rooms with light, and the kitchen was decorated in a Tuscan style. The effect was chic, yet homey, and the rent enormous, even for Baltimore.

Sabrina used her second bedroom as a home office where she operated her small financial consulting firm. Photographs from her parents adorned the walls. There were vistas of Mount Fuji, underwater shots of colorful fish and coral at the Great Barrier Reef, a photo of Charles and Marta in front of Stonehenge, and another of Marta racing the steps of a Mayan pyramid. There were no photos of Sabrina; she was never included in their journeys. Instead, they shuffled her to Grandmother Rose's home in Pennsylvania, or various college students would take turns house- and daughter-sitting for the Windhams.

After showering and packing a suitcase, Sabrina knocked on the basement door.

"Mr. Brothers; it's me, Sabrina Windham," she called through the steel door, knowing from experience that he rose early.

Ricardo Brothers opened the door, a steaming mug of coffee in one hand.

"Good morning, Sabrina. What can I do for you?"

"I have to go to Pennsylvania for awhile. I'm not sure how long. My grandmother is in the hospital," she said.

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that." Ricardo took a sip of his coffee. The aroma of freshly ground Columbian beans filled the hallway.

"Would you please collect my mail and forward it to me? Here is the address," she said, handing him an envelope. "I've included some cash for postage. Also, will you take care of the plants? I watered them on Saturday, so they're good for a few more days."

"Certainly. Anything you need. You have my phone number and my e-mail, so please keep in touch. I hope your grandmother is better soon."

She nodded her thanks. A car honked.

"There's my taxi. I have to run. Thank you, Mr. Brothers, I appreciate this."

Ricardo nodded kindly, and then sipped his coffee as he watched Sabrina hurry up the concrete steps. His orange tabby cat wound through his ankles, meowing softly.

"Morning, Sally. Ready for your breakfast?" He closed the door and followed the cat into his tidy kitchen.

* * *

The small airplane dipped below the clouds and touched down gently. The tube shook and ill-fitting cabinet doors rattled as the wheels roared down the runway. It coasted to a stop and the seatbelt light snapped off. Sabrina waited for the other passengers to disembark. She preferred to wait since the limited headroom on the "puddle jumper" plane meant she would have to crouch until others disembarked.

Across the aisle, a young mother cradled a sleeping infant over her shoulder. "You go ahead," she said as her harried husband struggled with the car seat.

Sabrina gracefully slid out of the cramped seat, opened the overhead storage and removed her briefcase. Packed with her notebook computer, cell phone, books and folders of pending work, the case weighed at least twenty pounds. She grunted, then shifted it in front of her, hoping it wouldn't throw her off balance as she exited the airplane. She paused at the top of the rolling stairs and looked around.

The small airport squatted in a valley nestled between green mountains with fog-shrouded peaks. The Appalachians were old, their shoulders rounded from millions of years of wind and rain. Sabrina viewed this same scene for many summers, coming to and going from Grandmother Rose's house. Always, she made the trip alone.

The same woman who used orange-tipped flashlights to guide the two-engine turbo prop commuter now drove an ATV with a trailer to the rear of the airplane. The steward opened the locker in the plane's belly and placed suitcases on the tarmac. The young woman, spry in a green, one-piece jumpsuit and yellow safety vest, slung the suitcases into the trailer.

"That it?"

The steward nodded and then tipped his fingers, miming a drink.

"Yeah, sure. I get off at four. See you at the pub?"

"I'll be there. I've got a couple of days off, so ..."

Their voices lowered as they moved closer. The woman laughed and pushed at the young man's chest. "Perv!" She quickly kissed him and then sprang onto the seat of the tractor. "Gotta get these bags to the terminal. See you tonight."

Sabrina walked across the tarmac and entered the airport. In the lobby, people hugged and chatted with arriving passengers.

"Well, it's not much, but it has the right ingredients," Sabrina thought, glancing at the single security gate and the lone ticket window.

She headed for baggage claim, joining the other passengers in front of a set of garage doors. The metal doors lifted noisily and Sabrina watched as the young woman from the ATV tossed the baggage onto a low-slung counter. She'd driven the tractor about fifty yards from the plane.

Sabrina found her bag, and then headed for the car rental counter when a short, elderly man stepped into her path.

"Excuse me, miss. Are you Sabrina Windham?"

Puzzled, she nodded. The man twisted a worn baseball cap in his hands. "I'm James Weaver; Rose's neighbor. The visiting nurse said you were coming in this afternoon and that I should offer you a ride home."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Weaver," Sabrina said. "But, I'm going to need a car while I'm here in Eaton, so I'll rent one."

"Well, here's the thing. Miss Rose has a nice car and the nurse said you're to use that while you're here. It's a real nice one. Miss Rose always gets a nice, new car every few years. It's right out front."

He shuffled towards a sliding glass door that parted when he passed its electric eye. Parked at the curb sat a Cadillac, its motor running and the radio tuned to a conservative talk show.

Sabrina smiled at the small-town charm that allowed people to leave cars running when performing brief chores. Locked doors in Eaton are rare.

James Weaver pushed the key fob and the trunk popped opened. He took her suitcase and hefted it into the voluminous trunk, then slammed the lid. Scooting to the passenger door, he opened it, gallantly standing to the side.

"Thank you," Sabrina said, sliding into the elegant, full-size automobile that flouted her parent's ideology of hybrid fuels and conservation. She caressed the leather interior. *I am*, she thought, *my grandmother's daughter*.

Since the fifteen minutes when her plane landed, she claimed her luggage and was on the road. Small towns had their rewards and a lack of traffic in the airport and on the road, was the best, she reflected.

"Have you ever been to Eaton?" James Weaver tried to restart the car, the ignition system grinding. He grimaced apologetically. "Oops. Forgot it was already on." He slipped the gearshift into drive and, without looking over his shoulder, he made a quick U-turn and drove out of the airport parking lot.

"Yes," Sabrina said. "My parents traveled a lot, so I spent most of my summers here with Grandmother Rose."

The old man nodded, not really paying attention to her nervous, chatty reply. He drove along River Road toward Eaton. "River's up," he commented.

Sabrina glanced at the water, its ripples glinting in the late afternoon sun. "Has it been a wet summer?"

He nodded, then spent the next few minutes recounting the increasing number of rainstorms. "One good thing about the rain," he added, "is the fall leaves will be grand. That should bring more visitors."

He turned into a quiet neighborhood lined with Victorian mansions and spreading maple trees. Some houses were modified into apartments for college students, others into offices for lawyers and doctors.

The local preservation foundation owned a few historic houses, selling them to wealthy residents who could afford the restoration and the upkeep. Most were included on the foundation's annual Victorian homes tour. Rose owned such a house, with each rose-themed room decorated in a different color. Sabrina stayed in the yellow "Lord Mountbatten Rose" room when she visited.

Sabrina studied the elderly man as he drove. He seemed to be in his mid-sixties, possibly seventies, but appeared strong. She wondered who he was and how he knew her grandmother. She didn't know James Weaver, although she hadn't been to visit for a few years.

"Do you know anything about her accident?"

He glanced at Sabrina apologetically. "Not much. She was alone. Doctors say she had a stroke. She was on the floor all night until my wife stopped by the next morning. She saw her at the bottom of the staircase. 'Bout had a heart attack herself. She thought the poor old woman fell down the steps and killed herself. Doctor thinks she was sitting on the bottom step, trying to catch her breath when she keeled over."

Sabrina's eyes filled with tears. Grandmother Rose had always been kind to her, although Sabrina could well imagine her as the evil stepmother in a cartoon. She was tall, rail thin with her silver hair swept into a chignon. She always wore haute couture, despite the fact that she rarely left her house.

To Sabrina, Grandmother Rose seemed a haunted woman who denied herself the pleasure and love of people, but not the pleasure of things. She seemed to enjoy her oriental vases and bronze statues more than her own son and his family.

As a beautiful and wealthy young widow, Rose Windham should have been the belle of the ball. Instead, after she moved to Eaton in 1976, the town's residents learned that the haughty woman didn't want friends.

Sabrina knew that her father felt slighted by Rose. She shuttled him off to prep school the year his father died, and then sent him to a military academy for college. In his junior year, he withdrew, making a list of the top ten liberal colleges in the nation and applying to all.

He chose Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts, for its particularly open-minded reputation. There, he reveled in socially conscious, left-wing repartee and indulged in artistic expression, majoring in theater with a minor in psychology.

At Hampshire, he met the love of his life, Marta, a beautiful Brazilian exchange student majoring in creative writing. Throughout their bohemian life, they

managed to rear their daughter, Sabrina, who, in turn, rebelled against her parents and sought education at a private girls' prep school and then at Harvard's business school studying finance.

She blinked back her tears as James Weaver pulled into the alley behind the Victorian mansion, parking the car in the carriage house.

"We're here."

"We're not going to the hospital?"

"She refused to stay. She's been released and has a nurse to take care of her at home."

* * *

Nothing could have prepared Sabrina for the sight of the fragile, pale woman. Rose's body barely mounded the quilts of the hospital bed incongruously placed in the dining room.

The crystal chandelier above Rose's head cast a yellow and ghastly light. Her nose, once patrician, now seemed hawkish, her mouth encircled with deep lines. Blue eyes pinned hers when Sabrina walked to the bed and gently picked up the bone-thin hand.

"Grandmother?"

"Sabrina," the elderly woman whispered, a tear rolling down the tissue-thin cheek.

"I'm here, Grandmother."

"Norman?" The old woman's eyes darted behind Sabrina, falling upon her neighbor, James Weaver.

"He couldn't come, Grandmother. They're in Tibet," she lied.

Rose Windham closed her eyes and sighed. A moment later, her fingers tightened. "Thank you, darling girl."

She sat by Rose's bed for several silent minutes, watching as the woman fell asleep. Then, she went looking for answers.

Sabrina found the nurse in the kitchen. The steaming teakettle stopped whistling as the young woman lifted it from the flame. She looked up briefly, nodded at Sabrina, and then concentrated on filling her teacup with the boiling water.

"Hello. You must be Miss Windham," she said, setting the kettle back on the stove. After wiping her hands on her blue hospital scrubs, she extended one to Sabrina. "I'm Shirley Piper. I'm an R.N., and I'll be taking care of your grandmother."

Sabrina nodded, pleased by the woman's confidence. "Call me Sabrina, please. It's nice to meet you."

"And call me Shirley. You'll want an update on your grandmother but can I fix you a cup of tea first?"

Sabrina recognized fragrant chamomile and grimaced. After drinking herbal tea all her childhood, she forswore it as an adult.

"Thanks, but I'll pass. I've got bottled water in my bag."

Shirley nodded and leaned against the counter. She lifted the cup to her lips and blew.

"Your grandmother fell, injuring her pelvis. Or, at her age, her pelvis may have fractured first, causing the fall."

"Excuse me? How does that happen?"

"Your grandmother has severe osteoporosis, also called brittle bone syndrome by some people. It is a wasting away of the bone that happens as women age. Bone breaks down more quickly than it is replaced so bones weaken and may fracture. There are medications that prevent or treat osteoporosis, but she has not been taking them.

"She also suffered a transient ischemic attack. You may have heard them called mini-strokes. These occur when the supply of oxygen is cut off to an area of the brain. Unlike a stroke, which is often permanent, the symptoms of a transient ischemic attack last less than a day, usually less than ten minutes."

Sabrina took a deep breath. It was the first piece of good news she'd heard today.

Shirley sipped her tea again. "The problem is that anyone who has a transient ischemic attack is at risk of developing a stroke in the future. Your grandmother is at risk, and a major stroke can be crippling, or even cause death."

"What can we do?"

"She refuses to stay at the hospital, and since she has plenty of money and her doctor under her thumb, she's insisted that we take care of her here. The problem with that is the limited amount of medical equipment available. We have established a hospital-room setting here, with oxygen and a heart monitor. I've started an I.V. to make sure she has her liquids. She's also on a blood thinner. We have contractors coming in tomorrow to modify the downstairs bathroom, to make it more accessible."

"Do you think she should be in the hospital? Do you want me to try to talk her into going back?"

"You can try if you like, but I've known Mrs. Rose for a few years, and I've never met a more stubborn, hard-headed woman. You see, my daddy is Dr. Piper, the physician under her thumb." Shirley gently added, "You need to understand that Mrs. Rose is getting old, and she is a frail woman. We can take care of her to a certain degree, but her biggest battle is time and nobody wins that one."

Sabrina nodded. "I understand, and you're right. It's important to make her comfortable. Is this a hospice situation? Is Grandmother Rose dying?"

"No, nothing like that. She can recover from this and live many more years. On the other hand, she could suffer more TIAs until she has a major stroke. There are

no guarantees. She knows that. That's why she wants to be home. I suggest that you make the most of the time that's left. Do you plan to stay awhile?"

"I really don't know. I haven't made any plans. I found out this morning that she was ill, so I hopped the next available flight out of Baltimore."

"Well, I can take care of her body. Only you can help her soul. Seems to me, that's what's been causing her the most pain."

Sabrina thanked the young nurse, wise beyond her years. She returned to her grandmother's bedside and, for the next hour, held her hand, comforting the old woman.

At midnight, Shirley Piper went off duty and another nurse, an older woman with beefy arms and a kind face, began the late shift. Rose would have around-the-clock care.

Sabrina stood and stretched. She looked for her suitcase and briefcase, and found them by the front door where she dropped them. Exhausted, she dragged them upstairs to her yellow rose room. Too tired to undress, she kicked her shoes off and climbed under the covers. Within moments, she was asleep.

CHAPTER TWO

For the next few days, Sabrina visited quietly with her grandmother. She gave the nurses the space and privacy they needed as they developed a routine for caring for the elderly woman. Rose slept for hours, thanks to the scheduled morphine shots to ease her pain. Sabrina filled her free time wandering around the mansion, organizing books on shelves, dusting knickknacks, and rearranging photographs of Charles and Marta in foreign locales.

Ricardo Brothers began forwarding her mail, and she arranged an alcove in the sitting room as her new office. The kindly landlord also adopted her houseplants, keeping them on his patio until her return. She had few clients since her business was new, and for one-on-one consultations, she referred them to a reliable financial pro. She hoped they would reconsider her services when she returned.

One afternoon, bored and snooping, she discovered a scrapbook and a collection of letters and journals tucked in the antique chest in her grandmother's dressing room.

Sabrina felt guilty as she untied the lilac ribbon that encircled the letters. She seldom ventured into her grandmother's bedroom as a child, intimidated by the lavender gloom and the overwhelming scent of roses. It reminded her of a mausoleum.

This afternoon, however, she pulled the long, heavy drapes away from the window, turned on the bedside lamps and spread the items on the satin coverlet. Some of the letters were in her grandmother's handwriting. Others were from Don Windham, Rose's late husband. There also were some letters with no return name on the envelope. Sabrina didn't know where to start, and her stomach flip-flopped.

I'm not meddling. I'm researching family history, she told herself.

She sorted the letters according to the dates on the postmarks. They ranged from 1955 to 1975, twenty years of Rose's life. She also organized the journals, starting with the earliest. They began in 1965, and ended in 1975.

"As if she stopped living when Grandfather died," Sabrina murmured. "Why? What happened?"

Sabrina never knew her family's history. Norman preferred to live in the present, never mentioning his father, never talking about his own childhood. Marta talked about her childhood, but it was a bittersweet story of a young Brazilian orphan brought up by affectionate Catholic nuns. Marta did not know her mother or father, and had no family until she met Norman in college. It was an important

connection: Both felt abandoned, alone, until they found each other. The difference was, Norman did have Rose, a wealthy, yet distant, mother.

When Sabrina was born, the couple was thrilled, but they had no idea how to form a family. Instead, they viewed Sabrina as a toy, almost a pet.

Impatient, Sabrina picked up the last letter, dated December 12, 1975. It was a small, creased envelope with no return address. With shaky fingers, Sabrina extracted the one-page note. The edges were torn, the blue ink faded and, in some parts, stained. Tears?

"I must see you again. It can't end this way. Meet me tonight. Believe me, Rose. We can do this. We deserve this. D."

Sabrina frowned, then re-read the letter.

"D?" Don Windham? Was she planning to leave him? Had she already left him and he wanted her back?

She picked up another letter, this one a brief note from Don Windham.

"Rose, Delivered the boat. It handled well, even in Force 8 winds off Bar Harbor. Be home soon. Love, Don."

Sabrina glanced at the postmark on the envelope: September 21, 1975. She picked up the first letter and held one in each hand, comparing the handwriting. They were different. Even the paper and the envelopes were different, although that wouldn't make much difference.

The style of writing and the context were different. One was passionate and pleading, the other, matter-of-fact and upbeat. Two men: A lover and a husband, and she lost both sometime in 1975, because Sabrina knew that Rose moved to Eaton, alone, in 1976. Norman, enrolled in a prep school in Virginia, seldom came home.

She opened several more letters, three from the mysterious "D" and two from Don Windham, dating from 1974 to 1975. They were similar. Again, "D" wrote short love letters begging her to meet him, while Don Windham wrote of various business contacts he made while traveling throughout New England, boat orders, and sea conditions.

Sabrina didn't bother reading any of the other, older letters. Instead, she picked up the latest journal and tabbed through the pages to the final entry.

"December 10, 1975. Christmas shopping today. I'm in New York at the Plaza, loving every moment. Macy's is fantastic and I had the best time at FAO Schwarz. I picked up a Pong game for Norman, some kind of video game that connects to the television. Now that he's fifteen, he doesn't want to play with his action figures anymore. I also found a pretty cashmere sweater for Margaret. Don wouldn't come. Said he had work to do and couldn't afford the time. He infuriates me. He certainly can afford the time; he just will not do it. He refuses to use any of daddy's money, as usual. Obstinate man. We could be living in a beautiful home instead of a hovel. I'm so tired of doing without, when we have my inheritance just sitting in the bank.

He won't let me invest a dime in the business, saying its 'the man's job to take care of the family.' At least he couldn't stop me from sending Norman to school. It felt so good to spend money today without Don asking to see my checkbook. I'm glad he didn't come with me. I'm going to take a long bubble bath, and I've ordered champagne and dinner for two. I damn well intend to enjoy my last night in New York. D will be here soon. I'm sure he'll appreciate my shopping today."

Sabrina flipped through the journal, checking entries for the initial "D," and finding it on nearly every page.

"Grandmother Rose! I can't believe what I'm reading," she said, biting her lip.

Sabrina picked up the scrapbook and slowly turned the pages filled with newspaper clippings, postcards, locks of hair, and photographs. This book, too, stopped in 1975.

It's as if she died, too, Sabrina thought as she found a folded newspaper clipping shoved between the last two pages, unlike others that were carefully taped or anchored with black corners. She read the headlines and gasped.

"Boat Builder, Partner Killed in Midnight Blaze, Factory Destroyed in Three-Alarm Fire."

There was no date at the top of the clipping. She read the rest of the article.

NEWPORT – Boat builder Donald N. Windham, 45, and his partner, Derek F. West, 44, died Friday in a midnight blaze that destroyed the Zephyrus Boatyard and injured one person, Rose Windham, 35.

Three fire companies and the local police responded to the tragedy, which is still being investigated. Fire Chief Flip Jenkins reported that the inferno started in an office, perhaps by a faulty kerosene stove, and spread throughout the shop quickly. Fifty-gallon barrels of resin and stacks of plywood, used in the manufacturing of fiberglass boats, were "like jet fuel on the fire. The Jakes (fire fighters) couldn't get close enough to put it out," Jenkins said.

Fire fighters were forced to battle not only searing flames and choking black smoke but also a lack of water. Jenkins said that there were no fire hydrants nearby, and the plant's water supply was inadequate for fighting such a massive fire. The roof and all but one wall of the two-story metal building collapsed, forcing firefighters to flee the structure.

Rose Windham was treated for smoke inhalation and second-degree burns at the scene. Police responding to the fire said she will be questioned later and that, at this point, she is the only eyewitness to the tragedy.

Sabrina stared, open-mouthed, at the newspaper article. She assumed that Don Windham had died of natural causes. No one volunteered details and she never asked about her family's history.

Her hands shook and she wanted to call her father, but he and Marta were already in Tibet, wandering about on the backs of ponies. How much does he know? He must know all, Sabrina reasoned. But why hadn't he ever told her?

* * *

That evening, Sabrina sat quietly at her grandmother's bedside. Together, they watched the news and then the cable's travel channel with Rose hoping for a glimpse of her famous son. His and Marta's documentaries were popular reruns.

Sabrina adjusted the bed at a slight incline, enabling Rose to view the large, flat-panel television the contractors installed on the dining room wall. Sabrina wondered how long the 150-year-old plaster walls would support the heavy screen.

The nurse placed a nightstand with a portable telephone and a pitcher of violet-scented water next to the hospital bed, and plumped satin cushions behind Rose's back. Morphine and glucose water dripped steadily into the back of the old woman's blue-veined hand.

A hairdresser came by after lunch and washed and styled Rose's hair. Wearing a frilly ivory nightgown, her silver hair combed into its smooth chignon, she appeared to be on the mend.

"Grandmother," Sabrina cleared her throat. "May I speak to you about something personal?"

Rose flinched, then closed her eyes. "Of course you can."

"Do you miss my grandfather? Do you miss Don Windham?"

Rose's breast heaved slightly, a deep sigh from a small, shrunken woman.

"Every day."

"Did you love him?"

"Of course I did. I love Norman and you, too. Is that what you want to know?"

"No, Grandmother. I know you love me," Sabrina said, reaching out and stroking Rose's quilted leg. "I know you love Daddy, too. It's just that you never talk about my grandfather, and I'd like to know about him. I'd like to know what your life was like when you were a young woman."

"I see." Rose paused, licking her thin, pale lips. "Well, I'm not sure where to begin. It's been so long ago."

"Why don't you tell me how you met?"

"Please, would you hand me a glass of water?"

Sabrina complied, and Rose sipped thoughtfully.

“Well, I was very young, barely seventeen when I first saw Don. He was a ten years older than me, and working at a boatyard in Rhode Island. That’s where he was born. That’s where we lived when Norman was born.”

Sabrina nodded, but said nothing.

“We lived in New York and spent summers on Long Island, in the Hamptons. Oh, not the fancy side of the Hamptons. We had a cottage in West Egg like in the ‘Great Gatsby.’ Oh, I loved that novel.”

Sabrina waited. Rose closed her eyes as if seeing her childhood home again.

“Daddy ordered a new, beautiful sailboat and a handsome young skipper delivered it from a boatyard in Rhode Island. Daddy asked me to handle the jib, and the three of us sailed all afternoon. Don Windham was so serious and capable. I still remember how his hair curled and whipped in the breeze. He was supposed to return to Rhode Island by ferry, but we kept him on the water so long, that he missed the last one. Daddy invited him to dinner and to stay the night. He slept on the boat.”

Rose sipped her water.

“That night, I went to him and we talked for hours under the stars. We sat in the cockpit until dawn. When he kissed me goodbye, I knew I had to have him.

“Of course, Daddy was not happy about that. He had other plans for me. He wanted me to marry the son of his banker. A moron. I told him I wanted to marry Don. We wrote to each other. He would come to New York on the train and I’d meet him at a hotel. This went on for about a year, then Don said I needed to make a choice. Either I stand up to Daddy and marry him, or else.”

“Or else, what?” Sabrina asked when Rose paused.

“I didn’t want to know what else,” she said. “I was eighteen and could legally marry, so we went to the justice of the peace that afternoon. We told Mother, and she called Daddy. He never forgave me, and he refused to come home as long as Don was there.”

“What did you do?”

“I packed a couple of suitcases and caught the train to Rhode Island with Don. We lived in a small cottage by the bay while he worked at one boatyard after another until he was able to open his own. I didn’t see Daddy for two years, not until after Norman was born.

“Then, when Norman was five, my father died and I received my inheritance. We were suddenly rich. But Don wouldn’t take any of the money. He wouldn’t use it to build the business. You see, my father said terrible things to me after the wedding. He broke my heart and Don never forgave him.

“I forgave him. I would take baby Norman home to New York and visit my parents. We would go shopping or skating in the winter, and in the summer, we sailed around Long Island and played on the beach. It was almost like being a girl again, this time with Norman as a little playmate. But Don was never with us.”

“How sad.”

“I thought so, at first. Then I became angry. Don was stubborn and proud, even after my father died. He resented the man when he was alive, and more so when he was dead. He once told me he wished that I'd never inherited the money, that it only cursed our family.”

“How did it curse the family?”

Rose glanced at Sabrina, then frowned. “What? Oh, I'm sorry, dear. I've been rambling. I'm very tired now. Would you turn out the light?”

Rose's recollections had been clear and she seemed eager to share. Sabrina speculated about the abrupt dismissal, but didn't want to upset her.

“Sure, Grandmother.” Sabrina reached for the lamp and tugged on the cord. She picked up the remote control and placed it on Rose's lap. “Here; just in case you want to watch TV for awhile. Goodnight,” she said, and kissed her grandmother's cheek.

Rose placed a trembling hand on Sabrina's face. “Goodnight.” She closed her eyes.

* * *

Two days passed and Sabrina wanted to speak with Rose again. She read all of the letters, read the journals, and finished the scrapbook. She had a suspicion that the mysterious “D” was Derek West, but she wanted Rose to confirm it.

More than that, for the first time in her life she felt a family connection, a legacy. During the night, as she turned past events over in her head, a plan evolved. Excited, she wanted Rose to approve of her idea.

She couldn't wait to get started, but she dreaded telling Rose that she pried into her personal letters.

Hoping that breakfast would pave the way, she carried a tray with two cups of coffee and toasted, buttered English muffins into the dining room.

“Good morning, Grandmother,” she said, smiling. She placed the tray on the nightstand and picked up her coffee mug. “Mmmmm, this smells good.”

Rose picked up her dainty, rose-embellished coffee cup. She sipped, then placed it back on the tray. “Thank you, dear. Muffins? You have more faith in my teeth than I do.” She tore off a corner and popped it in her mouth.

“I want to talk to you about something. Something I think is important.”

“What is it, dear?” Rose asked.

“First, I have something to confess, and second, I have a plan I'd like to discuss. I've done something inexcusable, and you need to know. You also need to understand that I'm not sorry for what I've done; I'm only sorry that it may hurt you.”

“Oh my goodness, what have you done?” Rose, thoroughly alarmed now, struggled to sit up.

Sabrina placed a restraining hand on her tiny shoulder. “No; don’t get up. I found your journals and your letters. I’ve read them.”

Rose collapsed into the soft pillows, her eyes confused. “My letters?”

Sabrina nodded.

Rose’s mouthed twisted, her eyes darted back and forth, then rested on Sabrina. “You mean you’ve only now found them? You never were a nosy child, were you?”

It was Sabrina’s turn to gawk. “You mean, you don’t mind?”

Rose laughed gently. “I’m on my deathbed. Well, it could be my deathbed. My secrets have haunted me all my life. Do you think I want to take them to my grave?”

“Tell me about my grandfather. Then tell me about the fire. Tell me about Derek West and his family. Why did you move here to Eaton?”

Rose sighed deeply. “Well, that’s going to take awhile. I told you about my father, and how Don stubbornly refused to speak with him. This went on for many years, and after my father died, Don still refused to acknowledge or visit my mother.

“I was lonely and angry and wanted to punish him. Derek and Don were childhood friends, closer than brothers were. I wanted to hurt Don, so I came between them. It was” Rose paused and wiped a tear. “It was a tragic decision. I killed the man I loved, and I killed his best friend. I can never forgive myself for that.”

With this, Rose bowed her head and tears fell silently into her lap.

“Grandmother; I’m so sorry.”

“You read the newspaper clipping about the fire? Why do you think they died and I didn’t? Don followed me that night and they fought. I got between them but they pushed me away. I must have fallen and hit my head. I blacked out and, to this day, I don’t know how the fire started. The police said a kerosene stove had been knocked over. The next thing I knew, I was in the boatyard and the building was on fire. I saw Don running back in, calling to Derek. Then, the roof collapsed and I never saw either of them alive again.

“It’s so strange to tell it aloud. For thirty-five years, I’ve replayed the scene in my head. Not a day goes by that I don’t think about Don, and about Derek, and how my foolish, selfish heart killed them both. How could I forgive myself?”

Sabrina let out a deep breath. “My God, Grandmother. All these years, the burden you’ve been carrying.”

“It’s mine, child. I’ve none to blame but myself.”

“It was an accident, Grandmother. You didn’t start the fire.”

"If I hadn't been unfaithful, if I hadn't been with Derek that night, they wouldn't have fought and the fire wouldn't have started. They would not have died. Those are the facts, Sabrina."

"Does my father know?"

"I'm sure he does. He was fifteen then, almost a young man. He read the papers; he knew Derek's family. At the funeral, Faye West, Derek's wife, was hysterical, screaming that it was my fault, that I was a whore and a murderer. I suppose that Norman figured something was wrong when I grabbed his hand and we ran for the car. I never returned. I kept driving until we reached New York. Soon, I bought this house and moved to Eaton. Norman returned to school. We never spoke about it."

Sabrina rocked back and forth in her chair, her arms crossed over her chest.

"It must have been a nightmare for you."

"It still is."

* * *

That evening, Rose suffered another mini stroke and was rushed to the emergency room. Sabrina paced the hospital hall, biting her lip and brushing away tears.

At the sight of Shirley Piper, she nearly collapsed.

"How is she? Is she going to be alright?"

"It's not a serious episode, but like I told you, these TIAs are leading to a major stroke."

"It's my fault," Sabrina wailed, her hands shoved into her jean's pockets.

"Don't be ridiculous," Shirley said. "Your grandmother has enjoyed being with you. I've never seen her so happy."

"No, I mean today, I ... she ... we were talking about my grandfather and it brought up bad memories. I should never have spoken to her about him."

Shirley patted Sabrina's arm. "Honey; you're here to be with your grandmother through the good and the bad. You both need this time. You're not to blame for the tiny blood clots that move through her brain. Those are the cause of her strokes, not talking to you about the past. Why don't you go in and see her? She's awake and asking for you."

"Thanks, Shirley."

With a deep breath, Sabrina opened the hospital door. Blue-tinged neon light bathed Grandmother Rose. The clear vinyl tube attached to her nose hissed as it fed oxygen into her bloodstream.

Rose's eyes opened and she rested her dreamy gaze on Sabrina.

"Hello. I suppose it happened again?"

“Yes. I'm worried about you. I'm so sorry. I should never have brought up the past.”

“Nonsense. It's never far from my mind. I am actually relieved that you know. You're my confessor now.”

“Grandmother, I don't want to hurt you.”

“You can't, Sabrina. By the way, you never told me your plan.”

She cringed. “It's nothing, really.”

“Tell me. I need the diversion.”

Sabrina squirmed uncomfortably. “I don't think it's a good idea. I've already changed my mind, anyway.”

Rose sighed. “Tell me.”

“All right. I was thinking about finding Grandfather's first boat, if it still exists, and buying it. If I have something he created I could feel a connection.”

Rose's eyes flew open. “How amazing.”

“I told you it was a bad idea.”

“Indeed, I think it's a wonderful idea. I've often wondered what happened to all those boats. They were quite popular, although the run was short. Your grandfather was a genius, and his boats were beautiful.”

“Then you don't mind?”

“Not at all. I wish I'd thought of it. It's a lovely idea.”

Sabrina smiled tremulously. “Thank you, Grandmother.”

CHAPTER THREE

The gaff-rigged sail of the catboat filled as it slid gracefully from its mooring on the Warren River in Rhode Island. Soon, the teen tacked back and forth in five-knot winds.

"She's beautiful, Jay. Just like the day my daddy bought her for me," the boy's father said, emotion making his voice crack. "Brady's been pestering me for a boat of his own, and I'm glad you talked me into restoring her instead of buying a new dinghy."

Humbled, Jay shoved his hands in his jeans pockets. "You're welcome, Sam. We enjoyed working on a classic Marshall, and the Sandpiper is a nice little boat."

Melinda's eyes filled with pride, and she hugged her husband.

"You don't think it's too much for him, do you," she asked Jay. "Are you sure he can handle it?"

"Catboats are very stable thanks to their wide beam, Melinda. He'll do fine in these winds, but I wouldn't let him go out in anything above fifteen knots. At least, not until he's a bit more experienced. Swimming is a great teacher. Just make sure he wears a life jacket and stays on the river," he said.

"I can't wait to sail her," Sam enthused. "Thanks again," he said, shaking Jay's hand.

"You're welcome." Jay looked at his watch. "Well, I have to lock up now. He's sailing it home, right? You want us to deliver the trailer?"

"Yes; that'd be great. We're going to keep it at the dock for the summer, so just leave the trailer by the garage."

"Right; I'll have Brett drop it off later. See you, folks," he said.

Walking back to the boatyard, Jay whistled under his breath. Sam was a good customer. As commodore of the local yacht club, he often referred Jay's boatyard to its membership.

In the two years he and Brett operated the Warren Boatyard, they kept busy, but busy wasn't enough. They wanted the big, dramatic restoration jobs that brought national attention and mentions in popular sailing magazines. The yacht club had plenty of members and many aging sailboats.

Brett looked up from the rope he'd been splicing. "How'd it go?"

"Perfect. Thanks for giving their son lessons last week. You should have seen their faces. I swear, they almost cried watching him sail off into the sunset."

"Makes it worthwhile, doesn't it?"

Jay patted the folded check in his T-shirt pocket. "That and four grand."

* * *

A weekend spent searching the Internet gave Sabrina's spirit a boost. It turned out that the Zephyrus was now considered a "Classic Plastic," and enjoyed a cult following. She learned that Classic Plastic is another way of saying a well-built fiberglass boat, and that West Wind-designed Zephyrus had timeless appeal. She found several photographs of the double-ended daysailer, each identified by hull number. An advanced search yielded nothing about Hull Number One, her quest.

