



The Man For The Job

Marie-Nicole Ryan

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by Marie-Nicole Ryan

Wings ePress Books

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"Don't be ridiculous! You are the most arrogant man I've ever—"

"Been kissed by?" Mike finished.

"I'm perfectly capable of completing my own sentences," Gwyneth told him, her eyes ablaze.

"I'm sure you are, but..." he paused, not for emphasis, but because he'd lost his train of thought while staring into her fathomless eyes. His heart slammed rat-a-tat-tat like an Uzi, and his mouth had gone Sunday-morning-hangover dry. He snapped out of his daze. "B-but..."

"But what?" Her frosty tone went sub-zero. However, Mike fancied he saw the tiny muscles around her eyes relax as her eyelids dropped half-mast, her feathery lashes fluttering against stellar cheekbones.

Dammit. She seemed pleased by his inability to form coherent thought, much less speech. And the tiniest dimple appeared at the corner of her mouth as her lips twitched in an effort to keep a straight face.

Then disaster. The words escaped without his volition. "Marry me?"

What They Are Saying About

The Man For The Job

The Man for the Job is a combination of Spillane and Poirot. This fast paced mystery is hard hitting and gritty, yet instilled with a deep romance that cannot be denied. The characters are real and the reader cares about them instantly. This story is not one that can be read in segments; once you turn the first page, you must keep turning until you reach the end. And the last page leaves me wanting to read more of Marie-Nicole Ryan's work. Bravo!

—Dee Carey/Wings Author www.adeecarey.com

Fox in the Mist—October 2004

Mark of the Fox—January 2005

The Man For The Job was surprisingly good! I expected something like a Mickey Spillane novel, but this was nothing like that. Ms. Ryan created characters that had emotional depth, and winning personalities. Gwyn was sensational as a fiercely independent woman, with a heart of gold. Mike was just the sort of man most women dream of marrying—charming, romantic and protective, with a great sense of humor. It was wonderful to watch these two stumble towards each other. And stay there.

The Man For The Job is a must-read! It's the perfect way to spend a few hours. Even if it does make you wish all men were as clear and decisive in their emotions as Ms. Ryan's hero! 4 Slippers.

The Man For The Job
by Marie-Nicole Ryan

—Tracy Atencio
Romantic Interludes

Other Works From The Pen Of

Marie-Nicole Ryan

Praise For **See You In My Dreams**, Golden Wings Award Winner

"Ryan's tale of star-crossed lovers who have loved and lost is a poignant—and sometimes gritty—tale that will resonate in readers." Four Stars

Faith V. Smith, *Romantic Times*.

"*See You In My Dreams* is jam-packed full of suspense, mystery and action. A page turner from start to finish. Strong characters abound in this riveting novel about two people whose lives are connected both in the past and present. This story explores two souls that always find each and leave the reader thinking of the possibilities "could this really happen?" Four Angels,

Penny, *Fallen Angel Reviews*.

"*See You in My Dreams* reminded me a lot of Judith McNaught's first contemporary romances. It had a very mainstream style..." Four and Hearts,

Tara Black, *The Romance Studio*.

"Once you start *See You In My Dreams*, you will not be able to put it down. Come and experience a world where fairy tale dreams really do come true." Four Blue Ribbons,

Robyn Reo, *Romance Junkies*.

Love On The Run:

The Man For The Job
by Marie-Nicole Ryan

"The dialogue is witty. The plot is well-constructed and believable. The action is constant with enough tension to keep the reader's interest throughout. Truly a delight to read."

Barbara Buhrer, *Word Museum*.

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Wings

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A Wings ePress, Inc.

Romantic Suspense Novel

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The Man For The Job
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Dedication

To my father

because he would be so proud.

Daddy, I wish you were still here.

One

MIKE CARLTON, *Private Investigations*—at least that's what the sign on his office door said. Had Mike been able to afford the extra words, the painter could've added Deadbeat-Dad Locator, Photographer of Extra-Marital High Jinks and Occasional Guard of Some Downright Useless Bodies. But the work was steady, and it paid the rent. At least he didn't have to meet his clients downstairs in the bar anymore. His old man would be so proud.

And he had a nine-o'clock appointment. Most of his clients, if they bothered to make appointments, showed up at the last minute—probably trying to decide whether or not they needed his services.

Most of them did.

At 9:00 am, a leggy blonde waltzed into his office with an expression of well-mannered disdain written across her well-bred face. Her pinched expression told him something else, too. She'd already decided she was out of his league.

His mouth grew dry. His heart stuttered in his chest before slamming into a new rhythm. And testosterone surged. He'd always been a leg man—and hers were spectacular.

"Mr. Carlton?" the lithe goddess asked, her demeanor far too shy for someone who wore an expensive, white silk suit with a blessedly short skirt. On the other hand, her blue silk blouse was buttoned to the neck. Message loud and clear—he could look, but never touch. He'd see about that.

"I'm Carlton," he replied, succinct and to the point. After all, that was what people expected from their private eyes, right? "What can I do for you?"

Right then and there, she nailed him with her fierce, electric blue gaze. "You can cut the cheap detective imitation. I checked you out before I called for an appointment. Besides, Bogart didn't have a somewhat vague European accent."

Looks and brains too—maybe he could have everything. "I apologize, Miss ... I'm afraid my assistant didn't give me your name."

"Yes, she did. I heard her." She extended her long, graceful hand in his direction, even as she turned her elegant nose skyward.

He took her hand in his and resisted the powerful urge to bow and kiss it. A P.I. couldn't do crap like that—not if he wanted to live long enough to collect his Social Security checks.

"Then your memory must be failing. I'm Gwyneth Wells."

"Miss Wells," he acknowledged, then sat down and took a deep breath. He had a feeling he'd be doing a lot of deep breathing if she hired him. "How may I help you?"

She beamed at him, one of those dazzling, two-trillion-dollar smiles that made his head swim like poor old Jimmy Stewart's in *Vertigo*.

"Let me guess. You're fond of film noir?"

"Busted," he admitted. "But enough about my movie habits. I'm still waiting for you to tell me why you chose *today* to make my day?" Not that he was in any rush. He

could spend all day checking out the sweet thing in front of him. Wide-set blue eyes, creamy skin ... and legs a mile long.

Gwyneth Wells looked around his—what he'd thought was an adequate—office and frowned.

He jumped up and rushed to grab the teetering stack of files from the only other chair. "Sorry. Here, have a seat," he told her with his slightly less-expensive smile, "and tell me all about it."

He sat on the corner of the desk, all the while watching her as she sat and crossed one long, tan leg over the other. He did his best to keep his eyes on her face, but the smooth expanse of her skin kept pulling his gaze downward.

"Thank you." Gripping her white, Italian leather bag, his new client took a deep breath. "Someone's stalking me."

"Who?" He grinned and shrugged. "Can't say I blame him."

His new client huffed. A sure sign he'd gone a little too far with his hard-nosed P.I. routine; she had him off-kilter.

"Mr. Carlton, I must insist you take this seriously. I was told you're ethical and the best detective this city has to offer, but I must confess I find your flippancy most disconcerting."

It wasn't so much his new client sounded like a walking advertisement for a fancy finishing school, it was the quaver in her husky voice and the tears shining in the bluest damned eyes he'd ever seen—yeah, that's what got him. He couldn't resist a damsel in distress.

"Sorry. I am the best, but I'm afraid I've become addicted to my new persona," Mike told her with a shrug. "You know the old saying, when in Rome..."

She nodded in response, giving a well-bred sniff.

He shook his head. "Now let's get back to who's stalking you. He took another deep breath and let it out slow and easy. Coping with his pounding heart, a certain rebellious body part *and* the lovely creature sitting on the edge of her chair, might prove more than he could handle—but he was willing to give it a go.

She looked up, as if eager to tell him her story. And now he was more than eager to listen.

"Someone's been following me. Everywhere I go, I see him. At first I thought it was a coincidence, but he doesn't even seem to care if I notice him or not. It's quite annoying and frightening."

"When did you first notice him?"

"About two weeks ago—since I broke up with my fiancé."

"Could be the ex-fiancé keeping an eye on you?"

"I don't think so. I made it quite clear we didn't have a future, not after..."

"Not after what?"

"...not after I discovered his main client is a mobster." She heaved a sigh and frowned. "I disapproved and told him so quite vehemently. We argued. I returned his ring." Miss Wells stroked the back of her hand as if she missed the rock.

Mike smiled. *Kismet? Fate? She was a free woman.* "One of his clients? What does your ex-fiancé do?"

"My fiancé—ex-fiancé—is a corporate attorney."

"So what's his name and address? For my records."

"Richard Klein." She rattled off a pricey Park Avenue address.

"How did he take the breakup?" Mike swiveled from left to right, then back in his chair while he enjoyed the view.

His new client wrung her hands and moistened her lips. "He was furious. In fact, he made quite a scene at Giordello's—that's the restaurant where..."

Mike laughed. "Oh yeah, the old breakup-in-a-nice-restaurant-so-he-doesn't-make-a-scene routine. Works every time."

"I assure you, it wasn't funny." The Ice Queen glared at him, her face flushing. "I was embarrassed by his behavior."

"Okay, I'll check him out. It's like this. He's probably hired someone to keep an eye on you." He shrugged, then continued, "Could even be a P.I."

"I don't care who it is. I want him to stop. Why, he even followed me into the lingerie department yesterday at Bloomingdale's."

"Well, we can't have that, now can we?"

Gwyneth huffed. "If this frivolous behavior of yours is the best I can expect, I'm afraid my Uncle Wil made a mistake when he recommended you." She stood up. "Thank you for your time, but I don't think this is going to work."

Mike leaned forward, his interest piqued. "So who's your Uncle Wil?"

"Wilford Wells, we're partners. Do you know him? He seems to think quite highly of you."

Mike nodded. "He knows my father. They were college roommates. I've run across your uncle a time or two here in the city. You're not the first client he's sent me." He dreaded

the answer to his next question, but he still had to ask it.

"Please just tell me you're not a damn lawyer, too."

She stiffened, as if ready to fight. "And if I were?"

"And if you were? Well, I might have to rethink our whole relationship." Damn. As a matter of principle and as an ex-cop, he hated lawyers.

"And why is that?" Her throaty, sexy voice grew steely. Her uncompromising gaze pinned him like a wilted corsage on a strapless formal.

"Could be, because lawyers either spend their time defending the same scum a lot of good men on the job risk their lives to take off the streets, or maybe because they rack up thousands of dollars in retainers from the idle rich who think they're above the law simply because they have bucks-a-million or their faces on the cover of *TV Guide*."

He paused to breathe and narrowed his gaze. "New York City has too many of both, but I guess you don't see much scum in *your* practice."

"I work *pro bono*."

"Even worse." He couldn't believe his ears. This vision of elegance ... "You defend scum *for free*?" Knowing he'd dug himself into a hole didn't help much. He could tell from her rigid posture and the stern set of her mouth, the polar icecap would melt before he felt those lips against his any time soon.

Her voice dropped to a near whisper. "Not that it's any of your concern, but most of my clients are battered women and abused children, who..."

"All right, I get it. You're Mother Theresa." Damn. What on earth prompted such a smart-ass comeback? Why couldn't he keep his mouth shut?

"I take what I do very seriously, Mr. Carlton. I've been very fortunate, so I try to give something back, that's all." Apparently warming to her task, she added, "And you would do well to avoid stereotypical remarks and jumping to conclusions."

"Yes, ma'am," he replied as humbly as a guy who didn't have a humble bone in his body could manage. He could, on occasion, give a respectable imitation of humility. He hoped she bought it, because he really did want to plaster his lips against hers—and soon—sometime before he needed a prescription for Viagra. "So, I'm a jerk."

Miss Wells didn't hide her smile. "At least we agree on something."

Mike grinned. Making a woman smile was half the battle, especially one like Gwyneth Wells. Still there was more to the job than good rapport. "Back to business. What about the angry husbands of your clients? One of them could have it in for you?"

"It's possible. My clients come from all strata of society, and I've been threatened more than once, but..." She shrugged. "I don't know. I suppose it's possible."

"What about your current case load? Could someone be trying to intimidate you?"

"Anything is possible, Mr. Carlton. I just want you to find out who he is and stop him."

"Finding out who should be simple. Stopping him may not."

Her eyes widened, and a worried expression of disbelief crossed her face. "One more thing. It was obvious the minute you waltzed in here, you're loaded."

"So?"

"Anybody in your family unhappy about it?"

"My mother and father are both deceased. There's my Aunt Lilith and her son, and they aren't happy with the provisions of my mother's will. In fact, my aunt has indicated she plans litigation. When Mother passed away, she left me a sizable inheritance, and my aunt feels she should've been remembered in Mother's will."

"She wasn't?"

"No. They'd been estranged since before I was born. I'm not sure why. Something happened when they were teenagers, I think. Mother wouldn't discuss it."

"Maybe this is more than a stalking, Miss Wells." Mike watched for the flash of awareness to come to her big baby blues. One and one makes two? "How did your mother die—was it natural?"

"How did my mother die?" She sighed before continuing. "My mother was an alcoholic. Sober for the last year of her life, but it was too late to do any good."

"I'm sorry. Now, I'm going to need the names of all your contacts, friends and foes, and I'll need your schedule for the next week."

"All right." She pulled a Palm Pilot from her purse and began reading him the names. Turning to his keyboard, he entered the information.

When she finished with the last name, she let out a deep breath. "That should do it." She stood up and turned to leave.

"Hold on." Mike stood up; he grabbed his jacket from the coat rack in the corner.

Turning back toward him, she frowned, which was almost as dazzling as her smile. "I thought we were through."

"We are, but I'm going with you."

"You really think I need a bodyguard?"

"Yeah. I'm a package deal." He gave her what he hoped was his most disarming expression.

"Really?" Her dark blond lashes fluttered as she looked down shyly, then gave him a wolfish half-smile, as if she'd read his mind.

"In which case, perhaps we should be on a first-name basis. Please call me Gwyneth."

"Gwyneth."

Her cupid's bow lips spread into a wide smile. "Michael?"

Dropping his private eye persona for a second, he shook his head. "To be honest, I'd rather you call me Mike."

"Hmm, an honest man." Her eyes widened. "I think I like the sound of that."

An honest man? He wouldn't go quite that far. Honesty was an overrated commodity in his line of work.

Two

By the time Gwyneth and Mike reached the sidewalk of his office building, she'd asked herself over and over, what in the world she'd done. If it weren't for Uncle Wil's assurance Mike Carlton was topnotch, she wouldn't have discounted his ridiculous hard-nosed P.I routine. Although to give him credit, he had abandoned it somewhat after she called him on it.

Okay, so the P.I. was a total hunk with crystal green eyes that seemed to read her mind, a dimple in his chin and a sensual mouth that made her want to jump up on the desk and kiss him until both of them were senseless. So what? Not that she ever would.

Unfortunately, he wasn't much taller than she was, and if she wore her spike heels, she might tower over him. Damn. She hated being five-feet, ten-inches tall. That's why she always dated men with some real height, like Richard. But Richard didn't possess one iota of the intensity which seemed to sizzle from every single pore of the terribly masculine body walking beside her. When she compared the two, her ex-fiancé came up very short. In fact, further comparison made Richard seem a bit on the effeminate side.

Mike struck her as a man's man. He probably watched football with his hand inside his belt. Maybe he even carried a gun. Well, of course he did. He was a private investigator, wasn't he?

She'd been unprepared for his overt stares. He'd made her tingle in places Richard had never discovered. Frankly, she still wasn't sure what the big deal about sex really was.

Orgasm, smorgasm. It all seemed so mechanical. Insert part A into part B, and screw. Besides, it was pretty undignified, and some of the things Richard had suggested they do were simply undoable—at least for her.

What was the matter with her? she wondered, restraining a giggle. Why was her mind on sex at ten o'clock in the morning? Maybe it was the light pressure of Mike's hand, placed so protectively in the small of her back which sent waves of heat to places best not thought about in broad daylight.

"Penny for your thoughts." Then the corner of his mouth kicked up in a very sexy grin.

She blinked. "Uh," she gulped, then the tattletale warmth started creeping up her neck. "I-I don't think they're worth that much."

"Must have something on your mind. You've haven't moved for five minutes, and we've already lost one taxi."

"We have?" *Taxi, what taxi?* Startled, she looked first at Mike, then at the street. "I guess my mind wandered."

"See here, Miss Wells—Gwyn—you're gonna have to pay attention. If I were a hit man, you'd be toast, and I'd be on to my next job."

"Well," she managed with a little heat, "that's why I hired *you*, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but I'll need a little cooperation from you." He turned, put two fingers to his lips and whistled for another taxi, giving her at least five seconds to pull herself together.

To her horror, she found herself babbling. "All right. It's just I've never needed a private investigator before. I didn't know I would be responsible for anything." She shut her mouth. Men hated it when women talked too much. Hell, why did she care what he thought? She'd hired *him*, not the other way around.

As soon as the cab screeched to the curb, Mike opened the door for her. At least, her P.I. had a smattering of manners, in spite of the fact she still thought he was missing a clue or two.

"Thank you." After all, she knew how to be polite, too. After making sure she wasn't about to sit down on chewing gum—or worse, she slid into the back of the taxi.

Mike scooted in beside her and gave the driver her office address. Good Lord, he certainly seemed bigger, up close and personal. She gave what she knew was a pathetic attempt at a smile. Still, he didn't seem to mind. He even grinned back, proving he'd had excellent dental care.

Damn. Did he *have* to smile? She was nervous enough without feeling like she was a big piece of apple pie à la mode. Her heart raced—and that was a concern, too. Her father had died from some kind of coronary problem, and she most certainly had something going on in hers. Surely it wasn't supposed to flutter and flutter around like it was.

"You all right?" He reached over and caressed the back of her trembling hand.

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Amazed by how gentle his touch was, she shook her head, and admitted, "Not really. I-I'm just nervous, I guess." She kept her eyes directed toward her knees. Looking at them was a lot safer than looking into his see-all, know-all eyes.

More gently still, he extended his hand and with one callused finger, turned her face toward him, forcing her to meet his gaze. "You're going to be all right. I'll protect you. No one, and I mean no one, will get past me. You have my word."

How she wanted to believe him. "Honest and a man of honor, too?" she managed to say, but her trembling voice gave proof that she was still worried to this side of Wednesday.

"I am," he told her. Then, without warning or so much as a 'by your leave,' he leaned in and brushed his lips against hers; the bristled hint of a five-o'clock shadow grazed her cheek. Stunned, she returned his kiss. He tasted of coffee. Now she knew he liked it sweet—the coffee, that is.

"Oh, God," she gasped, aware she'd definitely descended into the depths of debauchery. Putting her hands in front of her, she pushed him away. "I'm engaged."

He grinned, then leaned back on his side of the taxi. "Not anymore."

"Well," she huffed, "you confused me." Taking a deep breath, she regained some self-control. "You have some nerve. I-I don't know why you did that." She clasped her hands in front of her—anything to keep them from shaking.

"It's simple," he explained, as if she were in kindergarten. "I wanted to."

"Do you always do whatever the hell you want?"

"Usually," he replied with a cheeky half-grin. Folding his arms across his chest, he beamed and set her to wondering if their children would have his beautiful eyes.

She took a deep breath and struggled for control. "Well, it's just not acceptable behavior. What we have is a business relationship, and you've overstepped the boundary of what is appropriate."

There, argue with that.

Mike heaved a sigh. "Perhaps if I threw myself on the mercy of the court and told you it was an irresistible impulse and I couldn't help myself?" He pouted with his bottom lip stuck out just like a kid who'd wrecked his favorite toy.

Gwyneth chewed her lip, wishing it were his. Damn. She was in trouble. How long could she hold him at bay?

"Well, what does the court say?" he challenged her.

"The court might look with favor on your pathetic excuse, if you were to promise to keep your hands and your lips to yourself from now on."

The rumble of low, masculine laughter erupted from the far side of the taxi. "You're asking the impossible."

Refusing to admit defeat, Gwyneth glared at him as if he were the worst wife-beater in the world. "I must disagree. All I'm asking is that you mind your manners."

"Or a reasonable facsimile thereof?" Mike kept a watchful eye on his new client. Her posture relaxed, her gaze softened, and a hint of a smile visited her mouth.

"So, tell me why a New York private investigator has a slightly foreign accent."

"My father was in the diplomatic service. My mother's a Brit. They met in London and married. We kicked around most of Europe while I was growing up. I speak several languages." Her question caught him by surprise, and that's why he'd answered her truthfully instead of going into his usual I'm-an-orphan routine.

"And now?"

He tried to think of an appropriate response, but couldn't help wondering how long her hair was. Not that he'd be surprised if she slept in that French twist. She was as uptight as any client he'd ever seen.

"Mr. Carlton?"

"Oh, right. My parents—they divorced when I was fourteen. My father brought me back to the States. And don't think I haven't noticed how you've changed the subject from you to me."

He watched her kissable lips spread into one of the smuggest smiles he'd ever seen. Imagining her in a courtroom, he knew she'd be a dynamite litigator. Every male in the vicinity would be dreaming of what it would be like to crawl between her thighs, until she blind-sided them with her sweet brand of interrogation.

"Ever see them?"

"See who? Oh, my parents?" He shook his head. "Not if I can help it. My mother remarried, but then divorced number two and remarried my father."

"Married your father twice? How interesting."

"It's unusual," he agreed, "but they're so much alike, it's difficult to imagine them with anyone else."

"How long have you been an investigator?"

"Now, counselor, I thought you had me investigated. Why the twenty questions?"

"Well, since I had my uncle's personal recommendation, I didn't ask to see your dossier or anything. I was more interested in results than your life history."

"My dossier?" *If she only knew...*

"Is your father still living?"

"Yeah, does consultant work in DC."

"Consultant work, diplomatic service?" She raised an eyebrow. "Those cover a lot of territory."

"It does," he agreed, his tone more grim than he'd intended.

All right, time for a change in topic. "What about your father? Was he proud of his Harvard Law daughter?"

Her expression clouded as she looked down at her hands. "No—I mean, yes—he was."

"You were an only child?"

Her face clouded and her gaze turned from his, while she worked on the inside of her bottom lip. His client was holding something back.

"I don't want to dredge up unpleasant memories," he began, reining his impatience, "but anything you tell me could be important."

"You really need to know about my father's mistresses? He had so many." She gave a casual shrug.

She didn't fool him for a minute. Her father's screwing around had hurt her—hurt her badly.

"You knew about your father's—uh, infidelities?"

"Not as a child, but in my late teens I figured it out. Actually, I saw him with one of them—at the opera. I've never cared for *Madama Butterfly* since."

"Poor butterfly," he murmured, wishing he could comfort her.

"Excuse me?"

"Just thinking out loud," he said, attempting to cover his blunder. Somehow he didn't think she'd appreciate his empathetic urges.

"Still, not like having your father around all the time for your field hockey games."

"My father wasn't around for *anything*." Her beautiful full lips twisted into a wry smile that tugged at Mike's heart. "He was a very big Camembert on the New York Stock Exchange. A very busy man."

"So he had lots of women," he commented as neutrally as possible.

Gwyneth sighed. "My parents lived separate lives for the last ten years of their marriage. I think my father's unfaithfulness drove my mother to drink. He couldn't stand her drinking, and my mother couldn't stand my father at all."

"So they put the *fun* in dysfunctional. Happens a lot." Mike shrugged, but he wanted to put his arms around her and make the pain go away.

Gwyneth heaved another sigh. Mike watched her small breasts rising and falling under her silk blouse. His breath caught in his throat. He'd wager his highly prized Yankee season tickets—not whole season, mind you—that the

counselor's breasts were perfect and rose-tipped, even if on the dainty side.

He itched to touch her, but having his butt kicked out of a taxi in the middle of Forty-Second Street traffic wasn't his idea of how to start a meaningful relationship.

The counselor could be worth wooing. But would wooing Miss Wells be worth it? All his instincts screamed, *Yes!* Wooing Miss Wells would be wonderful if he wooed her with every wishful bone in his worthless body.

Damn, all she had to do was sit there and breathe, and he was so turned around he'd invented a tongue twister.

Her brow furrowed in a not exactly unpleasant frown. "Something amusing?"

He really needed to work on his blank stare. "No. Why?"

"You're lying."

"Sorry, private joke."

"You're not thinking about kissing me again, are you?"

"Of course not. Unless you want me to."

Three

"Don't be ridiculous! You are the most arrogant man I've ever—"

"Been kissed by?" Mike finished.

"I'm perfectly capable of completing my own sentences," Gwyneth told him, her eyes ablaze.

"I'm sure you are, but..." he paused, not for emphasis, but because he'd lost his train of thought while staring into her fathomless eyes. His heart slammed rat-a-tat-tat like an Uzi, and his mouth had gone Sunday-morning-hangover dry. He snapped out of his daze. "B-but..."

"But what?" Her frosty tone went sub-zero. However, Mike fancied he saw the tiny muscles around her eyes relax as her eyelids dropped half-mast, her feathery lashes fluttering against stellar cheekbones.

Dammit. She seemed pleased by his inability to form coherent thought, much less speech. And the tiniest dimple appeared at the corner of her mouth as her lips twitched in an effort to keep a straight face.

Then disaster. The words escaped without his volition. "Marry me?"

Gwyneth's eyes widened. Her jaw dropped.

No, I didn't say it out loud. Taking a deep breath, he tried to think of a graceful—hell, it didn't even have to be graceful—exit line.

Recovering before he did, Her Loveliness told him, "This is a big mistake. I don't know what my uncle was thinking when

he recommended you." Opening and closing the fastener on her purse, she stuttered, "You're j-just not a serious person. This isn't going to work."

"Oh, but I am, sort of." His struggle for clarity was a symptom of something much worse. Gwyneth Wells had shredded and rearranged his brain into something resembling strings of mozzarella.

"But see here, counselor, you're too serious, and we both know I'm not, so we balance, right?"

"I'm not looking for a bathroom scale," she snapped. "I need someone who can keep his wits about him long enough to find out who's stalking me."

"Then *I'm* your man."

"You're *not* my man." Her shoulders trembled with obvious anger. "You're someone who's lost his less-than-tenuous hold on reality."

Mike straightened his shoulders, then eyeballed her, but didn't say a word, keeping his facial muscles under control. And watched.

Her face turned pink again. Her eyebrows raised in question as she waited for his next response. He contented himself with watching the rise and fall of her breasts. They would be lovely. He was certain of it. Quality rather than quantity.

"Well, say something. Don't just sit there with a blank look on your face. Maybe you're having a petit mal seizure? My dog Eloise—poor little thing—had spells like those for years," she babbled, balling her fists, clenching and releasing them over and over.

His silent treatment worked.

Finally he took pity on her. "You need the best. I *am* the best. Which one-syllable word did you not understand?"

Gwyneth huffed. "I'll have you know—"

"Dammit." He shook his head. "I knew your being a lawyer was the kiss of death for our future relationship." He glanced down and casually inspected the backs of his hands. "If you remember, I mentioned that fact earlier. Besides, it appears you lack the quality I most admire in a woman."

"Oh? And *what* would that be?" She tossed her head back, sweeping her fingers through the fringy bangs that softened her lovely face.

Casual took all his self-control, but he persevered. "Miss Wells, you have no sense of humor, and that's something I find almost impossible to ignore."

"Almost?"

"Oh. Was I mistaken?" Mike grinned. "Perhaps, there is hope for you after all. You picked up on the subtle nuance of my words. It gives me hope that somewhere lurking deep inside that lovely silk suit of yours resides a real human being."

"Bull!" Gwyneth shut her mouth, then added with a frown, "You're a bad influence." She leaned forward and rapped on the glass partition that separated them from the driver. "Stop and let me out. I'll walk the rest of the way."

"Now, Gwyn-eth," Mike began, deliberately lowering his voice and caressing the syllables of her name. He'd been told that his voice was a formidable weapon in his arsenal of

seductive techniques. He'd better pull out all the stops, if he expected to get anywhere with his new client.

"M-Miss Wells to you," she stuttered.

And damn if she didn't smile.

All right, it was a tiny smile, one that barely deepened the dimple at the corner of her lush, kissable lips, but it was a smile for him alone. He'd take his victories where he could find them.

Capturing one of her fidgeting hands in his, he leaned closer, prepared to celebrate his victory. "Miss Wells..." He paused, until she leaned toward him, her soft lips parted, breathless for his next words if he were any judge of women, "...how much are you worth?"

The lovely creature stiffened. Disbelief flashed across her face as if he'd picked his nose or broken wind.

"What?" she gasped, her hand clutching the base of her ivory-columned throat.

"I need to know the state of your finances." He grinned. "Just for the case."

She huffed as if she were offended by his mere mention of money. "If this is about your retainer, I assure you..."

Drumming his fingers on the car door, Mike heaved a sigh. "There you go, again—boring and predictable. Counselor, if I were worried about my retainer, I'd—"

The cab shuddered to a halt, shutting off the rest of his reply. Gwyneth threw open the door and jumped out. The sight of her long legs flashing as she exited the taxi damn near gave him heart failure. What else could he do? He jumped out after her.

The Man For The Job
by Marie-Nicole Ryan

"Hey, buddy," the cabby reminded him. "My fare."

"Sorry," Mike apologized and shoved a handful of bills at the driver. "Keep the change."

"That broad's nothin' but trouble. High maintenance, I can tell," the cabby offered.

Mike grinned. "I know, but I'm the man for the job."

He stretched his neck, hoping to catch a glimpse of her. There she was, striding along as if her panties were on fire and she didn't want anyone to notice, much less make a scene. As long as he could still see the top of her blond head bobbing through the crowd, he knew he could follow her home. After all, he was a detective.

Four

Like an armored tank brooking no obstacles, Gwyneth strode along the busy streets of the Big Apple. For once she wasn't worried about being mugged or stalked—just let someone try.

"Wilford Wells, just wait until I get hold of you. I'll wring your wrinkled old neck for the trick you've played on me," she muttered, knowing she must look as demented as half the people around her. And for once, she didn't give a damn what anyone thought.

'Now then, sugar', Uncle Wil had said, 'This Mike Carlton, I checked him out. He's the best.'

The best? If that phony cretin was the best, she'd hate to see the worst. She'd show her uncle what she thought of *the best*. She'd pull his gray, stringy ponytail out by the roots.

Dammit. She'd presented herself at Mike Carlton's office, expecting to be treated with due respect, and instead he'd hit on her like she was a lap dancer in a stripper bar.

He'd even had the nerve to kiss her in the back seat of a taxi. Never mind that Richard's kisses had never made her hot and squishy inside. Mike's lips were tender and warm, and he'd tasted of his morning coffee. How could one kiss—a kiss that reminded her of a rich burgundy, dark and earthy—upset her so?

What was the matter with her? She had no business thinking about Mike's lips or his earthiness—no matter that

she already had. Keeping her head on straight was of paramount importance. At least it always had been.

Gwyneth turned into her office building and managed a semblance of self-control while riding the creaky elevator to the tenth floor. True, she and her uncle could have afforded offices in a better location, but Uncle Wil had argued that their clients might be intimidated by more ostentatious surroundings. And these were certainly humble.

Humble or not, the sight of *Wells and Wells, Attorneys-at-Law* always made her feel proud, even if the faux gold paint was a touch tarnished. She loved her uncle, but he was in for a shellacking. And she was just the woman to wield the brush.

"He in?" Gwyneth asked the assistant she shared with her uncle. Without waiting for an answer, she flung open the door to his office.

"Good afternoon to you too, sugar."

She leaned across her uncle's desk, resisting the urge to throttle the only relative with whom she could stand to be in the same room. "You have some explaining to do."

An expression of total bewilderment took up residence on her uncle's grizzled face. Rearing back in his chair, he frowned. "What the hell's the matter with you?"

"Th-that detective you referred me to—he's a joke. That's what's the matter with me."

"You saw Mike Carlton, right? Not one of his flunkies?"

"Yeah, I saw him. He's arrogant, rude and a throwback." Maybe it was the glint in her uncle's faded blue eyes and the

twitch of his lips—or maybe it was the prickle on the back of her neck, but something made her stop mid-rant.

"He's standing right behind me, isn't he?"

"You got that right," came the already too familiar voice.

Gwyneth whirled. "You!" Advancing on the arrogant upstart who stood leaning against the door frame, looking ever so pleased with himself, she shouted, "I can't believe you'd have the effrontery to show your face in my office after your unconscionable behavior in the taxi."

"You hired me, counselor," Mike replied with a shrug, turning his palms upward. "What else could I do?"

"No, I distinctly remember firing you," she bluffed, all too aware that she'd done no such thing.

His forehead furrowed, but crystal green eyes shone under thick, dark eyebrows. "Fired? No, I think I'd remember if you'd fired me."

"I did," she insisted, barely refraining from stamping her foot. "I'm *sure* I did."

"Were we in the taxi when you supposedly fired me?"

"Of course we were." *The nerve of the man—acting so innocent, when all the time he knew exactly what had transpired between them.*

Removing his fedora, Mike ran his fingers through wavy, dark-brown hair, while he appeared to consider her words. Honestly, if she weren't so mad, she wouldn't mind tangling her fingers in those curls and...

Great! The man had cast a spell over her. She was on the verge of turning into a gibbering, over-sexed hedonist.

Then he smiled. Actually, he had such a sexy mouth and gorgeous eyes, but she didn't trust his expression. She took it as a sign that he was about to say—or do—something totally outrageous.

"That's not what I remember happening in the taxi." Then as if remembering they weren't alone in the room, Mike stepped around her and approached her uncle. "Sorry, Mr. Wells. We weren't properly introduced. I'm Mike Carlton." Mike offered his hand to her traitorous uncle who was actually smiling at the P.I. "Your niece has hired me to find out who's stalking her."

"I fired you!" Gwyneth gave in and stamped her foot.

"You didn't."

"Well, I am now." She fumbled in her purse and pulled out a roll of bills. "Here. Take this for your time and *no effort*. You are officially fired—as officially fired as I know how to fire anyone."

Mike took her money, ruffled the bills, then handed them back to her. "Too much, and besides, the taxi ride was pure pleasure on my part. You're very entertaining, counselor."

Outraged, she turned back to her uncle. "See what I mean? He's ... he's..."

"Got you all stirred up. That's what I see, sugar." Uncle Wil's shoulders shook with laughter.

Exasperated, Gwyneth took a deep breath in a feeble effort to regain control—then another. "Why aren't you leaving?" she managed to ask in her most dulcet tone. "You have been dismissed. I no longer have any need of your services. Must I say it in another language perhaps?"

"I understand English, counselor. It was my first language." He nodded at her uncle. "Sir, it was a pleasure meeting you, however brief our acquaintance."

"What's this act you're putting on for my uncle? That's not how you talked to *me*."

All she received for a reply from the outrageous phony was a smirking half-grin as he turned to leave.

"Mike," Uncle Wil called after the wretched detective. "I think we can do business. Since my misguided niece has fired you, I take it you're free for another job?"

"No!" she cried, unable to stop herself.

Ignoring her, Mike stopped, turned around to face them and gave a casual shrug. "Yes, as it happens I am."

"Good, 'cause I'm putting you on retainer. I want you to find Gwyn's stalker."

"I'd be more than happy to work for you, Mr. Wells."

Gwyneth stormed from her uncle's office and down the short hall to her own.

Once inside, she banged her head against the door. Her entire body shook with the effort it took to keep from screaming aloud. Betrayed. Her dearest uncle had gone against her express wishes. Now she would never get rid of Mike Carlton's leering face—or his hard body.

* * * *

Mike took the chair Wilford Wells indicated, then glanced over his shoulder in the direction his heartthrob had taken.

"I don't think I made a very good impression on your law partner." He turned back to the older man.

"Ya think?" Wells replied, his face deadpan.

Mike grinned. "I may have rushed her a bit."

Wilford Wells' bushy, white eyebrows rose. "Judging from her reaction, I'd say you did. Probably did her some good. She's just broken her engagement to a high-priced mouthpiece for the mob. She doesn't think she's ready for another relationship." The elder attorney cast Mike a cagey look. "Put the moves on her, did you? That's what all the hysteria is about?"

"Maybe a little," Mike admitted, finding sudden interest in the ceiling tiles.

The older man grinned back. "I tell her to 'get out there and meet someone new.'" He shrugged. "I talk till I'm blue in the face, but she doesn't listen."

"That's not a big surprise." Mike settled in his chair. "What do you think? Is the ex-fiancé keeping an eye on her or..."

"To be honest, I don't know." Wilford Wells frowned. "For that matter, it could be a client's ex-husband who didn't like the way things went in court."

"Gwyneth also mentioned her Aunt Lilith. Something about the will?"

"Yeah, Lilith's a long story. I'm not sure anybody knows the real scoop on her. She and her nerd of a son turned up, expecting something from the will, right after Gwyn's mother, Cynthia, passed away. Lilith's made a general nuisance of herself ever since."

"Is she a beneficiary of Gwyneth's will?"

"Nope."

"Then what would be the benefit of having Gwyneth stalked?"

"Gwyn herself has no issue—not yet anyway." Wells gave a half-grin, but his faded blue eyes twinkled with mischief.

Mike nodded. Greedy relatives, ex-fiancé with mob connections and angry client spouses—protecting Gwyneth Wells' charming posterior might prove more difficult than he'd imagined.

"I've a kid in my office who's a whiz with computers. I'll have him set up a data base and cross-reference her clients, friends—whatever." Mike continued, "That's the easy part. And then there's Gwyneth. She's reckless and doesn't pay attention to her surroundings. Someone's stalking her. She has to listen to me. Not thirty minutes ago, she jumped out of the cab and took off by herself."

"That would be right after you shocked her sensibilities?"

"Yeah."

Wells' eyes crinkled at the corners with amusement. "I don't suppose you'd like to tell me what you did to get her so shook up?"

"I assure you I meant no—"

"That's all right. I mind my own business. My niece is a big girl. She can take care of herself, but she's a handful. I just hope you know you're in for it."

Chuckling, Mike agreed. "Had the same warning from the cabby."

Wells guffawed. "It must've been something she wasn't expecting. She came in here all flushed and ready to rumble."

"I kissed her. I enjoyed it," Mike admitted, grinning.

Wells nodded and smiled. "She needs a little shaking up."

Pleased by Wells' approval, Mike decided he'd better get back to business. "I'm going to need a desk—here in the office if possible. I need to stay close by if I'm going to protect her."

Wells nodded. "We've got an extra office, used to be a storeroom. Just cleared it out to make room for an intern. But the little gal decided Wells and Wells wasn't high profile enough for her, so she ditched us to clerk for a judge instead."

"Sounds fine. Computer access?"

"Phone lines are in, but no computer yet."

"No problem. I'll have Sid bring over my laptop."

"You're set then?"

"As soon as I beard the lioness in her den."

Five

Attorney Paul Winston surveyed his domain. The polished woods and soft leather warned new clients that his firm was well-established and they could expect a large bill. He glanced at his solid gold Rolex. One more appointment and he could cut out to the golf course. He would give this new widow and her son fifteen minutes of his valuable time—but charge them for a full hour. Yes, then he would just make his tee time. Being the senior partner of Winston, Weiner and Rappaport did have its advantages after all.

"Mrs. Sand and her son to see you, sir," Paul's administrative assistant interrupted.

"Send them in," he barked.

The door opened, and all thoughts of golf—or anything other than bed sport—flew from his mind. Like a runway model, the auburn-haired beauty glided into his office. Attired in an expensive, black suit, her gaze caught his and held it. Entranced, he stared into her chocolate brown eyes. Standing up, he extended his hand. "Mrs. Sand, I'm Paul Winston."

"Lilith Sand. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Winston." She glanced at the dark-haired young man beside her. "My son, Edmund Everley."

Paul dismissed the sulky-looking teenager as a wimp. "Everley?"

The runt nodded back, his disdainful expression all too clear to Paul's experienced eyes.

"Yes, my first husband passed away, too."

At this statement, a hint of a smile played about her lovely lips. *Wealthy widow twice over?* His firm could always use another wealthy-widow client.

Motioning for them to be seated, he asked, "How may I assist you, Mrs. Sand?"

"I want you to investigate the will of my late sister, Cynthia Kimbrough Wells. She passed away almost two years ago and left her daughter everything. I'd like to contest it."

"Why?"

"Due to an unfortunate misunderstanding in my youth, my mother disinherited me and left my sister everything. I'd like a share of my rightful inheritance. It isn't fair for my sister's daughter to have it all."

"I'm not sure you have a legal basis for your inquiry."

"You're averse to taking my money?"

"I'm *averse* to taking money I haven't earned. I'm a lawyer, not a crook." At least he had to say that. And he *was* averse to wasting his time.

Lilith Sand smiled again, her gaze warm and inviting. "Some would argue that there's a fine line between the two."

Everley jumped up. "Mother, we don't have to kiss his ass. New York is full of lawyers."

Her expression never altered. "Quiet, Edmund. I want Mr. Winston to take our case because he comes highly recommended."

"You'll need to tell me more about this misunderstanding that led to your being disinherited."

Lilith Sand leaned forward, motioning for her son to be seated. "It goes back to a childhood incident. We were

swimming at our summer home on Lake Canandaigua. Our youngest sister, Deirdre, drowned."

"Tragic," Paul Winston weighed in, unnecessarily.

"Doubly so. Cynthia was supposed to be watching her, but she blamed Deirdre's death on me, even suggested that I had intentionally allowed our sister to drown. Mother believed Cynthia because she was always Mother's favorite. As soon as I was able, I left home for college. We remained estranged, and Mother left everything to Cynthia. That's all there is to it."

"How much money is involved?"

"My mother's personal wealth was substantial. She was the only child of an investment banker. My sister's daughter, Gwyneth, received a substantial inheritance from her father as well. She won't miss my portion. I don't think my son should be left out of his grandmother's will. After all, he was her grandson."

Paul hesitated. The longer he talked to Lilith Sand, the more uncomfortable he felt—her considerable charm notwithstanding. She reminded him of a cobra. He couldn't keep his eyes off her, but he was certain her bite was deadly. Perhaps, he should pass on the intriguing woman in front of him and play golf instead. On the other hand, there *would* be a sizable retainer involved.

"How long ago did your mother die?"

"Mother died five years ago."

"You've waited this long to contest her will?"

The Man For The Job
by Marie-Nicole Ryan

"I felt my niece will be more amenable to reason now that her mother is gone. And I was occupied caring for my husband who was quite ill at the time."

"I see." Paul drummed his fingers against the chair arm. Mrs. Sand wasn't telling him everything, but the lure of a large retainer for the firm was too difficult to resist. "All right. One of my clerks will get right on it. If you'll leave your name, address and other particulars with my assistant, we'll look into the matter."

Lilith Sand rose in one fluid motion. "Thank you, Mr. Winston. Come, Edmund."

Still as Paul watched Lilith Sand and her son leave his office, he wondered if he'd made a mistake.

Six

Nervous and downright twitchy, Gwyneth tapped her fingernails against the surface of the desk. "Mike Carlton can't treat me like this. He's used to women falling at his feet because he's so damned good-looking. I'll show him."

But before she could show him, her private line rang. She recognized Richard's number on the caller ID.

What does he want?

"Yes, Richard?" she answered.

"Meet me for dinner tonight. We simply must talk about all this."

"There's nothing left to say." Yet she found herself inexplicably pleased by the familiar sound of his voice. And Mike Carlton had absolutely nothing to do with her sudden fondness for Richard.

"I don't think we have. Our client lists shouldn't dictate our personal relationship. You're being extreme."

"No, I'm being ethical. You have *one* client. He's a gangster, and his wife is *my* client. That's a clear conflict of interest."

"Business-wise, perhaps, but it's business. We can't allow it to affect our lives."

"It already has. You're not the person I thought you were. It's over, Richard." *Why couldn't he understand?*

"I have more to say on this subject, but my next appointment is waiting. I'll expect you at Giordello's at eight," he insisted, then broke the connection.

"Bastard," She remembered, a little late now, that Richard's high-handed manner was his least attractive feature. Breaking the engagement had been the right decision.

"Problem?" Mike leaned against the door frame and gave a belated knock.

His unctuous tone grated on her last nerve. "Not unless you consider that I seem to be surrounded by jerks today." There, he should know he's not the only man in the world.

Mike turned a chair around and straddled it. "The ex-fiancé? What did he want?"

"None of your business."

"Temper, temper. The more I know about your ex, the better prepared I'll be to protect you."

Gwyneth sighed. "He wants—no, he *demands* that I meet him for dinner. He wants to talk about *us*."

"So it was the Honorable Richard Klein, Esquire, who called. Good, we'll go."

"Don't be absurd. I don't want to see him again. Especially not with you along for the ride."

Mike leaned forward on her desk, his face too close to hers. "I want to meet him face-to-face." He leaned closer. "I want to see what you saw in him."

Gwyneth leaned back in her chair—anything to get away from him. Yet the memory of Mike's kiss sent heat rushing to her face. "Back off."

Mike grinned, but he gave her some space. "You might as well get used to my being around. From now on, we're Siamese twins."

"I'm not meeting Richard for dinner, and I..." The thought of being *joined* with Mike sent the heat rushing to her face again. Damn! She absolutely should not think such thoughts in the middle of the afternoon.

"Humor me, counselor. I need to know if he's the one having you followed. One dinner and we can eliminate him."

"Well..." She hesitated, "I suppose you have a valid argument."

"Now, you're cooking. Where're we going?"

"Giordello's at eight."

"Great, I love Italian."

"You really don't expect to stay with me twenty-four hours a day, do you?"

"Sure do. That's why your uncle's paying me. He's given me office space. And after office hours, I'll hang out at your place. I can sleep on the sofa or the floor. I'm not picky."

"Well, I am. And I don't need a roommate. I like my privacy."

"Look, counselor, if you want to make up with your ex and have him spend the night, you can shut the bedroom door. I promise not to listen. I don't get my kicks that way. Besides, I'm sure I'd be bored to death."

"You are as disgusting as you are rude."

Mike shrugged, then fumbled in his jacket pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. "Mind?"

"Yes, I do. This is a nonsmoking office. It's a nasty, filthy habit. You can't smoke in my apartment either. That's another reason you can't stay with me."

"Okay, I'll quit." He slid the pack back into his pocket.

"Just like that—you'll stop?"

"Sure. I've been meaning to one of these days."

"Right," she told him as derisively as possible. If quitting were that easy, the tobacco companies would have gone out of business a long time ago.

"I can do anything I make up my mind to do," he told her with a grin.

"Is that supposed to be a warning?"

"Statement of fact."

"I'll take it as a warning."

A Brooklyn-accented voice over the intercom interrupted Gwyneth and Mike's verbal sparring. "Miss Wells, your two o'clock is here."

Thank God. Gwyneth breathed a sigh of relief. "Give me a minute, Gale," she replied, then turned back to Mike. "You'll have to leave. Surely you don't suspect one of my clients..."

Shaking his head, Mike stood up. "I'll be outside the door. Just in case."

"I won't need you," she told him as firmly as she knew how.

"You never know," he replied, not moving from the doorway.

"Believe me, I know." Dammit. Would he never leave her alone? Maybe he needed the persuading toe of a Sergio Rossi planted in his behind. "Mrs. Damico will be in here any second."

"Damico? Any relation to the mob boss?"

"Everything about my clients is privileged information. Now get *out*."

"Tut-tut, counselor, so rude."

Gwyneth sighed. "Subtlety seems a bit beyond your grasp."

"All right. I can take a hint, even one dealt with a very heavy, albeit lovely, hand."

Albeit? The man talked like a Raymond Chandler reject one minute and a professor the next.

Who is he? What is he? Questions she would have to ask her uncle later.

Much later, since Sylvia Damico, who was indeed the wife of a Mafioso and desirous of a quick divorce, stood gazing up into Mike's green eyes, her mouth gaping ever so slightly. Any minute the poor woman would drool, and the most outrageous private investigator in New York City would've made yet another conquest.

Another conquest? Surely she wasn't counting herself as one. No, not at all.

* * * *

Mike grew thoughtful as he closed the door to Gwyn's office. Her client, a petite lady of obvious Italian heritage with enormous dark brown eyes and trembling lips, intrigued him. In spite of Gwyn's taking refuge in privileged communication, he was certain that Mrs. Damico was none other than the wife of Gianni Damico, well-known to the police department as successor to John Gotti's empire.

He turned and strode down the hall to the office space Wells had designated. The office was small and clean with a

desk and chair, filing cabinet and telephone. Perfect. He pulled out the chair and sat down.

Gianni Damico.

Just what he'd always wanted—a chance to mix it up with the mob. Again.

Tamiko.

A standoff. His wife had been the NYPD hostage negotiator. And everything on the operation that could've gone wrong, had. The hostage dead. The perp dead. And his wife dead.

Tamiko. Even now, thinking of her made his stomach churn.

Her death had been ruled as an unfortunate mishap: *Lost in the line of duty.*

Lost in the line of duty? Hell. The perp had been one of Damico's button men, and the whole scenario smelled of setup. Mike and his partner, Dillinger, had been ready to bring the entire Damico Crime Family down. The dead hostage had been the police department's informant. Yet in one completely fucked-up operation, the entire investigation was dead in the water.

No witness.

No wife.

Mike banged his fist against the desktop. What he wouldn't give to put Damico behind bars.

Seven

After her appointment with Sylvia Damico concluded, Gwyneth added her notes to the woman's file. She'd already tried convincing the woman to go to a shelter for abused women but had met with resistance—not an unusual circumstance, but a troubling one nonetheless. Closing the file and locking it away, she took a deep breath. Time to get some answers from her uncle.

She marched into his office and closed the door behind her. No point in feeding Mike's already over-inflated ego by allowing him to think she had any personal interest in him.

"I think you need to tell me a little bit more about this private detective you've hired for me."

Uncle Wil looked up and gave her a smart-ass grin that he didn't have the decency to hide, his blue eyes alight with obvious mischief. "He's the best, sugar. What else do you need to know?"

"I mean, like what did he do before he became a P.I? What's his background? Who really recommended him to *you*?"

"Okay, okay. Stop with the interrogation, already. I'll talk." Her uncle heaved a sigh, then continued, "Mike's a former police detective. He was on the fast track for lieutenant, till he ran afoul of Gianni Damico—and the Police Commissioner."

"Ran afoul, how?" If she was any judge of Mike Carlton's character, he probably tried to seduce the Commissioner's wife.

Leaning back in his chair, he laced his hands across his stomach. "It's a long story."

"Then cut to the chase."

"Well, they say he and his partner had an informant in the Damico family who was about to give it all up. Everything and everybody—the entire operation."

"So what happened?"

"A SWAT team balls-up. Everybody who mattered ended up dead, including Carlton's wife."

"His wife?" That Mike had been married surprised her. He didn't seem the type to limit himself to one woman a week, much less marry and tie himself down.

"She was a hostage negotiator. Anyway, Mike went a little crazy for a while, told everybody who'd listen that someone high up in the department was in Damico's pocket. As you might guess, this sort of irritated the Commissioner. He and your P.I. went head-to-head. No telling what would've happened if Mike's partner hadn't pulled him off the Commish. Mike turned in his badge—and became an entrepreneur."

"Oh."

"Is that all you have to say?"

"Uh, yes." Totally at a loss, she had entirely too much to think about—a disgraced detective and one with a temper on top of all his other, more obvious faults. Finally, she managed a feeble, "I just needed to know."

"Uh-huh."

More to cover for her obvious confusion than any real desire to know, she asked, "Who recommended him?"

"An old friend of mine," her uncle replied, suddenly finding the office ceiling of great interest.

"Why are you hedging? What old friend of yours?" Pulling information out of her uncle was as tedious as watching a baseball game. What was the matter with him?

"I can't tell you his name. Let's just say he's highly placed in government."

"City government? Or state?"

"No, more like *national* government," he admitted, drawing his response out slowly.

"That doesn't make any sense. Why would anyone in DC know anything about Mike Carlton?"

"His father and I go way back, okay?"

"But he told me that his father..." She stopped, suddenly remembering what Mike had told her about his father being in the diplomatic service and a consultant. "His father's CIA?" She lowered her tone to a stage whisper.

Her uncle leaned back in his chair and studied the ceiling. "You didn't hear it from me."

* * * *

Mike stood on the opposite side of the door to Wilford Wells' office. He strained to hear what was being discussed, but beyond the low murmur of voices, he couldn't make out a damned word.

Damn. If Gwyn was trying to worm her way out of being his client, he needed to know. Besides, if she had any silly ideas of going to dinner without him, she was in for a big surprise. Now that he thought about it, he hadn't had a bite

since breakfast, and that had been a bagel and coffee. Not exactly what an active P.I. needed to keep the old fires stoked.

Besides, meeting the ex-fiancé was a damn near necessity. Dinner with Gwyn and the mob lawyer sounded just fine.

Without warning, the door opened. The ever-lovely Gwyneth asked with a sneer, "Is eavesdropping another one of your talents?"

"One of many," Mike admitted, then smiled and buffed his fingernails on his lapel. Being cool and casual was another of those talents, but belaboring the obvious wasn't necessary. Gwyn, being intelligent as well as an eyeful, would've already figured that out.

She attempted to brush past him.

He stepped into her path. She glared at him, sending his heart rate into the stratosphere. Her breathing quickened, her blue eyes full of ire—no, make that fire.

"Gwyn-eth," he drawled, enunciating the syllables, "what's next on our agenda?" The subtle scent she wore left him giddy. Something familiar, yet unique to her.

"*Our* agenda?"

"Let's get your routine down."

"All right," she sighed in apparent resignation. "I'll prepare a schedule. My usual court days, my appointment days—everything you need to know. If you'll give me about thirty minutes, I'll work up a printout, then we can discuss our options."

"Okay." Mike stepped back. Where was the hostility, the frank disdain she'd treated him with since they'd first met? She'd turned quiet and professional on him.

Why? Was she giving up to the inevitable, or was she up to something?

* * * *

Several hours later, in the back seat of another taxi, Mike relished his state of pleasant confusion. His client had kept her word and discussed security arrangements with him in an adult manner. He wasn't certain he liked this new turn of events. He was more comfortable with the reluctant, but feisty, temptress he'd kissed that morning, rather than this ice maiden.

He looked over at Gwyn. She sat on the far side of the cab with her lovely knees together and hands folded primly in her lap. It was obvious she wasn't about to allow another spontaneous demonstration of affection. He'd lost the element of surprise. *Dammit.*

Still, he couldn't resist looking at her shapely legs.

"Will you give it a rest?" She glared at him, daring him.

He held his hands up in surrender. "What? I haven't tried anything." Then he grinned. "Or maybe you want me to try something? And you're upset because I haven't."

Gwyn's eyes widened and her jaw tightened. Her struggle was obvious to anyone with his keen powers of detection.

"I would appreciate it—" she began.

Mike seized the opening and scooted over toward her. "Anything to oblige, Miss Wells."

"—if you didn't," she finished with a prissy emphasis that sent him back to his side of the taxi.

"All right," he continued with a good-natured smile. "I just want you to know I'm available—"

"Available?"

Her tone was meant to be withering, but Mike knew better. She'd enjoyed the kiss they'd shared. "Yeah, available. For—uh, protective services, guarding your body and emotional support—the usual."

"I hardly think those are the usual services. You're just a renaissance man, aren't you?"

"Have gun, will travel."

"Or in your case, have *lips*, will travel."

"*Touché*, counselor."

Gwyneth favored Mike with a tight little smile. Maybe she was more concerned about dinner with her ex. Was she regretting the breakup?

The taxi slowed, then stopped in front of Giordello's.

"Finally." Gwyneth heaved a sigh. "There he is." She indicated a tall, slender man, who smoked while he paced back and forth in front of the restaurant at a fevered pace.

A greyhound in a three-piece suit—the ex-fiancé. Already Mike disliked him. "Counselor, you let *him* smoke in your apartment?" he asked and nudged her ribs with his elbow.

"*No*, I didn't. He used the balcony." She huffed and hurried forward.

"Richard." She offered him her cheek for a peck, then backed away before he could pull her into his arms.

Hot damn. Here we go. I'll show this little prick how to treat a woman like Gwyn. She's as good as mine, or I'll give up women for good.

Scowling, the ex threw down his cigarette. "Who's your friend?"

"This is Mike Carlton, the detective Uncle Wil recommended. Mike, Richard Klein."

"Kling." Mike gave the man a peremptory nod, then repeated, "Kling," purposely mispronouncing his name a second time.

"Klein," the ex-fiancé corrected and placed a proprietary hand at Gwyn's waist.

"Yeah, right, whatever." Mike believed in the old adage that names conveyed power. And he'd be damned if he gave any to the jerk standing beside Gwyn.

Gwyn smiled brightly. "Shall we have dinner?"

"He's having dinner with us? Gwyneth, there are things we need to discuss ... privately."

"Sorry, but my client needs twenty-four-hour protection."

"Really. Nice job. Bodyguard to someone as wealthy as Gwyneth here. You have deep pockets, darling, and he's mining them."

That's enough. Mike jutted his chin and stepped into Klein's personal space. "Listen, you condescending putz. Maybe you don't care that someone's stalking her, but I do."

"I doubt you'd be so attentive if she didn't have a healthy trust fund."

Gwyn placed her hands on her hips. "Hold on a minute. I don't like being discussed as if I weren't here. Stop this macho sparring right now. You're both being ridiculous."

"Stand guard, then," Klein replied, with a shrug and a half-snarl of his thin lips. "We don't eat with the hired help."

"Mike's joining us for dinner," Gwyneth insisted. "I'm sure he hasn't eaten since breakfast." She glanced up at him, her moistened lips slightly apart, as if hoping he'd agree.

"True enough. Miss Wells has kept me quite busy."

"Fine." Klein glared at Mike, then pulled a beeper from his pocket. "Table's ready. After you, Gwyneth."

Klein was already losing patience, and Mike was damned glad. Gwyneth's ex was a jerk. *What had been the attraction?*

* * * *

All through dinner, Mike seethed but kept his mouth shut. Klein was arrogant and belittling in turn. Why did she let the ex talk to her that way? Where was the spunk Mike had witnessed all day long?

Klein leaned forward, eyeing Gwyn. "There's a client I want you to drop."

Gwyn's eyes widened as she straightened her back. "I beg your pardon. This had better not be the same song, second verse."

"My client, Mr. Damico, would appreciate it if you did not handle his wife's divorce action, and I would consider it a personal—"

"Don't be absurd." Her beautiful blue eyes flashed as she stood up. Mike held his applause.

"This *is* the same old argument," she continued. "If you choose to represent her husband, that's your problem, but I will not have you dictating whom I can and cannot represent."

Mike restrained the impulse to stand up and cheer the return of her spirit. All was not lost.

Klein looked around the room, a frown distorting his thin features. "Gwyneth, sit down. You're making a scene."

"Listen, pal, watch how you talk to the lady."

Klein settled his gaze on Mike like he'd just stepped on a dog turd. "Are you for real? I feel like I've stumbled into an old forties movie."

Mike jumped up, his fists clenched. Klein was asking for it. "I'll show you who's—"

"Both of you, be quiet," Gwyn demanded and sat down.

God! He loved a confident woman.

Gwyn shot him a pointed glare. "I'm perfectly capable of handling this. Please don't interfere."

Mike nodded and sat down. "Yes, ma'am." Hopefully, the fireworks weren't over. This could still turn out to be a fun evening.

"Richard, my clients and my practice are mine, and I resent any attempts at coercion from you."

"Way to go!" Mike offered, in spite of having just agreed not to interfere. And he more than deserved the sharp glare she darted at him. Damn. The woman was hot.

Gwyneth shoved her plate away, snatched up her purse and stood. "I've had more than enough. Gentlemen—and I use the term loosely—I'm calling it a night."

Klein sprang from his seat. "All right, I'll see you home."

Mike interrupted, "Maybe you will and maybe you won't. I think that's up to the counselor here. Gwyn?"

Her wide blue eyes glanced back and forth between him and Klein, her slender fingers drumming against her thigh.

"Gwyneth," Klein prompted in a tone so pompous, Mike considered stuffing his fist down the jerk's throat just to shut him up.

"I'm going home alone. Mike, I'll see you in the morning. Eight would be—"

Klein grabbed Gwyn's elbow. "I must insist."

"Stop it!" She jerked her arm away and headed toward the front entrance.

"Bastard," Mike barked at Klein, then rushed after his headstrong client. He reached the front door, but a sudden influx of patrons delayed him.

Finally, he worked his way through the group of tourist types. "Excuse me." He extricated himself after tripping over one zaftig matron.

Reaching the street, he glanced in both directions. Damn. He'd lost her.

* * * *

Taking a deep, ragged breath, Gwyneth tried hailing a taxi. *Dammit*. Never a cab when you needed one—and it wasn't even raining. She tucked her purse close under her arm and held it to her side. Okay, no taxi in sight, she'd just walk home. It wasn't all that far, and she needed to blow off some steam.

The very idea of Richard's ordering her around like that. How dare he tell her to drop a client! Further evidence of his autocratic behavior—she'd made the right decision in breaking up with him. After listening to her clients describe the domineering and controlling men in their lives, how could she have been so stupid to get involved with one?

Although normally, the sound of rapid footsteps behind her would've made her turn around and check out whoever was there, there was nothing normal about this evening or the thoughts she had. Mike, no doubt, had run after her. Well, he could just eat her dust.

Damn. If Mike had to take on the persona of a fictional private detective, why couldn't he have modeled himself after Robert B. Parker's Spenser? Now *he* was a detective she could handle.

She rushed on, passing a darkened alley.

"Where you goin' in such a damned, big hurry?"

She pulled her purse even tighter against her body, then whirled around and faced him. He was medium-height and stocky; his wise-guy silk suit pulled at the shoulders. His feet were planted firmly on the pavement.

He looked like trouble with a capital T.

"Excuse me." Heart pounding, she attempted to go around him, but he stepped into her path.

"We have some business to discuss. You're pokin' your nose in where it don't belong." He jerked her around and pulled her into the alley, then slammed her up against the wall so hard it knocked the air out of her. He held a gun to her throat.

The Man For The Job
by Marie-Nicole Ryan

Dazed, she gasped, "Here, take my purse. There's money. Take it."

Blowing his beery breath in her face, he rasped, "My boss don't want your purse. Stay outta his business." He drew back his fist, then slapped her head against the wall. Her vision blurred and the light faded. She slid down the wall...

But why ... ?

Eight

Mike stood on the sidewalk and cursed Gwyn for her rash behavior.

Not a damned cab in sight. Her apartment wasn't far, maybe five or six blocks. He'd hoof it. Granted, the neighborhood was upscale, but a determined stalker ... She'd be okay, as long as she'd hailed a taxi. But in her headlong rush from the restaurant, his client hadn't been in a wait-for-a-cab kind of mood.

Turning in the direction of Gwyn's apartment, he took off at a brisk pace. Keeping up with his impetuous client and keeping her out of danger was a challenge, but he was up to it.

First things first—he had to find her.

Intent on catching up with her or, at the very least, getting to her apartment building, Mike wasn't sure why he gave the alley a second glance. Something caught his attention. A thud? And a groan?

But fortune smiled. Mike stopped and peered into the dark littered passageway.

His heart stopped. Bruised and motionless, Gwyn lay crumpled on the ground. A man stood over her, his foot drawn back poised to kick her in the head.

"No!" He launched into the air, tackling the mugger. The man hit the ground with a loud grunt, and Mike landed on top of him. Over and over they rolled in the detritus of the alley.

Mike gouged. He pummeled. "You—son—of—a—bitch!" He accented each word with a powerful punch. For good measure, he bounced the perp's head off the asphalt until he stopped fighting back.

Satisfied the hood wasn't going anywhere, Mike knelt beside Gwyn's motionless body and felt for a pulse. Relieved by the steady beat against his forefinger, he took a deep breath. A dark bruise on her left temple seemed to be the only sign of damage—until he felt a knot at the base of her skull. *The bastard. If she dies...*

Mike reached in his jacket pocket, pulled out his cell phone and punched in 911.

"Emergency service. What is your emergency?"

"A woman's been mugged. She's unconscious."

"Is she breathing?"

"Yes, you have to—"

"Your location?"

"We're in an alley off fucking Sixty-Eighth Street between Second and Park."

"Don't hang up, sir. Help is on the way."

"I won't. Just hurry."

"Don't move her," his lifeline insisted. "Wait for the paramedics."

"But—"

"No. Sir, listen to me. Describe her injuries."

"Bruise on the left temple. Large knot at the base of her skull. Scrapes on her legs. That's all I can see."

"You should be hearing sirens any time now."

Mike listened. Nothing.

Desperate, he wanted to flag someone down, but he couldn't take his eyes off Gwyn. "Dammit, why didn't you wait for me?" he cried, the blood pounding in his ears.

Her eyes fluttered. He dropped the phone and pulled off his jacket, covering her with it.

Relief surged through him. "It's me. You're safe. Can you hear me?"

"Not deaf," she mumbled, then moaned.

"Not brain-damaged either. You're still your charming self." He hid his concern behind a flip response. At least she was conscious.

"Not so loud," Gwyn groaned. "My head hurts."

The shrill wail of the sirens pierced the air. "Police and paramedics are on the way. Just lie still." He wanted nothing more than to cradle her in his arms, but feared moving her.

"Gwyn," he murmured, "don't you ever listen?"

"Not often." She tried to sit and groaned.

"I told you not to move."

"But—"

"Shh." He pressed his lips to hers. A sharp intake of breath marked her surprise, but her soft lips parted. He deepened the kiss, tasting her sweetness, his heart shooting into jackhammer mode.

If only he could stay glued to her forever—not that she would allow it if she weren't semiconscious. At best, he'd found the perfect way to preserve her strength.

When Gwyn regained her senses, she'd tell him where to head. But for now, she was soft, warm and willing to be kissed.

Pounding feet and rattling equipment echoed in the alley. Reluctantly he ended the kiss and placed a peck on the tip of her delightful, pert nose.

"Over here!" Mike yelled at the police and paramedics.

Mike backed away, leaving the EMTs to do their thing.

The EMT shined a light into Gwyn's eyes, then checked her pulse. "Pupils equal and react to light, but heart rate's a little fast."

Mike hid a grin. He'd had a hand in jacking up her heart rate. "She's going to be all right?"

"We're taking her to CPMC. They'll x-ray her head and probably watch her overnight." They slapped a padded collar around Gwyn's neck and moved her, in tandem, to a backboard.

"I'm riding along with her."

A uniformed officer stepped up. "Hold on, here. I've got some questions about this incident." He jerked his head in the direction of Gwyn's assailant who still lay unmoving.

Another paramedic knelt beside the creep. "Not sure this one's gonna make it."

"You know anything about what happened to him? Like who he is and why he attacked her?" The officer asked, as if he were ready to arrest Mike on the spot.

Mike eyeballed the officer's name tag. "Officer Mahoney, *I* happened to him. I found him ready to kick Miss Wells in the head. I made sure he didn't. She left the restaurant before I did. Sort of in a temper, you understand?" He looked at the silk-suited tough-guy lying on the ground. "Looks like a

mugging, but it could be more. She hired me because someone's been stalking her."

"And you are?"

"Mike Carlton. I'm a P.I." He stopped, pulled out his license and showed it to the officer. "Her uncle hired me today. I don't know if this guy's the one who's been following her, but she can tell us later."

"Used to be on the job, didn't you?"

"Yeah, the Fifteenth." Mike glanced over his shoulder.

The paramedics were loading Gwyneth into the ambulance. "Look, I want to ride along with her. Can we finish this at the hospital?"

"Yeah, sure." The officer scratched his head. "You had quite a lip lock on her when we entered the alley. You two old friends?"

Mike grinned. "More like love at first sight."

"Yeah, right," Mahoney agreed, shaking his head. "Listen, kid, if you're aiming to go with your lady friend, then you'd better move it. I'll see you at the ER. Hav'ta bring in this skel, too."

"Thanks, Officer." Mike sprinted for the ambulance and clambered in the back door just in time.

Once inside, he seated himself on a narrow, padded ledge. "Okay if I hold her hand?"

The taller paramedic snorted, "If she'll let you. She's a little on the feisty side."

Opening one eye and looking at the paramedic with disdain, the lady in question protested, "Not feisty. Just don't like being manhandled."

She tried to sit up, but Mike placed a restraining hand on her shoulder. Wouldn't do for her to slug one of the paramedics. "Let them do their jobs."

She looked up at him and held his gaze. Her eyes grew shiny with unshed tears. "Not every day someone bounces my head against a brick wall." She blinked away the tears.

He couldn't resist teasing, "Don't worry. The brick wall's fine."

Her luscious lips twitched with obvious effort, trying to hold back a smile. "You saved my life. I never said 'thank you.'"

He winked. "I thought you said it real nice, counselor."

Next she worried her bottom lip with her teeth. *Dammit.* She was driving him halfway to distraction. Life wasn't fair. No uptight, hard-nosed attorney had any business having a mouth like hers. A mouth made for kissing. Must be the reason he'd kissed her at every opportunity.

And would again.

But next time, he vowed, he'd let her initiate it. Ah, hell. Who was he trying to kid? The next time those lips were in the vicinity of his, he'd make her forget all about that SOB Klein.

Not that he wasn't mystified by his own reaction to her. Her beauty was obvious enough. Any man would want her on sight. Gwyneth, with the face of an angel and the personality of a saguaro cactus, would challenge many a braver man. Fools rush in ... Well, maybe he was a fool, 'cause he was definitely rushing.

When his wife was killed four years ago, he swore he'd never love again—and he hadn't. And while he hadn't been a monk the last year, his few encounters had been brief—a means to an end, nothing more.

Gwyn's husky voice interrupted his train of thought. "My heart's pounding."

Mike glanced at the monitor display over her shoulder. He didn't pretend to understand the squiggles. "Flat line I know, but anything else is a mystery."

She tugged on the paramedic's sleeve. "Do I have that A-fib thing? My father had it. It killed him."

"No ma'am," the shorter of the two paramedics answered, "you got what we call sinus tachycardia."

"That sounds bad." Her eyes widened.

"Nah, it's just a reaction to all the excitement. Now, if you were hemorrhaging—"

"Am I?" she interrupted, the anxiety causing her voice to squeak.

Mike rolled his eyes. It certainly didn't take much to set her off.

"You don't appear to be." The paramedic took a deep breath. "Just listen, lady. I'm trying to explain."

Mike piped in, "Listening isn't her strong suit. Thought I'd warn you."

His helpful comment was rewarded with a flash of blue eyes.

"Sorry," she huffed. "Ever since my father died, I've been a little paranoid about heart stuff."

The Man For The Job
by Marie-Nicole Ryan

The paramedic sighed. "I just meant that a hemorrhage would give you sinus tach, too. But," he hastened to add, "you're not hemorrhaging, okay?" He craned his neck, glancing out the window. "We there yet?"

"Thank you for explaining it to me." She flashed the disgruntled man a wide smile.

Mike sat back and watched the power of her smile. A slow red flush crept up the paramedic's cheeks and a grin spread across his face.

Damn. No man had a chance when she decided to turn on the charm. Might as well start a Gwyneth Wells' fan club right here and now. He guessed by the time she came home from the hospital, she'd have acquired an entire entourage of admirers, fetching and carrying—anything to be near that smile.

And, dammit, he'd be first in line.

Nine

Gwyneth shifted uncomfortably on the stretcher—wires and tubes were everywhere. And she had a headache that felt worse than the biggest hangover she'd ever had. Still, she kept a close watch on the heart monitor—at least her heart rate wasn't in the one-twenty range anymore.

A petite, redheaded woman, dressed in a white lab coat over blue scrubs, entered Gwyneth's cubicle. "Miss Wells," she began, flipping through the chart, "I'm Dr. Canfield from neurology. How's your headache? Has the medication helped?"

Gwyneth grimaced. "Not much."

"Can you rate your pain for me on a scale of one to ten with ten being the absolutely worst pain you can imagine?"

Closing her eyes, Gwyneth considered her choices. "About a seven, I guess." In a gesture born of nerves more than need, she smoothed the sheet covering her. "How soon can I get out of here?"

Dr. Canfield smiled, then shook her head. "I'm afraid I'm going to keep you overnight for observation."

"Overnight? I can't stay here all night." Gwyneth sat up but was immediately overcome by a wave of dizziness and nausea. "Ugh," she flopped back on the gurney. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"Take a couple of deep breaths, Miss Wells, and try to lie still." The neurologist turned and yelled to a nurse, "We need a CAT scan on curtain two. Like now, folks."

The doctor glanced at the monitors. "Your heart rate and blood pressure are normal, but nausea could be a symptom of increased pressure in your brain. The scan will rule that out. It's normal procedure."

"Or not?"

"Or not," the doctor admitted, then hastened to add, "It's not unusual to have some nausea when you've had a concussion. We just need to make sure you're not bleeding into the brain. That's why we're going to watch you very closely for the next twenty-four hours."

"But what if there's something wrong?"

"Then we'll catch it quickly, and you'll go to surgery so the pressure can be relieved."

"You're talking about *brain* surgery." Gwyneth let out a long breath. "Oh my God, you want to operate on my brain?" Panicked, she sucked in rapid breaths, then grew dizzy. It didn't help that the monitor started beeping like a crazed garbage truck in reverse. She grabbed for the neurologist's hand and gasped, "I can't breathe."

* * * *

Mike hung up the telephone, leaned back against the wall and breathed a sigh of relief. Gwyneth's uncle was on his way to the hospital. From his place in the waiting area, he'd heard the rising note of panic in Gwyneth's voice. He'd fought for self-control, as a couple of orderlies rushed out of the cubicle carrying her on a stretcher.

The doctor approached Mike. "I'm Dr. Canfield, Miss Wells's neurologist. Are you Mr. Michael Carlton?"

"Yes."

"According to her chart, she designated you as the person to whom we can release medical information."

Stunned, Mike nodded. "Okay. What's wrong? Where are they taking her?"

"She's going up to medical imaging for a CAT scan."

"But is she okay?"

"It's normal procedure after head injuries."

"But I heard her all the way out in the waiting area."

"She's hyperventilating, Mr..."

"...Carlton. Hyperventilating?"

"That just means she panicked and breathed too rapidly which causes the carbon dioxide to build up in her blood. It's scary, not serious."

"But the CAT scan, what about that?"

"CAT scan stands for computerized axial tomography. It takes images of the brain in thin slices. We'll be able to tell if she's suffered a bleed or other injury. She's had some nausea, which isn't unusual, but it could also be an indicator of increased pressure in the brain."

"All right, thank you, Doctor."

The tiny redhead smiled up at him. "Are you a relative?"

"No, I'm a friend." Okay, so he exaggerated the truth. Gwyn, sure as hell, wouldn't describe him as a friend. "But I've called her uncle. He's on his way."

"I think she's going to be fine, but I'm keeping her overnight for observation."

"Good."

The doctor's attention shifted to focus over Mike's shoulder. "I think there's a detective waiting to talk to you."

Mike looked behind him. "Thanks. But you will let me know when she's through with the scan?"

"Sure, you can see her as soon as she gets back."

"Okay, thank you for everything." Mike glanced at the detective again. "Guess I'd better talk to him. He looks impatient."

"You're welcome," the doctor replied.

Mike turned around and walked slowly toward the familiar figure in black. "Dillinger, how the hell are you?"

A broad smile wreathed his old partner's face. "You old horn dog, what're you doing mixed up in a mugging? I never thought you'd stoop that low."

"Prick. Your mugger's in trauma one. I'm the hero." Mike buffed his nails against his lapel.

Dillinger rolled his eyes. "Should've known. You always liked that role. So, did you rescue a fair damsel—or just a little, old lady?"

Mike grinned. "A very fair damsel."

"Tell me more—officially, that is," Dillinger pulled out his notepad.

"Why don't we find the coffee shop and talk there?" Mike suggested, then couldn't resist adding, "Is that shiny head of yours regulation now, or are you just trying to hide how bald you really are?"

"Asshole," Dillinger swore under his breath. "I knew I couldn't ever be as pretty as you, so I don't try anymore."

"Prick."

"You're repeating yourself. Losing your touch, old man?"

Laughing, Mike admitted, "Guess I'm just a little worried over the fair damsel."

"Should've known. You haven't changed much. You never did have any brains where the ladies were concerned."

* * * *

Damn. The loud click-clacking of the CAT scanner nearly drove Gwyneth out of her mind. She already had a headache. She'd been injected with radioactive dyes, stuffed like a sausage into a smooth, round coffin of a machine, then bombarded by some kind of radiation death ray. Next thing she knew, she'd be glowing in the dark.

"Another minute, Miss Wells, and it'll all be over."

The reassuring voice of the technologist who was safely hidden behind a foot-thick wall of concrete only irritated Gwyneth more. *Fine for you*. The tech could afford to be reassuring. He wasn't the one clinging to sanity by long, acrylic fingernails.

Silently she counted, one Mississippi, two Mississippi, and so on, until finally the machine stopped its infernal noise.

"That's it. You're all done."

Finally she felt the machine slowly sliding her back to freedom—and air.

"I thought I was going to stay in that torture chamber forever."

The technician chuckled, then stopped. It must have been the sharp look Gwyneth shot him. "Sorry, I didn't mean to be rude. Normally when patients are claustrophobic, we can

sedate them, but since you have a head injury, too much sedation could mask any symptoms of..."

"Yeah, that's okay. I understand," Gwyneth admitted, trying to salvage her normally good nature and not wanting any more detail. "I've been a real pill," She attempted a smile.

"No problem." The technician flashed a big grin. "No one's at their best when they're in the hospital."

* * * *

Ten minutes later, Gwyneth was back in the crowded ER. How anyone managed to work in the chaos mystified her. And it registered that there were a few patients with worse problems than a headache.

Where was Mike? she wondered. After all, he did ride in the ambulance with her—and held her hand, too. That was kind of sweet when she actually thought about it. On the other hand, if he'd really been up to the job, she never would've had her head used as a volleyball ... Or maybe if she hadn't rushed from the restaurant like it was on fire...

Mike was probably talking to the police. Had he called Uncle Wil yet? Actually her head was feeling better, and she was more than a little tired of the whole ER experience.

The curtain whipped back, and the doctor entered. "Good news, Miss Wells, your scan is normal. No signs of bleeding."

"Great, so then I can go home?"

"No, I'm sure you can appreciate that we have to be careful with head injuries. That's why I'm keeping you

overnight for observation. Tomorrow, if you remain stable, I'll be more than happy to write your discharge order."

"Will I have to stay down here all night?"

The doctor shook her head. "No, as soon as there's an empty bed on neurology, you'll be transferred. By the way, I think you have some family here to see you."

"Thank you, Doctor."

The physician stepped aside, allowing Gwyneth's two favorite people in the entire world to enter the cubicle.

"Uncle Wil, Aunt Belinda, I'm so glad you're here."

"Darling, are you all right?" Her aunt rushed over and gave her a hug. "The doctor says she's going to keep you overnight."

"Yes, but I'm fine. Just have a big, old headache and a knot on the back on my head. Anyway, it's for observation.

Uncle Wil took up a spot on the opposite side of her stretcher. "Sugar, what happened? Where's Mike?"

"Haven't seen him since I returned from the CAT scan. He must be talking to the police."

"How'd this happen?"

"Well—uh, we were having dinner, and I got a little ticked off at Richard and Mike. Richard was telling me how to run my practice, and he and Mike got into some macho, testosterone-induced frenzy, so I ran out. By the time Mike found me, the mugger had already dragged me into the alley and was bouncing my head against the wall."

Her uncle frowned. "Why didn't you just give him your purse? You've lived in this city all your life. You *know* better."

Gwyneth sat up. "You don't understand. He didn't want my damned purse. He was trying to kill me."

"Now, now, sugar, lie down. Getting upset won't help anything."

Reluctantly Gwyneth lay down again and continued her tale. "When I passed out, I thought I was going to die, but Mike saved me. I heard one of the nurses say he nearly beat the guy to death. He's in one of the major trauma rooms—worse off than I am."

Wilford shook his head. "That was too close. You'd better stay in your apartment and let Mike handle the investigation."

"I can't stay hiding away. I have clients who don't have *anywhere* to hide."

"I can take over your caseload, sugar. Please."

"I don't think so. Some of my clients don't want a male lawyer."

"All right, all right. I know you're going to do whatever the hell you want, anyway."

Gwyneth smiled. "You know me so well. I think Mike's gotten lost, so why don't you go find him for me, while I talk to Aunt Belinda."

Her uncle nodded. "Yeah, I'll find him for you."

At that moment, Mike poked his head around the privacy curtain. "Someone looking for me?"

He stepped into Gwyn's cubicle. Standing beside the retro-hippie lawyer, better known as Uncle Wilford, was a statuesque and elegant honey blonde, who appeared at least fifteen years younger than the graying attorney who was sixty, if he was a day.

Way to go, Wilford.

Wilford nodded at Mike. "Belinda, this is Mike Carlton, the detective we hired to look after Gwyneth. Mike, this is my wife, Belinda, who in spite of her obvious beauty and intelligence, married me anyway."

"I've already heard so much about you, Mr. Carlton. Gwyneth's very fortunate to have you." Belinda Wells extended her hand, which Mike bowed over in his most courtly manner, ignoring the soft snort from Gwyneth. "I'm very pleased to meet you, Mrs. Wells."

"How gallant you are, Mr. Carlton," she replied with just the hint of a Southern drawl.

"Old habits die hard." He turned to his favorite client. "How's your head? I see you're already holding court right here in the ER."

"Sorry to break the bad news. I'm going to live. I hope we didn't interrupt any clandestine linen closet maneuvers," she teased with a touch of her old, saucy attitude.

Mike favored her with a grin guaranteed to soften the hardest of hearts, then replied, "No, I was between nurses."

The smile worked, because Gwyneth couldn't hide the twitching of her luscious lips.

Unfortunately, on Mike's other side, Dillinger was nudging Mike in the ribs. Reluctantly, he stepped aside. "Gwyneth, this is Detective Dillinger. He has some questions about the attack."

Gwyn rewarded the detective with a wide smile. "Of course, Detective, ask away."

Chicks seemed to dig his old partner for some strange reason. Mike couldn't fathom it himself, but then that was probably on the order of a good thing. Besides, he'd already warned his old partner that *la femme* Gwyneth was off-limits. *Way off.*

Wilford frowned. "Sugar, are you sure you're up to it?"

Gwyn reached over and patted her uncle's forearm. "I'll be fine."

A nurse in scrubs entered the cubicle. "Okay, young lady, your room is ready. It's time for you to head upstairs."

"Couldn't I just go home?" She still hated the thought of staying in the hospital all night long. And what about the chances for medication errors?

"No, ma'am. Someone will be waking you up every hour during the night to make sure you know who the President is and the day of the week."

Gwyneth grimaced. "Oh, so I'll be getting a lot of rest. I understand."

"I know it sounds like fiendish torture, but it's really necessary."

"Yeah, I think I remember something about all that subdural hematoma stuff." Gwyneth couldn't hold back the shiver. Hospitals gave her the absolute creeps. Too many chances for things to go wrong.

"I could wake her up every hour, couldn't I?" Mike offered.

"Never mind." Gwyneth shook her head. "I'll spend the night here."

"That's gratitude," Mike muttered good-naturedly, but the lady ignored him.

The nurse nodded. "Why don't you folks head up to forty-two-fifteen, and I'll bring Miss Wells up as soon as the doctor completes her orders."

The nurse turned to leave. "How's the man who attacked me?" Gwyneth asked.

"He's in the OR."

Dillinger rolled his eyes at Mike. "How soon will I be able to interview him?"

The nurse shrugged. "I don't know. It'll depend on his status after surgery."

Mike turned to Wilford. "Why don't you and your wife go on up to her room?" He nodded at Dillinger. "We'll stay here—just in case."

"Yes," Wilford's wife agreed. "I packed up some night things from your apartment, Gwyn. I'll put them away for you."

Wilford nodded his agreement, which was quickly replaced by a frown. "Listen, Kemosabe, I want to know how this happened in the first place."

Mike hung his head. "It was my fault. I couldn't keep up with her."

"No, it was *my* fault," Gwyn insisted. "I got mad and ran out of the restaurant."

Wilford arched his bushy gray eyebrows and glanced at Mike.

He'd already screwed up by letting his client nearly get killed—nothing like having it pointed out to everyone. "I got jammed up by a bunch of tourists. By the time I caught up

with Gwyneth, the perp had already pulled her into the alley. He must've been waiting for her."

"Mike saved me—not that I remember his doing it," Gwyn admitted.

"Say thank you, sugar," Wilford Wells told his niece.

"I did."

"Say it again."

"Thank you, Mike. I mean it, really. I should've waited for you."

Mike nodded. Gwyn's acceptance of her responsibility didn't negate his guilt. He wouldn't let her out of his sight again.

* * * *

After her uncle and aunt left, Gwyneth did her best to ignore Mike, who stood with his arms folded across his broad chest. She smiled up at Dillinger. "I believe you have some questions, Detective?"

The detective fumbled around in his jacket pocket and pulled out a notepad and pencil. "Mike says someone is stalking you?"

"Yes. I've seen him everywhere I've gone for the last two weeks."

"Everywhere?"

"Yes, he's been outside my apartment building. He shows up in the courtroom every time I have a court appearance. He's even followed me to Bloomingdale's into lingerie and the shoe department in Neiman Marcus."

She didn't dare glance at Mike. He was bound to make something of her shopping for lingerie—not that he would ever see her in it. Pity, too. She had some lovely things.

Detective Dillinger, thank heaven, was all business. "Describe him."

"Hmm, medium height, very muscular, always wore a suit, middle-aged."

"That fits the general description of your mugger. Could be your stalker problem is solved."

"I'm not so sure, Sam." Mike leaned back and folded his arms across his chest. "My opinion—he was working for someone else."

"Miss Wells, you'll need to vary your schedule from day to day."

"Detective, I'll to the best I can, but I'm an attorney. I have set hours when I'm in the office and days when I'm in court."

"Then I'd advise you to keep Mike close by. The department can't give you twenty-four-hour protection."

"I understand." She glanced at Mike who had a very pleased smile plastered across his face. "He'll have to do a better job of keeping up with me from now on." Not trying to be a smart ass, she just wanted to take the wind out of his sails. A tiny bit. The man was entirely too smug.

Placing his hand over his heart, Mike pulled a long face. "Counselor, you wound me. I've saved your life once already."

Before Gwyneth could respond, the nurse entered. "Orders all signed. Time to go." The nurse batted her eyelashes at

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Mike and Dillinger. "We're sure gonna miss these handsome fellas. We don't have hunks like them in here every day."

Gwyneth snorted. Mike and his detective friend barely managed to keep from slobbering all over themselves, but only just.

Ten

Getting Gwyn settled in her hospital room turned into a much bigger deal than Mike could've imagined. Surely the nurse down in the ER had already asked Gwyneth every question about her medical history, but another one had gone over them again. Rashly he'd insisted he remain in the room, and his lovely client had agreed.

Now he had entirely too much information about Gwyneth. Allergic to shellfish and penicillin, racing heart and claustrophobia—the counselor was the perfect picture of a nervous wreck.

His cell phone rang, startling him out of his contemplation.
"Yeah."

"Darling, must you answer in that common way?"

"Elinor." What did his mother want now? he wondered.

"How are you?"

"I'm quite well. I hoped you might come to the farm this weekend."

"This weekend? 'Fraid not. I'm on a case. Bodyguard."

"Not some disreputable hoodlum, I hope."

"No, Mother. Just the opposite." He glanced over at Gwyn.
"My client is a beautiful young woman with a stalker."

"I see. Do be careful. Is she suitable?"

"For what?"

"You know what I mean, dear. And if she is, you may bring her with you."

"I don't know if that's such a good idea. She's been attacked, and I'm sitting in her hospital room right now."

"I hope she's all right, but I wish you would try. Your father—"

"He wants me to come?"

"Of course, he does—not that he will admit it, of course. You know how he is."

"Yeah, right."

"I do wish you would not speak in such a common manner."

"Sure thing, Mom."

"*Mi-chael.*" His mother paused, her exasperation quite clear over the cell phone. "Please bring the young lady to dinner Friday night. As I told you, we'll be at the farm."

"Mother, I—"

"Dress for dinner, of course. Promptly please, at eight." His mother disconnected before he could protest.

Mike shot a wary glance at Gwyneth. Damn. She looked ready to laugh out loud.

"Your mother?"

"Obviously." He steeled himself for the comment he knew would come next.

"Funny." Gwyn's eyes were wide and bluer than blue, sparkling with mischief.

He waited. Finally, he caved. "All right, tell me what's so funny."

She drew her knees up and hugged them, her warm gaze never leaving his face. "I never had you figured for a mama's boy."

"Mama's boy?"

"Your mother has your cell phone number so she can reach her 'sonny boy' anytime she wants," she continued in the same vein.

"My father's been ill. He's..." The idea of his mother thinking of him as *sonny*—amusing.

"Mike, I'm teasing. I think it's sweet."

"Sweet? It's a matter of practicality, counselor. That's all."

"So is your father going to be all right?"

He ignored her question about his father. "She invited me to the farm for the weekend. I'm to bring you, if you're suitable, which you are."

"The farm?"

"To be more precise, to the farm in Virginia."

"Tell me more about your mother."

"My mother's *veddy British*. We dress for dinner. That's about it."

"You called her Elinor at first."

"She's not your baked-apple-pie kind of mother. I confess I call her Elinor to provoke her."

"Call me clairvoyant, but I think I'm picking up on some complicated family vibrations."

No shit, Sherlock.

She was entirely too perceptive. He clenched his fists. "A few." He unclenched them.

"And your father, the diplomatic consultant type?"

"I'm a disappointment."

"Hmm," Gwyn mused. "More complications. This weekend trip should be fun. Now, what shall I wear to a dysfunctional family reunion?"

"Tell me, would you have applauded when the *Titanic* sank?"

"Of course not. Why...?"

Mike narrowed his gaze. "This weekend will be something on the order of a colossal disaster. I can see you now, standing on the sidelines, laughing until your sides split."

Gwyneth drew herself up, raising her chin a notch. "For someone who can't open his mouth without making a smart-ass remark, you certainly can't take it, can you?"

Mike frowned. "My family isn't fun. They're stuffy and pretentious. On top of that, my father wishes I'd never been born. And I'd rather clip the grass on a golf course with hangnail scissors than spend an evening in their presence, much less an entire weekend."

"Then why are we going? Blow it off."

"Because it's a good way to get you out of town for a few days."

"Is that the only reason?"

"No."

"Well?" she prompted, raising a finely arched eyebrow.

"You'll have to meet my parents sometime—before the wedding."

Taking the pillow from behind her head, Gwyn tossed it at him. "You arrogant dolt. I've never seen anyone so determined to put me in a bad mood. You're..."

Hoping to deflect the issue of marriage, Mike interrupted with, "Gotcha."

"And *you* are giving me a colossal headache."

"Gwyn-eth." He loved the sound of her name, so ethereal for such a practical creature. "I think your attacker gave you the headache."

"You're not making it any better."

"Then why don't you lie down and rest those beautiful eyes of yours?"

She scowled back at him, or at least it appeared she tried but couldn't keep her beautiful lips from twitching. "You have my pillow."

Mike looked down at the pillow in his hands. "For once you're right about something."

Her scowl returned, along with a raised brow. "For once?"

"Don't think I haven't noticed that you're very excitable. You should do something about that tendency." He couldn't resist teasing, "It could mean high blood pressure, which can be quite serious."

Gwyneth frowned. "High blood pressure? Do you really think so? My father had that, too."

Walking toward her, pillow in hand, he began, "That's why you should put this pillow under your lovely head and get some rest. Before you know it..." He leaned over and placed the pillow carefully under her head. "...It'll be morning, and you can blow this joint." He tucked the sheet around her, her eyes widening at the gesture, her sensual mouth parting.

Hell, he'd go for it. Slanting his mouth against hers, he kissed her. He felt her startle in surprise, but in the end, the

surprise was on him. Her lips, soft and yielding, returned his kiss. He tasted her sweetness and reveled in the heat that spread straight to his groin. She slid her hands around the back of his neck, caressing him lightly. Yes, she touched him, didn't push him away. Would the wonders of Venus never cease? Her intoxicating scent pulled him into a maelstrom of longing. He never wanted to stop.

Yet here she was in a hospital bed with a concussion, and here he was with an insistent dick that craved a lot more than a sweet exchange of kisses.

Reluctantly he ended the kiss and gasped for air. She sighed, and what a sweet sound it was. "That was so far beyond incredible ... as to be indescribable."

Her mouth curved into a wide smile. "Do you tuck all your women clients into bed at night or just the concussed ones?"

"Just the stubborn, concussed ones."

He held his breath and waited for her response.

Gwyneth's face flushed a very pretty shade of pink. "I-I can't believe I just kissed you until my fingernails grew a quarter of an inch. Is that good for a concussion?"

Willing his conscienceless body part into submission, Mike reached out and stroked her eyebrow with the pad of his thumb. God, he wanted her. "You'll be fine, counselor. Go to sleep."

Her eyes widened. "You're not leaving me, are you?"

"No, I'm not leaving you. I'll be right over there." He nodded at the sleeper chair in the corner. "All night long."

"Thank you—for everything."

"You're welcome for everything."

Chewing her full, bottom lip for a second, she gazed up at him from beneath her thick lashes. "Kiss me again?"

Elated, he smiled, probably a real goofball smile if he could've seen it. He bent over and kissed her again and found her lips sweeter than before.

* * * *

Gwyneth spent most of the night thinking. There hadn't been much point in trying to sleep. Every time she drifted off, another sadistic nurse would come in, shine a bright light in her eyes and ask her if she knew who and where she was. Besides, she was afraid to go to sleep. What if she never woke up?

At five, she glanced over at Mike's lean, unmoving body. One of the nurses had actually covered him with a blanket. *How sweet was that?* The inconsiderate wretch had slept through the nurses' traipsing in—bright lights, questions and all. How could he sleep after kissing her the way he had? Didn't he feel anything? She'd known he was trouble from the first second he'd checked her out from head to toe.

And that smile of his, sly and sensual, as if he knew what she liked in bed and he was just the man to do it. The smile that said he wanted her and he'd have her too, whenever it suited him.

Her opinion hadn't changed. Even if she discounted his wisecracks and politically incorrect remarks, he was still big trouble in capital letters. What did it matter if his kisses were incredibly tender and arousing? Hell, with his finesse, he'd probably kissed more than his share of women. In fact, he

probably had advanced degrees in kissing, not to mention some other activities that popped into her mind and made her insides quiver like a newborn colt on its feet for the first time.

Maybe thinking wasn't such a good thing to do with someone like Mike, but following her emotions would only lead to more trouble. Men like Mike Carlton were a waste of time. But if he were a waste of time, why was she wasting so much of it?

Because she'd never experienced anything like the onslaught of emotions that one man generated with his lazy, knowing smile. He made her want to tear off her clothes and offer herself to him.

Now how bizarre was that?

"Mike Carlton, you have a lot to answer for," she told his sleeping form.

"What?" Mike stirred on the sleeper, then sat up and yawned. Stretching his neck from side to side, he grinned. "Good morning, counselor. Did you sleep well?"

"Not at all and certainly not as well as *you* did." She softened her words with a smile.

Mike's expression turned sheepish as he looked down at his feet, then back up at her, his green eyes shining. "I sleep like the living dead. My wife used to get pissed off at me too."

"Uncle Wil told me about your wife. I'm sorry. You've been through some rough times."

Mike shrugged, but his eyes clouded. "Others have had worse. I got through it."

Gwyneth didn't know what to say, but she could feel his pain from across the room. "It's tough. I lost my mother and

father within a year of each other. I know it's not the same, but..."

"It is a loss nonetheless."

"Who *are* you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, one minute you're a wise-cracking, politically insensitive jerk, and in the next I see a sensitive, emotional and obviously well-educated man who nearly killed the man who attacked me. How many personalities do you have?"

"As many as it takes."

She waited for him to complete his sentence, but he didn't. "To what?"

His gaze sought hers and held it. She couldn't look away, no matter how she tried. He made her feel hot and cold at the same time. Another wild urge to tear off her clothes assailed her.

The corner of his mouth lifted. "To win your heart."

Eleven

"You have to stop that," Gwyneth protested, waving her hands in front of her face. "You're not answering the question, and you're confusing me." *Confusing her?*

Hell, what an under-statement. Win my heart, indeed. He's after my body—pure and simple. Well, maybe not so pure.

Otherwise she wouldn't be feeling so damned hot-to-trot.

A half-smile played about his mouth. "Are you interrogating me, counselor?" he drawled. "Are we in court? I thought we were in the hospital."

"There you go again with the smart-ass quips." If he just wouldn't keep grinning at her like the damn Cheshire Cat.

"I don't mean to confuse you."

"Then stop all this nonsense about winning my heart. Y-you just want to sleep with me."

There. She'd said it.

He sat on the side of her bed and leaned in close—so close she could smell the faint scent of yesterday's after-shave. So close, she could see the color of his eyes was really a mingling of colors, darkest jade close to his pupils, then a light glass green, pierced with shards of gray.

"I don't deny I want to sleep with you." He waited a beat. "...for the next fifty years. Every night we'll make love and never see the other grow old."

Gwyneth took in a ragged breath and let it out. Either she was out of her mind, or he was. She wanted to believe him,

but she knew better. Love didn't happen like that—at least not for her.

"We just met less than twenty-four hours ago. You don't know me, and I sure as hell don't know you." She tried shaking her head, but he placed a hand on each side of her face, tenderly, but still restraining her.

"Hush, you're going to make your headache worse." He kissed her forehead. "I know I've never met anyone like you. It's true, you're a total pain in the butt, but there's something so fine and good deep inside you—I've only seen that in one other woman. I married her. And sooner or later, Miss Wells, I'll win your heart."

Stunned, Gwyneth didn't know what to say. She reached up and ran her fingers through his curly hair, admiring the way the ends curled around the nape of his neck. Biting her lip, she desperately tried to think of something appropriate. "Y-you're due for a trim," she managed, hating herself for the inanity of it. He'd poured his heart out to her, and she told him he needed a haircut.

Mike threw his head back and roared with laughter. "I love a challenge, and by all that's holy, you're a challenge."

The sheer confidence of the man stunned her, but she smiled anyway.

"Will you come with me this weekend? You'll really be helping me out if you do."

She folded her arms across her chest, completely suspicious of his motives. "And how's that?"

A sheepish grin played about his mouth, the one he'd used to kiss her so sweetly. She couldn't help but wonder if he would kiss her again—and how soon.

He fixed his gaze on her. "I told you my father's been ill. We've been estranged for some time, and this would be a good opportunity to mend some fences. Besides, he likes tall blondes. You'll impress him, even if I don't."

He took her hand in his large, strong ones. Her breath caught in her throat.

"And it would be good to get you out of town for a few days. Away from whoever's really stalking you. My parents have a lovely farm in Virginia. We can take long walks while we delve into your relationships with everyone you've ever come in contact with since the day you were born. Actually, my father might have some suggestions. He's a master strategist."

"Hmm, the more I hear about your father, the more interesting he becomes. And heaven knows it might help you mend some fences, especially if you asked *his* advice for a change instead of charging around like a bull in a china shop, doing whatever the hell you feel like."

Mike laughed again. "You know me better than you think. Either that or you've been reading my e-mail."

"Hmph, it doesn't take ESP or reading your e-mail to know that much." She straightened up, placing her hands on her hips. "I knew you were trouble the first minute I saw you."

"You did? No wonder you were so nervous."

"I wasn't nervous."

"You were so nervous you could barely walk."

"And you are so arrogant I can't believe your head makes it through the door."

"That makes us quite a pair, doesn't it?"

He leaned closer. Yes, he was going to kiss her.

'Bout damned time. Surrendered to his lips. His morning stubble against her upper lip made a scratchy contrast to the tenderness of the kiss. He deepened the kiss. She lost herself in the eddying flow of warmth that awakened new desires. Desires to know him, every inch of him. His thumb grazed the curve of her breast.

The door opened. They jumped apart. Dr. Canfield entered with a nurse in tow.

"Good morning, Miss Wells. I see you survived the night and are feeling much better."

"Uh—yes, I did," Gwyneth managed to say, the blood rushing to her face.

Dr. Canfield peered into Gwyneth's eyes, then checked her reflexes. "So how's the headache?"

"Still there, but not bad."

The petite redhead smiled. "I suppose you want to go home and take this big lug with you?" She angled a speculative glance at Mike.

"May I? Go home, I mean."

"If you promise you'll take it easy for the next twenty-four hours, I'll write your discharge order. And if you don't want to take him home, there are about six nurses who would kill to be in your place."

Gwyneth giggled. "Yeah, I think they were all in here last night, one at a time. Now I know why they were so thorough."

Mike grinned. "I'll see that she doesn't play her usual game of ice hockey this weekend. You should see the way she finesses the puck, Doctor. She has a killer slap shot and she can really handle the stick."

Gwyneth's mouth dropped open. The man was an incorrigible tease.

Handle the stick? What would her doctor think? "Mike," she protested, albeit softly.

"All right, then," replied the doctor, twitching a smile. "I'll write the discharge order and leave a couple of prescriptions at the nurses' station. They'll give them to you before you leave. One's for a mild painkiller. The other's an antibiotic for the cuts and scrapes."

"Thank you, Doctor."

As soon as the physician left the room, Gwyneth sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed. She stood up, intending to get dressed, when a wave of vertigo hit her. Grabbing for the bed, she would have fallen if Mike hadn't caught her in his ever-so-strong arms.

"Whoa, counselor." He eased her back to bed. "Now, sit on the side of the bed for a few minutes. Take it slow. I'll be right here."

"Okay, but..." She broke off, a little embarrassed.

"What?"

"I need to go to the bathroom."

"Why don't you wait till you get home to take a bath. You'll be stronger then."

"Mike..."

His lips twitched. "Counselor, I'm happy to give you a hand."

"You will *not*." Gwyneth reached for the call button and pushed it. "Any one of those nurses who's so hot to take you home will be more than happy to help me."

Twelve

Mike followed Gwyneth into her Park Avenue apartment. "Nice digs." A uniformed doorman, fancy, carved-wood doors, expensive Oriental carpets on the hardwood floors ... and a suck-ass security system. He'd have to do something about that.

"Thank you. Most of it's stuff my mother left me. It's comfortable. That's all I care about."

"You feeling okay? Not dizzy, are you?"

"No, I'm fine. Much better, really." She walked slowly down the hall on Mike's right. "The guest bedroom and bath are on the right. Mine are on the left."

"I don't have to sleep on the floor? I was prepared, you know."

Gwyneth smiled at him. She did have a lovely smile, when she wasn't trying to play ice princess. "No need to rough it."

Turning around, she shuffled to the kitchen. Mike followed. It was one of those restaurant-wanna-be styles with a professional-size stove and a refrigerator large enough to provision an army division. Gleaming surfaces everywhere.

"Ever use any of this stuff?" he asked, certain she didn't.

"On occasion," came her arch reply.

"And what occasion would that be?" he asked, teasing her deliberately.

"Dinner parties, you know, the *usual* occasions."

"The caterers love it, don't they?"

"All right, yes, the caterers love my kitchen. It came with the apartment. The woman who lived here before thought she was Julia Child."

Mike swept her into his arms. "That's all right, counselor. You won't starve. I'm a damn fine cook." Holding her felt so right. He inhaled her unique scent, unable to identify what was so special, except that it was Essence of Gwyneth for want of a better description.

"And I'm the queen of ordering in."

He shook his head and looked into her blue eyes. Her gaze was warm and tender. He hated to remind her of the danger of her situation. "Good idea, ordering in. For now anyway."

Still relaxed in his arms, Gwyneth sighed. "When are we going to Virginia? I can't wait to get out of here."

"Tomorrow's Friday. We'll leave whenever you can drag your lovely body out of bed."

"Fly or drive?"

"Up to you. Flying's easier."

A smile curved her lips. He would have to kiss her again—real soon.

"Let's drive," she suggested. "We can rent a convertible and drive with the top down."

The thought of sunshine and Gwyneth's hair blowing in the wind stirred his imagination. "Sounds great. You drive?"

She shook her head. "Of course not. No New York City-bred girl does."

"But I do." He slanted his mouth across Gwyneth's. Every time he kissed her, he learned something new about himself.

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About her. Need grew and exploded in his veins. "Time you went to bed—for a nap."

She pressed against him and whispered, "Take me to bed."

Thirteen

Mike swept Gwyneth into his arms and headed toward her bedroom. "Your wish is my command, counselor." Her arms slid around his neck. A feeling of pure contentment rose in his chest. He took a ragged breath. Heart hammering, the pulsation sounding in his ears, Mike shut his eyes for a second or two.

Gwyneth nudged him. "We're not going to make it, if you keep walking with your eyes shut."

Opening his eyes, Mike grinned. "I was trying to decide if you really meant 'Take me to bed' or if I'm dreaming."

"You know for a guy, you talk a lot."

"Do I?"

"Yeah," she breathed in his ear, "but I know how to make you stop."

"You do?"

Gwyneth planted her lips on his for a mind-blowing, heart-rending, *cojones*-charging kiss. Yes, she did know how to shut him up. He luxuriated in the taste of her morning coffee, her lips still sweet from the six packs of sugar she dumped into a single cup. He would take her at her word and take her to bed. What happened after that was anybody's guess.

Carefully he maneuvered his way around a large sofa and stumbled into the hall, barely avoiding a tall palm with spiky fronds that raked against the side of his face. At the doorway to her bedroom, he nudged the partially open door with his knee. He couldn't believe his good luck. Something had

wrought a marvelous change in the lovely lady's attitude. And he wasn't about to question it.

By the time they sank down on the quilt-covered bed, his conscience and his dick had parted company. He wanted her too much to hold back. She was in his arms, her lips on his, and she was willing.

Gwyneth held her breath, stunned by insistent waves of heat settling in her belly and between her thighs. While Mike yanked the shirt from his trousers, she shrugged out of her blouse, for once not caring where it landed. She wanted—no needed—to feel his skin next to hers. Splaying her fingers over his broad muscular chest, she moaned.

"Are you all right?" He grew breathless and hoarse.

She nodded and reached for his belt. Unbuckling it, she took a moment to shove his slacks and boxers down to his knees. His erection was rock hard and gloved in silken skin. Swallowing, she hid her surprise.

Mike cupped Gwyneth's breasts—small, but perfect. He bent over her writhing form and teased his tongue around one of her pink nipples, tightening it into a pearl. She gasped at his touch and arched against him, her heart pounding in her ears.

The sudden contact nearly made him lose it. Threading his fingers carefully through her blond hair, he took a long ragged breath, then let it out. "Are you sure?"

"Yes-s," she gasped.

Mike struggled out of his trousers. "Protection?" He glanced around frantically. "Mine's so old, it's out of date."

Eyes still glazed with passion, Gwyneth rolled over, opened the drawer in the bedside table and pulled out the necessary item. "Here." She handed it to him. "Such a waste to cover your lovely—"

"Lovely?" Little Mikey had been called many things, but never lovely. He took her hands in his, and together they sheathed him. He groaned. Her sensual touch sliding up and down his penis—pure magic.

"There seems to be another obstacle," Mike whispered as he pulled down her white leggings.

"I know you can get rid of it," she whispered back, her breath warm on his neck.

"And another," he declared softly, revealing a white lace thong.

"I trust you will prevail."

Mike captured the thin, elastic band of her thong with his teeth and teased the scrap of lace down over her slender hips and long legs. A triangle of blond curls beckoned. Gwyn opened herself to him. He parted her delicate folds and found another pearl. He flicked at the small nub with his tongue. Her pelvis writhed upward, as he circled the sensitive spot. Inhaling the scent and tasting her musk, he sighed. *Perfect.*

Gwyneth moaned and thrust toward him. "Please."

Centering himself over her and taking his weight on his elbows, he thrust home as she rose to meet him. Gloved in her silken warmth, he found her tight and delicious beyond imagining. "Slow," he breathed, trying to keep from losing control, his entire body shaking with the effort.

But she would have him her way—hot, sweaty and fast. As her body held his in thrall, he acceded to her demands. A pink flush spread over her breasts. Her climax came quickly—his own a nanosecond later, triggered by the involuntary clutching of her sweet prison. He heaved one last thrust and nearly collapsed over her.

"Ohmigod," Gwyneth gasped, overwhelmed by the earthiness of their lovemaking. If she were going to be indiscreet and reckless, she'd definitely picked the right man for the job.