She drove downtown to Sullivan's, the local bookshop, but found in its place a new store named East of Eaton. She appreciated the shop's name, a play on words and homage to John Steinbeck's classic novel "East of Eden."

She pushed open the heavy oak door and entered a bibliophile's wonderland. Her eyes filled with views of rows upon rows of new bookcases. A staircase wound its way up to a cafe. The aroma of fresh ground coffee beans and chocolate chip cookies assaulted her senses. As she let the door close, she glimpsed a customer behind her. Too late, she shot her arm to hold the door open and instead struck the man in the shoulder.

"Oh, excuse me," she murmured, then froze at the sight of her girlhood crush.

Robert Hall glanced at her with impatience, then paused. "Sabrina?" he asked. "What brings you to Eaton?"

She flushed and fumbled with an apology. "Oh, so sorry. Robert Hall? It's been years since I've last seen you. Rose had a stroke and she's in the hospital. I'm here to take of her."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Robert said, stepping aside to allow yet another customer in the store. "Will she be alright?"

Sabrina chewed her bottom lip, twisted her head away hiding eyes bright with unshed tears. Robert watched as she shrugged, the simple gesture heart wrenching.

"Let's step over here," he said, his hand light on her elbow. He led her to a quiet area of the shop, shielding her from curious customers' view with his broad shoulders.

Not wanting to speak about Rose, afraid she would lose control and cry, she lifted her chin and asked, "How are you, Robert? Did you finish law school?"

He recalled the gangly girl from his summer job at the local rec center. "Yes. Do you still play tennis?"

Sabrina rolled her eyes and shook her head. "No, sorry. Your lessons were wasted on me."

"Where do you live now?" he asked, studying the exotic, beautiful woman.

"I have an apartment in Baltimore where I run a small financial business," she said, watching as Robert looked over his shoulder at the woman at the front counter. He nodded once, as if in silent agreement with her.

Sabrina assessed the woman, noting her delicate beauty even from half across the store. Unruly, dark brown hair crowned her oval face; dark brown eyes watched her curiously.

"Is she your girlfriend?" Sabrina asked, inclining her head.

Robert fastened his dark eyes on her and flashed a grin. "No, that's Erica Moore. We're business partners."

"So you own a part of this bookstore?" Sabrina asked, surveying elegant, expensive yet practical furnishings. "Why am I not surprised?"

He looked at his watch, already withdrawing. "I have a client in a few minutes, but I would be honored if you would have dinner with me while you're in town. Are you free on Friday?"

Sabrina's eyes widened. Robert Hall asking her for a date? Well, dinner. Her lips parted as her breath hitched. "It depends upon Rose. How she's doing by then. Why don't I give you a call later this week?"

Robert pulled a small silver case out of the inner pocket of his expensive suit coat and withdrew a business card. Using a slim Cross fountain pen, he scratched a note on the embossed card. "Here's my cell phone number if you can't reach me at the office," he said, holding out the card.

As Sabrina reached for it, he cupped her hands. Leaning forward, he brushed a soft kiss upon her brow. "Again, I am sorry Rose is ill."

A bit stunned by his closeness and sudden attention, Sabrina could only lift her head and nod. He squeezed her hands gently, then let her go. Whether it was small-town friendliness or something more, Sabrina's knees nearly buckled. She busied herself tucking the business card into her back pocket. She watched as he approached the woman at the counter, spoke for a minute or two, then patted the woman's hand. One again, he reached into his suit pocket and this time extracted some folded documents. He placed them on the counter then left the shop, but not before glancing across the stacks to Sabrina. She flushed as he caught her eye. *Busted*, she thought. Pretending she hadn't been watching, she lifted her hand in a gesture of farewell.

Frozen with indecision, Sabrina looked at the bookcase in front of her. Why was she here? What was it she wanted?

A few moments later, the shop owner ambled over and extended a hand in greeting. "Welcome to East of Eaton. Are you looking for anything in particular?"

Sabrina blinked a few times, as if clearing her vision. "I'm looking for books on sailboats."

Erica pointed towards the back wall. "There's not a lot on that topic since we're a mountain town, but I do have a couple. They're in the sports and recreation area."

Sabrina thanked her and wandered in the opposite direction. Eventually she made her way back to the sports section and perused the book titles. There were a couple of illustrated books on tying knots, another book on trailer sailing, and yet another on fixing old boats. She picked up the ubiquitous yellow-and-black, how-to manual for “dummies” and leafed through the pages. She opted for the handyman book and the how-to manual, then browsed her way to the popular paperback novels. She pulled a couple bestsellers off the shelves, piled them on her growing stack of books and headed for the cash register.

This time, a petite elder woman worked behind the cash register. Her nametag identified her as “June Duval.” She beamed at Sabrina as she placed the books on the counter. The shop owner, Erica, wandered over while June Duval rang up the sale.

“I see you found a few books,” she said, glancing at the titles.

Sabrina nodded. “Yes, thanks. You’re right, there’s not much on sailing but I did find a couple novels since I’ll be in town for awhile.”

“Robert tells me your grandmother is Rose Windham. I hear she’s in the hospital. I hope it’s not serious.”

Sabrina frowned, her eyes bright again with unshed tears. “I hope so too,” she whispered. She nodded her thanks, accepted the paper bag of books and quickly exited the shop.

On her drive home, she thought about crushingly handsome Robert Hall. She felt a thrill of excitement at the idea of dinner out with him. Did he know of her schoolgirl crush? Would he be flattered or feel harassed?

* * *

Several days passed with out any clues on the lost Zephyrus sailboat. She created accounts for all the major Internet sailing forums and read comment threads. She placed classified ads in several New England newspapers and even hired a private investigator, hoping that he could find some records, any that hadn’t been destroyed in the fire.

Rose, who agreed to stay in the hospital temporarily, monitored her granddaughter’s search. “You should look in the attic. I kept several boxes of Don’s paperwork that he stored at home. Maybe you can find an old invoice.”

Sabrina needed the breakthrough. She located the boxes and after opening one, inhaled the aroma of cherry tobacco. Old Spice and paper. She recognized the carved mahogany pipe that her grandfather clenched between his teeth in every old photograph. She held an old handkerchief to her cheek, reveling in the cologne that still clung to the linen fabric.

She created piles, sorting the papers into stacks of invoices, receipts, lists and business correspondence. The earliest invoice for the selling price of a Zephyrus, \$5,000, was dated March 1969, paid in full by someone named Blair.

It's a start, she thought, and tucked the invoice into her pocket. Later, again on the Internet, she searched the online telephone directory for any Blairs living in Rhode Island. She quickly narrowed her search to those living along the coast. She assumed that anyone with a boat needed a place to put it.

She found forty listings and printed the list.

She started with the Blairs (she assumed it would be a man) who lived closest to Warren, where the Zephyrus had been built. On her seventh call, she reached an elderly man. Having polished her speech, Sabrina launched into a quick introduction.

"Hello, my name is Sabrina Windham. My grandfather, Don Windham, designed the Zephyrus sailboat. I'm trying to locate a Mr. Blair who may have purchased one. Do you know anything about this boat?"

She paused. After a second or two, the querulous voice responded. "Sailboat? Eh? You looking for Don Windham's sailboat?"

Finally a lead in her quest. Sabrina's heart raced. "Yes, do you know anything about a Zephyrus sailboat?"

"Sailboat, eh? Yes, I have one. It's in sorry shape, girly. You don't want this one."

Excited, Sabrina paced the sitting room ignoring his comment about the boat's condition. "You have a Zephyrus? May I ask you, which year?"

"Eh? Speak up, girly. I don't hear so well."

"Sorry," she raised her voice. "What year was the boat built?"

"Why, the first year, girly. Don Windham owed me money for a truck and trailer, so he traded me a new boat for it."

Sabrina pumped her fist excitedly.

"Mr. Blair, I would like to visit you and look at this boat. Is that okay? Will you allow me to see it?"

"Sure; I don't mind. She's been sitting by the barn for nearly twenty years now. Put 'er in storage after I retired. Kids didn't want it, and I'm too old to sail a fast boat."

Sabrina confirmed his address and told him she would be in Rhode Island on Saturday. Again using the Internet, she made a hotel reservation near Mr. Blair's zip code. Then she hurried to the hospital to update Rose.

"I don't know, Grandmother. This could be it," she said, her cheeks flushed.

Rose raised a weak hand, which Sabrina grasped.

"I hope so, dear. Mr. Blair? I don't remember him, but I do remember Don coming home one night with a dreadful truck and trailer. The thing was a rust bucket; it had a dragging muffler and it backfired when he revved the engine."

Rose closed her eyes and smiled, as if reliving the joy of an argument with her long-gone husband. "Don had just started building boats, and he said he needed a truck to move them to the dock. I don't remember if he traded the first one they built."

"I'm going to see Mr. Blair this weekend. He lives near Warren, Rhode Island. That's where you and Grandfather lived, isn't it?"

Rose nodded. "Yes. It's a small town on the Warren River, north of Narragansett Bay. Not many people lived there, but it was close to Providence, as well as Newport and Bristol. And, we could afford the rent."

"May I use your car, Grandmother?"

"Certainly, dear. I'm not going anywhere."

* * *

Friday approached and she decided to keep her dinner date with Robert Hall. She felt a bit guilty, going out while Rose lay in the hospital, but the old woman insisted.

"I don't want you rattling around in that old, drafty house every night," Rose cautioned.

Sabrina acquiesced, but pointed out the obvious. "You rattle around in it and have for decades."

"That's different. I'm an old woman and I deserve to live with my ghosts. You, on the other hand, are young and beautiful and it would be a waste of your spirit. Now go," she said, squeezing Sabrina's hand. "Robert Hall is quite a catch."

"I'm not looking for romance," Sabrina said, blushing at Rose's gentle teasing.

"That's exactly when it looks for you," the old woman warned.

* * *

Early Friday evening, she stood before the cheval glass mirror in her bedroom, critically examining her outfit. She hadn't brought many clothes with her but at the last minute, she tucked her dressiest cocktail dress in a suitcase. The blue charmeuse strapless gown featured a sweetheart neckline with pleated bodice. The casually tossed matching shawl complemented the tea length gown, wrapping around her long neck and trailing softly down her back. She styled her long dark hair casually, letting it flow over her bare shoulders. She applied a slick of lipstick and then blinked her eyes, making sure the blackened lashes were dry. No need to look like a raccoon.

She felt a thrill of panic when the doorbell rang. It had taken nearly ten years, but Robert had arrived.

His eyes measured her as she stood in the open doorway. Did he find her lacking, she wondered. He raised a corsage for her to inspect, and lifted her left hand. He slid the small, white rosebud onto her wrist and stepped back. Sabrina gazed at the delicate flower, attached to a diaphanous bracelet of thin, stretchy ribbon. Then her eyes lifted to measure Robert.

No, he did not lack. He wore a hand-tailored black suit, lavender shirt and hand-painted silk tie. His short dark hair and smooth cheeks completed the image of a male model. Sabrina leaned toward him and inhaled. He even smelled like power, his tantalizing cologne stirring her senses.

"You look lovely tonight, Sabrina," he said. "Shall we go?"

Sabrina nodded and shut the door behind her, locking it and dropping the house key into her small evening bag. Robert's hand barely touched her elbow as he guided her to a sleek Audi sports car.

"Now this is lovely," she said, breathless.

"Do you like cars?" he asked.

"Well, I like this one."

As she sank into the luxurious interior, she caressed the butter-soft leather seats, admired the simple artistry of the expensive machine.

Robert slid behind the wheel, turned the ignition and the formidable motor growled. "It's only a few blocks, so we'll take it easy. But if you like, after dinner, we can take a drive to Breakthrough Lake. I'll show you how fast it can go."

Sabrina gripped her lower lip between small, white teeth. They practically glowed against the dark red lip. Robert noticed and thought about her lush lips opening beneath his.

Unaware of his tension, she continued to worry her bottom lip. "I'm a bit of a conservative, Robert," she admitted. "I don't think I would care to drive too fast."

Robert let the topic drop and within a few minutes, he parked in front of the town's best Italian restaurant, Dante's. Sabrina waited for him to open her door, then she swept long legs out of the car, took his hand and stood. She flipped the matching shawl back in place, the teal band encircling her slender neck, the ends snaking down her bare back.

Oblivious to the feral look in his eyes, Sabrina clasped her hands and purse in front of her. "I'm famished."

As they walked through the restaurant to Robert's reserved table, he paused at a booth where a couple sat intimately sipping wine and whispering.

"Erica?"

Sabrina stopped abruptly, nearly plowing into Robert. She peeked curiously around his wide shoulders at the couple and saw the friendly young woman from the bookstore.

"Robert! How nice to see you," Erica said.

He looked pointedly at the man sitting next to her.

Erica caught his message. "Oh, excuse me. This is Clay Knight. Clay, this is Robert Hall."

The man stood, nodded at Robert and extended his hand. They shook and exchanged brief greetings.

"Nice to meet you."

"Same here."

Robert, always suave and polite, stepped to the side and slid a possessive arm around Sabrina's waist. "Erica, you recall Sabrina Windham. From the bookstore," he said.

Erica nodded and smiled engagingly. Clay extended his hand in greeting. "Nice to meet you, Sabrina."

Robert frowned, then subtly pulled Sabrina towards his chest. "Please, enjoy your dinner," he said curtly. "I'll see you tomorrow, Erica."

Then he escorted Sabrina to his table where first the restaurant owner and then the waitress fawned over him.

As she studied the menu, Sabrina realized that Robert Hall led an extraordinary life, surrounded by people in awe of his breathtaking good looks and elegant style. He seemed to expect it, as if he considered it his due. *It must be difficult, she thought, to be so beautiful. It's as if everyone wants a piece of him, wants to touch him, to taste him.* She recalled seeing his younger sister, Katrina Hall, and having the opinion that both were so startling beautiful, they were almost unreal. She wanted to lay a comforting hand on his, but then she would be like all the rest then. Wanting to touch him.

As dinner progressed, her heart continued to lighten under his compliments and admiring glances but strangely, all she could think about was leaving for Rhode Island in the morning. Her quest to find the Zephyrus took priority over her companion's charms.

Declining his offer of a late-night drive along the lakefront, Sabrina soon found herself back on her doorstep, her house key in her hand. Spending time with Robert was everything she dreamt of as a young girl, but her trip to New England dominated her thoughts. He took her hands in his, brushed his lips against her cheek and said goodnight. "Please give Rose my best wishes. Perhaps I'll see you again while you're in town?"

She nodded distractedly. "I will, and yes, perhaps. Thank you for a lovely evening, Robert." Then she slipped inside, closing the door on her youth.

* * *

Sabrina rose at six, packed her suitcase and headed East on I-80. She estimated it would take at least six hours to get to Rhode Island, and she wanted to leave herself enough time to eat lunch and freshen up before driving to Mr. Blair's house.

Her stomach twisted nervously. This kind of impetuous behavior wasn't normal for her. She left spontaneity and reckless impulse to her parents, Norman and Marta.

She turned on the radio, hoping the distraction would settle her anxiety. Unaccustomed to driving in traffic, she was a bundle of nerves by the time she crossed the Tappan Zee Bridge in New York. "It's all downhill from here," she told herself. Then she hit the Connecticut traffic on I-95.

"Where do all these people come from? It's not even rush hour," she snarled.

Instead of six hours, the drive took eight. She pulled into Warren around two o'clock, her stomach rumbling from hunger. She drove south on Route 136, Market Street, looking for a café. She didn't want fast food; she needed to sit in a booth and eat slowly, waiting for the roar in her ears to subside. She drove past a cheery blue-and-white wooden sign with a sailboat and arrow. It read "Warren Boatyard." In the distance, the Warren River twinkled. She spotted piers and white boats behind many houses. Finally, she found a small coffee shop and pulled in. The Cadillac's large engine hissed when she turned off the ignition.

Sabrina closed her eyes, savoring the quiet. She drove straight through, stopping only once at a rest area in Matamoras, Pennsylvania. It was a nerve-wracking experience for a city girl whose jaunts were measured in blocks.

For a Saturday afternoon, the small town was quiet. A young couple walked their terrier down the sidewalk, and a lone man sat outside the coffee shop reading a newspaper. Sabrina picked up her purse and got out of the car. She wasn't sure if she should lock it.

Silly; this isn't Baltimore, she thought.

Inside the small restaurant, she told herself she chose wisely. She selected a fresh garden salad, a bowl of mushroom barley soup, a multi-grain roll, and a strawberry smoothie from the surprisingly eclectic menu. "This is wonderful," she gushed, spooning the last of the soup into her mouth before the waitress could clear the dishes. "I haven't had soup like this since ... um, never."

"It's a specialty of ours. We make the best soups in town. No kidding. You should try the fudge, too. Killer," the waitress said, winking.

"I will. Thanks," she said. "Is it always this quiet? I'm visiting from out of town."

"Well, it's too late for the lunch crowd but it's not normally this deserted," she said, looking out the large front window.

Sabrina paid her bill, left a large tip and took along a serving of fudge for later. She drove by the hotel and, since it was after three o'clock, checked into her room. She stashed her suitcase beside the bed and took few minutes to wash her face, freshen her makeup and brush her hair.

She changed into a pair of jeans and sneakers, recalling that Mr. Blair said the boat was stored near a barn. She grabbed her lightweight black leather coat, and

brushed breadcrumbs off her maroon tailored shirt. She tugged at the V-neck, now worried that it was too low and too tight.

"I hope he doesn't think I'm making a pass at him," she said to her reflection. She double checked her teeth for stray flecks of pepper, then slid her hotel key card into her back pocket.

Back in the Cadillac, Sabrina looked at the directions, wishing she'd brought a state map along instead of a one-page computer print out. The instructions to his house were clear, but what if she made a wrong turn? How would she make it back to the starting point? She shrugged, and started the car.

Traffic was still light, and she offered a brief prayer of thanks. A few minutes later, after turning right, checking the directions, turning left, checking them again, and trying to keep her eye on her mileage (how the heck can you go 1.7 miles?), she stopped the car in front of a small, battered two-story house. In the distance, she saw a barn. Behind that, the Warren River sparkled.

She pulled into the unpaved driveway and parked a few yards from a sagging front porch. As she stepped out of the car, Mr. Blair, a bent old man in overalls and a faded, plaid shirt, ambled down the porch steps.

"Good afternoon," he rasped. "You the Windham girl I talked with the other day?"

"Yes sir," she said, extending her hand. His grasp was strong and his blue eyes twinkled.

"You're a pretty little thing, aren't you?"

"Thank you, Mr. Blair." She gestured with a nod to the barn. "Is the Zephyrus over there?"

"Ah yup. Guess you're anxious to see it, aren't you?"

"I am. I'm very excited. I've never seen one of my grandfather's boats before."

"Eh? Why not?"

"After he died, my grandmother moved to the mountains of Pennsylvania. I live in Baltimore, and don't have much time for recreation."

"That's too bad. Coming from a sailing family as you do, you should have blue water in your veins. Well, come on along."

He shuffled through the tall grass, his feet unflinching finding the path to the barnyard. Sabrina cringed when the small old man pushed against a heavy wooden gate. She thought she should lend a shoulder, but then the gate creaked and swung open. Chickens cackled and raced out the opening of the barn.

"Don't mind them. They like to nap in here," Blair said.

In the shadows on the side of the barn, covered with several faded and torn tarps, she could make out a large lump that must be the sailboat. She tiptoed towards it, unsure what might be living inside. Blair wasn't as shy. He strode forward and yanked the tarps off the boat.

Sabrina gasped. It was chalky white, with black streaks running down the hull. The bent mast lay across the cockpit, crushing the bow pulpit. Varnish peeled off the faded teak trim.

She looked closer. There were bales of moldy hay on the cockpit seats and she could hear the “cheep cheep” of tiny peeps in the cabin.

It sat in a rusted, steel cradle, and its broken lead keel lay beside it. Blair plucked a ladder from the side of the barn and leaned it against the boat hull with a thud. “Help yourself, missy. Have a good look.”

“I’m not sure what to look for,” she murmured.

“Well, what is it you want to know?”

“I’m searching for Hull Number One; the first boat my grandfather made.

Your invoice was the earliest, and I was hoping that maybe this boat ...” her voice faded.

“Well, what you gotta do is climb up in there and look in the cabin. There’s a bronze builder’s plate on one of the walls. That’s where it tells you the hull number. Why do you want Hull Number One?”

“A personal quest, I guess you could say.”

He stepped back. “Like I said, help yourself.”

Sabrina climbed the ladder and stepped gingerly into the cockpit. She looked over the edge. “In there?”

“Ayuh.”

She inched towards the cabin opening and removed the warped teak washboards. “Do you have a flashlight?”

“Nope. I have a lighter. Want it?”

“Um, sure. Thanks.” She caught the deftly tossed stainless steel Zippo lighter. She flipped the lid and timidly rubbed the wheel. After a few tries, the spark caught igniting a small butane flame. She looked inside. The cabin was filled with several inches of black, oily water. Chicken feathers floated on the surface.

“Where did this water come from?” she called over her shoulder.

“Hatch leaks.”

She didn’t want to step into the rank water, so she leaned in and reached her arm forward, the flame casting shadows on the washed-out teak. The lighter was growing hot, beginning to burn her fingers. She couldn’t see a bronze plate. She almost gave up, had pulled her hand back toward her face when out of the corner of her eye she saw it. It was on the bulkhead by the cabin opening. She clung to the teak grab rails and leaned inside.

It read, “Zephyrus 32, No. 1, Zephyrus Yachts, Warren, Rhode Island.”

“Yes!” she whispered.

* * *

Walking back to her car, Sabrina wished she could ask Rose what to do next. She didn't know how to buy a boat, didn't know what kind of questions to ask, so she started with the most important.

"I want to buy it. Will you sell?"

"Well, you see, I'm fond of that boat."

"But you haven't taken care of it. You can't sail it. Why would you want to keep it?"

"I don't. I'm just warming up."

"I don't understand. You do want to sell the boat, then?"

"Maybe. How much?"

"I don't know. What's a boat like that worth?"

"It's worth \$5,000 to me."

"What? That's what you paid thirty years ago. I know, I've got the invoice," she cried, pulling the folded paper from her jeans pocket.

"That's what its worth. Do you want it?" The canny old man leaned against the Cadillac and squinted at her.

"Yes."

"Then we gotta deal," he said, sticking out his hand.

Sabrina cautiously took it. "Will you accept a check?"

The old man looked at her car, then her, then the car again. "Sure."

* * *

Back at the hotel, Sabrina called Rose. She whispered into the cell phone, not wanting to disturb her. "It's here, Grandmother. I've found it."

"How exciting. I bet she's beautiful."

"Not really. It's been stored next to a barn for a long time, and it looks pretty shabby right now."

"Boats are female, so you must refer to the Zephyrus properly. Calling her an 'it' is not nice."

Sabrina chuckled. "Boat etiquette, huh?"

"That's right. Now that you're an owner, you have to follow protocol."

"That's right; we own a sailboat. I gave that old thief a check today. What should I do now, Grandmother? I have to get it repaired. I mean 'her.'"

"Find a local boatyard, and talk to the owner. They can arrange to have it transported to their shop."

"It's going to be more expensive than I thought," Sabrina warned.

"I'm sure it will be," Rose replied, "but it's a labor of love, darling. It's worth it."

"I don't know if it's a blessing or a blight, but I'm glad I have you and that you understand."

"It's a blessing. Goodbye, dear."

Sabrina turned off her cell phone and walked to the window. She lifted the gauze curtain and looked at the Warren River shimmering nearby. She relived her adventure, marveling at all she'd accomplished in one day. Then her stomach growled. Picking up her purse and leather coat, she headed out, stopping in the lobby to ask the clerk for directions to a nearby restaurant.

"Preferably something close. Walking distance," she emphasized.

The man crinkled his forehead. "Well, there's the donut shop, but that's not real food. If you go three blocks that way, you'll come to a little bar called Maude's," he said, pointing out the glass front door. "It looks like a dive on the outside, but the food is great. It's early so there won't be a crowd."

"Thanks," she said, and strutted out the hotel. She felt jubilant, she felt alive. She rarely had adventures or took risks, and she had done both today. No matter the outcome, she enjoyed finding the sailboat and she promised herself that she would never regret it.

She heard the music before she saw the bar. It was a weather-beaten building with several motorcycles and pickup trucks in the parking lot. A neon sign glowed in the window advertising a beer from a small-town brewery not far from Eaton. She opened the door and walked in.

The interior was a contrast in light and dark: well lit over the pool table where two men concentrated on their game, dim along the far wall, lined with wooden booths. The bar stools were filled with people Sabrina imagined were "regulars." She nodded to the bartender and headed for an empty booth. As she sat down, she plopped her purse on the table and shrugged out of her coat.

Across the bar, Jay West sipped his beer, keeping his narrowed eyes pinned on the young woman. As soon as she walked in, he noticed her. How could he not be aware of the exotic beauty with dark hair and delicate features? He noted the slim waist that accented her rounded jean-clad hips, and luscious cleavage when she shrugged out of her coat. She smiled, her toothy grin white against dark red lipstick, when the bartender stumbled in his haste to bring her a menu.

The girl was stunning, exuding refinement and money. What was she doing in Warren and, more importantly, was she alone?

Nate, the bartender, nodded vigorously as she handed him back the menu and asked for the popular Pennsylvania lager and a cheeseburger.

Jay's upper lip curled into a wolfish grin.

"Hey, are you listening to me?"

Jay glanced at the heavy-set man on the stool next to him. While Brett's wife, Shawna, held a scrapbooking workshop at their house, he relaxed with a beer and dinner at Maude's.

"No," Jay replied.

Brett looked around, curious until he spotted Sabrina. "Whoa brother; she's out of your league."

On the other side of the bar, Sabrina noticed the tall man sitting on a stool. He was dressed in a faded black T-shirt, and his rough, worn jeans rode up his ankles, revealing a pair of scuffed work boots. Chestnut hair curled over his ears and flipped up at the back of his neck. A dark lock strayed into eyes framed with dark, flaring brows. It was a hip fashion that pretentious executives paid stylists hundreds of dollars for, yet this man's style sprang from nonchalance.

High cheekbones slashed his face and a short beard and mustache muted his mouth. A fisherman? *Probably a construction worker*, she thought. *Still, he's sexy.*

She grinned a bit too brightly at the bartender, thanking him for the beer. Nervous, she hefted the bottle and bumped her front tooth. Clunk.

"Ouch," she murmured, rubbing her front teeth with her index finger, worried she chipped one. She glanced at the bar and met Jay's eyes. Was he smiling at her?

She lifted the longneck beer and drank, her throat undulating with each gulp. She set the beer back on the table and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. She was aware of his eyes on her and her skin tingled. She nervously gazed at her bottle and tugged gently at the label, a game bored females play at bars. Soon, shreds of wet paper littered the tabletop, but it worked. The time between placing her order and having a hot, juicy burger placed before her dissolved.

"Yes, please," she responded to the bartender's question. "Ketchup and mustard. Thanks."

She lifted the bun lid and poked at the burger. Hot cheese clung to her finger and she slid it into her mouth, sucking it clean. As she pulled her finger from her lips, she looked up and once again saw the man watched her intently. Blushing with embarrassment, she shifted in her seat and knocked her purse onto the floor. As she bent over to retrieve it, she watched in agony as a tube of lipstick rolled across the floor, bouncing off the barstool next to the man. Sabrina pretended she hadn't noticed it and shoved the rest of the contents back into her purse. She decided she would buy another lipstick, considering the tube lost.

Meanwhile, Nate brought the ketchup and mustard and hovered at her table. "Can I get you another beer, miss?"

"Thank you. That'd be great," she said.

She refused to look across the bar, determined to eat her burger, drink her beer and leave while she still had some dignity. She didn't understand why she felt self-conscious, but after a few minutes of trying to eat daintily, she gave up and devoured the sandwich.

To hell with him, she thought. *He's rude, staring at me like that.*

Agitated, she chewed, her cheeks stuffed with bread and meat. The burger was no longer juicy. It was cardboard, dry and tasteless. She gulped her second beer, washing down the last few mouthfuls.

Pulling her wallet from her purse, she extracted two twenties and placed them on the table. She was furious. The entire time she tried to eat her dinner, minding her

own business, the obnoxious man at the bar stared at her. Okay, so she licked her fingers suggestively and a few times she stared back at him, but enough was enough.

She grabbed her purse and jacket and swung out of the booth. "Keep the change," she told the bartender, open mouthed in astonishment at the size of her tip.

In the parking lot, Sabrina slipped into her coat and hung her purse over her shoulder. She turned in a slow circle, unsure which direction the hotel lay. As she did, the tavern door opened, Jay walked out and stopped in front of her. In his open hand, he held her lipstick. She glared at it for a heated moment, and then looked into his face. It was shadowed, except for his lower lip. She fixated on it.

"I hope you're happy. You've ruined my night out."

"Me?" His voice was low and soft. *Dangerous*, she thought.

"Yes, you," she lashed, grabbing the lipstick and shoving it in her front pocket. "Who do you think you are, staring at me?"

"You were flirting with me."

Sabrina took a step back and gasped. "I was not! I was trying to enjoy dinner, but I couldn't because of you."

Jay stepped closer forcing Sabrina to lift her chin to see him. It exposed the long, pale line of her neck. He hungrily followed that line to the swell of her breasts, heaving against the too-tight shirt. Jay also saw a wisp of dark lace. "You fooled me."

"You're incredibly rude and you're making me nervous." Sabrina took another step back.

He pushed his hands into his jeans pocket and grinned. "Let's start over. I'm Jay; what's your name?"

"None of your business," she snapped, frantically turning her head, looking for the hotel sign.

He touched her arm gently. "Hey, it's okay. Are you lost?"

Sabrina looked up into his shadowed face, wishing she could see his eyes. She forced herself to calm down. She was in the parking lot of a brightly lit restaurant in the tiny town of Warren, not a dark alley in Baltimore. "I'm not sure where my hotel is. It's only a few blocks away, but I don't remember which way to go."

"I'll walk with you. It's probably the Warren Inn, right?"

"Yes, but you don't need to walk with me. Which way is it?"

"This way," he said, turning her, his hand gentle on her elbow.

Sabrina took several steps toward what she hoped would be her hotel, then stopped abruptly. She looked pointedly at his hand on her arm, then at his face and blinked in surprise. This time, light from the waning sun revealed a scattering of freckles across a straight nose, a full mouth with straight, white teeth. His eyes

weren't dark after all; they were clear gray-blue. Glints of red shone in his mussed hair.

He released her arm.

Sabrina caught her bottom lip between her teeth. From a distance, he was hard lines and angles, but now, outside in the fading light, he was almost adorable.

Without thinking, Sabrina lifted her hand in a halting gesture. Jay caught it and gently pressed it against his chest.

"All right, maybe I was flirting. At first," she conceded. "But not now. I don't know you. I think I'd better go." Shakily, Sabrina pulled her hand away.

"I'd like to know you," he said. "What's your name?"

This time she couldn't refuse. With bright eyes pinned on his lips, she answered breathlessly. "Sabrina."

"Sabrina, you're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

"Yeah, right," she drawled.

"I never lie." He changed the subject abruptly. "It's going to be a nice evening. Would you like to go for a sunset sail?"

Sabrina blinked again. "What?"

"Take a short sail on the river and watch the sunset," he explained. "It's a Rhode Island tradition."

"I've never been on a sailboat before." Well, except for this afternoon, but that doesn't count, she mentally added.

He gestured to a large, vacant lot across the street. On the far side of the lot, along the river, several small sailboats were tied to a pier. "Here's your chance."

She frowned. The idea of sailing with this stranger was intriguing. "How do I know you're not a murderer?"

"You don't, but this is a small town and everyone knows me. I can give you a reference."

As if on cue, an older couple walked out of the bar and headed for a truck in the parking lot. "Good evening Jay," they called.

"Good evening Paul, Barb," he replied, his eyes pinned on Sabrina.

"That was convenient," she said.

He sheathed her hand in his, its heat radiating up her arm. They crossed the street in silence, walking towards the boats rocking in the current.

"Which one is yours?" she asked.

Jay nimbly dropped into a small boat and patted the gunwale. "They all are. But this evening, we'll use this one. She's my favorite. Just give me a minute to get her ready, then you can climb aboard."

Sabrina watched as he tugged on the shrouds, making sure that the rigging was tight. He pulled the cover off the mainsail and checked the sail ties. He placed the rudder in the water and tied the tiller against the port side of the boat, then stood in the cockpit and looked around.

"Ready?" she asked?

"Wait just a sec. Going over my list," he said, then continued his mental survey. After checking in the small cabin for life jackets and flares, he stepped to the middle of the boat and held out his hand, beckoning Sabrina.

She gingerly took his fingertips in hers, then stepped onto the seat cushion. The boat rocked and she grabbed his arm with both hands. Jay pulled her towards the middle of the cockpit and the rocking motion stopped.

"You've never sailed before?"

"I told you I hadn't. This is a small boat, isn't it?"

"Yes, but it's fast and easy and fun. I promise you won't go for a swim tonight."

"I'd better not," she warned, sitting on the cushion and placing her purse beside her. She shrugged out of her coat, the movement again catching Jay's eye as her shirt stretched across her breasts.

He looked away, then reached out of the boat and released the lines from the pier. He pulled in the fenders and stowed them in the small cabin. Using the boat hook, he shoved the dinghy away from the pilings and they were adrift. Not bothering to use the small outboard motor, Jay maneuvered the boat into the wind.

"Would you please sit here and hold the tiller like this?" He offered Sabrina the teak handle.

"Why? Aren't you going to sail the boat?"

"Yes, but I need to raise the sail. Unless you want to do it?"

"No thanks," she said reaching for the tiller. "I think I'll hold the thingy."

Jay stood and deftly untied the sail. Within seconds, he shackled the top of the sail to the halyard and pulled the bright white sail up the mast. Sabrina watched unabashedly as the muscles in his back rippled. He cleated the line, then unfurled the jib sheet. The small sail curved and filled with the slight breeze.