"Sorry. *He* has to catch His breath," Mike rasped, his breath warm. His arms still around her, he nuzzled her neck.

"I love you," he breathed.

"What?" Gwyneth sat up, startled by his words. "B-but—this was just..."

Mike pulled back and gazed down at her. "Just what, Gwyn? Sport? Is that all it was for you? A piece of strange?"

Her eyes widened. "No, no. I mean, I just assumed..." she faltered. "I mean, I thought that's all it was to *you*."

"I don't say the words unless I mean them. I don't give my heart lightly."

She blinked furiously, confused and concerned. *What the hell was she playing at?*

"It's just—this is so sudden—God! I can't believe I just said that," she babbled. "I don't know. I've never been so—"

"Spontaneous?"

"Reckless."

"I'm sorry," he apologized, pulling completely away from her and swinging his legs over the side of the bed. "I rushed you." He squared his shoulders. "I take full responsibility."

Gwyneth watched in disbelief as Mike stood up and started jerking on his clothes. "No, that's not what I meant."

He sat back down on the bed, looking over his shoulder at her, his body rigid and unyielding. "Then what did you mean?"

"Hell! I don't *know* what I meant. I'm not like *this*. Being with you, it was wonderful. I never experienced anything like it before."

Tears started falling down her cheeks. She wiped them away, desperate to explain the unexplainable. "It was Fourth of July and New Year's Eve all at the same time."

Mike felt his mouth curve into a smile. "That good, huh?"

Gwyn lay her head in his lap. She gazed up at him and pleaded, "Don't go. I just need some time to get used to—"

"To what?"

"Being a new woman. Your woman if you still want me." She worried her bottom lip, uncertain what his next response would be. Would he kiss her or walk out the door?

"Sit up," he commanded gently. She sat up. "We won't make love again until you're absolutely certain that it's what you want. I've fallen in love with you—"

From the living room, the intercom buzzed. The doorman announced, "Mr. Klein to see you, Miss Wells. He's already on his way up."

"No!" Gwyn hissed and scrambled from the bed. She grabbed her clothes from where they lay all over the bedroom floor.

Mike leaned back and enjoyed the sight of the naked Gwyn, all flustered and upset, while she jerked on her clothes. "Hold on. Take it easy. The door's locked."

She glared at him, her face pale and drawn. "He still has a key."

Mike grinned. "Then I guess *you'd* better get a move on."

"*Me?*" She pointed at him. "You *cannot* sit there like that. Get dressed."

Mike stood up, slow and easy, and started drawing on his pants, while a desperate Gwyneth pulled on her blouse wrong-side-out and yanked the white leggings over her slender hips.

"What's he doing here now, anyway? He should be at his office." Hurriedly she finger-combed her hair in front of a mirror. "Crap. I look like I've just crawled out of bed."

"You did."

"Ugh. I can't believe this is happening," she cried and darted from the bedroom.

Raking his fingers through his hair, Mike followed, admiring the charming view of Gwyn's swaying backside as she rushed ahead of him.

By the time they reached the living room, Mike could hear Klein's key in the lock. Gwyneth rushed to the door and snatched it open. "Richard, what are you doing here?" she gasped.

"I called your office, and they told me you were mugged last night. I rushed over—why didn't you call me?" he demanded. Klein stopped, caught a breath, then looked from Gwyneth to Mike and back at Gwyneth.

"I can see what's going on here. Your hair's a mess, and your blouse is wrong-side-out," he declared. Striding toward Gwyneth, he grabbed her upper arm. "You slut. You couldn't wait to get a new stud—"

Mike's fist connected with Klein's jaw, the shock of the blow racking back up his arm, jarring his shoulder. "Keep your hands and filthy mouth off her," Mike ordered and punched him in the gut for good measure.

Klein went down, knocking over a lamp and vase. They shattered. Mike stood over him. "Now get out of here."

Klein glared up at Mike, wiping a smear of blood from his mouth with the back of his hand. "You'll not give me orders in my fiancée's apartment. Gwyneth, get rid of him now. *Now*, and I will forgive your indiscretion."

Mike stared down at him. "Buddy, she's not engaged to you anymore. You keep forgetting that." He stepped back. "Gwyn, it's up to you."

Looking at the two men, she sank down on the sofa. "Just leave, Richard. It's over between us."

Klein got to his feet, all the time keeping a watchful eye in Mike's direction. Giving his Armani suit an indignant brush, he advanced on Gwyneth.

Mike stepped between Klein and Gwyn. "Hold on," he warned. "The lady asked you to leave. If I were you, I'd go."

An expression of pure hatred mixed with disbelief took up residence on Klein's ferret face. "Gwyneth, are you going to let this interloper come between us?"

Anger flashed in her eyes. "It's over. Just leave."

Mike couldn't resist. "And while you're at it, leave the key."

Klein's face grew red with rage, his fists clenched.

"Gwyneth?"

"Leave the key, Richard."

"Fine!" Taking the key off the key ring, he threw it on the floor then spun around and glared at Mike. "I'll see you up on charges for assault." Klein stormed away, slamming the door behind him.

Mike turned toward Gwyneth. "Are you all right?"

Gwyneth shook her head. "No, I-I thought for a minute he was going to hit me, and I just stood there, helpless. Like one of my clients."

"Has he ever hit you?"

"No, he's controlling and demanding and—"

"What?"

Her face flushed a dark red. "Nothing."

"It's all right. Don't tell me, if you'd rather not." No, she didn't have to tell him. Somehow, he could guess what she'd rather not say. He sat down beside her, and she jumped like a frightened animal, avoiding his touch.

"I meant it. I'll wait."

Gwyneth gazed into his eyes, while tears formed in hers. "Thank you."

The Man For The Job
by Marie-Nicole Ryan

Anxious to diffuse the tension, he glanced around the room. "Where's your broom and dustpan. I'll clean up this mess."

Blinking her tears away, she gave him a brave smile. "You're actually housebroken, aren't you?"

"Yes, counselor," He kissed the top of her head. "And I almost never whiz on the floor."

Fourteen

Torn between laughter and tears, Gwyneth watched Mike sweep up shards of porcelain and leaded glass. Laughter because the unexpected sight of his graceful form bent over a dustpan truly amused her, and tears because she felt like she was hanging on to the last timber of a burning bridge—one she'd set on fire herself. In the space of twenty-four hours, her nice, orderly life had flipped on its backside.

Mike glanced up from his task. "I hope these weren't irreplaceable, family heirlooms." He raised one dark eyebrow.

She shook her head. "No, but it wouldn't matter."

"I'll replace them."

"No." She shrugged. "Honestly, it was worth it to see, once and for all, what Richard's really like."

Mike shrugged. "No offense, but it's good riddance to bad rubbish. The man's a slime ball."

"Makes me wonder what I ever saw in him," she muttered.

Mike swept the last of the damage into the dustpan, then stood up. "What *did* you see in him?"

Needing some time to think about her response, Gwyneth stood up. "Here, give me that."

After disposing of the broom and dustpan, she returned to the living room and found Mike posed against the fireplace, presenting a very 1940s' image. All he needed was a cigarette and a gold case to complete the picture.

"Don't think I haven't noticed you're avoiding answering my question."

Gwyneth sank down on the ottoman closest to the fireplace. "You're pretty sharp for a P.I." Stalling for time, she ran her fingers back through her hair. "It was almost an accident—how we met, I mean. One of my classmates from law school introduced us. Richard was successful, and he seemed crazy about me. When I look back at it, I can see he had all the warning signs of an abuser."

"You said he never..."

"No, not yet, but he could've—if I'd married him." Vainly trying to press the wrinkles from her leggings, she continued, "He's controlling and suspicious. I put on blinders, I guess. His biggest client is a Mafia don. You met his wife yesterday in my office."

"Makes you wonder about his scruples, too."

"Yeah. Makes me wonder about *my* intelligence."

Mike sat down on the ottoman beside her. "It's easy to see how you would be attracted to that greyhound in a three-piece suit."

The description fit Richard so perfectly, she giggled. "You're so funny."

"Only one of my many charms, Miss Wells." His eyes gleamed with good humor.

"Weren't we driving to Virginia today?" she asked, changing the subject, not quite ready to think about Mike's other considerable charms.

"Tomorrow."

"Oh." The thought of another twenty-four hours with Mike ... Good God, what would they find to do in all that time?

"I'm going to call my assistant and have him bring over my laptop. I'll need it this weekend. In the meantime, do you have a computer I can use?"

"Of course."

"And Internet access?"

Gwyn smiled. "I assure you I am a well-adjusted member of the twenty-first century. Of course, I have Internet access."

"Spend much time in trashy chat rooms?"

"None. I don't have time for that."

"Good." Mike leaned over and brushed a feather-light kiss across her lips. "At least we don't have to worry about your having a cyber-stalker."

"Cyber-stalker? I think I have enough trouble without that."

"True, but we need to check your e-mail for anything that might be questionable."

"I doubt you'll find much. I don't get a lot, and I learned a long time ago to delete messages from anyone I don't know."

"Not a bad idea."

She led him to a classy armoire, then opened it, revealing her computer equipment. Nothing like what he probably had in his office, but sufficient for her needs.

Mike sat down and let his fingers fly over the keyboard.

"Anything I can do to help?" she asked, feeling at a loss with nothing to do. She wasn't used to just standing around and wringing her hands.

Mike looked up and grinned. "It's all pretty straightforward. Are there any files you don't want me to dig

in? Tell me now, 'cause you won't have any secrets after I'm through."

"I'm pretty straightforward, too. No secrets," she told him with a smile. "Uh, I think I'll soak in the Jacuzzi for a while. That way I won't distract you."

"Good idea, because you are a very big distraction," Mike replied, keeping his eyes on the monitor.

Unsure whether Mike's words were a compliment or not, she nodded. "Okay, that's what I'll do then. See you in a bit." Maybe he would join her? No, that was silly. After all, he had a job to do.

* * * *

Mike sat hunched over the computer for at least an hour, trying to erase images of Gwyneth in the Jacuzzi with jets and bubbles sporting around the curves of her perfect body.

Finally he heard the soft tread of her footsteps as she came back into the living room. She approached him and rested her hand on his shoulder. Ignoring his suddenly snug pants proved almost impossible. He took a deep breath. The heady scent of her expensive perfumed soap filled his nostrils and catapulted his imagination into overdrive. Damn. How was he supposed to investigate when he couldn't keep his mind on anything but making love to her all day and all night.

"Find anything of interest?" Gwyn leaned over his shoulder.

Mike struggled for control and shook his head. "Not yet."
The doorman buzzed.

Gwyneth glided over to the intercom, but Mike could still smell her perfume.

"Yes?"

"A Mr. Butts to see you, Miss Wells."

"Thank you. Send him up please." She wandered over to where Mike was working. "You have quite a knot there." She pressed her thumbs into the stubborn knot, kneading away the tension in his broad shoulders.

"No wonder." He glanced up at her with a sly smile.

"So what is this Mr. Butts going to do besides bring you your laptop?" She nibbled at Mike's ear lobe.

Dammit. Couldn't she see he was working ... and that she was tempting him?

"I'm going to give him your address book. He'll do an in-depth background search on all your friends and associates. At the same time, you and I will go over your client list and come up with any candidates who might have a reason to stalk you."

"Okay," she agreed, but then her face clouded. "You do understand I can't allow you to handle the client files in the office. They're privileged."

"Yes, counselor, but we can discuss any husbands or boyfriends who've made threats against your loveliness."

"Sure." She tried to hide a smile by chewing on her full, bottom lip. Another little habit she had that simply drove him out of his mind.

"Have you always defended abused women? What about earlier in your career?"

"After I graduated from law school, I worked in the D.A.'s office in Boston as a prosecutor. I guess I might have made a few enemies there. I didn't start as a defense attorney until I moved back to New York and joined my uncle's practice."

Mike gave a sheepish grin. "I really was off the mark when I accused you of defending slime, wasn't I?"

"Way off."

"I misjudged you."

"I did the same, but you were so—"

The doorbell rang, stopping Gwyneth in mid-sentence. "You're not off the hook for your disreputable behavior, you know." She gave an emphatic nod in his direction, then headed to the door.

"Look before you open the door. Can't be too careful," he warned.

"All right, Columbo."

After checking the peephole, she turned to Mike. "Is Sid a young guy with a crew cut and glasses?"

"Sounds like Sid."

Gwyn opened the door, admitting Mike's assistant.

The bespectacled young man looked like a teenager, but in reality was in his mid-twenties, and dressed casually in loose-fitting clothes. He had Mike's laptop under his left arm and extended his right hand to Gwyn. "Hi, I'm Sid. I brought this for Mike."

"Hello, Sid, I'm Gwyneth. Come in. He's been singing your praises."

Mike watched in amusement as Sid's gaze did the usual up-and-down survey of their client's figure. "Well, Mike hasn't said much about *you* at all."

"You weren't in the office yesterday when she came by."

"Sorry I missed you." Sid shuffled over to Mike, who popped a floppy out of Gwyn's computer. "Here's her address book. I want you to do a search on everyone."

"Come on, Mike. Give me a clue. What am I looking for?"

"Anything suspicious. Someone with a grudge against our client."

Sid's gaze slid up and down Gwyneth again. "They must be crazy. Can't say I blame 'em. She's a fox."

"And look up anything you can find on Sam Vitullo. He's the punk who tried to bash her lovely head into a pulp. He's currently in the hospital in police custody."

Mike consulted his list again. "Also check out Lilith Sand and her son, Edmund Everley."

Sid shrugged. "Anyone else, like the Greater Manhattan phone book?" Then he grinned. "Shouldn't take too long. Piece of cake."

Gwyneth smiled at the young man. Mike expected a lot from him; she just hoped he was up to the task. "Thank you for your help, Sid."

"I'm taking Gwyn down to Virginia for the weekend." Mike scowled. Did Gwyn turn on the charm for everyone but him? "If you come up with anything of interest, you can reach me on my cell."

A knowing smirk spread across Sid's face. "You're my hero, Mike."

"Nothing heroic about it." Mike gave his assistant a get-lost wave. "Thought it'd be a good idea to get her outta Dodge, while you do the research gig, *capeesh?*"

"Yeah, I can dig it, man. You and the Gwyneth chick are taking off for a little rest and re-lax-ay-shun."

"Yeah, that's right, and don't you just wish you were?"

"I do—sincerely."

The chick in question planted her feet wide apart and set her hands on her hips, looking for all the world like a washerwoman. "All right, you two bad boys. That's enough trashy talk. I *am* in the room, you know. And I'm not deaf."

Mike flashed a wide smile at Gwyneth. "No way could we could forget you're in the room, counselor."

Sid raised his eyebrows. "Kind of sassy, isn't she?"

"Mike Carlton, just because you have a way with words doesn't mean you're going to have your way with me—"

Mike watched, delighted, as Gwyneth broke off, turned a deep shade of pink, then gasped, "Nice meeting you, Sid."

"Yeah, you too." Sid ducked his head and giggled like a girl. To Mike's amusement, the young man's face turned almost as pink as Gwyn's.

"I—uh, guess I'd better be going. I'll e-mail you any files that show promise. Uh, g'bye, Gwyneth, Mike."

* * * *

By the time Gwyn returned from walking Sid to the elevator, Mike was already engrossed with his computer search and—smoking a cigarette.

"I'm pretty sure I told you no smoking in my apartment—ever."

"And you have to know any P.I. worth the name works better on cigarettes and coffee."

Hands on hips again, Gwyneth raised her chin a notch. "Not if he wants to live to be a ripe old age," she paused, waited a telling beat, "and not in my apartment."

Pacing from one side of the living room to the other, she wasn't through with her lecture. "You said you would quit—just like that. I *knew* you couldn't do it." She pointed at the door. "On the balcony—and not in the hall either. The owners' association will have me blackballed."

He looked around the room. Of course, she didn't have an ashtray. "You're worried about what your neighbors will think?" She reached out, snatched the butt from his hand and rushed to the kitchen with it. He heard water running.

So much for his nicotine craving.

* * * *

Gwyneth returned, still not through with him. She could put up with a lot, but not cigarette smoke. "You don't know these uptight people like I do. They have nothing better to do than make my life a living hell if they get it in for me."

Mike stood up and walked toward her. "You're such a worry wart, Miss Wells."

"I think I like *counselor* better." Her heart jack-hammered against her sternum worse than it had during her first appearance in court.

The Man For The Job
by Marie-Nicole Ryan

"Do you?" Mike slipped his arms around her waist and pulled her against him. Dear heaven, there was a hard bulge pressed into her middle. "That your gun or...?" she quipped, ready to vamp like Mae West to the hilt.

Mike narrowed his gaze as he looked down at her, but he couldn't hide the desire that glittered in his eyes.

An enormous lump formed in her throat. Why did the morning after have to be so difficult? Not that this was really *the morning after*, just *after*.

"I'm glad to see you." His gaze softened, then lowered his lips to hers.

Fifteen

Elinor Carlton rolled her husband's wheelchair into the sun room. Ever since his stroke, his taciturn nature had turned irascible—that is to say, mean. But he did enjoy having tea with her amidst the flowers and chintz. At least that hadn't changed.

She sat down before the Queen Anne pie crust table, picked up the Georgian silver tea set and poured the steaming, fragrant Earl Grey into the delicate Royal Doulton teacups. It did so please her to have things from her native country.

She positioned his cup so he could reach it easily with his right hand, since his left remained weak and trembled. "What do you think, dear? Should I let Michael know that Marina will be here?"

"Hell, no."

Nothing wrong with his powers of speech, she thought.

"Maybe you ought to warn Marina that *he'll* be here."

"But he's bringing someone with him. If I'm not mistaken, I think our son's smitten. She sounds special."

"Huh. Who is she?"

"All I know is she's a client, but still he had this tone..."

"She'll have to be checked out. And don't hand me any bull about his tone. I don't care. He has other responsibilities."

Elinor drew in a deep breath. *Patience is a virtue,* she reminded herself. "Michael lives up to his responsibility. He can't help it if he doesn't love her."

"He should've thought about that before—"

"Enough, George. You're impossible. For once, be happy our son is coming for a visit. Let's do keep it civil for a change."

George grunted, then picked up his cup of tea and sipped it.

All in all, she considered, it had gone quite well. Maybe Michael's visit wouldn't be a total disaster, unless something that ranked with the sinking of the Titanic wasn't classified as a disaster.

* * * *

In spite of a bone-melting kiss that hadn't lasted nearly long enough, Gwyneth found herself looking for things to do. So she spent hours reviewing her case files, looking for any possible fiends who might wish her harm, while an entirely too focused Mike used his laptop to communicate with Sid about said possible fiends.

Finally deciding she'd had enough, she checked her watch. Nearly seven. "Hungry?"

Mike looked up, his expression blank. "Is it time for dinner?"

"It's seven. We could go out, or I can order in."

Mike shook his head. "No way. Order in. I want to keep you under cover until we leave for Virginia."

"Hmm. *Undercover*, I think I like the sound of that."

Mike stood up and started a slow prowl toward her. "Why, counselor, are you propositioning me?" His lips twitched as he

tried to hide a smile, while his green eyes glowed with mischief.

"Propositioning you?" she started to flare, but the sudden flush of warmth between her thighs told her she protested too much. "You don't think I'd proposition you, do you?"

He continued his slow progress around the room, running a tan hand along her bookshelves. "No, you wouldn't have to. A look. A touch. That's all it would take. You wouldn't even have to open that kissable mouth of yours."

Gwyneth backed away. "I don't know what to make of you sometimes. No one has ever talked to me the way you do. Or made me feel the way you do."

"Not even the ex-fiancé?"

"No, definitely not." She took another step backward.

"So, counselor, tell me—how do two lawyers get married? I'm sure it's a very business-like deal. You already have a pre-nup signed? He's already named as beneficiary in your will?"

Mike was entirely too close to the truth. "The pre-nup was still under discussion when I broke it off," she admitted, her heart kicking into fourth gear as he continued his leisurely stroll toward her.

"Was it now?" He grinned, the satisfaction written across his face. He followed her backward journey around the room.

She couldn't move. Her back against the wall ... She gulped, wondering at the welling of emotion and passion his nearness provoked. *Would it be as good this time? Could it be?*

"You're not sorry, are you?" He pulled her into his arms.

"About what? No ... I'm relieved." And truthfully, she was. The proverbial weight had been lifted from her; there remained a definite uncertainty about where things were headed with Mike. How could she have fallen into bed with him after knowing him a mere twenty-four hours? She'd never done anything like that before. But it had seemed so right at the time—not to mention the best sex of her entire life.

"Doing some of that thinking you talked about earlier?"

She gazed up into his half-shuttered eyes. His mouth was so close, she could almost feel the beard stubble on his upper lip with its perfect divot, or taste the last of his coffee laced with cream. "Does it show?"

"Just a storm cloud in your sunny blue eyes."

She looked down. He could read too much in her expression. "I don't understand what's happening between us—or why it's happening, I guess."

"I know I rushed you—but I don't regret it."

"Rushed me? You knocked me on my—"

"Very shapely ass."

"But why? Why me?"

"Don't try to explain the unexplainable. It's magic or it's not. Why were you attracted to me?" He wound his arms around her waist, drawing her into his embrace.

"Humph," she tried to protest. "I wasn't attracted to you. I was appalled. You were rude and politically incorrect." Her hands splayed down the strong muscles of his chest. She unbuttoned one button of his shirt, then another.

"You weren't attracted to me?" His dark, bushy eyebrows rose in disbelief.

"No." She opened the third button, revealing his finely furred chest. Swallowing hard, she opened a fourth.

"But you went to bed with me—less than twenty-four hours after we met."

Gwyneth grinned up at him. "Well, I-uh, you caught me at a weak moment. I had a concussion."

"Yeah, yeah. It's the old 'you caught me when I had a concussion routine.' Won't wash with me, Gwyneth." He cupped her breasts through her blouse with his strong hands. "You've a very distracting way of conversing, counselor."

"But effective?"

"Oh, yes."

Mike shut his eyes and began a tender assault on her bottom lip, nibbling until Gwyneth thought she would go mad. When her head fell back, arching her neck, she felt his lips igniting a trail of fire as they worked their way down to her breasts. A low, feral moan escaped her throat when his teeth worried her nipples through the knit fabric.

His hands skimmed underneath her troublesome garment, and he slipped it over her head. It went away, not that she was in any shape to care exactly where. Now he was free to lavish his attentions, unfettered, on her breasts—first one, then the other. Oh, God, if he kept it up, she would come without his ever entering her.

She gasped, "Hurry." Her breathing grew ragged. She fumbled with his belt. His pants slid down over his butt and he kicked them away, his mouth never losing contact with her

skin. He ground his pelvis against hers, his erection hot and hard. She gasped again, "Now."

He jerked her loose-fitting skirt down over her hips. It fell in a puddle on the floor at her feet. He knelt before her, and his mouth was at the apex of her thighs. "No, not yet," she begged, but he nudged her legs apart and brought her to a fast, shattering climax with his tongue. The waves overtook her before she knew what happened. Heat suffused her body until she would surely combust.

"My love," he murmured. Then his mouth was on hers again, and she tasted herself on his lips. He lifted her up until she wrapped her legs around his waist. He hesitated, then buried himself deep within her, impaling her against the wall. So hard, so hot, he thrust.

And she met him thrust for thrust like an animal in the wild—clawing, biting, anything to assuage the raging desire assailing every cell in her body.

Faster and faster until the sweat fell from his forehead and mingled with hers. "Come for me, Gwyneth. Come for me," he pleaded, his voice a bare rasp in her ear. With each powerful thrust, she felt herself lifting away, spiraling into heights never before experienced. Her climax started, her inner muscles clutching and releasing, never letting him go. "Oh, God," she moaned, losing herself as the waves racked her entire body.

His breathing quickened. His body shook. He penetrated deeper and deeper as her body imprisoned his, until he too shuddered and spilled his seed into her still spasm-racked warmth. He groaned, as her body continued contracted

around, him, milking him of every last drop. Gasping for air, he tried to clear his head. What had he done?

God, not again.

"I'm sorry."

A lazy smile curved Gwyneth's lips. "What for? That was the most indescribable experience I've ever had." Still panting, she pressed a kiss against his neck. Her legs were still wrapped around his waist, but a sudden weariness overcame her. "I think I need a little lie-down."

"Protection," he managed to say. "I don't think—" Carrying her, he started walking toward the bedroom.

Gwyneth's head popped up off his shoulder, her blue eyes wide with surprise. "Crap." She'd never forgotten to use protection before. Of course, she'd never coupled like a wild beast against her living room wall either.

"But I-I'm on the pill."

"But, Gwyn, pregnancy isn't th—"

"I know," she interrupted quickly, then chewed on her bottom lip. He was right ... again.

Mike carried her into the bedroom.

"Set me down. I can't think straight like this." He deposited her gently on the bed, their bodies parting. Pulling the sheet around her, for protection ... a little late for that. She really didn't want to discuss her prior relationships, and she certainly didn't want to hear a lengthy recitation of his. Yet the time had come. She kneaded an edge of the sheet, twisting it into a bigger mess than it already was.

As difficult as it was, she leveled her gaze on him, took a deep breath and plunged ahead. "I've already told you, I'm

on the pill. And no matter what you think about the way I've been with you, I'm not promiscuous. Richard and I were together for six months. We always used protection. I've always practiced safe sex. There, that's it."

Mike sat down on the bed, crossing his legs Indian fashion. "I know it's not easy to bring up this stuff." Why was he so uncomfortable? He'd had this discussion several times in the last year, but somehow Gwyneth was different. What he felt for her wasn't casual. "I was married for two years, and I was faithful. Tamiko's been gone for four years."

Four years. In some ways it seemed like yesterday when life as he knew it ended.

"And since then?" She had to ask, even if her throat had a lump the size of Gibraltar in it.

"No one—"

"No one?" Gwyneth couldn't quite believe that a man as sensual and heated as Mike could go that long without—

"Let me finish. No one for nearly three years, then no one serious. Just—uh, a few casual—but I've always practiced safe sex."

Warming to the task, she asked, "And before? You've only accounted for six years of your life. I have no doubt you've been active longer than that."

A glint of humor flickered in his eyes. At least Gwyneth hoped it was humor.

"Well, counselor, since you're in interrogator mode, you must know that I've always made it a habit to be careful."

Liar. Liar. He'd failed once.

Gwyneth had the grace to drop her head, embarrassed, but he agreed with the necessity of her questions. "Okay, that settles it. We're both disease-free, and I'm on the pill. Let's drop it."

He reached out and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Spoils the mood, doesn't it?"

Gwyn nodded. "Jut a bit." She yawned widely. "Think you could order dinner while I take a nap?"

"Chinese all right with you?"

"Uh-huh, just no seafood or shellfish for me."

"Right, you're allergic."

* * * *

After placing the order and disconnecting, Mike turned to Gwyn and opened his arms. "Wanna neck until the food comes?"

She gazed back at him from beneath lowered lashes. "I'd like that."

A languorous smile spread across her face as she scooted into his arms, molding her body to his. He sighed. Contentment settled over him. Holding this woman in his arms felt so right, something he hadn't experienced since his marriage. Within minutes, she fell asleep—deeply, like a child.

But rest escaped Mike. He extricated his arms and legs from Gwyn's and eased out of the bed. Troubled, he crossed the room to stand by one of the two long windows. Staring out at Central Park, he considered his options. Unfortunately the view didn't give him any answers. *When was the right time to tell her?*

The Man For The Job
by Marie-Nicole Ryan

The intercom buzzed and jerked him out of his guilt trip. He looked over at Gwyneth's sleeping form, curled in a ball with hair spread over her pillow like a shimmering waterfall of palest gold silk.

He walked to the intercom. "Yeah."

"Peking Palace delivery."

"Send him up." Mike strode into the living room, grabbed his trousers and quickly slipped them on. He barely had them fastened before the doorbell rang.

Sixteen

Awakened by the sound of the doorbell, Gwyneth's mouth watered as the spicy aroma of Chinese food wafted into the bedroom. Damn, but she was within an inch of wasting away.

She scrambled from the bed, slipped on a white silk wrapper and padded over to the mirror. She shook her wild mane of hair, then dragged a brush through it.

"Ugh." Her face was pink from whisker burn, and her lips not only felt swollen twice their size, they looked it, too. Well, if the very sight of her didn't scare Mike off, nothing would.

Following the smell of food, she wandered down the hall to the living room, then to the kitchen. The sight of Mike in her kitchen—bare chest, bare back, bare feet and wearing only a well-tailored pair of tan slacks—nearly did her in. The muscles in his back and chest rippled as he moved about, playing Suzy Homemaker. For a moment or two, she watched him—and enjoyed the view.

As if sensing her presence, Mike stopped in the middle of removing plates from an upper cabinet. He turned, a lazy, knowing grin spread across his face. Her cheeks grew warm with the intensity of his gaze as it traveled up and down her body.

"I'm speechless. Veronica Lake just walked into the kitchen."

"Veronica Lake?" she replied, giving him an arch smile. "Who are you trying to con? You're so full of it, and you're *never* speechless."

"Can I help it if I find you inspiring?" Mike leaned back against the counter, crossing his arms and still devouring her with his gaze.

She walked up to him, invading his personal space, and looked into his eyes, challenging him. "Inspiring. Is that so?"

"You know it, counselor." He put his arms around her, then cupped her buttocks. He pulled her against his hard body and grinned. "See how *inspired* I am."

"Is that what you call it?"

"Among other things."

Clasping her hands around the back of his neck, she playfully rubbed her pelvis against him. *Hard as a damn rock.*

Mike's grin widened. "Careful, Little Mikey's been known to have a mind of his own."

Gwyneth giggled. "That another one of the *things* he's called?"

"You're awfully fresh, for someone who just had her way with me against the wall."

Her mouth dried at the memory. She swallowed, then chewed her lip before admitting slowly, "I seem to have a vague memory of the incident to which you're referring, Mr. Carlton."

"Well, counselor, I'll never forget it."

"Good, because your testimony will be invaluable, if this should ever come to trial."

"And the charge would be?"

Gwyneth paused, considering her answer carefully. "*Animal cruelty.*"

A dangerously wicked glitter flashed in his jade eyes. "And just what animal was mistreated?"

"Oh, no. You're getting into dangerous territory," she warned, stifling a giggle.

"I love danger."

"I've no doubt of that. You strike me as a daring man—a risk taker."

"I've taken a few in my time."

"Judging from your performance—more than a few."

"One shouldn't judge by performance alone. Enthusiasm has a way of lending expertise. Now, if I were to make the same statement regarding your performance..."

Her face grew hot. "I see what you mean." Biting her bottom lip again, she admitted, "It *was* special—for both of us—wasn't it?"

"You are a master of understatement, counselor. It was damn extraordinary." Leaning forward, Mike kissed her forehead. "Still is. More than ever."

Tears stung Gwyneth's eyes. If Mike kept up the sweet talk, she'd fall in love with him for sure. And he'd be nothing but trouble. Thirty short years had taught her that men couldn't be trusted.

First there'd been her father, remote and critical to the nth degree, then a parade of boyfriends who were more interested in her money. And then, there'd been old Richard, and all he wanted was the pleasure of running her life.

Why should Mike be any different? Sweet words now, but it wouldn't last. Better she should guard her heart. Let him use

her body as long as it suited *her*, but keep her heart out of it—if she could.

Tears rushed to her eyes, but she fought them back and pulled away from Mike. "Let's eat. I'm starving." She tried keeping her tone casual—not that she did casual very well. She turned and headed for the dining table, but he caught her wrist.

His dark eyebrows were drawn together. "Something I said?"

"No, I'm just ready to faint from hunger."

"Then dinner is served." He made a sweeping, formal bow and pulled out a chair for her. Damn. What happened? One minute Gwyn was playful as a kitten, and the next she was fighting back tears and treating him like a client's ex-husband. He searched his memory. Had he been too crude? No. Gwyn had instigated the banter, even influenced the direction.

Feeling lower than a slug's belly, Mike speared a bite of Szechwan beef and navigated it clumsily to his mouth. He watched Gwyn eat, handling her chopsticks like a pro. But she wouldn't spare a look for him.

"You must eat a lot of Chinese food?" he asked in what he judged was the lamest ever attempt at small talk.

She looked up from her plate and glared at him for a second, then shuttered her gaze and finally gave him a weak smile. "Lots. Why?"

"Your skill with the chopsticks." Oh God, why couldn't he just keep his mouth shut?

Companionable silence. Yeah, that's what was needed.
Good, old, companionable silence.

A raised eyebrow was the lady's only response.

Shit.

Frustrated, Mike threw his chopsticks and napkin down on the table. "Dammit, Gwyn. What's wrong?"

Blank look. "Nothing."

Maybe a little humor would help. "I've done or said something wrong, but being a man, I'm challenged to know what. Work with me, Gwyn. I need help."

Gwyn solemnly brought a piece of cashew chicken to her mouth and chewed.

"Fine." Mike stood up, nearly knocking his chair over. Two could play that game, he decided. He stomped back to the living room and booted up the laptop. If she were going to indulge in the silent treatment, he'd just get some work done.

Pay dirt—six e-mails from Sid, all with attachments. Mike downloaded all of them and started reading.

Pages of stuff. "Gwyn? I need to hook up to your printer. Sid's e-mailed me a ton of background material."

A desultory voice drifted out from the kitchen. "Sure, go ahead."

"Gracious to a fault," he grumbled.

"Did you say something?"

"Who me? Not a word." *Not a fucking word.*

While he printed out the files, he heard Her Sulkiness milling about in the kitchen—cleaning up, he supposed.

Then she glided into the living room, a frown creasing her forehead. "Do you think you could put on a shirt?"

"Now?" He looked up, irritated. "Actually, I'm quite comfortable. Hot-natured, you know?"

She sniffed. "Well, that certainly doesn't surprise me."

"You weren't exactly complaining a while ago," he snapped.

Without a word, Gwyneth whirled and stalked from the living room. A door slammed.

Mike rolled his eyes. Screw it. She was too damned distracting—in the room or out of it. Just what he deserved for letting his dick do the thinking for both of them.

He forced himself to focus on the pile of paper her printer was spitting out. As he scanned the material, he reached an alarming realization. He didn't have a clue who was after her. The more he read, the longer the list of suspects.

Exasperated, he declared, "All right, I've had enough of this." He stood up and padded down the hall to Gwyneth's closed door. He tapped lightly. "Gwyn?"

"What?"

"I'd like to go over this material with you. Get your impressions." *That is, if you can get over your snit-fit long enough to act like a reasonable adult,* he finished silently.

The door opened, and a still-sullen Gwyneth strolled out, still refusing to meet his gaze.

Not knowing what else to do, he followed Her Highness back to the living room where she sank down on the sofa across from him. She arranged the folds of her wrapper to cover her legs and primly crossed them at the ankle, then she folded her arms across her chest. Unmistakable body language—she'd moved into self-protection mode. But why?

Mike sighed. It was going to be a hell of a long night.

"First of all, your ex-fiancé has had only one client for the last year."

"So?" She gave an elegant shrug, her face a picture of ennui. "Then I guess," she argued, none too patiently, "it's no wonder Richard was so hot to have me drop Sylvia Damico's suit for divorce."

"Now your Aunt Lilith—she's an interesting piece of work. She's had four husbands. They all died, each one leaving her wealthier than the one before. By the way, your aunt—the one who drowned—Auntie Lilith was supposed to be watching out for her, but no one could ever prove it was anything but an accident."

Another shrug. "Old history. Not relevant."

Dammit, he had to shake her out of this mood. "There was an FBI profiler by the name of Sikes who thought she was a black widow, but he had an accident and is no longer with us. Again, suspicious circumstances. With your inheritance, she could have a major reason to harm you."

"If she's already wealthy, why bother?"

"Her reasons don't have to make sense to us, only to her."

"And my cousin Gregory?"

"He's a Silicon Valley genius, but likes to hang around his mom a lot and is reputed to be a major pain in the ass by anyone ever unfortunate enough to work with him."

Another blank look. Gwyneth's silence was pissing off Mike in a major way. "Bored?"

She shrugged.

Instead of choking her beautiful neck, he flipped through another printout. "And there are at least seven of your clients whose husbands have threatened you."

No response.

"Dammit, Gwyn. This is your life we're talking about." He glared at her, but was instantly sorry for his harsh tone. She'd fallen asleep, dark smudges under her eyes.

Hell. He was a no-good bastard. The woman was still suffering the effects of a concussion, and here he was yammering at her nonstop—not to mention the other stuff, which wasn't exactly the prescribed treatment for her injury.

He leaned over her and brushed away a stray wave of blond hair that had fallen across her lovely face. He marveled at the texture. Strands of spun silk couldn't be any finer.

"Gwyn," he murmured, so as not to startle her.

Her eyes opened. She stretched and yawned. "Was I snoring or drooling?" She gave him a sheepish grin.

"No. I think you should go to bed where you'll be more comfortable. You've had a long day."

She nodded, then started to stand up, but her knees buckled. Mike caught her before she could fall. Sweeping her up in his arms, he carried her down the hall to her bedroom.

Gently he lay her on the bed. "Are you all right? Should I call the doctor?"

She gave a dismissive wave. "I'm just tired."

Mike wasn't convinced. "Are you sure?"

"I'm all right, really."

Awkwardness claimed him. "I-uh, I'll probably be up quite late. I don't want to disturb you, so I'll use the other bedroom."

"That's very considerate, but you don't have to."

Mike pulled the sheet over her shoulder, resisting the heady impulse to caress the ivory slope of her arm. "G'night, counselor. Sweet dreams." He leaned over and placed a light kiss on her forehead.

"Night, Mike."

A tiny glimmer of a smile played about her lips as she snuggled into her pillow. It gave him hope.

"See you in the morning." He tamped down his need and forced his feet to take him from her room.

* * * *

He poured over the printouts until the words ran together. Finally he turned off the computer, arranged the stack of printouts into a moderately neat pile, then headed down the hall to the guest bedroom. He halted his stride at the door to hers. Should he check on her, make sure she was all right?

Yeah. He should. He gave a light rap, but heard no response. He opened the door and walked to the side of the bed. Moonlight streamed through the window, illuminating Gwyneth's face. Once assured that her color was good and she was breathing easily, he left the room, closing the door behind him.

Mike turned toward the hateful barrier and rested his palm against the cool surface of the carved wood.

Whether they made love or not, he wanted more than anything to hold her in his arms all night. Silly, but there he was. But he'd left it up to the lady in question, and she hadn't protested his using the guest room. So be it.

Gwyneth awakened to the sound of the door closing and was pleased he'd come to check on her, even if he hadn't stayed. It was kind of sweet. Still she wished he were there with her now, just so she could feel his strong arms around her all night.

Never had she felt so protected, warm and well-loved. But what she felt couldn't really be love. *Could it?*

She swung her legs over the side of the bed and got as far as the door, then stopped short.

No. No matter how much she wanted to, she couldn't go to him. He must think she was a real ditz, acting the way she had after dinner. She leaned her forehead against the cool wood of the door and sighed.

Might as well go back to bed. Whether or not she'd sleep was anybody's guess.

Seventeen

"I'll pack and won't even notice you're gone." Gwyneth took another sip of coffee. Just imagine, Mike had been up at dawn, prepared coffee and brought a steaming cup of the fresh brew right to her bedside. As far as she could tell, he'd forgiven her moodiness from the night before.

Damn, but she could really get used to having a man like him around. Not that she even remotely believed a relationship with her own private eye would last as long as the coffee in her cup would stay warm.

"If I leave you long enough to pick up a change of clothes, will you promise to stay put?"

"I'm not exactly anxious to get killed."

"So your answer is 'Yes, I will stay put'?"

Gwyneth clenched her teeth and forced a smile. "Yes, I will stay put."

"You won't call anyone?"

"No, I won't call anyone."

"Keep the door locked," he warned, chucking her under the chin. "Don't let anyone in. I'll be back in forty-five minutes or less."

"Okay." Forty-five minutes. Truthfully, she was a little nervous about being alone. "Can't I just go with you? Wouldn't we save time?"

"We might save time, but there'd be greater risk of exposure. When we leave, we'll head straight out of the city."

Keep the door locked," Mike warned, his expression intense. "And if someone comes by, you're not here."

"Enough, already. I'm not a child. You keep forgetting who had the most to lose here."

"Not at all. We both have a lot to lose."

The low timbre of Mike's voice vibrated through her middle. He cared. "Oh, yeah, I'd better call Uncle Wil and let him know where I'll be. I really have to. He's a real mother hen, but he'll go ballistic if I just disappear."

Mike nodded his agreement, but his expression remained stern. "No one else."

Gwyneth stood up to walk him to the door. Slipping her arms around his neck, she looked up into his eyes and fluttered her lashes furiously before asking in her cheekiest manner, "You mean, don't call the ex-fiancé, don't you?"

The intensity of his gaze startled her. "Check." He leaned forward, slanting his mouth across hers. His lips claimed her, told her she was his forever—and to hell with Richard.

Oh Mama, you never told me it could be like this.

Her knees weakened, and her insides sizzled with heat. She wanted nothing more than to wrap her legs around him for the umpteenth time and love him within an inch of his life. Love him until the world was a vague complication that could be ignored. Love him until she forgot all her self-doubts.

Reluctantly, she broke the kiss—such a lovely kiss. "We're never going to make it to Virginia if you keep this up," she reminded him.

"I know. All right, I'm going—now." As he pulled away, she slid her hands slowly over the hard muscles of his upper arms

across his forearms to his strong, tanned hands. He startled her as he took her hands in his and kissed the back of them. "Behave yourself. This is my last warning."

Speechless, for once, Gwyneth could only nod.

* * * *

Gwyneth zipped up the last of her luggage. The Carltons dressed for dinner, so she'd chosen basic black. Like all professional women in New York, she had an extensive wardrobe of the color, suitable for every occasion. Still it was summer ... maybe something in white?

As she rolled the largest suitcase into the living room, the telephone rang, startling her. Mike had instructed her not to call anyone but Uncle Wil, but he hadn't mentioned "answering" the telephone. While she debated over whether or not to answer or allow it to roll to voice mail, the telephone rang again, more insistently if she were any judge. She'd always made certain her clients had her home number for emergencies. Unable to let it go, she ran and picked up the receiver. Her stomach clenched at the sound of woman's sobs.

"M-miss Wells?"

"Sylvia? What's happened?"

"My husband ... again. I told him about the divorce. He hit me again."

"How bad is it? Shall I call an ambulance? The police?"

"No, it's not too bad, but I've made up my mind. I've had enough. I want to leave him—for good—but I don't have anywhere to go."

"Where're you now?"

"I'm at my mother's house, but this is the first place he'll look. Besides, I don't want Gianni to hurt her, too."

Damn. A desperate client was the last thing in the world she needed, but she couldn't leave Mrs. Damico in danger. Gwyneth's recent experience had given her a new appreciation for fear and helplessness. "I'll call a shelter for you and see if there's an available spot."

"Can you take me? I'm afraid."

"Give me your mother's address. I'm going to call a taxi and send it to you, then have the driver bring you back here. I'll go with you to meet the shelter contact—as long as you understand that they won't allow me to go with you to the actual shelter."

"I know. You've told me before." Sylvia then rattled off her mother's address, adding, "Thank you."

"It's okay, but we don't have much time. I'm on my way out of town for the weekend."

"I'll be ready."

After hanging up, Gwyneth placed the promised call for a taxi and made another to the shelter. As luck would have it, there was a space for Sylvia. And there might be just enough time for the young woman to get to Gwyneth's apartment before Mike returned.

One more call to her uncle, and she'd be ready. "We're going to visit his parents' farm in Virginia for the weekend."

"Works fast, doesn't he? Are you sure about this, sugar? Awful sudden."

"It's not what you think. Mike decided it's a good idea to get me out of town for a couple of days. Can you handle things at the office a little while longer?"

"Anything for my favorite niece."

"You're a doll, Wilford Wells."

Her uncle's deep-throated chuckle resounded in her ear. "Ain't it the truth."

"Well, I need to finish things here."

"Okay, but you take care of your sweet self. And don't give that P.I. of yours too much trouble."

Still giggling after she hung up the telephone, Gwyneth wondered how her uncle could be so different from her father. Brothers from the same womb, but Uncle Wil had all the warmth and emotions. All her father had had was a steel-clad heart, impervious to those who tried to love him.

Now what else did she need to do before leaving? The kitchen. She rushed to the table, snatched up their morning coffee cups and placed them in the dishwasher. In midstride to rinse out the coffeemaker, the telephone rang again.

What now?

Picking up the receiver, she gritted her teeth at the sound of Richard's arrogant whine.

"Have you come to your senses yet? Gotten whatever it was out of your system?"

Taking a deep breath to steady her nerves, she sank down in the nearest chair. "Richard, you have to understand. It's over. We're through."

"What do you mean over? I told you I'd overlook this unfortunate indiscretion."

"Don't belabor the obvious. We've already covered this ground. I thought we could remain friends, but I realize it's impossible."

"You're being rash. You'll regret this."

"Is that supposed to be some kind of threat? Who do you think you are?"

"I'm coming over. We have to discuss this face to face."

"No, don't bother. I'm going out of town. Leaving in just a few minutes, in fact."

"Out of town?"

"That's what I said."

"That's crazy. You don't know anything about him. I won't allow it."

Still trying to control her, was he? "You don't have anything to say about it. I have to finish packing. I'm going to hang up now."

"I insist—"

Gwyneth broke the connection. "Screw you, Richard." Not that she would ever speak so crudely if he were actually listening.

* * * *

Crime boss Gianni Damico had had a pisser of a day. If he'd been a kid, he would've lain on the floor and thrown a tantrum. Unfortunately, as the head of New York City's premiere crime organization, he didn't dare indulge in emotional displays.

Instead, he'd just have someone killed. It had been a long time since he'd done any of the dirty work himself. Maybe too long.

Many layers of protection shielded him from loose lips, but *omerta* in America was a damn joke. No longer did anyone have respect for tradition. Two bullets in the head was how he rewarded anyone dumb enough to betray him. He wasn't about to let someone grow fat in a Federal prison after singing to the government.

To make matters worse, his stupid bitch of a wife was trying to divorce him. Whatever happened to family loyalty? If a wife didn't know her place, she deserved a smack in the mouth. And now, she'd run off and left him. No doubt gone to see her fancy, do-gooder lawyer again.

Damn that pasty-faced, kiss-ass Klein. He didn't have *his* woman under control either. What was the use of paying thousands of dollars to a lawyer, if he couldn't get his fiancée to drop a client in a lousy divorce case?

Another instance that Gianni would have to take matters into his own hands. Miss well-to-do Wells would have to go—if he could find her.

He turned to his aide. "Find Klein and that bitch he's engaged to. If you can't find her, find me the detective," he roared at his assistant. "They're bound to be together. One of them will know where my wife is."

"Yes, sir." Squeaky, whose voice matched his nickname, Deloroso backed out of the study, nodding like the Mafia version of Uriah Heap.

* * * *

Back and forth Gwyneth paced, until she was certain she'd worn a path in the hardwood floor. Would Sylvia get there before Mike returned? And what would he say about the small detour they would have to take before leaving for Virginia? Of course it didn't matter what he said, she still had a responsibility to her client. And of all people, an ex-cop should understand responsibility.

Glancing at her Rolex, she saw that Mike had already been gone nearly forty-five minutes. Somehow, she had the feeling that he would be very punctual. It was still early, not quite eight. *Hurry up, Sylvia.*

The intercom buzzed. Gwyneth rushed over to answer it, hoping it was Sylvia. "Yes?"

"A Mrs. Damico, Miss Wells?"

"Send her up." Thank heaven. With Sylvia already here, Mike would have to behave himself. At least he'd better.

As soon as the doorbell rang, she ran to open the door.

To Gwyneth's horror, the poor woman's left eye was swollen and discolored in shades of purple and blue.

"Oh, no. He really did a number this time, didn't he?"

Setting down her bag with a determined thump, Sylvia nodded. "For the last time. I'm not going to be his punching bag anymore. I'd rather be dead."

"Well, you won't have to worry about him again. The shelter is very discreet and very secure. We'll leave as soon as Mike gets back."

"Mike?" Sylvia frowned and started pacing.

"My friend, he's a private detective. We're going to visit his parents in Virginia. You met him at the office yesterday. Tall, with wavy, chestnut hair."

A tiny smile pulled at Sylvia's mouth. "Yes, I remember."

Before Gwyneth could respond, the intercom squawked again.

* * * *

Mike knocked on the door of Gwyneth's apartment. A sickening lurch in the pit of his stomach told him they didn't have any time to waste.

"Gwyn?" Where the hell was she? He'd left the rental car double-parked at the curb. His stomach lurched again.

The door opened.

"Finally." Exasperated, he strode inside, then stopped short. Damico's pretty, little wife sat hunched on the sofa, holding an ice pack to the side of her face. "What's going on? We have to leave."

"We're ready, but we need to make a little detour first."

"Gwyn-eth—"

"Shh." She shut him up with a light kiss. Okay, so he was a sucker for her lips—no matter where she happened to put them.

"Since you're in such a hurry, I'll explain in the car. Come on, Sylvia."

Gwyn grabbed the Damico woman's bag and shoved it toward him, then shouldered a small one herself, while pulling another along behind her. Good God, it looked like she'd packed for a trip to Europe, not a weekend in Virginia.

What else could he do in the face of a steamrolling, protect-the-innocent-at-all-costs heroine? He nodded his assent and hoped like hell he wasn't making a big mistake.

* * * *

Richard Klein shifted uncomfortably under Gianni Damico's unwavering stare. "I'm afraid Gwyneth was gone before I made it to her apartment."

"That's too damn bad, Klein. That little blond twist of yours is going to be your downfall."

Klein swallowed. His only client wasn't happy, and his historic way of dealing with those who didn't please him was reputedly *unpleasant*, to say the least. "Technically, she isn't my little blonde anymore."

Damico's sallow complexion darkened in an ugly mask. "What do you mean?"

"She's broken our engagement. I thought I could get her to change her mind, but she's gone off with that detective."

"Hah. Dumped your sorry butt, did she? Well, can't say I blame her, if you didn't *do* her any better than you've protected my interests."

"Sir, I assure you, I..." Richard felt his face grow hot at the insult. If anyone but Gianni Damico were making such disparaging remarks, Klein would've reacted physically and swiftly.

"Aah, forget it." Gianni gave an off-hand wave of dismissal. "Broads. They're all alike. Go figure."

Richard refrained from mopping the perspiration from his brow. Showing weakness in front of his powerful client wasn't a good idea.

"If I knew where Gwyneth was going, I could find out where your wife is. The doorman told me that Mrs. Damico left with Gwyneth and the detective."

"Why didn't you say so in the first place?" Damico growled. "Knock yourself out. I've got my own sources. I probably have a better idea where your ex-fiancée is than you do."

Klein gritted his teeth, disliking his client more by the minute. "Really?"

"Well, well," Gianni Damico smiled as he shifted through the papers on his desk. "Here we go. Want to know who's putting it to your blonde?" Without waiting for an answer, Damico continued, "Carlton is an ex-cop—a gigantic pain in the ass when he was on the force. Now here he is, sticking his nose in my business again."

"So?"

"Wait, there's more. You might be surprised to know that Carlton's father is a high-level Washington consultant who dabbles in diplomacy. In other words, he's a government spook. CIA or worse. His mother is a genuine British blue blood. They live in a pricey townhouse in Georgetown and spend their weekends on a farm in Virginia. So where do *you* think she is?"

"Well, I'd say that in all likelihood—"

"Never mind," Damico droned. "If I were a betting man, I'd say Carlton has run off with your blonde to Virginia."

His client smiled, but the man's half-shuttered eyes were dead—a combination that chilled Richard down to his toes.

"Then I'll go to Virginia. I can persuade her to tell me where your wife is. I know it."

"Hah. I've got a man already on the way to Virginia. He'll find that interfering bitch all right."

"Then what?" He pulled at his collar, which was suddenly too tight.

"Well, then..." Damico started patiently, "he'll grab her and ask her oh-so-nicely to tell me where my wife is, you idiot!"

"Y-yes, sir."

* * * *

Uptown in his penthouse, an anxious Paul Winston waited until Lilith Sand came to the telephone. What he was about to do was reckless, but so what?

"Lilith Sand." Her rich contralto reached through the telephone and stirred him on a primal level beyond anything he'd experienced in the last ten years.

"Mrs. Sand, this is Paul Winston."

"Mr. Winston. Surely you don't already have news about my case?"

"I'm afraid your case is still in research, but I wonder if you would like to spend the weekend in Virginia."

"Mr. Winston, do you ask all your clients away for the weekend?"

Nothing ventured, nothing gained. "Only the wealthiest and most attractive." So what if she had all the appearances of a black widow? He could handle her.

"Well in that case, how can I refuse?" Her low laughter came over the telephone, curled through his ear and sent a shock straight to his groin.

"I apologize for the short notice, but I have good friends with a farm in the Powatchee Valley who indulge in the quaint British custom of having weekend house parties. And I thought of you."

"I'd be delighted, but what will your wife say?"

"I'm a widower."

"I see."

Through the telephone, Paul could almost see her seductive mouth curve into a smile. And again, his groin reminded him that it'd been too long since—

"Dress for dinner?"

"Resisting the temptation to descend into adolescent vulgarity, I'll just say yes."

"Lovely. I don't know my son's plans for the weekend, but I'll tell him of your kind invitation."

Her son? "Yes, we'll go by private plane." He recovered quickly. "I keep one at my disposal, since my client base is international."

"Sounds delightful."

"I'll pick you up at five. We'll arrive in time for dinner. I'm sure you'll fit in admirably. They always have an eclectic group of guests."

"Sounds charming."

"Five then. Good-bye."

He broke the connection. Eclectic group, indeed. Why had George Carlton called earlier and asked Paul to bring his

newest client? And how had his old friend even known about her?

* * * *

Mike saw to it that Sylvia Damico was settled comfortably in the 1957 Ford Thunderbird convertible he'd leased from Retro Rentals. Then like a good soldier, he loaded the trunk with their luggage, gritting his teeth, but not so that Gwyn or the battered woman in the back seat could tell. He slammed the trunk, walked around to the driver's side, opened the door and slid into his seat.

Time to get the hell outta Dodge.

Turning the key in the ignition, he glared at Gwyneth over his shades. "I think you mentioned something about an explanation?" He pulled out into the street without waiting for her answer.

"I-I'm sorry to interfere with your plans," came the feeble voice from the back. "Please don't be angry with Miss Wells. It's my fault," which made Mike feel like pond scum.

"Okay, so I'm a jerk, but I at least need to know where we're going, don't I?"

"Agreed on both points, Detective," came Gwyn's snippy reply. "Don't pay any attention to him, Sylvia. His bark is worse than his bite."

"Truce, ladies. Honestly, my mother did bring me up with better manners. But will someone please tell me *where we're going*. I'm the driver. I *need* to know." He hit the steering wheel in frustration.

His partner in crime reached over and ran her fingers across the back of his hand, then gave him a playful slap on the wrist. "If you'll kindly keep your eyes on the road—and your hands on the wheel—I'll tell you."

Okay, so he'd tried to cop a judicious feel of her knee. It was right there—handy, so to speak.

"We're meeting the go-between in Queens. She'll take Sylvia to a shelter. That way she can't be traced through us."

"Queens? Why didn't you say so in the first place? I'm headed in the wrong, damned direction." Mike flicked on the turn signal and made a right turn. One more right and he'd be headed toward the Queensborough Bridge.

"You do know how to get there, don't you? I know how men hate to stop and ask directions."

"Yeah, yeah." he groused. He glanced in the mirror at Sylvia's battered face. "Shouldn't we take her to the hospital or something?"

"I don't *need* a hospital," Sylvia protested. "I need a divorce."

"There's a nurse at the shelter. She'll check Sylvia over and give her whatever she needs."

"This place is safe?"

"Yes, it looks like an ordinary row house, but it's been rehabbed on the inside to accommodate ten women and the staff. We're lucky they had an opening."

Mike nodded. "Security?"

"All windows and doors are wired, and they have a hotline to the local precinct."

The Man For The Job
by Marie-Nicole Ryan

"Okay, ladies. Queens it is." He made his second right down Lexington Avenue, hoping like hell for a break on the traffic lights.

Eighteen

Mike sat in front of a small coffee shop, cursing the day he was born. The trip to Queens had been complicated by a fender-bender in the middle of the bridge, which tied up the eastbound lanes. Traffic came to a halt, and everything remained at a standstill until the police arrived on the scene and started directing traffic around the crash. All in all, it had been a forty-five-minute delay.

He glanced at his watch for what had to be the tenth time. Gwyn had been inside for a good ten minutes. If they didn't get on the road soon...

Hell, so what if they were late to dinner? Other than his mother's thinking they were boorish for being inexcusably late, what could happen? It certainly wouldn't make any difference in what his father thought.

The sound of the front door closing shook him from his thoughts. He looked up. Gwyn strode toward the car; her long, beautiful legs might be hidden by a pair of slacks, but there was no hiding the way the fabric clung to her shapely thighs and hips. Not only that, he had a damn good memory of those gorgeous limbs wrapped around his waist.

Blood rushed to his groin. Damn. If he didn't get his dick under control, how was he going to walk around in polite company the rest of the weekend? The only option would be to stay in bed—yeah, great idea.

Opening the door, Gwyn slid into her side of the car.
"What's up?"

"What's up?" Mike threw his head back and roared with helpless laughter.

"Hmm, I see what you mean."

Leaning toward him, a smile of feigned innocence playing about her lips, she ran a pink-tipped fingernail up his inner thigh.

He groaned. The woman was dangerous or demented—possibly both. No, delicious was more like it.

"Can you drive with Little Mikey like that?" Gwyn's tone was so sweet, she might've been asking him if he'd like one sugar or two in his morning coffee.

"I can drive all right."

Mischief lit her blue eyes until they sparkled. "Yes, well, we both know you can do that, but can you drive the car? That's what I'm asking."

"Counselor, if you'd take your hand off my leg, it might help."

"Turning on the key might help." Gwyneth reached toward the ignition. "Weren't we going to Virginia?"

"Hold your hands where I can see them," he ordered in his most authoritative, cop's voice. "Move away from the victim and remain on your side of the vehicle." He paused, then softened his tone, "Or we're not going anywhere but the nearest Motel Six."

Gwyneth held up her hands in mock surrender. "Motel Six?" Pursing her lips, she added, "I don't believe I've had the pleasure."

"I knew it was a mistake to drive to Virginia." He turned the key; the motor roared to life, all 380 horses raring to go.

"Why is that?"

Mike pulled out into the street. Keeping his tone casual, he laughed. "I had some silly idea about watching your hair blowing in the wind, the sun shining on your face. Romantic claptrap stuff."

"And that was the mistake?"

"Yeah, you're going to drive me crazy, counselor. I'll be on testosterone overload by the time we roll into my parents' farm."

"I'm afraid I don't see the problem, Detective." She folded her hands primly in her lap. "You already act like a testosterone junky."

Mike grinned. "I do?"

"You are guilty of the most heinous behavior."

"Now you're the judge, too?"

"Most assuredly. And I'm ready to pronounce sentence on you."

Straining to keep his eyes on the road, he told her, "Go ahead, Your Honor. I'm prepared to pay for my crimes."

"Good. Michael Carlton, I sentence you to spend the rest of your nights with the woman at your—" Gwyn broke off. Had she said more than she meant to? "I mean—"

Mike interrupted, hoping to save her a speck of embarrassment. "That's all right with me. No appeals necessary."

"There you go, being reckless and rash."

"I'm never reckless or rash." He glared over his shades. "I say what I mean."

"It is entirely too soon for you to talk like that. Besides, I thought men avoided relationship talk at all costs. What's the matter with you, anyway? Why can't you just be normal?"

"Normal?" Mike threw Gwyn a fleeting glance. "I never aspired to normality. I just happen to know what I want. And that, my dear counselor, is you."

"Well, you've *had* me. There's no need to keep up the sweet talk."

Mike's frustration mounted as he realized Gwyn was being obtuse just for the hell of it. "It's not sweet talk. I don't engage in *sweet talk*."

From the corner of his eye, he could see Gwyn sitting stiffly with her hands folded in her lap. "I was only kidding about the life sentence, anyway," she told him.

His natural cockiness returned, he grinned. "Too bad. I was looking forward to a life sentence with you."

"And what I think doesn't count?"

"Gwyn, we have plenty of time. Let's just get out of the city, get you safe, then we can sort out our future."

"Oh, really? I can't believe how arrogant you are."

"Arrogant?" His hands tightened on the steering wheel. Gwyn's argumentative nature could be damn annoying. The woman was a born attorney—she never took "no" for an answer and always had to have the last word. She probably came out of the womb arguing with the obstetrician.

"You are. Just because you—"

"Just because I what?" Mike interrupted, keeping watch for the entrance to I-278.

"Never mind." She folded her arms across her chest.

"Counselor." Mike gave an exasperated sigh. "Has anyone ever told you how infuriating you are?"

"Infuriating?"

He didn't respond. He'd just sighted the entrance ramp coming up too soon, and he was in the wrong damned lane.

"Dammit. Here we go." Flicking on the turn signal, he whipped into the correct lane, cutting off a taxi driver who lay on his horn. Smiling, Mike jammed a stiff middle finger in the air.

Gwyn gasped. "And you're a lousy driver. You *do* know the way, don't you?"

He threw her his most innocent smile. "Didn't you bring a map?"

"A map? Where would I get a map? I don't even drive."

Deciding he'd teased her enough, he confessed, "I don't need a map. I've driven this way a time or two."

"Have you?"

"Yes, counselor. Are we going to argue all the way to Virginia? Not that I mind—"

"Are we arguing? I thought we were having a healthy discussion."

"A discussion? How about some conversation? What were you like when you were a little girl?"

Gwyn rolled her eyes, then grinned. "I took gymnastics until I was twelve and had this growth spurt. Eight inches in a year. Suddenly I wasn't one of those tiny dolls prancing around the mat in my leotard. Just a long-legged, gawky girl of five-ten."

"Okay so your Olympic hopes for gold were dashed." Mike shrugged. "What else did you do for fun?"

"I rode horses for a while, but when mother discovered my raging crush on the instructor, she packed me off to boarding school."

"Bummer."

"Not really." Her low laughter sent a thrill straight to his groin.

"The school instructor was even better looking. We all lusted after him in our passionate little teenage hearts."

Mike nodded. "I always knew..." His voice faded.

"Knew what?"

He winked at her. "'Bout the passion."

"Oh, you!"

* * * *

No sooner had Mike merged onto the New Jersey Turnpike than Her Loveliness fell asleep, turning her pretty little nose up at the sun and leaving him plenty of time to think while the T-Bird ate up the miles between New York and Virginia.

There was a certain matter he needed to tell her. But when? Maybe he should have checked an etiquette book for the best time to confess...

No, explain was more like it. When should he explain how he'd fathered a son by a woman who wasn't his wife?

Was it too soon?

The one thing Mike knew without question was that the counselor didn't take him or his intentions seriously. Not yet, anyway. So why bring up the most shameful act of his past

until their relationship was on stronger footing? Gwyn desired him—yes, without a doubt—but could she accept his son by a woman Mike had never loved, never meant to touch, much less make pregnant?

Worried, he cast a glance at the slumbering beauty beside him, exactly as he'd imagined her—wheaten hair streaming in the wind, her pert nose turning pink from the sun. Romantic claptrap, he'd called it. Maybe it was, but her strength and intelligence spoke to him as loudly as the lithe curves of her body. And her goodness—in spite of her wealth, she wasn't greedy for more. No, she argued for those less fortunate than she and looked out for the innocents. All of that rolled up into what was, at times, the most irritating person he'd ever come across.

Total insanity—it was the only explanation. But damn it, he would keep her from harm, in spite of her penchant for rushing headlong into the breach like a fool. After all, they were two of a kind.

* * * *

Lady Elinor Carlton glanced over the top of her reading glasses. "I think everything is coming together for this weekend. We'll have more guests than usual, and I see you've engaged extra staff from the bonded agency we normally use."

"Yes, ma'am," the housekeeper replied. "They've all been cleared by security as well."

"Well, then, we should have quite an enjoyable time." Elinor dismissed the young woman with a nod, then picked up

a basket and her gardening gloves and walked out through the French doors into her garden.

The flower garden, with its lush and haphazard growth reminded her of the garden in her country house in Sussex. It quite handily provided a much needed respite from her often ill-tempered husband. It wasn't wheelchair-accessible. She'd seen to that, arguing that removing the cobblestones and replacing them with the smoother surface of concrete would spoil the Old World ambiance. George could still enjoy the garden's fragrance and beauty from the spacious terrace, without worrying her with his petty complaints about the sun and buzzing insects—and Michael.

She did so hope her husband would be on his best behavior with their son, who would be here soon—for the first time in several years—with his *client*. Was she truly a client or was she more? If she were *more*, it would prove quite an interesting house party. Pleased that her plans had come together so effortlessly, she smiled, while removing two buds of each three from her pride and joy.

"There, that should do it." The *Lady Elinor*, a white rose with pale lavender edges, was her own cultivar, one which she would enter in the local rose society contest—and win, of course.

Elinor handed the basket of discarded buds to the head gardener, who had followed her down the path to the rose garden. "Well, Tanaka? What do you think?"

"You will win this year, Lady Elinor." Tanaka bowed, but not before she caught a glimpse of a tentative smile.

"I shall be very disappointed if I don't." She hastened to add, "But never fear, I shall blame only myself."

"You are too kind."

Her heart went out to the man. He hadn't been the same since his daughter, Tamiko, was killed, and Elinor was pleased to see him smile whatever the reason.

His wife, a lovely French au pair, died giving birth, so it was only natural that the gardener had worshipped his daughter. Just as it was only natural that Michael and Tamiko had played together as children whenever the Carltons were in residence at the farm.

George had been irate when Michael and Tamiko announced their engagement and apoplectic when they eloped. Only Elinor's insistence on keeping Tanaka had saved the man's position. Her husband still found it ironic that she, one of Britain's upper class, was more understanding about a misalliance than he, a self-made man from America, who believed in equality for all.

Rubbish. All she had wanted was for her only child to be happy.

But then there had been that unfortunate bit of business with poor Marina.

* * * *

Gianni Damico had one soft spot in his hard heart for his nephew, Reggie Gruhn. Gianni's twit of a sister had fallen in love and run away with one of the Damico family's British contacts. Perhaps, he'd made a mistake by taking the lad into the family *business* ... The current assignment would tell.

Finding Sylvia was a test. Whether or not Reggie succeeded would tell Gianni if his nephew could be trusted with any of the more subtle and complex jobs often necessary in the family's line of work.

The private line rang, and Gianni snatched it up, anxious for a progress report. "Yeah?" he barked into the receiver.

"ello, Uncle Gianni. "ow are yew?"

"Cut the crap. What do you know?"

"Just as we thought. Mama and Papa Carlton are in the country for the next week. I'm there now, and I used your contact in the security agency to wangle a position as one of the catering staff. Quite a neat bit of work for twenty-four hours, I'd say."

Impressed, Gianni hid it. "You're on the inside already? Is the Wells woman there? What about the detective?"

"Sonny boy isn't 'ere yet. Same for Blondie. 'owever, there is an 'ouse full of people nearly tripping over each other."

"Really?" Gianni's curiosity grew. "What sort of people?"

"Very exclusive bunch, I tell you. Foreign executive with a wimpy daughter and her little boy, who might be an 'oly terror, but I haven't decided about 'im. Then there's your typical 'igh-priced mouthpiece accompanied by a very choice piece of mature goods and her foul-mouthed weasel of a son."

"All right. You've done good so far. But keep your mind on one thing. I want to know where they took Sylvia. If you can't get the blonde alone and talkative, call me. I'll send reinforcements."

"M-may I make a suggestion?"

"What?"

"Why bother with 'unting down a woman what doesn't want to lie in the marital bed, so to speak? Dump 'er, I say."

"Stuff your suggestions. I don't need 'em." Gianni slammed down the receiver. Damn. His reasons were his own. How dare Sylvia leave him? She belonged to him until he didn't want *her* anymore.

Nineteen

Mike wove his way through the Beltway traffic. The last four hours of silence had been a nice change of pace. He still hadn't figured out when he ought to tell Sleeping Beauty over there about his son. Sometime this weekend, he *would* tell her. He would find a private spot and explain everything. Then if she didn't write him off as a total jerk ... It was more than he had a right to expect.

Gwyn groaned and stretched, arching her back. Her breasts jutted out nicely, a damn good view in Mike's eyes.

"Are we there yet?"

"Another hour."

"Where are we?"

"On the Beltway, just south of DC."

"Mm."

"Hungry? You slept through lunch."

"Not especially."

"You don't have one of those eating disorders, do you?"

"Of course not," she huffed and pinched the skin on her forearm. "Do I look like I have one?"

Mike threw her a quick grin. "I think you look perfect."

* * * *

The chirping of his cell phone interrupted Richard from his task at hand.

"Don't answer it," the redhead beneath him gasped, never missing a thrust.

"Shut up. It's business. And keep quiet." Richard pulled out. He could always re-warm this little number he'd picked up in a bar. "Yeah?" he answered.

"You told me to call when I had a feel for things here."

"Give me your number." He reached over to the nightstand and grabbed his PDA. He waited until she rattled off the number and entered it. "How's the new position?"

"Boring as hell, and the grand dame is unbelievably Old World. Veddy top drawer, don't you know. How long is this going to take?"

"I don't know. There's been a complication."

"You're not falling in love with that skinny bitch, are you?"

"How could I? She's as cold as they come."

"Very funny. You'd better be telling the truth."

"You know I love only you. She's the means to an end."

"So what's the complication?"

"She's hired a P.I."

"A P.I.?"

"Yeah, and he's an ex-cop."

"So he's a washed-up cop. Probably an alcoholic."

"That's not the real complication. He's the son of your new employers."

"Shit. How the hell did that happen in a city the size of New York?"

"The P.I.'s father and Gwyneth's uncle were college roommates about a hundred years ago."

"The good-old-boy network rides again."

"Apparently."

"I never understood why you wanted me to take this out-of-town gig in the first place."

"Having you in the same city is too distracting. I just wanted you out of town. You're the one who chose to work for them. I'm supposed to be wooing Miss Goody-Two-Shoes, am I not? I can't do that and attend to your baser needs, can I?"

"I suppose not. But I'm warning you—end it soon."

"I have to move carefully. Weren't you listening?"

"I need to see you. I miss you."

"It's patently impossible. Just hold on. It can't last much longer. I've got to go. I'm rather busy."

"What are you doing?"

"Working on a brief. You're interrupting."

"When am I going to see you again?" she whined into his ear.

"Soon, now let me get back to work."

The redhead on the other side of the bed giggled. Richard shook his head and motioned for her to keep quiet. Too late.

"You're with a woman, aren't you? You son of a bitch!"

"Don't be ridiculous, darling. I told you I was working." He disconnected. He certainly wasn't going to listen to any more of her guff, not when he had a nice piece of action going.

"Now then." He turned his attention to the redhead.

"Where were we?" No need for his main squeeze to know that plan A was already shot to hell.

* * * *

"Are we there yet? How far out do they live?" Gwyneth asked as Mike turned the car down yet another narrow, tree-lined road.

"Counselor, you sound like you're five years old. *Are we there yet?*" he mimicked. "Don't worry. It's another mile or so."

"Okay." Scooting over closer to him, she rested her hand on his knee. "So tell me, who'll be there?"

Mike shrugged. "Never can tell. All sorts. Mostly people they've met through my mother's connections from Great Britain or my father's diplomatic service. He's in a wheelchair now—had a stroke last year—but it's never boring, I promise you."

"Well, that's something."

"What was that?"

"I was about to remark that at least I don't have to worry about being bored to death."

"You're in fine form, counselor, but save your wit for my father. He's the one you need to impress."

"Hmph. I don't feel a need to impress anyone."

"Well, your feistiness is in your favor." Mike slowed the car and turned onto a private drive. The estate, enclosed by a brick fence stretching in either direction as far as Gwyneth could see, seemed immense. A tall, ornate, iron gate barred the entrance. From where she sat, she could see two cameras. Mike's father must be a real nut about security, she mused, then decided she liked the idea of relaxing for a few days without worrying about someone trying to kill her.

Mike spoke into the intercom. "It's me. Open the gate."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Michael," came the voice through the intercom.

The wrought-iron gate swung open. Mike gunned the accelerator and sped through as soon as he had clearance. "Just another five minutes to the farmhouse and a bathroom." He grinned at her, his eyes glittering with mischief. "I would stop, but there are security cameras everywhere, and I wouldn't want you to entertain the guards unnecessarily."

"Cute."

He glanced over at her and winked. "I know. Part of my charm."

The car topped a slight rise, and the *farmhouse* came into view. To be precise, a three-story, half-timbered, Tudor-style mansion sprawled across the landscape. Not unused to wealth and its trappings, Gwyneth still found herself surprised. Mike just didn't seem the WASP-y type. She guessed her first impression of him as a smart-alecky, down-and-out P.I. still lingered.

"Some farmhouse, huh?"

"Not too shabby," she admitted.

Mike circled the T-Bird around the pea-gravel drive and pulled to a stop. "Wait, I'll get your door." He flung his door open and hopped out of the car.

"Oh, I see what's happening. You're going to be the perfect gentleman while we're here. I'm impressed." She rolled her eyes to let him know she wasn't. *He must put on quite a show for his parents. This weekend might actually prove interesting.*

The Man For The Job
by Marie-Nicole Ryan

"Now, counselor, don't be tacky." He opened her car door and stepped back with a formal bow.

Gwyn smiled up at him. "I promise I'll be on my best behavior, too."

"Good." He planted a light kiss on her forehead. "Let's beard the lions in their den."

She was about to comeback with a snappy response when she heard the crunching sound of feet running on the gravel drive. She glanced around Mike's shoulder and saw a small, dark-haired boy running for all he was worth.

"Daddy!"

Twenty

At the sound of his son's voice, Mike spun around in time to catch the boy as he vaulted into his arms.

"Hey there, son, I didn't know you were going to be here this weekend."

"Yes, it's s'posed to be a surprise, Grandmama's surprise. Mommy's here, too." His son's dark brown eyes shone with excitement.

Oh great. Mother's idea of a fun weekend. Mike straightened his shoulders. "Adam, there's someone I want you to meet. This is my friend Gwyneth. Gwyn, my son, Adam."

Her expression was unreadable, but her eyes sparked like flint. "So I gathered."

Gwyn turned quiet and polite and inside Mike cringed.

"He's a fine, big boy, isn't he? How old are you, Adam?"

He held up his fingers. "Almost six."

Gwyn's face turned pink and she avoided all contact with Mike as she calculated.

"Interesting." One word. But at least she had a smile for his son.

"Yes, well. I was debating on the proper time, and now..." He shrugged.

She chewed at the inside of her lip, then answered in clipped formal tones, "How nice that someone took care of it for you. After all, you've had two whole days."

"Just waiting for the right time ... and circumstances."

"Don't bother." She brushed away his excuses. "I'm sure it's a thrilling story, but it has nothing to do with me, now does it?"

"I think it does." Shifting Adam around to rest on his hip, Mike tried again. "We have an audience. Try to behave."

Gwyn gave a soft sigh. "I don't think I'm the one with behavior problems."

Together, the three of them walked to the front entrance. Damn. The entire family had lined up to greet them, his mother standing beside his father's wheelchair. And alongside them was the reason for his stomach's sinking to his knees—Adam's mother, Marina.

Standing before a rat squad panel would be easier than facing all of them at once.

Sweet, little Marina, attempting a brave smile which failed to hide her disappointment at seeing Gwyn with him. Naturally his father wore a fierce scowl—difficult to tell which of the two was more disappointed.

"Mother," he acknowledged, leaning forward to kiss her cheek.

"Father." Mike nodded, but didn't extend his hand.

"Hmph." His father averted his gaze—not that Mike expected his father to respond any other way.

"Marina." Marina smiled, then found sudden interest in her open-toed sandals.

"This is my friend and client, Gwyneth Wells." He turned to introduce Gwyneth. "My mother, Elinor, and my father, George Carlton."

"Gwyneth, my dear, I'm delighted to meet you. I do hope you'll find our quaint customs not too tiring."

"I'm very pleased to meet you—uh, Lady Elinor."

"Oh, my dear, Michael is such a tease. I don't use my title here in the States. Please call me Elinor."

"You can bloody well call me Mr. Carlton." Mike's father glared at Gwyn, his nostrils flaring.

Her eyes widened a bit, but she swallowed and managed an agreeable, "Of course, Mr. Carlton."

"More British than the British," Elinor chided him. "Don't mind my husband. He's been quite a grump every since he had his stroke. Personally, I think it addled his brain. Once upon a time, he was quite pleasant."

God, it's starting already. Mike turned to Marina. "How are you? Adam looks wonderful."

"We've been fine. Adam has missed you."

"I just saw him last weekend. Don't make it sound like it's been months."

Marina's face darkened with a flush. "Oh, I didn't mean to sound like that, really, Michael."

"Well, if my son had made an honest woman out of you, my only grandchild could see his father every night," Mike's father insisted.

"Well, why don't we air all the family secrets at once? Get everything out in the open," Mike blustered. No telling what Gwyn thought. She was probably ready to run and hide—he sure as hell wanted to.

His mother could've warned him. Having Marina and Adam there to greet him and Gwyneth was his mother's idea of an

interesting weekend. He'd have a choice word or three with her later.

Never at a loss, his mother placed an arm around Gwyneth's shoulder. "Let's go inside, dear. I'm sure you must be exhausted from your drive."

"Yes, thank you."

"Can I spend the night in your room, Daddy?"

"If it's all right with your mom." Mike glanced at Marina who nodded her assent.

"Good. Daddy, come see my new pony. Grandpapa Carlton and Grandpapa Vadim bought him for me. His name is Pete. I know 'cause he told me," Adam finished with a whisper of a giggle.

Thanking heaven for his son's diffusing the difficult moment, Mike smiled and set the boy down. "All right, let's see this new pony of yours. Have you ridden him yet?"

"Oh, yes. Grandmama says I have a good seat."

"I'm sure you do." Mike agreed, distracted. While he and his son walked around to the stables, he glanced back over his shoulder, but Gwyn was no longer in sight.

* * * *

Marina watched the confident swing of Michael's shoulders as he strolled away with their son—her only hold on a man who couldn't be held except by love. And he didn't love her. He never had.

From the very first second she'd seen him leaning over the tall blonde, she knew Michael was in love. Every plane of his face softened when he looked at his so-called friend.

It just wasn't fair. She had known Michael and his family for years. Their fathers had planned a match between them—a marriage of two important families. But that was before he fell in love with Tamiko. After Tamiko died, Marina thought surely her chance would come, that he would turn to the mother of his child for comfort, but no.

And now, it certainly appeared that Mike was more than ready to move on, it was with a snippy blonde who looked more like a super-model than the hot-shot attorney she was reputed to be.

To add insult to injury, Michael's mother had already taken Gwyneth under her wing. None of it was fair. Her only consolation: Michael was a good father to Adam, and that was all that was important. Her son had a father who loved him and spent time with him.

What more could a mother want?

* * * *

"The house is lovely," Gwyneth murmured politely, not knowing what else to say while she struggled to process the happenings of the last few minutes.

Mike had a son—who was not his late wife's child. And *where* did Marina fit in his scheme of things? If Gwyneth were any judge of character—and as an attorney she needed to be—Marina was in love with the rascally P.I. from New York. But what did Mike feel for the lovely, olive-skinned mother of his child?

Dammit. Just when she thought she had Mike all figured out, something would happen and the entire equation changed.

"I suppose by today's standards, it's old-fashioned and formal, but it does so remind me of the home where I grew up."

The sound of Elinor's well-modulated, cultured voice jerked Gwyneth out of her bout of Twenty Questions. "Do you return to England often?" she asked for want of anything better.

"Several times a year. I confess I miss it more as I grow older, but now my life is here with George. He needs me."

"He hasn't adjusted well to his disability, has he?"

"No, he's still quite angry. You see, he was such an active man. Golf—he absolutely loved it—but now refuses to go to the club. Can't bear to be reminded of his limitations."

"What about his work?"

"He's still able to accomplish a bit, but nothing like the level before. Luckily, his verbal and cognitive skills have returned, but he'll never have full recovery of his motor coordination. Or at least, that's what we've been told. I must confess that George has been very determined to regain what he has," Elinor continued as she led Gwyneth upstairs.

She noted the highly polished floors, the muted tones of antique, Oriental rugs, and the dark, oak woodwork, gleaming with a beeswax finish. The atmosphere of the entire house made her feel like she had stepped back in time. She could almost see herself descending the grand staircase in a long dress, dripping with jewelry. *Silly thought.*

"Here you are, dear." Elinor stopped in front of a door, then opened it. "I hope you'll find it suitable."

Gwyneth walked into the rose-hued room. Long, silk draperies hung at the leaded-glass windows. The walls had been covered in the same silk damask. A massive Elizabethan bed with heavily carved, bulbous posts dominated the room. "It's lovely." *For a museum.*

"Gemma will bring up your luggage, unpack for you and draw your bath."

"Really," Gwyneth protested, "I can unpack and draw my own bath. I'm used to being on my own."

"But a little pampering never hurts. Enjoy it, my child," Elinor replied.

Gwyneth smiled. "Thank you. You're so kind. I might as well take advantage of your gracious offer." *Yeah, a little pampering just might offset what was bound to be a screwed-up weekend, if the first fifteen minutes of her visit were any indication.*

* * * *

Watching his son ride, Mike allowed himself to forget the scene at the front door. The absolute joy he experienced while spending time with Adam was the upside of what would, no doubt, be a totally fucked-up weekend.

He looked at the boy, who was a veritable spitting image of Marina with his dark eyes and hair, and wondered if there was anything of himself in his son. True, he was intelligent and spirited, and more than once, Mike had regretted that he simply couldn't learn to love Marina. Together, they could've

given Adam a two-parent home. But a man's heart didn't always follow the lead of his head.

And he knew, without a doubt, that his mind, body and soul belonged to Gwyn. He would win her, despite his mother's manipulations, his father's disapproval and Marina's sad, but resigned, face.

"See, Daddy, I can ride."

Adam's shrill voice pierced the quiet of the stable yard. The only other sounds Mike heard were the soft knickers of stabled horses. That and the familiar, ripe stable smell brought back memories—of another boy and his father. He'd been the boy, and his father had stood to the side, yelling for the young Mike to sit straight, to hold the reins properly. He'd always failed his father. No matter—he was a man now, and how he treated his son was more important than his father's failings of twenty-five years ago.

"You're doing a great job, son," Mike called as Adam took another round in the ring.

"Have a pair of Wellies, sir," one of the grooms offered.

"Thanks, Jack, I will." Leaning against a fence post, Mike bent over and pulled on the green boots, then stepped into the ring. A second groom handed him the pony's lead rein. "You ready, son?"

"Yeah, I want to go fast." The child executed an encouraging "get-along," rocking movement in the saddle.

"All right, here we go." Mike picked up the pace—not much, but enough to make Adam feel like he was racing around the riding ring. His delighted squeals filled the air ...

Music to Mike's troubled mind—the best kind, the healing kind.

Mike spent another twenty minutes leading his son and pony around the ring before coming to a breathless halt. Sweat ran down his forehead, and he definitely smelled of horse. "Time to get cleaned up. You know how your Grandmother is about cleanliness."

"Yes, sir." Adam swung his leg over the pony's head and would've fallen, had Mike not caught him.

Adam threw his arms around Mike's neck. "I love you, Daddy."

"I love you, too." As it always did, Mike's heart filled with love—and a familiar disbelief that anyone could love a child as much as he did.

Twenty-one

Gwyneth stepped out of the tub and grabbed a thick, white towel sheet. She wrapped it around her body, then snatched another towel from the rack, winding it around her head turban-style.

The mirror showed her too clearly that her nose was as red as a certain, unfortunate reindeer's. She guessed her usual sun block wasn't up to the task of riding all day in a T-Bird convertible with the top down. Not much point in riding around in a convertible with the top up, was there?

Leaning forward, she checked to see if any dreaded crow's feet had dared to show their little claws at the corner of her eyes. Nope, not yet. Well, truthfully, she did have one tiny line so minuscule that it hardly counted. She reached for a jar of moisturizer, but stopped. She heard voices in the hall—Mike's low rumble and Adam's high-pitched, childish one. Tugging the bath sheet tighter around her, she headed from the bath to her bedroom door. She leaned her ear against it and listened.

A sharp rap sounded, and she jumped back.

"Gwyn-eth?"

She just loved the way Mike said her name, when he drew it out so playfully. She eased the door open to two sets of eyes—one pair of amused green and the other of curious brown. "Yes?"

Mike's gaze traveled up and down her body quickly, as if he couldn't help it. "Hi."

"Hi yourself," she replied. Okay, so she wasn't very original, but he did have her at a disadvantage, since she was damned near naked, while he was fully clothed and redolent of horse or was it pony?

"Hi, Gwyn," piped Adam.

"Hello. Did you show your Daddy your pony?"

"Yes, and Daddy can run almost as fast as my pony.

Mike chuckled. "Can't you tell? I must smell to high heaven."

"That's wonderful," she told Adam, then gave an impolite sniff and gazed into Mike's eyes, telling him, "Actually, you do, but I wasn't going to mention it."

"May we come in?"

She snuggled her towel a little tighter as she stepped back from the door. "Uh, do you think you should? I mean, I'm—"

"Irresistible, I assure you."

"That's not what I meant." She shot a glance at Adam.

"I'm going to sleep in my Daddy's room," Adam volunteered.

"Yes, I know, and I think that's wonderful."

A wistful expression danced across Mike's face. "You do?"
Let him wonder, she decided and arranged her face into what she hoped was an enigmatic, Mona Lisa smile.

"Son, sometimes it is best to know when to make a strategic retreat. Our bath beckons. We don't want to offend the lovely Gwyneth with our manly selves."

Adam turned to walk down the hall, and Mike reached over and kissed the tip of her nose. "You need a better sun block, counselor."

Before she could respond, Mike turned to follow his son. She watched father and son, so alike in their mannerisms, open the bedroom door next to hers. She heard Adam ask Mike, "Were those bumps under her towel, boobies?"

"Adam, where did you hear such a word?"

Gwyneth strained to hear the boy's answer.

"School. Mommy has them, too. Did you know that?"

Only the firm shutting of the door kept Gwyneth from hearing Mike's reply. Giggling, she collapsed weakly against the jamb, her shoulders shaking with laughter. Mike's son was adorable, but the same question still plagued her—just how did Mike feel about Adam's mother? And would she ever get the man alone long enough to find out?

* * * *

Mike shut the door behind them, biting the inside of his lip to keep a straight face. Once he felt he'd regained sufficient control, he said matter-of-factly, "All grownup women have them, son."

"Oh," Adam replied with a solemn nod, then a wide grin replaced his expression of curiosity. "Neat."

This time, Mike nearly bit through his lower lip to keep from laughing and gave himself a mental shake as well. *It's just the beginning. The kid is growing up, and heaven help us, he's taking after me.*

Mike hadn't been able to keep his eyes off Gwyn's *bumps*, either. A towel was all she held between him and the sweetest set of pink-tipped breasts he'd ever had the pleasure and honor of addressing.

His pants grew snug as the image of her lying beneath him formed in his mind. *Damn*. If he was going to make it through the weekend, he'd better summon a modicum of self-control. Gwyneth right next door—his mother's doing, of course.

"Adam," he began.

"Yes, Daddy?"

"You—uh, let's get your clothes off."

"Can I take a shower like you do?"

"Sure. Just get a move on."

Mike slipped Adam's shirt over his head.

"Boots, Daddy." Adam plopped down on the floor and stuck his feet up in the air.

Mike bent over and tugged off the boots, then the boy's jeans. "Now, ready to get clean?"

"Sure." Adam skipped into the bathroom. Mike followed, reaching in and turning on the shower. "Wait till I get the water right."

* * * *

After Adam had been given his dinner and settled for the evening, Mike stood in front of the mirror, adjusting his black tie. *Dressing for dinner?* Foolish nonsense, but if it made his mother happy, it was little enough to do. The small things were simple. Big things like career choice, whom he married—now those were altogether different.

"Can I stay awake until you come to bed, Daddy?" Adam asked from his spot on the corner chaise.

"If you want to." Mike was sure, or at least he hoped like hell, his son would conk out long before.

Whether or not Gwyn would give him the time of day remained to be seen. At least she hadn't screamed or fainted on learning he had a son. But if he knew anything about her, he knew she had a million questions. And sooner or later, he owed her the answers. Truthful answers—no matter how uncomfortable they made him.

* * * *

Gwyneth pulled her hair back and up, then turned her head from one side to the other, assessing the effect. Dissatisfied, she let the hair fall to her shoulders. Maybe she should just wear it down. Mike seemed to like the Veronica Lake look, so why not?

No, she was *not* going to start wearing her hair to suit Mike Carlton.

Absolutely not.

Maybe she should cut it. Long hair was so out. Marina had long hair—long, silky, black hair. Obviously she didn't care about being a fashionista. And if she were an exotic, olive-skinned, dark-eyed beauty like Marina, she wouldn't have to worry about style either. Classic beauty made its own statement, although Gwyn had to admit, Marina didn't seem to be aware of her beauty. If anything, the other woman was on the shy side of reserved.

Maybe she would leave her hair down after all. She stepped back from the mirror and smoothed the line of her dress over her hips. The simple, asymmetric, off-the-shoulder, white sheath had a band of black across the left shoulder to the right breast, then down to the hem on the

right. It was slit to mid-thigh on the left, for no other reason than she was inordinately vain about her legs.

How they'd managed to grow long and shapely, she hadn't a clue. It had to be genetics because she'd been a bookworm in high school. Except for years of gymnastic lessons as a pre-teen, she'd never seen the inside of a gym. And now, of course, she was too busy to go to the gym and work out.

No, that wasn't the truth. She really was going to have to stop lying to herself.

Sometime.

The real reason she didn't go to the gym was she hated comparing herself to all those buff bods prancing around in shiny exercise wear. She'd never gotten over her high school nickname of Stringbean.

She swore under her breath. What the hell was she nervous about? It was just a dinner party. So what if Mike's mother came on like the Queen Mum's little sister? In her time, Gwyneth had rubbed elbows with the best—or at least with quite a few who *thought* they were the best—of New York society. Actually Mike's mother had greeted her very graciously, but his father had been damned rude.

She looked down at her ridiculously high heels. She'd probably tower over Mike. Well, that would just be good enough for him—put him in his place.

* * * *

Mike leaned over and kissed his sleeping son on the forehead. Carrying him to the bed, he pulled a sheet and blanket over his son's sturdy, little body.

A quiet knock sounded on his door. *Gwyn?*

At least he hoped so. Maybe he could explain everything before dinner. It would certainly make for a more comfortable evening if he could get it all out of the way. Either that, or she wouldn't be speaking to him at all.

Opening the door, Mike stopped. "Marina."

"I—uh, I came to tell Adam good-night," Marina explained, a dark flush staining her neck and face.

Mike stepped back, allowing her to enter his bedroom. "Sure. He's already asleep. We had quite a session with the pony."

"I know. I watched from the window."

"You did?"

"Yes, I'm still a little nervous about his riding. I know it's just a pony, but, well..."

"It's that mother thing."

"Yes, I guess so." Marina walked over to the far side of the bed and stroked a lock of black hair from Adam's forehead. "He was so happy to see you." She waited a beat, then added, "I was, too."

"Marina—"

"I know. That wasn't fair, was it?"

Gnashing his teeth felt in order, but he managed a quiet, "You don't have anything to apologize for. I'm sorry I can't—" He broke off, wishing he could wring his mother's neck—just a little.

"Return my love. Yes, I'm well aware of that. You've made it quite clear by bringing your *client* with you."

"I didn't know you and Adam were going to be here—honest." Hurting Marina more than he already had was never in his game plan. She was a sweet, intelligent, if slightly fragile woman who'd had the misfortune of falling in love with him at the wrong time.

Walking back toward him, Marina shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I thought I'd accepted that you'd never love or marry me, but when I saw how you were looking at *her*, I realized I hadn't given up hope. But you won't. I know that now. If it isn't Gwyneth, it'll just be someone else."

"I wish we weren't having this conversation." *Man, was that an understatement.* Mike squirmed. Talk about a guilt trip.

"I know. We've had it before, haven't we?" Marina looked down at the toes of her shoes.

"We have."

"Sorry."

"Stop saying you're sorry." Dammit. He'd raised his voice without really meaning to, but his patience was at an end. "You haven't done anything to be sorry for."

Marina's eyes widened, her flush darkened. "See you at dinner." She tried to walk around him.

Contrite, Mike caught her wrist. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell."

Marina jerked her wrist from his hand. "Go to hell, Michael. You can bloody well go to hell." Without another word, she fled from the room.

Mike looked over his shoulder at Adam, breathing a sigh of relief. At least their bickering hadn't awakened him.

"That was a touching little scene," came Gwyn's scathing tone.

Mike turned back to see her standing in the doorway, arms folded across her chest. "Sarcasm and sullen expressions aren't very becoming," he told her in his driest tone. Gratified by her flushed face and sudden intake of breath, Mike added, "I can explain. You'll think less of me, but—"

"Less of you?" Her pert nose went up in the air. "Why, I hardly think of you at all."

Walking toward his prickly client, Mike found himself smiling. "Liar, liar, pants on fire." He reached out and caressed her cheek. "You can't get me out of your mind, any more than I can get you out of mine." He backed her against the door frame.

Her sensual lips parted. Her eyes widened. He forged ahead, "From the first moment I saw you slinking into my office, I've been senseless to anything or anyone but you."

Her breathing increased as her breasts rose against his chest. It was all he could do to keep from burying his face between them.

"Stop it. You're driving me crazy."

"I know. We're both goners, and you know it." He leaned in. "Now if you'll be very careful and not get lipstick on me, I'll kiss you."

"You jerk." But her breath was warm and soft on his cheek. She slanted her head carefully as he'd instructed and kissed him, tasting of mint toothpaste and smelling like lemonade heaven as her body melted into his. Her lips, as

lush and sweet as he remembered, parted. Sweeping his tongue into her mouth, he nearly lost his bearings.

He sighed, then pulled back. "You're not being careful," he warned. "We have to go down to dinner in reasonably good shape, or everyone will think you've forgiven me for not telling you about my son."

Gwyn jerked back and pinned him with her level, blue gaze. "And what about that? I felt like an idiot."

"I had planned to tell you this weekend, but matters obviously got out of hand. After dinner, we'll take a walk in the garden. We'll talk then." He hesitated, but then decided he'd better warn her. "Whatever you do, don't trust my mother. She's enjoying this little confrontation she's set up."

Eyes widening in surprise, Gwyneth sputtered, "Don't trust your mother? She was very nice. Now your father, I wouldn't trust him to tell me which way is left."

"At least with my father, you know where you stand and what he's thinking. He doesn't hold back. My mother is—don't get me wrong, I love her—but she's the more devious of the two."

Appearing to consider his words, Gwyneth gave a brief nod. "Okay."

Mike offered his arm. "Shall we go down and face the jury?"

Placing her graceful hand on his forearm, she nodded her agreement. Mike whispered in her ear, "You were kidding about not thinking about me, weren't you?"

Gwyneth's only response was a wide grin and a coy fluttering of her dark blond lashes. It didn't matter that she

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didn't answer. He already knew.

Twenty-two

Elinor surveyed her guests. Marina had just entered, red-faced and sullen. Presumably, the poor dear had a talk with Michael. Circulating among her guests, she wondered how long before he would make his appearance with the fair Gwyneth on his arm. After all, she had great faith in her son's ability to remain in the young woman's good graces.

The quiet whir of her husband's wheelchair caught her attention. Turning and heading in George's direction, she leaned over and straightened his tie. "Now then, have you discovered anything interesting about Michael's friend?"

He frowned and gave a very impolite, "Humph."

She nodded and smiled at new arrivals, then asked, "Am I to interpret that as 'yes' or 'no,' dear?"

"She's Wilford Wells' niece."

"Your college roommate? The hippie one with the long hair and lovely blue eyes?"

"That's Wilford. Flirted with every cause that came down the pike. The two of them have an almost totally *pro bono* practice for the downtrodden and penniless."

"I take it there's sufficient family money then?"

"Gwyneth's father made a fortune on Wall Street. Everything the man touched turned to gold. Uncanny, he was."

"He's dead?"

"Yes. Her mother, too. Another family fortune—old money. In the crassest terms, Mike's friend is loaded."

"Well, she's certainly lovely." *Brilliant choice, son.*

"And bright, too. Wonder what she sees in our son?"

"Really, George, you must make allowances. Michael is handsome, intelligent and—"

"A prime example of wasted opportunities. Now then, where have you seated Gwyneth?"

"On Michael's right."

"No, I want her on *my* right. Seat someone else on Michael's right. I want to talk to this young woman, take her measure."

"I suppose I could place Mrs. Sand on his right."

"Safe choice as long as Mike doesn't get it in his head to marry her," George remarked with a snort, then pivoted his chair as if to greet another guest. Abruptly he spun the chair back around, adding, "And while you're at it, put Marina on his left."

Elinor permitted herself a discreet chuckle. "It won't do any good. From the expression on Marina's face, they've already had words."

"Don't care. It's about time he takes responsibility and marries the girl."

"She's hardly a girl."

"She's the mother of our only grandchild. I won't have his future ruined by the stain of bastardy."

"No one pays attention to that anymore. Besides, Michael has given Adam his name and supports him. I'm afraid you're going to have to be satisfied with that. Our son's heart is taken."

"You mean his dick—"

"George!" she rasped. "You forget yourself. We have guests. No need for vulgarity."

But he ignored her—as he often did.

"Ma'am, may I be of assistance?"

Elinor glanced in the direction of an unfamiliar, working-class, British accent. One of the caterer's people, she assumed. "Yes?"

"Reginald, ma'am. Shall I make those place card changes for you?"

"You were listening to my conversation with my husband?"

"Of course not, ma'am, I just 'appened to overhear when I carried a tray of canapés to the buffet. I 'ope I'm not overstepping."

His eagerness was only too apparent, but she waved him away, offended by his obsequious manner. "No, Millie will take care of it. Attend to your usual duties. Serve the canapés." She nodded a dismissal.

"Yes, ma'am," he replied with a polite nod of his shiny pate.

Then, to her astonishment, the cheeky upstart lowered his right eyelid in a slow, but plainly obvious wink. Stiffening her spine, Elinor ignored him. Indeed, she would be having a word with his employer, but not now. She'd just caught sight of her son and his lovely client as they stood at the top of the staircase. "Michael darling, and Gwyneth," she called, making her tone gracious and warm. "Come, I want to introduce you to everyone."

* * * *

At the sound of his mother's voice, Mike paused. He felt the muscles in Gwyn's back tense. "It'll be all right," he whispered against her slender, ivory neck.

"I wish I'd stayed in the city." She dropped her tone so only he could hear.

"You're safe here," he assured her.

"Then why do I feel like a sacrificial lamb?" She continued slowly down the stairway.

"I have it on good authority that we're having steak and lobster, not lamb, for dinner." He resisted the growing impulse to kiss her. "But if you like, I'll be more than happy to take a nibble or two of your sweetness, but I'd probably trip down the steps if I tried it now."

Her cheeks flushed in response. "Shush—someone will hear you."

Mike grinned. "No one's listening to me, they're all looking at you."

Fixing him with her blue gaze, she batted her lashes at him. "Is that supposed to be a compliment?"

"Of sorts. I assure you, I can do better."

"I certainly hope so." She feigned a weary sigh.

"After dinner, we'll walk in the rose garden, and I'll shower you with all the appropriate compliments your little heart desires."

"I won't hold my breath." Her tone was matter-of-fact, but a smile curved her ripe lips and gave him hope that the weekend might not be a disaster after all.

They reached the bottom of the stairs where his mother—and nearly everyone else—stood smiling at them. Inclining his

head, Mike kissed his mother's cheek, knowing how she hated demonstrations of affection. *Too common.*

His mother reacted as he'd expected. She stiffened, but the smile never left her face. "Michael, careful, you'll muss my makeup." She reached for Gwyn's hand. "Gwyneth, dear, I want you to meet our old friends, the Howards."

Gwyn nodded. "Of course." Casting him a regretful glance over her shoulder, she allowed his mother to lead her away.

Mother's in fine form, he mused. Divide and conquer.

Surveying the other guests, he estimated there were at least twenty of the buggers milling about the room. He followed Gwyn's progress around the room as she smiled and nodded, chatting up his parents' friends. How well she fit in with them. Lovely and graceful as a Greek goddess, Gwyneth seemed to be a hit with the hunt crowd. There was so much he didn't know about her, but he looked forward to the discovery. Anything, and everything, that made Gwyn Wells tick fascinated him. She was such a contradiction, he thought—not for the first time.

"Michael?" A soft, hesitant voice snapped him out of his Gwyneth-zone.

Mike turned around to face the mother of his son. "Marina." He acknowledged her with a nod, hoping she wasn't about to renew their argument in front of everyone.

She gazed at him with pleading eyes. "Do you think we could take a turn in the garden?"

"Of course." He followed her through the French doors and out into the night. The familiar scent of honeysuckle—it reminded him of the summer nights when he and Tamiko had

strolled in the same garden, their hearts so full of love, secure in the knowledge that they would spend the rest of their lives together.

How naive they'd been.

At the edge of the boxwood maze, Marina stopped and turned to face him. "I wanted to apologize. I was unspeakably rude earlier."

"It's all right." He looked down at the toes of his shoes, then met her direct gaze—dark brown eyes, just like Adam's. "I wish I could feel differently. You're a wonderful person, a wonderful mother," he began.

"I know." A rueful smile marred her pretty face. "And someday I'll make someone a fine wife—just not you."

"No. Not me," he admitted as gently as he could.

"I've always known how you felt. I guess I just hadn't truly given up. Thank you for being honest and not wishy-washy. I know I need to get on with my life, even if I don't always act like it."

Mike placed a hand on each of her shoulders. "I want you to be happy. You do know that, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. You're a good person, no matter what your father says."

Mike snorted. "Yeah, well, he does have his own opinion."

"He loves you, Michael. In his own way, he admires your independent nature, but he'd never admit it."

"Not likely. At least, not in my lifetime."

"Just remember what I said. I've seen how he watches you when you're not looking. He's proud of you. He is."

"Thank you for telling me. I'll try to remember that the next time he chews my butt for breakfast."

Marina giggled at his response, then her brow furrowed. "We can still be friends, can't we—for Adam's sake?"

"Of course, we can." Mike waited a second, then forged ahead. "I hope you and Gwyneth—I mean—uh—"

"You want me to be nice to Gwyneth?" The frown never left her face.

"Damn. I'm not handling this very well, but the thing is—I'm going to marry her. She'll be around when Adam's with me."

"So it'll be easier for all of us if Gwyneth and I can be civil."

"Right. I don't expect you to have her to tea, but—well, you know what I mean."

"Yes, Michael, I do."

Mike held his breath. Marina's gaze had turned inward. He didn't give much for his chances until, without warning, she nodded and gave him a brave smile. "All right. I know you're right."

Then her bottom lip started trembling, and Mike didn't know what else to do but say, "Thank you," and kiss her forehead.

Naturally, Gwyn chose that very second to enter the garden. She cleared her throat—rather theatrically, Mike thought.

"I seem to be interrupting again."

Twenty-three

Gwyneth leaned against the door, her arms folded across her chest. Just because she'd interrupted a tender moment between Michael and the mother of his son didn't mean she was going to jump to conclusions.

Like hell she wasn't.

She waited. Mike's eyes nearly rolled back in his head, and Marina just turned and stared.

"Gwyneth—" he started.

"Never mind, I see there's still some unfinished business between you two. Why don't you give me a ring when you're ready—like never."

Mike set his jaw. Maybe he was biting his tongue—too bad since Marina looked like she'd be only too happy to do it for him.

Gwyneth restrained the impulse to smack someone's ears. After all, she was in polite society and the guest of the most arrogant, untrustworthy man she'd ever had the misfortune of knowing. Damn if she'd make a scene, but...

A discreet, "Ahem," interrupted her mental tirade. She turned, relieved for the distraction. She'd seen enough of Michael and Marina to last twenty lifetimes.

"Miss Wells?" The servant shifted his weight from one foot to the other and avoided her gaze.

"Yes?"

"There's a bit of a problem. I wonder if you could give us a hand?"

"Of course," she mumbled. Now what kind of problem had arisen that would require her particular assistance?

She soon found out.

The servant ushered her into a book-lined study. Michael's father sat behind his desk, a now familiar scowl across his lined face.

"Sir, are you ill? What can I do?"

George Carlton nodded in the direction of a video monitor. "There's someone at the gate asking for you. To whom have you given our location?" If anything, his frown deepened.

"No one," she replied, genuinely puzzled. "I mean, I didn't even know exactly where Michael was bringing me—just somewhere in Virginia."

"Fellow says his name is Klein. Says he's your fiancé." *Richard here? What a mess.* "Uh, uh..." she stammered.

"Well, is he or isn't he?"

"He *was* my fiancé, but I don't know how he found me."

"Says he wants to come in and talk to you."

Gwyneth shook her head. "I don't have anything else to say to him. I broke our engagement two weeks ago."

"Good. My guards will send him away."

"On the other hand..." Dammit! She'd take advantage of this opportunity and roast Richard's ears for him—and maybe a few other body parts while she was at it. He had no business chasing her around like someone obsessed. That position was already filled—or were Mike's suspicions correct? Was Richard responsible for the stalker? "...Maybe I should talk to him. I mean, since he's here."

"It's your choice." George Carlton pulled his face into a grim approximation of a smile. "This is a farm, not a prison."

"Could've fooled me."

"Miss Wells, it pays to have a modicum of security."

"I'm sure it does. I didn't mean to imply otherwise."

Mr. Carlton spoke into the microphone. "Let him in, Mac."

"I'll wait for him out front." More than eager to remove herself from the grim, old man's presence, Gwyneth turned to leave.

Michael's mother walked into the room. "Is there anything I can do, Gwyneth? Set another place for dinner?" She frowned and added, "Although it will make us uneven at table."

Heaven forbid.

Gwyneth forced her fists to unclench. "No, I assure you he won't be staying for dinner."

* * * *

Mike looked down at Marina. Her dark brown eyes twinkled with mischief. He'd seen the same expression on his son's face when he'd been bad or was about to be.

In spite of the warm, summer night, Marina hugged her arms to her chest, as if chilled. "I think you're in trouble again."

"Try not to look so pleased," Mike reproved, but he couldn't completely banish the grin that tugged at his lips.

"I'm sorry, sort of." She glanced over her shoulder in the direction Gwyn had taken.

Mike sighed. "She's a little high maintenance, but—uh, we'll work it out."

"You'd better go after her."

"Probably should." He folded his arms across his chest. "Personally, I favor letting the good counselor cool down."

"She *is* a little on the volatile side."

Remembering just how volatile the counselor could be, granted in very different circumstances, Mike agreed, "A little." The memory brought a new rush of blood to his groin. "But her heart is good."

"Glad to know that."

"Come on in. I'll see what she's up to."

"And I think I'll see if your mother needs help with anything."

Mike nodded, glad for Marina's discreet excuse to leave him alone with Gwyneth.

His mother certainly had enough help, a full-time household staff and catering people running all over the place.

Once inside, he looked for Gwyn.

He found her. Storming from his father's study, she blazed right past him without a second glance and strode to the front door.

Was she leaving? Had his father said something so vile she felt she had to rush off without a word?

"Gwyn," he called after her. *Dammit. What's she up to now?*

She stopped. *Thank heaven.*

She turned. *Uh-oh.*

Her lovely lips were set in a firm line, eyes glaring. In a word, the good counselor was about to throw a fit. In spite of the very real terror engendered by the thought of witnessing another of her temper tantrums, he brazened it out. "What's wrong?"

Her hands clenched at her side, she announced, "Richard's followed me here, and I'm going to kill him."

Mike disregarded the startled expressions of the guests in earshot of her statement. "Second the motion. But what the hell's he doing here?" He lowered his voice, hoping that Gwyn would take the hint.

"I don't know. I don't even know how he discovered where I was. But he's going to be sorry," she hissed.

"I'll talk to Klein." *Talk to him—hell!* With every testosterone-pumped cell in his body, Mike ached for the chance to punch the other man's lights out. It would be so sweet.