"Okay, we're ready to go," he said, smiling. He took the tiller from Sabrina and sat on the opposite side of the boat. "Just sit back and relax."

"Great idea," she said. But could she relax? Impetuously, she agreed to go with this man, putting her life in the hands of a stranger. A rugged and sexy stranger with beautiful, strong hands she realized as she watched him steer the little boat into open water. The sensation of letting go and being uninhibited for once thrilled her.

The wind was light, yet the little dinghy moved quickly. Sabrina watched the shoreline, admiring houses and yachts as the boat forged down the Warren River toward the bay.

"We won't go far," Jay said. "It's nice, though, to have a stretch of water between you and the sunset."

Sabrina closed her eyes. She reveled in the warmth of the setting sun and the gentle breeze. The water was nearly flat, so the small waves ripped in the boat's wake.

"This is wonderful," she said, her face tilted towards the breeze. "I've never experienced anything like this."

"Don't you like boats?" Jay asked.

"Well, sure. I've just never had the opportunity to go on one. I mean, in school I joined the crew club, but that's rowing on the river. It's more about competition than relaxation. I've been on a couple of dinner cruises on the Patapsco River."

"You live near the Chesapeake Bay?"

He knows his geography, she thought. "Yes. I live in Baltimore."

"Busy place. Do you like it there?"

"Well, sure. I've lived there most of my life, so it's home. I went to boarding school in Maryland."

"You went to a boarding school?"

"Yes. Good old Hillcrest. Class of 1998. Then I went to Boston for college."

"Boston as in...?"

"As in Harvard Business School. I admit it; I'm a nerd."

"You don't look like the nerds I went to school with." Jay observed.

Sabrina dimpled at the compliment.

Jay lost his heart.

"Where did you go to school?" she asked.

"I was born here and went to public school. Then I moved to Maine, worked at a few boatyards there and got my degree in naval architecture at the Maine Maritime Academy."

"Naval architecture? You build houses?"

Jay laughed gently at her naiveté. "No, I design boats."

"Really?" Sabrina squeaked. "That's amazing. I just bought," she began, then yelped and grabbed at his knees when a large wake rocked the dinghy.

"Careful," Jay said, steadying her. "There's a couple more coming. They're from that barge over there," he pointed.

Sabrina placed her hands on either side, balancing herself. "Sorry; I wasn't expecting that."

"Would you like to steer?" Jay offered.

"No thanks. If you don't mind, I'd rather watch the sunset," she said. "It is beautiful, isn't it?"

Jay nodded as the sun sank closer to the horizon. Orange, pink and violet banded together for the spectacular event. As the sun sank into the bay, Jay turned the boat and headed back towards the river, tacking slowly towards Warren.

Sabrina watched as he expertly handled the sheets and tiller, and all too soon the experience ended. Jay handed her the tiller and told her to keep the boat steady while he pulled down the mainsail, tied it to the boom. He let the current move them to the pier and then tossed a line around a piling.

He held her hand as she stood on the seat and jumped to the pier. She dropped a loop around a cleat as instructed and waited as Jay finished docking the boat. Soon, the small vessel was secure, its fenders cushioning it from the weathered pilings. He tossed the life jackets into the cabin, tidied up the lines and lifted the rudder from the water. He slid the cover back on the flaked mainsail, nodding as he mentally checked items on his list.

He sprang to the pier and stood next to Sabrina in the dusk. "Hope that makes up for staring at you in the bar."

She laughed. "I've forgotten all about that." She bit her bottom lip, suppressing a smirk and dimpling instead.

There it is, again, Jay thought and before he could stop he enfolded her in his arms. "I've been dying to kiss you."

She felt heat radiate from him as she swayed. *He's hypnotized me*, she thought, and closed her eyes. When their mouths touched, his gentle and hesitant, she dove recklessly. She sought his kiss with demanding lips, leaning into him when the ground tilted.

He held her as she deepened the kiss, giving her time to explore, to experiment. Her tongue darted in his mouth and teased his, then she rubbed it along his parted lips. When she sucked on his bottom lip, nipping it gently with her sharp, white teeth, Jay knew he had to stop her while he still could.

He pulled back. "Whoa," he murmured. "Now I can die a happy man."

She buried her face in his chest, embarrassed by her wanton exuberance.

Jay wrapped his arms around her and caressed her back and neck. His fingers slid into her straight, dark hair. He broke the enchantment. "Do you like seals?"

"Seals?" Sabrina giggled.

Jay grinned and lifted her chin. "Yeah; we've got a lot of seals in Rhode Island, you know. They come up the bay." He rubbed his thumb against her bottom lip.

"If you'd like, I'll show you. There's a group sleeping on the rocks behind my place right now. It's just a block that way," he said, pointing in the direction opposite the hotel.

"Sure," she said, "why not?" Although honestly, she knew why not.

They walked along the river towards a high wooden fence. As promised, seals lounged on a collection of flat rocks at the edge of the river. At the sound of their footsteps rustling the grass, a few wary seals lifted their heads and barked. One began to shake.

"We're too close," Jay said and drew Sabrina back a few feet.

Once the seals were appeased by the distance they reclined, keeping their bright eyes on the humans.

"Can we watch them for awhile? Do you mind?" Sabrina asked.

"Sure. Let's sit down here."

She sat cross-legged in the grass, keeping as still as possible while watching the seals. Soon, their snoozing relaxed her and she leaned back on her elbows. She looked at the dark sky, searching for constellations she could recognize. It was a futile gesture, so she gazed at Jay.

"Now you're staring," he teased.

"The grass is wet and I'm cold," she confessed.

"Let's go," he said, standing and offering a hand. He kept her fingers wrapped in his and hiked back to the fence. "Watch your step," he said, leading her up a wooden staircase.

"Where are we going?"

"My place," he said.

"This is where you murder me?"

He laughed softly. "Trust me."

"That's what they all say," Sabrina retorted.

Jay opened a door and turned on a light switch. The sparsely decorated loft apartment was trimmed in teak and brass like the inside of a sailboat. The curtains were made of old canvas sails and prints of majestic tall ships adorned the walls. An oversized couch covered in dark blue ultra suede dominated the room, partitioned by a gleaming, mahogany bar. Behind it was a small, tidy kitchenette with polished nickel appliances. Jay picked up a remote and turned on a receiver, tuning it to a radio station playing rock music.

"You really like sailboats, don't you?" Sabrina asked, turning in a full circle as she admired the space.

"No. I love sailboats," he emphasized. "Can I get you a drink?"

"Sure. I like sailboats, too. In fact, I bought one today. I can't believe I just said that. I bought a sailboat."

"Hey, that's great. Welcome to my world." He handed her a bottle of water and touched her elbow. "Let's sit down and you can tell me about it."

While he unlaced his boots and tossed them in a corner, Sabrina sat obediently and twisted the bottle cap. The water was cool and refreshing. Sitting a short distance from her, he lifted her legs and tugged off her shoes. He swung her feet into his lap, spinning her to face him. With a light touch, he massaged the soles of her feet.

Breathing was difficult, and she shivered. Uncertainty made her wary.

"So, who are you Sabrina, and what brought you here?"

Emboldened, she teased him. "Here? You mean to your lair?"

He grinned wolfishly. "I'll take very good care of you," he promised.

"No," she protested, pulling her feet from his lap. She sat straight and placed her bottle on the table. "I'm not sure what's going on here, but, umm. Okay, well, I'm sure I know what's going on. I, uh..." She looked around helplessly. The Zephyrus was the last thing on her mind.

Jay watched her struggle with anxiety and leaned back against the couch, one hand resting on his knee, the other framing his head. The effect was one of submission, opening his body and assuring her that she was in control.

It was a natural, inviting gesture and one her body recognized instinctively, whether or not she understood. She slid against him, wrapping her arms around his neck. "Don't make me talk anymore. Kiss me." She closed her eyes and waited.

Amused, Jay stroked her hair from her face and lifted her chin. He brushed her lips with his, gently. She grunted a protest and wiggled deeper into his arms. "Kiss me," she demanded, her eyes still closed.

His mouth was hot as it melded with hers, and oh, could he kiss. He pulled her against him, making her head swim at the contact. She sucked tenderly on his bottom lip, teasing him into aggression. He fisted his hands in her hair and pulled her head to the side, baring her neck and shoulder. With a growl, he plundered and Sabrina gasped at the bolt of desire she felt.

This animal need was new; never had she been so reckless or daring. The heat of his gaze stripped her and now she burned for his hands to do the same.

"Touch me," she whispered. "I want to feel your skin next to mine."

"Sabrina," he gasped, "I don't think ..."

"Good advice," she said, cutting off his words with her wicked mouth. She traced her tongue across his lips. "Let's not think about this."

She tugged at her shirt, pulling the buttons loose. She tried to shrug out of it, but the cuffs caught at her wrists, binding her. "Help me," she pleaded, rubbing her cheek against his bearded one, her lace-covered breasts heaving against him. She lifted her arms weakly, caught behind her back in her shirtsleeves.

"Honey, we need to slow down," he said, catching her wrists and unbuttoning one cuff, then the other. She shrugged free, then slid her hands inside his T-shirt.

"I don't want to. If I do, I might change my mind." She rose on her knees and pressed him into the back of the couch, drugging him with one deep kiss after another. Helpless, Jay cupped her breasts.

While Sabrina focused on tugging off his T-shirt, Jay slipped his hands behind her and unsnapped her satin, red and black bra. As the wisp of material fell away, he marveled at the dark peaks of her breasts. Her skin was dusky and smelled faintly of cinnamon and, he inhaled again, hay?

Unable to resist, he brushed his tongue against her nipple. She reacted instantly, arching her back and thrusting her breasts forward. Jay placed a hand over one swollen nipple, rolling it gently between his fingers, while he tugged the other between his lips. His free hand slid down her waist and cupped her bottom. Sabrina straddled Jay, resting on her knees. When she felt the pressure of his hand on the back of her thigh, she lowered herself into his lap and rocked gently.

"Hold on," Jay cautioned. "Not here. You're going too fast."

"I know," she murmured, "I'm burning up." She nuzzled against his beard, rubbing it first with her cheek, then her shoulder. Moaning softly, she captured his face turning his mouth to hers. Between each intoxicating kiss, she gasped for air.

"This is so strange," she whispered, her breath teasing against his ear, "but I need you." Her voice was husky, strangled with tears. "Now!"

Pulling her to her feet, he led Sabrina into the next room, to his unmade bed with its inviting, cool sheets.

"First, let's take care of these," he said, brushing his lips against her neck. Reaching for her waistband, he tugged her against him and slid the zipper down its track. He caressed her satiny hips, pushing her jeans to the floor.

Sabrina stepped out of them, wearing only her panties and a pair of white crew socks. Undoubtedly, she was the most exquisite woman Jay had ever seen, much less touched.

She stepped into his embrace and he concentrated on kissing her, caressing her silky back. Sabrina deftly unsnapped buttons and his jeans followed hers to the floor. Her fingers slid beneath the band of his boxers. "These too," she murmured against his chest.

Within moments, they were wrapped in each other's arms and rolling on the bed. Sabrina felt charged, electricity sparking from her fingers as she caressed his body. She luxuriated in the taste of him as her silky, agile tongue danced across his skin. She whispered in his ear, words outrageously exciting and sensual.

The roughness of his worker's hands lightly teased her nipples to aching hardness. Every inch of her skin tingled as he stroked her belly, her thighs, the small of her back, the inside of her elbows.

His skin next to hers seared, and she could not touch him enough. The soft, dark hair on his chest tickled her fingers marvelously, and she thrilled at the solid, flat planes of his back. His lips touched a nipple, tenderly at first, then insatiably. He suckled with a delicate strength that made her gasp and bow her back.

With her legs wrapped around him, sliding and shifting under him, she bucked restlessly and begged for release. It was tearing her apart, this throbbing need that only he could satisfy.

When he slid his fingers between her legs, he found her swollen and damp. "Ahh, Sabrina," he groaned and kissed her again.

He trembled, his eyes closed as if in prayer, when Sabrina slipped her hand around him, holding and exploring him with audacious curiosity. She could wait no longer. She fitted him between her thighs.

Lowering his lips into the fragrant hollow of her neck, he drove into her with measured force. He grasped her wrists and pulled them above her head. With her pinned and him sliding in and out with a steady rhythm, he noticed that he hadn't removed her panties. The friction of the lacy band drove him wild, and his control slipped.

Sabrina wanted to claw at him, yank his hair, and scream her need. With every thrust, she felt his wildness and despaired that she would find release in time. Then, as he closed his mouth on her breast, it happened. He buried himself inside her, hard and hot, thick and smooth, and she spiraled over the edge. He liberated her hands and held her close, urging her, and it was stronger and sweeter than anything she experienced before.

As she fluttered downward, her body spent and weak, he tensed. Then, with a rough cry of fulfillment, he collapsed against her. She could feel him tremble as he rolled over. She pillowed her head on his chest and closed her eyes.

* * *

It was dark and Sabrina was afraid to move. She was curled against Jay, his arm possessively tossed over her hips. His breathing was deep, his chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm. She eased herself away, slowly sliding toward the edge of the bed. When she made it, she stood in the moonlight and watched him sleep.

As she shivered in the night air, doubt and remorse clouded her thoughts and she began to panic. She could blame it on alcohol, although she'd only had two beers at the most. No, it wasn't alcohol. It was the sunset sail and his carefree, lazy smile.

"Uh oh, Grandmother. Now I know what happened to you," she whispered, her eyes tender as she watched him sleep.

Sabrina gritted her teeth, and then searched the shadowy floor for her scattered clothes. She tiptoed into the living room where she hurriedly dressed, pulling her wrinkled shirt from between the couch cushions. She laced her shoes and wiggled into her coat. She knew her makeup and hair were a mess, but she had to get out of here now, before he woke and she had to look into his eyes.

Six years of Catholic school training was not wasted on her and shame flushed her cheeks. She opened the door as quietly as possible and let herself out into the night. It closed with an audible click, but Jay was sound asleep. Sabrina raced down the steps, cringing when her footsteps alerted a seal and it barked hoarsely.

She sprinted to the middle of the dark street and after looking both ways saw the illuminated hotel sign in the distance. As she walked hurriedly towards the light, she opened her purse and withdrew a brush. With wild, frantic yanks, she smoothed her hair. She tucked her shirt into her jeans and buttoned her jacket. She frantically searched her purse for the hotel key card, then, with a sigh of relief, found it in her back pocket. The last thing she wanted to do was ask the hotel clerk for another key; especially at, what time was it? She pulled out her cell phone and pushed a button. The screen lit up: 2:48 a.m.

With her head averted, she let herself into the hotel lobby and walked towards the stairs to her second-floor suite. The clerk looked up from his magazine briefly and then ignored her.

In her room at last, Sabrina leaned against the door and giggled. She stepped into the bathroom, the light and fan driving away the quiet. She turned on the shower and began to strip. She yelped softly when she saw the red marks on her breasts and belly, and licked her swollen, aching lips.

“Mmmmm!” She wrapped her arms around her shoulders and giggled again. Then, hefting her tender breasts in each hand, she examined them for small hickeys. She raised an eyebrow at her reflection. “You should see the other guy,” she quipped.

Soon, the steaming shower, fragrant soap and soothing body lotion dispelled her aches, leaving her skin glowing and soft. Later, lying naked in her bed, she ran her hands over her belly and between her thighs. She squeezed her eyes and regretted leaving him, yearning again for his touch, his kiss, his powerful body against hers.

She slept fitfully, hugging her pillow.

* * *

In the morning, the town once again seemed normal. Sabrina shook her head at the memory of her late-night race through the streets. She realized that, although Jay lived somewhere close, she lost all sense of bearing in the dark. He could be anywhere of three directions. Not that she wanted to see him again. Okay, she did. But she didn't think she could face him.

He's probably glad he doesn't have to get rid of me, she thought. I've got the morals of a cat in heat. A vision of Sister Carolyn, her seventh grade health education teacher, floated before her. She cringed at the memory of sex education and the Catholic stance on reproduction and birth control. That's where she and the religion parted ways. In most other areas, the doctrine had its hooks in her and kept her on the “right path.”

Even so, Sabrina had limited experience with sex. She dated during high school, but never had a serious relationship.

She'd only made love with two other men: one she almost convinced herself to marry, despite Grandmother Rose's advice, and the other a rebound from her broken engagement. She dated Jeremy Rice for three years in college. He took it for granted they would marry and she would work while he finished medical school. Finding him in bed with another woman at a fraternity party devastated her. Jeremy represented the one thing she craved: a family. She refused his contrite telephone calls and eventually they stopped. She sent him the engagement ring and returned all of his presents. She didn't want any reminders.

Michael, her second lover, was a guitar player in a Boston band. Her dorm roommate set up a blind date for both of them. They recognized from the beginning they had little in common, but the sex was healthy and helped assuage

her wounded pride. Michael didn't mind. When his band moved to California, they kissed goodbye without regret.

Sabrina was up, showered and dressed by eight o'clock, and scouting the streets of Warren for a breakfast diner. She decided on the donut shop, eating three glazed donuts and downing several cups of coffee.

She asked the waitress for a telephone directory and idly stirred sugar into her coffee as she flipped through the yellow pages.

"Excuse me," she called to the waitress. "Is this close?" Sabrina pointed to the small ad for Warren Boatyard in the phone book. Its services included boat restoration and boat building, "no job too small."

The woman nodded. "Sure is. Right down the road."

"Thanks. That's all I need."

Sabrina punched the number into her cell phone. It rang several times and, just as she considered hanging up and redialing, a deep voice boomed, "Boatyard. Brett here."

"Hello, I'm looking at your ad in the phone book and it says you do boat restoration. That 'no job is too small.'"

"That's right, ma'am. What can we do for you?"

"Well, I have a boat and it's a real mess," she began apologetically. "I need to have it moved and then, I guess, do whatever magic you do."

"Is this a fiberglass boat?"

"Yes, it is."

"What's her length, overall?"

"Uh, what?"

"How big is the boat?"

"I'm not sure. It's a Zephyrus; does that help?"

There was a brief pause before the man answered. "Thirty-two; those boats had a short run and only one design."

"Well, this one is special, despite roosting chickens and lily pads in living room."

"Cabin. Lily pads in the cabin," Brett said, chuckling. "Where is this boat?"

"It's at Mr. Blair's house, next to his barn." She reeled off the address. "It's been sitting for at least twenty years, so it's going to need a lot of work."

"I can go take a look at it and give you an estimate. Why don't you give me your name and telephone number."

"I don't need an estimate. I want this boat restored to her original condition," she said, proudly remembering to call it by its feminine pronoun. "I don't care what the cost is."

Brett didn't respond at first. Then, "Miss, you sound like you're new to sailboats. Let me give you some advice: When you fall in love, run like hell."

"Excuse me?" Sabrina's gut clenched.

“Run, and don't look back. This boat could end up costing you ten times what she's worth.”

“That's what she's worth to me,” Sabrina said. “Look; you're right. I don't know what I'm doing. That's why I'm calling you. But I do know this: I want this boat in pristine condition.”

“Bristol.”

“What?”

“Bristol. Boats are restored to Bristol condition, not pristine.”

She giggled. “Whatever, Mr. ... What did you say your name was?”

“My name is Brett Story. I'm assistant manager of the Warren Boatyard.”

“Mr. Story, I appreciate you trying to talk me out of throwing money at you. You may not hear this often, but today, money is no object. In fact, if you'll meet me at Mr. Blair's house with a truck or trailer, or however you people move boats around on the land, then I'm prepared to give you a \$20,000 deposit.”

“I can be there in an hour.”

Not a bad businessman after all, she thought. “That's what I want to hear. Thank you, Mr. Story.”

Sabrina hung up her cell phone. “I'm doing it, Grandmother.”

Next, she called the hospital and talked to Shirley Piper, her grandmother's personal nurse.

“She's doing very well, Sabrina. In fact, we're beginning physical therapy today. We need to get her moving so her hip mends properly. The doctors say it was a small fracture and she's ready to try the walker.”

“Thank you, Shirley. I really appreciate what you've done for her. May I speak with her?”

“She's having a sponge bath right now and then will eat breakfast. Can you call back in about an hour?”

“Sure. Well, actually, it will have to be a little later. I'm going to pick up my new boat.”

“How nice! You bought a new boat?”

“Well, not really new. But she will be like new when she's finished.”

Sabrina signed off and looked at the small clock on her cell phone. It was a little after nine; she called Mr. Blair and arranged to meet him again, this time with a mover.

“That'll be fine, missy. You might want to come over here a little sooner and get rid of the peeps. Unless you want some chickens.”

“Mr. Blair; surely you will remove your property from my boat.”

“I would if I could, girly, but I can't climb no ladder and my eyesight isn't what it used to be.”

Sabrina gritted her teeth. *Fine*, she thought, *you old crook*.

* * *

Sabrina bailed many buckets of greasy, black water from the cabin, removed three hen's nests, and tossed eight bales of hay from the boat by the time Brett Story arrived. He efficiently maneuvered a tractor-trailer next to the barn then. He climbed onto the truck bed, removed chains from a forklift and drove it down the ramp, parking it by the sailboat. Then he hopped off to study the Zephyrus. Once Brett had weighed his options, he guided the long, padded blades of the forklift under the sailboat and lifted it, swinging it effortlessly onto the long tractor bed. Once again, Brett hopped off the forklift and then slung several webbed straps across the boat, cinching it to the trailer. Next he deposited the broken lead keel in front of the boat, then drove the little forklift back up the ramp and attached the chains, securing it to the tractor-trailer.

The process took less than twenty minutes. Looking at Sabrina, he shook his head. "You sure you want to do this?"

She handed him a check for \$20,000. "I'm sure."

Now that he had the boat secure, Brett took a moment to study Sabrina. "Didn't I see you last night at Maude's? Weren't you ... uh, didn't you and ..."

He stammered, suddenly realizing the awkwardness of the situation.

Sabrina's cheeks reddened. "Maybe. I had dinner there last night," she said, looking away. "I'm Sabrina Windham and this boat was designed and built by my grandfather, Don Windham," she added, pride flushing her cheeks.

Brett stared open-mouthed.

Sabrina waited for another response but only Brett's silence filled the gap.

"Well, my grandfather and his partner, Derek West," she amended. "I'm determined this boat will be restored and like I said, I don't care what it costs. It's that important."

Brett exhaled. "Right. Well, guess I'll be off. I'm going to need you to come by the boatyard this afternoon to sign some paperwork. No matter what you say, the boss will insist on an estimate. He's particular about the paperwork." Brett eyed the Zephyrus warily. "I think he's going to want to deal with you, and your boat, personally."

"No problem. What time is best for you?"

Brett stepped up to the truck cab and opened the door. "I'd say after three. We've got to do a survey first. Then we can write up a list of priorities."

"Great; see you then," Sabrina said, rubbing her hand across the chalky, swollen belly of her boat. Without the keel, the boat sat close to the ground. She grinned once more at Brett. "Too late I'm afraid to 'run like hell.'"

"They do get under your skin. Kinda like a woman. Well, not in your case. Maybe. Ah, I better get a move on before I put my foot deeper in my mouth."

She winked at him. “Men; I prefer men. With one exception,” she said, stroking the boat once more.

Sabrina stood beside Mr. Blair in the overgrown weeds in his front yard as Brett drove the 18-wheeler out of the barnyard and disappeared down the highway.

“Well, missy, you got yourself some project there.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Jay was in the machine shop, the radio blasting loud rock music when Brett returned with the loaded truck. He didn't hear the engine or the air brakes over the music and the grinding wheel that he operated, shaping a new engine mount. A rag tossed at his head alerted him to Brett's presence.

"Where have you been?" he growled.

"Working; which is more than I can say for you," Brett countered. "Wish I could drag my lazy ass to work whenever I wanted."

"Yeah, well I misplaced something this morning."

"Wouldn't be a sexy brunette, would it?"

Jay tossed the rag at Brett. "Mind your own business. What's that?" he gestured to the laden truck.

"That, my friend, is our next project. I've got a cashier's check for \$20,000 and I need a survey and estimate quick."

Jay stepped out of the attached shed and into the boatyard. He recognized the boat immediately, swiveling to glare at Brett.

"What the hell is this?"

"It's a Zephyrus, buddy."

"I can see that. What the hell is it doing here?"

"Picked it up this morning down on Route 136. Customer wants it restored to Bristol. Says she will pay whatever it takes. This here twenty grand deposit," he said, patting his shirt pocket, "is a down payment."

"Well, I don't want it. Get rid of it."

"Come on, Jay. Get real; we can use the work and you know it. Besides, this is a project boat. We restore this classic and we'll get some great publicity. Think what Shawna can do with the web site. We'll put photos of before and after. It'll be great."

"I don't want it here. I'm not going to touch this boat," Jay snarled. "Get it out of here."

"Well, Jay, here's the thing. This boat just happens to be Hull Number One of a design by Don Windham and his partner, Derek West. You are West's grandson and, here is the clincher, the new owner is the granddaughter of Don Windham."

Jay swore viciously and picked up a piece of two-by-four. In a rage, he swung at the boat. The dull gel coat cracked.

"Jay, calm down. Man, this is Karma. Don't you see?"

"No, I don't see."

"You will. It gets better. The granddaughter is a sexy brunette named Sabrina Windham."

This took the wind from Jay's sail and he stepped back, tripping over the dropped board and sitting hard on a box of old canvas sails.

"Knocked you on your ass, didn't I?"

Jay swore viciously, then stood up, wiped the sawdust from his jeans and walked to the back lot where seals littered the rocks. He dropped into the cockpit of his old wooden skiff and pulled the outboard cord. The well-maintained engine roared and within moments Jay careened down the Warren River, headed for Narragansett Bay.

Brett calmly released the cinched webbing around the Zephyrus and picked up the forklift's remote control. He had a survey to complete before three o'clock.

* * *

Sabrina arrived at the boatyard a little early, anxious and excited to get started.

"Hi Brett," she called out. The chubby man was bent under the hull, thumping it with a rubber mallet.

"Hey, Miss Windham. I'm almost finished with the survey."

"What exactly is a survey?"

"Well, I examine the boat, the way a physician would a patient, looking for problems. I make a list and, based upon the survey, you know how much the boat is worth."

"I already know how much she's worth," Sabrina said. Her confidence had given her an aura of serenity. "Every penny."

"Must be nice to have money to burn, because that's what you're going to do with this clunker. Now, it breaks my heart as a businessman, but I have to recommend that you forget restoring this boat. It's going to take at least six months of steady work and probably fifty thousand to make this boat new again. Well, new and improved."

"You don't want the job?" Sabrina cocked her head and smiled gently.

"Oh, believe me, I want the job. My boss, now, he's a different story." Brett sighed. He didn't want to do it, but Jay was too stubborn for his own good. "Can I talk to you openly?"

"Certainly."

"Let's go to Maude's. We're going to need a quiet booth and I'm going to need a beer."

"But it's only three o'clock," she protested.

"It's time," he said, matter-of-factly. He escorted her to the gate and locked the boatyard. In the distance, Sabrina heard muted barking of seals. The fence looked

familiar, too. An uneasy feeling came over her and she looked over her shoulder. Jay's apartment was near here. She opened her car door. "Shall I drive?"

"No; leave it. Maude's is just a couple of blocks away. Let's go," he replied.

Sabrina felt déjà vu and shivered. "Maybe I need a beer, after all."

They walked quickly and soon she recognized the weathered tavern. The parking lot still contained motorcycles and pickup trucks. "Don't these people ever go home?"

Brett chuckled. "Yes, but they come back the next day."

Inside, the tavern looked friendly and its cedar-planked walls glowed in the filtered sunlight. Brett pointed to an empty booth near the back of the building. An old, stocky woman with frizzled gray hair approached them, menus and a dishtowel in her hands.

"Afternoon, Maude."

"Hey Brett. Where's Shawna today?" She eyed Sabrina with mistrust.

"She's at home, as always. This here is a client of the boatyard, Maude. She's picked up a sailboat that needs some work."

Maude nodded. "You mean that piece of crap you hauled by here this morning?"

Sabrina grimaced.

"Ayuh, that's the one," Brett said. "Miss Windham here has bought herself the original Zephyrus."

"Windham, you say?" Maude looked closely at Sabrina. "Don Windham's daughter? Nah, you're too young. You his kin?"

"Yes," Sabrina said, leaning forward eagerly. "You knew my grandfather?"

"Used to," Maude said, wiping the table and dropping the menus without ceremony. "Went to school with him and Derek. Those two were best friends. Tragedy that was, the fire."

Maude cleared her throat. "Listen, the kitchen isn't too busy if you two want something special."

"Thanks, Maude," Bret said. "Can we start with a couple of lagers? Sabrina, are you hungry?"

Rattled, Sabrina picked up the menu and scanned it. "Umm, actually, I am. I forgot to have lunch today. I'll have, um, how about a bowl of chowder and a BLT?"

Maude nodded. "Brett?"

"Thanks; I'll just have a beer. Shawna's cooking pot roast tonight," he said, rubbing his large belly.

Maude peered at him over her glasses. "You tell her I said hey, and good luck with the new baby."

Brett nodded and the old woman shuffled off to the kitchen. He grinned at Sabrina. "She's a bit protective. Shawna's her grandniece."

"It's a small town, isn't it? I mean, it's amazing to me that she knew my grandfather. I never met him. He died a long time ago."

Brett nodded. "Yes, I know. In fact, that's what I need to talk to you about."

Curious, Sabrina leaned forward. "What is it?"

"Well, this could be a bit touchy. I mean, I don't really know what happened last night when Jay left the bar after you, but ..."

"Jay? What does this have to do with him?" Sabrina leaned back, frowning and blushing furiously.

Brett nodded again, heaving a deep sigh. The woman was an open book.

"It's like this, Sabrina, I like you, and I think you coming to Warren and finding this boat is something special. I mean it," he said, raising a hand when she tried to speak. "Don't stop me; I've got to get this out."

He paused long enough for Maude to plunk two frosty beers on the table. After she was out of earshot, he continued.

"Sabrina, I could tell something was happening last night. Jay never chases women, but he wouldn't take his eyes off of you. The way he ran out of here. Well, I've never seen him act that way."

Sabrina bit her lip and looked away, unwilling to comment.

"And I can see you got something going for him, too. Don't you?"

"Brett. If this is about my relationship with Jay, then you need to stop right now. I don't mean to be rude, but it's none of your business."

"See, that's the problem. It is my business," he said, gulping his beer. "Jay is my boss. He owns the boatyard."

She dropped her trembling hands in her lap. "That's bizarre," she said.

"Believe me; it's more bizarre than you think. Jay is the grandson of Derek West, your grandfather's partner."

"You're kidding me," she exclaimed. For the first time in her life, she understood the term "thunderstruck."

Brett nodded, satisfied that she understood, that she comprehended the uncanny situation.

"Sabrina; there's more. You see, Jay had a terrible childhood and his family, his grandmother, blame the Windhams for all their bad luck. He went berserk this morning when he saw the Zephyrus. He wanted to destroy it as soon as he saw it."

Sabrina's chin dropped and her eyes misted.

"When I told him who you are, pointed out that this is some kind of mystical connection, he got pissed off and left. Probably holed up in a bar downriver."

"I can't believe it. Oh my God," she said, hiding her face in her shaky hands.

Maude returned, shoving a steaming bowl of chowder and a toasted BLT towards Sabrina.

"What's the matter?" She looked accusingly at Brett who silently mouthed "Jay," pointed to Sabrina's bowed head, then rolled his eyes. Maude grunted, and

returned to the kitchen, shaking her head. She owned a bar long enough to know love was a rocky road.

She stopped in her tracks, and turned slowly to look once more at Sabrina. Love? Between a Windham and a West? Now she'd seen it all.

Long, silent moments passed. Brett drank his beer and regretted not ordering anything to eat. The chowder smelled tempting, and who could resist toast and bacon? After a few minutes, he began to squirm.

"Sabrina. Eat your lunch."

She shook her head, still refusing to look up. Her heart ached and she felt on the verge of tears.

"Well," Brett said. "Do you mind if I eat the soup?"

That made her laugh and she sniffed, wiping her nose. She finally looked up and Brett saw sparkling tears in her eyes. She hiccupped, her breath hitching in her chest.

Oh, Grandmother Rose! She cringed at the memory of their talk.

"Brett. It's awful. You don't know, nobody knows, what happened."

He spooned the creamy soup into his mouth and swallowed.

"You're wrong, Sabrina. Everybody knows," he said, nodding sagely.

* * *

It was late when Jay motored to the dock, tying the skiff to a cleat along the seawall. His head down, he strode to the back of the boatyard. The motion-detector light came on as he neared the steps to his apartment.

"I've been waiting for you."

He stumbled at the sound of the soft voice, peered closely at the dark staircase. There, sitting on the second step, huddled in her long leather coat, was Sabrina.

"Go away," he muttered, searching his jeans for his house key.

Sabrina stood and leaned towards him, smelling smoke and bourbon. "Are you drunk? She stepped closer, her hands in her coat pocket.

"Unfortunately, no. At least not very. You should leave," he said, refusing to look her in the eye. Instead, he concentrated on her feet, bare for some reason.

"I should," she whispered. "But I can't."

He frowned. All afternoon he had cursed her and her family, drowning his anger at a bayside bar. Now all he wanted to do was sink into her, inhale her musky perfume, taste her fevered lips. He looked away instead. Years of anger, years of hurt had hardened him.

Sabrina understood his rage. It wasn't simple for her to confront Jay, this intimate stranger, but she had to try to relieve his sorrow. "May I come upstairs? I'd like to speak with you," she said.

"I don't have anything to say to you."

She let her long, leather coat fall open. Beneath it, she wore only a bra and panties. "Well, may I come upstairs and not talk to you?"

With a growl, Jay crushed her against his chest and his mouth ravaged hers. Sabrina encircled his neck with her arms, melting into him, yielding to his fury. He released her long enough to pull her up the stairs. He fumbled with the key, unlocked the door clumsily. Inside, he slammed it shut and shoved her against it.