"No, this is my problem. I'll settle it."

"No, it's *our* problem, and *I'll* settle it." He clenched his fists and squared his shoulders. Time for heroics. A male thing. Gwyn would understand—and appreciate it, of course.

She giggled. "Relax, Terminator. I can do this, but you're going to have to take a chill pill, or I won't be able to stay mad long enough to get rid of him."

Plainly, he'd expected too much. She didn't understand or appreciate his red-blooded, American male need to bust his rival's nose and rub his face in the dirt. Women.

"This isn't a joking matter. He might be dangerous."

She smiled as if she were talking to a dim bulb. "Then I'll scream, and you can rescue me. Take it or leave it. That's the only deal on the table."

Grudgingly, he nodded. "I'll be right here—on the other side of the door." God, he loved it when she talked business.

"Fine."

A second later, she'd slipped through the door and out into the night. Mike took a deep breath and prayed Klein would try something.

"I certainly wouldn't mind having a go at her," a voice said behind him.

Mike whirled. Maybe he could punch someone after all.

The owner of the voice was nearly a head shorter and fifty pounds lighter than Mike and barely out of his teens. In other words, a pasty-faced runt.

"Pardon?" Mike asked in his deadliest tone.

"Closest thing I've seen to one of those Viking women on horses."

"Valkyries?"

"Yeah, that's it. She's one long, luscious drink of water. And I'm a little on the thirsty side—"

"That's enough! Mike advanced on the punk. "The lady is a respected attorney, and she's my guest." Deciding introductions were in order, he added, "I'm Mike Carlton. This is my parents' home."

"Edmund Everley, financial and computer genius." Everley looked around, an arrogant smirk marring his expression.

"Nice digs."

"Thank you," Mike acknowledged with a frown, distracted from his mission by Everley's remarks. "If you'll excuse me, I need to check on matters outside."

* * * *

Gwyneth put on her sternest, no-nonsense expression. "You have five minutes." She made her tone as terse as Judge Judy's, then made a point of checking her watch. "Starting now."

Richard's face turned beet-red. "Don't be ridiculous," he sputtered. "I didn't come all this way to have you brush me off."

"We're through. It's over. How many ways do I have to say it?" Amazed, she watched as Richard reacted. His entire body shook with anger. Even his usually immaculate shirt and tie were in disarray.

"It can't be over. We've made plans for our future. You can't give it all up for that ne'er-do-well..."

She smiled. "He does well enough. Better than you."

Richard's face passed beet-red and deepened to purple. Fists clenched, he stepped toward her.

Refusing to back down, Gwyneth shook her fist in his face. "Take another step, and so help me, I'll kill you with my bare hands."

"I don't think so," Richard rasped. He took that other step and grabbed her by the shoulders before she could take a swing at him.

Instead, she pounded on his chest and raked the side of his face with her nuclear-indestructible, acrylic nails, leaving four rows of red, raw skin.

"Bitch!" Richard screamed, releasing her and grabbing his face. "You almost blinded me."

"I should've gone for your heart, you bastard." So intent was her focus on his next move—

Mike stepped between her and Richard and flattened him with a powerful punch to his solar plexus, followed by a sharp uppercut to the chin.

Mike stood over Richard, rubbing the knuckles of his right hand. "Big mistake, pal."

Gwyn's mouth dropped open. Richard lay unmoving on the pea-gravel drive.

"Glass-jawed weasel." Mike laughed.

"Did you kill him?"

"Nah," he replied, continuing to favor his right hand.

She reached for him. "Are you hurt? Let me see."

"I'm fine." He gestured, dismissed her concern.

Gwyn glared down at Richard. "What about him?"

Mike shrugged. "Get one of the guards. We'll put him in his car. When he comes to, Security will see that he leaves the estate."

"But he's unconscious. Shouldn't he see a doctor?"

Mike stiffened, shooting her a fierce glance. "All of a sudden, you're concerned about this jerk? He was ready to manhandle you. If I—"

"I could have taken care of it myself."

"Couldn't take the chance. Surely you didn't expect me to stand by and—"

"I was handling him." She raised her chin a notch. "Honestly, I'm sick of all the macho shenanigans. Yours and his. I'm considering giving up men entirely."

Mike threw his head back and laughed ... and laughed entirely too long.

"Seriously," she insisted.

Mike shook his head. Obviously he didn't believe a word of it.

"Listen, counselor, are you going to get someone to help me, or are you ready to risk your manicure?"

Gwyneth glanced down at her hands. Luckily her Chicago Champagne Toast nail polish was undamaged. "All right, I'll get someone." She turned and walked gingerly through the pea-gravel. Why didn't his parents have a paved drive? she wondered. Her Sergio Rossi pumps would certainly be worse for the wear.

* * * *

Once inside, Gwyneth glanced around the foyer. Where was security anyway? Who should she approach? Marina was closest. Would she know who or where the security guards were? "Marina?"

A vision in a burgundy Vera Wang, Marina turned. A frown flitted across her face, which she quickly replaced with a smile. "Yes. We need to talk ... privately?"

Sizing up her competition, Gwyneth took a deep breath, then nodded. After all, she'd stood up to Richard, surely she

could handle Marina. "But first I need—I mean, Mike wants one of the security guards to help him—uh, outside."

Marina's dark eyebrows went up in alarm. "Is he—"

"No, Mike's fine. He just needs some help with something."

Peering around the room, Marina nodded to the left. "That big guy is Rocky. He's head of security."

"Thanks." Gwyneth rushed over to him. *Big guy?* He was a mountain. The man was at least six-feet, five or six with shoulders that strained at the seams of his navy blazer.

"Rocky?"

Rocky turned to her with a friendly smile across his broad face. Blue eyes twinkling, he nodded. "Yes, Miss Wells, how may I assist you?"

"Outside—Mike needs you."

His body tensed as he patted the side of his jacket. *He's armed*, she realized with a shock. *Well, of course, he's armed. He's security.*

"I'm on it."

Watching the guard's wide back retreat, she turned again to Marina. "You wanted to talk to me?"

Marina nodded. "Shall we go out on the terrace?"

* * * *

Rocky picked up Klein by the shoulders, while Mike bent over and grabbed the attorney's feet. Together they carried Klein to his car and shoved his carcass behind the wheel. Mike slammed the car door. "Thanks, Rocky."

"Sure thing, Mike." Rocky turned up his nose at Klein. "So this dude's your squeeze's ex, huh?"

"Yeah. Emphasis on *ex*."

Rocky threw an amused glance at the ex. "Didja notice? He pissed his pants. Don't know what she saw in 'im."

"Yeah. I don't think he's used to dealing with real men." Mike flexed his bicep and grinned. "Klein's such a chicken-shit, he'd better think twice before messing with *my* girl again."

"Well, she's a looker. You done good, kid."

"Thanks." Mike grinned at the man who lived up to his name. "Speaking of Gwyn, where is she?"

Rocky cocked his head to one side and raised his eyebrows. "When I came outside, she and Marina had their heads together."

"Uh-oh." Mike ran his hands through his hair. "Guess I'd better get back inside before someone really gets hurt."

Twenty-four

A full moon had risen in the summer night sky, bathing the terrace in pale silver. A night tailor-made for love, but instead of being in her lover's arms, Gwyneth was about to get up-close and personal with the mother of Mike's child.

Was she the only one who saw disaster looming? She didn't need ESP to know she should've never let Mike sweet-talk her into coming to the country for a quiet weekend.

Quiet weekend? If being surprised by a hitherto unknown son and his mother, harassed by her ex-fiancé and snubbed by Mike's father constituted a quiet weekend, she sure as hell hated to see any other kind.

Marina led Gwyneth to a teak bench and sat down. She smoothed the sleek lines of her Vera Wang. "I love your gown. Stella McCartney?"

"No." Gwyneth glanced down at her own dress. "It's by a young designer in Soho. Kiki Renaldo. She's up-and-coming. You should be hearing of her soon."

Marina flashed a wide smile. "It's lovely." She glanced down at her hands as if uncertain how to continue.

After watching the dark-haired woman chew on her bottom lip and take deep breaths for what seemed like an hour, Gwyneth decided she'd had enough. "Let's cut to the chase. You wanted to talk privately. We're private. Let's talk."

"I'm sorry. It's just that this is difficult for me. I-I imagine you have questions. I'll answer them."

"Damn right, I have questions. Just how do you fit into Mike's life?"

"I'm the mother of his son. That's all I am to Michael."

"I'm just guessing, but we're not talking about an immaculate conception, are we?"

"No, of course not."

"Mike and I haven't known each other very long, but from what he's told me, he was in love with his wife. But Adam's age would indicate..." Gwyneth waited, hoping Marina would just get on with it.

"He was born after Michael and Tamiko were married." She paused, then added, "Nine months after."

"What?" Had Mike had one last fling as a free man or had he been unfaithful on his honeymoon? Good Lord. When it came right down to it, Gwyneth wasn't sure she could handle the truth.

Her eyes pleading, Marina spoke haltingly, "Let me start at the beginning. I-I don't think I can manage this if I don't."

"Fine." Gwyneth sank down on the bench beside Marina and tried to keep from planning Mike's murder.

"I've known Michael since I was a little girl. His father and mine are old friends. They always planned that Michael and I would marry. I know it sounds old-fashioned, but it was okay with me. I was crazy about him. I'm a couple years younger, so Michael basically thought I was a major nuisance. Tamiko was always around, but she was his age and they went everywhere together when he was here at the farm."

"But then they fell in love."

Marina nodded. "Well, that's how it is, you know. Michael has a mind of his own. His father threatened to disinherit him, but Michael told him, 'Go ahead.' He and Tamiko would just run away and live their own lives."

"I still don't see how you—"

"Please," Marina begged, tears shining in her dark eyes. "Just let me finish. One night, Michael and Tamiko had a big fight. She broke their engagement, and he took off. Over the years, Tamiko and I had become friends, so she asked me to find him and make sure he got home all right. He was in an after-hours dive called The Red Eye, drunk as a lord, but I managed to get him into my car and drove him home."

"So one thing led to another, and you just slipped right into Tamiko's place. Convenient."

"It wasn't like that. I—uh, yes, I guess it was, but please ... Please, let me finish. It's sordid enough without having to repeat it."

Growing more infuriated with every syllable Marina uttered, Gwyneth bit back her anger, then nodded. "Go on."

"One of the guards helped me get him upstairs. I tried to loosen some of his clothes, and he was so out of it, he thought I was Tamiko, come to make up with him. He—"

"He raped you?" Gwyneth gasped.

"No, no, it wasn't like that. I wanted him. I loved him. But he didn't know what he was doing. He didn't remember being with me the next day." Marina held up a hand to stop Gwyneth's saying anything else. "So I decided, no harm done. I was more in love with him than ever, but I knew he loved

Tamiko. Then he found out that his father had threatened to fire Tamiko's father if she didn't break up with him.

"Michael went ballistic. He tracked Tamiko down, and they ended up eloping. He brought her back to the house as his wife not forty-eight hours after I'd been with him. There was another big row. He told his father to go to hell, and he and Tamiko left.

"When I turned up pregnant, my father was furious. He locked me in my room for two weeks before I finally admitted the baby was Michael's. My father went to Mr. Carlton, and together they made sure Tamiko knew everything. She never spoke to me again. Michael never came back to Virginia until after Tamiko died, but he's always been a good father to Adam."

"Why are you telling me all this?"

"I don't want you to blame Michael. It was my doing. And I don't regret it. But I've finally accepted the truth. He'll never love me—not the way I want him to. He's in love with you. And if it isn't you, it'll be someone else. So he's yours, even if he's not mine to give."

"Gracious of you." Gwyneth had more to say, but something in Marina's expression made her stop. Maybe it was the dark beauty's trembling lower lip, or perhaps it was the sheen of unshed tears in her eyes. "I'm sorry. That was a stupid and hateful thing to say. I don't blame *you*."

"But I don't want you to blame Michael either. He's been so sad since Tamiko died. And now he's happy again."

Gwyneth shook her head. "I don't know if I'm the right person for Mike—"

"You are, if you love him," Marina insisted, her mouth set in a firm line.

"It's too soon."

Someone walked up behind Gwyneth and placed his strong hands on her shoulders.

Mike. She recognized his familiar, woodsy scent.

"Too soon for what?" he asked.

"Well?" Mike looked from one startled face to the other.

"Too soon for dinner? What?"

Marina recovered her voice first. "Too soon for the Harvest Moon. There won't be one 'til next month."

The true object of his affections nodded. "Yes, that's right."

Clenching and unclenching her hands and clearly uncomfortable, Marina stood up. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I want to check on Adam again before we sit down to dinner." She looked from Mike back to Gwyneth. "Besides, I think the two of you have a lot to talk about." Without waiting for a response, Marina rushed back into the house.

Once Marina was out of hearing, Mike crossed his arms across his chest and grinned down at Gwyneth. "Well, I see you both still have your hair, so what were you really talking about when I came up? The two of you were in earnest conversation. Surely you weren't that involved over the presence or absence of the Harvest Moon."

Gwyneth frowned and raised her chin a defiant notch. "Just how much did you hear?"

"Don't play games, counselor. What did Marina say?"

"She told me about—everything."

"Everything?" He took a slow, measured breath. "Could you be a little more specific?"

Jumping up from the bench, she poked him in the chest. "Yes, I can be specific. You plus Marina equaled Adam. She told me how you took advantage of her."

"She said *I* took advantage of her?"

"No, I say you took advantage of a young girl—just because you'd had a fight with Tamiko. You had to know Marina was in love with you."

Mike tamped down his anger. He had a sneaking suspicion Gwyneth was baiting him, purposely holding him at bay. He knew Marina well enough to know she accepted all responsibility for what happened that night. While he wasn't blameless by any means, he sure as hell didn't care for Gwyn's spin on it either.

"I made a mistake. A big one," he admitted.

"I just don't know." She turned away from him, then back again. "Things have moved so fast with us. And I'm not an impulsive person. I like things logical and orderly." Her blue gaze never left his. "Y-you scare me."

He couldn't believe his ears. "Scare you?"

"Yes, you just rush headlong into life—everything. You're so passionate..."

Mike pulled her to him. "Gwyn, life is precious. It's too short to waste. I've mourned Tamiko, but she's gone. I can't bring back a single second of our lives together. And we wasted so many."

"Wasted?" Gwyn pulled back, but he wouldn't let her go. He could never let her go.

"She never really forgave me for that night with Marina. I never stopped loving Tamiko, but she made it damned difficult. We fought more than we loved."

"I'm so sorry. I didn't know. I thought..."

"That Tamiko and I were a match made in heaven?" Mike gave a laugh full of pain and bitterness. "We might've been, if I hadn't gotten blind drunk that night. But you know what? That's something I can't change. Marina's a good person, and I've ruined her life. I have a son, and I love him."

"But the way I feel when I'm with you—I don't understand it. It's not like anything I've experienced before. I don't trust it—myself, maybe. I'm terribly fickle. Didn't I plunge into an affair with you twenty-four hours after we met?"

"Technically." Mike grinned, the memories of that plunge still fresh in his mind. Was it possible he'd only known her for forty-eight hours?

"Well, who's to say I won't find someone new four or five months down the road?"

"Because we'll be married by then, and I'll kill anyone who so much as looks at you."

Gwyneth gazed up at him, her eyes wide and deep blue. "I believe you would."

Mike let out a deep sigh. "The reason we're together is because we're meant to be. I knew it from the first moment you walked into my office."

He leaned in to kiss her, slanting his mouth across hers. Her lips parted, and Mike was aware only of the sweet softness of her mouth and the rushing sound of blood pounding in his ears. She clasped her hands behind his neck,

her touch tender and warm. His blood surged. God, he wanted her, right here and now. He pressed against her.

Shaking her head, Gwyneth pulled away. "I can't think straight when you do that."

He tucked a stray wave of blond hair behind her ear. "You're not supposed to, counselor."

"No, I need some time. I need to think."

"No, you need to *feel*. You already think too much."

"And *you* don't think enough."

"That's why we're such a good match."

"Let me go. I need to be alone."

"All right, Garbo. I'll let you be alone." He tried to keep his tone light, belying the frustration that wracked his gut. If he wasn't careful, he was going to scare her all the way back to the city. He glanced down at his watch. "Dinner will be announced in fifteen minutes. Is that enough time?"

Gwyneth shrugged. "Maybe enough time to calm down."

"But I like you off-balance." Mike was thrilled to see a flicker of good humor return to Gwyneth's eyes.

"You would."

A smile played about her lips. It gave him hope. Slowly he backed away from her. "Okay, the garden is yours. Just don't get lost in the maze. I'd hate to have to summon a search party and find your bleached bones in one of its many dead ends."

Her smile widened. "Would you really?"

"Be sorry? Of course I would."

"No, summon a search party?"

"I'd head it *personally*."

Rolling her eyes heavenward, Gwyneth sighed. "That's what I'm afraid of."

Mike threw his head back and laughed.

"I'm serious."

"I know. That's what's so funny."

"Mike Carlton, I am not amused."

"No, but you're incredibly lovely, so I'll forgive you."

"Forgive *me*? For what?"

"For not having a single funny bone in that gorgeous body of yours."

"Well, I'll have you know I do..."

He couldn't take it anymore. "Shut up, Gwyneth." He pulled her into his arms, planted his mouth on hers and kissed her until she was as limp as a rag doll. Then he backed her up to the bench and sat her down. "Now, think about it all you want. Dinner is in ten minutes."

He spun on his heel and walked back into the house, hoping no one would notice the bulge in his pants.

* * * *

In the kitchen, madness reigned supreme. Reggie Gruhn had never seen such a brouhaha. The catering super was running around so crazed he was sure she'd go postal any second and start whacking at her unfortunate underlings with her prized butcher knife. Not enough that she'd chopped, diced and sliced every vegetable that hadn't moved out of the way.

Just give me a gun and someone to cap, Reggie mused. Pretending to be the new man on the catering staff was a pisser of an assignment.

"Move your stumps, you lazy cretin," the caterer screeched in Reggie's ear.

"Old on now. I'm doin' me best." He picked up the nearest utensil and waved it under her nose. Too bad it was only a slotted spoon. Somehow it didn't have the same cachet as her chef's knife.

"I'd hate to see your worst," she snapped.

"Stuff it, luv, or I'll scoop out yer bleedin' entrails," Reggie yelled.

"Don't know where the service found you, but you're fired as soon as this job is over."

"Don't worry, I quit."

The head caterer placed her hands on her hips and straightened up to her intimidating height of six feet. "You can't quit until I say so. Now, two of the guests are allergic to shellfish, so we have to make substitutions. See that you don't screw them up." She flung the seating chart in Reggie's face. "Here is where they'll be seated."

Gazing up at her furious face, he smiled. "Y'know, luv. Yer not 'alf bad when yer angry."

"Just don't screw it up."

He couldn't resist. He gave her his most seductive stare and made a kissing motion with his mouth.

"Ugh!" she screeched and flounced away.

Reggie glanced at the seating chart.

Yes! The gods of Mario Puzo had rewarded him, and so would Gianni Damico.

* * * *

On the patio, Gwyneth stood up and started pacing back and forth. "Damn that man." Her heart still pounded in her chest as strongly as it had when Mike had kissed her.

Arrogant jerk.

But there was no denying the power he had over her. One kiss, one touch from the man—and she was a five-foot-ten-inch charged mass of estrogen.

So much for a logical and orderly life.

She'd told him the truth. It wasn't that she was a control freak—well, not much of one. Her mother's alcoholism, her father's disregard and eventually his death had all been beyond her control. It had nearly driven her bonkers.

And now Mike. Poor Marina was still in love with him. She said she'd given up, but had she?

Could I give him up?

What a silly question. All she and Mike had going for them was incredible chemistry. All right—some really, really fantastic sex. But his talk about fate was just so much BS. She didn't believe in fate or any other mystic explanation. It boiled down to one thing: She was a tall blonde with great legs. As for everything else, she could look like Judge Wapner, and it wouldn't matter. Mike was a leg man—pure and simple.

Her mind busy with straightening the gnarled threads of her life, Gwyneth wasn't paying attention to her surroundings.

The Man For The Job
by Marie-Nicole Ryan

She stumbled and fell. Glancing around, she saw her pacing had taken her to the entrance of the maze. The brickwork had given way to a cobbled walk. She looked down again, hoping she hadn't broken her heel. Her mouth dropped open and she gasped for air that couldn't quite fill her constricted lungs.

She'd tripped over a man's foot. He lay face down in the grass—with a large knife protruding from the middle of his back.

Twenty-five

Making small talk wasn't high on Mike's list of favorite things, but like a dutiful son, he circulated among his parents' guests. In reality, he was more interested in catching up on the latest Yankee scores with Rocky.

Finally, he made his way over to the corner where the bulky security guard stood quietly, observing the guests with unveiled interest. "How'd the Yankees do?"

Rocky gave a wide grin. "Beat the socks off the Sox—six to one—almost a shutout. Won me a nice piece of change, too."

"Good deal."

Rocky nudged Mike in the ribs. "Check *her* out."

Mike glanced around the room. "Where?"

"Through there—in the dining room. The housekeeper, Millie."

Mike took in the view. Slender, as tall as Gwyneth, but with darker hair. Attractive girl, she looked harried as she adjusted place cards. Who wouldn't in the midst a full-blown dinner party thrown to his mother's exacting standards?

"She's new?" But there was something familiar about her.

"Yeah, only been here a month. But take it from me, she's a waste of time."

Mike sniggered. "Meaning she shot you down."

"Meaning she doesn't know a good man when she sees one."

"She's not bad," Mike agreed with a grin, "but I'm prejudiced toward a certain leggy blonde."

"Can't say I blame you."

"I left her on the terrace—thinking."

"Thinking?" Rocky shook his head. "That doesn't sound good."

Mike's response was cut off by the sound of his mother's cultured, British voice. "All right, everyone, shall we go in to dinner?"

Glancing around, Mike didn't see Gwyneth. "Gwyn must still be outside," he told Rocky. "I told her ten minutes." He shook his head in mock sadness. "Guess I'll have to teach her to tell time."

Rocky snorted, "Yeah, right. She's just the lady to clean your clock, too."

Weaving his way through the guests, Mike headed for the terrace, then stopped short as a woman's scream pierced the air.

Gwyn.

His heart hammering and a breath hanging in his throat, Mike sprinted for the French doors. He'd thought she'd be safe here with all his father's security measures. He should've never left her alone.

The terrace. Empty. "Dammit, Gwyn! Where are you?"

"The maze," came her hoarse cry. "Hurry."

Thank God, she was alive. He sprinted the short distance to the maze. There at the entrance he found her, kneeling beside a body, the front of her dress covered in blood. His police-detective training kicked into gear. "Get back from him. Did you touch anything?"

"I-I don't think so." Her body shook like she had the flu.

He knelt beside the body and felt for a pulse—not that he expected to find one. And he didn't.

He stood up and pulled her to her feet. She collapsed in his arms, but he held her tightly against his chest. In spite of the warm, summer night, she shivered.

She looked up at him. "Mike, it's Richard. He's dead."

"But Rocky and I put him in his car."

The soft whir of his father's wheelchair approached on Mike's left. "What's going on?" his old man demanded. "Who is it?"

"It's Klein, Gwyn's ex-fiancé. Bastard's dead."

More guests crowded around the bloody tableau. Mike heard a woman scream. "Everyone stay back. Send someone to call the local authorities. I'll preserve the crime scene until they get here. Tell them we need the coroner while they're at it."

"I'm sorry. I didn't see him. I tripped over his foot." Gwyn glanced down at her dress. "Omigod, his blood is all over me. I have to change." On the verge of hysteria, she frantically tried to wipe Klein's blood from her gown.

"No," Mike told her evenly, hoping his tone would calm her. "You have to wait until the authorities get here. They'll take your statement. They'll let you change then."

She gazed at him, her eyes wide with fear. "For evidence. Right, I know how this works."

"First time you've been on this side of it. It's going to be all right." Mike pressed a kiss to her forehead, and her body seemed to relax a bit. At least she wasn't still shaking like before.

"Look here, I'm going to have one of the security guards take you into father's study. You can wait there for the police."

Mike glanced over his shoulder. "Rocky." He motioned with a jerk of his head toward Gwyneth.

"Sure thing," Rocky agreed. "Come with me."

Gwyn bit her lip. "Mike?" She gave him a pleading glance, then shook her head. "No, that's silly. You have to stay here—at the scene."

Marina stepped forward and held out her hand. "I'll go with you."

"Thanks, Marina." Somehow the two women had forged a truce—for now at least.

He watched them walk back into the house, then turned his attention to the people gathered around the body.

"People, you're gonna have to move back inside. And no one leaves until the authorities say so."

A familiar figure stepped to the front of the group, a smile pasted across his face. "And who's going to watch you? Didn't you and this fellow have a common brawl just a little while ago?"

Mike leveled his gaze at the speaker. "Everley? That's your name?"

The arrogant twerp squared his shoulders and, filled with obvious self-importance, jutted his chin at Mike. "Yes."

"Okay, Everley, you can stay here and watch me, but you're not to touch anything. Understand?"

"I'll have you know I'm a computer whiz and financial genius, so I'm pretty sure I *understand* your monosyllabic

enjoinder against contaminating the scene of the crime. And just who put you in charge?"

"I did." Mike wished he had a dollar for every time a pipsqueak like Everley tried to get tough. He loomed over the little jerk, who in spite of his self-avowed genius, didn't have enough sense to avoid pissing off someone who was fifty pounds heavier and nearly a foot taller.

A willowy, auburn-haired woman elbowed her way to Everley's side. "See here, I won't have you speaking to my son like that."

"Your mommy brought you to the dinner party?" Mike glanced back and forth between the two. "I don't think we've been introduced," he, remembering his manners—and mommy was a looker, even if she was a suspect in this homicide. "I'm Mike Carlton."

Her dark brown eyes widened as she placed a graceful hand in his. "Lilith Sand." She gave a nod toward Everley. "My son, Edmund."

It was Mike's turn to be surprised. Standing before him were Gwyn's aunt and her little nerd of a cousin. How ironic. He'd whisked his client away from the city, right into the arms of two people who had every reason to wish her harm. He cursed himself for not reading Sid's dossiers more carefully. While the intel hadn't included photographs, Mike mentally kicked himself for not recalling Everley was the name of Lilith Sand's second husband.

"Mrs. Sand," he managed to say with a polite nod, "I'm sure you understand the necessity of preserving a crime scene until the local authorities arrive."

Before she could respond, Rocky hurried to Mike's side. "Sheriff's on the way. He wants everyone back in the house."

Mike watched with approval as the guests complied and started retreating from the maze entrance.

Except for Everley. "I'm staying."

Rocky advanced and loomed over the mama's boy even better than Mike could. "Mike and I will preserve the scene until the sheriff arrives. And no bullshit from you, kid."

Everley glared, but complied.

Rocky turned to Mike and simpered. "Oh, Mikey, he glared at me. I think I'm going to wet my pants."

Mike started to laugh, but then was hit by a sobering thought. A man was dead.

"Bauer still the sheriff?"

Rocky nodded. "Oh, yeah."

"Shit. I'm screwed."

Twenty-six

Inside the house, Gwyneth sat on a Chesterfield sofa, hugging herself. She shivered, still unable to comprehend that Richard was dead. Honestly, she'd never wished him any harm.

"Do you want something to drink?" Marina asked from the armchair on Gwyneth's right. "Tea or coffee? You need something to warm you up."

"Tea, I guess. I'm not really cold. I don't know why I'm shaking like this."

"It's the shock. I don't see how you can be as calm as you are. I-I can't imagine stumbling over a body like that, especially someone you knew."

"It doesn't seem real. I mean, I saw his body, but I guess it hasn't sunk in."

Marina leaned over and patted Gwyneth's hand. "It's going to be all right. You'll see. Michael will take care of everything."

"Thank you. I'm sure you're right." Gwyneth wondered how the young woman could be so confident. "You've been very sweet. I know my being here isn't easy for you." If their places had been reversed, Gwyneth was certain she wouldn't be so resigned—and definitely not so nice.

"It's easier because you've been so understanding." Nervously Marina smoothed the skirt of her gown over her knees.

"Understanding? Actually, I've been pretty rude."

"Well, Adam and I were a surprise." Marina gave Gwyneth a rueful smile. "Put you off balance, but you listened."

"Still, I don't think I would be so gracious."

"No, I feel better than I have in a long time. It's like I needed something to smack me in the face—a reason to give up. But until I saw you with Michael today, my pride wouldn't let me."

"Look here, I don't know where this relationship with Mike is going. We've only known each other a couple of days. I still can't believe it. I mean, one minute I was hiring a private detective, and the next, I was..." Gwyneth let her voice fade, not wanting to pour salt in Marina's wounds.

"You are getting along famously, I see." The sound of Elinor Carlton's cultured tones snapped Gwyneth out of her reverie. "How lovely. Somehow I knew the two of you would be friends."

Gwyneth shivered again. There was something about Mike's mother—something deep, perhaps even devious—that unnerved her. Was the regal Elinor the real power in the Carlton clan?

Marina spoke, then stood up. "Yes, we are. And if you wouldn't mind staying with Gwyneth while I get her something warm from the kitchen?"

"Of course, my dear. How thoughtful," the lady of the manor intoned.

After Marina had left the room, Mrs. Carlton turned her pale blue gaze on Gwyneth. "Now then, dear, why on earth did you do it?"

"D-do what?" *Does she think I actually killed him? What will the police think?* Genuine panic sent her into another spasm of shivering.

"Why spoil my dinner party? The police will be here for hours. Dinner is ruined, and my guests will go hungry. Couldn't you have just taken a deep breath and come back inside without screaming at the top of your lungs?"

"But he was dead."

"Well, he would have been just as dead after dinner, wouldn't he?"

* * * *

Marina eased open the door to the kitchen. A tall, thin woman, wearing a towering chef's hat, was shrieking at the new housekeeper, whose eyes were wide with alarm. "What the hell's going on here? Why can't we serve dinner now?"

"I told you," the housekeeper replied, her hands clenched and held tight to her body. "There's been an incident."

"What kind of incident? Surely nothing's more important than serving food at the proper temperature?" The caterer glared around the room. "And while we're at it, who's the SOB who stole my best knife?"

Unable to get a word in edgewise, Marina winced. She had a very good idea about the location of the caterer's *best knife*.

The housekeeper took a deep breath and spoke again, obviously trying to maintain a semblance of order in the kitchen. "There's been a murder—outside. I'm afraid dinner *will* have to wait."

"A murder?" the caterer screeched, then glanced about wildly. "I've got to get out of here. A murder? I might be next."

"You might do, if you don't put a sock in it, luv," one of the catering assistants replied. The short, balding man shot a cheeky smile at Marina. "Now then, me pretty little bird, wot can I do for you?"

"Tea," Marina croaked, "and something warm, perhaps some soup—for Miss Wells. She's in shock."

"How about some lobster bisque?" he suggested.

"Y-yes, that would be fine. Thank you." At least one person in the kitchen had kept his head amid the chaos.

* * * *

Still shivering when Marina returned from the kitchen, Gwyneth looked up and smiled her gratitude for the tray Marina carried so carefully. Mike's mother was wearing on Gwyneth's last nerve. Imagine the woman's suggesting she should've waited until after dinner to find Richard's body.

Marina set down the tray. "Here's some tea. And the only sane person in the kitchen also dished up a bowl of soup."

Gwyneth reached for the tray. "Mmm. Thank you."

"It's lobster bisque. I hope you like it."

At the word lobster, Gwyneth dropped the tray. "Are you trying to kill me, too?"

Confusion raced across Marina's face, followed by a hard gaze. "Kill you? W-what do you mean? I was just..."

Realizing she'd reacted too quickly, she apologized as she bent to pick up the tray. "I'm deathly allergic to shellfish. Nearly died once."

"I-I didn't know. How could you expect me to know?"

"I don't. I'm sorry for losing it like that. It was a knee-jerk reaction—really."

Marina heaved a sigh of relief. "I thought you'd had a personality change. It was a bit sudden."

Lady Elinor stood up. "So sorry, my dear. I did inform the kitchen that we had two guests who were allergic. They were prepared to make substitutions, but I suppose someone misplaced the seating chart. "If you will excuse me, I must have a word with the caterer."

After Mike's mother had left, Gwyneth turned to Marina. "Is she for real?"

Marina gave Gwyneth a sad little smile. "I'm afraid so." An expression of concern followed. "You said 'kill me, too.' Why would you think that?"

"Mike brought me to Virginia for the weekend—to get me away from whoever is stalking me in the city."

"Will you tell me more? If you want to, that is."

Leaning forward, Gwyneth began her tale. "It started one night after my ex-fiancé..." The realization of Richard's death hit her full-force. Her stomach clenched and threatened revolt. She swallowed hard. "If it weren't for me, he'd be alive." Verging on hysteria, she wavered irrationally between tears and giggles. Richard might've been a real jerk, but he didn't deserve to die. There wouldn't be any men left on the planet if that were the case.

* * * *

In the salon, Lilith Sand sat on the tapestry-covered sofa with attorney Paul Winston on her right and her son on her left. The rest of the guests were scattered around in groups of twos and threes, discussing the evening's shocking events.

"Edmund, I do believe that's your lovely cousin in the study on the proverbial hot seat. I think she's just gotten her skinny posterior into a bit of trouble. Killing her ex-fiancé. How gauche, but how wonderful."

"Really, Mother, you find joy in the simplest things."

Paul leaned across Lilith to whisper conspiratorially, "Edmund, if your cousin is convicted of murder, she'll go to jail. Do you understand?"

"Now, Paul, no need to be insulting. Gwyneth may have made her will in someone else's favor—her uncle or some charity. She's such a humanitarian with her *pro bono* law practice," Lilith's tone dripped with the scorn she felt for her niece. "I can't wait to see that she gets exactly what she deserves."

"Maybe she didn't do it," Paul suggested.

"Don't be ridiculous," she insisted. "Of course she did it. She's covered in blood."

"Circumstantial, so far."

Lilith sniffed. "You're just dazzled by her long legs, like the rest of the men here."

Paul raised an eyebrow and had the nerve to agree. "They are rather awesome."

* * * *

"In here, Sheriff Bauer." Gwyneth looked up from her second cup of hot tea at the sheriff's entrance. He strutted and puffed out his chest, trying in vain to hold in his middle-age paunch.

"So, little lady. Looks like you've gotten yourself in a big heap of trouble."

Tight-lipped, and jaw clenched, she insisted. "I found his body. That's all."

"And all that blood got on you, how?"

"Are you arresting me, Sheriff Bauer? If you are, you need to read me my rights."

"Now, now, little lady. There's time enough for all that. You're a material witness, not a lawyer."

"You're quite wrong. I am a lawyer, and I know my rights, obviously better than you do."

"Why damn. I'm so sorry, little gal. Out here in the sticks, we're not used to having pricey lady lawyers commit murders. Whaddya say you strip off them bloody clothes so I can have one of my deputies bag'em for evidence."

Furious, Gwyneth stood up. "Shall I strip here, Sheriff, so you can prove the chain of evidence?"

"Chain of evidence." He shook his head as if he couldn't believe she really was an attorney. "Lord amighty, I do love it when a lady talks all legal and everthang. It fair turns me on."

"Screw you." Gwyneth was pleased to see Bauer's beady eyes go beadier and his face flush until it matched his sparse

The Man For The Job
by Marie-Nicole Ryan

red hair. She set her chin and folded her arms across her chest. "I'm not doing anything until you read me my rights."

"If that's the way you wanna play it." The sheriff dug in his pants pocket, taking so long he could've been playing pocket pool, for all she knew. Finally, he retrieved a wrinkled card. "All right, you asked for it. 'You have the right to remain silent. You have the right to an attorney ... '"

Twenty-seven

Powatchee County Detective Moira McKenzie drove along the winding, narrow road and grumbled under her breath. "Of all nights for Sheriff Bauer to call me out. And on a murder, no less." It was bad enough that her less-than-exciting evening of oven-cleaning and hair-coloring had been spoiled, but the slimy slug of a chauvinist was making a point of attending the scene as well. 'Lots of important people at a dinner party. Need a female along.'

Holy shit. Bauer hated having women in the Sheriff's Department, and he especially hated her. He showed it by being as obnoxious and misogynistic as possible.

Just because these people were rich and important, he'd dragged her out. Not that she was all that crazy about cleaning ovens, but coloring her hair—that was a different matter. She had a date Saturday night with the tallest deputy in the sheriff's office—the only one who wasn't fifty-something and running to fat. So it was absolutely vital that she annihilate every white hair in her black-already-turning-prematurely-gray hair.

Damn. Silver-white hair looked fine on her Dad and on her older sister Siobhan, but Moira would be damned if she'd let her hair turn white before she landed a husband. At least that's what her mother said ad nauseam. And she always listened to her mother.

McKenzie pulled up to the gate. She flashed her badge and told the black-suited guard, holding a weapon sufficient for

elephant hunting and barring her way, "Detective McKenzie. This the Carlton' estate?"

"Yes, ma'am, go on in. Sheriff's already here."

"Thanks." The gate opened, and McKenzie drove through it. Damn. Bone-head Bauer was ahead of her. He'd be sure to give her an extra measure of his special brand of torment. Needless to say, the leading lawman of Powatchee County wasn't up to speed on the finer points of sexual harassment. The upshot of putting up with his guff was that she didn't plan on spending much more time in Powatchee County Sheriff's Department.

No indeed, she had her eye on a bigger pond where her experience in law enforcement would look good on her résumé. Period.

She drove up the winding drive to the Carltons' neo-fake, Tudor monstrosity with enough room to house five families, which to her mind was totally wasted on an old man in a wheelchair and his pretentious crone of a wife, who occasionally deigned to open the county fair as a demonstration of noblesse oblige. Other than appearing at the flower shows, the grand dame didn't waste her time with the locals. The old man was supposed to be a retired spook from the CIA. Moira hadn't heard much about the son, but local wisdom had it that he preferred to live in New York City and that the parents preferred it, too.

She pulled into a space next to the sheriff's car, shut off the motor and opened her car door, making sure it banged into the side of his. She smiled. Make that one for the home team.

She strode across the pea-gravel drive to the front door. It was opened by what had to be a man who had to be either a security guard or a refugee from the World Federation of Wrestling.

"Sheriff Bauer is in the study, ma'am." He motioned to the right.

She flashed her badge. "Detective," she corrected. "And thank you."

Yes, there he was. Redheaded, fox-faced pig, preening and strutting around like the cock of the walk. Sorely tempted to stand back and watch the old fart make a fool of himself, she finally announced her presence. "Sheriff."

"Detective McKenzie, how nice that you could join us."

"Thank you." *Jackass*, she finished silently. After all, getting fired tonight wasn't part of her game plan.

"So, where's the DB?"

"Outside, McKenzie. Entrance to the maze."

She turned to leave, but was stopped by Bauer's drawling voice. "I want you to remain here with the perp."

A tall blonde dressed to the nines in a bloodstained evening gown jumped up from the sofa where she'd been sitting quietly. "I am not the perp, you jerk."

As much as she liked the blonde's taste in clothes and her epithet for the sheriff, McKenzie thought better of saying so, at least while oink-oink Bauer was in the same room.

"Yes, sir," she replied tamely, more to give him a false sense of security than anything else.

"Get the dress off her, her underwear. Everthang. Bag it for evidence."

"Shall I question her, too?" As if she really needed his instructions!

"Natcherly. Don't go dumb on me, McKenzie."

"Has she been read her rights?"

"Do you think I'm incompetent?"

McKenzie awarded Bauer with a wide smirk. "Do you really want me to answer that?"

Beady-eyed Bauer narrowed his gaze. "I reckon I already know what your answer'd be, De-tec-tive McKenzie. Just follow instructions and see you don't screw it up."

She watched him strut from the room. More likely, he'd need a map to find the DB.

"That's the bad thing about bosses. Can't work with'em. Can't kill'em."

* * * *

Mike crouched beside Klein's body, not touching the remains, but checking the ground. Depressions in the grass led up to the cobbled entrance of the maze—Gwyn's tracks easily discernable from the apparent divots dug out of the turf from her spike heels. He prayed for another set of footprints—other than his own.

"Everley, see anything from where you're standing?"

"All I see is some jerk who thinks he's Sherlock Holmes."

As much as Mike wanted to shove his fist down Everley's throat, he resisted. Not that he wouldn't find it satisfying to shut the little creep up, but the twerp was just too small. No sport in that.

Mike shook his head as he stood up. "Put a sock in it."

Everley braced his slight body and clenched his fists. "You and whose army?"

Before Mike could answer, his response was cut off by a shout.

"Just what the hell do you think you're doing?"

Mike turned in the direction of the voice. A uniformed man with a big badge and potbelly strutted across the lawn. His old nemesis had arrived, flanked by a couple of Neanderthals, the Tweedle twins who Mike remembered from his summers spent in Virginia. Tweedle-dumb and Tweedle-dumber he'd always called them.

"Maintaining the crime scene, Sheriff."

"Well, move your ass, boy. Looks like you're contaminating it to me."

Everley spoke up. "He hasn't touched anything. I've had my eye on him the whole time."

Mike couldn't repress a grin. The kid was such an ass. Bauer would make mincemeat of him.

"Edmund Everley, sir." He offered his pasty-white hand. "Financial genius."

The look Sheriff Bauer gave Everley could've stripped paint, but it warmed Mike's heart.

"Why ain't you in the house with the rest of the guests? Are you a witness?"

Everley looked nervously over his shoulder toward the house. "Well, no, but—"

"No buts. Get in the house," Bauer ordered, his face right in the young man's. "Get!" he repeated with more force. Everley backed away, turned and scurried toward the house.

The sheriff turned his attention back to Mike. "Don't I know you?"

Here goes nothing. "Mike Carlton. This is my parents' home."

A grimace twisted Bauer's mouth into his approximation of a smile. Mike's stomach sank to the region of his knees.

"I remember you now. I used to give you tickets for speeding around in your expensive sports car—and general hell-raising. I also recall you had a real smart mouth."

"I don't deny I was a little on the wild side—years ago," Mike admitted.

Bauer glanced down at the body. "I knew you'd come to a bad end. Heard you moved to New York City, became a cop."

"Yes." Mike shoved his hands into his pockets, waiting for Bauer's next words.

"Well, you don't have jurisdiction here."

Mike stifled a groan. He'd been right—to the letter. "I'm a P.I. now. I thought you'd appreciate someone maintaining—"

"What I'd appreciate is you shuttin' your mouth and lettin' me do my job. I don't need a washed-out cop telling me what to do."

"Then maybe you ought to watch where you're walking, Sheriff. You're about to step on Gwyn's footprints."

"Gwyn?"

"She found the body."

"Oh yeah, the skinny blonde up in the house—the one covered in blood. She's got a smart mouth, too."

"Yeah, that's Gwyn," Mike agreed, unable to keep from grinning. He could just imagine her flaying Bauer with her razor-edged tongue.

"Well, her high-toned airs don't sit well with me. A murder suspect is a murder suspect."

"Suspect?" Mike advanced on the sheriff, ready to defend his woman. "Don't be stupid. She found—"

Like a well-practiced drill team, Tweedle-dumb and Tweedle-dumber stepped between Mike and Bauer.

The sheriff warned, "Hold on there, boy, or you're gonna find yourself in worse trouble than that little gal up there."

Mike took a deep breath and swallowed his rage. "She *found* the body," he repeated in measured tones. "She couldn't have killed him."

"Finding the body is close enough in my book."

Mike couldn't resist. "Then change your reading matter. She's a lawyer, not a murderer."

"Pears to me, she's a little hard on the men she dumps. I'd watch my back, if I was you." Bauer bent over and erupted with a belly laugh. Always obsequious, the Tweedles added their raucous guffaws to the sheriff's.

Folding his arms across his chest, Mike waited for the three men to grow tired of their asinine behavior. Heaven knew he had.

Pissed at their fumbling efforts, Mike threw up his hands in disgust. "Are you going to investigate or not? There's a dead man at our feet. Shall I call in a state investigator?"

Bauer straightened up, nearly choking with rage. "If and when I need help, I'll ask for it. Right now, it's cut and dried."

He rubbed his hands together. "I'm gonna arrest your girlfriend. Should take me 'bout five minutes."

Mike clenched his jaw and eyeballed Bauer. "You wouldn't know a genuine clue if it bit you on the ass and gave you a business card."

"Whoa, boy!" the sheriff shouted, but stepped back. "I can see my deputies are gonna have to teach you some respect."

Tweedle-dumb, who Mike was convinced had only an IQ point or two more than his twin, spoke up. "Yeah. That ain't no way—"

"Shut up, Dwayne," Bauer barked. Tweedle-dumb shrugged and backed down.

"Well, Sheriff?"

"Well, what?"

"Have you called the M.E.? I shouldn't have to remind you, this *is* a murder scene. You've screwed around so long the real murderer's had time enough to escape."

A canny smile spread across Bauer's face. "I already got my murderer. And she ain't going nowhere—'cept to my jail." He guffawed, bent over and slapped his knee. "And I don't think she's going to find the accommodations to her liking."

Mike turned away in disgust. "Have at it, Bauer. I'm washing my hands of you and your Keystone Kops investigation."

"I know you think you're smarter 'cause you went to an Ivy League school and all, but I've been doing this since before your daddy crawled between your momma's legs."

Twenty-eight

Breathless and knees trembling, Gwyneth led Detective McKenzie upstairs. "My room is right here." She opened the door and walked across the threshold.

McKenzie followed Gwyneth inside. "I have to stay with you, sorry."

Gwyneth nodded. "It's all right. I know you have a job to do." Reaching behind her back, she wriggled the zipper of her gown.

"Need some help?" the detective offered.

Gwyneth shook her head. "Thanks. I can get it." Sliding the zipper down, she let the dress fall to the floor. The lacy undies she'd donned earlier in the evening, hoping that Mike would be pleased, suddenly seemed tawdry.

The detective held out her hand for the dress, but to Gwyneth's relief, averted her gaze. "I need the rest, too." McKenzie placed the blood-streaked dress into a brown-paper evidence bag and started labeling it.

Gwyneth's mouth dropped open. She swallowed hard, desperate for some moisture. "S-sure. I—uh..." She walked over to an armoire, opened the door and pulled out the lingerie drawer. Big, white cotton panties seemed more appropriate for going to jail—not that she'd brought any with her. Not that she even owned a pair of the monstrosities her mother used to wear. She pulled out the most decorous panties and bra she'd brought. "Do I have to change right in front of you?"

"Sorry."

Turning her back to McKenzie, Gwyneth quickly slipped out of her underwear, letting them drop to the floor, then just as quickly redressed, pulling on a pair of khaki slacks. As she slipped her arms into a cream-colored silk blouse, she told the detective, "I just wish the sheriff were more interested in finding the real killer than in blaming me."

A wry grin quirked one corner of McKenzie's mouth. "The sheriff hates intelligent women. Maybe if you were a little more—"

"Blonde?" Gwyneth suggested. "Meek and mild? Not likely."

"I didn't think so." The detective shrugged.

Buttoning her blouse, Gwyneth snorted. "I guess that works both ways. He didn't seem to be one of your fans either."

McKenzie gave a short bark of laughter. "You're very perceptive."

Hands on hips, Gwyneth narrowed her gaze at the other woman. "On the other hand, it could be that he's the bad cop, and you're the good cop."

"You really do know how it works," McKenzie acknowledged.

"I worked in the DA's office for a couple of years."

"That's a big switch, from prosecuting the bad guys to defending them."

"The way I see it, I'm still going after the bad guys. Most of my clients are abused women. I help them get their freedom."

"Can't be much money in that."

Gwyneth shrugged. "There isn't."

"Nice. You must be a trust-fund brat."

"Fraid so." Gwyneth smoothed the slacks over her hips, then looked down at her hands. Blood. She didn't remember touching Richard. Maybe she had after all. "May I wash?"

Detective McKenzie crossed the room and grabbed Gwyneth's hands. "Wait. There's DNA evidence here. I have to take a sample."

She gritted her teeth while the detective bent over and pulled an evidence kit from her briefcase. McKenzie swabbed the bloody specks from her hands, then scraped under her nails.

"I scratched him," Gwyneth explained, "when he came at me out front."

"You do remember that anything you say can be used against you, don't you?"

"But I did scratch him, defending myself. I didn't kill him."

* * * *

On his way back to the house, Mike met Marina running toward him.

"You've got to do something. The sheriff arrested Gwyneth, and he's going to take her to jail."

Mike lengthened his stride into a discreet jog. He had to see Gwyn before they took her away.

He found her standing in the hall with a female officer, who didn't look much happier than Gwyn. He looked at the

officer's name tag: Detective McKenzie. "Any relation to Robson McKenzie?"

"Just my big brother. You know 'im or run afoul of the law?"

Mike grinned. "Once, when I was a kid, I spent an entire summer here. I bloodied his nose for making fun of my accent. But that didn't keep him from showing me the best places to fish."

Gwyn heaved an exasperated sigh. "I hate to interfere with old home week, but—"

"May we have a moment, Detective McKenzie?"

"Sure, I'm in no hurry."

"Thank you." Mike pulled Gwyn into his arms. She felt so slight. He wondered if she were strong enough to withstand the rigors of Powatchee County's jail. He could feel her heart pounding against his chest. "It's going to be all right."

"Will you call Uncle Wil?"

"I will. I'll bail you out."

"The charge is murder, Mike. I doubt they'll grant bail."

"My father has contacts. He'll help." Under normal circumstances, Mike wouldn't ask his father for spit, but for Gwyn, he'd swallow his pride and beg if he had to. Surely the old man wouldn't refuse.

"You'd ask him? For me?"

Gazing into the bluest eyes he'd ever seen—eyes filled with tears—he admitted, "I'll do anything for you. Don't you know that by now?"

Her eyes never left his, but her bottom lip trembled. "Thank you." One hand splayed down his chest, and the other

slid behind his neck, tweaking a wave of hair. "You need a haircut."

"I need a lot of things." He grinned down at her. "But a haircut isn't even on the list."

Her pupils dilated as she pressed against him. "I know what's on your mind," she whispered.

Mike's heart slammed in his chest. Passion fought with fear—fear won. He feared for her safety and that she would be railroaded. What if he couldn't find Klein's killer?

Dammit. Pull yourself together, man. He'd have to solve the murder himself since the sheriff was so damned determined to pin it on Gwyn.

McKenzie tapped Mike's shoulder. "Hey, you two are going to need a double cell, if you don't cool it," she told him under her breath. "I have to take Miss Wells in for questioning. You can follow me."

"Thanks." He turned back to Gwyneth. "I'll be there as soon as I've talked to my father," he assured her. Then he turned to McKenzie. "Jail still in the same place?"

McKenzie raised an eyebrow. "You know where it is?"

"Oh yeah. Spent one very long night there."

"I just bet you did."

Taking a deep breath, he tried to keep his tone light. "Counselor, I know I can depend on your good behavior until I get there."

"It's not my first day at school, Mike. It's jail." Her body trembled in his arms; his woman was clearly reluctant to leave him.

"And you mean to tell me you've never been jailed for contempt of court? They do that all the time on TV."

A glimmer of a smile played about her lips. "I'm not a wild-eyed defense attorney."

"I know. I just wish I'd seen you in action. I bet you're glorious."

"I am." Gwyn's attempt to keep it light failed. She sniffed and rested her head on his shoulder. "Just hurry."

Mike took her head tenderly between his hands and kissed her. Lord, she had the softest lips. "I love you," he whispered.

"Detective McKenzie." Sheriff Bauer stomped into the foyer, his face red and angry. "What the hell are you doin', lettin' these two lollygag around? Get your skinny ass down to the jail and take this murderer with you."

That did it. Mike whirled around and punched Bauer in the nose and followed with one in the gut for good measure.

Doubled over, coughing and spitting, Bauer screamed, "You're under arrest too, Carlton."

One of the Tweedle twins, Mike wasn't sure which, whacked him over the head with his come-along. As he lost consciousness, he heard Gwyn crying and McKenzie's wry, "Cell for two, anyone?"

* * * *

Gwyneth sank to her knees beside Mike. "He needs a doctor!" she yelled, while she surveyed the guests who'd gathered like a group of vultures to watch the excitement. Surely one of them carried a little black bag.

She touched his cheek, her fingers barely grazing his tanned skin. *Oh, God, what if that idiot deputy had hit Mike too hard?*

"On your way, McKenzie," the sheriff growled, "before Florence Nightingale here starts givin' mouth-to-mouth."

"Miss Wells," the detective prompted, tapping Gwyneth on her shoulder, "we have to go."

She looked up at the detective, pleading, "But I—he needs me." She'd never forgive herself if ... No, she wouldn't allow negative thoughts to confuse the situation. Mike just had a concussion—like she'd had after being attacked. He'd be all right. He had to be.

Slowly she stood up, looking around for help. "Please, can't someone help him?"

A woman with a head full of wild, curly hair pushed her way through the guests gathered around Mike. "I'm a doctor. I'll have a look at him."

A flash of jealousy swept through Gwyneth as the doctor knelt on the floor beside Mike. The doctor's pretty face, not Gwyn's, would be the first thing he would see when he regained consciousness. Then just as rapidly, remorse set in. How could she be so trivial when Mike was still unconscious?

"Thank you, Doctor—"

"Morgan." The doctor paused long enough to give Gwyneth a smile. "His pulse is strong. I think he'll be all right."

"Good," shouted Bauer. "Now haul his butt outta here and down to the jail."

The good doctor jumped to her feet, her face red with anger. "Sheriff, this man's not going to jail. He's going to the hospital."

Detective McKenzie leaned forward and whispered in Gwyneth's ear, "See? He's in good hands."

Her heart full of mixed emotions, Gwyneth allowed the detective to lead her outside. In the distance, she heard George Carlton's gruff voice. "Hold on, Sheriff Bauer. Let's go in my study. We need to have a little talk."

Gwyneth glanced at the crowd of guests. Quickly they'd turned their backs, and here she was alone and alarmed—unless she counted Detective McKenzie and that despicable sheriff.

She'd come to depend on Mike so quickly. *How could that have happened?* She stiffened her spine. She'd just manage without him or his father's high-handed manipulations. She didn't need an old CIA agent—or whatever the hell he was—smoothing the way for her. She was innocent. Dammit.