In the dark, against the wood barrier, he devastated her with his mouth, punished her with his hands. Unwilling to release her, he shoved her panties down with one hand and stroked her, sliding fingers into the wetness. With sharp teeth, he tugged at her bra until her breasts were free, then he sucked voraciously on her hardened nipples. Sabrina panted and squirmed against his questing touch. She arched her back, begging him to suckle one breast, then the other. She whimpered when he removed his fingers, then sighed when it was replaced with his long, hot, hard shaft. She wiggled her hips, slipping and sliding around him as he pushed against her velvety softness.

He cupped her bottom, lifting her feet off the floor, pinning her. His face buried in her soft, dark hair and, audacious and urgent, his hands slid her up and down his length. Suspended between the wall and his body, straining closer, needing him deeper, she wrapped her legs around his waist.

The soft sounds coming from deep in her throat and the impatient touch of her hands assured him that despite his ferocity, he pleased her. He rested against her for a moment, trembling and fighting for control. She wouldn't allow it, biting at his shoulders and plunging her tongue into his ear.

"Wait; don't move," he whispered against her neck.

"I can't help it," she moaned, shifting fluidly with an intuitive pace. The slow, swirl of her hips drove him insane and with a roar, he picked up his own rhythm. She cried out when she felt the crest, riding each wave of ecstasy. As she quivered with the joy that only he could provide she felt him plunge within her one final time. Then, they both sagged. In the dark, she listened to his labored breathing and felt him tremble as he held her.

* * *

Naked and nestled in the sheets of his bed, Sabrina slept. As the sky lightened, Jay watched her sleep, savoring the fine bones of her face, the soft curve of her neck. Exotic, with long lashes and dark, rich hair, she didn't look like a Windham. He had seen photos of both Don and Rose, yet he couldn't see either of them in Sabrina.

She hadn't said anything to him about the sailboat; hadn't once tried to convince him to restore the Zephyrus. The cynic in him reminded him to be patient. She would.

Sabrina stretched, opening her eyes slowly. When she saw him, she smiled, her lush, swollen lips parting. She scooted into the curve of his body and sighed. She traced his jaw, tickling his beard and lips. She rubbed a finger in the crease between his eyebrows.

"Don't frown."

Jay closed his eyes slowly.

"Maybe this is the way it's supposed to be," she whispered against his neck.

"Now you sound like Brett."

"Maybe he's right."

"What did he tell you," Jay said, rolling onto his back.

"Nothing I didn't already know," Sabrina said, laying her head on his chest. She listened to the sound of his heart, heard it speed up as his anxiety mounted.

"You knew? From the beginning, you knew?"

"I knew about our grandparents. I didn't know you existed, didn't know who you were when we met. When we ..." she faltered. "I didn't know the connection until this afternoon when Brett told me."

"What the hell does he know?" Jay eased his grip, sliding a hand to caress her naked back.

"Well," she said, snuggling into his embrace, "he says he knows 'everything,' whatever that means. That everyone knows. Does that mean the whole town?"

Jay nodded. "Yeah, I'm afraid it does. My grandmother went nuts. She made sure that everybody knew Rose Windham was an adulterer. She blamed the fire on Rose, said she killed them."

"It's true," Sabrina said, sighing. "Rose told me about it two weeks ago after I found some letters and a newspaper clipping. It was horrible. So tragic."

"You don't look anything like her, do you?"

"No; I look like my mother. She's Brazilian. She and my father met in college."

"She must be very beautiful," he said, stroking her cheek. "You are."

Sabrina turned her head and kissed his palm. "When I first saw you, I thought you were scary. Dark and brooding and dangerous."

"But not anymore?"

"No. I guess I've developed a taste for danger. And all these hard muscles," she said, squeezing his arm.

"I've been too rough with you," he said, contrite. "I've hurt you, haven't I?"

He held her against the pillows and studied her, noting the bites and bruises, the scratches and swollen lips. "What have I done to you?"

Sabrina chuckled and cuddled him to her breasts. "Don't be silly. I'm not made of glass. You haven't done anything that I haven't asked for."

"No, it's not right. A man doesn't hurt a woman."

"I'm fine," she said. "Look, if you're going to be a crybaby every time we have sex ..." she teased.

"You want a 'tough guy' to have sex with, is that it?" He took advantage of his position and rubbed his beard against her hardening nipples.

"Well, I've never had one before and it is kind of fun," she reasoned, arching an eyebrow.

"Posh girl comes to town, trolling for trouble."

"No, rich girl comes to town to find boat. I don't troll for men," she said, stiffening. "Does it really bother you? The money?"

"Sabrina, it's never a problem for those who have it."

She pushed him away. "Maybe I better go." She lifted gracefully from the bed, and sorted through clothing and sheets, looking for her underwear.

He rolled on his back and watched her with distrust. "They're in the living room," he offered.

She glared at him, then stomped into the living room. She returned a minute later, clad in her bra and panties, her coat slung over her arm. "What is the matter with you? Why do you want to pick a fight?"

When he didn't answer, she dropped her coat and slithered up the bed, crawling on her hands and knees until she covered him. Straddling him, she picked up his hands and placed them on her hips. Slowly she moved against him. "Is this the only way we can get along?"

He tugged at her hair until her lips were an inch from his. "Make love, not war," she murmured as he gently kissed her.

He proceeded to do just that: caressing her weary body, whispering endearments against the soft skin of her neck. His deep, drugging kisses put her in a stupor. For the next hour, he made love to her with an aching tenderness, caressing her until her soft sighs became breathless pants.

Sabrina felt adored as he held her, stroking and kissing her to sweet abandon. She saw the sun's glow reflected in his eyes and moaned his name softly, before his mouth covered hers again. She wanted this, and more. Maybe this wild sexual attraction could be love, she briefly wondered, then his body covered her and he entered her slowly, deliberately. His steady, measured strokes set the rhythm and, despite her attempts to quicken the pace, he controlled their lovemaking. Tension building steadily, she urged him deeper and yet deeper insider her.

Sabrina clung to him, begging for release, covering his neck and chest with frantic kisses, but he refused her pleas to accelerate. Her climax came in a quaking rush, tearing through her with might that forced his release.

He feels it too, she thought, as they floated to earth, their mouths fused, their trembling arms wrapped around each other. *Will he tell me?* She wondered.

* * *

With supreme effort, Sabrina opened her eyes. Jay's alarm clock buzzed insistently. She pulled a pillow over her head as he reached for the off button. She felt the bed sag as he sat up, heard his feet thump against the floor.

She lifted the pillow. "Lover boy ..." she began in a soft, wheedling voice.

Jay looked at her amused. "Yes?"

"Will you get my bag of clothes?"

"Where is it?"

She stretched luxuriously. "Ummm. It's in my car," she said, exhaling deeply. She licked her swollen lips then burrowed into his pillow and closed her eyes.

She reminded Jay of a contented cat and he stroked her rounded bottom. She sighed again and mumbled something unintelligible.

"What?" he asked, leaning in.

"*Sabes que eu te amo*," she whispered, her eyes closed, her breathing deep. She was on the verge of sleep.

"I don't understand. What did you say?"

When Sabrina didn't answer, Jay shrugged and pulled on a pair of jeans. He went into the great room, making coffee at the kitchenette. Lifting one of his sail curtains, he saw Sabrina's massive Cadillac parked on the street next to the boatyard's padlocked front gate.

As the coffee brewed, Jay padded down the steps to the boatyard. He hadn't bothered with shoes, and the dew was cold against his bare feet. When he reached the Cadillac, he saw that she had left it unlocked, but she also had left the keys in ignition. Just in case she needed a quick getaway, he mused. On the passenger seat was her purse and a small bag he imagined contained clothes. He slid in, turned the key, and the massive engine purred to life. Shifting it into drive, he steered the car down to the alley, to the back of the boatyard where his own pickup truck rested. He parked it, collected her bags and exited the car, tucking her car keys in his jeans pocket.

As he made his way to the stairs, he heard tires crunching on gravel. Brett maneuvered his truck into the empty space beside Sabrina's car. Catching sight of Jay, he wolf whistled through the open window.

Jay grinned, barefoot and bare-chested on the stairs, and lifted Sabrina's purse and bag as way of explanation.

Brett nodded. "Guess you're going to be late again," he joked. "Man; must be nice to be the boss." He chuckled, watching Jay bound up the steps.

Back upstairs, Jay deposited Sabrina's purse and bag at the foot of the bed. He took a cup of steaming coffee into the shower with him, and in fifteen minutes was dressed and ready for work.

He knelt at the bed and stroked Sabrina's glossy hair.

"Wake up, honey," he urged.

Sabrina stirred, opening her eyes. Confused at first, when she recognized him, they softened.

Jay's heart sped up and he caught his breath at her serene beauty. "I brought your bag up. I have to go to work. You stay this time. Understand?"

She nodded, blinking slowly. As she stretched and yawned, the sheet slid to her waist. Her breasts mounded as she raised her arms over head. She brought her arms down around his neck and pulled him to her lips. With her hands stroking the back of his neck, she gazed into his face trustingly.

"Oh, baby, you're wicked," he moaned. He buried his face in the hollow of her neck, inhaling her scent, muted by and mingled with his own. With superhuman effort, he lifted his head.

"I've got to go. Please let me go," he implored, clenching his jaw.

Sabrina luxuriated in her power for a few seconds, and then let her arms drop. She wiggled deeper into his pillows, her lips curving into a satisfied, mysterious smile. She listened as Jay moved through the apartment, pulling on his work boots, gathering his wallet and keys, and then closing the door softly. She heard his muffled footsteps as he raced down the stairs.

* * *

When she opened her eyes again, the clock read 10:20. She heard machines buzzing in the distance and the occasional clang as a tool dropped. A radio played loud rock 'n' roll. Jay was at work in the boatyard below.

She saw her overnight bag and purse at the foot of the bed and decided she needed a shower. She took her time, first exploring the small cabinets and closets in the bathroom. *Even this room looks like a sailboat*, she thought, peeking behind the teak doors and noting the sparse contents. She opened her bag and withdrew her toiletries.

Thank goodness I brought my toothbrush, she thought, squeezing the tube of paste. Her bathroom ritual took considerable more time than Jay's, and by 11:30 she was showered, her hair dried and styled. She had to make do with wrinkled clothes. She couldn't find an iron anywhere. How can some people not own one? All of her life she had fastidiously ironed her clothes before wearing them. She hung her jeans and shirt over the shower bar and ran the hot water, hoping to steam some of the wrinkles free.

Once dressed, she realized she was famished. She poked in the cabinets in the kitchenette. The coffee was cold, and there was no creamer. The refrigerator was nearly empty, also.

"How does this man survive?" she spoke aloud.

Sabrina decided to head for the coffee shop where she'd lunched her first day in town. She couldn't find her car keys, though. She frowned, trying to recall where she had left them.

She stuffed her clothes and toiletries in her bag and walked barefoot down the stairs. She saw he moved her car, so she opened the driver's door. Tossing her bags on the seat, she looked in the ignition, under the floor mat, even the visor.

"Looking for these?"

She jumped, bumping her head on the liner. "Ouch," she said, rubbing her forehead and turning slowly. Jay leaned against the fender, her keys in his outstretched hand. She slid out of the car and when she reached for her keys, he tucked them in the front pocket of his jeans.

"Thought I told you to stay put," he said.

Sabrina rolled her eyes. "Maybe if you had some food, a girl would stick around." She sidled up to him, wrapping her arms around his waist, lifting her head to nuzzle his chin. "I'll be back," she murmured. "I'm starved." She wiggled her fingers into his pocket and withdrew her keys.

"Besides," she said as she slid in the car, "I need you. You've got my boat."

Jay leaned in before she could close the door. "Is that why you need me?"

Sabrina grinned. "You want me to stroke your ego?"

"Among other things," he said.

She whispered in his ear and kissed him goodbye, but since Jay didn't speak Portuguese, he couldn't know that she described, in explicit detail, what she needed.

"I hope that was a compliment," he said.

"Oh, it was, *me amo*."

He grimaced as she fought the wheel of the large car, and drove inexpertly down the alley and into the on-coming, honking traffic.

"City girls."

Back in the shop, Brett was putting a tarp over a wooden hull he had been sanding.

"Hey, you took Spanish in high school, didn't you?"

"That was a long time ago, bud."

"What does '*me amo*' mean?"

"Run like hell," Brett replied.

* * *

Jay and Brett usually worked in companionable silence. Each had various projects going at the same time. They staggered chores, varnishing teak, then repairing engines while the woodwork dried.

Jay ignored the Zephyrus, installing an autopilot on a new sloop.

At one o'clock, Brett turned off the radio. "Lunch time. Maude's?"

"Sure," Jay said, wiping his hands on a rag. He shoved the red flannel into his back pocket. "Why don't you head over? I'll be along shortly."

"Sure. Want me to order you anything?"

"Yeah, I'll take a hoagie, no onions."

After Brett left, Jay walked over to the Zephyrus. He touched the crack he made in the gel coat the day before. He ran his hand along the hull, stroking the swollen belly above the waterline. He closed his eyes and tried to imagine how Derek West must have felt when the finished boat came out of the shop. Did he feel pride in his workmanship?

As a student, he had studied naval design, including the Zephyrus. Now, he looked beyond the dull finish, the pitted propeller, the broken keel, and chipped rudder. He closed his eyes and leaned against the boat, waiting for it to speak to him, a silent communion.

In his mind's eye, he could see her as she once had been, with foamy waves splashing against the gleaming white hull as she slid across the deep blue Massachusetts Bay. The sleek double-ender sailboat with its salty cabin and proud bow designed by Don Windham and built by Derek West had been a classic beauty. She would be again, he vowed.

* * *

Later that afternoon, sitting cross-legged on her hotel bed, Sabrina called Rose.

"Well, Grandmother, you're not going to believe this, but I've met someone, and I know it's crazy, but I think it could be serious."

"Why wouldn't I believe it? I fell in love in an afternoon. Maybe crazy runs in the family."

"It must. His name is Jay West."

Sabrina heard a gasp on the end of the line. Seconds passed in silence.

"Grandmother, are you there?"

"Jay West? As in the West family?"

"Yes; he's the son of Margaret West. Not only that, he owns the boatyard where I have the Zephyrus."

"What?"

"I met him my first night in town, but I didn't know who he was. Then, when I found out, it was too late."

"Too late? As in ..."

"Um hmmm."

"My goodness. Well, what next?"

"I'm not sure. I need to convince him to restore the boat."

"I thought you said they picked up the boat. Didn't you give him a deposit?"

“Actually, I gave the deposit to his assistant manager, Brett Story. He's the one I talked to on the telephone, and he picked up the boat. I had no idea Jay was involved until after the boat was delivered. Brett told me that Jay was furious when he saw the Zephyrus. He wanted to destroy it when he saw it.”

“Why would he want to do that?”

“Brett told me that Jay's mother was an alcoholic and took drugs, and that she died of an overdose when he was twelve.”

“How tragic!”

“He went to live with his grandmother, who apparently had gone off the deep end. She poisoned him with stories of the Windhams, and how we ruined her life. He left home for a while, went to college in Maine and studied naval architecture. When he returned, he started the boatyard.”

“Sabrina, do you believe in destiny?”

“I'm beginning to.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Jay finished his sandwich, wadded his napkin and tossed it in the empty basket. “I needed that.”

Brett spooned mashed potatoes and gravy into his mouth and groaned. “Ahh man, why can't Shawna cook like this? What's so hard about meatloaf?”

Jay shrugged. “Can't have it all, I guess.”

Brett saw his opening. “Worked it out yet?”

“What?” Jay finished his root beer, stalling.

“You know damn well, 'what.' Are you going to work on the Zephyrus?”

Jay nodded. “Whatever she wants.”

“Well, that was easy. Sounds like you got it bad,” Brett teased. “What did she say to change your mind?”

“Nothing. I'm not going to talk about her. You keep your fat mouth shut, too.”

Brett raised his hands in surrender. “What'd I say?”

“Don't tell me you didn't spill your guts yesterday.”

“You should be thanking me; you finally got a love life.”

Jay shook his head resignedly. “I don't need help.”

“What about Faye?” Brett prodded.

“What about her?”

“What are you going to do when she meets Sabrina.”

“That won't happen.”

“Are you kidding?”

“She's not going near her,” Jay bristled. “She's not going to ruin this.”

* * *

Faye West clumped through her kitchen, still dressed in her bathrobe and slippers. It was after two o'clock and she had just watched a “shock” talk show episode titled “Are You My Baby's Daddy?” It featured a young, overweight woman, her infant, and three men, similarly dressed in oversized T-shirts, baggy pants with crotches that hung down to their knees, and baseball caps turned sideways. The men had submitted to DNA testing and, surprise, surprise, none of them were the “baby's daddy.”

“Slut,” Faye grumbled, lighting a cigarette and then opening the refrigerator. She looked inside for the seventh time that afternoon, not hungry because of

nicotine and caffeine, but knowing she had to eat. Faye weighed about ninety pounds but she claimed she didn't have an eating disorder. She just wasn't interested in food. She wasn't interested in much of anything, actually.

Except Jay. She picked up the portable telephone and called the boatyard.

On the other end, Brett noted the caller ID and whistled to Jay. "It's your grandmother."

"Don't answer," Jay responded, then went back to spraying primer on the bottom of a boat. "I've got to finish this coat or I'll have to start all over."

Over the compressor, Jay heard Faye leave a long and rambling message, although he couldn't make out the words. He realized, guiltily, that he generally had dinner with Faye once a week and missed it last night. One thought diverged to another and he recalled how he spent last night.

Faye slammed the telephone back onto its base and walked to the kitchen window. She still lived in the same house Derek West built for them on the Warren River, although it was beginning to look rundown compared to her neighbors' homes. She didn't want to think about it, didn't want to think about the fact that the yard needed mowing or that the gutters were full of leaves. When Jay lived with her, he kept the house maintained. Now, with the boatyard and his own place, he barely had time for his grandmother anymore, she thought.

She called back and once again, the men ignored her telephone call. "I need you to come and take care of the lawn," she told the answering machine, "and look at the garage door, too. Something's not right. Stupid remote doesn't work anymore."

Faye suffered from depression and never sought help. Instead, after the betrayal and death of her husband, and the subsequent addiction and death of her daughter, Faye retreated into a familiar world of bitterness.

Jealousy consumed her as a young wife and she detested the bright and beautiful Rose Windham. Fair haired, blue eyed, educated and wealthy, Rose was everything Faye wasn't. She even had a roly-poly son who gurgled and bounced on his daddy's shoulders, while Faye delivered a premature, sickly and demanding daughter. Faye thought Derek was disappointed; he wanted his first born to be a son. Derek looked up to Don Windham and wanted everything his older friend had.

That included Rose Windham, and it cost him his life.

In reality, Margaret was a beautiful little girl and Derek had been thrilled with his small family, but the insecure Faye imagined intrigue and unhappiness where none existed. And when it did exist, after more than ten years of accusations, Faye's bitter anguish became vindication.

She detested Rose Windham still, blaming her for Derek's death and for Margaret's. If the young girl had a father around, she would not have turned to drugs and alcohol, Faye reasoned. The girl wouldn't have gotten pregnant at the age of seventeen, would have finished high school and made something of herself.

Faye gazed despondently out her kitchen window and waited for the telephone to ring. Waited for the only person in the world she loved, and the only person who loved her, to call. She stood in the kitchen unmoving for more than an hour until the telephone rang. She smiled skeletally.

* * *

Later that afternoon, Jay took a break and went upstairs to his apartment. Sabrina hadn't come back, and he wanted to see if she'd left anything behind, a sign she may return.

The apartment was silent and empty, shadowy. Sabrina straightened the bed before she left and her scent lingered in the bathroom. Jay stood in the bedroom for several minutes, his eyes closed as he savored the memory of Sabrina's goodbye kiss.

Unbidden, his thoughts turned to Faye and he flinched. He returned her call and agreed to have dinner with her the following evening. He also promised to stop by on Saturday, mow the lawn, and check her air conditioner. Normally, he didn't mind Faye's demands, but now that Sabrina had materialized, he resented having to choose. He also didn't look forward to keeping the two women apart.

His apartment phone rang and he checked the caller ID before picking up the receiver.

"Yeah, Brett?"

"Hey, Sabrina is on line one. She's at the grocery store and doesn't remember how to get back here. You want I should tell her to take a hike?"

"Nah, I'll talk to her. Put her through."

He waited as Brett cycled the telephone system and soon he heard her breathy voice. "Hello, Jay?"

"Hey. I hear you're lost again," he teased.

Sabrina shifted her cell phone to her shoulder and reached into her purse for the Cadillac keys. "Not really; I know where I am. I'm not sure where you are, though. I was wondering if you'd like to have dinner this evening, maybe someplace a bit more intimate than Maude's."

"Where were you thinking?"

"Well, what do you suggest?" She unlocked the trunk of the car and placed shopping bags into the trunk.

Jay played the game. "Why don't you come here and we'll have dinner at my place?"

Sabrina slid behind the wheel and started the Cadillac's engine. "That could be arranged if you like steak with red wine, salad, bisque soup and ice cream for dessert. Where do you live?"

Jay gave her directions and, as soon as he was convinced Sabrina was on the right track, he hung up and went downstairs to the boat shop.

"Well, old buddy, you've worked hard enough today," he said, slapping Brett on the back. "Take off. I'll see you tomorrow."

Brett shook his head. "I can't go home now. Shawna will think I've been fired."

"Go fishing, then."

Jay walked through the shop, turning off lights and cutting switches to the table saw and other heavy equipment.

"All right," Brett conceded. "I'm going. You know, I could close up the shop if you want to take off."

Jay shook his head and pointedly opened the front door. "No thanks."

He went to the street entrance and slid the large, chain-link gate closed, securing it with a padlock. He set the burglar alarm, and went to his loft apartment, taking the stairs two at a time. Inside, he quickly stripped and jumped into the shower. He was lathering his hair when he heard the apartment door bang open, followed by a few more thumps. He was rinsing the shampoo when the shower door slid open and a frisky hand slid up his belly.

"Hey!" he yelped.

Sabrina's face appeared in the opening, mischievously smiling, a dimple in her soft, round cheek. "You could have helped me with the groceries, you know," she chided as she pulled off her shirt. Her shoes and pants followed and within seconds she was standing in the shower between Jay and the spray, still clad in her underwear. She picked up the bar of soap and rubbed it on his chest.

Jay kissed her gently, his hands resting on her hips. "Thought I'd be finished by the time you got back."

"And deny me all this fun?"

"What about the ice cream?"

"I put it in the freezer. The rest can wait," she said, her bold hands sliding lower. "Mmmmm. You missed me."

"It's that obvious, huh?" Jay chuckled and slid her bra straps down her shoulders, planting kisses along the tops of her round, wet breasts. He swiveled her so she was out of the spray then sank to his knees, his arms wrapped around her hips. His hot mouth seared her skin as he tongued her belly and thighs. He pulled her panties down to her ankles and, as she stepped out of them, he pressed his mouth against her. With her hands trembling in his wet hair, Sabrina swooned and leaned against the tile wall. He held her tight, cupping her bottom as he lick and bit and plunged his tongue into her velvet softness. He relished her taste, reveled in the feel of her as she hardened against his mouth.

Sabrina slung one leg over his shoulder pulled him closer with her fisted hands. His fingers were free to roam her wet body and caress her breasts. When he

tweaked her nipples, Sabrina whimpered and ground against his mouth. Soon she was panting and begging for release.

"Let go, sweetheart," he whispered.

Sabrina moaned and erupted, pushing him away as she sank slowly from heaven. The only thing holding her up was her leg, wrapped around Jay's neck. She thought she would be mortified as she looked down into his grinning face, but instead she giggled.

"You're crazy, you know that?" She caressed his face, her fingers sliding through his short beard and mustache. "And, don't ever get rid of this," she commanded.

* * *

It was dark by the time they emerged from Jay's bedroom, groggy and relaxed from their tantric lovemaking. He considered falling asleep but when Sabrina whispered in his ear that she was hungry, he followed her into the kitchen.

Dressed in one of his shirts, the sleeves rolled up and the buttons off center, she opened the refrigerator and pulled out the grocery bags.

Jay sat on a barstool and spooned ice cream into his mouth while Sabrina broiled steaks and concocted a salad. The soup was ready made, so she popped it in the microwave.

"You're pretty quick, aren't you?" he noted.

"When you live alone, you get efficient. This is one of my favorite meals, so I've streamlined the process. See, while I broil the steaks for six minutes on each side, I pour salad from a bag, sprinkle on the blue cheese crumbles and chopped walnuts, then slice the pear and, voila, all it needs is salad dressing. Dang; I forgot to buy dressing." She rummaged through his refrigerator. "Do you have any dressing?"

Jay nodded, his mouth full of chocolate ice cream. Sabrina, of course, couldn't hear anything except a mumbled reply so she scavenged the refrigerator door until she found a nearly empty bottle.

"Goody; it's Italian. My favorite," she said and dumped the contents into the salad bowl.

Seven minutes later, sizzling steaks were placed on plates and glasses filled with red wine. With a flourish, Sabrina plunked two bowls of steaming red pepper bisque on the counter beside the salad and tore chunks off a fresh loaf of Italian bread.

Jay reached for a knife and fork then paused while Sabrina bowed her head and moved her lips silently.

"Are you okay? What are you doing?"

She looked up and laughed. "Saying grace, silly. Don't you pray?"

Jay scratched his head in jest, slightly unnerved. "No, not really."

“Well, I’m a good Catholic girl, so I pray all the time. Hopefully, it will make up for the premarital sex and birth control,” she quipped.

Jay’s mouth dropped open and he was speechless.

Sabrina laughed again and shoved his shoulder. “Eat your dinner, Jay. I’ll pray for you, too.”

* * *

Later that night, back in the king-sized bed, Sabrina spooned against Jay’s back and stroked his hair. “Jay?” she whispered. “Are you awake?”

He didn’t reply and by the rhythmic rise and fall of his shoulders, she could tell he slept deeply. Confident he couldn’t hear her, but needing to say something about how she felt, Sabrina murmured in the dark. Nervous and shy, she spoke in her mother’s language, Portuguese, so even if Jay had been awake he wouldn’t have understood. In a soothing, soft voice she told his sleeping back what she couldn’t say to his face.

She held her breath when he stirred and rolled over. He tossed an arm across her hips and tucked his head to her breasts. His breath stirred against her chilled skin and she shivered. It was easy to imagine being in his arms forever, wanting to belong to him, wanting a family. She closed her eyes and pictured a baby with chestnut curls and blue eyes and her heart ached.

It also frightened her, this intense yearning for someone she barely knew. Yet, she acknowledged, she did know him. What she felt for him, and what he certainly must feel for her, seemed light years from the crush she had on Robert Hall, or the relationship with Jeremy Rice, her former fiancé.

But what if he doesn’t want me? What if he doesn’t feel the way I do? What if he’s not in love with me?

Sabrina stifled the urge to wake Jay, to prod him to make love to her again because she knew the need was born of fear and desperation. Intellectually, she knew that sex couldn’t be the only bond between them. She willed herself to relax, to breathe and to stop worrying. Soon she slept, not waking until Jay’s alarm clock buzzed.

CHAPTER SIX

The following morning, Jay and Sabrina sat at the bar and drank coffee. Jay had scrambled eggs and toasted bagels, but she was too nervous to eat. “I have to leave tomorrow. I have to see my grandmother,” Sabrina said, twisting her long, dark hair into a knot at the back of her head. “I should be there.”

Jay sipped his coffee. “I thought you said she was in the hospital.”

“She is,” Sabrina replied, picking up her own coffee cup. “But I still need to be there. I’m the only family she has.”

“What about your parents?”

“They’re still in Tibet. They won’t return for another two weeks. Besides, they don’t count.” She slammed her cup on the counter.

“What do you mean, ‘they don’t count’?”

“They’re not close to Grandmother Rose. They never have been. My father went to boarding schools and then went to college out of state.”

“Like you did,” he observed, sipping coffee.

“Yes, but it was different with me. I spent my summers with Grandmother Rose. Honestly, if you think about it, I’ve probably spent more time with her than with mom and dad.”

“You’re not close to your parents?”

“It’s their choice, not mine,” she said defensively. “Sometimes I think they would have preferred a dog. A pet they could keep in a kennel.”

Jay put his cup on the mahogany counter and wrapped his arms around Sabrina. “Hey, it’s all right, honey,” he said, kissing her tenderly. “Don’t cry.”

“I’m not,” she said, sniffing. “It just makes me mad, that’s all. If I ever have a child, I’m never leaving it behind.” She swayed into his embrace, her eyes fiercely closed.

He rocked her gently, waiting for her tears to subside. When she sniffed and started to pull away, Jay took her hands in his. “Would you like me to go with you?”

Sabrina recoiled. “You? Go to Pennsylvania with me? You want to meet Grandmother?”

“Well, not if you don’t want me to,” he said, reading her body language.

“No, it’s not that. I just thought that, well, that you...” her voice became a whisper. “...wouldn’t want to meet my family.”

She lifted nervous eyes to his and pleaded silently.

"I'll do whatever you want me to do, Sabrina. Whatever will make you happy," he said.

"Say that again," she commanded.

"Whatever you want," he replied, cupping her head and sliding his hand through her hair, loosening her ponytail. He caught her trembling bottom lip between his own and rubbed it gently. "If it makes you happy," he murmured against her open mouth, his tongue teasing hers.

Sabrina's heart thumped heavily, tears beaded her lashes and slid down her cheeks. Jay tasted the salt and groaned. "Why are you still crying?"

"Because I'm happy."

* * *

"You sure you can trust me with the shop for three days? Yesterday, you couldn't even rely on me to close it," Brett teased.

"Don't be a wiseass. I trust you. I just didn't want you around. Besides, we're not open on Sunday, so it's only two days."

"What about Faye? Weren't you going to have dinner there tonight?" Brett reminded.

Jay flinched. "Ah crap. I'm going to have to cancel. Listen, the lawn needs mowing. Think you can do that on Saturday?"

"No, but I can do it on Sunday. The in-laws are coming by and that's a good time to cut loose."

"Thanks. I appreciate it. I guess I'd better call her."

Jay retreated into his small, private office with the portable telephone and called Faye. She picked up on the first ring.

"Grandma, it's me, Jay."

"I know. I got the caller I.D."

"Look, I've got to go out of town for a couple of days. I can't come to dinner tonight. Also, Brett is going to come by on Sunday to mow your lawn, so don't worry about that."

"Where you going?" Faye demanded.

"Client of mine needs to consult about a project," Jay said, not quite lying. Sabrina was a client, he reasoned.

"Well, when you going to be back?"

"Monday, probably late," he added, realizing she could still finagle dinner with him.

"Harrumph." Faye hated to be frustrated and had a sneaking suspicion that Jay was avoiding her. "Call me when you get back now, you hear?"

"Yes, Grandma," he said, his mild tone calming Faye's mounting anxiety. "Get some rest. I'll see you in a few days."

He hung up and telephone and shuddered. He detested lying to Faye, but the woman was clinging and often unreasonable. Still, he was all the family she had and Jay felt responsible not only for her well-being, but for her happiness. He knew that the only thing that made her happy was his presence at her table, or working on some project in her small, decrepit house.

She liked to imagine that he was still a teen and living at home. She blithely ignored the fact he'd run away from her and home as a teen, living on his own for more than fifteen years.

Jay slung his duffle bag across his shoulder and headed for the shop door. "Thanks, Brett. I appreciate this," he said.

"No problem, brother."

"All right, then. You've got my cell phone number, so call me if you need me. Mr. Corder will be by later this afternoon with his trailer to pick up the 30-footer. The invoice is on the board in the office."

"Got it, Chief. Have a good time."

"What else?" Jay murmured, looking around his shop. The two men, friends for years, worked with precision and both kept the small boatyard immaculate. They generally worked ahead on each project, so there weren't many loose ends.

Brett threw a shop rag at Jay. "Would you get out of here? It's under control."

Jay saluted his assistant manager and left the shop, striding through the boatyard and to the street. Sabrina leaned against the blue Cadillac twisting the car keys in nervous fingers. Jay bent and kissed her gently on the mouth, wrapping a large, warm hand around her anxious fingers.

"Want me to drive?"

"Oh, yes, would you? I'm not very experienced, and I've decided I hate Connecticut's traffic more than New York's," she said, handing him the keys. He opened the passenger door and she slid in with a sigh of relief.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sabrina didn't want to alarm Rose, so she didn't tell her that Jay came to Pennsylvania, too. He whistled as he drove down the shady street lined with Victorian mansions. "Pretty town," he observed. "Nice houses."

"Eaton was a wealthy town in the 1800s," Sabrina explained. "Many of the coal barons lived in these mansions, competing with each other to see who could build the fanciest house. Most of these homes were designed by the same architect."

Jay grinned. "You sound like a tour guide."

"I like history. On my twelfth birthday, Grandmother sent me the official county history. It was written in 1894, so it's not exactly current."

She guided him to the alley and he parked in the garage. They walked to the front of the home so Jay could see Rose Windham's house from the street. Sabrina glowed as he admired the professionally painted gingerbread trim and the white wicker furniture on the expansive front porch. The gardener updated the landscape for the summer, placing lush ferns along the balustrade. A hammock slung on a metal stand and a swing swung on the porch. Floral pillows graced the furniture.

Jay inwardly flinched. He couldn't prevent himself from comparing the wealth, beauty and ease that Rose Windham enjoyed while his own grandmother, Faye West, moped in a small, one-story tract house with faded vinyl siding, a broken garage door and an air conditioner that worked sporadically. He silently vowed to visit Faye on his return and tend to the chores he'd neglected.