* * * *

"Ugh," Mike groaned. An elephant had to be sitting on his head. Nothing else could cause that much pain. He tried opening his eyes, but they felt better shut. Besides, everyone had halos, and he knew damn well he wasn't in Heaven.

Gwyn. He forced himself to open his eyes and tried to sit up.

"Lie still," a woman's soft voice ordered him.

"Can't. Things to do. People to see." He sank back to the floor. Sitting up wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

"No, you don't," she insisted.

"Michael, please do as Doctor Morgan says." His mother's voice invaded his consciousness. "Your father's calling Gwyneth's uncle as we speak."

"And I'm under arrest." He looked around for Bauer and his henchmen.

"If I remember correctly, that's why you were arrested the first time," his mother reminded him. "You really must learn to control your temper."

"Whatever." He rubbed the back of his head where he found a lump the size of a California Condor egg. "Wasn't really arrested. Just detained until I cooled off."

"Anyway, your father has placated that detestable man, Sheriff Bauer, and you're no longer under arrest."

"Nothing like power and influence to *placate* the sheriff." Mike sat up and wished he hadn't. Damned room spun like a Tilt-a-Whirl. "I've got to find Klein's killer."

"Let the authorities handle it, son."

"Yeah, right. Leave it to Bauer, and I'll be visiting Gwyn on weekends." He struggled to his feet, accepting Rocky's hand. The crazed amusement park ride intensified, but it cleared after a minute. "I'll make a couple of calls. Then I'm going after Gwyn."

Rocky placed a hand on his shoulder. "You're not in any condition to drive. I'll go with you. You can make your calls from the car."

"Good enough."

"Mr. Carlton, you've had a concussion," the pretty doctor warned. "You need to go to the ER."

"Not this time. Don't worry. I've got a hard head."

* * * *

While Rocky drove, Mike rang Sid's home number, hoping like hell the young detective-wannabe hadn't gone clubbing.

After a single ring, Sid answered, "Yeah, make it quick. I'm on my way out."

"Sorry to ruin your night. I need you to hop on the first plane to DC. I'll have someone pick you up at the airport."

"Just like that? Hop on a plane? That takes cash."

"I'll give you my credit card number."

"No need. I know it already."

"Figures. We'll discuss that later. Just get down here. Bring your best toys. I need a lot of help."

"Great!" Sid's tone was full of excitement. "At last, a chance to do some real detective work. What are we dealing with? Breaking and entering? Jewel heist?"

"For a start, I need access to AFIS. There's been a murder, and they've arrested Gwyneth."

"You're shittin' me, right?"

"Wrong. Gotta go. I on my way to bail her out—if I can."

His eyes on the road, Rocky asked, "Who's Sid?"

"My assistant. He performs magic with computers and wants to be a real P.I.," Mike drawled.

"All that glamour, huh?"

"Sure. Lots of glamour to go around." Mike gingerly touched the back of his head again. No, this wasn't his first concussion—just the first in Gwyn's honor. Somehow, he doubted it would be the last.

Twenty-nine

Reggie Gruhn held his cellular out from his ear. His boss and uncle, Gianni Damico, was in fine voice. "What the fuck are you doing?"

He cringed, wondering if his uncle would ever learn from Don Corleone's sotto voce style.

"Have you found where that bitch of a lawyer stashed my wife or not?"

"W-well, to tell the truth, things are rather bollixed up, if you know what I mean."

"Hell, no, I don't care about bollixes. I want results. And if you can't give me what I want, then I'll send someone who can."

Reggie took a deep breath, then blurted it out. "There's been a murder."

"You killed her?" Damico's voice thundered through the mobile phone. "You idiot!"

"N-no."

Again, Reggie held the phone away from his ear as his boss of bosses ranted. "That's just great. Now I'll never know where Sylvia is. What about Klein? Has he worked that girlfriend?"

"That's just it. Klein's dead. Someone put a bit of a vent in his back—right between the old shoulder blades."

Silence.

Not that he wasn't grateful for a little silence. But that meant Uncle Gianni was thinking, and in Reggie's experience,

thinking wasn't boss-uncle's strong point. Oh, for the subtlety of a Michael Corleone—now there was a real Don. Gianni Damico was more like Sonny Corleone—big on muscle and a bit dainty on cerebral capacity.

"So, who did it?" His uncle's desperate tone rasped through the line like a rat hitting an electrical fence

"You'll like this, really you will. Miss Wells has been put in nick."

"In *nick*?"

"She's in Old Bill's hands."

"Old Bill—who's that?"

"Old Bill means jail." *You twit*. If he only had the nerve to say what he really thought. Then again, better not. His shoulders twitched with a sudden dose of reality. Boss-uncle would have someone venting Reggie's head with one of those lead suppositories his thugs were so fond of using.

"Dammit. Why didn't you say so? Speak American. Did she do it?"

"Don't know, but she found the body and—"

"I get the picture."

"I thought I might help the authorities with their investigation."

"Yeah? And why would you do that?"

Bugger, but the man was stupid. "You'll see," Reggie promised.

* * * *

Ushered into a space that was better suited for a closet than an interview room, Gwyneth sat down on a straight

chair, but not without looking at it first. Thankfully, the seat was reasonably clean, even if the stuffing showed through the cracked, bile-green vinyl.

"Are you sure you don't want a lawyer? I mean—"

"I know. It's the old saw about a lawyer who defends himself—"

"Something like that." McKenzie motioned toward an ancient refrigerator. "Want something to drink?"

"Thank you, no." Gwyneth's stomach rumbled with hunger. Dinner would be a longtime coming, she guessed.

McKenzie sat down, taking the chair across from Gwyneth. Leaning forward, the detective smiled companionably. If Gwyneth hadn't known better, she would've thought she was about to have a chatty lunch at Le Grille Lyon, instead of being grilled herself. Yes, tonight she was definitely on the menu.

"So help me out here. Just tell me what happened. Why was Mr. Klein at the Carltons' dinner party?"

Gwyneth took a deep breath and plunged ahead. "He followed me down here. I came with Mike."

"Mike Carlton? He's the son of your hosts, right?"

"Right. Mike thought I ought to get out of the city, for the weekend at least."

"Why was that?"

"It's a long and..." Gwyneth sighed before adding, "...complicated story."

McKenzie shot her a wolfish smile. "I've got all night."

Sighing again, because Gwyneth knew interrogations quite often took all night, she began, "Wednesday, I hired Mike.

He's a P.I. I thought—uh, think that someone was stalking me and someone tried to kill me."

The detective sighed. "You're right. It sounds complicated." A frown took the place of McKenzie's smile.

"I broke off my engagement to Richard—for personal reasons. Then someone started following me. Everywhere I went, this man would show up. He even followed me into the lingerie department. I managed to elude him."

"Now, just why would someone try to kill *you*?"

Detective McKenzie's skepticism was only too apparent. "Well, when I first graduated from law school, I worked in the DA's office in Boston for three years. I sent as many felons to jail as I could."

"And now?"

"I moved back to the city and my practice now is mostly *pro bono*. My clients are battered wives. And there's more than one ex-husband who's sworn he'd get even."

McKenzie emitted a short bark of laughter. "In other words, you've got quite a few people who might want to kill you."

Gwyneth nodded. "And there's my Aunt Lilith. She's upset about my inheritance from my mother. She's threatened to sue me for a portion of the estate. And she and her son turned up at the Carltons' this weekend. I didn't even know they were there until I saw them after I found Richard."

"Damn, don't you just hate coincidence?"

Gwyneth ignored Detective McKenzie's expression of disbelief. "Anyway, I hired Mike to look into the situation. He thought I needed someone with me at all times."

The detective nodded. "Sounds reasonable."

"He was with me at my office when Richard asked me to dinner, so I agreed—just to make sure he understood that we could be friends, but that I was moving on. But after that interminable dinner with Richard and Mike, I jumped up and left alone. I know it was reckless, but I was so angry by their bickering. I just had to get out of there."

"Yeah." McKenzie agreed with a nod. "Guys are like that."

"I was rushing along, when this creep pulled me into an alley. I thought he was a mugger, but he wasn't interested in my purse. He was more interested in banging my head against the wall. I'm very fortunate that Mike followed after me and ... He saved my life."

"Quite the hero, isn't he?"

Gwyneth let the detective's gibe pass. "They kept me in the hospital overnight for observation, so Mike came home with me—to protect me." Her face heated up. "You see, I really didn't like him when we first met ... b-but we had this chemistry thing going." She shrugged. "One thing led to another and—"

"Wasn't that kind of sudden?"

"Maybe, but—" Gwyneth broke off. If she still didn't understand what had happened with Mike, why try explaining it to McKenzie?

The detective's lips twitched. "I see. And your ex-fiancé—what did he think about you and Mike?"

"Richard's behavior and response were bizarre. He made absolutely no sense. Told me he'd forgive my indiscretion—"

like all I'd done was flirt. But I reiterated that our relationship was over."

"How did Klein know where you were going for the weekend?"

"I told him I was going to visit Mike's parents. He must've done some investigating of his own."

"So, what happened tonight—when Klein came?"

"They told me that he was at the front gate. You've seen their security?"

McKenzie nodded.

"I met him in front of the house. He wanted me to leave with him. When I refused, he came at me, grabbed my shoulders, and I scratched his face. At that point, Mike came outside and punched Richard."

"Then?"

"Mike and Rocky—he's the head of security—put Richard back in his car. And I went back inside."

"Go on."

"After that, I went outside and talked to Marina. She's the mother of Mike's son. We spent some time on the terrace—just talking."

"About what?"

Gwyneth's face heated up. "Personal things—Mike, her and me. I had some questions."

"What happened between talking to..." McKenzie glanced down, consulting her note pad, "...Miss Vadim and finding the body?"

"Mike joined Marina and me on the terrace. Marina was very understanding. She wanted to give us some time alone,

so she went back inside. Mike and I talked for a few minutes, then he went inside. I had a great deal to think about, so I stayed out on the terrace and walked over toward the boxwood maze. I really wasn't watching where I was stepping and I tripped over Richard's body—only I didn't know it was Richard—his face was down. All I could see was this huge knife sticking out of his back. I knelt down beside the man—that's when I saw it was Richard.

"You touched the body?"

"I think I touched his neck, feeling for a pulse. Then the horror of it hit me. I screamed. Mike and everyone else came running. You know the rest."

"Do you have a knife, Gwyneth?"

"No, I don't." She rolled her eyes and sighed. "Detective, you saw my dress. Where would I have hidden a knife? It had a huge handle."

"Did you touch it?"

Gwyneth shook her head. "I don't think so. I was upset, but I'm almost certain I didn't."

"We'll take your prints."

"Of course. If there's no match, will that be enough to clear me?"

McKenzie shrugged. "Not necessarily. That'll depend on the DA."

* * * *

After being fingerprinted, Gwyneth wiped the ink off her fingertips and tossed the tissue into the wastebasket beside

the counter. She still found it difficult to believe she was going to be charged with murdering Richard.

The very idea. That an anachronism of a sheriff, a veritable parody of a police official could actually have her arrested and hauled off to jail. "Dammit."

"Ruin your manicure?" Detective McKenzie's mouth twisted into a rueful smile.

"No, I just can't believe what's happened. It's a nightmare. My worst nightmare."

"Are you sure you don't want to call a lawyer? You know the drill."

"Look, I know that I could've been held for twenty-four hours without being charged. Why not just question me? Why drag me out in handcuffs? What's next—a mug shot?"

McKenzie shrugged, then gave a reluctant nod. "Look, you pissed off the sheriff. You're everything he hates in a woman. You're smarter, prettier and more successful than he is."

"Just my luck."

* * * *

"There'll be someone to pick you up," Mike promised Wilford Wells, trying to calm him down. "My father's driver will take you straight to the jail."

"Damned well better," Gwyn's uncle grouched. "Your father owes me big time. I covered his ass more than once in school—and after."

Mike felt his eyes roll back in his head. "I'm sure you've an interesting tale or two." Normally he would've enjoyed hearing Wilford's story, but this wasn't the time. Still the

older man's voice sounded too loud and way too clear across the cell phone connection, as if he were sitting in the backseat of Rocky's Land Rover instead of in New York City.

"You got that right."

"Look, Wilford," Mike had to shut him up somehow. "We're at the sheriff's office. Call me once you're in the air. I'll have seen Gwyn by then."

"Okay, kid. You take care of her. She's the only family Belinda and I have left that counts a damn."

"Don't worry, I will." Mike disconnected. "Damn," he muttered under his breath.

Rocky grunted. "Likes to talk, does he?"

"Yeah, he's worried—like I'm not."

"She's in jail. That's pretty safe."

"Maybe I've seen too many *women in prison* movies."

Rocky's shoulders shook with suppressed laughter. "I have a feeling she can take care of herself."

"If she just keeps her mouth shut." Not Gwyn. No way would she be able to keep it zipped. If he'd learned anything about her in the last two and a half days, it was nothing and no one could keep her from expressing her opinion whenever and wherever she wanted.

A frown passed over Rocky's face as he gave a thoughtful nod. "Hmm, she might just get into trouble after all."

"Right."

Five minutes later, Mike and Rocky strode into the sheriff's department. It had undergone major renovations since his youthful incarceration. "They've certainly tarted the place up," he remarked quietly.

"Slammer's still the slammer," Rocky replied.

One of the Tweedle twins stood up from behind a desk, brushed fried chicken crumbs off the front of his shirt and lumbered forward, hands on hips. "Whatcha want?"

"I'm here to see Miss Wells."

"She's being interrogated, I think." The deputy gave his crotch a healthy dig.

"Does she have legal counsel present?"

"You her attorney?" Tweedle-dum asked, a skeptical look across his piggy face.

"No."

"Then that ain't none of your concern, fella."

"I'll wait."

"Suit yourself." The deputy jerked his head toward a bench before turning around and heading back to the comfort and security of his wood desk and chair.

"Thanks, John." Neither of the Tweedles was named John.

The deputy stopped, did a one-eighty. "M'name's Darwin, not John."

Mike offered his most disarming smile. "Sorry, guess I had you confused with John Wayne."

Rocky sniggered with a simpering smile, then just to piss off Darwin, added, "But I thought he was more like Mel Gibson."

The Tweedle's face turned red, and he clenched his beefy fists at his sides. Surprised, Mike couldn't believe the deputy was actually intelligent enough to know he was being ridiculed. "Just kidding, Darwin. Remember how we used to kid around when I spent summers here?"

"Yeah, I got a long memory," Darwin replied, a frown crossing his wide face.

"Minor youthful indiscretion, Mike?" Rocky's grin widened.

"Maybe one or two."

"You actually spent the night in jail?"

"Yeah."

"For?"

"Reckless driving. My father let me cool my heels overnight. Wouldn't lift a finger. Taught me a good lesson."

Rocky's smile widened. "To slow down?"

"Never depend on anyone but myself for anything." Mike returned the smile. "And to slow down."

"Did you?"

"Enough to keep under Bauer's radar." Mike added with a shrug, "Almost."

"As much as Bauer seems to dislike you, I thought maybe you tried to date one of his daughters."

Mike shook his head. "God, no. They all look like him."

Darwin cleared his throat. "You two gonna talk all night?"

"Might as well." Mike leaned his hands on the deputy's desk and continued in his most companionable manner, "If you let me see my friend, see that she's all right, I'd have no reason to stay."

Darwin shook his head. "Can't do that. I don't have the authority."

"But I do." Detective McKenzie strode purposefully from the hall into the reception area. "Mr. Carlton, you can go back for a few minutes."

"Thank you. I appreciate it."

The attractive detective flashed Mike a crooked smile.
"Don't mention it."

"Still, you could make all this very difficult, and you haven't."

"Somebody has to play the good cop."

"Guess so." Mike hoped like hell that the detective's "good cop" remark was her way of defusing the situation, rather than the truth.

"Follow me. She's in an interview room."

Mike strode down the hall behind McKenzie. "Is she locked up?"

"Fraid so," she replied, without turning around to face him. "After all, a man was murdered tonight."

"Do you really think she did it?"

"It doesn't matter what I think. The evidence is being gathered, but it takes time."

"Look, you're a cop. You must get a gut feeling sometime. What does your gut tell you now?"

McKenzie stopped and faced Mike. "It tells me I missed my dinner, and it'll be hours 'til breakfast."

"You and my mother seem to be upset over dinner plans. In fact, the Lady Elinor was most disturbed with the timing of Klein's death."

"Most inconvenient, I'm sure," McKenzie said, affecting a British accent.

Mike laughed. "You've caught her tone exactly." Hoping to gain the confidence of the only intelligent and sane person in the sheriff's office, he asked, "Perhaps, I could buy you some dinner after I see Gwyn?"

The detective cast him a long, speculative glance. "I don't think so."

"A cup of coffee then?"

"And do without the oil pan grunge we have here?"

"I realize it would be a hardship." He gave her his best knock 'em-dead smile.

McKenzie hesitated—at least Mike hoped she was hesitating before shooting down his suggestion. "Sorry, I'd better not. I'm sure you understand."

"I do." He hadn't expected her to accept his offer for dinner, but he'd hoped she would—for Gwyn's sake. He hoped, too, that the female detective would stick around until morning. The idea of Gwyn alone in the jail and without his protection drove him nuts.

* * * *

Pacing back and forth in the lockup cage hadn't dissipated any of Gwyneth's pent-up energy. She tried slowing down her breathing, but didn't have much luck. Dammit! She couldn't stand being locked up.

At the sound of the opening door, she whirled around and clutched the wire frame of the cage.

Mike—thank heaven. She let out a heavy sigh of relief. "Finally."

"Counselor." A smiling Mike stood in the doorway. "It's true. Held up by a slight concussion, but, yes, I am finally here."

She clung to the wire cage, anxious to be as close to him as possible. "I'm so happy to see you. They wouldn't let me stay until you came to. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. What about you?"

She nodded, then swallowed hard. Her mouth dried and her heart pounded at the mere sight of him.

The detective tapped her watch. "I'll be back in ten minutes."

"Thank you." Gwyneth waited until the detective left. "She's been very nice, really."

"I'm glad. They can't arraign you 'til tomorrow. This one-horse county doesn't have a night court."

"Too much to hope for, I guess." She bit her bottom lip to keep it from trembling. "So I'm stuck here for the night?"

"Your uncle will be here by morning—Sid, too. His computer savvy will help me with the investigation. I don't trust Bauer to share any information or evidence with me. I'm sure my father will use his influence to get the judge to post bail. For once, I'm grateful for his contacts."

"Nothing like having your girlfriend in jail to bring you and your father together." She grimaced. Mike's father would never accept her ... if she was ever released.

"You said you're my girlfriend. Did you mean it?"

"A slip of the tongue?" she suggested.

"You know what they say about Freudian slips?"

"I'm familiar with the expression."

"You'd better watch that smart mouth, counselor. Bauer's looking for any excuse to hang you."

Gwyneth made a kissing motion with her lips. "I can handle myself. Trust me."

Mike laced his fingers over hers through the wire of the lockup cage, causing her to shiver at his touch. "Dammit."
"What?"

In spite of her circumstances, her mouth curved into a smile. "It's the effect you have on me. Sometimes I wish..."

Mike's expression fell from one of saucy confidence to one of uncertainty. "You don't like it?"

"I like it too much. And *like* doesn't begin to describe it."

"Careful, counselor. Your words might go to my head."

Gwyneth giggled. "I know *where* they go." She took a long, lazy glance up and down his tuxedo-clad frame.

"I'm shocked that you are so ribald, given your location."

"I'll plead insanity, of course."

"Of course."

A warning tap on the door announced Detective McKenzie's return. "Sorry, time's up."

Mike shut his eyes for a moment, then set his jaw. He didn't want to leave her, but he didn't have a choice. "Behave yourself," he warned.

"Do I have a choice?" The natural huskiness of her voice touched a cord deep in his soul. Yeah, dammit—in his very soul.

"No." Every cell in his body ached to kiss her, but unlacing his fingers from hers, he backed away. He didn't trust himself, and he didn't want to make their parting any more difficult than it already was. "It's only for the night," he told her, then remembered he'd planned an entirely different way

of spending the evening before all this happened. Leave it to Klein to get himself killed. His mother had it right—most inconvenient.

His gut wrenched as he turned to leave. Gwyn straightened her shoulders and gave him a brave smile, but he saw through it. He saw the fear in her wide, blue eyes and the tension it took to keep her body from shaking. "I love you," he mouthed.

Gwyneth's bottom lip trembled, even as she shook her head in disbelief. "You know you're certifiable?"

"Maybe," he admitted. Certifiable or not, frustration wracked him. Damn. That Bauer was such a prick. A man like him still holding office—it didn't speak too highly of politics in Powatchee County. "I'll find out who did it," he promised.

"I know you will. I trust you, Mike."

Thirty

Mike followed Detective McKenzie out of the cellblock, Gwyneth's words echoing in his mind. 'I trust you.' He wished he had as much faith in himself as she did. "Detective," he began, "will you—I don't have any right to ask, but—"

McKenzie interrupted, her tone pained. "Would I mind losing a night's sleep and keeping an eye on your girlfriend?"

"The—uh, sheriff," Mike hesitated, trying to find a polite way to say something damn impolite. "He seemed to dislike her on sight. I thought you might—"

"Spit it out. Here, I'll help you. You seem to have a problem saying you're afraid the sheriff will take advantage of your girlfriend's being a prisoner."

"It wouldn't be the first time something like that happened."

"Well, as irritating as the sheriff is..." A frown furrowed her brow as she placed her hands on her hips. "...I don't think he'd dare to molest a prisoner."

Mike set his jaw, while he clenched and unclenched his fists. "He'd better not."

She reached out and touched his forearm. "Don't worry. As long as she's here, I'm on duty. I'm the only female officer in the sheriff's department."

"Has she made a statement?"

The detective nodded. "I still have to type it up, then she'll have to review it. I don't know why I'm explaining this to you. You know the drill."

Mike nodded. "I'm heading back to my parents' house. See if the sheriff's made any progress."

"And do a little private investigating on your own?" A knowing half-smile worked its way across her angular face.

"Yeah."

Detective McKenzie's eyes darkened. "If Bauer thinks you're horning in on his investigation, there'll be hell to pay."

"Guess I'll have to worry 'bout that later."

"Just what I figured."

"If you were in my place?"

The detective's gaze narrowed. "I'd do the same thing."

Vindicated, Mike told her, "Training runs deep. I can't let this go."

"I never thought you would."

* * * *

An hour later, Mike was scanning his notes. He'd already questioned three of the catering staff, as well as their supervisor. Only one more to go.

A short man, whose clean-shaven appearance included his head, looked up.

"Reginald Gruhn?"

"See here, mate. I've already answered the sheriff's questions. What d'you think you're going to find out that I 'aven't already told 'im?"

"You're British?" Why was Gruhn copping an attitude? Mike wondered.

"Yeah. I'm legal. Got me green card and everything."

Gritting his teeth, Mike resisted the impulse to smack the jerk on his shiny head. "Why don't you tell me what you told the sheriff, then I won't have to trouble you anymore."

"Well, it was that tall, blond bird. 'Ad to be. She was in 'ere skulking about. Very toffee-nosed and suspicious like."

Mike's stomach knotted. "Which tall blonde?" Gwyn wasn't the only one who fit that description.

"Just the one they took out of 'ere, covered in blood. Really you'd think if a bird was going to knife her old boyfriend, she wouldn't wear white. Crime of passion, I s'pose."

"Get back on track, fella. What did she do in here?" *How had Gruhn learned Klein was Gwyn's old boyfriend?*

"Just whizzed through—maybe she was looking for that knife."

"Wait a minute. Was she skulking or was she whizzing?" Mike jumped on the discrepancy in the caterer's story.

"Well, now, when I say whizzing, I just meant she came in and left quickly. It was more like skulking. Really."

Not satisfied with Gruhn's response, Mike decided to let it go, but filed it away in his memory bank. "How long was she in here?"

"Not more than a minute or two."

"Show me."

"Show you wot, mate?"

"Where she was, what she touched."

"Well, she blows in, then jumps like a flushed quail when she sees me—like maybe she was expecting the kitchen to be empty. She waltzed over by the counter—over there."

Gruhn stopped to scratch his head, as if pondering the event. "Now that I think about it, that's where the knife was last seen."

Mike already knew that. Dammit. "What were you doing while she was in here?"

"Well, I was a bit on the busy side, stirring the lobster bisque."

"Was she in your line of sight the entire time she was in the kitchen?"

"Not exactly. 'Cause, you see, the bisque started to lump up, so I 'ad to give it a vigorous stir. Know wot I mean?"

Every word the man uttered was another nail in Gwyn's coffin. Not that Mike believed a word. Gruhn's gaze was just a little too direct and he was a little too helpful. *The man was lying, but why? What was he hiding? Was he fingering Gwyn to shift the suspicion from himself?* Mike would make sure he ran Gruhn's fingerprints through AFIS. And why was he the only one of a busy catering staff who'd seen Gwyn in the kitchen?

"Thank you. Would you send in the housekeeper?" Once he questioned her, he'd start on the guests.

The housekeeper sauntered in, her jaw set and disdain written across her face. "Mr. Carlton?"

"Just call me Mike. Mr. Carlton is your disagreeable boss," He smiled, more to disarm her than anything else. "I appreciate your humoring me. I have a few questions of my own. I hope you don't mind." He gestured for her to be seated.

The housekeeper sat, then settled her gaze on him, her wide, blue eyes hooded. She reminded him of someone, but who? "Miss Grayson, have we met before?"

"I don't think so. Do you really have questions, or are you just trying to pick me up?"

Mike permitted himself a self-conscious laugh. "Sounded like it, didn't I? I'm just trying to clear my friend. It's obvious she couldn't have killed anyone, especially with that knife. I was with her only moments before she found Klein. And she didn't have it then."

"Well, then..." Miss Grayson gave him a not-very-encouraging smile. "I'm sure you'll *clear* her without any trouble."

The housekeeper was one cold fish. Any minute, he expected frostbite to wither his softer parts. "I understand you've been working here for a month or so."

"Four and a half weeks. Tonight was the first big dinner party."

"Hasn't turned out too well, has it?"

"It's a disaster, and I was anxious for everything to go well. Prove myself." She ran her fingers back through her dark blond hair.

"I'm sure my parents won't hold the murder against you." Charming this iceberg was a slow go.

At his words, her eyes widened. "Why would they blame me? I'm not responsible for anything that's happened here tonight. I don't even know the man who was killed. He wasn't a guest, was he?"

"No, he wasn't." Mike looked at his notes again, pretending to study them before asking, "As housekeeper, you mingled among the guests and oversaw preparations in the kitchen?"

"More or less."

"See anyone in the kitchen who didn't belong?"

"No, just the catering staff."

"None of the guests?"

"Of course not. Why would one of the guests come into the kitchen? It isn't done."

"You know, you puzzle me."

"How so?"

"You're beautiful. Intelligent. Why are you a housekeeper, a servant in someone else's house?"

"I didn't grow up with a lot of advantages, Mr. Carlton. It's a job."

"Sorry."

"No need to apologize. That's just the way life is. Some people are born with a silver spoon, and others have to work for a living."

"Yet you speak as if you're college-educated."

"I am. I had a scholarship. I worked hard."

Touched a nerve that time. "Thank you for your time, Miss Grayson."

"No need to thank me. You're the son of my employer. I'm happy to be of assistance." She rose, straightening the slim skirt of her blue-gray dress.

Still puzzled by the impression that he'd met her before, Mike watched the housekeeper march from the kitchen, her back straight and her shoulders rigid. She'd sauntered into

the kitchen. What was her problem? Was she just a servant with a chip on her shoulder? Or was she hiding something, too?

* * * *

Mike cursed under his breath, then glanced around the living room. He'd already interviewed at least five people who'd been standing in or near the foyer and heard Gwyn threaten to kill Klein before she went out to meet him. Only three more to go: Paul Winston—an old friend of his father's, Winston's client and newest conquest—if Mike was any judge—and the little jerk who'd been outside at the crime scene. Mark down another one who'd heard Gwyneth threaten Klein.

"Mr. Winston," Mike began formally, as if he'd never met the attorney before.

"Mike." Winston acknowledged him with a grim nod, flicking a piece of lint from the sleeve of his Armani. Mike had never seen Paul Winston less than impeccable. Damned irritating, it was.

"So, where were you?"

"That's the trouble with you private detectives. Straight to the point. No, 'How's the family?'"

"I'm sure you'd like to get home sometime tonight."

"Why?" Paul raised an eyebrow and grinned. "Pretty exciting stuff. I've a room upstairs. Think I'll stick around."

"Don't waste my time, Paul." Mike's impatience grew with each minute that passed, and his father's old friend wasn't helping. "An innocent woman is spending the night in jail."

"And not in your bed—what a shame." The auburn-haired woman at Winston's side spoke, her voice had a low, melodic quality—soft and definitely seductive.

While she studied him, Mike took her extended hand. "Mrs. Sand, we meet again." *Gwyn's infamous aunt. What the hell was she doing here anyway?*

Like a reigning queen accepting the attentions of her courtiers, she nodded. "Yes. I see from your reaction, you've heard of me."

"My reaction?" Years of experience as a police officer had schooled him too well to react to her name.

She continued, "You blinked when you said my name. A muscle in your jaw twitched." Reaching over, she touched his wrist with long, elegant fingers. "And your heart rate is faster than normal."

"Perhaps it's because I'm in the presence of a beautiful woman."

A roll of low-pitched laughter emanated from her throat as her mouth pulled into a Mona Lisa smile.

"You find me amusing?" He didn't find *her* amusing. Just downright scary.

"Not at all. I find *you* delightful. What would you like to know?"

Shit. The woman was a piece of work, all right.

* * * *

For the first time in her life, Gwyneth paced back and forth inside a jail cell. Her breath caught in her throat; her palms were clammy. And self-control was almost a thing of the past.

How could she stay locked up all night? What if there were a fire? Would anyone try to free her?

What cosmic jokester had seen fit to send a claustrophobic attorney to jail?

At least the sheets looked clean, even if "Property of Powatchee County Jail" was stenciled in black ink across the top hem. She didn't want to think about who'd last slept on the narrow bed. Not that she'd get a minute's sleep.

The clean, modern architecture of the facade proclaimed the jail was new, but the air of misery was as ever present as any cell in the Big Apple.

She pulled her blazer tight, as if she could actually stop the shivering that threatened to wrack her body any minute.

Take a deep breath, she told herself. Breathe in, breathe out.

Letting Mike—or anyone else—take care of everything didn't sit well. Not at all. As an attorney, she was used to charging ahead and taking no prisoners when it came to protecting her clients from abusive spouses.

But tonight, she had to sit in a jail cell and wait...

Damn.

But she trusted Mike. In the space of two and a half days, she'd entrusted him with her life, then her heart and now her freedom.

In spite of her first impression, Mike had proved he had his own personal sense of honor. He adored his son—and treated Marina with honesty. In the depths of her heart, Gwyneth knew he would do everything in his power to clear her of Richard's murder.

Richard.

Somehow, it was her fault. A man was dead. No, she hadn't plunged a knife into his back, but he wouldn't have been there if he hadn't been following her. "I'm sorry, Richard. I never meant for it to end this way," she said half-aloud.

"That's as good a confession as I ever heard, little lady."

Startled, Gwyneth looked up. Sheriff Bauer stood leering at her from the other side of the bars. In the depths of her phobic introspection, she hadn't heard him enter the cellblock. "That's not what I meant."

"I think it's 'xactly what you meant." He waggled a pen and a familiar, yellow legal pad at her. "Care to make it official?"

* * * *

"Even though I've pledged my full cooperation," Lilith Sand told Mike in what he assumed was her most charming manner, "I have to tell you, I didn't even know my niece was here until after the murder occurred."

"You didn't know Gwyn was here?" Somehow Mike didn't quite believe her.

"I'm afraid I came down quite late—just before she—"

She placed her hand on Paul Winston's knee. "I should say, we came down late—together."

"So you had no idea Gwyneth would be here?" *Yeah, right.*

She smiled. "No. Paul invited my son and me for the weekend. It was very gracious of him, don't you think?" The woman fluttered her eyelashes at Mike.

Thick and dark her eyelashes were, but he found her cold and calculating despite her seductive demeanor.

"I heard her threaten to kill someone," the son spoke, squirming in his seat as if he couldn't wait another minute to implicate Gwyneth. He reached out and set his martini on a Hepplewhite side table.

Mike sighed. He could hear his mother screaming about the ring it would leave. Of course, she wouldn't dream of inconveniencing her guests. She'd wait until they'd left, then threaten her new housekeeper with dismissal if she didn't have a remedy in her bag of tricks.

"Yes, Everley, I believe you mentioned that before—outside." Mike narrowed his gaze.

"Told the sheriff, too." A wide smirk spread across the punk's face.

"Not surprised."

"Edmund, why couldn't you have kept that to yourself?" Lilith asked her son, then sipped daintily from her champagne flute. "There's no need to cast suspicion on your cousin."

"I told the truth, Mother. As you've always taught me."

Yeah, right, you smarmy, little bastard. Aware he'd learn nothing more from the three stooges, Mike offered, "Refills?"

"Yes, please." Lilith passed him her glass.

Mike took it casually, but carefully to keep from smearing her prints. "And you're drinking Scotch, Paul?" Might as well pretend to play gracious host to his mother's guests—while he collected their fingerprints.

"Yes."

The Man For The Job
by Marie-Nicole Ryan

"One moment." Mike headed to the salon where the bar had been set up. Under the guise of searching for a serving tray, he opened a door in the Sheraton sideboard and left Lilith's glass inside. He prepared a scotch straight up and a dry martini, then poured another flute of champagne. Carrying them back into the living room, He handed out the fresh drinks, then retrieved the men's glasses and secreted them alongside the champagne flute in the sideboard. They should be safe until Sid arrived and dusted them for prints. He'd already obtained print samples from the kitchen and catering staff. All he had to do now was be patient—not his best event.

Thirty-one

Gwyneth leveled her gaze at the sheriff. "Detective McKenzie already has my statement. That's all I'm signing."

Damn the man. Who did he think he was? Just a big frog in a little pond. Why, he wouldn't last fifteen minutes in New York. A big-time mobster like Gianni Damico would eat him alive—not such a bad idea.

"Well, little lady, if you just showed a little remorse, the DA would probably go easy on you."

What an ass. Jutting her chin at the sheriff, Gwyneth cast caution to the wind. "Never mind the fact that I'm an attorney. Anyone who's ever watched an episode of *NYPD Blue* would recognize your tactics. It's a no-brainer. Besides, I can't show remorse for something I didn't do."

"Well, I think you did. And I got more than one witness who heard you threaten the victim. Clear-cut case of murder—that's how I see it. Now maybe, just maybe, it was a crime of passion. It's easy to see that a fine-lookin' gal like yourself might get all emotional and passionate. And you got a hell of a temper. If it wasn't for you sneakin' that big, old, butcher knife out of the kitchen, you might get by with manslaughter." Bauer shook his head sadly. "But that there knife business shows premeditation. Com-pren-day, blondie?"

"I didn't take a knife from the kitchen," Gwyneth told him between clenched teeth.

A canny grin replaced his leer. "You weren't quite careful enough. Someone saw you."

Someone saw me? Disbelief hit her like a fist in the stomach. "Impossible. I don't even know where the kitchen is."

"Honey, ever' woman knows where the kitchen is, or she ain't much of a woman."

Gwyneth rolled her eyes. The sheriff ought to be on a sitcom, instead of taking up precious air in the cellblock—and driving her absolutely nuts.

"Little lady, anybody ever tell you that you got a bad attitude?"

"Bad attitude? I didn't say a word."

"You don't have to. What you think is written all across that purty face of yours."

"Don't you have something better to do than harass me? Isn't anyone running a stop sign or red light?"

Bauer's beady, pale-blue eyes narrowed. He stood with hands on hips, his feet planted apart. "Well, I happen to think takin' a cold-blooded murderer off the street makes up for a missed traffic violation or two."

"But you haven't taken a murderer off the streets, you cretin. You've arrested a New York City attorney who's going to bring suit against you and your department as soon as she's out of this cell."

Bauer held his hands up, wiggling his fingers back and forth in faux fright. "Mercy me, little gal, please don't be so rough on this poor ole country boy."

Gwyneth snorted in disgust and turned away from the sheriff's leering face. If he didn't leave her alone, she would have a stroke—or worse. She might go into a-fib and die like

her father did. Come to think of it, her heart was racing. Hell. A jail cell was no place to die.

"I take your silence to mean you don't wanna talk."

She whirled around and snapped, "You can take my silence and shove it." She broke into her best imitation of his cornpone accent, "Where the sun don't shine, you execrable excuse for a *Homo sapiens*."

Bauer's face turned scarlet. "A homo?" His bushy, red eyebrows rose nearly to meet his balding hairline. "I ain't no homo. I'm as red-blooded an American male as draws breath."

"You are so full of crap, I don't know how you breathe."

"I'm gonna see to it personally that you never see the light of day again, little lady."

"I'll be out by tomorrow. Just wait and see."

Brave words. She still had to make it through the night.

* * * *

Reluctant but more determined than ever, Mike knocked on the door to the study. In spite of the older man's disability, Mike knew his father still kept the late hours he had as a younger, healthier man. He waited.

"Come," his father answered, his voice gruff—as usual.

Mike took a deep breath and opened the door. He found his father sitting military-erect behind his desk. "Sir, if I might trouble you?"

"You've always troubled me. Why should tonight be an exception?"

"I—"

"No need to answer. It was a rhetorical question."

Clenching his jaw, Mike bit back a withering reply. Alienating his old man would only further delay the case he was trying to build. Self-control was essential.

"I need a favor—not for me—for Gwyn."

"What kind of favor?"

Figuring he had nothing to lose and everything to gain, Mike came right out with it. "Access to your computer."

His father's eyes widened. "Out of the question."

"It'll be hours before my computer expert is here. It would save valuable time."

The frown lines deepened in his father's face. "It is apparently useless to explain that my computer is off limits and contains classified material."

"I'm not interested in your diplomatic bombshells. All I need is access to the FBI database, AFIS, and the DMV for Virginia, New York and New Jersey."

His father let out a long-suffering sigh. "I hate to see you waste your time playing detective. At least being a policeman was an honorable, if an appalling waste of your breeding and intelligence."

Same old story. "No one gives a flying fuck about breeding. This is America, in case you've forgotten, you hide-bound anachronism."

George Carlton laughed out loud. "You certainly have an eclectic vocabulary. You would do well in the CIA, if you would only allow me to put a word in the right place."

"The only assistance I need is your cooperation in my investigation."

"You've had all the cooperation you're getting. Have I not asked my guests to accommodate your investigation? And they have. Have I not put my entire staff at your disposal?"

"Yes, and I'll solve this murder without your damn computer or connections."

"The Blue Ridge Mountains," his father intoned, "will turn red before you solve this murder or act like a man and live up to your responsibilities."

"You know damned well that I live up to my responsibilities. I take them very seriously. While you're at it, maybe you ought to ask Marina if she even wants to marry me. You might be surprised by her answer."

Mike turned and stormed from his old man's odious presence. No one else could push his buttons like *he* could. His mother played her games, yes. But would he ever gain his father's grudging respect? Not damned likely.

* * * *

Marina closed the door to Michael's bedroom. She breathed a sigh of relief that the evening's events hadn't disturbed her son, although he had kicked off his covers. She felt an overwhelming need to reassure herself that he was untouched by the violence that had changed lives downstairs.

What had promised to be a difficult evening at best had turned into a nightmare. On the heels of spilling her guts to Gwyneth, Gwyneth had been arrested for murder. Marina didn't believe for one minute that Michael's new love interest had killed her ex-fiancé.

How could she have found time to murder someone? It just didn't make sense. Gwyneth's prickly personality and quick temper concealed a caring heart and understanding soul—not one inclined to murderous rages.

Marina wished there were something she could do to help Michael solve the murder. More than anything, she admired his fierce determination to smoke out the killer and prove his girlfriend's innocence.

As she scurried down the stairs, Marina formed a plan. Someone in the kitchen must have seen whoever stole the knife. Perhaps she could trip up that person in his or her statements.

Marina reached the bottom of the stairs, but found her way blocked by the Head of Security, who was smiling at her.

"Miss Vadim?"

"Yes, Rocky?"

"Is the little one okay?"

"Yes, he's fine, except for a tendency to kick off his blanket."

"Well, I'm sure you took care of that."

Marina nodded, then seized by inspiration, she asked, "Rocky, do you think we could, maybe, go behind Michael and sort of re-interrogate the staff—casually, without their knowing it? Check for any differences in what they told him. Then we could compare notes."

Rocky's smile broadened. "Have anyone in mind?"

She chewed her bottom lip as she considered his question. "Is Michael suspicious of anyone in particular?"

"He didn't trust one of the catering staff. The Brit implicated Miss Wells, and something bothered Mike about the housekeeper, too."

Marina grinned. At least she could do something now, not just stand by and wait for the guys to solve the murder. "Why don't you take the housekeeper while I get chummy with the Brit?"

"Sounds like a plan. But be careful..." Rocky cautioned with a frown, "...don't give yourself away. There's a killer in this house, and we don't need any more victims."

"Have no fear." Marina giggled with excitement, "I'll use all my considerable charms."

* * * *

Rocky watched Marina square her shoulders and head for the kitchen. He hoped she'd really heard what he'd said about being careful. That little boy upstairs needed his mama. Still, he couldn't help but admire her spunk. Now, he had to have another go at dazzling the frosty-as-an-Eskimo housekeeper. If she gave him the time of day, he'd be surprised. But never let it be said that he wouldn't do the bidding of a pretty little woman like Marina Vadim.

He found Millie in the salon talking in hushed tones with the lady of the house.

"Ma'am, is there anything I can do?" he asked Elinor.

The housekeeper didn't give him a second glance, but looked away instead.

"Yes, Rockford, I want to thank you for assisting my son."

"Not at all, ma'am. I'm happy to lend a hand."

"As Head of Security, I'm sure that Mr. Carlton would be happy to assign your further duties. Perhaps you should see him for instructions."

Rocky bowed. "Of course." Damn. He'd bungled that bit. Nothing to do now but follow the old bat's orders.

He turned to leave, but not before he saw a smirk of a smile cross Miss Iceberg's face.

He nodded. "Miss Grayson."

"Rockford." She addressed him as if he were her servant.

Smiling through clenched teeth, Rocky bit back his anger, then moseyed into the elder Carlton's study. "Sir, Mike has set up an incident room in the library."

The old man studied the monitor in front of him. He drummed his fingers on the keyboard. "Does he have everything he needs?"

Rocky cleared his throat. "He will have by morning when his computer person gets here. Of course, if you decided to help..." The old grouch's frown deepened as he gave a firm shake of his head.

Never one to give up without a fight, Rocky tried again. "If you'll excuse me for saying so, this is important to him, sir."

The scowl lines turned into trenches. "Then help him. Keep him out of my way."

"Yes, sir. I'm sure your work is more important than your relationship with your son." Hell, if the old man fired him, so what? He couldn't keep his trap shut. Mike deserved better treatment from his own father.

George leveled his gaze at Rocky. "If you weren't the best at what you do and it wouldn't cause me great inconvenience to replace you, you'd be out the door. Understood?"

"Perfectly." Rocky couldn't help but wonder if Mike could divorce his family. Probably not. The damage was done.

He strode from the study, muttering under his breath. His employer might be a bastard of the highest order, but he paid well. Sure, old George expected value for his money. Not that Rocky found his duties difficult. It was the old man's personality, not the duties that got under his skin. What his boss had been like before the stroke, Rocky had no idea, but the man was dour, unpleasant and sarcastic—and that was on his good days.

"Well, you certainly have the look of someone with his tail between his legs. Did old George give you some busy work?" Millie's throaty voice came from behind him. He turned to find the housekeeper leaning against the wall and a smirk across her face. Her long, lean body intrigued him—even if her personality turned him completely off.

"I was hoping to talk to you, Millie"

"Oh really? Think you have time?"

"Sure, I've got plenty of time. The old man wants me to keep Mike out of his hair. Considering how they get along, that won't be hard. I'd rather talk to a good-looking woman any time."

The lady in question rolled her eyes. "Is that the best you can do?"

"Oh, I'm well aware that you're several levels above me, *schweet-heart*."

"Puh-leeze. Why don't you just come right out with it? You want to question me? Ask away. What do you want to know?"

"Guess I'm busted." Rocky offered her his best sheepish smile. "I'm trying to help Mike. I mean his new girl is spending the night in jail. Just wondered if you know anything that could help."

"Maybe I do. Maybe I don't."

"Which is it, Millie?"

She shrugged. "What's in it for me if I give Mike's *new girl* an alibi?"

"Mike would be very grateful."

"I'm sure his gratitude has some value, but I like things that are a little more tangible." She rubbed her thumb and first two fingers together in the time-honored gesture for money.

"You've got the wrong take on this, Millie. I'm not looking for a false alibi. Just want the truth."

"How boring." She pulled a long face. "All right. This is for free: I didn't see the lady anywhere near the kitchen. That's all I can tell you. That's what I told the sheriff, and that's what I told Mr. Michael Carlton himself."

"You know, you kinda remind me of Miss Wells. If you just lightened your hair a little bit and—"

Millie straightened her shoulders. Her mouth drew into an ugly sneer. "That's enough. I like my hair just fine. I don't have to tart up like a fancy-schmancy, bleeding-heart lawyer."

"Whoa, lady—just a suggestion."

"Take your snooping nose and insert it up your back passage."

Rocky held up his hands in mock surrender. "Yee-ouch. That's severe."

"I find it saves time."

"I guess so." *What a bitch.* "Think I'll find Mike and give him a hand."

"Yeah, why don't you do just that?"

Damnation. Rocky hoped Marina was having better luck with her Brit.

* * * *

Marina headed for the kitchen. What if the caterers had already left? She glanced around, hoping to find the short, bald man who'd handed her the lobster bisque for Gwyneth.

"May I 'elp you?"

At the sound of his voice, Marina jumped. "Oh, I didn't see you." *Think fast. You can do this if you don't lose your nerve.*

"Well, I was in the pantry. Don't suppose you 'ave x-ray vision like that bloke Superman?" He gave her what she was sure he thought was a killer smile. "Sorry, didn't mean to give you a fright."

Marina rewarded him with what she hoped was her most charming smile. "I guess I'm a little jumpy after all that's happened tonight. I don't suppose you'd have something to eat? I'm afraid we all missed dinner. And I'm just starving." She took a deep breath and stuck out her breasts—just a little. Maybe *they* would distract him from her real purpose.

Good grief, she was acting just like that woman in the movie. 'They're called boobs, Ed.'

"Well, luv, I'm sure I can find *you* something." He stepped into her personal space. "Fancy anything in particular? Name's Reggie—just in case it's *moi* you fancy."

Oh Lord. Before she could stop it, a high-pitched, wheezing giggle erupted from her throat. Clapping her hand over her mouth, she faked a cough. All right, so she wasn't Erin Brockovich or even a poor imitation of Stephanie Plum. She still had an assignment.

"Water, luv?" Reggie patted her on the back with one hand—and managed to cop a feel with his other. Startled by his audacity, she jumped.

"Water," she gasped, "please."

Her target fairly skipped over to the sink to procure her the sovereign cure for her cough.

She took the glass of water from him gratefully, stalling for time. What next? How could she bring up the subject without sounding like she was interrogating him?

Good old Reggie saved her the trouble. "I've never been in a real murder investigation before. It's just like on the telly." He smiled widely as if thrilled by the prospect. "Did you know that bird—the one who offed her fiancé?"

"Yes, I met her this evening. I know it sounds terrible, but I think it's so exciting." Marina leaned her elbows on the counter, edging up close to Reggie, then told him, "I understand she's already got a new boyfriend."

"Then 'e'd better be watching 'is back too. That bird—she wields a mean knife."

Marina drew back as if in awe. "You don't think she'll ever get out of jail, do you?"

"Wouldn't surprise me. You know 'ow it is with the rich. They can afford the best when it comes to barristers—and judges, too."

"Really? You really know a lot about this legal stuff, don't you?"

Reggie positively preened. "Well, I do 'ave a bit of experience in that line. Back 'ome—not in this country, of course."

I'll just bet you do, you slug. "I'm so impressed," she murmured breathlessly. "Did you see anything? I understand she took the knife from this very kitchen."

"That she did. I saw 'er myself. In fact, I've been a great 'elp to the authorities in this matter."

"You saw her take the knife? Did she see you? I mean, you could be in grave danger, if she should get out on bail."

"Not to worry, luv. That sheriff isn't about to let a killer out on bail—no matter how big a toff she is."

He glanced around as if checking for eavesdroppers. "Now, I tell you this in confidence, but I wouldn't be surprised if she 'asn't done this sort of thing before—prob'ly got away with it too. Real slick, she was. Waltzed in 'ere, cool as could be, and slipped away with that knife."

"What did you do?"

"Well, I didn't know wot she was about, now did I? Course, if I 'ad known, I'd've wrestled her for it. Saved the poor bloke's life." Reggie shook his head sadly. "Too late now."

Marina placed her hand on his forearm. "You're so brave."

"And you're the sweetest little bird, I've met in weeks."
Reggie moved in for...

Good Lord. He was about to kiss her. "Oh." She scrambled just out of his reach. "I think I hear my son. I'd better go to him. He has bad dreams at night."

Frowning, Reggie looked around the kitchen. "I don't 'ear nothin'."

"You're not a mother, Reggie. Mothers can always hear their babies." She whirled around, ready to rush from the kitchen before good old Reggie got any more funny ideas.

"Just 'ow many kids d'you 'ave?"

She shot him a smile over her shoulder. "Just five, and another on the way."

"Bloody 'ell," he rasped.

Stifling another giggle, Marina ran from the kitchen and into the hall. Once she was sure she was out of Reggie's hearing, she leaned against a wall and laughed until tears started rolling down her cheeks. No one would ever believe her first attempt at detecting.

"Any problems?" Rocky's deep voice brought her back to sanity.

Marina looked up into his solemn, concerned face. He looked down at her, with eyes as sweet and clear as the first day of Spring ... and she wanted to melt right there on the spot. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"I would. Tell me."

Glancing back over her shoulder, she restrained her melt-on-the-spot urges. "Let's go somewhere more private." She

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giggled again. Damn. Here she was acting like a giddy schoolgirl. Rocky must think she was a real ditz.

"All right."

"I'll tell you everything."

Thirty-two

Gwyneth watched Bauer waddle out of the cellblock and breathed a sigh of relief. If Detective McKenzie hadn't rushed in to notify him of a six-car pileup, that cartoon of a sheriff would still be waving a pen and paper in her face for a confession. He really needed to take a chill pill. His red face could only mean he had a rip-roaring case of high blood pressure. Honestly, the man looked like a stroke waiting to happen—not that she wished him any harm. Not much anyway.

What's Mike doing? What can he do? After all, he didn't have the same resources that the authorities had, or did he? Would Sid, Mike's wannabe-P.I. assistant, have what it took to access federal databases? Probably not, but if he did—well, that was pretty scary, too.

Once more, she settled down on the bench-like bed and pulled her knees up, resting her chin on them. She glanced down at her wrist to check the time, but of course, she didn't have a watch. The detective had taken it with the other valuables at the time of the arrest.

At least she was the only prisoner in the cellblock. That was a small blessing. *Wasn't it?*

How did this weekend get so messed up? But Mike couldn't hear her. Besides, it wasn't just the weekend that was totally screwed. It was her life.

All her ideas about love had taken a ninety-degree turn. She'd been happy—or so she'd thought. A law practice and an

uncle and aunt who'd treated her like the daughter they'd never had.

Of course, there was the little problem of someone's stalking her and just maybe trying to kill her, too. A trifling inconvenience, to be sure.

Then she met Mike, hired him, got kissed in the back of a cab and mugged—all in very short order. And the very nanosecond she found herself in bed with her own private eye, her whole life turned upside-down.

It was probably all those orgasms. Having one climax after another must have affected her brain. It wasn't used to all that blood flow, and the rest of her body wasn't in the habit of receiving that much attention either.

Making love with Mike was definitely a quantum leap from anything she'd ever experienced before. He was powerful and tender and sexy, and he made her feel like she was the most desirable woman on the planet. And that, sure as hell, was a unique experience.

All right, Gwyneth, confess. Is it the mind-blowing sex, or is there a future for you and this man?

Trust. It all boiled down to trust. Did she trust him? She'd already given him her heart. But ... Maybe all the abused wives she'd represented had colored her judgment.

On the other hand, Marina seemed to think a lot of Mike, even after all they'd been through. But his son's mother didn't seem very experienced or worldly.

Okay, she'd just list his good points—aside from his dynamic performance in her bed. Too bad the sheriff didn't leave the pen and paper. She could use them right now.

On the plus side: He was a good father, kind to Marina and honest with her. Then there was his intelligence—no need to dilute the gene pool—not to mention, he was handsome. And his sense of humor—a real smart-ass when it suited him, but she liked him that way. She'd never get bored. And she certainly wouldn't be watching Letterman over his shoulder while they made love.

Negatives? Well, he had the most dysfunctional family she'd ever seen—outside her own. Dangerous profession—he could get killed. *Oh, no. Please be careful, Mike.* Whoever killed Richard might still be hanging around.

Hot tears stung her eyes. Okay, as horrible as finding Richard's body had been, the very thought of losing Mike hurt worse. The remorse she felt over Richard's death couldn't compare to what she'd feel if she lost Mike.

In a bare couple of days, he'd become a part of her, like an extra rib or an extension of her soul. As corny as it sounded, it was true. Mike Carlton was indelible ink on the map of her heart. He was the gum she couldn't scrape off the sole of her shoe. He was her man.

And what she wouldn't give to have his strong arms around her right now. Morning couldn't come too soon.

* * * *

As the door to the library opened, Mike glanced up from his computer in surprise.

Millie, the housekeeper, stood there, holding a tray. "Would you like some café au lait, Mr. Carlton?"

"Thanks. Just set it down." He indicated a free corner of the desk. Since Rocky had struck out with the housekeeper, maybe Mike ought to have another go at her.

"It's late. You look exhausted. Have a seat." He gestured toward a high-backed, Queen Anne chair.

Her eyes widened, but she hesitated long enough for Mike to hope she was tempted by his offer. "Go on. Take a load off. I won't tell."

But Millie shook her head. "No, thank you. It wouldn't be appropriate."

He rolled his eyes. "Appropriate or not, you look like you're ready to drop. Take a break. It's an order."

"Well, since you put it that way." Giving him a tight smile, she sat down, then nodded in the direction of the laptop.

"What're you doing?"

"I'm running backgrounds on some of the guests and staff."

The housekeeper straightened up. "You're doing what? I mean, how?"

Mike gave her his cagiest grin. "Just takes knowing a few shortcuts."

"You can hack into what?"

"Federal databases. There's always a backdoor," he bluffed. He wasn't a hacker—that's why he was so anxious for Sid to show up with his bag of tricks.

"But isn't that illegal?"

Mike shrugged. "Sure, but who's to know?"

"But I thought you used to be a cop."

"*Used to be* is the operative phrase. They have rules. I don't." To his delight, Millie's left hand developed a slight tremor. "Don't worry." He let out a low, conspiratorial chuckle. "I'm sure *you* don't have anything to hide."

"Of course, I don't." Standing abruptly, she blurted, "I have to go. I need to—"

"To what?"

"It'll soon be time to serve breakfast. You're such a smart guy. You figure it out."

She rushed from the room. More than pleased that he'd made the elusive housekeeper so nervous, he leaned back.

Wonder what she's hiding? He glanced at his watch: four o'clock. Damn. He grabbed the telephone and dialed Sid's cell phone.

"Yeah?" Sid answered, breathing heavily.

"ETA?"

"I'm at the airport. Clearing security right now. Flight's at five. I should be in DC by no later than six."

"Gwyn's uncle is coming in about the same time."

"Cool. Any suspects?"

"One or two."

"That's it? I thought you'd have the case solved by now."

"Just get your ass down here. There's plenty to process."

"Right."

Mike disconnected. "Soon, Gwyn, soon." Damn that creep Klein. How dare he get himself killed and manage to incriminate Gwyn at the same time? That took talent.

Whoa. The man was dead, wasn't he?

Mike closed his eyes. Lack of sleep was making him feel somewhat blurred around the edges.

Blaming the victim for his own death was beyond the pale.

A faint sound made Mike open his eyes. He could've sworn he heard a cat. He spied a large yellow tabby perched high on a shelf. But no sooner than he'd seen the creature, than she leapt from her resting spot onto the desk right in front of him, sending the fresh cup of café au lait flying.

"Damn. How long were you up there? Just taking it easy, were you? Keeping an eye on me?" The green-eyed cat cast him a bored glance, then bounded from the desk to the hardwood floor. She stopped long enough to give the spilled contents a disdainful sniff, then, perhaps attracted by the cream, licked at it.

Mike watched as the cat stiffened, gasped—and collapsed. Fuck.

"Rocky!" Mike shouted and jumped up from his chair. He stared down at the cat. *Poor kitty.*

But instead of the security guard, the obnoxious Everley glided in. "What's up?"

"I think I've made someone a little nervous, and that someone just had a go at poisoning me. The cat's dead."

"Damned if it isn't," Everley remarked dryly, sparing a fleeting glance for the hapless animal at his feet. "You're so observant. Think I can be a smart detective like you when I grow up?"

Mike again resisted the impulse to smack Everley's smirking face. "Spare me your juvenile humor. Find the security guard and get the housekeeper back in here."

"Oh, dear. I think there's trouble afoot. Does that mean I've been promoted to investigator status?"

"No, it just means I won't have to knock you on your sorry ass."

"Hmm." Everley smirked. "Guess that cup of joe was a little on the strong side."

Mike glared at the punk and knelt down beside the cat.

"I think it's a little late for CPR, Mikey."

Ignoring Everley, Mike sniffed the cat's mouth. "Cyanide," he pronounced on catching the scent of bitter almonds. "Get Rocky and the housekeeper," he ordered between clenched teeth.

"All right. Jeez, you act like someone gave you a wedgy."

"That's it." Mike jumped up, grabbed Everley by the front of his shirt and slammed him against the wall—just to get his attention. "Listen, shithead, I've had enough of your smart mouth. One more word, and it'll be your last. Understand?"

Everley's white face turned deep red, but he managed a nod. Mike released him and watched, with no small amount of satisfaction, as the punk slid down the wall until his butt hit the floor.

Okay, so he had some weight and height on the kid, but Everley was long overdue for an attitude adjustment.

The younger man scrambled to his feet and, straightening the jacket of his tuxedo, he fled the room only to run straight into Rocky in the hall.

"Hold on, kid. What's the rush?"

Everley's reply didn't bear repeating.

Rocky stared at the cat, then shot Mike a look of disbelief. "What the hell's going on here?"

"The cat got something that was meant for me."

"I'll say. Who did it? Everley?"

"The housekeeper brought it in, which is suspicious enough. I want to question her—see if she left it unattended."

"Yeah, I'd be real interested to know where our little friend Everley was, too. You gonna notify the sheriff?"

Mike shook his head. "Hell, no. Given the lack of ability he's already demonstrated, he'd only add to the confusion. I'd rather keep it quiet for the time being, give—"

"Give'em another shot at killing you? Mike, you're nuts."

"Whoever it is will slip up sooner or later."

"You've got to call the authorities."

"Not until I talk to our not-so-friendly housekeeper."

Rocky shot Mike doubtful look, then shrugged. "Okay. You're the boss."

Mike grinned. "Not exactly."

Grinning back, Rocky admitted, "Well, I doubt your father could tolerate another visit from the sheriff."

* * * *

The noose tightened, cutting off her air. Her feet scabbled for purchase, but found none.

Gwyneth awoke in a full-blown panic, her head pounding until she thought it would explode. She gasped for breath, then forced herself to envision the image of an alpine lake, surrounded by snow-covered peaks and topped by an unclouded, cerulean sky. The pulse pounding in her ears

slowed until the muscles in her throat finally relaxed and the pain in her chest faded.

In spite of all her heavy breathing with Mike, she hadn't had a true panic attack in several years. Why now? Just because she was in jail and suspected of murder? Good enough reason, she supposed.

What time is it? she wondered. How could they arraign her for murder when they didn't have a single shred of real evidence. She was certain she hadn't touched the knife. Everything was circumstantial. She'd found the body and managed to get Richard's blood all over the front of her dress as she'd knelt beside him. Circumstantial, damn it.

The entire case was full of holes. She'd have loved to have such an easy case dropped in her lap—not that she took murder cases—but it would have been a pleasure to smear the sheriff's face in it when she defended herself and was found innocent. The case probably wouldn't even go to trial. There wouldn't be enough evidence to arraign her. She was sure of it—almost.

But this was the sheriff's turf, not hers. Who knew how things might actually work in Powatchee County, Virginia? Still, the law was the law, and she'd based her life on its principles. She'd trust it. She had to.

* * * *

"What happened?" the housekeeper's voice rose to a surprised screech—a well-bred screech, Mike conceded, but a screech nonetheless.

"The cat died from the coffee you brought me. Please explain."

"But I can't. Surely you don't believe I'd try to murder you. Twenty-four hours ago, I didn't even know you."

"Then retrace your steps from the time you prepared it. Who was with you? And was the tray always in your sight?"

Millie Grayson's face turned as pale and gray as her long dress. He watched for any sign that she was lying. Her long, thin fingers worried at her collar. A nervous gesture? Or was she used to wearing something there? Had she been wearing something there earlier in the evening?

Hell, with Gwyn around, he really hadn't paid much attention to the housekeeper's accessories. If Gwyn were here now, she could tell him in a heartbeat. Accessories were her thing, not his.

"I prepared it in the kitchen."

"Anyone see you?"

"Yes, two of the caterer's people were packing up. They're gone now."

"Which ones?"

"The supervisor and that droll fellow with the Cockney accent."

"Did either of them know where you were taking the tray?"

She hesitated, then admitted, "I might have mentioned it."

"I see. And after you left the kitchen?"

"I brought it through the dining room and passed through the salon. Your mother called me over. I set the tray down on a table in the foyer."

"My mother called you aside? What did she want?"

"Just making sure that arrangements had been made for all the guests. We only spoke for a minute or so. She left to retire for the evening, and I brought you the tray."

"Long enough for someone to add poison—if you're telling the truth."

An angry flush stained the housekeeper's face. "I'd have to be pretty stupid to try to poison you with coffee that I brought you myself," she said through clenched teeth. "I'm afraid you'll need to look a little farther for a suspect—sir."

Mike nodded at Rocky. "We'll check your story with the catering staff tomorrow."

"My story? I've had enough of your interrogation. I quit."

"Listen, doll. You can quit. But you damn well won't leave, if I have to call the sheriff and accuse you of attempted murder." He flashed her his most insincere smile. "Hey, you can keep Gwyn company."

"Gwyn!" Millie spit. "To hell with precious Gwyn. I'm sick of her. You'd like to blame all this on me, wouldn't you? Just to get *her* out of jail. Well, I think she's right where she belongs. At least the sheriff got that right."

"You don't know anything about Gwyneth," Mike responded. He'd touched a nerve, but why?

"I don't have to know her. I know her *type*. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm through answering questions. I'm going to bed. In case you haven't noticed, it's nearly five in the morning. I've been up for almost twenty-four hours."

Mike gave her a dismissive wave. "Go on. I'll check out your story while you have a nice nap. Sweet dreams."

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He watched with amusement as the housekeeper marshaled her self-control before she fled the library.

He turned to his friend. "Well, Rocky?"

"She's hiding something."

"Yeah, but what?"

Thirty-three

By six in the morning, Gwyneth had her opening planned. Not that a real opening statement could be used at an arraignment, but the judge might grant her some latitude. After all, if Uncle Wil didn't arrive in time, she'd be forced to act as her own attorney.

She wasn't sure the grand jury would return a true bill against her. The evidence was pathetic. Or did this one-horse town *even* have a grand jury? Perhaps there would simply be a preliminary hearing, followed by arraignment if the judge felt there was sufficient proof.

Naturally, she would argue for a dismissal of charges based on lack of evidence. As her own attorney, she could be heard. Would bail be set or denied?

She paced back and forth in the cell, rehearsing. Concise and direct. Most of all, she couldn't act guilty. She had to separate her emotions from the situation. In other words, she had to present herself as a consummate professional—nothing more, nothing less.

Intent on the proceedings to come, Gwyneth started as the door to the cellblock clanged. Good Cop McKenzie walked in, carrying a Styrofoam cup and paper plate.

"I see you're wide-awake, counselor. I brought you some coffee. It's not much, but I can vouch that it's hot and fresh. Sorry I can't say the same for the biscuit. I think it's left over from the early nineties."

Flashing the detective a smile, Gwyneth nodded. "Thanks. Coffee'd be great."

"Careful, it's hot," McKenzie warned.

Gwyneth accepted the cup of coffee and the questionable pastry through the bars, then knocked the biscuit against one of the steel bars. "It's hard enough to use as an antiaircraft missile. Maybe the government could use more of these. Be a lot cheaper than those smart bombs."

"At least a night in jail hasn't dulled your sense of humor."

"My sense of humor?" Gwyneth snorted. "Listen, Detective, I'm not exactly known for my sense of humor. Ask anyone who's been up against me in court."

"Well, at least you've gained some perspective of what it's like on the receiving end of the law."

Gwyneth blew on her coffee, then took a cautious sip.

Hot.

"Yes," she gasped, but she'd been warned. Wondering if she'd ever swallow again, she set the cup down on the edge of the lavatory. "This experience isn't on my top ten list of anything, and I doubt it'll do much for my résumé."

"There you go." McKenzie's mouth kicked up in a half grin. "There's that sense of humor again. You'd better watch it, or people will find out that you actually have one."

"Well, there's one thing for sure. Sheriff Bauer doesn't appreciate it."

"That's because the sheriff..." The detective leaned her head forward and spoke in a hushed voice, "doesn't have one at all—no disrespect intended, of course."

"Of course not." Gwyneth resumed her pacing, considering her options should the sheriff manufacture evidence unrelated to the blood on her gown.

The detective turned to leave, then stopped and turned. "By the way, are you going to act as your own attorney?"

"Yes. I don't know if my uncle can get here in time, so I'm prepared."

"Well, I'll leave you to it."

"Thank you, Detective McKenzie. You've been—okay."

McKenzie's eyes twinkled. "That's the nicest thing I've ever had a prisoner say. You're welcome, Miss Wells."

* * * *

"Where the hell are they?" Mike paced back and forth in the library-cum-office. "I should be in court for Gwyneth's arraignment."

Rocky stuck his head inside the doorway. "I just heard from the driver. The engine overheated. They're stalled out on I-66 between exits fifteen and sixteen."

"Overheated? Hell. All right, what's their location? I'll run and pick them up and take Wilford to court. Otherwise, Gwyn's stuck defending herself."

"Ever have any doubt she would?" Mike's father asked from the doorway.

"It's what she does."

"Likes to be in control, too. What time is her hearing?"

"Nine. Why?"

"I want to make sure the judge sets bail."

His father was going to help after all? "What can you do?"

"I do have some reputation in the community—and I know the judge who'll be presiding."

"I see. Why're you doing this?"

His father cleared his throat. "She seems to be rather important to you. I'm not mistaken in that, am I?"

"No, of course you're not. T-thank you."

"That wasn't so difficult, was it?"

"Don't usually have much reason to say it."

"Granted. Rocky can meet the limo and take Wilford to the courthouse. I'll come with you to support the fair Gwyneth."

Dumbfounded, all Mike could manage was, "Fine, let's go."

* * * *

The bailiff's voice rang out. "All rise. The Honorable Judge Sybil Melkin presiding."

The judge entered, attired in the requisite black robe and stern visage. Her Honor was diminutive, but her robes had been tailored to her small stature. Gwyneth took a deep breath and stood up with the rest of the people in the courtroom. The judge's there'll-be-no-BS-in-my-courtroom expression gave Gwyneth pause. She'd hoped for a sympathetic male judge. While she'd never traded on her good looks, they'd never been a hindrance either.

"Be seated. Docket number 102 on charge of 124.3, first-degree murder on complaint of Detective McKenzie."

Gwyneth stood up again. Damn. She hadn't counted on being the first case. Where was Mike? Where was Uncle Wil? Not that she couldn't defend herself. Still—a little backup and moral support never hurt.

"Gwyneth Wells for the defense, Your Honor. I'm representing myself."

"Do you waive the reading of the charges, but not the rights there under?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

The prosecutor interjected. "Your Honor, given the seriousness of the charges, the Commonwealth asks that bail not be set."

"Your Honor, the accused—"

Judge Melkin leaned forward, her half glasses slipping farther down her nose. "Miss Wells?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"Representing yourself is your privilege and right, but I'm reminded of the old adage that the lawyer who represents himself—"

"Yes, Your Honor. I'm very familiar with it. My uncle will act as my attorney at today's proceedings. He's in transit, but he's been delayed."

"All right." Judge Melkin nodded at the prosecutor. "Now, if the Commonwealth will proceed."

The D.A. stood and began. "Your Honor, this is a particularly heinous murder. The decedent is the former fiancé of the accused. We have the blood-covered dress she was wearing when she stabbed him. We have witnesses who heard her threaten to kill him not thirty minutes before his body was discovered."

"That's it? What about fingerprint evidence?"

"No fingerprints, Your Honor, but we do have the skin samples from under the nails of the accused—DNA results on

that are pending. We can produce a witness who will testify that he saw her take the knife from the kitchen."

The last sentence hit Gwyneth in the stomach like she'd been kicked. Someone saw her take the knife? How could that be?

"Miss Wells, how do you plead?"

"Your Honor, I ask for a dismissal of all charges based on lack of evidence. The accused merely found the body and tripped over it. Her fingerprints aren't on the knife because she didn't stab the victim. What did I—she wipe the fingerprints off with? Surely the DA can address that issue."

"At trial, Miss Wells. The evidence is circumstantial, but I do find it compelling enough to go forward with this indictment. How do you plead?"

"Not guilty, Your Honor."

"Your Honor, the prosecution requests that no bail be set."

"Your Honor," Gwyneth protested, "the accused is a reputable New York attorney. She doesn't pose a flight risk."

"The accused lives out of state and is independently wealthy. I assert she *does* pose a flight risk," the D.A. countered.

"I'll surrender my passport, Your Honor."

"Your Honor," the D.A. continued, "this is a cold-blooded murderer who thinks that just because she's beautiful and rich you ought to cut her some slack."

A stentorian voice reverberated from the back of the courtroom. "Your Honor, may I be heard?"

Gwyneth turned. Mike, along with his father and her Uncle Wilford, had entered the courtroom. Her heart lifted—she was no longer alone.

The judge gave a curt nod. "Identify yourself for the court record."

"George Carlton. I personally guarantee the defendant's appearance in court."

Gwyneth's mouth dropped open. *Mike's father* would guarantee her appearance? She would've bet money that he couldn't stand the sight of her.

"Your relationship to the accused?"

"She's my son's fiancée, Your Honor."

Fiancée? That was stretching it a bit.

"Very well, Miss Wells. You are released into the custody of Mr. George Carlton, who is well-known to the Court for his years of government service. Bail is set at five million dollars."

The prosecutor's face turned red. "Your Honor, I object!"

"Objection noted. I assume you'd like this trial to begin as quickly as possible?"

"Yes, Your Honor," Gwyneth and the prosecutor answered in unison.

Judge Melkin consulted her calendar. "Two weeks from today. Can the People be ready by then?"

"Yes, Your Honor. Our case is airtight."

"Miss Wells?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

* * * *

The officer guarding Gwyneth permitted her a moment with her support group. "Well, sugar," Uncle Wil teased, "Perry Mason always got his cases dismissed at the prelim."

"Well, Old Perry didn't have to spend the night in jail." She threw her arms around her uncle's neck. "I'm so glad you're here."

Then she turned to Mike's father. "Mr. Carlton, thank you."

"You're welcome. I figured my son would appreciate it."

"And what am I—hamburger?" Mike asked and opened his arms.

"You look like prime rib to me, and I'm starving," she told him as he pulled into his arms. Burying her face in his shoulder, she felt secure for the first time in twelve hours. Her heart rate picked up as she caught the hint of his clean, masculine scent. If she could just stay in his arms...

Uncle Wil patted his briefcase. "I've got a ton of money in here. I'll have you out as soon as I find a bail bondsman."

Gwyn sighed. "Thank you. Just hurry."

Thirty-four

Two hours after her arraignment, Gwyneth was released into the custody of Mike's father. While she still had no clue why the elder Carlton had stepped up to the plate for her, she appreciated his effort. No point in looking a bona fide gift horse in the mouth. She glanced upward and marveled at the cerulean sky. After taking her first, sweet breath of freedom, she let it out slowly.

"Well, sugar, that trust fund of yours took a little nosedive, but I couldn't leave you in the pokey, now could I?"

"Thank you, Uncle Wil." She looked around at the three men who'd worked together to free her. "I'm grateful to all of you."

"Anytime, counselor. Now all we have to do is find out who really killed Klein," Mike offered.

"Normally, I'd say 'just let the authorities do their job,' but I don't think the sheriff is going to look for any other suspects. He already has me." She placed a hand on Mike's strong biceps. "We'll have a strategy session as soon as we *get back*—once I take a shower and get rid of the jail stink."

"Sid is already at the house. He may even have some answers for us by the time we get back to the farm."

"I hope so." Her body shivered involuntarily. "I don't think I'll ever be blasé about jail time again."

"At least you were in the new jail." Mike grimaced. "I can tell you from personal experience the old one was a pest hole."

"Well, the new one wasn't exactly a picnic. The sheriff paid me a visit and made a ridiculous attempt to get me to cleanse my soul."

Mike winced. "Good thing you were behind bars. I can just imagine what you'd have done if you weren't."

"You're right. I might've actually committed a real homicide."

Opening the door to the limo, Mike motioned for her to enter. As she passed in front of him, he whispered in her ear, "I missed you last night."

Whether it was the sensual warmth of his breath against her skin or the sultry undertone of his voice that caused her to tremble, Gwyneth wasn't sure. But one thing she knew; she couldn't wait another minute to have him.

But of course, she would—wait another minute, that is. Several minutes, if she was any judge. Somehow she didn't figure the esteemed George Carlton would appreciate her having her way with his son in the family's very fine limousine.

So instead of grabbing Mike by his broad shoulders, jerking him into the limo and performing a lip lock, she contented herself with gazing into his desire-darkened eyes and luxuriating in his warm embrace. Mike's mouth kicked up in a self-satisfied half smile. Apparently he was as ready to make up for lost time as she.

Home, James, and forget the park.

* * * *

Reggie Gruhn eased into his uncle's office. He tugged at his collar. For some inexplicable reason, it was tight. He hadn't been back in the compound five minutes before one of his uncle's lieutenants slithered up and told him Gianni was waiting for a debrief.

Gianni Damico looked up, a scowl drawing his dark eyebrows into one ugly one. "So what do you have to tell me?"

"Well, I believe I've done you a tremendous service." Reggie polished his fingernails across his shirt front. "I told the sheriff that I saw the blonde lawyer-you-love-to-hate take the knife from the kitchen. She'll pay a visit to Old Bill for Klein's murder."

"So who did kill 'im?"

Reggie shrugged. "Damn me, if I know. Wot's the diff? 'E's dead, and Gwyneth Wells, Esquire, 'as been arrested."

"He was my damned lawyer. That's the difference. I paid him a fortune in retainers, and now it's all wasted—just because of that busybody, blond bimbo. And I still don't know where my bitch of a wife is!" Uncle Gianni slammed a dark, hairy-backed fist on his desk.

Reggie jumped back—better to keep out of the way of those fists. "Yes, but I've put Miss Wells' pretty derrière—oh, you should see 'er, she's really fine—but I digress, don't I, Uncle?"

Blood suffused Damico's face, turning it dark and uglier than ever.

"You idiot. Did it ever occur to you that when they can't find you they'll discount your testimony?"

"Well—uh," Reggie stammered, "I—uh..."

"You have to go back."

"Go back? Wot the bloody 'ell for?"

"To testify at her trial. I want that bitch sent away forever."

"But I don't want to go back. Stick around in that r-rural place? I'll go starkers."

"You'll do as you're told. Your testimony will take care of her. She won't be able to interfere in my marriage, and Sylvia will come back home, and—" Damico gave a significant pause before finishing with, "I'll be ... grateful."

"Just 'ow grateful w-would yew be, Uncle?" Reggie leaned forward, unable to keep the smile off his face or the images of rolling in a pile of ever-so-lovely, green, U.S. cash, from his mind's eye.

"I might not snap your pencil neck!" Damico shouted into Reggie's ear.

"Ow!" He winced and straightened up. The visions of green faded into black—like the inside of a coffin.

"Now get outta here. And don't screw this up."

Reggie started backing from the room. "No, sir, I won't screw it up. Not me."

* * * *

Marina leaned over her sleeping son and gave him a gentle nudge. "Wake up, sleepy head. It's morning."

Adam opened his dark brown eyes, rubbing them with his fists. "Mommy?" He looked around the room. "Where's Daddy?"

"Daddy had to go check on his friend. There was some trouble last night." What else could she say? She didn't want to scare him.

"Is Daddy okay?"

"He's fine."

"What happened to his friend?"

"We'll talk about it later, okay? Let's get you dressed. We're going home."

Adam grimaced. "But I want to stay here with Daddy."

Marina sighed. His response was just what she'd expected. "How about this?" she suggested. "We'll stay until Daddy comes back, then we'll ask him what he thinks. If he thinks you should go home, then you'll have to do what he says, okay?" She hated making Michael the heavy, but the truth was Adam would agree to whatever his father wanted. Her son was an absolute daddy's boy. And she wouldn't have wanted it any other way.

Adam made a face, then nodded. "Okay."

* * * *

Mike and Gwyneth climbed the stairs to the second floor. She leaned her head against his shoulder as they walked down the hall to her room.

"Are you going to need someone to wash your back?"

"Mm. That sounds heavenly. Would you?"

Mike nodded. "Soon as I check Sid's progress. He might've found something while we were in court."

"That's probably more important than washing my back."

"But not as much fun," he conceded, placing a tender kiss on her neck. He sighed.

They stopped at her door. She looked up at him and batted her baby blues. "You know, there'll be plenty of time for—uh, all this, after we find out who killed Richard."

"Does that mean you're not going to dump me—like you did him?"

"I'm not fickle," she insisted with some spirit, then pouted. As much as he wanted to, Mike resisted the urge to bite her full, bottom lip. "I was kidding."

Gwyn's expression changed from petulant to troubled. "I know, but I still feel responsible for his death. If he hadn't followed me here, he'd still be alive."

"It's not your fault. The guy was a jerk."

"Being a jerk doesn't justify his death. If it did—well, there're quite a few who might be in trouble."

"Following you here—his choice, not yours."

"I know. I guess I-I'm just a little touchy."

"No wonder. You just spent a night in the slammer. *You're due.*" He pressed her up against the wall and nuzzled her neck. "In fact, you're due for a major dose of TLC once we find his killer."

She trembled in his arms. The memory of her long legs and perfect, rose-tipped breasts sent a heated surge to his groin. He cupped her buttocks and pressed his erection against her.

"Mm, all that for me?" Gwyn gazed at him, her blue eyes warm with welcome.

"I don't see anyone else in the hall." He laughed.

"What's so funny?" Her forehead furrowed as if puzzled.

"If I were to share," he drawled, "we'd never find Klein's murderer because we'd be too busy."

She looked at him from beneath her thick lashes as if suddenly shy, but her kissable lips drew into a smile. "And then, before we knew it, the sheriff would be pounding on the door, and I'd be back in his less-than-congenial custody."

"And we wouldn't want that, would we?"

"No, we wouldn't."

For a brief moment, Gwyneth averted her gaze from his. "I think I love you, Mike."

"I think you do too," he teased, even if her words sent his heart rate into the stratosphere.

"Smart-ass." She said and cuffed him on the shoulder.

"But you said you love me."

"Pay attention. I 'think' I love you. The jury's still out." Her blue eyes sparkled, her mood lightening.

"Waiting for the verdict always this difficult, counselor?"

"Yeah."

"Guess I'll appeal if the decision isn't favorable."

"All the way to the Supreme Court?"

"All the way, counselor. And I must warn you, I never give up."

"Then you'd better let me take a shower. And you'd better get busy..."

"I'll show you busy." He leaned in to kiss her, but Gwyn kept up the flow of conversation.

"...with your computer whiz, because I don't fancy spending any more time in jail."

Mike pulled a long face. "And here I thought you were going to say that you didn't fancy spending—"

"—Another night without you?"

"Right on target. You're pretty sharp—for a lady lawyer."

"You have *no* idea."

"I'm beginning to figure it out. That was your plan from the start, wasn't it? Fool the naïve detective into protecting your gorgeous body. Something you knew I couldn't resist."

"How would I know something like that?"

"How could you *not* know?"

"Is that your way of saying I'm a witch?"

"Yes." Mike grasped his heart. "I'm powerless against your charms."

Gwyn rolled her eyes and gave a theatrical sigh. "You've business to attend to. Get out of here before we really do end up in bed in the middle of the day." She leaned against the door. "What would your parents think?"

"No fair. The very specter of my parents has caused a major downsizing in my anatomy."

"Good." She grinned, then placed a hesitant hand on the doorknob.

"All right. I bow to your wishes. You take your shower, while I mosey downstairs and find us a killer. Agreed?" He hoped it would prove that simple.

"Agreed." She nodded, then blew him a kiss. Clearly reluctant, but determined, she slipped into her room and closed the door in his face.

Mike waited until the door shut, then walked to his own room. Striding to the adjoining door of their suites, he grinned.

Unlocked.

His grin widened as he tapped on the door. Without waiting for her response, he whipped it open to find her half-naked. Fate was kind indeed.

Grabbing her blouse to cover her breasts, she squeaked, "Mike."

"I didn't *say when* I'd find the killer."

She dropped her blouse and shot him a sultry glance. His heart revved up at the sight of her breasts. Perfect twins they were.

"Come to think of it, you didn't," she purred, dropping her gaze.

"I'm all yours, counselor."

"I don't know what I'm going to do with you."

He closed the distance between them and drew her into his arms. "I do."

Thirty-five

In spite of the inferno pumping through his body, Mike heard a noise from his room. He held his breath, wishing he could surrender to the blaze.

Then, "Where's Daddy?"

At the sound of Adam's voice, Mike groaned. Reluctantly he pulled away from Gwyn. "I have to see what he wants." He sat up and grabbed his shirt and jeans.

A flushed Gwyn leaned back and took a deep breath. "I understand, I understand. I really do."

Mike jammed his feet into his shoes and stumbled toward the connecting door. Thank God he'd shut it, or his son would've received an early course in foreplay. With a last parting glance over his shoulder, he mouthed, "Sorry." Pasting a smile on his face, he opened the door.

"Daddy!" Adam squealed and made a running jump into Mike's ready arms.

"Hey, fella. What's happening?"

"Mommy says I have to go home with her. But I want to stay here. She says it's up to you."

"Oh, she does, does she?" Mike shot Marina a good-natured 'Thanks-a-lot' expression and set his son down on the floor. "You know what? Your mommy's right. Some bad things happened last night, and I'd feel better if you took your mommy back to the city. You can watch out after her there better than I can here. Will you do that for me, partner?"

"Take care of Mommy? Sure!" Adam nodded vigorously. "I'm a big boy."

"Yes, you're a very big boy." Marina nodded and hugged their son. "Thanks, Mike."

Mike grinned. "Only too happy to oblige."

Adam's eyebrows furrowed as he looked up at Mike. "Daddy, your shirt is funny." Adam glanced at his mother. "Mommy, Daddy needs help getting dressed, doesn't he?"

She flushed, then bit her lip to keep from laughing. "Just sometimes."

"Uh, sorry." Mike cleared his throat and wished the floor would swallow him up. Nothing like shoving his relationship with Gwyn in Marina's face.

"Well, maybe you *should* get some help this time." She turned to leave, then turned back. "I almost forgot. Sid's got something for you. Something about fingerprints."

"Great. Just take Adam and get back to the city before anything else happens, okay?"

Marina nodded. "I will—right after lunch. Don't worry."

"And I am sorry," he told her softly.

"It's okay, really. I've made peace with it."

"I'm glad."

"And besides, I sort of like Gwyneth."

"Yeah, she's not so bad once you get to know her."

"Obviously." Marina kept smiling; there was even a sparkle in her brown eyes.

Mike restrained a sigh of relief. In spite of his dread of Marina and Gwyneth's first meeting, things had gone pretty well.

Adam tugged on his mother's arm. "Do we have to go now?"

"Yes, we do—right after lunch." She turned to Mike. "Good luck, and maybe you ought to—uh, fix your shirt."

* * * *

Gwyneth massaged lemon-scented shampoo through her hair as the steamy hot water sluiced down her body.

Finally. She felt a little more human and a little less like someone who'd spent the night in the county lockup.

Just as well that Mike's son interrupted their lovemaking. As confused as she was by the way her body reacted whenever she came within ten feet of him and as much as she craved his touch, it scared her. Control—with Mike, she just didn't have any. Logical thought abandoned her, and all she wanted was to lie in his arms. This thing with him was so new ... and unexpected. *It couldn't stay like that, could it?* she wondered while she rinsed the shampoo from her hair.

With one hand, she shut off the water, while she groped blindly for a towel with the other. Cold, marble tile—yes. Towel—no. Strong, muscular chest—yes.

"Mm. Mike."

"Need some help with your back?" He sighed theatrically. "But I see you're finished."

She tiptoed and peeped over his shoulder. "Where's Adam?"

"He's going back to the city with his mother. He'll be safer. Marina just needed my help in convincing him."

She gazed into his shining eyes. "Mm, so are you gonna take off that shirt which, by the way, is buttoned wrong?"

A sheepish grin spread across his face. "Adam spotted it, too. Thought his Daddy was pretty funny."

"I bet he did, but you didn't answer my question. And I notice you aren't taking your shirt off either."

"Very observant, counselor."

Mike handed her the towel. She wrapped it around her body and stepped out of the shower.

"'Bout time I find the killer."

"You weren't thinking about it ten minutes ago."

"No. I wasn't." He ran the pad of his thumb down the side of her neck. "I have to tell you. Something happens to me every time I get near you."

"Oh, yeah, and what would that be?" She slipped from his reach, then grabbed a bottle of lotion, opened it and poured some into her hands. Slowly she slathered the pink liquid over her arms and legs, while Mike stood with his tongue hanging out. Not literally, but he had that *look*.

"I have a severe hemodynamic relocation reaction."

"That's a pretty big term for a P.I. to use. I'm not even sure what it means." She kept her tone teasing and playful. Tempting him was so much fun.

"Yeah, it means the blood leaves my head—"

She interrupted him with a laughing, "—and relocates to the little Mikey brain." She slid her finger down his zipper.

"Hmm, I believe you're having another one of those—whatchamacallits."

"That's it." He took her teasing hand and placed it between both of his. "Marina told me Sid has some initial intel back on the fingerprints, so..."

"This..." She leaned forward and kissed his nose. "This'll have to wait."

"Yeah, 'fraid so."

She stepped into his arms. "Okay, then, you go play detective." She ran her fingers through his wavy hair. He shuddered.

Focus.

"I'll find Uncle Wil, and we'll work on my defense. But you know, if you're really a good detective and find the real killer, I won't need a defense."

Mike groaned. "Being near you is driving me crazy, Gwyn." He shook his head as if trying to clear it. "That's my plan. I will find Klein's murderer. I promise."

"I know you will." Gwyneth rested her head on his shoulder, letting out a long sigh. If she wasn't careful, she could get addicted to being in his arms. Oh, hell, she already was.

Mike marshaled his self-control and stepped an arm's length away from her. "We've got to stop meeting like this," he quipped, giving her a wink, then turned and strode from the room, not trusting himself any longer. Wrapped in a towel, the naked Gwyneth would try a monk's self-control—much less his.

He flew down the stairs, taking them two at a time. He found his assistant hunched over his keyboard. In Mike's

absence, Sid had worked his magic and transformed the library into a state-of-the-art control center.

Sid looked up from his monitor. "'bout time you dragged your ass down here."

Mike ignored the younger man's grousing. His assistant's attitude was par for the course, but Mike didn't mind. Sid's genius with computers made putting up with a little attitude more than worth it.

"Marina says you have something."

"Well, if Marina's the hot chick with long, black hair, the answer's yes. Who is she, anyway? Got a cute kid, too."

"Cut the crap." Mike wasn't about to give his assistant even a short version of his bio.

"Well, it seems you had some interesting guests here last night." Mike watched over the computer whiz's shoulder. "Looks like one Lilith Sand has had a run-in with your former co-workers in upstate New York."

"Her prints are on file?"

"Arrested for the death of her last husband. Here." Sid spun around and tapped on a second laptop. A printer started spitting out sheets of paper. "You spent so much time upstairs with your girlfriend that I had time to find the local newspaper coverage of the trial."

Mike grabbed the printouts. "She was acquitted."

"Yeah, but according to popular opinion, she bought someone off. Check the letters to the editor after the trial ended. Evidence disappeared. Witnesses changed their stories. It was a regular cock-up."

"That's all?" Lilith Sand, Gwyneth's aunt. Some kind of coincidence—or was it?

"Her son's had a scrape or two—juvie stuff."

"Those records would be sealed."

"True, but the self-acclaimed Wall Street whiz kid has made an enemy or two, so I called in some favors. "Sid shot Mike a self-satisfied grin. "Those records are downloading now."

"What about the other guests?" Mike scanned the printouts. "I'm guessing no, because I've known most of them all my life. The staff? Any hits?"

Sid chortled. "On the staff? Considering the security your father has around here, I'd guess that he's had them checked out."

"True, but I'm curious about the housekeeper. She's new."

"Right. I did get an interesting hit on one of the caterer's staff."

His interest piqued, Mike leaned forward. "Yeah?"

"Lowlife scum by the name of Reggie Gruhn."

"Yeah, I remember him." Mike clenched his jaw. "Short guy, shaved head. Gave evidence against Gwyn."

"Crap."

"Says he saw her in the kitchen, taking the murder weapon."

"Not good. Any chance he's telling the truth?" Sid asked, then ducked.

"No!"

"Okay, okay. Don't pop a blood vessel."

Mike took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "So what did you come up with on Gruhn?"

"He's connected."

"Connected?" Mike wondered aloud. "He's a Brit. Only in the country a short time, right?"

"Yes," Sid allowed with a smirk, "but his uncle is none other than crime boss Gianni Damico."

"Damico?"

"Know him?"

"Yeah, I know him." So Damico's fine hand was added into the equation. One of his henchmen had lied to the sheriff about Gwyn. Mike didn't believe in coincidence—not for one damn second where that Mafioso bastard was involved. Klein had been Damico's mouthpiece—no doubt bought and paid for handsomely.

And Gwyn was Sylvia Damico's divorce lawyer. All Mike had to do was show the connection between Klein, Damico and Gruhn, and there would be reasonable doubt. But if he could prove Gruhn actually killed Klein on Damico's orders, he could get both men sent to the slammer. That would be even better.

A damn sight better.

"Give me everything you have on Gruhn. Everything. I want to know if he was breast-fed as an infant. I want to know when he shagged his first piece. I—"

"I got it," Sid interrupted. "Everything."

What if there was really only one agenda? Getting rid of Gwyn. The stalker back in the city—the reason she'd hired him in the first place.

Dammit. He hadn't done a very good job of protecting her. He'd let his personal attachment get in the way.

What a dumb-ass fool he'd been. Getting Gwyn out of town was supposed to protect her. But Damico's reach was long—too long.

"See if there's any connection between Lilith Sand and Gianni Damico."

Sid frowned, but his fingers flew over the keys. "What makes you think there is one?"

"Dunno, just don't want to rule anything out." Mike sat down in front of a free laptop. Hands poised over the keyboard, he watched the screen. "Why don't I do a search on the housekeeper, Millie Grayson, while you cross-reference the lovely Mrs. Sand and the crime boss?"

"Haven't found anything yet. Use the Hugga Mugga search engine."

"Hugga Mugga?" He'd never heard of that one.

"Created by yours truly," Sid replied with a wide smirk. "Click on the yin-yang icon."

Mike did as his assistant instructed. "Damn." The screen suddenly transformed from an ordinary Internet connection to the graphic of a large, blinking eye. "So how long is this thing gonna keep winking at me?"

Sid sniggered. "Click on the third eyelash from the left."

Mike's frustration increased. "Bottom or top?" Couldn't Sid ever do anything simple?

"Bottom."

Mike clicked on the eyelash. A trumpet blared, and the iris morphed into a kaleidoscope of color. Then a soft, seductive, female voice said, *Your wish is my command, master.*

Shades of Jeannie. Mike raised an eyebrow and frowned.

"Just tell her what you want, Mike. She's voice-activated."

"Search."

That's all I know how to do, darlin', but I might make an exception in your case. Give me a little more information. Like a name or—

Mike interrupted, "Name, Millie Grayson."

No need to be rude, hon. Searching...

"Pretty cool, huh?" Sid leaned back and smiled.

Mike chuckled. "Yeah."

Number of exact matches: four thousand. Would you like to redefine your search?

"Yes, redefine for east of the Mississippi."

Searching ... Two thousand four hundred and eighty-two. Limit further?

"Yes, limit to age group twenty-two to thirty-five."

You're really getting the hang of this, sweetheart.

Searching...

"Thank you." Was he nuts? He was actually talking to a computer like it was a human. Next thing, he'd be asking Scottie to beam him up.

Three hundred and twenty-two. Suggest further definition.

"Go with that, then cross-reference with factors of educational level, occupation by state and criminal record."

Sid looked up from his monitor. "Now, cross-ref Lilith Sand with the housekeeper and see if Jeannie pinpoints any areas of interface."

Searching...

Mike watched as the search engine's working icon switched to an animation of a red-and gold-clad odalisque, who performed a dance with less covering as the search process continued.

"Sid, you're seriously demented," he commented, shaking his head, "I think you need more work to do."

"Nah, this is just a hobby. I wanna be a detective like you, boss."

"You're already a detective. The real thing, kid. There's more intel found in the computer than skulking around no-tell motels every night of the week. I'd be lost without your skills."

"Gosh, Mike, I didn't know you cared. But you have a gun. I don't," Sid protested, "And you have a license. And I don't."

"When we get back to the city, we'll work on it."

"Cool."

"Hey, what's this?" The odalisque had gone away with a puff of black smoke. "Did I kill it?" When the animated smoke dissipated, the screen filled with data.

Three hits, master, the silky computer voice announced.

"Damn!" Mike leaned back in the chair. "Would you just look at this?"

Thirty-six

Gwyneth sauntered outside onto the flagstone patio. The warmth of the August sun beat down on her face. She relished the simple freedom of moving around—even though before she'd found her ex-fiancé's body, she'd never given her freedom much thought. Spending the night in jail had done wonders for her perspective.

Besides, if she couldn't nibble on Mike, she might as well find some lunch.

"Well, dear niece, I see you've managed to steal the spotlight, as usual."

"Lilith, I didn't see you sitting there." Truthfully she hadn't, yet there was the black widow herself, attired in a melon silk ensemble that flattered her autumn coloring and made the absolute most of her slender figure.

Her aunt looked over the large, Jackie O-style sunglasses. "No reason you should with a handsome man tripping over his own feet trying to find your fiancé's murderer—which, by the way, he hasn't managed to do," she finished with an arch smile.

Gwyneth took a deep breath. Deep breaths were preferable to scratching out the eyes of her mother's sister. "How is it that you're here at the Carltons' home? Stalking me?"

"Don't be silly, dear. I'd rather be bored to death than follow you around. You and your pathetic do-gooder life." Lilith shuddered, then sipped from her glass before

continuing. "I prefer to spend my money. I worked hard enough for it."

"I'm not sure *work* is what I'd call it."

Her aunt gave an enigmatic smile. "My dear, you have no idea how much work it is to convince dried-up old men that they are fabulous in bed."

"You have my deepest sympathy. By the way, I sent flowers for your latest departed spouse. Only two weeks ago, wasn't it?"

"Three, dear. But then, time flies when one is having fun."

"I guess it must."

"Oh, do sit down and have a drink. Drop this holier-than-thou act. I find it rather tedious at this hour of the day."

"Sorry, but I'd rather be bored to death than drink with you."

"*Touché*. Pity you aren't more original." Her aunt smoothed the wrinkles from her melon silk slacks. Her off-the-shoulder blouse showed her tanned shoulders to perfection.

Gwyneth rolled her eyes, but she had to admit, compared to her aunt, she felt somewhat colorless. No wonder the woman had married so well and so many times. She had to be fifty if she was a day, but didn't look a day over thirty-nine.

"You must give me the name of your plastic surgeon. He did a wonderful job this last time." Her aunt's quick flush ... a scored point.

"Ah, Gwyneth, there you are." Her face flushed pink from the heat, Elinor Carlton stepped onto the patio, carrying a basket of cut flowers. "I'm so glad they released you."

"Into Mr. Carlton's custody. I'm not exactly free."

"It's only a formality. Michael will find the miscreant who killed the unfortunate Mr. Klein."

"Yes, I'm sure he will."

"Shall we have lunch? Cook has prepared something light for us."

Before anyone could answer, a small whirlwind by the name of Adam popped out from behind a large, lavender-blossomed crepe myrtle and rushed over to Gwyneth. Planting his small feet wide apart, he placed his hands on his hips. "Hi."

"Hi, yourself." Gwyneth looked down at the little boy who was quickly winning her heart. "What've you been up to this morning?"

"I rode my pony. And got my boots dirty. And when Mommy tried to get me to change 'em, I ran away and hid behind the tree, but she didn't find me, and I got tired of hiding so I came to see you."

Gwyneth stifled a giggle. "Well, I can see that you've had a very busy morning." What a bundle of energy and words Mike's son was.

Marina rushed onto the patio, her face pale with an expression of near panic. "Has anyone seen Adam? There you are, you scamp."

Adam fell to the ground and rolled in laughter. "You caught me."

"Yes, and we're going to wash your hands and face. Grandmama won't let boys with dirty faces and hands have lunch."

"Yes, she will." Adam glanced at his grandmother.
"Grandmama'll let me have lunch, won't you? It's just a lil dirt. Not 'nuff to hurt."

"I'm afraid you're mother is correct." Elinor Carlton spoke with gentle forbearance. "Boys at my table must always have clean hands and faces."

"Aw..." The boy picked himself up and dusted his hands off on his jeans. "I want Gwyn to wash me."

"Adam—" Marina protested.

He screwed up his face and pouted. "Gwy-ynnn."

"Okay, cowpoke, let's go." Gwyneth held out her hand.
"It's all right," she told Marina, "I don't mind."

Adam took her hand and started skipping toward the French doors, dragging her along behind him. "Why was my daddy in your room today?"

"Uh, uh," Gwyneth stalled. "Your-uh, daddy was helping me with a problem I have. Grownup stuff, you know."

"Oh, I know what that means."

"You do?"

"It means you're not gonna tell me, right?"

"Right."

"Grownups sure are weird 'bout stuff."

"Oh, really?" Gwyneth ruffled Adam's dark hair. "No weirder than little boys who ride ponies and get themselves all dirty."

"That's not weird. That's fun."

* * * *

Mike spread the printout for Sid to review. "Not bad for a computer dummy."

"Hot damn!" Sid shouted with unrestrained excitement. "You've hit the mother lode. Let's tell Gwyneth."

"No, wait. The connections are all circumstantial. I still have to figure out which one murdered Klein."

"Maybe they're all in it together."

Mike shook his head. "Don't think so. There's something off."

"What're ya gonna do?" Sid asked, scratching his buzz-cut head.

"I have a plan," Mike told him with a grin. "But first, I have to talk to my old man."

* * * *

Mike held his breath waiting for his father's reaction. "Well?" Pompous old goat was enjoying making him wait.

George Carlton cocked his head and raised a bushy, white eyebrow. "And if I should agree to this far-fetched plan of yours, what will you do for me in return?"

"I will do just about anything—well, almost."

A speculative gleam came to his father's eyes. "I don't suppose you'd deign to marry the mother of your son?"

"No."

"What about giving up this absurd idea of being a private detective and go into the family business?"

"You mean be a CIA spook? Hell, no."

His father chuckled in rare good humor and leaned back in his wheelchair. "Didn't figure you would. All right, I'll agree to

this plan of yours. I'm anxious to see just how good you really are."

"T-thank you," Mike managed. Damn. He hated asking old man for anything, but this was for Gwyneth.

"That wasn't so difficult, was it?" was his father's parting jab.

"No," Mike answered, "no more than pulling teeth with a pair of tweezers."

"Hmph!" His father responded, but Mike caught a glimmer of a smile tugging at the corner of his usually dour mouth.

* * * *

Paul Winston groaned as Lilith Sand sat straddled across his butt, massaging musk-scented oil into his tight, shoulder muscles. Her bare skin against his...

"What's this all about tonight?" she purred into his ear, her breath warm and sweet. He felt a thrill deep in his groin.

"How should I know? Maybe he thinks he's Hercule Poirot."

He felt the weight of her body shift as she laughed. "Oh, you mean collect everyone into the drawing room and solve the case in front of our very eyes? How droll." She leaned low against his back, her nipples grazing the oiled skin.

"It should provide some entertainment," she admitted, "but I have other plans for *our* evening, and I can assure you they don't include the boy detective."

"Really?" He flipped from his back and captured her hands with his own. He gazed into her snapping brown eyes and knew just what she had planned.

"Really."

* * * *

Detective McKenzie leaned across the sheriff's desk. A frown creased his pitted face as he scowled up at her. "So what's it all about?" she asked. "This command appearance at the Carltons' estate?"

"Damned if I know. But if the most connected man in the county requests our presence at seven, seven it'll be."

"It has to be related to the murder." A sensation akin to giddiness pumped through McKenzie's body—excitement, pure and simple. As Dr. Watson would say, 'the chase was afoot.'

"Well, I didn't figure it was for a sit-down dinner, McKenzie. You have anything better to do?"

"No, sir, Sheriff," she told him with a large measure of cheek. "Solving a murder always makes my day."

"Humph." He set about straightening the papers on his desk. "Already done that, missy."

"We'll see, won't we?" McKenzie didn't give the sheriff time to answer. She left before she broke into laughter and lost her job. For some odd reason, Bauer just didn't appreciate her brand of humor.

* * * *

Her cell phone chirped. Slowly so that no one would pay attention, she walked toward the maze. Once assured that she couldn't be observed, she slipped the cellular from her pocket. "Hello?"

An all-too-familiar voice hissed, "Don't say anything. Just listen. The brave boy detective is up to something. No matter what happens tonight, don't open your mouth. He doesn't know anything, and even if he does, he can't prove it."

"But—" Her response was cut off by the annoying sound of a dial tone. She swore, sorry that she'd ever embarked on a life of skirting the law. It just wasn't fun anymore.

* * * *

Detective Moira McKenzie looked up from her desk and didn't repress her groan. "Mr. Gruhn, isn't it?" she asked, knowing full well who he was—the annoying little caterer who'd given evidence against Gwyneth Wells. "What do you want?"

"Hello, Detective McKenzie. Have I told you what a smashing bit of fluff you are?"

"Get your lousy hands off my desk. What do you want?" she repeated, anxious to get rid of the slime ball.

Gruhn flashed a smile that showed evidence of recent visits for cosmetic whitening. "Just to make m'self available for the investigation."

"The sheriff already has your statement, doesn't he?"

"Yes, but I thought you might like to perform an in-depth interview. Might trigger something in me memory, y'know?"

"Have you remembered something else? Something you forgot to tell the sheriff?"

"Well," he paused, rubbing his chin in an overly dramatic pretense of thinking. "There's something tickling at the far

reaches of me brain cells, and I think if you spent some time with me, I might be able to bring it to the fore."

"Far be it for me to put a roadblock in the way of justice." Pulling the tape recorder from her desk drawer, Quinn gave him a smile she didn't believe in.

"All right, Mr. Gruhn, I'll tape this interview." She recorded the date and the nature of the session. "Go ahead. I'm all atwitter with anticipation."

* * * *

"I want those damn reports ASAP," George Carlton yelled into the telephone. "I don't care. I want the results by tonight."

George broke the connection. *Damn. Yes, damn technology and damn his wasted left arm and hand.* Couldn't slam down a receiver worth a damn. That had always been such a satisfying resolution. Now the telephone connection could be broken with the flick of a switch. His receiver had been replaced by a headset so he could prance around in his wheelchair like some sort of geriatric rock 'n' roll star.

* * * *

"Grayson, are you paying attention?" What was wrong with the young woman? Elinor wondered for the second time. The housekeeper was distracted and downright impossible.

"Of course." Millie Grayson pressed her lips together until they formed a thin, pink line.

"Then we've finished the dinner menu. See that Cook prepares everything I've requested."

"It's quite different from the usual fare."

Heaving a sigh, Elinor admitted, "My Michael is quite fond of American cuisine—what a misnomer that is," she grumbled more to herself than anyone.

"It seems that you're taking a great deal of trouble with tonight's menu. What's so special about this evening?"

"Just that my son and his fiancée are dining *en famille*. I wouldn't be surprised if they announce their engagement this evening."

"Really?"

"That will be all, Grayson. There's no need to concern yourself with family matters."

Grayson's face flushed at the rebuke. Turning to leave, the housekeeper paused at the doorway to the office.

Anxious to be left alone, Elinor glanced up sharply. "Yes?"

Chewing her bottom lip, Grayson tempered her response—and rightly so. "Nothing, Mrs. Carlton."

* * * *

"Daddy?"

Mike looked up from his sheaf of printouts, surprised to see Marina and Adam standing in the doorway. "I thought you were going back to the city."

"We're ready to leave. Adam just wanted to say good-bye."

Mike pushed away from the desk and held out his arms to his son, who promptly jumped onto his lap.

"Daddy's gonna miss you," he told the squirming boy.

"I'll miss you too, Daddy. When're you coming back?"

"Soon."

"Is Gwyn coming?"

"Of course, she lives in the city."

"Oh." Adam stopped and placed his hands at his waist.

"Tell her she can ride my pony while I'm gone."

Mike couldn't resist a wide grin, not with the image of the long-legged Gwyneth riding Adam's Shetland pony popping into his mind. "I'll be sure and tell her."

"She'll have to feed him some apple, okay?"

"I'll make sure she does," Mike promised.

"Adam, it's time to go." Marina stood in the doorway.

"Rocky's ready to take us home."

"Okay." Adam hugged Mike, scrambled down to the floor, then held out his hand. "No kisses. I'm too big for that stuff."

Mike nodded and shook his son's hand with all the solemnity the occasion required. Adam turned and skipped from the library to his mother's side.

Mike's vision clouded, but he blinked the unaccustomed moisture away. His son was a miracle. And in spite of all the dire warnings about broken homes, he couldn't see any sign of emotional damage in the boy as the result of having parents who had separate homes and lives.

Marina turned. "Thank you for sending Rocky with us. I like him." Her face flushed a pretty, pink. "He's a nice man."

"You'll be safe with him."

Marina smiled shyly. "Yes, I know."

* * * *

Detective McKenzie leaned back as Gruhn leaned forward to tell her, "I quite like the sound of 'all atwitter.' Makes me go all warm in me knickers, it does."

"Mr. Gruhn!" she snapped, trying to rein his personal comments, "Do you or do you not have further information that will assist in this investigation?"

"Of course, I do, luv."

"De-tec-tive," McKenzie told him, enunciating each syllable, while she mentally counted to ten. "Why don't you start at the beginning and tell me everything you remember."

"Well, first I was preparing the lobster bisque—cream soups are my specialty, you know. I start them by using the best *crème fraîche*, then I put—"

"Put a sock in it, Gruhn. Do I look like Martha Stewart? I don't give a dog's fart about your recipes."

"Now, luv, I can see I was mistaken. But then I'm sure Her Domestic Majesty would have a sovereign remedy if one of her doggies did fart," he babbled, as he continued pacing back and forth.

McKenzie sighed and looked down at the backs of her hands. Maybe it was time to start greasing them and wearing gloves to bed. Trying to regain focus, she smacked the desk with her fist. "I'm waiting, Gruhn."

The little man's eyes widened, but he complied. "As I said, I was in the kitchen—in me element, you know?"

"You already covered that. Cut to the chase." Really, maybe she ought to have a manicure. Gwyneth Wells' nails were lovely, and that shade of polish was so stylish. Maybe

some of those acrylic nails—she could certainly use them right now to claw Gruhn's eyeballs out of his empty head.