Sabrina unlocked the front door and punched a code into the alarm system. The panel flashed green and she closed the door behind them. The house was hushed and gloomy. Sabrina walked through the first-floor rooms and lifted shades, opened curtains and let the sunshine pour into the stylish interior. Jay said nothing, his mouth grim as he followed Sabrina. He was careful not to touch any of the precious vases or statues, and wondered how someone could live in a house full of elegant antique furniture.

"She likes roses, doesn't she?"

"It's a theme," Sabrina explained. "All of the Victorian mansions along this street are part of the historic preservation plan for the town and are open twice a year for the historic homes tour. They do it once in November, with houses decorated for the holidays, and again in the summer, when the gardens are in bloom. This house has an English country garden and a rose-themed interior. The house next door is a Tudor style with heavy, dark British furniture. It belongs to

Dr. Finkelstein, who teaches English at the college, so his theme is Shakespeare. It has a large corner lot, so the community theater stages Shakespeare in the Park plays during the summer.”

Sabrina continued, “Across the street is Alfredo Dante's house and it has an Italian design. See, each house is different and decorated along a theme that is unique to the owner.”

Jay nodded. “Sounds nice,” he said. “But why are you nervous?”

“I'm not. Really, I'm fine. Let's go upstairs. I'll show you my room.”

“That's what I've been waiting for,” he joked and picked up their bags. He kept his eyes on her rear as she mounted the steps. When she opened the door to her bedroom, he squinted.

“It's yellow,” was all he could say, overwhelmed by the femininity. He dropped the bags and turned his back to the bed. “Come here,” he murmured, pulling Sabrina into his arms and pulling her on top of him as he collapsed on the bed. He rubbed his hands on her rounded bottom, clutching her to him. He groaned in pleasure and his mouth sought the opening of her shirt.

Sabrina planted her hands on his shoulders and sinuously squirmed against his pliant body. “You're the first boy I've ever snuck into my bedroom,” she whispered.

“Ever?” he mumbled against her shirt, pulling buttons loose with his teeth. He refused to let go of her bottom, gently maneuvering her against his aching groin. His tongue snaked beneath her bra and laved a hardened nipple. Sabrina hissed appreciatively.

“You shouldn't tease me,” she said, rising to sit astride him. He watched interestedly as she slowly unbuttoned her shirt and removed it. She reached behind and unsnapped her bra, let it slide down her arms, then tossed it into a corner. Jay sighed deeply, admiring her honey-hued breasts crowned with cinnamon. Sabrina leaned over him, her hands beside his ears, and let one breast swing close to his lips. He lifted his head, opened his mouth and encircled her nipple. His hands slid up her belly and reached for the snap at the waistband of her jeans.

She flipped her dark, soft hair to one side, an ebony waterfall that flowed onto Jay's shoulder. She supported herself with one hand and used the other to reach between them and unbutton Jay's jeans. Soon, she freed him from his boxers and encircled him with eager fingers. She stroked him, sliding her hand up and down until he felt like steel.

Meanwhile, Jay's fingers were on their own quest, pushing her jeans down her hips and pushing aside the wisp of fabric between her thighs. She was wet and warm against his palm. Sabrina's hips began a rhythmic surrender. With their jeans pushed to their ankles, they arched towards each other until velvet enclosed steel. Raising his hips, he entered effortlessly and their bodies sealed.

Sabrina's knees clasped his hips, her hands splayed on his chest. Jay supported her with one hand on the small of her back while the other stroked her belly and breasts. His fingers traced back to the dark triangle between their sweating bodies and he caressed her. Sabrina frantically increased her pace, sliding up and down and squeezing until Jay gasped and went rigid. She nearly screamed her pleasure, biting her lip at the last moment and groaning instead.

Slowly she sank, her flushed cheek resting against Jay's chest, still covered with his black T-shirt. The absurdity of their loving struggle, the fact that they refused to take the time to undress, made her giggle.

"I amuse you?" Jay murmured against her hair, stroking her naked back.

"Yes, you do," Sabrina said. "We're crazy, don't you think?"

"Probably. It would explain how I ended up in a yellow frilly bedroom with my pants around my ankles with a woman I've only known a week."

Sabrina giggled again and struggled to sit up. Instead, she rolled over and straightened her clothes. While she reached for her discarded bra and shirt, Jay recovered his jeans and snapped them easily. "Wait," he said, pulling her towards him. "Don't get dressed yet."

Sabrina paused, her shirt and bra in one hand, her other securely in Jay's palm. He settled her between his knees and rubbed his face on her belly. She dropped her clothing and wrapped her arms around him tenderly.

"Is something wrong?" she asked, resting her cheek on the top of his head.

"No, honey, everything's just right," he said, nuzzling her heavy breasts. "This is nice and you smell great. You're so beautiful; I can't keep my hands off of you."

"That's good. I want your hands on me," she whispered, closing her eyes as he sucked tenderly on one breast, then the other, rolling her firm nipples between his lips. "And your mouth," she added.

"You like it when I touch you, don't you?" he gently teased.

"I love it." Her passionate response startled him at first, then he felt a rush of possession.

Sabrina cupped his face and lifted it to meet her lips. She kissed him deeply, pouring her heart into the gesture. "But you'd better let me get dressed, or else..."

"I think 'or else' is a better idea. I could use a nap about now; couldn't you?" he bent over and untied her shoes and tugged them off, and then unsnapped her jeans again and slid them down her hips. "I think a nap is exactly what you need," he affirmed.

When he had her naked, he pulled her lush body against his and stretched out on her bed. "What about your clothes?" Sabrina asked.

"I'm fine," he said, yawning. He closed his eyes and explored her bare skin. Sabrina felt erotic and wicked, lying atop the bed nude, her skin tingling at the touch of his lightly callused hands and clothing. His T-shirt was soft to the touch, his jeans worn smooth.

"Quit wiggling and go to sleep," he said, a teasing smile tugging at his mouth.

"I can't," she confessed. "You're doing this on purpose."

"Doing what?" he murmured, his eyes closed.

"You know very well what," she said and tucked his hand between her thighs. She pushed against his palm and sighed rapturously when his fingers began their feathering tempo.

She wiggled up his body until his face was buried between her breasts and rubbed sinuously. "Kiss me," she demanded, her hand cupping the back of his neck.

Jay complied, kissing and suckling one breast then the other, gently tugging and biting her engorged nipples while his fingers stroked Sabrina into submission. The slow and sensuous caress drove her to the brink and over, and she hugged him tightly.

"Okay," she conceded, fluttering to earth. "I'll take that nap now."

* * *

A couple of hours later, Sabrina poked around in the kitchen while Jay took a shower. He came downstairs, his uncombed hair wet and shining. He tucked a clean shirt into his jeans, then raked his unruly hair.

"That's it? You're good to go?" Sabrina marveled. "Why is it that men can take a five minute shower, wear old, wrinkled clothes and look like a hunk? Women spend at least an hour getting ready and we still don't like the way we look."

Jay shrugged.

She slammed the cabinet door. "Well, there's nothing to eat except six cans of chicken noodle soup. That does it. I'm going to take a bath while you call for pizza."

She headed up the stairs, and called over her shoulder. "Would you check the wine cellar and pick out a bottle of red? Order extra cheese and pepperoni, too." As an afterthought, she added, "Please."

"I thought you wanted to get to the hospital," he stalled.

"I do, but visiting hours are from six to eight. We've got at least an hour," she replied from the landing. "The telephone number is on the speed dial. Just punch 'memory six.'"

The disembodied voice on the end of the line put Jay on hold for several minutes, then came back, repeated the order and told him it would be at least twenty minutes.

After he hung up the telephone, Jay searched for the basement door, finding it at the end of the hall. The staircase was steep and the walls musty and draped with cobwebs. He found a furnace, some rusty garden tools and a box of mildewed

newspapers. No wine cellar. He hiked up the stairs to Sabrina's second-floor private bath, opened the door and perched on the side of the old claw foot tub.

"Okay, I give. Where's the wine cellar," he asked.

"It's in the kitchen pantry. Grandmother had a temperature-controlled unit installed in the kitchen years ago. Where did you think it was?" Sabrina relaxed in the deep water filled with fragrant bubbles. She dimpled. "Oh, you went into the basement, didn't you? Ewww; there are spiders down there."

She reached up and stroked his head. "You have cobwebs in your hair," she said, shaking her fingers trying to rid them of the sticky threads.

Jay contemplated pulling off his clothes and climbing into the oversized tub for his second bath of the day, but the doorbell rang. Sabrina brightened and stood, water cascading down her body. "Pizza!"

She tugged a soft towel from a nearby bar and wrapped it around her torso, tucking the corner over her left breast. She shoved at Jay, immobile on the side of the tub. "Quit staring and go get the pizza," she bossed. "I'll be right down."

Jay sighed then stomped down the stairs. He yanked open the door as the impatient delivery boy's finger hovered at the bell. Pulling out his wallet, he said, "How much?"

"Sixteen-fifty," the teen said as he leaned to the right, looking around Jay and at the beautiful young woman skipping down the steps in panties and a T-shirt. Jay glanced over his shoulder, then shoved a twenty into the kid's hand, grabbed the pizza box and slammed the door in his face.

Grinning, Sabrina tugged the box from his grip and headed down the hallway to the kitchen. She placed it on the table, then opened a cabinet and withdrew plates. Then she pulled a couple of wine glasses from a hanging rack. She nodded her head towards an oak door. "There's the wine cellar," she said. "What do you think? A shiraz? A zinfandel? Anything but merlot, please."

Jay flipped open the pizza box and watched as steam rose. "Couldn't tell you, sweetheart. I'm not a wine connoisseur."

She opened the wide, nickel-plated refrigerator. "How about a beer? We have lager or ale."

Folding a slice of pizza and lifting it to his mouth, he paused long enough to say, "Lager," then bit off half.

"Save some for me, piggy," Sabrina said, sliding into a kitchen chair. She twisted the caps off of two lagers and handed him one. Then she watched apprehensively as he lifted the bottle and chugged. "What's with you tonight?"

Jay set the bottle on the table and picked up his pizza again. "Nothing," he said. "I'm fine. Just not used to all this toff."

Once again Sabrina felt the stab of the haves versus the have-nots. "It doesn't really mean anything," she assured him.

"As I said before, money's never a problem for those who have it," Jay said nonchalantly.

"And I'm a 'poor little rich girl,' right?"

"Would I have ever met you if it weren't for your money?" he asked, his voice low and dangerous.

Sabrina's head whipped. "Absolutely not! And you mean, if it weren't for Rose's money, because I don't have much of my own. She wouldn't have met Don Windham, either, without the money. They never would have married and maybe he wouldn't have built a boat yard with your grandfather. My father and I would never have been born. Perhaps you never would have been born. Who knows what affect money has and who knows where it begins or ends?"

She climbed into his lap, forcing him to abandon his beer and pizza. Snuggling against his chest, her arms draped around his neck, she said, "But we can choose how we let it affect us. In the past few weeks, I've learned some ugly truths about people abusing each other in the name of love and money. Don Windham rejected Rose's fortune, forcing her to break with her father. His obsession and selfish determination drove her into another man's arms."

Jay stiffened at her words. "That other man was my grandfather. Maybe her selfishness and greed drove her husband away. Don't for a minute think it was some tragic love story."

Sabrina sighed. "No, you're right," she said, softly kissing his cheek. "She knows she was wrong and she lives with the guilt. Their blood is on her hands. I believe she suffers."

Jay looked around at the opulence and scoffed. "This isn't suffering." He pulled her arms from his neck, pushed her from his lap and stood. "Being betrayed and then widowed is suffering. Living as a crack whore is suffering. Watching your own mother kill herself with drugs and alcohol is suffering."

"You're right; you win. Your family suffered while mine enjoyed their luxurious lives. A guilt-ridden widow shunning family and friends, a lonely, confused little boy shuttled off to military school, and a burdensome daughter that nobody wanted. But all of that's okay because at least we could cry into silken pillows, right?"

She shoved from the table and wrapped her arms around her stomach. "Why are we arguing? Because I suggested wine for dinner? Do you see how crazy it is, that one small thing leads to another and it just gets blown out of proportion."

She approached his back, wrapping her arms around his waist, resting her cheek on his shoulder. "We don't have to let their craziness affect us. I've just found you. Let's enjoy this. Enjoy being together. Don't push me away."

He didn't want to, but he could feel Faye's venom in his veins, the poison closing down his heart. How could he be here, amid the elegance and refinement of Rose Windham's home when Faye's old house was practically falling to pieces, the air

conditioner a piece of junk, the lawn overgrown and full of weeds. And Faye, an anorexic, cigarette-puffing harridan, all because of a bored prep woman's whim. Seduce another woman's husband to make her own sit up and take notice.

As chaotic thoughts rushed through his mind, he felt Sabrina caressing his chest, tugging at his heart, as if her fingers could push through skin, through muscle and heal him. He turned in her embrace and clutched her, rocked her against him.

"I'm sorry," he whispered against her glossy head. "All my life, all I've ever heard is bitterness and hate for the Windhams. Not you. Rose Windham. Sometimes I think it's the only thing keeping Faye alive. Her bitterness."

Sabrina stroked his cheek and shed tears for the little orphaned boy who grew up with a twisted, angry grandmother. "You have to let the bitterness go," she whispered. "We have something special and I know it's too soon, but I can't help feel this way. I love you and I wouldn't want anything, or anyone, hurt you."

Her simple, heartfelt admission humbled him. He cupped her face and kissed her, a groan of defeat tearing his throat.

"I'm going to get dressed and go visit Rose," she whispered against his lips. "Do you want to go with me?"

He nodded, his forehead resting on her silken shoulder.

* * *

Jay stood in the doorway of the hospital room, watching as Sabrina knelt at the bedside. One hand clasped Rose's frail white fingers while the other gently smoothed the blanket, stroking the old woman as if she were a beloved pet. She ducked her head, glancing under her arm towards Jay. She murmured and nodded. Jay advanced slowly.

Rose's pale blue eyes lifted from her granddaughter to the giant towering over her bed. Tears filled then flowed down her sunken, wrinkled cheek. She lifted a wavering hand.

"You're so like him," she whispered. "You're so handsome."

Jay's eyes darted from Rose to Sabrina. He cocked an eyebrow at the word "handsome."

Rose continued, "So like her. Such a lovely girl, your mother." Her head lolled to the side sadly. "I'm sorry. Please forgive me. I took everything from you."

He didn't know how to answer so he stood silent, stoic. Sabrina reached for his hand and squeezed it.

"Rose, we're going back to Rhode Island on Monday. Jay runs a boat yard there. I'll be back mid-week. I won't be gone long," she promised.

Rose blinked, nodding her head once. "Yes, yes, go. Don't fret. I've got all these doctors and nurses hovering around. There's nothing to worry about."

Jay watched the gentle exchange between grandparent and grandchild and thought, *This is how it's supposed to be. No screaming and slapping. No drugs and alcohol.*

Sabrina thought she was unloved as a child but he could see it pouring from the old woman. A worshipful love for the only person in the tangled web not damaged by Rose's selfish, destructive past. It was hard to recall his hatred, his rage while looking at the fragile old woman, silently weeping as she caressed them with her strange pale eyes. Silently apologizing for the ruin she caused. He felt a lightness and couldn't help himself as he laid a reassuring hand on her arm. She reached over, trailing an I.V. tube, and patted his hand, smiling tremulously.

* * *

The next morning, Sabrina pulled out the boxes filled with old letters and journals and they lounged on the side porch for hours, reading about their grandparents' lives.

"Look at this photo of Don and Derek," Sabrina said, handing Jay a small black-and-white photo with scalloped edges. "You really do look like him."

Jay studied the photo. "I've never seen one before," he murmured.

Sabrina looked up from the box, curious. "You've never seen a photo of your grandfather?"

He shook his head. "No, Faye burned them all. There's nothing left."

Placing a hand on his knee, she said, "Well, I'll share my booty with you. Rose gave me permission to keep anything I want. And believe me, this is the last thing my father would want. He and Mom have each other and their Tibetan yaks, or whatever they ride over there."

Jay tucked the photo in his wallet. "Thanks."

He'd been quiet since they started the ransack, reading about the Windhams and the Wests through the perspective of the young, beautiful and wealthy Rose. He tapped a box. "Is this the last of it?"

Sabrina looked inside and saw a cache of letters tied in lavender ribbon. "Yes, this is the end. These letters are from the final year. There's a newspaper clipping of the fire" she said, halting as Jay stood and stretched.

"I'll look at it later," he said. "I'm getting restless. Let's take a walk."

"Sure," she said, rising gracefully. "Where would you like to go?"

"Anywhere. Just not here," he growled, looking around at flouncy pillows and vases. "Too stuffy, too many flowers."

She slipped into a pair of sneakers, put her wallet in her jean's pocket and fisted the car keys. "I know just the place," she said. "But we need to drive there."

* * *

Fifteen minutes later, she pulled onto a winding country road. "How far up this mountain are you going to go?" Jay asked.

"Not much further. Hold your horses."

They rounded a switchback in the road and she pulled onto a beaten patch. "You're going to like this," she promised, turning off the car but leaving the keys in the ignition.

"Don't you want to take those with you?" he asked.

"Nah, this is the country. People don't bother locking up here. Come on, follow me."

They walked a game trail between a low cliff and a stand of hemlocks until it opened to a glorious waterfall, spilling into a deep, quiet pool. The roar of falling water pounded his eardrums. Then a bird sang, and another and soon the tree frogs began chirping to each other. It didn't take long before nature welcomed them as one of her own.

He reverently took her hand. "What is this place?"

Sabrina pulled him to the ground, sitting on a flat, sunny rock. "This is Weeping Woman Mountain," she said. "And that is Weeping Woman Falls. There's an old Indian legend of a warrior who died in battle and his wife wept for weeks at the top of this mountain. When she finally threw herself off, the gods took pity and lifted her to heaven to be with him. As a memorial to her love, they turned her tears into this waterfall."

She looked at him and rolled her eyes. "Yeah, I know. It's hokey. There's always an Indian legend of star-crossed lovers leaping to death. This one is my favorite."

Jay stretched out on the rock, resting his hands on his stomach. He studied the clouds, watching as the billowy white puffs floated through the treetops. The gentle rush of water soothed him and he knew this is what he missed: water.

He detested being inland. It had been two days and already the saltwater was drying in his veins. He rolled to his side, propped his head on hand and watched Sabrina explore.

She dipped her toes in the pool, looked for tadpoles and occasionally looked over at Jay. She picked wildflowers and brought them to the rock, sitting cross-legged in the sunshine. "We used to make wildflower necklaces at school," she said, concentrating on weaving stalks. She made a small loop and held it up for inspection. "More like a crown instead of a necklace," she said, laying it on Jay's head. Then she reclined next to him, laying on her stomach. With her chin on her knuckles she studied him. He hadn't said anything in the past half hour; just watched her frolic by the pool.

He traced a finger down her elegant nose, over her lush lips and lifted her chin, leaning in for a gentle kiss. Closing his eyes and rubbing his unshaven cheek against hers, he said, "Will you marry me?"

Sabrina blinked. "Is this the definition of whirlwind?"

"Well, you said you love me."

"Yes," she admitted, sitting up and scooping him into her arms. She cradled his head against her breasts. "I did, but that doesn't mean we have to get married."

"You haven't answered my question."

She rocked gently, looking into his dark blue eyes. "Can I think about it?"

"I'll give you two minutes."

She frowned at his ultimatum. "Hmmm, You're not going to make this easy for me, are you?"

He shook his head. "One minute."

"Boy, talk about pressure," she quipped nervously. "Be serious. This is the rest of our lives we're talking about."

"Thirty seconds."

"If I decline?"

"Then you can find someone else to fix your boat."

Her eyes widened. "You do fight dirty. Okay, why not? Let's do it. But I'm going to tell the kids how you twisted my arm. Wait a minute; you do want children, right?"

"A dynasty."

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Rose took that well,” Sabrina said, looking out the window, studying topography that swung back and forth from forested mountainsides to rolling farms with corn fields. They were on the highway heading back to Rhode Island and the Zephyrus.

Jay didn't respond as he focused on changing lanes. Although traffic was light on I-80, he refused to relax. Too many yellow warning signs warned of stray deer. So far, he hadn't seen any but the too-frequent cautions made his jaw clench. The man who once dared ocean crossings on small, leaky sailboats was nervous about deer. In his mind's eye, he saw the huge Cadillac plow through a herd, their bodies exploding in torrents of blood and guts, just like the carcasses he'd seen along the highway. He shuddered involuntarily.

Sabrina noticed. “Are you okay?” She placed a concerned hand on his thigh.

He nodded curtly, refusing to look away. Instead he constantly scanned the sides or the roadway. He swung the large car around yet another mangled corpse and couldn't resist a quick glance. Sabrina saw panic in his eyes.

“Deer don't generally wander onto the road during the day. They mainly come out at dawn and dusk, when it's time to feed,” she said, casually adding, “We probably won't see any.”

After two hours of silent, tension-filled driving, they neared the state line where Pennsylvania gave way to New York. Before they crossed the Delaware River, they stopped at the small town of Matamoras to stretch their legs, use the facilities.

At the rest stop, Sabrina fed dollar bills into a soda machine. She looked over her shoulder as Jay stepped out of the men's room. “Do you want something to drink?” Not waiting for a response, she fed another dollar into the machine. “Water? Or soda?”

Jay ambled over to her, viewing the choices. He punched a button, waited for it to clunk down into the opening. Then he twisted the cap, released the carbon dioxide and drank thirstily. He tossed the empty bottle into a waste bin. He hadn't spoken a word except for the occasional grunt all morning.

Sabrina frowned, then opened her bottled water and drank. She stepped outside into the early afternoon sunshine and rested against the fender of the Caddy. Jay followed and pulled the keys from his jean's pocket.

He walked to her side and opened the door. Sabrina ignored him, calmly sipping water. He waited a few seconds then thumped the door shut. Not sure what to say, he stood silent and still.

Sabrina arched an eyebrow. "You know, if you're already regretting asking me to marry you, why don't you say so? Instead of giving me the silent treatment."

Jay looked right and then left, anywhere but at her. *Probably checking for eyewitnesses*, Sabrina thought.

He shoved his hands into his pockets and stepped closer, straddling her. He looked at his boots before looking into her eyes.

"I'm not regretting anything," he said huskily. "I don't want anything ... anyone ... to ruin it."

She understood now. "Anyone? As in Faye?"

He nodded, then pulled his hands out of his pocket and slid them up and down her arms. In a conciliatory gesture, he tugged her into a loose embrace. Although it seemed as if he were comforting her, she knew he was asking for reassurance. For her promise that nothing Faye said would change the way she felt.

"She can be ... difficult," he warned.

Sabrina placed the water bottle on the hood, then curved her arms around his waist, gently caressing his back. Her cheek rested against his chest, the worn T-shirt soft against her skin. She closed her eyes and inhaled the delicious scent of soap and sweat. "You intoxicate me," she said, sniffing appreciatively. "If you think I'll let anyone get between me and this," she said, rubbing her cheek against his heart, "you have another think coming. I won't be intimidated. She doesn't scare me."

"She's demanding. Possessive."

She tipped her head back to look into his troubled eyes. "You belong to me now. How's that for possessive?" Her heart beat erratically at the claim, praying he wouldn't pull away.

He didn't. He smiled indulgently, then kissed her softly.

"Let's hit the road. We can be home in a few hours if we beat rush hour traffic."

* * *

But they didn't. Traffic built up as they neared Connecticut so they stopped for a late lunch in Danbury.

Sabrina ordered the Italian restaurant's house special: ravioli. "This is so good," she gushed. She speared a stuffed pasta shell and held it out for Jay to try.

While he chewed, he nodded thoughtfully. "Almost as good as mine, but I'm not sharing."

"I figured as much," she said, then aggressively snatched a slice of his gourmet pizza.

She bit into the slice of pizza and hummed. "We should stay here and wait for dinner."

"Need to get home," he said tersely.

She looked at him through lowered lashes. "By the way, what will we do about living arrangements? I live in Maryland."

Jay shrugged as if it weren't an obstacle. "Move in with me."

"Just like that?" She snapped her fingers.

He nodded warily.

Sabrina's expression hovered between careful consideration and cartoonish overplay. She scrunched her lips, rubbed her chin and rolled her eyes. Then her face relaxed and she looked at Jay lovingly.

"Okay." She stole another slice of his pizza. "There's lots of rich people in Rhode Island and I'm sure they'll want my financial advice."

CHAPTER NINE

Faye paced the small kitchen, a cigarette smoldering between her claw-like fingers. Jay sat at the old Formica table and watched her, his face stern. She stopped abruptly and turned to him. "I can't believe you'd betray us," she snarled.

"Grandma, there is no us. Only you and me. We're the only ones left."

"The family! Your grandfather. Your poor mother! All dead because of Rose Windham and now you're going to marry that whore!"

Jay stood, the chair falling in his haste. "She is not a whore."

"She's a whore! Just like her grandmother! I can't stand to look at you. Get out of here!" Her last words rose to a screech as she pointed towards the door, the forgotten cigarette dangling from her fingers. She angrily threw it into the kitchen sink, then picked up the closest thing – a jelly jar – and threw it at the wall. It shattered and strawberry jam slid down the plaster, puddling on the floor amid shards of glass.

Jay was familiar with her hysterics. From the age of twelve, when his mother killed herself overdosing on heroin, he'd lived with Faye, endured her volatile temper, her rages, her insanity. At sixteen, he ran away and learned how to support himself. He found ways to make money, crewing on yachts out of Newport during the summer and working construction during the winter. He earned his high school diploma at night school and put himself through college.

He knew her anger would escalate, that more household items would crash and break around him. It's why she chose to live in the same old house, ignoring the constant state of disrepair. She surrounded herself with cheap, pitiful belongings that she could destroy at will. She refused to become attached to anything or anyone. Except Jay.

Now a man, he was the image of his grandfather. Tall, auburn hair, insolent gray-blue eyes, his freckles nearly obliterated by the sailor's tan. And just like his grandfather, he was leaving her for a Windham whore. She howled in frustration and opened a cabinet door. Skinny claws hooked around drinking glasses and she slammed them to the floor.

Jay stalked out of the house and headed for his truck. Faye would break and bash as long as he remained, almost as if she did it for him. He drove down the long, dirt driveway, leaving the decrepit bungalow in his rear view window.

Inside, Faye heard the truck's engine roar to life, wheels spin. She plunged her fingers through her lank, gray hair and screeched. Slumping against the sink cabinet, she slid to the floor, wrapped her bony arms around her knees and cried, great, heart-wrenching sobs of fury. He was gone.

* * *

Jay couldn't go back to the loft; couldn't face the tenderness and concern he knew he would find in Sabrina's arms. He didn't deserve it. Once again he hurt his grandmother. He parked at Maude's and went inside the welcoming dark bar.

He sat on a stool and ordered a draft.

Maude ambled through the dining room, a stained apron encircling her large waist, a damp dishcloth tossed carelessly over one shoulder. She paused at the bar and looked at Jay.

"Little early to be drinking, ain't it?"

Jay raised his head at her gruff words. He didn't answer; just lifted the heavy glass mug and drank.

Maude moved a little closer, peering in the dark at Jay's hair. "What you been doing?" She raised a hand and brushed his head. Jay jerked back involuntarily. "You're covered in glass."

"It's nothing," he growled.

Maude stared steadily, then nodded. *Hummmph. That dink grandmother of his is on another rampage.*

Everyone knew about Faye's temper and destructive ways. Not only had the townsfolk called the law on her, but some suggested the boy be removed for his own protection. But the boy took care of that himself, running away from home. Why he ever came back, why he continued to put up with the insane old woman, nobody knew. But he had and he kept her house from falling down on her head, despite her. He replaced the dishes and the furniture she broke, paid all of her utilities, had groceries delivered so she wouldn't have to go into town.

And still, she treated him the same way she treated her husband before the fire took his life. Same way she treated her daughter. Nobody was surprised when the forlorn girl grew into a rebellious teen and sank into a world of drugs. It was her only escape.

The entire town knew Faye West was batty, and they kept their distance. The only one who couldn't seem to accept it was her grandson. Still loyal despite her abuse.

Maude barked at the barkeep. "Get him the usual." Turning towards Jay she said, "If you're going drink, and it looks like you're here for awhile, least you can do is eat something."

Then she ambled away, pushing through the swinging kitchen door.

* * *

Sabrina paced the small apartment. Occasionally, she pulled the cell phone from her pocket, checking to see if she had somehow missed his call. She punched in his cell phone number and listened to it ring. It went to voice mail. "Where are you? Are you alright? Please call me."

They arrived in Warren late the night before and went straight to bed. Wrapped in each other's arms, they whispered stories from their childhoods. Some were funny, most were sad, but at least they talked. Something they had forgotten to do much of the past week.

"This is insane," Sabrina said, her voice hushed in the dark. "We haven't known each other but a week." She rolled to her side, looking at his profile. "Tell me this isn't insane."

"Believe me," he assured her. "I know insane and this isn't it." He curled a hand around her neck and pulled her mouth to his.

In the morning, she hid under the covers and pretended to sleep, hoping he would make coffee. He did, then brought a cup into the bedroom. Leaning against the built-in dressers he sipped. "I know you're faking," he informed her.

Sabrina pulled the sheets down and sniffed. "Did you make me a cup?"

He gestured towards the door with his coffee cup. "Nope. Going to have to get up, get it yourself." Then he settled back and watched as she stretched, climbed out of bed and searched for her panties. Giving up, she picked up one of his T-shirts, smelled it, then shrugged. She pulled it on and it fell to her knees. Walking past him, she spotted her underwear. "Oh, there they are." She plucked them from the windowsill and stepped into them.

She nodded towards the kitchen. "Okay, show's over. Let's eat breakfast."

Once she settled with a cup of coffee, she looked through cabinets and the refrigerator, peering into the bright, nearly empty cavern. "I think we have the makings for omelets," she said, pulling out a plastic bin of cheese and smelling it.

She put it on the counter behind her and extracted a carton of eggs and a container of butter. In the cabinets, she found a can of ham and a small container of sliced mushrooms. "Ta-da!"

"Tell you what, Merlin. You make breakfast; I'll go take a quick shower."

"Fine, but eggs cook quickly. You better be out here in five minutes or I'm starting without you." Her stomach growled.

True to his word, he was back and at the counter before the omelets finished cooking. Sabrina placed the morning paper next to his plate, minus the comics. They ate in companionable silence, each reading the newspaper. It felt right.

Behind the paper, Jay spoke. "I'm going to see Faye this morning."

Sabrina felt her stomach knot. "Do you want me to go with you?"

“No!”

She felt relief at his abrupt refusal. “Okay then, I’ll just stay here. Maybe do a little cleaning. Guess I’ll make a grocery list. I need to call Rose anyway and let her know we’re in.”

A noise beneath the floor startled her. “What’s that?”

“It’s Brett. Today’s a workday, sweetheart.”

Sabrina smiled. “Of course.”

Jay dropped the paper and stood. “Thanks. That was excellent.” He picked up his truck keys and wallet, sliding them into his pocket. He leaned over the counter and kissed her lightly. “I’ll be back soon. Then we’ll go to the store. Going to need more than groceries.”

Whistling, he walked out the door. Sabrina watched from the window as he trundled down the stairs. He paused at the yawning opening of the boatyard shop to talk to Brett. He gestured to the apartment and Brett looked up. Sabrina waved. Then the heavy-set man playfully punched Jay in the arm. He turned back to the window, his hands clasped to his heart. She heard his faint call. “It should have been me! I’m the one who saw you first.”

Jay slid his hands in his back pockets, watching Brett kiss his fingers to the lovely woman in the window. “Alright, stuff it or I’ll tell Shawna. Better yet, I’ll tell Maude,” he said. Then he turned and looked into the shop. The Zephyrus sat upright, supported by two-by-fours. The boat, once a source of torment, was a pitiful shell. All the years he agonized over it until Sabrina’s soft touch lifted the curse. It was easy to let the anger go. With his eyes steady on the fiberglass hull, he said, “Brett, take off. You’ve been carrying the shop alone and you deserve some time.”

“Aw, I don’t mind,” Brett said.

Jay glanced over his shoulder. “Ayuh, but I do.”

Brett nodded. “Oki doki, you want me to go fishing again, right?”

“Unless you want to go home.”

Brett walked into the shop and turned off the fans and lights. “I think I will, brother. You’ve inspired me.”

* * *

That was hours ago and still Jay hadn’t returned. Sabrina killed time taking a shower, cleaning the apartment and making lists. She couldn’t wait any longer. Something had to be wrong. She started to pull on her shoes when she heard a noise downstairs. It’d been quiet for hours; she assumed that Brett had gone out on an appointment. She heard more bangs and a crash. He must be back.

She rushed to the window, looked outside but did not see the truck. She dashed to the bedroom, stood on the bed and peeked out the high window. No trucks out

front either. Then she heard his footsteps on the stairs. She hurried into the living room and swung open the door.

"Thank goodness, you're back. I've been so worried ..." her voice trailed off. Stepping through the opening was a thin, wizened woman. She had both shaking hands wrapped around a gun. "You whore," she spat.

Startled, Sabrina backed up raising her palms in supplication. "Faye?"

"You call me Mrs. West, you piece of trash!" She advanced, pushing the door closed with her bony hip. She leaned back against the door and reached one hand behind her to lock it.

Sabrina lowered her hands and took a step forward. "Mrs. West, what are you doing?" she said, her eyes pinned on the gun.

Faye cradled the hand holding the gun and raised it. "Don't come any closer." She nodded towards the sofa. "Sit down."

When Sabrina didn't move, Faye pointed the gun at the ceiling and pulled the trigger. A bullet drove into the tile and white flakes fell like snow. "Now!" she screeched.

Half a mile down the road, Jay lifted his head. He looked at the bartender. "Did you hear that?"

The man shrugged. "Nah, what was it?"

Jay swiveled on the stool. "Sounded like gun fire. Who could be shooting a gun in town?" He slid off the seat and headed for the tavern door. He opened it and looked cautiously outside. Then he lifted his head and smelled it. Fire! Not just fire, but burning resin. He called over his shoulder. "Call the Jakes! The boatyard's on fire!" Then he raced out into the sunlight.

Sabrina covered her nose at the stench. "What is that smell?"

Faye grinned wickedly. "That's your death you smell, whore. This time you're not getting away."

Sabrina was confused. "What are you talking about?" Then she gagged on the fumes. Smoke drifted in the cracks and ductwork. "Oh my lord! The shop's on fire! We have to get out of here."

She stood and stepped towards Faye, grabbing the old woman's tiny arm. "We've got to leave now."

Faye snatched her arm back and screeched. "Not this time, bitch. There's no one here to drag you out." Then she swung her hand, hitting Sabrina on the side of the face with the gun. Sabrina sank to her knees, covering her head as the woman battered her again and again.

"Please stop!" she cried. "You don't know what you're doing." If there had been an opportunity to stop the woman's assault, she missed it. Never considering the woman would hit her or that she knew about the fire, Sabrina's only concern was to pull her from danger.

"I know exactly what I'm doing," Faye growled. "You're not going to get him. He belongs to me."

Footsteps pounded up the steps outside and frantic hands turned the doorknob. When it wouldn't open, Jay began thundering on the wood. "Sabrina, get out of there! The shop's on fire!"

The old woman backed up and once again raised the gun. Sabrina looked up, blood streaming down her face and mixing with tears.

"Why have you done this?" she cried.

Jay turned the knob again. He heard voices. Women's voices. Pounding on the door again he begged, "Sabrina, for God's sake, open the door!"

He backed up and slammed into the door. It held, bruising his shoulder. Then he kicked at the knob. He kicked several more times, the wood at the latch starting to splinter.

Two more kicks and the door burst open. Horrified, he saw Faye West standing over Sabrina, a gun pointed at her head.

"You thought I would let you get away, but you were wrong!"

"Grandma, put the gun down." He choked on the words. "We need to get out of here. The place is on fire."

Faye lifted her sharp, pointed chin. "I know. I started it. Just like before. When your granddaddy ran off with that whore. I knew about it. I knew all along. He didn't fool me. I knew he was running around behind my back. I just didn't know who with." She looked down at Sabrina's dark hair. "But I found out and then I told Don all about it. I was there that night. I watched them fight over her. He only cared about that whore, not his own wife. Or his daughter. It was all about her. But I was there. I knocked over the paint can. I started the fire then. I hit that bitch with all my might." Faye raised the gun to strike Sabrina again.

Jay stepped into the room. "No!"

Faye looked into his face, her eyes blazing. "But Don had to save her and in the end, they both died."

Jay moved closer to Faye. "Look at me, Grandma. Put the gun down. We have to get out of here." He heard sirens as the fire truck arrived. He gestured towards Sabrina, frozen on her knees as smoke wound up the stairs and filled the room. "She's not to blame for what Rose did. You can't punish her. Give me the gun."

Faye looked at Sabrina, her eyes narrow slits. "All that money isn't going to save you now."

She pointed the gun in Sabrina's face and her finger squeezed the trigger. The bullet drove into the ceiling as Sabrina's fisted hands flew upward, knocking the

gun away. She rose like an avenging angel and a deep war cry sounded in her throat.

Before she could launch herself onto Faye, strong arms wrapped around her waist and carried her to the door. Jay shielded Sabrina against his body as he hurtled down the burning stairs. He raced into the parking lot and a police car jerked to a stop, barely missing him. He saw an ambulance and motioned for it.

A uniformed tech jumped out with a medic bag in one hand. Jay thrust Sabrina into the young man's arms. "Take care of her. I have to get my grandmother out of there!"

Then he turned back towards the shop, but before he could reach them, the stairs collapsed. Faye stepped into the second floor opening and surveyed the boatyard. Strangely calm, she watched the flashing red and blue lights, the fire fighters dousing flames in the shop and Sabrina collapsing to the grass as a medic gently touching her face. And she saw Jay, hands fisted at this side, tears of frustration running down his face. She still held the gun, oblivious to the flames licking the walls around her. She lifted it, pointing it towards Sabrina. She could still do it.

"Grandma, no!" Jay looked helplessly around. "Somebody help! I need a ladder."

Fire fighters stepped back from the inferno in the boat shop and looked to the top of the building. One climbed up the fire truck and into the cherry picker. He flipped controls and the mechanical arm lifted the bucket to the building, hovering at the burning doorway.

Faye shook her head slowly and backed into the flames. Seconds later, the top floor collapsed into the inferno.

Faye was gone.

CHAPTER TEN

Sabrina wished she could wait until the swelling receded, until the stitches could be removed, but she had to return to Rose. She didn't want to horrify her, but she didn't have a choice.

Her grandmother's broken sobs hurt worse than the bruises. She clasped the woman's frail hands and shushed her.

"I'm fine, Grandmother. It's over," she said, laying her head on the bed. "She was insane."

"To think, all those years ago, she was there. That she started the fire." Rose's words were barely audible over the ambient noise of the hospital. "And that she hurt you, tried to kill you. My darling, precious girl." She pulled a hand free from Sabrina's and cupped it on her head.

Then she raised her other hand and reached imploringly. Jay stepped to the bedside and held it. "Thank you. Thank you for saving her," she whispered, tears spilling again from her blue eyes. She tugged his hand down to the bed and laid them atop Sabrina's. "It's time everyone stopped paying for my mistakes. You need to start your lives free from all misery I've caused."

Sabrina shook her head. "Grandmother, Faye had a choice. She didn't have to start the fire or attack you. She knew you were there to break up with Derek. But she wanted revenge and it destroyed her."

Sabrina glanced up at Jay. "There's a proverb that says, 'Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves.' Faye dug one for us all."

She bowed her head. "Even the Zephyrus is gone."

"Not exactly," Jay said. He pulled a small bronze plate from his back pocket and read aloud, "Zephyrus 32, No. 1, Zephyrus Yachts, Warren, Rhode Island."

He gently tugged on her hand until she stood with him. "Let me explain something about boats. They're never gone. Little by little, if she's around long enough, everything gets replaced. Except one thing," he added, placing the builder's plate in her hand. "Let's replace what's missing. I need a boatyard and West Wind is a great name for a new business."

"Let's build our own Zephyrus," Sabrina said, wrapping her arms around his waist, leaning into his embrace.

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Madeline Sloane is a writer with more than 25 years experience in communications. With ten published history books under her belt, she is new to the world of romantic fiction but finding it just as fun to research. In addition to writing, she is a college instructor whose interests include traveling, history and boating. Rounding out her list of Top Five interests are reading and cooking. On the web at www.MadelineSloane.com

ABOUT THE SERIES: WOMEN OF EATON

The first novel in the “Women of Eaton” romance series, “Distracted” introduces readers to Eaton, a fictional, idyllic town tucked away in the mountains of Pennsylvania. Several of the characters in “Distracted” are featured in other books such as “East of Eaton,” “West Wind” and “Deadline.” Look for many citizens of Eaton to return in new stories that explore and celebrate romance.

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Smashwords: www.Smashwords.com/profile/view/MadelineSloane

PRAISE FOR DISTRACTED

BY MADELINE SLOANE

A Great Beach Read!

This is a charming story that had all my favorite things in it: Books, Boats and hunky men (not necessarily in that order).

–Jen C. (Smashwords Edition)

Thoroughly Enjoyable

Madeline Sloane brings romance to the table with her first book! “Distracted” is cleverly written; the dialogue is well delivered, easily readable and certainly enjoyable.

– Lucinda J. Knier (Kindle Edition)

A Cute Romance

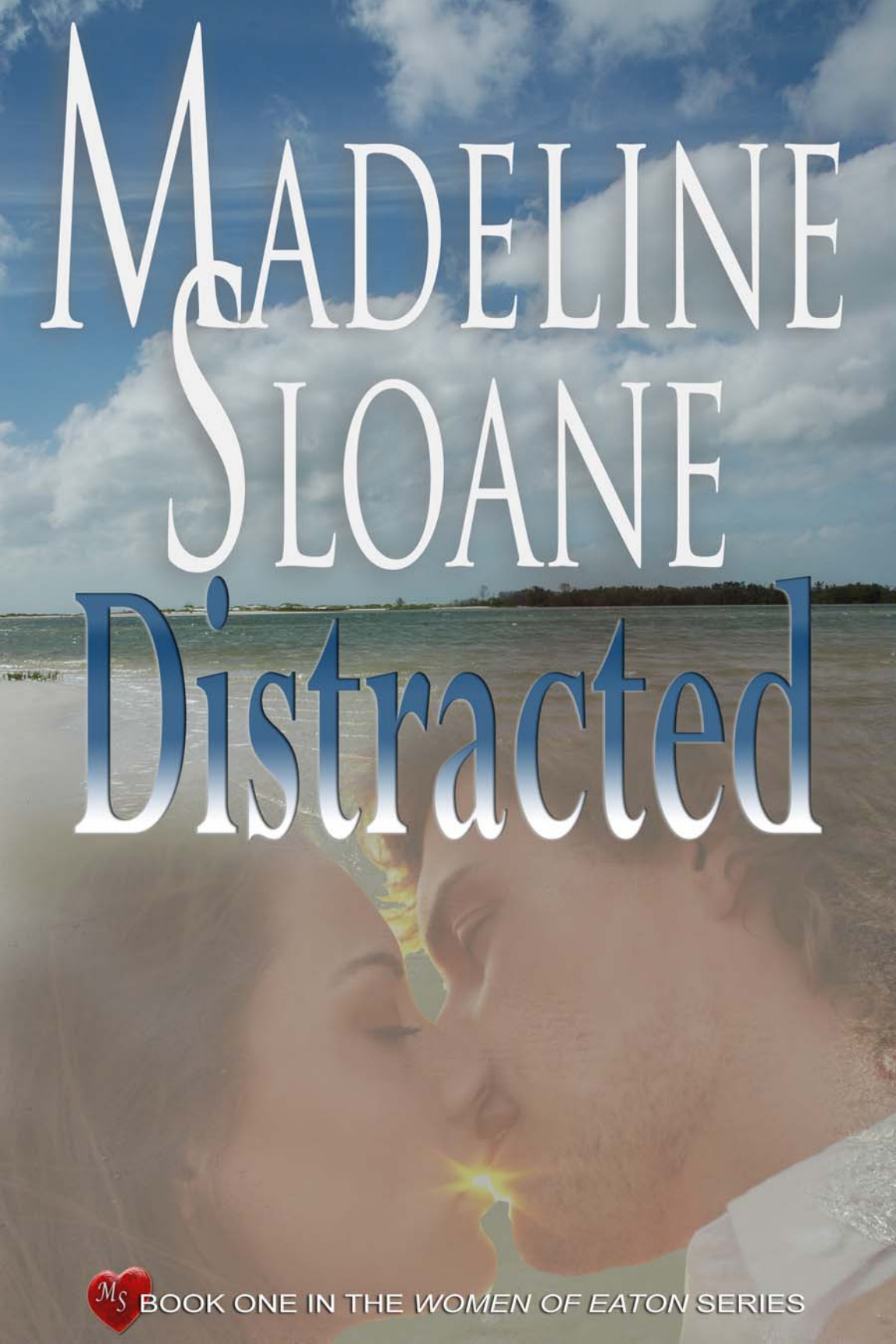
This was a cute romance. Erin is supposed to help Stephen hurry up and get his book done, which turns out to be an impossible task. Stephen’s tendency to put things off and enjoy life is cute and funny, but in real life, this guy would annoy me to no end. (And I’m laughing as I write that.)

– Ruth Ann Nordin (Kindle Edition)

A Refreshing Read

What a refreshing read, unlike so many romance novels of the past, which made the female lead out to be some kind of second-class citizen who could never stand up for themselves. (Many of these books I’d throw against the wall in disgust.)

– Susan Ward (Kindle Edition)

The background of the cover features a romantic scene of a man and a woman about to kiss. The woman is on the left, her face in profile, and the man is on the right, also in profile, facing her. They are positioned in the foreground, with their faces close together. Behind them is a beach with gentle waves and a blue sky with scattered white clouds. The overall tone is soft and romantic.

MADELINE SLOANE *Distracted*



BOOK ONE IN THE WOMEN OF EATON SERIES

Women of Eaton: WEST WIND

WOMEN OF EATON SERIES
EXCERPT

DISTRACTED

A CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE BY

MADELINE SLOANE

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Women of Eaton: WEST WIND

To Ivan

CHAPTER ONE

Erin fidgeted in the pin-striped chair. The “two-minute” wait promised by the receptionist stretched into ten.

She glanced again at the magazines spread on the side table. The titles were unfamiliar. Some scholarly, some technical, none very interesting. She pushed them aside until she found a new copy of “Them” magazine, a slick tabloid that specialized in reporting the latest scandals and love interests of the stars.

The cover featured its typical fare of movie stars and beautiful people. In one photograph, a man and woman ducked their heads to avoid the paparazzi. He wore sunglasses, an unbuttoned island-print shirt, a pair of baggy, khaki shorts and sandals. Hmmm, nice abs, she thought.

The woman looked familiar. An actress, maybe? She was wearing a pink bikini top and a black sarong knotted at her slim, tanned hip. They were holding hands and walking down a pier in a tropical locale. Erin glanced out the large window at Washington’s overcast skyline and shivered. Smog and low clouds nearly obscured the Capitol dome.

She flipped through the magazine; the first ten pages or so were filled with advertisements. Then she came to the cover feature: The island couple. There were several photographs of the hunk with various beautiful women. In one, he was standing at the wheel of speed boat, shirtless, sunglasses on again, his sun-streaked wavy hair whipping in the wind. In another, he was strumming a guitar at a beach bonfire.

“Like what you see?”

Erin dropped the magazine and stood up.

“Patricia. How are you?”

“Fine. Sit down, Erin.”

Patricia McDowell slid behind her massive desk. An imperious veteran of the publishing trenches for more than thirty years, Patricia’s company churned out quality non-fiction that often made university professors’ reading lists but always made the New York Times bestselling list. Her diamond-hard veneer and keen business sense aside, she was the patron saint of artists, musicians, and historians who needed help writing books.

Patricia had tapped Erin after the young woman interned at McDowell Publishing while earning a master’s degree. As an editorial assistant, Erin helped

senior staff move manuscripts through the system, from the authors to the production department.

She became efficient, but it was her combination of charm and persistence that Patricia valued most. She discovered that Erin could succeed, often through guile and wile, when experienced editors failed.

Her easy-going personality put many shy and introverted scholars at ease as she helped them complete their books on time.

Patricia couldn't care less if the girl recognized a split infinitive or a dangling participle. She had plenty of grammarians on staff. She wanted results and Erin delivered.

"Nice-looking man, isn't he?" Patricia nodded towards the tabloid Erin had tossed on the stack.

"George Clooney? He's still yummy."

"No. The man on the cover."

"I didn't really notice," Erin said. She picked up the magazine, thumbing through the pages until she found the photo spread.

"He's okay, I guess. Who wouldn't be with that kind of money? How much do you think that speedboat cost?"

"I'm not sure, but the sailboat cost at least \$500,000. I know. I bought it for him."

"What? You're kidding me! You know this guy?"

"That, my dear, is your next assignment. The boat was an advance on his forthcoming book."

She smiled at Erin's disbelief.

"Yes; it's that important. That's why I need you. He's already missed three deadlines. I'm afraid he's a bit lackadaisical. His first chapter was due last month." Patricia leaned back into her leather chair and arched a silver eyebrow. "I cannot tolerate that."

"Is he local?" Erin flipped through the magazine to the feature article and this time looked closer at the photographs.

"No. I hope you don't mind, you'll have to travel for this one. He lives in North Carolina, just a few hours away," Patricia added, noting Erin's frown.

Erin chewed her lip. She preferred to work with D.C. writers, primarily retired professors. She kept an apartment in Dupont Circle, near the fashionable northwest but not as expensive. Still, living in the capital was expensive and she could not afford to turn down a job.

"Can you leave right away?"

Erin fumbled through her jacket pocket and pulled out her mobile phone. Flipping through its digital calendar, she scanned the months of April and May. Nothing she couldn't reschedule.

"Yes. Do you have a bio on this guy? What does he do?"

Patricia paused. "I'm sorry, no bio unless you count the 'Sexiest Man in America' feature in 'Them.' He's an artist and for some reason he's popular in L.A. You won't believe what they're paying for his paintings. Anyway, your job is to make sure he finishes this book. Hell, I need you to make sure he begins it. I envision a book that can be used in a university setting by art students, and still entertain the layperson. It's important we publish his book right away while he's on top. He's an exciting talent, and a richly illustrated, very personal book about Stephen Spence would be extremely marketable."

"What's his name? Stephen Spence?" Erin echoed distractedly.

"Have you heard of him?"

"I'm not sure. I'll have to do some research. I guess these kinds of magazines would be the best place to begin," Erin said, dropping the tabloid on the table.

"The paparazzi apparently like to follow him. Who are the women?"

"Who knows? You seldom see him with the same one twice. He doesn't appear to be lonely, does he?"

Erin heaved a sigh. "Men like him seldom are."

* * *

She wasn't sure how long the project would last, so Erin over packed. She decided to keep her appearance professional and maintain a dressy-casual style for work. To her traditional "librarian garb," she added a new cocktail dress. She also packed a few cotton tops and shorts since spring came earlier in the Carolinas. Stephen Spence lived by the Atlantic, so she could beachcomb, maybe swim during her free time. She tossed an assortment of undergarments, stockings and her bathing suit into the mix.

She didn't keep a toiletry bag packed so she went through the medicine cabinet and the shower and dumped products into a water-proof tote.

Aidan leaned against the bathroom door, eating a protein bar. "Hey, what's going on?"

Aidan Carter was Erin's ex-husband and a full-time student, still working on his doctoral degree. Their marriage ended a year ago after she discovered his affair with another student. It was a bitter breakup. After their divorce, Erin discovered it hurt more to lose her childhood friend so they remained close and, temporarily, roommates.

Sometimes, though, Aidan forgot they were "roommates." Sometimes, she did too.

"I have an assignment. I'll be gone for at least a month, I imagine," Erin said.

"What's the assignment?"

"I'm going to North Carolina. Patricia has a client who can't meet his deadlines. I have to go down there and crack the whip."

Aidan nodded. "Who is this client and how old is he?"

"Jealous?"

"Maybe."

"Well, don't be. It's work," Erin said, relieved she hadn't brought home the magazine with photos of Stephen Spence. "Besides, you have your life and I have mine. Remember?"

It wasn't exactly the truth, but Erin refused to admit it. During the past four months that Aidan had been back, they had ended up in bed together a few times. It wasn't that odd, really, she rationalized. He was gorgeous, with dark hair, steady gray eyes, and chiseled features. He also was a brilliant scientist, or would be when he finished his doctorate. Sex with Aidan was safe, she told herself.

"I remember, but I worry about you. You know I care," he said, stepping into her bedroom. He cupped her chin and gently kissed her lips. Then he glanced into her suitcase and noticed the mass of frilly underwear and her bathing suit.

"Looks more like a vacation to me."

Erin closed her suitcase and zipped the flap, suppressing a grin at the thought that she would be spending the next few weeks at the beach with a handsome and rich playboy.

"Well, it's not."

CHAPTER TWO

Erin drove the twelve hours to Hatteras in a short-lease SUV. Living in a major city with a subway meant she rarely needed a car. Since Patricia was picking up the tab, she opted for something large and luxurious. It was dark by the time she rolled into the ferry parking lot at Swan Quarter and it was empty.

“Great. That’s just great,” she muttered, climbing out of the vehicle and walking to the pier. A weather beaten “Closed” sign swung on a chain strung across the entrance. The last ferry to the island faded to a speck in the distance.

Back at the SUV, Erin turned on the overhead light and studied the GPS, flipping through the digital maps. There was no other way to the island. She would have to stay on the mainland and catch the morning ferry.

She backtracked a few miles to Route 264 and checked into a small roadside motel. In the lobby, she found a shelf with colorful brochures. She shuffled through them until she found one with the ferry schedule, then tucked it into her purse while the desk clerk ran her credit card.

“Is there a restaurant close by?”

The clerk, a dark-skinned quiet man, shook his head. “There is a convenience store across the street,” he suggested.

Instead, Erin stopped at the vending machines near the staircase and punched the buttons for a bottle of water and a pack of peanut butter crackers. She fed more dollar bills into the machine, and then selected a bag of chips and a chocolate bar.

An hour later, showered and wrapped in a fleece robe, she sat cross-legged on the motel bed, the remote control in one hand and the candy bar in the other. She flipped through the local channels searching for a weather update, but the old television only brought in local channels, and none of them included a forecast. The bed was littered with junk food wrappers and cracker crumbs. Her cell phone trilled, and she dove for her purse. She scanned the caller ID before pushing the green answer button.

“Aidan?”

“Hi. How was the drive?”

Erin chewed her lower lip. “Okay.”

“Did you make good time?”

“Aidan. You don’t have to check up on me.”

“I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.”

After a few silent seconds, Erin continued, "We talked about this, Aidan. We go our own ways."

"I don't know if I can."

"You already have."

"No, I haven't. I'm right here."

"I'm not going to talk about this again," she said. "You've got things to do; I've got things to do. I can't have you calling me up every night. You've got to stop pressuring me, Aidan."

"Fine. Good night."

Erin shook her head at his abrupt farewell, turned off her phone and tossed it on the bedside table. Too energized to go back to bed, she pulled out her tote bag and carried it over to the bathroom sink. She ferociously brushed her teeth and then flossed until her gums bled. She twisted her long, blonde hair, tying it into a loose knot then leaned towards the dark glass and glared at her reflection. She growled and muttered, "Men!"

Picking up her cell phone, she programmed it to send all calls from Aidan to voice mail.

* * *

In the morning, Erin placed three outfits on the bed and stepped back. The first was a La Vintage skirt and jacket she had found at a boutique specializing in black and white haute couture clothing. It was a "power suit," but it still exuded sexiness. A soft gray blouse with its plunging neck line complemented the pencil skirt. The heels on the black, patent-leather Vince Canuto dress pumps probably were a bit too high for an island visit.

The second outfit was a sleeveless, blue mock turtleneck sweater and a pair of flare-legged Armani khakis. The pants emphasized her slim waist and curvy hips. The sweater showed her trim, strong arms to an advantage. A pair of Hugh Boss boots – shiny, calfskin with a side zipper – finished the ensemble.

The third outfit was a pair of brown, lightweight shorts by Dockers, a black, cotton T-shirt with a handkerchief hem and a pair of leather sandals. She had selected the outfit on a whim. In fact, she bought several in different colors. They were modest and comfortable and less intimidating than the first two choices. Considering the photographs she had seen of Spence, she decided a low-key approach may be the best and opted for the shorts.

Weather also could be an issue. The forecast for the North Carolina coast, printed from a web site and taped to the motel's front desk when she checked in the previous night, had not been helpful. An ominous black cloud with a single raindrop beneath it was partly obscured by a gray sun. A cartoon thermometer called for a high of seventy-three degrees.

“Partly cloudy with a chance of rain,” the forecast boldly predicted beneath the pictures. She imagined the manager’s choice to print daily forecasts in black ink had been motivated by frugality.

Wearing only panties and a bra, she peeked between the heavy, vinyl drapes to see ... almost nothing. A blanket of fog lay over the parking lot. She could see only the front bumper of her rental SUV, which may or may not have been the only car in the parking lot. She shivered, then went back to her suitcase and pulled out a sweater.

Twenty minutes later, after a hastily eaten continental breakfast in the hotel lobby, she drove back to the Swan Quarter ferry with time to spare. She sat in the SUV after paying for a ticket and waited for the “Governor Hyde” to begin loading. The Sound Class ferry was more than 160-feet long and carried thirty-five vehicles. Hers was the twentieth in line, and only five cars followed.

Soon it was her turn and she drove up the creaking, steel ramp. An old man with a stubbly beard and wearing a Greek fisherman’s cap stood near the SUV’s right front fender. He coaxed her forward with a gloved hand. When her bumper was only a few inches from the car in front, the man signaled halt, then gave her a quick thumbs up. She shifted into park, turned the engine off, and set the parking brake as instructed.

It was still a bit chilly for shorts but she ignored the cold, damp wind, pulled her sweater on, and climbed out of the truck. The dull yellow disc of the rising sun grew brighter over the bow of the boat as it plowed eastward through a light chop. She leaned over the rail, settled a pair of sunglasses on her nose and watched as seagulls wheeled and circled around the ferry. In the distance, as visibility improved, she spied a sailboat. Slowly, the morning fog burned away and the ship chugged noisily through the Pamlico Sound.

* * *

More than two hours later, the ferry landed at Ocracoke. First car on the ship meant last one off, so Erin disembarked after a few minutes. She drove the SUV to a lonely corner of the parking lot. Once again she consulted the GPS receiver, having entered Spence’s address into the device the day before. She zoomed in the tiny screen and studied the network of roads until she located his house. The mechanical voice of the GPS commanded: “Head south on Northpoint Road toward Pamlico Shores Road.

Erin smiled. During the past two days, she had become accustomed to the disembodied female voice and nicknamed her “Becky.”

She put the SUV into gear and drove out of the ferry lot towards the small village of Ocracoke.

“Turn left at Pamlico Shores Road and drive point-one miles before turning right at British Cemetery Road,” Becky ordered.

“And we’re on our way,” Erin chimed.

She drove down the small paved road to the stop sign and looked right. Beyond the brown beach house at the curve was the glimmering sound. To the left she saw scrubby shrubs, a few bent and twisted cypress and oak trees, and the roof tops of island cottages. The roadway was narrow with no markings and no other cars were in sight.

She drove on.

“In 500 feet turn left onto Back Road,” Becky piped.

Erin glanced to her right and noted a small, rundown cottage. Folding chairs were stacked on the porch. A live oak’s limbs stretched over the structure, shading it well and inhibiting any grass that may have taken root. A rusted blue truck and a trailer hauling a white bass boat were parked in the driveway. A hand-lettered sign offered night crawlers and cut bait.

“Hmmm... Spence’s neighbors aren’t that fashionable.”

On the left she noticed a small cemetery bordered in a gray, weather-beaten wood fence.

“Hence the name ‘Cemetery Road,’” Erin said aloud, having started to converse with Becky the previous afternoon. Becky had no reply.

She stopped the SUV in the middle of the road and looked at the headstones. Most were small, thin eroded stones, discolored with black and green mildew. The trees at the back of the cemetery were stunted, windswept oaks.

She drove on, passing more houses. “The neighborhood’s improving,” she told Becky.

She braked the SUV to a crawl and turned onto Back Road. On her right, an octagon, cedar-sheathed house contrasted with an elegant, older house covered in whitewashed siding and with a large wrap-around porch. Erin noted that most of the houses on the island were situated on pilings, probably because of rising seawater during tropical storms and hurricanes.

“Continue point four miles, then turn left at State Road 1341,” Becky monotoned.

Erin drove through more of the same: an unmarked paved road bounded by rustic cottages mixed with newer construction, shrubs, sawgrass, palmettos and stunted oak trees.

“Drive point three miles, then turn left onto unnamed road.”

“No name, eh?” Erin squinted into the sun as she searched for her turn.

“Satellite signal lost,” Becky announced, and the little cartoon car on the GPS screen became a question mark.

“Thanks a lot, Becky.” Erin slowed even more after checking the rear-view mirror and seeing nobody on the road. She had to be close. In the distance, she

could see houses. Most were three-story wooden and glass sentinels amid the saw grass. They all faced Pamlico Sound.

“Ahhh, here’s the money,” Erin noted.

She passed two unmarked, black-topped roads and decided to keep looking. Ahead, on the left, she saw a battered, unmarked mailbox. Just beyond it she saw the edge of a narrow, unpaved road – a trail really. She imagined the entrance to Spence’s property would be somewhat grand, like some of the houses she passed earlier. It seemed unlikely that the rusting mailbox, impaled by an unpainted wooden post and set in a five-gallon bucket filled with concrete, would belong to a famous artist. “And playboy,” she thought.

“Probably not the road I want to take, right Becky?” she asked the GPS receiver. No answer, of course. Becky’s screen only showed the question mark. “Afraid to commit, are we?”

She smiled and accelerated past the mailbox, then braked to an abrupt stop. Numbers or letters on the box were more likely to be on the right side, so the postal carrier could see them when delivering the mail. She could at least see if she had passed the address.

Erin pressed the button to lower the window, leaned out for a better look at the box. It bore only stick-on letters that announced: “S_ence.”

“You would think a guy like that could afford a decent mailbox,” she said. After checking the mirrors for oncoming traffic, she put the SUV into reverse, backed up a few yards, then shifted forward and turned onto the sand and gravel trail.

Erin drove slowly and admired the change in topography. There was much more open space now, although it was still swampy.

“Arriving at destination on left,” Becky chimed, having regained her bearings.

Erin stopped in front of a massive gray house that floated in the field of sea grass. Unpainted and on pilings, the wood-shingled house featured a gabled roof and long engaged dormers. Hinged, wood-batten shutters were held open with a stick, protecting the old-fashioned sash windows. The house was encircled by a wrap-around porch and behind it she glimpsed a long stretch of white beach and blue water.

She didn’t see a driveway, so she stopped her truck close to the edge of the road. She checked her watch. It was just after noon and, according to Patricia, Spence expected her. She hiked the fifty yards to the front door, wading through the sea oats and saw grass that whipped and scratched her bare legs.

“Shoot,” she hissed, licking a finger and rubbing it on a long, bloody scratch. “I should have worn pants.”

After plucking sticker burrs from her shorts and shaking sand from her sandals, Erin pressed the doorbell. She waited a minute or two before pressing it again. After a few more minutes, she tried knocking on the door. There was no answer.

She frowned. Spence knew she was arriving today, so he wouldn't have left town, she reasoned. After peeking in the windows and detecting no signs of life, she knocked harder, calling, "Mr. Spence. Hello. Mr. Spence?"

She considered calling Patricia and asking for the artist's telephone number, but decided she couldn't give up that easily. Looking for another entrance, Erin walked around the side porch but a locked screen door barred access. She retraced her steps to the front, went down the steps and around the porch. Just past the screen door the land sloped downward. With no stairs in sight, she decided to climb through the railing while she could still reach it. She tossed her purse first. Then, using the railing as a ladder she scrambled up and slithered onto the porch.

She leaned against a gray piling and studied her surroundings. A few feet away, swinging slowly in a white, cord-twisted hammock was a man. He was wearing faded, ragged shorts and sunglasses. A pair of flip flops and three empty beer bottles on the deck beside him completed the vignette. The mailbox seemed appropriate now, Erin thought.

She stood up slowly, brushed sand off her shorts and walked towards the sleeping man. She hesitated waking him. Instead, she spent a few heartbeats assessing him. He was tall and tanned. His wavy, sun-streaked hair was a bit long and unkempt. He had a broad forehead and a wide mouth. He kept in shape, she noted. His arms were large and heavily muscled. He had a spare tire, however, so if this was Spence he had forgone the crunches. The hair on his arms and legs was thick. A thatch of copper hair traced down his chest, snaking into the waistband of his faded Bermuda shorts. His feet were long and his large toes splayed and tanned. He must not wear shoes often, she thought.

"Do I know you?"

His slow, Southern drawl caught her by surprise. She thought he had been sleeping. Playing opossum instead. She took a step back.

"Mr. Spence? I'm Erin Andersen. I've been sent by Patricia McDowell to help you with your book."

He slowly lifted his sunglasses. Steel blue eyes squinted in the morning sun.

"Hey, move over here, would ya? Can't see who I'm talkin' to."

Erin picked up her purse and moved to the far side of the hammock, the afternoon sun shining on her face. Spence took in her sandals, her legs, shorts, and shirt. He stared at her chest a few seconds before moving up to her face. Then he grinned. His teeth were bright white against his dark skin.

"Well, howdy. I forgot you were coming. You want a beer?"

Erin hesitated, then decided she needed to make friends fast.

"Sure. It's been a long, thirsty trip," she lied.

Stephen Spence pointed to a bar against the back of the house and said, "Me too. Why don't you grab us a couple. What'd you say your name was?"

He hadn't moved out of the hammock. Just pointed a finger and dropped his sunglasses back into place. Erin placed her purse on the deck and walked to the bar. Behind it, she discovered a small refrigerator. She had to bend over to open it. Inside were Coronas – at least two dozen and nothing else – so cold they formed ice crystals when she pulled out two bottles.

“Opener’s on the counter there. Limes, too.”

She picked up the bottle opener. It was ancient and rusty. Glad I’ve had a tetanus shot recently, she thought. On the counter was a basket of limes. Recalling college days with tequila shots and lemons, she rolled the lime, softening its rind so the juice would flow. She pulled open a couple of drawers until she found a sharp knife. She thought about neatly tucking the sliced lime into the opening but decided she should just shove them into the long necks. Lime pulp clung to the inside of the bottle and the beer fizzed. She walked over to Spence and handed him one. The other, she upended. She was amazed at how good it tasted.

“Ahh, be still my heart,” he said and drained half the bottle.

Fascinated, Erin watched as he licked the lime from his lips and smiled at her.

Well, I’m off on the right foot, she thought. She searched for a chair and, not finding one, headed back to the bar, brushed off a few stray crumbs and hoisted herself up onto the counter. Obviously, this was a one-person deck and guests had to make do. If he wasn’t going to provide a chair, she would have to find her own seat.

“You know, sometimes that’s my kitchen table.”

“I don’t mind. These are old shorts,” she lied again. She lifted the bottle to her lips. Another shot of courage, she thought.

She heard him chuckle, a low rumble. “You’re kind of feisty, aren’t you?”

“Not really, Mr. Spence. I’m your assistant. I’m here to do whatever it takes to help you write your book.”

She waited. She had learned that sometimes, in situations where the client didn’t appreciate professional intervention, reaction was better than proaction. She would bide her time.

Unfortunately, Stephen Spence was the kind of guy who didn’t mind the time spent biding. The hammock rocked gently as he occasionally put one of his big feet against the deck and pushed.

Erin was nearing the bottom of the bottle when she finally gave in. “Do you have any questions?”

“Nope.”

He upended his beer, savoring the last of it. He shook the bottle at her expressively and then set it on the deck beneath him where it joined the other three empties.

Erin exhaled a bit forcefully, blowing wayward tendrils off of her forehead. She lifted her bottle and drank its contents in a series of chugs, then licked the lime

pulp off her lips. After setting her bottle to the side, she jumped off the bar and once again bent over to open the fridge. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Spence lift his sunglasses.

"Are you checking me out?"

"Yes ma'am. You sure have nice legs."

Erin shuffled her feet to the left, giving him a profile of her rear instead of full-on view. "Perv," she muttered. She pulled two more beers from the ice box and, again, slid lime slices into bottles. She walked to the hammock and put the icy beer into his hand. Then she picked up her purse and went back to the bar. She lifted her long neck bottle in salute and took a deep pull before hopping back up.

"I'm told you're having problems meeting your deadlines."

Spence did not reply, just rocked slowly in the hammock, the cold beer cradled in his right hand.

"You do understand why I'm here, don't you Mr. Spence?"

"Spence."

Erin felt a flash of impatience. "You do understand why I'm here, don't you?"

"Yep."

She pulled a small notebook out of her purse and clicked her ink pen, the tip poised over a fresh sheet of paper. "I think the first thing we should do is make a schedule."

Spence snorted softly and raised his beer to his lips.

"You think that's funny?"

He lifted his sunglasses and winked at her. "Honey, I don't have a schedule."

"Well, now you do, Mr. Spence. You've signed a contract to produce a book, and there are deadlines to meet. I'm here to make sure you do. And," she added, "I'm not your 'honey.'"

"Touchy, eh? You married?"

"No. Not that it's any of your business," Erin said, stonily staring across the wetlands.

"Relax, sweetheart. Just don't want some angry husband knocking on the door next week."

"Well, you won't. And don't call me sweetheart, either."

"Don't you like men?"

Erin sputtered angrily. This conversation is getting way out of control, she thought. "Mr. Spence ..."

"Spence."

"Mr. Spence! I'm here to do a job. My sexual preferences are none of your concern."

"So hands off, huh?"

"If I want a relationship, I'll get a puppy," she snarled.

"Hmmm. Sounds like the voice of experience," Spence observed.

Erin frowned. In the distance, the Pamlico Sound shimmered.

* * *

Four beers later Erin was sitting on the deck, her legs stretched in front of her, burning in the mid-afternoon sun. She felt loopy. Her continental breakfast had consisted of a plain bagel and a Styrofoam cup of bitter orange juice. She missed dinner the night before. She began chewing on lime rinds and peeking into the cracks of the deck for stray peanuts.

So far she had learned that Stephen Spence rarely got up before noon, and it was only because he fell asleep in the hammock late last night that she had the pleasure of his company now.

He also talked a bit about Ocracoke, telling her how his family came to the small island.

"I was born here. There's not many of us; about 800 or so year-round residents. My folks came to the Outer Banks in the '60s and opened one of the first dive shops in the area. My dad was in the Navy and learned how to dive. He taught my mom, and they worked together for years."

Erin nodded gently, relaxing at his soft, Southern accent.

"How long have they been married?"

"My dad is gone now. He died a few years ago."

"Oh, sorry to hear that."

Spence sobered. "He died of emphysema. He smoked."

"What about your mom? How is she?"

"She gets along. Still runs the dive shop. She's a tough old lady."

"How old is she?"

"Well, I'm the youngest, and she had me late. She was in her forties, I think. Surprised as hell when I came along. She's in her seventies now, but she doesn't act like it."

Finally, he swung his legs out of the hammock and walked over to his guest. She licked her lips. They felt swollen and more hairy than the kneecaps in front of her. He offered his hand. She put her left hand into his and waited.

"One, two, three."

He pulled her to her feet at "three" and smiled. Devastating, she thought, her gut clenching at his brilliant, white smile.

She leaned against the bar and burped.

"Oh, my gosh! Excuse me," she said. "I'm not used to drinking beer for lunch." She valiantly swallowed the next burp.

"Don't apologize. I'm impressed." Stephen Spence smiled again, disarming her. "Let's go inside. You've had too much sun."

He picked up her purse and slung it over his shoulder. Then he put a hand on her shoulder and steered her towards a sliding glass door. Once inside, her head began to clear. It was at least ten degrees cooler and she spied a large, white sofa.

“Sanctuary!”

“I take it you’re not from the South?”

Erin slumped on the couch and, uninhibited by the alcohol, stretched out and sighed.

“No. I live in D.C. but I’m from Pennsylvania.”

“You tired?”

“Mm hmm.”

“How ‘bout I let you take a nap while I shower? You mind if I leave you alone for awhile?”

Erin snored softly.

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

He stood in the middle of his living room a few moments and watched her sleep. Honey blonde hair spilled out of her ponytail and covered her face. He was tempted to brush it back.

* * *

Twenty minutes later, Erin woke up and realized she had to pee. She sat up and immediately felt woozy. Whoa, she thought, what have I done? No matter; her bladder was more important. She walked slowly down the hall and opened every door she came to. She found the bathroom on the fourth try. She frantically pulled her shorts down and sat on the toilet. Relief was immediate. She put her elbows on her knees and began rubbing her eyes. They were filled with salt.

“Could you hand me that towel?”

Her head snapped up and she looked towards the shower. Stephen Spence, half hidden behind a fogged glass door, had turned off the water and noticed that his guest had found him once more.

She hid her face in her hands and muttered, “Good lord.” She shook her head slightly then, reaching to her left, picked up the towel he had asked for and proffered it in his direction.

“Thanks. ‘Preciate that.”

He closed the shower door and turned away, whistling “How Much Is That Doggie in the Window?”

Erin peeked through her fingers and watched through the foggy glass as he rubbed down with the towel, his back to her. Despite her best intentions, she let her eyes slide down, taking in the wet curls against his neck, the broad expanse of his back tapering into a slim waist. A few seconds later, she was slipping through the door but not before stealing one last peek at the man in the shower. He finished

drying off and wrapped the towel low around his waist. As he stepped out of the shower, she quickly closed the door and sprinted towards the living room.

Spence didn't bother dressing. He followed her into the living room and collapsed into one of the large armchairs. He exhaled loudly.

"That's a chore. You ever notice that taking a shower is a lot like work?"

Erin looked away.

"No. I, um, generally take showers early. I find it very refreshing."

"That so? I don't generally get up early."

Erin laughed. Embarrassed, she attempted to act and converse normally, though she still looked away. "Mr. Spence, I apologize. I didn't mean to intrude. I had to use the bathroom and didn't realize you were there also."

"Spence. Call me Spence."

"I don't think I've gotten off on the right foot here. I ..." Erin trailed off. She stared out the sliding glass doors at the back bay and licked her swollen lips. "If you want me to leave, I understand. I'm sure I can find a hotel on the island."

"Are you thirsty?"

"What?"

"Are you thirsty? You keep licking your lips like you're thirsty."

She bit her lower lip, confirming the fact that they were still there although she still couldn't feel them. Alcohol did that to her. "I am. I could use some water."

He stood up, retied his towel, and walked into the kitchen. Now she was looking.

Erin heard ice clinking into a glass followed by a stream of water. He brought her the glass and, as she reached for it, sat down next to her. She downed it in several large gulps. He watched as her throat jiggled. She lifted the glass to her forehead and closed her eyes.

"It's so hot here. It feels like summer already."

Smiling, Spence took the glass from her.

"Why don't you lie down and relax. You got a little burned out there. You may have sun stroke."

"Really? Is that serious?"

"Can be. Some people die from it. You're probably just dehydrated."

Erin's head swam. She closed her eyes and sank into the cool, white sofa. Spence stood up and, after placing a pillow under her head, went into his bedroom to dress.

* * *

Hours later, Erin woke up. For a moment she felt lost. She blinked to clear her vision then sat up and straightened her clothes. She heard music in the distance and

followed it down the hallway. She found him in his studio, standing at one of his canvasses.

He frowned as he concentrated, then glanced back and forth from the painting to several photographs he had clipped to the corner. A tackle box filled with paint tubes sat on a tall table next to his hip. He had pulled out the tackle box tray and was using it as a palette. The table top also served as a palette with layers of dried oil paint stacked one on top of another like an artistic archaeological dig. He had a brush behind one ear and was chewing on another. He didn't move for several minutes, studying the scene before him. He didn't notice Erin, her footsteps muffled by the carpet.

He glanced first over his shoulder at the sun now sinking into the Pamlico Sound then back at his canvas before he spied her. She didn't move.

"The light's wrong now." He put his brushes in a bottle of linseed oil and the tray on a table behind him, then sauntered towards her. "How ya feeling?"

"Fine. I think I should find a hotel on the island and freshen up."

"Thought you were going to stay here?"

Erin backed up as he came towards the door. "I think you and I need a bit of privacy and maybe a fresh start." Even as the words came out, she realized they did not sound convincing.

"Nah, no worries. I've already put your suitcase in your room. It's at the end of the hall," he said, taking her arm and escorting her to the opposite side of the house. He opened a door and Erin was dazzled by the view from the large windows. The room seemed to float in light as the mirrored closets on the far wall reflected the blues and browns of the wetlands. Centered in the middle of the room was a king-sized bed covered with a champagne silk spread. Minimally decorated, there was no other furniture in the room other than mahogany floating shelves attached to the walls. He moved to one of the mirrored doors and opened it.

"See? Your own bathroom." He emphasized the word "own" and his smile was overly bright.

Erin cringed. She was embarrassed but it was the memory of his wet, tanned, muscled body that flushed her cheek, not his gentle teasing.

"I unpacked for you," he added, stepping towards the built-in dresser and opening the top drawer. He pulled out a lacy bra and swung it around his index finger.

She gasped. He had retrieved her suitcase out of the SUV while she slept and put her clothes away? She blushed furiously. He dropped her bra, closed the drawer and changed the subject.

"Hungry?"

"Yes," she replied, disarmed by the simple question.

"I don't have much in the way of vittles here so we'll go out. I suppose you'll want to take a shower? You might want to lock the door. You know, to keep out intruders."

He stifled a laugh, backed out of her room, and closed the door.

Functioning on auto pilot, Erin stepped into the bathroom. It was exactly like the one she had barged into earlier, except this room had her toiletries on the counter, her shampoo and conditioner in the shower. She opened the mirrored medicine cabinet and found her toothbrush, her floss and even her birth control pills.

She stepped out of the bathroom and into the closet area. Pulling open drawers she found her lingerie, her stockings, shorts and shirts. Her dresses hung on satin-padded hangers. He had left out her red La Rok, a short-waisted cocktail dress with a cut-away back and short tulle skirt. He had even arranged her silver Stuart Weitzmore slingback sandals, with their corsage straps and four-inch heel, beside the dress. So, he had even decided what she should wear tonight.

Erin sat on the bed and fumed at the invasion of her privacy. She thought about calling Patricia. Instead, she went back into the bathroom and turned on the shower.

"It's on," she growled.

Soon Erin was sleek and polished. The skirt of her strapless red dress flared high above her knees in baby-doll fashion. Her high heels made her legs appear long. They were a bit sunburned from her morning on the deck so she decided not to wear stockings. Instead, she slathered them with fragrant lotion. She used makeup sparingly, but the dress called for a bit of war paint.

The casual, tomboy approach hadn't worked. Sharing a few beers on the deck had been a bad idea. Maybe the glamour puss would succeed.

She stepped into the living room, her small silver evening bag in her hand. Spence, sitting in an armchair and toying with the TV remote, whistled.

"I didn't think you'd wear it," he said, referring to her dress.

"Why not? That's why I brought it."

"You clean up nice."

She sashayed into the center of the room and batted her lashes. "Thank you. Wish I could say the same."

It was another lie. Spence was dressed in a pair of tan, baggy pants, a black silk shirt and leather sandals. His wavy dark hair was pushed back and he hadn't bothered to shave. He looked reckless and sexy.

He placed his hand over his heart and tossed his head back, laughing. "Now that's just unkind."

He walked towards Erin. "What can I do to improve your opinion of me?"

"Obey me. We've got a lot of work ahead of us."

Spence bowed. "As you wish."

She smiled and turned towards what she hoped was the front door. They didn't speak as they walked outside. Without a word, Spence whisked her into his arms and waded through the tall grass towards her SUV.

Erin gasped at the touch of his warm hand cupping her bare legs while the other snaked around her back and curved under her arm. His fingertips brushed the side of her breast.

"Hey! Put me down."

"Quit complaining," Spence said. "You'd never make it through the field in those shoes."

Erin flinched as his warm breath caressed her cheek. She closed her eyes and held her purse tight.

Seconds later, Spence set her on her feet at the passenger door and held out his hand. Erin shrugged; he knew the town best, so she handed him the keys and he opened the door. He smiled as she maneuvered into the high vehicle, then obligingly tucked her short skirt under her thigh and closed the door. He climbed behind the wheel, started the truck and wound his way back towards town.

A few minutes later, Spence pulled into the shell-packed parking lot of a local restaurant. "You like seafood?"

"No," she said sniffing at the tantalizing aroma of grilling meat. "But I do like steak."

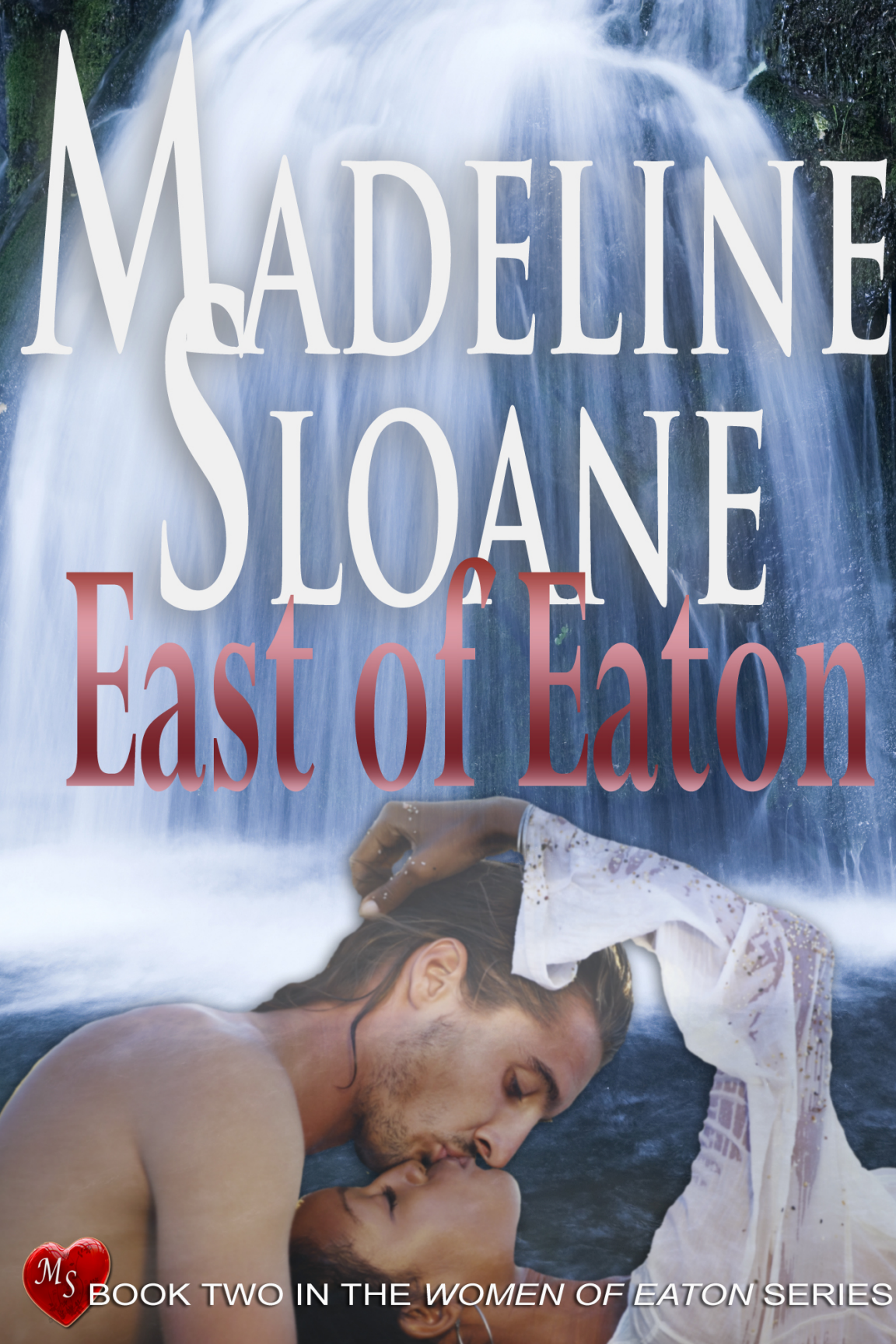
She didn't wait for him to open her door. Instead, she slid down carefully, placing one high heel on the running board while the other floated inches from the ground.

"You need help?" Spence asked, keeping his eyes on her thighs as her dress rode high.

"No thank you; I'm fine," she said as she dropped, groping for the door handle.

"Yes you are," he agreed softly.

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MADELINE SLOANE

East of Eaton



BOOK TWO IN THE WOMEN OF EATON SERIES

Women of Eaton: WEST WIND

WOMEN OF EATON SERIES
EXCERPT

EAST
of
EATON

A CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE BY

MADELINE SLOANE

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Madeline Sloane is a writer with more than 25 years experience in communications. With ten published history books under her belt, she is new to the world of romantic fiction but finding it just as fun to research. In addition to writing, she is a college instructor whose interests include traveling, history and boating. Rounding out her list of Top Five interests are reading and cooking. On the web at www.MadelineSloane.com

ABOUT THE SERIES: WOMEN OF EATON

The first novel in the “Women of Eaton” romance series, “Distracted” introduces readers to Eaton, a fictional, idyllic town tucked away in the mountains of Pennsylvania. Several of the characters in “Distracted” are featured in other books such as “East of Eaton,” “West Wind” and “Deadline.” Look for many citizens of Eaton to return in new stories that explore and celebrate romance.

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Women of Eaton: WEST WIND

To Ivan

CHAPTER ONE

Erica leaned against the kitchen sink, a scrap of paper clenched in one hand, the ringing telephone in the other.

A sleepy voice rumbled through the line. "Hello?"

"This is Erica Moore. My daughter and your son have gone out tonight without my permission. I want her home immediately," she said, each word clipped with impatience.

"My son?"

"My daughter works with Brian at the pool. I don't mind their friendship, but she's only sixteen and I won't have her running around with boys."

"Uhhhh"

Infuriated by the man's soft exhalation, she curled her left hand into a fist imagining she could reach through the wires. She heard a rustling on the line, as if the man were rolling over in bed.

"Look, Mrs. ..., what did you say your name is?"

"Moore. My daughter is out with your son. Brian needs to bring her home now!" she reiterated, pacing the kitchen floor.

"Mrs. Moore...."

"Ms."

"Okay, Ms. Moore," he corrected himself with a trace of sarcasm, "Brian is not my son."

She rolled her eyes. "May I speak with his father, then?"

"I'm afraid not. His parents are on a missionary trip to Africa. Brian is my nephew."

"Well, if I can't speak with his father or mother, I'd like to talk to him. Does he have a cell phone?"

"Uh, maybe. I think so. I've never had to call him. When he comes home, I'll talk to him." The man yawned.

Erica held the receiver away from her ear and stared at it disbelievingly for several seconds, then raged, "Don't be ridiculous! I've just told you that my daughter is in trouble and you're going to wait for him to 'come home' before you do anything?"

"I'm confused? Is she on a date or is she in trouble?"

"Both! She is too young to be out with Brian."

"What would you like me to do?"

“Jump off a cliff, you jerk! I’ll handle this.”

She slammed the telephone into its wall mount and grabbed her car keys from a hook by the bulletin board. She stepped into the foyer and opened the front door of the Colonial home of her childhood. She paused, then turned towards the stairwell. “Dad, I’ll be back,” she yelled up the stairs. “I’m going to find Daisy. I’ve got my cell phone if she gets home before me.”

Walter Moore poked his head out the door of his upstairs study, his fingers caught between the pages of a book, holding his place. “Is everything alright?”

“No. Everything’s not alright. Daisy is out on a date without permission. I’m going to find that boy and wring his little neck,” she said, her voice rising in frustration. “Then I’m going to wring hers.”

“Honey, calm down. She’s fine, probably having a good time.”

“There is no way I’m letting her go out with some boy she hardly knows.”

“Well, how else is she supposed to get to know him?”

“Dad!” she shrieked. “Errrrhhh!”

Slamming the door closed behind her, she stomped down the dark sidewalk to her car. Once inside, she turned the key and gunned the engine. She slid the transmission into reverse and started backing out when another car turned into the driveway. She hit her brakes, the small car rocking.

In the rear - view mirror, she could see the high, tight headlights of a Jeep. She also could see two silhouettes. Recognizing Daisy’s long hair, she shoved the gearshift back into park, yanked the keys from the ignition and jumped out of the car. She strode to the driver’s ragtop door and rapped hard on the window. The young driver unzipped the window.

She flashed him what she considered her “evil eye,” then stood on her tiptoes and glared at her daughter. She pointed at Daisy, her finger less than an inch from the boy’s face. “You, get in the house now.”

“And you,” she said, pointing between the boy’s astonished eyes, “get out of my yard and don’t come back.”

Daisy bowed her head. Brian’s knuckles turned white against the Jeep’s steering wheel as he stared straight ahead, his mouth full of cotton. Erica stormed back to the house.

At the steps, she turned and bellowed, “Now!” then went inside, slamming the door.

She leaned against the stairwell, one hand draped on the banister, and waited for her daughter. Walt once again came to the top of the steps, shook his head sadly, then slipped back into his den.

Mere seconds passed before Daisy erupted through the door, her dark eyes wide and focused on her mother. “Mom? What’s wrong? Why did you embarrass me that way?”

Her voice, sweet and timid, wavered. Her eyes brightened with unshed tears. A quiet, artistic girl, Daisy avoided confrontations and spent most of her time sketching, reading or working on her computer. Her bedroom served as her art studio and her sanctuary.

As a child, schoolmates taunted her with jeers ranging from “shy” to “snob.” Now entering her junior year of high school, she was a confident and beautiful young woman. The jeers and taunts ceased, giving way to awe and envy.

She is my most precious treasure; I can't lose her, Erica thought as studied her daughter's frowning face, so much like her own. “Where were you and who gave you permission to go out?”

“We were at the ice cream parlor. Brian gave me a ride home from the pool, and we stopped for an ice cream. That's all.”

“Didn't you realize that I would be here, worrying sick about you when you didn't come home? I went to the pool to check on you and they said you had gone off with that boy. I've been sitting here waiting nearly two hours for you to come home.”

“I'm sorry. We ran into a couple of kids from school and we sat around talking. I didn't realize the time.”

“You're sorry. Well, that's just fine. You're also grounded. You can go to work and that's all. You're to come straight home and no more rides with boys.”

Tears flashed in Daisy's eyes. “Mom! That's not fair. I just had an ice cream with a nice guy. We're not going to do anything wrong.”

“Exactly. With you at home, I don't have to worry that you'll be doing something you shouldn't. Now go to your room.”

Erica turned her back on her daughter, the conversation over.

Daisy glared at her mother then stomped up the stairs, stifling sobs. She went into her grandfather's den.

Walt slid his reading glasses down his nose, peeking over the rims at his granddaughter. She sat on the worn, plaid footstool by his chair, a tear sliding down the side of her nose. His heart ached to comfort her. “Hi, honey.”

Daisy immediately turned to her ally. “I can't believe her, Pappy. She grounded me. I didn't do anything wrong and now I can't go anywhere.”

Walt squirmed in his chair. “Your mom needs to know where you are all of the time. Why didn't you call?”

“I didn't realize how long we were out. We were having so much fun, talking to some kids. I never go out and the first time I do, she reacts this way. She's crazy!”

Daisy kicked the leg of the maple side table and the footstool rocked precariously. She crossed her legs, Indian-style, put her elbows on her knees and curled her fists against her cheeks. Her long, blonde hair shrouded her face.

“She's not crazy. She's worried about you. Your mom has had a hard life and...”

“So because she’s had a hard life, I have to pay for it? I’m not her. I’m not going to go out and get pregnant.”

Daisy, crying in earnest, ran to her room and slammed the door.

Walt sighed, put his book on his side table, walked heavily down the stairs and went into the kitchen. It was difficult being the only man in the house, especially since the women could be emotional and, lately, feuding.

His daughter stood at the kitchen counter swabbing the stainless steel sink with abrasive cleanser. Walt could tell she was still annoyed by her quick jerks as she rinsed the sponge, furiously squeezing the soap from its blue pores.

“Erica,” he said. “I try not to interfere with you and Daisy, but I think tonight you went a bit too far.”

“I don’t think so,” she said. She dropped the sponge and began flinging dishes into the open dishwasher.

“Don’t break that,” he cautioned as she slammed a pot lid against a glass bowl. He continued, “Daisy is right; she’s not you and she’s not going to do anything stupid.”

Erica turned to face her father, her hands on her hips. “That’s right. I was stupid, wasn’t I? I’ve lived with my stupidity every day for the past seventeen years. And you know what, Dad? I’m not sorry. I know she’s the best thing that could ever have happened to me, even if she did come along at the wrong time. But this isn’t the life I want for my daughter. I want her to enjoy her youth, finish high school and go to college.”

“You finished high school and you went to college,” he pointed out.

“Sure, I graduated from high school with a baby in the audience. I had to go to college and work a full-time job to support her.”

Erica sighed and turned back to dishwasher, this time her movements were slower, her anger ebbing. “I know, you were there and you did everything you could to help. I’ve always appreciated that, Dad. And you know I love you, but sometimes I wonder if Mom had still been alive, if I had had a woman watching out for me, I might not have gone boy crazy.”

The comment stung, but Walt didn’t show it.

“You weren’t boy crazy,” he said. “You had one boyfriend. I wish I had been there more, but you were such an independent child. You never seemed to need my help. It’s not your fault, honey, it’s mine. I was too easy going.”

“This is exactly why I’m freaking out here, Dad. I’m not going to let my daughter out of my sight anymore. I don’t care. She’s not going to date until she’s out of college. Final answer.”

“That’s silly, Erica. You know you can’t keep her under your thumb.”

“Well, I can try.”

Walt shrugged and slowly walked back up the stairs to his study. He understood his daughter’s fears and he, more than anyone, knew they were justified. He also

knew she couldn't avoid the chaos, the passion and the unpredictability of life. He said his piece and hoped some of it would sink in. If he pushed, he knew his daughter's contrarian nature would overcome her common sense.

Erica turned on the dishwasher and locked the back door. She moved through the house checking doors and windows, her nightly routine. She opened the front door and called for her cat.

"Here kitty, kitty. Jasper."

A faint tinkle preceded Jasper's dash from the bushes at the front of the house. A shorthaired cat, he sported a black-and-white coat that reminded Erica of a tuxedo. His red collar and bell completed his dapper attire. Jasper daintily jumped the steps until he reached Erica's ankles. Nearly 18 pounds, the fat cat was friendliest when he hoped she had a treat.

"Let's go to bed, Jasper."

Erica opened the door and held it for Jasper, who ungratefully took his time deciding to come in. He sat down, his huge belly bowling out in front of him, and licked his chest.

Erica put her foot on the big cat's back and gave it a push. "Move it, fatso."

His ears flattened and he leaned back disapprovingly, then fell sideways. Ever arrogant, Jasper stood up. His tail twitched twice and he stalked into the house.

Back in the kitchen, he forgot her disrespect and winnowed between her feet. Erica gave him a spoonful of milk, then headed up the steps to her bedroom.

Once in her room, she kicked off her sandals and unbuttoned her shirt. She moved into the private, adjoining bathroom and tossed the shirt in the laundry basket. Her jeans followed along with her bra. She turned on the water in the shower and while it the water heated, she brushed her teeth.

She paused, studying the mirror. She tried to imagine herself as others saw her, but couldn't. She'd stopped thinking of herself as a woman, much less an attractive one, long ago. She spent so much time de-sexing herself, being a mother first, a daughter second, a businessperson third.

When she selected clothing, it was based upon durability and comfort. She never bought anything that needed dry-cleaning. She rarely wore makeup, either, preferring tinted skin moisturizer, a little mascara and neutral lip-gloss.

She felt she had been in limbo for years, waiting for something, or someone, to happen before she could begin her "real life." Meanwhile the years slipped away. She forged ahead, earning a college degree and working as a researcher at a local law firm while she saved money for her own business.

And she raised her child as best she could. Living with Walt was a blessing. Not only did she have her father, but Daisy had her grandfather and a built-in nanny. Widowed for nearly twenty years, Walt cherished his small family. He retired from his job as a public school teacher when Daisy was born so his daughter could work and then go to college. Once Daisy began Kindergarten, Walt went back to

substitute teaching at local schools. It was a good arrangement and Daisy helped to heal his grieving heart.

Erica stepped into the hot shower and steam enveloped her. She concentrated only on the world within the large, claw foot tub. After letting the spray stream over her head for a few moments, she picked up the shampoo and sudsed her wavy, dark brown hair. She had a habit of running her hand through her hair, pushing it from her eyes, which precluded her from keeping a specific style. She kept it informal and shoulder length.

She squirted shower gel onto the bath puff and soaped her long legs. *I'm getting soft*, she thought, as she ran the puff over her calf. Erica didn't exercise; she walked during her lunch breaks. When she was younger, especially after Daisy was born, she jogged and worked out at the gym, but in recent years, she preferred walking. She found it meditative, relaxing. As a result, her body lost its lean, muscular definition. She became more rounded. She considered herself a few pounds overweight, but she didn't let it bother her. Not too much.

Finishing her shower, Erica turned off the water and stepped out of the tub. She dried off quickly and grabbed her favorite nightgown off a hook on the bathroom wall. She slathered moisturizer on her face and hands, petroleum jelly on her lips and exited the steamy bathroom.

She didn't have a television in her bedroom; she preferred to read at night. Like her father, books were her passion. She enjoyed reading about others and their vicarious adventures, while keeping her own life ordinary.

But all of that was about to change, she mused. Last month she signed the papers for her own business – she now owned a bookstore. The former owners of Sullivan's Books, an elderly couple retiring to Florida, ran the shop for generations. It broke their hearts, the woman confided in Erica, that their own children weren't interested in operating the store and, in fact, moved from the area in search of greener, more exciting pastures. For Erica, it was the fulfillment of her dream. She scrimped and saved money for a down payment, and then scrimped more to expand and renovate the shop.

She fell asleep, her paperback unread on her pillow, dreaming about the grand opening of her new bookstore.

CHAPTER TWO

Daisy cried herself to sleep. When she woke up, her face was puffy and sad. Erica stirred half-and-half into a cup of coffee and felt a bit guilty when a listless Daisy walked into the kitchen. Erica tried her standard bribe.

“Want to go shopping later this afternoon? I’ve got to go to Peachy’s for some things for the store.”

Peachy’s, the heart of Eaton despite its location on the outskirts of the town, served the community needs with its various shops and businesses. Owned by the same family since 1842, Peachy began as a general store. During the past century, it evolved to include everything from goldfish to gasoline, and provided services ranging from haircuts to hot tub repairs. Each generation of the Peachy family added to the business, expanding it as their various interests and talents emerged.

A few years earlier, one of those “big box” stores opened on the other side of town, but lasted only a year. After that, a big discount chain moved into the abandoned building. It closed too. There was no competing with the hometown oddity.

Peachy’s never moved into book selling, mostly because the Sullivan family already provided the service. As much as Peachy’s had a monopoly in some things, they were neighbors first

Morose, Daisy sat at the small wooden table. She didn’t look up from the bowl of cereal she’d poured for herself. “I’ve got to work at the pool until seven. Thanks, anyway.”

“Well, I can wait until later. We can go tonight after dinner, or we can eat out, if you want.”

Daisy knew the routine well. Her volatile mother would get angry, yell, make her cry, then try to make up. Daisy allowed it most of the time. Throughout the years, she had amassed quite a lot of music, clothes, art supplies and books by milking the remorse.

Erica shrugged and picked up her pocketbook and car keys. She knew the routine, as well, although she’d never admit it. “I’ll see you tonight, then. You remember to come home right after work; no side trips.”

“I know,” Daisy said, annoyed.

Erica drove slowly through the neighborhood, heading for town. Summer was in full swing and children rode bicycles and played ball in the streets. She decided to take a slight detour and drive by the community pool at the corner of High and Elm streets. She paused at the stop sign and peered through the tall, chain-link fence. She spotted Brian in his lifeguard's chair, perched above the loud mob of children. He had zinc oxide on his nose, sunglasses over his eyes and a whistle in his mouth. He blew a couple of quick bursts and pointed at a little boy. "Quit splashing, Franklin, or you'll have to sit out."

A little girl came up to his post, crying. He jumped down and put his hand on her shoulder. "What's wrong, Jody? You hurt your finger?"

Erica watched as he examined at the little girl's hand. A few moments later, he kissed it. She threw her arms around his neck and squeezed, then sprinted to the shallow end and jumped into the pool, splashing Franklin. Brian put his fists on his hips and shook his head.

"So, he's a nice guy," Erica fumed to herself. "He's also a troublemaker."

A car honked behind her. How long had she been sitting at the intersection, watching Brian? She waved her hand in apology and, checking both ways, drove on.

Once downtown, she parked behind the bookstore. *My bookstore*, she thought proudly as she turned the key in the lock and pushed open the metal back door. She flipped on the lights in the long tunnel that ran behind her business. It served as a storage area with boxes of books stacked along on wall and furniture jumbled in a corner.

She walked through the shop, turning on lights, music and her computerized cash register. She arrived a half-hour before her new staff, enjoying the quiet.

She'd negotiated with the owners to sell her the entire building. She didn't want to relocate anyone; she wanted to become their landlord and spread her business into empty storefronts. She planned to tear down walls and enlarge the existing shop. She also intended to use the empty second floor. Or, part of it at least. She talked with a contractor about raising the ceiling and converting half of the second floor into a spacious, open loft. For more than 125 years, customers funneled through the cramped bookstore. Erica felt that it needed to stretch if it were to survive.

She admired the layout and additional amenities that large bookstore franchises offered, and that was her goal. The stacks would be roomy and she would place comfortable chairs and sofas throughout the shop to encourage reading. Her plans included adding a small coffee and pastry shop, a stage for acoustic concerts and book readings, a music and film section, and even a playroom for toddlers.

Erica wanted her bookstore to be a destination, a place where people could spend hours, if they wanted, browsing and reading. She felt certain the business

would thrive; the town couldn't support large chain stores, and hers was the only bookstore within a forty-mile radius.

She would offer free downloads of electronic books, also, encouraging readers to come to the bookstore with their eReaders and "shop" online the comfort of the store's new cozy café, which she named "Sullivans" in homage to the longtime previous owners. She wouldn't let the "digital revolution" cripple her new business, as it had so many others. She knew that shopping for books could be a sensory experience and she intended to surround shoppers with sights, smells, sounds and textures that induced them to spend money on one thing or the other.

It helped that the once-depressed downtown was evolving. It boasted several small art galleries, chic new restaurants and even a nightclub. Although tucked away in upstate Pennsylvania, it was becoming a popular place to live. Quiet, pastoral, historic, the small city of Eaton was a safe place to raise children. Its proximity to major cities and the advent of high-speed telecommunications also helped. More people could work at home, via the Internet and cellular technology.

Before she took her business loan to the bank, she sat down with Robert Hall, her attorney and former employer. Their friendship began while she worked at his law firm.

"Do you realize how many people live in this region?" he asked. "According to demographics I've read recently, there are more than 300,000 single, college-educated people within a one hundred-mile radius. You're talking about people with a disposable income of \$6 billion. They don't have children, they enjoy art and literature and they don't mind spending money on what they enjoy. I think that demographic alone guarantees your new bookstore will succeed. That is, if you are willing to make the changes needed to improve it both physically and thematically."

"What do you mean, thematically?" Erica asked.

"Your bookstore needs to take into account topics that matter to all people, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity or sexual preference. You need to cater to all people not only adding diversity but emphasizing it. It needs to be sophisticated. Raise the bar with your décor, your book titles, your beverages and desserts."

"Wow. That's going to cost a lot more than I anticipated." Eric chewed her bottom lip.

Robert spread his hands. "I understand. But, you don't have to worry about going it alone. If you're interested, I'd like to invest in your business."

"Robert! Really?"

"Yes, Erica. We've known each other for a long time. I know you and I trust you. You're an ethical woman and you're driven to succeed. I would certainly consider investing in a business that would improve this city and provide me with hours of enjoyment. I love a good bookstore and I'm sick of having to go to a major city to patronize one."

Not only did Robert understand and appreciate her vision, he wanted to be a part of it. Erica was thrilled with the suggestion. She knew how dedicated he was to his own business. If he were only one-tenth as dedicated to hers, she couldn't miss.

They spent hours going over renovation plans. He enjoyed recommending contractors, interior designers, booksellers and even chefs. If she needed it, he had a client who could provide it.

With Robert's support, Erica secured the loan she needed and at a great interest rate. Last week she signed the papers for her bookstore, "East of Eaton," a play on the book title, "East of Eden" by John Steinbeck. Robert suggested the name not for its biblical reference, but because the historic building she purchased was east of Main Street.

"You can't lose with a name like that," he enthused.

"You better be right," Erica replied. "Or we're both cursed, just like Cain."

She worried about renaming the store; for more than one hundred years, it had been known throughout the community as Sullivan's. But the Sullivans were now living in sunny Florida and Erica agreed with Robert that a fresh start deserved a fresh name.

Today, the contractors would finish tearing down the last wall. They sectioned the area temporarily with sheets of clear plastic to contain the grime and concrete dust. For the past three weeks, Erica kept ahead of the contractors, packing books into boxes, shuttling them into the back tunnel or to the far side of the shop, safe from the debris.

She checked the time. She expected her assistant manager, June Duval, any moment. A widow who worked at the bookstore for 28 years, Mrs. Duval agreed to stay on when the Sullivans retired. Much to her surprise, she enjoyed Erica's enthusiasm and plans.

Mrs. Duval also adored Robert. A stylish gallant, he often escorted her to the symphony and the occasional art gallery opening.

Robert enjoyed discussing books and films with her and appreciated feminine company without the complications younger women entailed. "You have no idea how intelligent that woman is," he once told Erica. "She's read every book she's ever sold. She's a walking encyclopedia."

"She's had time," Erica responded. "She's devoted her life to this shop. I'm just glad she agreed to stay and that retiring to Florida doesn't interest her yet."

At a quarter 'til nine, Mrs. Duval inserted her shop key into the brand new front door. Made of heavy oak with twelve beveled glass panes, the door and the hardware were antique reproductions. As the door swung open, it struck an old-fashioned bell. Erica raised her head at the sound. She spent a lot of time picking

out the right bell. It had to be musical and faint; not the kind that disturbed people browsing or reading, but would catch the attention of the person at the counter.

Her eyes lit up as the elfin, silver-haired woman gently shut the door and flipped the “Closed” sign.

East of Eaton opened for the day.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Erica said. “I have to run to the convenience store. We’re out of sugar and creamer. I’m sorry; I was too distracted this morning to pick it up on my way.”

Mrs. Duval’s face was serene, nearly unlined and belying her age. At sixty, she could have passed for fifty any day. “You go along, dear. I know you can’t drink your coffee without it. Don’t worry. I’ll be fine. The contractors know what to do and until the shop is finished, I’m just here to dust, pack and sort.” She wryly added, “Then dust some more and unpack.”

“I hear you,” Erica said, pulling her purse from underneath the sales counter. “I’ll only be a minute.”

She walked out the door, head bent as she fished in her purse for her wallet, and collided with a man on the sidewalk. The impact knocked her to the ground. She sat there, stunned. Her open purse spilled its contents onto the walk. The man staggered several steps before stopping against a large flowerpot, part of the city’s beautification project.

“Excuse me,” he said, gathering his wits first. “Are you alright?” He knelt by Erica and offered his hand. “Can you stand up?”

Looking into his eyes, she wasn’t sure if she was dizzy because of the fall or because she literally bumped into the most handsome man she had ever seen. Well, not as handsome as Robert, but She blinked and struggled to her feet.

Brushing off the back of her pants and her elbows, she apologized. “I’m sorry. I was trying to hurry and I didn’t see you.”

She squatted to pick up her purse, shoving her wallet, keys, cell phone and ink pens into the cavity. Her lip moisturizer had rolled away and she stretched to retrieve it. Their hands met, his closing around the tube first.

“Here; let me help you,” he said putting a hand under her elbow and gently lifting her.

Erica found herself staring into concerned blue eyes, unable to speak. His eyes were deep set and crowned with thick, dark eyebrows. *How unfair*, she thought, noticing his long, lush lashes. Dark brown hair curled against his collar, sweeping his cheek as he bent over. He hadn’t shaved for a couple days and on him, scruffy was definitely sexy. His mouth was wide, his lips thin, his nose straight and narrow. Taken separately, his handsome features seemed delicate, but combined for a dreamy, poetic look.

“Wow,” she said, dazed.

“What?” he asked.

Erica blinked. Had she spoken aloud? "I think you should sit down for a minute."

He took her hand and led her to a nearby park bench, another aspect of the city's beautification plan. When she sat, he crouched in front of her and examined her eyes, first one and then the other. "Your pupils seem okay. I don't think you have a concussion. How many fingers do you see?"

He waved his hands in front of her face. She blinked and tried to focus. "Seven? No, eight. You know, most people generally hold up two."

"I think you're fine," he said, laughing.

He sat on the bench next to her and gestured towards the bookstore. "What's going on? Is this place closing?"

Erica felt herself flush as his jean-clad leg brushed against hers. "No. We're renovating. We'll be open to the public in another week."

"What happened to the old couple who used to run it?"

"They retired to Florida. I bought the building and I'm expanding."

He whistled. "You mean this entire building will be a bookstore?"

"Well, almost. The florist is staying and so is the goldsmith at the end of the block. I'm taking out a few walls so there will be more space between the stacks and room for browsing. I want shoppers to stay for a long time. I'm also adding a coffee shop and on weekends we'll have live music."

Her face glowed as she told him her plans and he found himself studying her as she spoke. Erica blushed at his scrutiny.

"Sounds great. But what about my book fix? I need something now."

She bit her lip. "It's a bit of a mess in there right now. We've been moving all of the books from one side of the shop to the other so the contractors can work faster. What are you looking for?"

"I had my eye on a book in the history section."

"Oh well, that side hasn't been touched yet. I guess I can let you in, if you promise to be careful and stay away from falling hammers."

"Falling women are my specialty."

She blushed again and stood up quickly. Slinging her purse over her shoulder, she walked over to the shop and opened the door. The bell rang softly. "Enter," she said, her back against the door.

In three long strides, he was next to her, his arm snaking behind her head to hold the door. Eye level with his collar, she was fascinated by the dark curls at his throat. She breathed in his aftershave and her eyes closed. It had a dizzying effect and she began to sway.

"Hey, hey. I thought you were okay. Maybe you have a concussion?"

Her eyes snapped opened and she rubbed her face with her hand. "I'm fine. I guess I just stood up quickly. Head rush," she explained. She stepped through the door and flung her purse on the counter.

Mrs. Duval stopped packing a box and made her way towards the front of the shop after hearing the bell ring. "That was quick." She glanced at the man behind her employer. "Good morning, Clay. We're not really open to the public yet."

"I know, June. But I ran into ...," smiling, he turned to Erica, his hand outstretched. "I'm sorry. I don't know your name."

She slid her hand into his and he gave it a light squeeze. She froze. His smile faltered and he lifted an eyebrow quizzically.

"Erica," June supplied. "Clayton Knight, this is Erica Moore. She's the new owner of East of Eaton. She is quite capable of speech, though apparently not at the moment."

He released her hand slowly and his lips turned upward, this time lighting his eyes. "Have we met?"

Erica recovered her wits. "Yes. Five minutes ago outside. I'm the person who ran into you."

He laughed easily. "No. I mean before. Your name sounds familiar."

"No. I would have remembered you."

Clay and Erica's eyes locked for several seconds until he broke the connection. He studied the scaffolds, the compressors, the curtains of plastic sheeting. "East of Eaton? That's a terrific name. Where are your workers?"

"They'll be here later this morning. Mrs. Duval and I are shuffling books around today, making sure they aren't damaged during the construction phase. The history section is right over there. There are a lot of boxes in the aisle, but you can move anything that's in your way."

"Thanks. I will."

Erica watched the tall, slender man saunter to the far end of the shop, then she turned to Mrs. Duval. "You know him!"

It was not a question. Mrs. Duval was mildly amused. "Of course I do. I've worked here nearly all of my life. Clay is one of our best customers. Not only does he shop here regularly, but he sends his students our way also."

"Students?"

"Clay is a history professor at Marshall College. He's also one of our local authors."

Erica found herself peeking at him as he shoved cartons of books out of his way and rested a hand on the top of the bookshelf. A couple of the top buttons of his white shirt were undone. His jeans were faded and snug. He also wore a jacket, a comfortable, black blazer that gave him some semblance of formality. A casual chic style. She gave him four stars on the hunk meter. *Hell, I'll give him five*, she thought.

He glanced at the women and caught both of them staring at him. He winked. "Thanks. Found it," he called, a book in his hand. He opened it and flipped through the pages.

Erica turned to Mrs. Duval and stammered, “Oh, my.”

“Yes; he is a sweetie, isn’t he?”

“Is he married?” Erica’s eyes followed his every gesture.

“No. I don’t think so. I really only know the basics. He’s not much of a talker. Guess he does enough of that with his job. Do you like him?”

“I don’t know him but, wow, who wouldn’t like him?” Mrs. Duval changed the subject. “Where’s the cream? You didn’t go to the store?”

“No. It can wait.”

“Your coffee can wait? This is a first.”

Erica dragged her eyes from the lone customer. “You’re right. I’m acting like a fool. Guess I’ll try this again,” she said, picking up her purse and stepping from behind the counter.

“Bye,” she said, peeking over her shoulder. She caught a smile and a wave from the new customer. Erica ducked her head and walked out the door. She made a mental note to double-check that the history section of East of Eaton was well stocked.

It’s just good business, she told herself.

CHAPTER THREE

“I’m so excited. We’re only a week away from our grand opening. Everything is on schedule and the place is gorgeous. I couldn’t have done this without you.”

Robert reached across the table and tweaked her nose. They were having lunch at Encounters, a new bistro on Main Street. Stylish and slightly expensive, it offered an alternative for the lunch crowd tired of the usual submarine sandwich or burger. Lunch at Encounters was Robert’s treat. Twice a week they met to talk about the business. On Tuesday, it was Erica’s treat and Robert endured pedestrian cuisine at the Eaton City Deli.

It was nearly three o’clock and the lunch crowd had long faded. Robert preferred to eat later and Erica admitted it made sense. The service was better and the food freshly made. They dined on the brick patio nestled between Robert’s law office and the restaurant. Lush ivy and hanging baskets of summer blooms gave diners a sense of privacy and the bistro became a popular, romantic spot for young professionals.

Clay Knight, strolling down the sidewalk with books under his arm, spied Erica. “Hello again.”

She her heart skipped a beat as he paused, resting a booted foot on the wrought iron rail that separated the patio from the street traffic. This time he wore a black, faded T-shirt with a popular motorcycle logo. A chain dangled from the belt loop of his black jeans and anchored his wallet. He still hadn’t shaved and he had the beginnings of a mustache and goatee. The bad boy effect was devastating.

“Hello,” she replied.

Robert watched Erica, bemused by her breathlessness.

“It’s a beautiful day, isn’t it?” He gazed at the clear blue sky.

“Uh huh.”

Confused, Clay turned back to Erica. “I’m sorry; don’t you remember me? You are the owner of the bookstore, aren’t you? Didn’t we meet on Monday?”

“Uh huh,” Erica repeated.

“Well, guess I’ll see you around,” he said nonchalantly and walked away.

Robert leaned forward and snapped his fingers in Erica’s face, breaking the spell. “What just happened there?”

She realized she had been holding her breath. She inhaled deeply and blinked. “Robert, I’m not sure.”

"Do you know that hood?"

"Not really. Well, we met the other day. He came to the bookstore."

"So he's a customer?"

"Yes, and he's not a hood. He's a college professor."

"He certainly doesn't dress like one," Robert said, a slight frown darkening his handsome face. "Are you that unresponsive to all of the customers? I mean, 'uh huh' isn't exactly the type of greeting I'd expect from you."

"No. You're right. I don't know what happened. He seems so different from the last time I saw him." She toyed with her salad, pushing field greens around her plate, separating the sugared walnuts from the ripe strawberry slices.

Robert lifted his glass of wine and watched her over the rim. He sipped and slowly swirled the deep red pinot noir, watching as it formed "legs," a sign of a good wine. "Are you interested in him?"

"What? No, Robert. He's a customer. I'm just a bit preoccupied, you know, with all of the construction."

She gathered her composure and launched into a description of the new bay windows, but Robert could tell her mind was somewhere else.

Clay walked the six blocks back to campus, crossing the nearly empty parking lot. A breeze swayed the trees lining the sidewalks. It was a peaceful scene. He bounded up the Humanities Building stairs, two at a time, then headed down the long corridor to his office. As he unlocked the door, he pulled a note from his small bulletin board.

"Clay! Why haven't you called me? Sophia."

He crumbled the note and tossed it in the waste can, then put his armload of books on his desk and flipped on his computer screen. Settling into his desk chair, he opened a computer file, the draft of his latest manuscript. He opened one of his new books and, after reading a few pages, began to type.

"Hey, how's it going?"

Derek Herman, another professor in the history department, stood in his doorway. Derek was a good friend and a good instructor. Tall with curly black hair, he specialized in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, and his students enjoyed his lectures. He kept the debates lively, dividing his classes into capitalists versus workers.

It didn't really matter what the students felt. Their job was to learn and develop a mindset that enabled them to argue each situation logically. As a result, Derek held his class at the end of the hall so others wouldn't be disturbed when "discussions" escalated into yelling matches. He never apologized; his students were passionate and prepared.

Clay rocked in his desk chair. "Great. I've got three chapters finished."

“You are going to make your deadline?”

“Oh yeah. I have nothing to do this summer but research and write. My nephew’s here, but he’s a great kid and he’s older, so I don’t have any interruptions. Though, he has been using my Jeep and leaving me on the Boot Express,” he said, lifting a leg and laughing.

“Well, if you need a lift, let me know.”

“I don’t mind; I’m mostly either here or downtown. I only live a mile away, so it’s no big deal.”

“Okay. See ya.” Derek patted the doorframe twice and moved down the hall to his own office.

Summer was a quiet time on campus; most of the students were gone and the department secretaries worked short shifts. It was too quiet so Clay put a CD in his computer. After a few moments, music erupted from his speakers. His latest book was about Reconstruction in the South, so he reckoned it was appropriate to play Southern rock. He leaned back and closed his eyes as the first guitar riffs of Lynyrd Skynyrd’s long intro to “Free Bird” began. Clay reached for his keyboard and started typing while he sang softly, “... would you still remember me....”

His fingers paused and he found himself thinking about the woman from the bookstore. She hadn’t recalled him today when he saw her at the restaurant on Main Street. She’d been having lunch with a hotshot. He wasn’t sure why, but it disturbed him. He leaned back in his chair, put a boot on his desk and drummed a pencil on his knee. At the end of the Southern anthem, Derek bellowed from the end of the hall, “Play it again!”

CHAPTER FOUR

By Sunday afternoon, peace had been restored in the Moore household. Erica and Daisy shopped at Peachy's, trying on clothes and shoes and having lunch at Sheila Peachy's new cafe. Daisy came home with two large shopping bags.

"Remember, those are school clothes," her mother said as they walked into the house. Daisy grinned as she trotted up the stairs, knowing it was important for Erica to pretend she hadn't been bribing her daughter. Once in her room, she carelessly tossed the bags in the corner and sat at her small desk. She flipped open her laptop computer and typed a few words then waited.

"Hi, where have you been?" Brian typed back through the computer's instant messenger.

"Shopping. Want to come over?"

"Can't. Uncle's got the car."

"When will he be back?"

"Soon; I'll let you know."

They continued chatting, Daisy's fingers flying over the keys. She heard her mother calling from downstairs.

She typed "brb," shorthand for "be right back," then she leaned back in her chair turning her head towards her open bedroom door.

"What?" she yelled.

"Come to the top of the stairs, please," Erica called.

Sighing dramatically, Daisy padded into the hall. Her grandfather also poked his head out his study door, a book tucked under his arm.

"Who is she talking to?" he asked Daisy.

"Me, I guess." She leaned over the stair rail. "What, Mom?"

"I'm going to the bookstore to unpack some more boxes. Do you want to go?"

"No thanks. I'm going to put away my clothes and clean my room."

Erica cocked her head and raised an eyebrow. She knew better. "Right. Well, stay home. I'll be home late so you'll have to fix your own dinner."

Daisy squinted across the hall to her grandfather. Pizza! "Okay. See ya later."

They both ducked back into their respective rooms, the conversation over. Erica felt dismissed. Shrugging, she picked up her purse and car keys and headed out the door. Sometimes it seemed that Dad and Daisy preferred to be home alone.

She started her car, an older Honda, and reversed out of her driveway. As she drove the two miles to downtown Eaton, Erica felt excitement build. The bookstore was nearing completion and the grand opening next week would be an all-day festival that concluded with a live band. She hired two people to help stock shelves and another to manage the small coffee house.

She pulled up to a stoplight at the corner of Main and was deafened by the music from the car next to her. She recognized the rock song – “Whipping Post” by the Allman Brothers. She caught a glimpse of the other driver but couldn’t see his face, just muddy jeans and fingers tapping on the steering wheel as he kept time with the music.

Some guy four wheeling in his Jeep, minus its top and doors.

It’s a great day for it, she thought, turning her attention back to the stoplight.

Jeep! That kid had driven a Jeep the other night, she recalled, irritated at the memory of her fight with Daisy. She craned her neck to see the face in the other vehicle.

From his vantage point, all Clay could see of the person in the next car were legs, tanned and shapely. As he admired them, he saw Erica lean forward and smiled lazily as he recognized her.

Her eyes widened, then the light turned green and behind her, a car horn sounded. Automatically, she pressed her foot on the accelerator and shot forward. She turned right onto Main and in her rearview mirror watched as the Jeep pulled into her lane and made the same turn. She chose a parking space in front of her shop and turned off the car. As she stepped out, the Jeep pulled along side her and double-parked. The bluesy tune “Hoochie Coochie Man” now played on the stereo as Clay rested a hand on his steering wheel. With the four-wheeler’s top and doors removed, the sun caught fire in his dark hair. He wore a blue chambray shirt and jeans. She saw a brown leather band circling his neck as he leaned forward and turned the volume down.

Erica shrank against her car, suddenly self-conscious of her shorts and sleeveless, half-buttoned shirt. She planned on working in the shop without bothering to turn on the air conditioning.

“Hello again. Still don’t remember me?”

She noticed for the first time that he had a slight drawl. “Of course I remember you.”

“Are you open yet?”

“No. Not yet. We’re having a grand opening on Saturday. Please come.”

“I will. What are you doing now?”

“Now? I’m going to unpack a few boxes,” she said, inclining her head towards the shop across the street.

“You’re working on a Sunday?”

“I don’t mind. I like my work.”

“How about you hold off on that for an hour and take a ride?”

“With you?” she squeaked.

He held out a hand to help her climb into the tall vehicle. “Sure. I won’t bite. Come on, I’ll show you something you’ll like.”

Erica contemplated his hand for a few heartbeats. He turned his palm up and gestured, “Come on. I’m not dangerous.”

I doubt that, she thought. She stepped on the running board, took his hand and let him haul her up and into the bucket seat. She gasped when he reached across her, his chest brushing hers, and pulled the seatbelt around her lap. He buckled it and adjusted the harness so it went between her breasts and over her shoulder. Her eyes, large and luminous, fastened on his.

“It’s the law,” he said with a roguish grin. “Click it or ticket.”

He slid the floor-mounted stick shift into first gear and roared down the deserted street. Her wavy hair immediately began to whip her face. Clay reached into the glove box, his arm brushing her knees, and withdrew a baseball cap. He handed it to her, smiling. She put the cap on her head, shoving wayward curls underneath. She reached into her purse and pulled out a pair of sunglasses. She put them on and slanted her face to the sky. Clay turned up his CD player and the long guitar solo from the Allman Brothers’ hit, “Jessica” boomed. She could feel the music fill her chest and she laughed from pure pleasure. Clay regarded her and couldn’t resist grinning.

“Like it?”

“Oh yes,” she said loudly. “This is wonderful.”

A few turns later, he accelerated onto Lakeshore Road. Erica felt her spirits lift as they passed Breakthrough Lake, wide and lazy, the sun glinting on the ripples. The boat traffic was light – only a few bass boats and a couple of kayaks. On the far shore, she saw children jump off docks and into the water, splashing and laughing. Once she had been just like those children, picnicking at the lake while her parents grilled burgers. That was before her mother died. She buried the memory and instead focused on the handsome man beside her. She could see his lashes behind his sunglasses. He had a dimple, she noted, and a scar beneath his chin.

“Like what you see?”

Erica didn’t answer but she didn’t turn away, either. She let herself relax and inspect him, starting at his shoulders, working down to his slim hips and long legs. Then she worked her way back up his lean frame, pausing again at his chin.

“Are you undressing me with your eyes?”

Erica grinned at his teasing, shaking her head. Then she looked through the windshield at the lush, green mountains. Clay slowed the Jeep and turned the corner onto a dirt road. They climbed a steep hill, nearly overgrown with summer

brush. A few minutes later, he pulled over to the side of the trail and parked. He turned off the music.

"Where are we?" She asked, glancing around.

"Near the top of Weeping Woman Mountain. Have you ever been here?"

"No."

"Good," he said, jumping from the Jeep. He walked to her side and once again reached across her; this time his shoulder brushed her breasts as he unclasped her seatbelt. Erica flushed at the contact. He stepped back and offered her his hand.

She swung her legs out of the opening, her foot reaching for the running board. He took her hand and placing his other on her hip, helped her jump down. He closed the gap between them as she pulled off her sunglasses. He lifted the baseball cap off her head and Erica immediately put her fingers into her hair, pushing it up and off her face.

"You're going to have trouble combing it later," he apologized, running his fingers through her curls.

"I always do," she answered, breathlessly, dropping her sunglasses onto the Jeep's dashboard.

He tossed the cap onto the console and took her hand. "Come on. I want to show you something."

Stunned by this sudden intimacy, his easy-going familiarity, Erica let him pull her along the path. In less than fifteen minutes, Clay had physically touched her more than any other man in the past ten years, except for the occasional hug from her father. She could hear blood roaring in her ears, her stomach tingling. She hadn't dated (not that she considered this a date) since she graduated from college. The few men she dated back then disappeared after learning she had a baby. When Daisy was five, Erica decided not to let any man come between them.

She soon realized it wasn't blood pounding in her ears; it was a waterfall that fell hundreds of feet down a sheer cliff. The pool beneath it was wide and peaceful, lined with flat stones. A few golden trout swam in the shallows. Moss carpeted the ground and birds sang in the trees. She sank to her knees, open-mouthed.

"I didn't know this existed," she said softly.

Clay sat next to her, picking up a pebble and tossing it into the pool. "It's beautiful, isn't it? I found it one day, driving through the woods. I come up here when the seasons change. It's a bit difficult in the winter when the road gets icy. The falls are frozen then."

He reclined on one elbow. "Tell me about yourself."

"There's not much to tell," she said, suddenly shy.

"Sure there is. Are you from here? How old are you? Are you married? Stuff like that."

"Would I be here if I were married? You're not married, are you?"

“Ah, now you’re getting worried. No, I’m not married.” He rolled onto his back and recited his vitae. “Clayton Knight, 32. I teach history at Marshall College. Two sisters, one brother. Single. I like loud, rock music. Grew up in Virginia. Went to college for way too long. I like the mountains so when I saw an opening at Marshall a few years ago, I joined the staff. Your turn.”

“You already know what I do; I own the bookstore. I’m 33, a single mother and my father is my nanny. Well, now that my daughter is too old for a nanny, they’re more like co-conspirators.”

“Where’s your ex-husband?”

“I don’t have one. Her father isn’t a part of our lives.”

He noted her solemn admission. “Guess it’s tough for you,” he said.

“At first. I suppose I was heartbroken like most young girls when he didn’t turn out to be Prince Charming. But, we were only sixteen. We were kids. What could I expect?”

Clay didn’t say anything. He kept his eyes on the waterfall. Erica felt uncomfortable after telling him her past. She stood and walked towards the slippery path to the water’s edge.

“Tell me about your daughter,” he invited.

“She’s brilliant and beautiful and, of course, she drives me crazy.”

“What about your parents?”

“Dad teaches at the local high school. My mother died when I was fifteen. I missed her terribly. Dad seemed to drift after that, staying home and always reading.”

Suddenly Erica needed space. She walked around the edge of the pond. With her flip-flops on, she waded out a few feet. The bottom sloped quickly and water reached her knees.

“Be careful. There’s a deep hole near the falls.”

“I’m not going that far,” she said and then slipped, her foot hovering over the chasm. She went under and swallowed a mouthful of water. She foundered, choking, her arms flailing until Clay’s strong hand grabbed her. With an iron arm around her waist, he pulled her against him in shallows. His free hand pushed wet hair out of her face.

“I told you there was a hole.”

Erica clutched him, shivering against the cold and looking wildly over her shoulder at the dark patch in the quiet pool. She blinked as water beaded her lashes, and leaned into Clay. His arm tightened around her, snaking up her back. His fingers tangled in her hair as he pulled her head back, revealing her throat. Her wet shirt clung to her breasts, the thin material transparent. He lowered his head and his lips touched her throat. He felt her heart pounding against his chest, her pulse racing against his mouth.

Electric at his touch, Erica arched against him. Reflexively, she dipped her head and offered her lips. She waited for his touch. She craved it.

Instead, Clay released his grip. Manacling her wrists, he pulled her hands up and around his neck. Erica shuddered.

“Well, this is interesting,” he whispered as he nuzzled her ear.

Instead of answering, she sought his mouth, licking his lips. She taunted his tongue with hers until Clay deepened the kiss. His hands slid down her back, pulling her closer as he cupped her bottom. But she still wasn’t close enough. One hand slid lower, pulling her knee up his leg until her hips cradled him. She could feel him growing hard through his wet jeans. Erica’s breasts ached in his crush. All other sensation disappeared – no cold water, no wet clothing – just his hot mouth on hers, tongues teasing, tasting. Clay groaned, then stumbled and released her. He stepped back and slid his hands down her arm, cupping her hands in his.

“Wow.”

Erica shivered as he stood knee deep in the pool with her, holding her hands and studying her face. His blue eyes pierced her.

“Yeah, wow,” she whispered, trying to catch her breath.

He broke the spell, letting go of one of her hands and turning towards the shore. He paused for a moment, swiped a floating flip-flop from the surface of the pool and handed it to her. She hadn’t even noticed that she had lost one. Once at the shore he regarded his wet jeans and boots.

“That’s one way to get rid of the mud,” he said, crooking a smile at her.

Erica put on her shoe and then plucked the wet material of her shirt from her hardened nipples. “Well, this is embarrassing. I think we’d better go back,” she said.

Clay pulled off his wet boots and tossed them, along with his socks, into the back of his Jeep. He unbuckled his belt and pulled it through the loops. It, too, went into the back of Jeep. He draped his shirt on the driver’s seat. Stripped to the waist and barefoot, he looked like a gypsy. Erica could see his necklace now. It was a St. Christopher medal on a leather string.

He came over to Erica and held out his hand. She put a foot on the running board and using his hand for support, climbed back into the Jeep. Clay pulled her seatbelt harness down and tucked it around her hips. Then he brushed her lips softly, his lips tracing a path from her mouth to her ear. At Erica’s involuntary shiver he whispered, “Are you ready?”

She nodded slowly, parting her lips for a deep breath.

He paused, studying her. “You’re irresistible,” he said, then captured her mouth once more. When the kiss ended, he took the sunglasses she had dropped on the console and put them on her, tucking them behind her ears and pushing the bridge up her nose. He picked up the baseball cap and set it on her head.

“Now I can resist you,” he teased, but Erica watched as his eyes lowered to her wet shirt, pressed against her by the seat belt. Erica felt her nipples harden again as if his hands were caressing her instead of his eyes. She crossed her arms.

Clay stepped away regretfully. “Let’s get you back to town.”

The ride back was too quick. Erica’s heart had barely slowed when he pulled into a space behind her parked car. He jumped out of the Jeep and shrugged into his damp shirt, leaving it unbuttoned. Again, he helped her unbuckle her seatbelt. This time he held both his hands out, placing them on her hips as she shifted in the seat. He wrapped his arms around her, letting her body slide down his slowly. As he lowered her, his lips pressed against her neck then her lips. He trapped her against the vehicle, his mouth hungry and hard.

Erica, her feet finally on the ground, found she couldn’t pull away, didn’t want to. She returned his kiss, her own hunger matching his. She pushed her aching breasts against his bare chest.

“When can I see you again?” he murmured against her ear.

Daisy and Walt were watching television and eating pizza when Erica came home. They glanced at each other guiltily, then Walt shrugged, took a long swig of his beer and folded another slice of pepperoni pizza into his mouth. Daisy laughed at his antics, folded her pizza slice and shoved it in her mouth. She washed it down with soda.

A distracted Erica walked by the study. “Hi,” she waved and headed for her bedroom. She began unbuttoning her shirt. She needed a hot shower.

“Mom?” Daisy appeared at the door watching her mother stand on one foot while she pulled off her wrinkled shorts. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I decided not to work late.” Erica headed for her adjoining bathroom. “I’m going to take a bath and head for bed.”

Daisy walked back into the study. “I think Mom’s sick.”

Walt looked up, a worried frown on his face. “Why?”

“She didn’t yell at us for eating pizza in the den. She’s taking a bath and then going to bed early. “

“That is strange. Oh well. Hand me the remote, will you?”

In the shower, Erica adjusted the temperature and the spray to a hot massage. Steam enveloped the small room. She closed her eyes and let the water pound the back of her neck. She imagined his lips, warm and demanding. She crossed her arms, sliding her hands over her shoulders, moving down to her breasts. She could

still feel his bare chest against her, hot through her damp shirt, and she felt a bit dizzy. Smiling, she reached for her shampoo and lathered her hair.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Madeline Sloane is a writer with more than 25 years experience in communications. With ten published history books under her belt, she is new to the world of romantic fiction but finding it just as fun to research. In addition to writing, she is a college instructor whose interests include traveling, history and boating. Rounding out her list of Top Five interests are reading and cooking. On the web at www.MadelineSloane.com

ABOUT THE SERIES: WOMEN OF EATON

The first novel in the “Women of Eaton” romance series, “Distracted” introduces readers to Eaton, a fictional, idyllic town tucked away in the mountains of Pennsylvania. Several of the characters in “Distracted” are featured in other books such as “East of Eaton,” “West Wind” and “Deadline.” Look for many citizens of Eaton to return in new stories that explore and celebrate romance.

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