"And sit down," she ordered. "You're making me nervous."

He complied with a smarmy grin. "Yes, ma'am. Are you sure you wouldn't like to use the handy-cuffs on me? I'm feeling a bit aroused."

McKenzie slammed her fists down on the desk. "Out of here. Or I'll have you charged with sexual harassment."

A shocked expression took the place of his smarmy smile. "You misunderstand, luv—I mean, Detective McKenzie. I'm just gob-smacked by your charms."

"Gob-smacked?"

"Oh—" he started, but she cut him off at the pass.

"No, don't tell me. I don't want to know." She stood up, ready to escort him from the building. "So unless you can tell me anything new, we're through."

Gruhn straightened up; his eyes became unreadable. An involuntary shiver ran through her body—and it surprised her. The man might act like a dimwit, but he possessed the eyes of a killer if she'd ever seen one.

"Detective McKenzie, I saw the tall blonde 'and the bloody knife over to the new boyfriend. They're in it together."

"And when did you see this? Why didn't you tell us in your initial interview?"

"It slipped my mind. That's why I came forward now."

In it together? Is it possible?

"All right." She slapped a legal pad down on the desk in front on him. "Write it all down and sign it."

Thirty-seven

Tired of being left out of Mike's loop, Gwyneth decided she'd just go to the source. Smoothing back a strand of hair, she took a deep breath, then slipped into the library. Without saying a word, she watched as he worked furiously at the computer. Something was up, and she would know *what* before she left the room. "Mike..."

He looked up from his keyboard and grinned. Dammit. He didn't seem at all surprised to see her. "What's up?" she asked.

"Not much. Keeping your beautiful backside out of the slammer."

His eyes were the color of palest green jade as he gave her the oh-so-casual, up-and-down perusal. At least she had his attention.

"No, I mean, what's the big plan for *tonight*?"

"Tonight?" he asked with a choirboy expression that she didn't buy for a New-York minute.

"Yes, tonight. Don't play dumb. I know you're up to something."

"Not much. Just decided I'd speed things up. Y'know, get everyone together and see what happens. One might turn on the others."

"Others? Y-you think there's more than one person involved?"

"Can't rule it out." He leaned back in the chair, arms folded across his chest with the most annoying look of satisfaction pasted across his face.

She was getting nowhere at a turtle's pace. *Time to raise the stakes.* "You know something, don't you?" She more or less slithered toward him. His eyes widened and darkened. *Good sign.*

"Me?" He scooted back in his chair.

"Tell me."

"Nothing to tell, counselor."

Determined to worm it out of him, she slithered closer and sat on his lap. "Mike..." Delicately, she ran her finger behind his ear. She could feel him shift under her. "Don't keep me in the dark."

"Gwyn..." His breath grew a little ragged.

"What, Mikey?" Wincing her fingers through the chestnut waves, she heaved a sigh.

"Stop. I'm not going to tell you my plan. I need your reactions to be natural."

"But drama was my minor in college," she whispered in his ear, nipping the lobe.

Mike took a ragged breath and tried to laugh her off. "Drama queen. That explains everything." He nodded and gave her a wry smile that lifted the corner of his mouth. "Now why am I not surprised?" Again he shifted in his chair.

"Am I too heavy?" she asked, batting her lashes at him. She would wear him down or know the reason why.

"N-no..."

"No, I'm not too heavy, or no, you're not going to tell me anything?" she asked him as innocently as she could. Two could play that game. And sitting on his lap was making her think of games, all right.

"The second," he told her, his jaw clenched, "the answer's still no."

"All right, then, I'll tell you what I already know. Your mother says you went to your father and induced him to invite everyone of note here tonight, including some of the caterer's staff and that horrible sheriff."

"True, but that's all you need to know."

It'd been entirely too long since she'd felt his lips on hers. Leaning forward, she kissed him and worried his bottom lip between her teeth. "Surrender, you're mine," she told him.

Mike groaned, "You don't play fair," before crushing his lips to hers. His strong hands skimmed under her skirt and up her thighs and hooked the lace of her panties. Her heart pounded, and her skin burned at his touch.

Breaking the kiss, she glanced upward. "Upstairs now?"

She didn't have to ask twice.

* * * *

Like a lemming, Mike followed Gwyn upstairs to her room. Luckily, no one saw her leading him by his tie like a tame monkey on a leash. "You know, we don't have time for this."

"Sure we do. It's like this, if you don't make love to me, you're going to have to tell me what you know—and don't bother denying it, you know something. And your plan."

"I'm not telling you anything. I've already told you why."

"Then I have to assume you really don't have a plan, and you're just blowing smoke."

"Now would I do something like that?" he asked, unable to hold back a laugh.

Her eyes widened, then she poked him in the chest. He took a step back. "Watch it," he warned. Damn, but she was a formidable, if beautiful, opponent. Going to bed wasn't such a bad idea, but his plan for the evening was already set.

"You think this is funny?" she asked, poking him again.

"Sort of." This time he gave no ground. "Mmm. What if I poked *you* like that?" He ran his hand over one of her breasts. The nipple budded under his touch. He grinned. "You don't seem to mind."

"If you poke me, I'll have to sue you for—"

"For what?" He grabbed her around the waist and pulled her to him, then lowered his lips to hers and kissed her.

"Mm," she murmured against his mouth, "I'll think of something."

"But in the meantime—"

"In the meantime, you'll be too ... She nibbled on his lower lip, then added, "...busy."

"Mm." Mike edged her toward the bed. He ripped her blouse open. Buttons flew.

She looked up at him, her lips parted expectantly. "I thought you were too busy," she teased in a breathy tone that sent his testosterone level soaring.

"Uh-huh. Time is of the essence."

"Any other clichés you want to utter before I love you senseless?"

"We'll see who's senseless," he challenged, stroking a rose pink nipple. The nipple tightened into a bud. "You're so beautiful." Then he cupped her breasts, weighing their warmth. Gwyn sighed and wriggled against him.

"Sounds like a line to me."

"It is, but it's no less true."

"I see. Now what if I admitted you're the best lover I've ever had?"

"Thank you."

"I didn't say it. I said 'what if?'"

"In that case, I'd say you had remarkable good sense."

"Remarkable? Why remarkable?"

"Because falling in love is one thing, and being a good lover is another. Remarkable is when everything comes together. Chemistry. Passion. Love." He nibbled her ear lobe. "That's what I've found with you."

Her eyes widened as she drew back. "Are you sure it's not just chemistry?"

"Absolutely."

"You sound awfully certain."

"Believe me, there's no sex in the world that is worth putting up with a stubborn attorney with the personality of a cactus and a tendency toward hypochondria."

"What—"

"Say thank you."

"'Thank you' for what? Unless I'm very mistaken, you just insulted me."

"No, I just told you that I love you in spite of your bad habits and character flaws."

"Allow me to clarify this. Against your better judgment, you're fondling my body, and if I'm not mistaken, ready to have your way with me, again, but you can't stand me."

"Clarify this, counselor. I love you—every inch of your long, lovely body and every quirk of your high-maintenance self. I love you."

"I'm still not convinced." She drew her lips into a pout. "*I* think it's just the chemistry. I might need..." She worried her lip with her teeth. "...a wider basis for comparison. I'm afraid my experience *is* rather limited."

"I won't be responsible for what happens if you even think about broadening your experience."

"Oh, really?"

"Really."

She favored him with a smirking grin. "I suppose jealousy is a good sign."

"I'd be so far beyond jealous. I'd be devastated, destroyed. Could you be responsible for that?"

"Oh, I don't know. I like to think that the loss of my affections could do that to someone."

"You sweet witch."

"Witch?"

"Yes, you put a spell on me the first moment you walked into my office."

"Good, because I wasn't very impressed with you at all."

"And you made no secret of it."

Gwyneth giggled, snuggling closer into Mike's arms. "I didn't, did I?"

"But you were fooling yourself."

"I was?"

"Yes, I'm a master of observation. I watched your body language."

"And just what did my body language tell you?"

"You kept touching your hair. That told me you were very interested. And you were squirming in the chair, and that told me you thought I was hot."

"You're so arrogant."

"Am I wrong?"

Her lips spread into a wide, seductive smile that sent his hormones into overdrive. "You had my number, all right."

"Finally, you admit what I've known all along."

"I do love you, Mike."

"Show me."

"I will show you."

Gwyneth took in Mike's wicked grin and slipped her arms around his neck. Pressing her body against his, she gloried in his ready response. "You're going to find the killer and keep me out of jail?" Finding the killer had just been put on hold for the time being.

"Nuh-uh, counselor, you're in for some of that TLC I promised."

His mouth descended on hers. First, he teased and played with her bottom lip, nibbling tender kisses that set her heart racing and the warmth building and pooling in her lower belly. Then he claimed her breasts. She grew light-headed and moaned her need for him, grinding her pelvis against his erection.

Mike groaned, then pulled at his shirt while Gwyneth feverishly unbuttoned it with shaking hands. He ripped it off and let it fall to the floor. She splayed her hands across his chest, admiring his well-defined muscles, then teased his flat nipples with her tongue until they formed tight nubs.

"You're killing me." He let out another low groan.

"Not you, too? I must be more careful. The sheriff already wants me to spend the rest of my life in jail."

Unbuckling his belt, she unzipped his pants and closed her hand around his hot length. Heat that matched her own.

Grinning, she backed him toward the bed. He offered no resistance, unless a knowing smile counted. She nudged him down, then skimmed her panties over her butt and stepped out of them. He waited for her—proudly.

She knelt beside him on the bed. His eyes widened as she stood up and over him.

"Omigod. What a view," he whispered.

"Do you want to just look or—"

"God, no. Please—"

"That's better. I like a man who begs." *Since when?* Next thing she knew, she'd be calling for a whip. Who was this woman who'd taken over her body?

"I want to touch you, fill you. Come for me."

She knelt over him, carefully centering herself over his erection. Plunging down, she joined the heat of their bodies and began to rock back and forth, up and down. His knees forming the back of her saddle, they arched and merged together.

Enveloped in the hot, silken prison of Gwyneth's flesh, Mike cupped her breasts in his hands and gasped from pleasure. Her hands on his body ... fire. On the brink, his breathing grew ragged ... desperate.

Above him, she cried his name. He thrust harder, her body jerking as her climax took her over the edge. His need gathered, grew and exploded with the contractions of her body around his. He groaned her name, barely able to breathe.

She collapsed across his chest, not breaking their bond. "I do love you," she murmured, "I really, really do."

"I know. I really, really know," he gasped, teasing her.

"If I had the energy, I'd smack your smug face." She emitted a long sigh.

"I'm glad you don't."

"You'd better be." Gwyn moaned and rested her head on his shoulder.

She felt so right in his arms and in his life. Could things get any better? Somehow he doubted it.

* * * *

Gwyneth preened before the mirror, giving Mike an eyeful. "Like it?" she asked. For dinner, she'd chosen a turquoise, hip-hugging skirt and a belly-skimming top in the same color. Around the neckline was a narrow band of hand embroidery in a Greek-key motif. Shaking her head, her gold hoop earrings flashed, and the small turquoise studs enhanced the blue of her eyes. She looked hot.

"You look good enough to eat," a sweaty, exhausted Mike told her from the bed.

"You should know, bad boy."

Mike groaned. "You are an *evil* woman. I'm a wreck. How do you expect me to unmask a killer tonight?"

She turned to look at him. "I am, aren't I? I think I like the sound of that."

"I can die happy now." He lay back on the bed, arms outstretched, a wide smile plastered across his face.

"Well, you'd better drag yourself out of that bed, or I'll have to call in someone else to save my butt."

"Yeah," he told her, still grinning, "maybe you ought to call the sheriff."

"Hah. I'll just call the best detective I know."

"But *I'm* the best detective you know."

She shook her head and gave him her most seductive smile. "'Fraid not."

"I'm in no condition to argue. It's all I can do to breathe."

"One word, Mike—Poirot."

"Poirot?" Mike scrambled from the bed. "You really know how to crush my ego. Bringing up the competition like that. He probably even has some gray matter left," he told her with a leer, "but Poirot hasn't spent the last hour and a half in bed with you, and I have."

"Are you saying I loved you senseless?"

Mike nodded, feigning resignation. "Senseless."

"Well, then. Mission accomplished. Take your shower, get dressed, and let's get your show on the road," she ordered.

She watched as he headed toward her bathroom. "You know," she called after him, "I don't think I've ever appreciated the male butt before. As a work of art, I mean."

Mike stopped. "What? You think my butt's a work of art?"

Gwyn sighed. "I know this will increase your already tremendous ego, but ... It's pretty much perfect from my vantage point."

He walked toward her with a lazy grin. "Yours is better."

Gwyn glanced over her shoulder into the mirror. "You know, I think you're right. You have five minutes. Get busy."

"All right. I'm going, I'm going."

* * * *

Gwyneth shut the door to her room. "Who forgot to pay the light bill?" she wondered aloud, feeling her way down the hall toward the stairway.

A rush of air warned her—but not soon enough.

She felt the pressure of a firm hand in the middle of her back. Too late. "Wha—?" she yelled as she stumbled. She grappled for balance. Her heel caught on the edge of the rug. "Why—?"

Down she tumbled, head-over-heels. She made a frantic grab for the stair rail.

No use.

She gave up trying to stop her crashing descent. As her body seemed to move in slow motion, the old gymnastic training kicked into gear.

The Man For The Job
by Marie-Nicole Ryan

Don't fight it. Go with the fall. She pulled her knees to her chest, tucked in her chin and thumped the rest of the way down the long staircase.

In a sickening fast-forward, her head hit the marble floor. A blinding pain. Then nothing.

Thirty-eight

Elinor Carlton stood in the doorway of her husband's study and watched Paul Winston hand his companion a martini. Normally, she would join her guests, but she was curious about the woman Paul had brought with him.

"Here you go, Lilith. Shaken, not stirred," he informed the auburn-haired beauty with a sly grin.

"But of course. I wouldn't expect anything less. How was the rest of your afternoon?" she purred.

"Excellent. I had quite a nice ride."

"Was that before or after you left me?"

"Both, my dear."

Good grief. Enough drivel. Elinor cleared her throat and entered the salon. Pasting a smile on her face, she announced, "We'll be quite informal tonight. Dinner will be served on the terrace. Cook has prepared an American-style cookout."

Lilith smiled. "I'm sure it'll be delightful.

"Well, certainly better than last night. I must apologize. I've been so distracted I've been quite remiss as your hostess. But this murder has cast rather a pall over everything."

"Oh," Lilith Sand replied, "I've been well-entertained, I assure you."

"Yes, I suppose you have." Anxious to change the subject, Elinor continued, "I understand Gwyneth is your niece."

"Yes. Odd coincidence, isn't it? I haven't seen her in years. She's quite lovely."

"Yes, but do you think she really killed that poor young man?"

"Wouldn't be surprised," Lilith replied.

"Lilith, really," Paul protested.

Lilith shrugged off her companion's demur. "Her mother was quite unstable—alcohol, you know. After our younger sister died, Cynthia seemed to fall apart. Everyone knew it wasn't her fault, but my niece had a difficult childhood. Her father was distant, more concerned about his career on Wall Street than his daughter. Of course, now that he's gone, Gwyn is independently wealthy."

"Oh, dear," Elinor resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "I'm afraid I do find the American propensity for discussing money matters quite ill-considered."

Lilith's face flushed, but she kept smiling. "It doesn't hurt to know your son is marrying money, now does it?"

"Now, ladies, please. Let's not argue," Paul interjected in a futile attempt at playing peacemaker, but Elinor wasn't impressed.

"My son has money in his own right. I'm only interested in his happiness. His first wife was our head gardener's daughter."

"Well, that's ad—" Lilith turned toward the foyer. "What in the world?"

"Bloody hell! Gwyneth's fallen," Elinor cried, forgetting her upbringing for once. She ran to the young woman's still form and knelt down—never mind her arthritic knees.

"Is she dead?" Lilith asked, looking down, but appearing to Elinor's eyes quite unconcerned.

She glared up at the Sand woman and shivered at the dead brown eyes staring back at her. "That would suit you, wouldn't it?"

"It wouldn't break my heart," Lilith lifted her shoulders in a shrug.

Bitch. Elinor felt for the young woman's pulse and was relieved to find it bounding and strong.

"Ooh," Gwyneth moaned and rubbed the back of her head. "What happened, dear? Did you trip?"

Gwyneth struggled to sit, straightening her legs with a groan. "Damn, I think I've bruised every inch of my body. Where's Mike?" Then she remembered. "He's in the shower—or was. How long was I out?"

"Don't try to stand just yet." Mike's mother placed a restraining hand on Gwyneth's shoulder. "Not long—mere seconds, if I were to hazard a guess."

"Two concussions in one week. Good thing I have a hard head."

"We'd better take you to hospital," Lady Elinor suggested again.

"No, I'm all right." Gwyneth struggled to her feet, then swayed as a wave of dizziness hit. "Whoa."

Lilith's escort jumped to Gwyneth's assistance. "Here, let me help. You'd be better off if you sat down for a while."

She nodded her agreement and allowed Paul Winston to lead her to the sofa in the salon.

"We must at least call a physician to check you, if you won't go to hospital," Mike's mother insisted forcefully this time.

"No way," Gwyneth insisted. "I'm not missing tonight."

"What about *tonight*?" Lilith asked, a frown furrowing her forehead.

Almost let the cat out of the bag that time. "Well, dinner, you know," Gwyneth hedged. The arrival of the young housekeeper diverted Aunt Lilith's attention.

"May I help?" the housekeeper asked.

"Yes, Grayson, call that nice, young Dr. Morgan for Gwyneth."

"Yes, ma'am," the housekeeper replied, "I'll call right now."

"You'll allow Dr. Morgan to look you over, won't you?"

"All right, but I'm not going anywhere—as long as we have that straight."

"Really, you're such a drama queen." Her aunt needled Gwyneth with a glare. "Most of us couldn't care less."

Lady Elinor's mouth dropped open, but she recovered. "Mrs. Sand, I do not appreciate your speaking to my future daughter-in-law in such a manner."

"She's *my* niece. I'll speak to her in any fashion I choose. I don't appreciate your interference in our family discussion."

Elinor drew herself to her full height, and with the authority that only centuries of upper-class British breeding can give, said, "This isn't the time or place to air what should be private family grievances."

Paul Winston placed a restraining hand on his companion's arm. "Lilith, let it go. You're just making things worse. Let's take a turn on the terrace."

Gwyn straightened up. "Wait just a damned minute. I didn't fall. Someone pushed me."

"Paranoia reigns supreme in Virginia. I'm afraid you can't blame your clumsiness on me. I was talking to Paul and our gracious hostess when you fell." Lilith continued with an arrogant sniff, "In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if you didn't fall at all, but threw yourself down the stairs in a bid for attention. So pathetic."

* * * *

The sound of raised voices reached Mike as soon as he stepped into the hallway. Taking the stairs two at a time, he rushed down.

By following the disturbance, he found himself at the arched entrance of the salon. There he saw his mother, Paul Winston, the Sand woman—and Gwyn, sitting on the sofa, rubbing the back of her head. His stomach lurched. "What the hell's going on here?" He knelt by Gwyneth. "Are you all right? What happened?"

"Someone brushed past me in the hall and assisted me down the stairs with a well-placed shove."

"Did you see who it was?"

Gwyn shook her head. "No, the light was out. The hall was dark."

"Anything you can remember? A sound or a hint of perfume?"

"No, nothing."

He looked up at his mother. "Has anyone called a doctor?"

"I asked Grayson to call Dr. Morgan," his mother said, "the one who was here last night."

"She's on her way, ma'am."

"Good. I'd invited her tonight, anyway. I hope you don't mind. I thought she'd even out the table."

Mike concealed his irritation with his mother's persistent attention to the finer details that, in his book, didn't amount to anything. "Whatever—as long as she's coming."

He turned to Gwyn, touching her cheek lightly. "Are you *sure* you're all right?"

"Yes. I'm so glad you sent Marina and Adam away." She placed her hands in his.

"I should've sent you, too."

"She can't leave the jurisdiction," Edmund Everley insisted with a smug smile that, in Mike's mind, was more of a grimace.

"So now you're a lawyer?" Mike bore down on him. "And where were you just now?"

Everley tilted his head and put his hand to his mouth in a self-conscious pose, giving the matter consideration. "Let's see. I was in the kitchen, wooing the housekeeper. But she wouldn't have anything to do with me. Damned uppity for the hired help, don't you think?"

"I'll be checking your alibi with her."

"Of course, you should." Everley's smirk grew wider.

"Edmund," Lilith Sand reproved her son, "I'll speak to you in private."

"Don't be such a drag, Mother. I'm a big boy."

Mike stood up. Time he took control of the situation while he still could. "I'd appreciate it if everyone would clear out while I talk to Gwyn."

"We were just going for some air." Lilith Sand smiled up at her escort. "Weren't we, Paul?"

"I believe we were." Paul offered the woman his arm. "Shall we?"

Watching the couple leave, Mike glared at Everley. "Don't go far. I'm not through with you."

"Oh, my." Everley's mouth twisted into a smarmy grin. "Does that mean I'm a suspect? May I go out onto the terrace, sir?"

"Suit yourself." Mike would've given anything to take that smart-ass down a peg and teach him some manners. Too bad. Wouldn't be a fair fight.

The doorbell rang, and the housekeeper rushed to answer it.

Doctor Morgan walked into the salon. Mike looked up and gave her an anxious grin. "Thank you for coming so quickly."

"You again?" She gave him a wide smile. "Who hit you this time?"

"Not me—Gwyneth. Someone shoved her down the stairs."

"Really?" Dr. Morgan dropped her playful expression and shifted into a no-nonsense medical persona. She snapped open her black leather bag and pulled out a small, lighted instrument. "You're sure you didn't faint or trip?"

"I damn well ought to know when I'm shoved down a staircase..." Gwyneth added with some heat, "...and I don't faint."

"I stand corrected. Now, did you lose consciousness?"

"A few seconds, I'm told."

"That's good. All right now, I want you to focus on a spot over my shoulder while I examine your eyes." The doctor switched on the ophthalmoscope.

Gwyn did as directed, muttering, "I wish I'd never heard the word concussion."

"Good, now the other." Dr. Morgan shut off the lighted scope. "Eyes are equal and react to light. No sign of hemorrhage."

Mike let out a quiet sigh of relief.

"Hold out your arms. Flex your fingers. Good, now grip. Good, normal strength. Your legs? Can you stand?"

Obediently Gwyneth stood up, then grabbed for Mike's arm.

"I'm still a little wobbly, but everything else seems to be in order."

"No matter, I want to check you into the hospital for overnight observation."

"No." Gwyn shook her head. "Been there, done that. Mike can wake me up every two hours and look into my eyes. I don't need some sadistic nurse doing it."

Dr. Morgan glanced at Mike. "She really must be checked frequently."

"No problem, I'll do it. I'd rather she stay here where I can keep an eye on her."

"Please, I want to stay here," Gwyneth insisted, "with Mike."

Dr. Morgan shot a cagey glance at Mike, then grinned at Gwyn. "Can't say that I blame you. But it's still against my best judgment."

"I understand, Doctor."

"Please call me Tara. All this doctor stuff is so formal."

"Well ... Tara, is it all right if I eat? I'm starving."

Tara nodded. "I'd go light, but from the looks of you, you don't eat a lot anyway."

"But I do."

"Then I'm afraid I hate you. Every bite I eat goes to my hips."

Edmund Everley returned to the salon, casting a leering glance at Tara's hips. "They look all right to me. In fact—"

Gwyneth groaned. "Back from the terrace already, Edmund? Grow up. Haven't you ever heard of sexual harassment?"

"Now, cousin, don't be so cranky."

"Then act like an adult instead of the immature little dweeb you are."

Everley glared at Mike. "You put up with this? She must be really something in bed 'cause—"

Mike hauled back and slugged him.

"Umph—" was all the little jerk managed. The momentum of his blow knocked Everley back two steps before his eyes rolled back in his head and he collapsed.

Mike shrugged. "Tara, I think *he* might have a concussion."

"I think you're right."

"Edmund?" Lilith, with Paul Winston trailing behind, rushed in from the terrace. She scowled at Mike. "What have you done? You-you thug."

"Auntie Dearest, Eddie has a foul mouth. And he was warned."

"Paul, I want you to sue this man, and I want him arrested for assault."

"Lilith, your son had it coming."

"Well, you're not the only lawyer in town. I'll find someone else."

"Don't waste your time or the court's." Paul gave a heavy sigh. Then Gwyneth noted a wicked gleam appeared in the attorney's eyes. "Maybe Judge Judy could explain it to you."

"Well, if you know someone who—"

"I was joking."

"This is no joke. Mike Carlton assaulted my son, and I want him arrested."

"Arrested? Looks like I came just in time." Sheriff Bauer ambled in from the foyer accompanied by Detective McKenzie, who looked quite presentable in her basic black, off-the-shoulder dress. Alas, Bauer still wore his khaki tan uniform. And it didn't do a thing for his potbelly, Gwyneth thought with satisfaction.

"Carlton, don't you ever learn?" the sheriff asked.

"I'm afraid Mr. Everley's bad attitude got the better of me, Sheriff."

Tara Morgan looked up from her place beside Edmund. "He's coming round. He should be all right."

"I want Mike Carlton arrested," Lilith insisted.

"You'll have to wait until I unmask Klein's murderer. Then you can take me to the pokey if you still want to, Sheriff."

"Who says I have to wait? I'll haul you in right now!"

Just then, Mike's father rolled in and joined the fray. Gwyneth's neck was getting stiff from all the comings and goings. It was worse than a tennis match—or better, depending on the point of view.

"And miss dinner, Sheriff?" George cast his steely gaze on the lawman. "I'd consider it a personal favor if you'd wait. My son isn't going anywhere, but if he can tell us who killed that young man, I, for one, would be grateful."

"Yeah, if he can." Bauer offered with a sneer twisting his face into a mask.

"I can." Mike squared his shoulders, and Gwyneth didn't doubt him for a minute.

"We'll see about that." The sheriff's sneer had taken up permanent residence on his rat face.

"You think the murderer is one of us?" Lilith asked with eyebrows arched.

Mike grinned. "It should be obvious."

Elinor clapped her hands softly. "I think everyone should calm down and remember that dinner is ready. Why don't we go out to the terrace and enjoy it?"

Mike beamed at his mother. "An excellent idea. What do you say, folks, we do as our hostess asks and have some of that grilled steak I smell all the way in here?"

Everley raised up, fists clenched. "You son of a bitch."

"Quit while you're ahead, kid." Paul Winston placed a hand on Everley's shoulder. "Or you're going to find yourself on the floor again."

Edmund jerked away from the attorney's hand, but pulled his face into a desultory glare.

Gwyneth stood up and poked her cousin on the chest. "You little worm. If Mike hadn't hit you, I would've."

An ugly sneer crossed her cousin's face. "Yeah, right." Still he retreated with a careful gait.

Tara looked from Gwyneth to Mike and back again. "Is it always this exciting?"

Mike shrugged. "Sometimes it's worse."

* * * *

"Detective McKenzie, how nice to see you again." Gwyneth sat down by the detective who appeared uneasy.

"And no bars this time."

"Ouch."

The detective's face flushed with obvious embarrassment. "Sorry, being tacky wasn't my intention."

"No problem." Gwyneth admitted with a slight shrug. "I'm still a little sensitive about my time behind bars."

"Is your life always this interesting?"

"Interesting?"

"Well, let's see. Your ex-fiancé is murdered. You already have a new lover in the wings. By the way, I can't fault your taste in men. Then someone pushes you down the stairs. I could go on, but why bother?"

"Actually, until someone started stalking me, my life was pretty ho-hum—but once I met Mike, everything changed."

McKenzie's gaze narrowed. "I believe you mentioned someone was stalking you in New York City."

"Yes, for about two weeks. That's why I hired Mike. He thought my breakup with Richard might be behind the stalker."

"You're right. Be careful. Someone here—"

"I know, but Mike's going to smoke out the killer tonight." Gwyneth looked back over her shoulder in Mike's direction, where he was spending entirely too much time talking to pretty, little Doctor Morgan. "He's spoken with everyone here tonight. I wonder who..."

The detective's mouth dropped open. "He hasn't told you?"

"No."

"But surely..."

Gwyneth shook her head and shrugged. "He wants my reactions fresh and unstudied."

"Still, it's a risk."

"I trust him."

"You must."

* * * *

Lilith leaned forward and asked Paul in a hushed tone, "What do you think he's up to?"

Paul kept his tone low as well. "I think he's winging it. For all intents and purposes, he appears to be chatting up that very luscious, young doctor—not that I blame him."

"My niece had better rein him in, or she'll lose him."

"I think you underestimate her hold on him. But he's up to something. That's certain."

"I think it's insulting saying that one of us pushed her. Gwyneth was just clumsy and fell."

"Well, you can't deny that Klein is dead."

"And Gwyneth killed him. She was covered in his blood. Mike is just trying to besmirch all of us in a futile attempt to clear *her*."

"You really think your niece stabbed her ex-fiancé in the back?"

"Who else?" *Really, Paul could be so dense.* "Gwyneth—or maybe Mike did it for her."

Beer in hand, Mike ambled up to the couple. "Interesting point of view, Mrs. Sand." *Now what the devil were they up to?*

Lilith jumped. "Well, it's true."

"You think so?" Mike took a long swallow, but he waited for Lilith's reaction.

Hot damn. Tiny lines appeared at the corners of the woman's mouth as she bit back her answer. Even better. He was punching the right buttons.

"In fact..." He took another pull on his beer. "...There could be several people here tonight who'd like to frame Gwyneth for murder. One of them might even be a relative—say, you or your son?"

"That's preposterous."

"Paul, did you know Lilith—I hope you don't mind my calling you Lilith, since we're almost related—Lilith has been

investigated for the death of a husband or two? I'd be careful if I were you. She might have her eye on you next."

"Lilith? What's he talking about?"

"Evil, vicious minds, that's what he's talking about—disgruntled children, unhappy with my share of my late husband's estate when he passed."

A blank expression passed over Winston's face. "We'll discuss it later. Why don't we circulate?" he suggested.

"Good idea, Paul." Unless Mike was mistaken, Lilith Sand was a black widow. Would she kill a blood relative? Why not? Surely she wasn't in Gwyneth's will. Contrary to his confident statement earlier, he didn't know who killed Klein. Not yet.

* * * *

Reggie Gruhn's hands sweated as he gripped his cellular. "Now, see here, Uncle Gianni."

"Don't call me that."

"Well, see here. I've done me best. I'm serving their bloody dinner, but that peeler ain't about to let me near 'er."

"Never mind. *I've* already taken matters in hand. Some of my men are going to snatch her and bring her to me. I mean to find out where Sylvia is, if I have to dirty my hands to do it."

"But this place is like a bloody fortress. Guards, guns and gates."

"Listen up. This is what I'm going to do."

Reggie listened, then let out a low whistle. "Bloody 'ell."

Thirty-nine

Rocky maneuvered the SUV into the traffic crossing the George Washington. Beside him sat pretty little Marina. She looked up at him with trustful doe eyes from beneath those thick dark-fringed lashes of hers.

Keep your eyes on the road, man.

"I hope you don't think I'm a coward for leaving when so much was happening."

"No, ma'am. You have the boy. Mike's right. It isn't safe there. You're just doing what any mother worth her salt would do."

She smiled back at him. And damn, if his stomach didn't flip-flop.

"I know you and Mike will be all right, but I hate the thought of leaving Gwyneth in danger."

"So, whaddya think of Mike and Gwyn?"

With a slight shrug, she replied, "I hated it at first, but she's—"

"High maintenance," Rocky finished for her.

"That's not what I was going to say. We had time to get to know each other. She has a big heart, in spite of her—"

"Bad ass—uh, attitude." Rocky cringed. "Uh, sorry. Guess I'd better watch my mouth." Even though he was pretty sure the kid had fallen asleep by the time they'd left DC.

Marina glanced at the back seat. "It's all right. He's still asleep."

"Sorry, I spend too much time with guys. My mama taught me better—honest."

"It's all right, really. I'm not some delicate flower you have to guard your tongue around, although I would appreciate it if you're careful around Adam."

"He's a bright kid. Real full of himself."

"He takes after Mike. Mike's brilliant."

"Yeah, I always figured him for a bright guy."

"That's why Mike's father's so rough on him..." Her calm composure soothed Rocky's tension. "...about his joining the police force and now that he's a P.I.—Mr. Carlton thinks he's wasting his talents."

"Yeah, well, fathers are like that. Mine said I'd never amount to anything. He wasn't far wrong."

"Oh no, Rocky, you're Head of Security for Mr. Carlton. He wouldn't have just anyone."

"Nah, that's not what I mean. My old man was a grifter. You know—a con man. He nearly sh—had a fit when I joined the Navy. And then I went to college after I got out. I spent some time on the force in DC, then and one of my buddies and me started our own security firm. As they say, the rest is history."

"Well, I think you've done quite well. Your father should be proud."

He raised an eyebrow. "Like Mike's dad is?"

"I see what you mean."

"But you know," he added, "the old man isn't that bad. I know he comes off like a real hard—uh, case, but he's old guard. None of that touchy-feely stuff for his generation."

"My father's like that, too. He's an old softy with his only grandchild, but he was really strict when I was growing up. Maybe that's why I—"

"Rebelled? You couldn't have been that bad."

"I disappointed my father by..." Marina nodded toward Adam. "He's never forgiven me. But at least he doesn't hold it against my son."

Rocky's face heated up. He'd heard all about his friend's illegitimate son. It was the only thing he'd ever heard of Mike doing that was out of character. How could he have hung a sweet little gal like Marina out to dry?

"I know what you're thinking. It wasn't Mike's fault. It was mine."

He couldn't hold back. "Humph. Last time I looked, it took two to—you know."

"That's because you don't know what really happened," she whispered, "and this isn't the time or the place."

He sighed. "Sorry, I keep talking out of turn. It really isn't any of my business."

"No, no, it isn't." Marina's face turned a deep red. "I didn't mean to be rude. It was a difficult time, but it's over, and I don't regret it. How can I?"

"Course not. Heck, you've got a great kid."

Marina rewarded him with a shy smile. Damn, if she didn't get prettier every minute he spent with her. And double damn, if his heart wasn't pounding in his chest at the very sight of that little smile of hers and those sparkling, brown eyes. *I'm done for. She's got my number and doesn't even know it.*

* * * *

Gianni Damico shouted over the *thwap-thwap* of the propeller and roar of the helicopter engine. "How much longer?"

"Fifteen minutes," the pilot shouted back.

Gianni laughed. That blond, bitch lawyer was in for a surprise. He'd show her what happened to people who crossed him. And then, he'd show his wife, too. He rubbed his hands together. Hell. He'd show 'em all.

He twisted around in his seat and smiled again. A second chopper was a discreet distance behind the first. Carlton wouldn't know what hit him.

* * * *

Wilford Wells sat in the far corner of the terrace and nursed his Jack Daniel's. The hair on the back of his neck just didn't want to lie down. He shook his head as he leaned over to George Carlton. "I don't feel good about this."

"I think it'll work."

"Personally, I think Mike's playing with fire, and I don't want my niece to be the one who gets burned if his plan goes up in smoke."

"It'll work."

Wilford watched Lilith Sand whispering to Paul Winston. "She's working him all right."

George grinned. "No doubt about it."

"Hell, I thought he was smarter than that, but then, many a man's been defeated by a brick-shithouse body and a pair of doe eyes."

"Hah. Sounds to me like you're falling under her spell, too."

Wilford shook his head. "Not me. First of all, I'm married to the greatest lady on this planet. And second, I've known Lilith too long."

"That's right. She's related by marriage."

"I don't claim kinship." He chuckled as he watched the P.I. mosey over to the couple. Mike leaned in and said something to Lilith, who stiffened.

He winked at George. "Looks like she took offense to something he said. Probably warned Paul to watch his ass."

"Interesting woman." George raised an eyebrow and nodded. "We could've used her at the Agency. She would've been unstoppable."

"I'm not sure even the Agency could control *her*."

"Still, might've been fun to match wits with her..." George banged on the side of his wheelchair with his good arm. "...in the old days, I mean."

"Yeah, well, she might've been more than you could comfortably chew, even then."

George laughed. "But it sure would've been fun trying."

"Hah!" Wilford snorted. "She'd chew *you* up and spit you out for breakfast and be looking for another man before coffee break."

George's shoulders shook with barely restrained laughter.

"Good to see you in high spirits, old man."

* * * *

At the unaccustomed sound of his father's laughter, Mike looked around in surprise. His old man had never been much of a jokester, and since his stroke...

A flash of gray cloth caught his eye. Millie, the housekeeper, was flitting around and making sure the guests were well-fed and liquored.

Great. The alcohol might loosen some tongues—the right ones, anyway.

At least his son was well out of it. Marina, too. And unless Mike was mistaken, he'd picked up on some vibes between her and Rocky.

He continued to scan the guests. Gwyn was talking to Detective McKenzie and Everley. Uh-oh, looked like her weasel cousin was putting the moves on the detective.

I have to hear this. Mike ambled over to the three just in time to see Everley's face flush a deep red as he backed away from the two women like they'd been diagnosed with Ebola.

"Say, Eddie, sorry to see you go, but don't let me stop you."

Everley's jaw tightened, but he spun around and stalked over to his mother. Mike grinned at Gwyn and nodded at McKenzie. "Don't know what you said, Detective, but it must've been good."

"Believe me, it was priceless." Gwyn giggled. "I wish I'd thought of it first."

"I get more practice with jerks than you do. It's all in a day's work," McKenzie answered with a smug smile.

"Gwyn, did I tell you that I used to go fishing with Moira's brother?"

"At least once," Gwyn's tone turned terse.

Now why would his fishing with the detective's brother bother her? Was she jealous?

"Cardinal sin, repeating myself. Next thing you know, I'll turn into my old man." He let out a self-deprecating laugh, ready to continue ragging on his father, but a low-pitched drone caught his attention. Mike glanced up and watched a dark speck appearing over the mountain range. It sounded like...

"What the hell?"

Forty

Rocky set down the suitcase in the slate foyer of Marina's co-op.

"Is that everything?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Yes, of course it is." She laced her fingers together to keep her hands from shaking. "I mean, I ought to know what I took with me." At least she would've known if she wasn't so confused by a certain large, manly presence standing so resolutely in her home.

"It's been a pretty exciting weekend," Rocky told her with a wide grin. "I'm impressed you can keep anything straight."

"Me, too," she admitted wryly, then turned to her son.

"Take the bag of toys to your room and put them away."

"Now?" Adam whined. "I want to talk to Rocky. He's going to show me his handcuffs. Then I can be a p'licemen like Daddy."

"After you put your toys away."

"Okay." The boy picked up his bag and dragged it down the hall toward his room.

"He's a good kid, Marina."

"Thank you." She glanced down at the backs of her hands and studied them a moment before asking, "Would you like to stay for some coffee? It's been a long day—and a long drive."

Although she knew her offer of *coffee* meant just coffee, her heart sped up, hammering in her chest so loudly, she was amazed Rocky couldn't hear it.

"Thanks." His grin crinkled the corners of his sky blue eyes. Funny, she hadn't noticed them earlier. "Coffee would be great."

"Of course, I don't want to keep you." She glanced up at him from beneath thick, dark-fringed lashes. "I know you need to get back to Virginia."

"Now, hold on here. You're not getting rid of me that easy. Mike wants me to stay here and make sure you're all right and that you *stay* all right."

"No, really. You should go back. Mike might need you. You saw for yourself that we live in a secure building. We'll be fine."

Stubbornly he crossed his arms across his chest. "Yeah, I saw the doorman and all that, but I think I ought to stick around just to make sure."

"Please, Rocky, go back. I'm worried about Mike—and Gwyneth. Whoever killed her ex-fiancé might have a grudge against one of them as well. I don't know what Adam would do if something happened to Mike, and Mike would be so upset if anything happened to Gwyneth. They *need* you."

She could see her pleas affected him by his furrowed brow, but would he agree? She had a bad feeling. "I don't think the troubles are over. Adam and I are out of the way, but they're still there. And the murderer is, too."

"You've got a point. I'll call Mike and see how it's going."

"Sure. That's exactly what you ought to do. Then I'll tell him that we're fine and that you're coming back."

"No, he'll tell you I should stay here."

"We'll see what he says, won't we?"

"You are one, stubborn little gal."

"I don't deny it."

Rocky pulled his cell phone from a pocket and hit the speed dial. He shook his head, a puzzled expression on his ruggedly handsome face. "Damn. He's not answering."

"See! I told you he needs you. You have to go back." Panic spread through her. Her legs trembled as she thought of all the terrible things that could be happening.

"Marina," Rocky pleaded, "it's two hundred and fifty miles. And the way security is now, it would take me that long to catch a flight."

"What about a private plane?"

"No," Rocky insisted. "Leaving you and the boy doesn't make sense. I'm here. I'm doing what Mike wanted. I'm supposed to be protecting you and Adam." He shook his head. "Mike must've turned off his phone."

"He doesn't ever turn it off," she persisted. "Something's wrong. I know it."

"His battery's dead," he suggested, then took her by the shoulders. "Look here, Marina, Mike can take care of himself. He's a big boy. I'm not budging."

She wasn't sure if it was the sickening fear of what might be happening to Mike and Gwyneth or the sudden contact of two, strong, muscular hands on her shoulders, but her heart rate accelerated and pounded in her chest.

"Talk about stubborn." She folded her arms across her chest and tried to hide her reaction to Rocky's touch. "Try him again—please."

Rocky's face darkened to a shade of deep red. He backed off a step. Was he as confused as she was?

"Sure thing." Again he punched the number, listened, then shook his head. "No answer, just the voice mail."

"I'm really worried. I know. I'll call the house. Someone always answers. I don't know why I didn't think of that first."

"Well, you'll see I'm right."

"Men. You're so obstinate." She turned away to make the call. Was her face as flushed as his? If the heat she felt was any indication, it was. Oh, God, how could she be worrying about being embarrassed when the father of her son might be in danger?

"I think we're pretty evenly matched—stubborn-wise, I mean."

A smile tugged at her mouth, while she wondered what he meant by 'evenly matched.' Was he making light of her concerns or just...? Heck. What was the matter with her, anyway?

Rocky waited as she dialed the Carltons' number. Apprehension grew and settled in the pit of her stomach.

Busy. She frowned and tried the number again. Maybe she's made a mistake.

Busy again. She turned to Rocky. "I don't understand. I'm getting a busy signal. They have several lines. They can't all be *busy*."

Rocky started pacing about the room. "If Mike needs me, he needed me an hour ago." Shaking his head, he smacked the palm of his hand with his fist. "A day late and a dollar short. Dang it. I hate being caught off-guard."

"What are you going to do? Should we call the authorities in Virginia?"

"Yes, you call them, and I'll call a buddy of mine that runs a chopper service. He can probably help me."

"Oh, thank you." Without thinking, Marina tiptoed and kissed him on a rough, stubbly cheek.

"Oh—sorry." She grew more flustered than ever; her face heated up like it was Fourth of July fireworks. "I didn't mean..."

The security specialist grinned. "Well, you really make me hate to leave. And no apology necessary. I didn't mind that kiss one little bit."

"Well, uh—" To hide her embarrassment, Marina glanced at her watch. "Please hurry."

He nodded. "I know. But when I come back—uh, I wonder if maybe you'll allow me to take you and Adam out to dinner and a movie."

Marina smiled. "I'd like that."

"Okay, I'll call my friend from the SUV. You lock yourself in and don't come out for anything or anybody. Understand?"

"Yes, Rocky, I understand."

"Okay. I'm outta here."

* * * *

Marina closed the door behind Rocky and locked the deadbolt. Even if it was a secure building, she wasn't taking any chances.

So he wanted to take her and Adam to dinner and a movie. That sort of came out of the blue. She couldn't deny

that he was awfully nice and had such pretty blue eyes. And long, curling lashes. Ready with a smile and a laugh, in spite of his gruff voice.

"Whoa, girl, you're letting your imagination run away." Maybe it was time she had a real date. And he wanted Adam to come along—very low-key, and a very smart move, Mr. Rockford.

Adam tugged at Marina's elbow. "Mommy, I'm hungry."

"You are, are you? Well, let's check the fridge and see what we have."

"I want a hot dog."

She peeked into the freezer. "How about some homemade vegetable soup?"

"Sou-u-p? Not with veg-uh-bles," her son whined in mock protest. They'd played this little game before.

"You know you like vegetables—"

The rest of her sentence was cut off by a knock at the door. "See there, Rocky's come back. He must've forgotten something." She rushed for the door, unlocked and opened it.

The doorway was filled by a mountain of a man—but it wasn't Rocky.

Forty-one

"In the house!" Mike yelled. "Now!" Two choppers hovering in the air, suspiciously low. Not military issue. Not good.

His grim-faced mother shepherded the other guests inside. As a child, she'd weathered the London Blitz. Nothing phased her.

Gwyn? From the corner of his eye, he saw her—pale, but not panicked—pushing his father's wheelchair, while the old man shouted orders into a com device. "Secure the perimeter and deploy the rest to the house. Two choppers. Estimate fifteen each, max."

Mike reached into his jacket and pulled out his pistol. Dropping behind a large planter, he watched his father's men as they spread out, assuming defensive positions. If he hadn't seen it for himself, he wouldn't have believed it. His father maintained what amounted to a small army—most of them retired Navy Seals.

Sheriff Bauer sidled up to Mike. "What's everyone getting so excited for?"

"Down, you idiot. Can't you see we're under attack?"

"Attack? All I see is some whirly birds—" Bauer broke off as ropes snaked down from the choppers, quickly followed by men in military-style gear.

"Mercenaries." Mike checked the clip and jammed it into the handle. "They're too well-trained to be anything else.

"I'll be damned." Bauer drew his gun and dropped down by Mike. "What's this all about, Carlton?"

"Not sure," Mike said through gritted teeth. *Nice time for Bauer to get chatty.*

"Thieves, I guess. Damn. I guess your folks got a lot of fine stuff. That's the way it is now. Modern thieves."

Mike shook his head. "I think this is more personal than someone looking for a rich score."

"Who've you pissed off?" Bauer shook his head, showing his disgust. "I knew you'd come to no good."

"This isn't the time."

A spray of automatic gunfire erupted, cutting off further conversation. A spitting sound as a shell struck above Mike's head. "Damn. I've only got one clip. How are you set for ammo?"

Bauer snorted. "I'm all right for a while. Guess you'll have to make 'em all count, boy."

* * * *

Reflexively, Marina stepped back, then immediately regretted it. Her caller took the advantage and walked right into the apartment.

Where's Adam? She had to protect him.

"Who're you?" Marina opened her mouth to scream, but thought better of it. No need to scare her son if the man just had the wrong apartment. "You can't come in here."

"For that, I apologize, Miss. But I'm afraid I must insist."

"No, you can't." She attempted a shove, but he was as immovable as a mountain.

The intruder reached inside his jacket. "Just keep still, and everything will be all right, Miss Vadim."

"Y-you know who I am? What do you want? I-I don't keep a lot of money here, but you can have what there is," she bargained. Pure instinct told her he wasn't a thief. No, he was much worse. Power emanated from him in cold, chilling waves that sent shivers up and down her spine.

"Let's just say someone powerful wants me to keep an eye on you for him."

"Really? If it were my father, he would've warned me you were coming."

"I'm not from your father or the father of your son."

"Who then?"

"It doesn't matter. Let's say you and the boy are collateral for a loan that's being called in."

Marina swallowed the lump of cotton that had formed in her throat. "I don't think I like the sound of that."

"Where's the boy?"

"I left him in Virginia w-with his grandparents."

"Nice try, Miss Vadim, but I saw you bring him into the building just a few minutes ago."

"Who *are* you?" The man's polite demeanor didn't ameliorate the evil waves she sensed—if anything, it made it worse. Now, if Adam would just stay quietly in the kitchen, but no—

"Mommy!" came her son's shrill voice from the kitchen.

The intruder didn't say anything, but the muscles in his face tightened. His hooded eyes seemed to bore right through her. Her stomach clenched as if she'd been struck.

She lowered her voice in an attempt to not frighten her son. "I want you to leave. I don't want—"

"Miss Vadim, I'm afraid your wishes can't be taken into account. I have my instructions. I'm here to ensure that you and the boy remain comfortable—and safe."

"Go to your room," she yelled, hoping to prevent Adam's coming into the living room and seeing the intruder. "It's time for your nap."

But no, her son shuffled from the hall into the living room. He tugged on her jacket, ignoring the ominous stranger. "But I'm hungry."

Why had she sent Rocky away? Why hadn't she listened to Mike? Hands shaking, she tried again to get between the intruder and the front door. "I'll fix you some soup."

"No, I want a hamburger."

"Why don't you fix the boy what he wants?"

She glared at the man. "We don't *have* any hamburger. We've been out of town. I need to shop."

"I'll have groceries brought in."

Damn. He had an answer for everything. She watched in silence as he pulled a cell phone from his jacket pocket. He spoke so softly she could barely make out his words. "Send someone over with groceries."

Then he leveled his dead brown eyes on her. "Call your doorman. Tell him you're expecting a delivery. And don't try anything funny."

"Wouldn't think of it," she muttered under her breath.

The corner of his mouth crooked up. "Sense of humor. That'll make things easier."

"Well, certainly, I should make things easier for *you*, right? I let you in the damned door, didn't I? That was easy, too. Wasn't it?"

"Mommy, you said a bad word."

Marina leaned down to Adam. "Shush. Go to your room, son, please."

"All right, I'll go." Adam turned and reluctantly dragged each step down the hall to his room.

Marina heaved a sigh of relief.

"Call your doorman, now," the huge man ordered.

She glared up at him. "Fine."

After she'd done as instructed, she turned to him. "All right, at least tell me your name. What am I supposed to call you—armed intruder that I wish would disappear off the face of the Earth?"

"Names are highly overrated."

"I'm not interested in your opinion. I just want to call you something."

"I don't think I'll be here long enough for the Stockholm syndrome to take effect."

She folded her arms across her chest. "You have that right."

"A little spirit is admirable, but I wouldn't push it, Miss Vadim."

"*Sorry*. And here I thought I was acting like the perfect doormat."

His gaze narrowed. "Perhaps you ought to sit."

Marina sat. She glanced around the room for anything she could brain the man with, should he ever take his dead-eyed gaze off her.

"I wouldn't advise anything rash."

"No, I guess you wouldn't. You're not the one being held as—what did you call us—collateral for a loan being called in. And I *still* don't like the sound of that."

The buzzer sounded. "I'll get it." He moved to the security panel.

"No, I have to. The doorman will think something's wrong if I don't answer."

He frowned.

"Really. I *a/ways* answer."

"Not much social life?"

"No. Caring for my son is more important than *dating*," she said in as scathing a tone as she dared. If only she hadn't made Rocky leave. All that stood between her son and the stone-cold killer standing so quietly in her living room was one under-muscled mom who hadn't worked out at the gym in six months. If she and Adam lived through this, she'd sign up for karate tomorrow.

She stood up from the sofa and walked slowly to the security panel.

Think. Think.

"Just in case you're thinking about giving some kind of alarm code, I'm listening to every word. Say, 'Yes,' and 'Send him up.' That's it. Understand?"

She nodded. She hit the intercom button. "Yes?"

"Delivery for you, Miss Vadim."

"Send him up."

"Not the usual guy. Want me to check 'im for ya?"

Marina bit her upper lip and suppressed the urge to scream. "Just send him up."

* * * *

"Dammit to hell!"

Rush hour. Rocky pounded his fist against the steering wheel. He hated New York traffic with a passion. "Guess I'm spoiled," he admitted. Powatchee County, Virginia, was a sleepy, wide spot in the road. Millionaires, horses and retired government agents. A guy couldn't go ten feet without running into one of the three.

Still, George Carlton paid a salary that made this poor cracker from Georgia delirious. Okay, so he had a comfortable life—maybe too comfortable. Other than his job responsibilities, he didn't have anything else.

No long-term relationships. He'd always avoided them. Told women right up front he was out for a good time and not to depend on sharing the Sunday *New York Times*.

Hell, I'm thirty-eight years old. Maybe I've got some kind of clock ticking. He chuckled at the thought. And maybe it was just one, pretty little lady and her son that had him thinking.

The traffic in front of him came to a complete stop. Maybe he could cut over to ... Frustrated by the delay, Rocky dug into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone.

Hell, still no answer. Maybe he ought to try Mike's number. And if Mike wasn't wrapped up in Gwyneth's long legs, he might actually pick up the phone.

"Yeah," Mike answered before Rocky heard it ring.

"Hey, bud, what's up?"

"We're under attack." Mike's tone was low and hurried.

"No shit!"

"Two choppers of mercenaries. Adam and Marina okay? They're with you, right?"

"Nah, Marina had a fit for me to head back and give you a hand. She was right. You need me."

"No! Go back. Stay with them. We'll manage."

"But—"

"I mean it."

Over the cell phone, Rocky heard a burst of automatic weapons fire.

"Gotta go." Mike disconnected.

Mike was right. No way in hell could Rocky get there in time to make a difference. He'd trained his security force for just such a scenario. They'd do their job just fine without him.

"Crap. Choppers and mercenaries."

Guess he'd better follow Mike's orders. He flipped on the turn signal and made a move for the next lane.

A horn blast warned him of the driver's displeasure. He hit the window control, stuck out his arm, jabbed a stiff, middle finger in the air, and shouted, "Up yours!"

* * * *

Arms folded across her chest, Gwyneth stood at the doorway of the safe room, shaking her head. "I'm not going in there while all the men are risking their lives to protect us."

"Honestly, Gwyneth, what do you think you can do?" her aunt said, with a smug smile. "Are you Cagney—or Lacey?"

Gwyneth ignored her aunt's expression. "I can handle a gun if I have to. Uncle Wil made me learn."

Mrs. Carlton stepped forward. "Gwyneth, that's well and good, but Michael wouldn't want you to risk your life. We have a trained security force. They'll handle it. Just come inside."

"Trained for something like *this*?"

"Yes, dear, even this."

Gwyneth glanced inside. "But it's crowded." She pulled at the neck of her blouse. "I won't be able to breathe."

Mrs. Carlton narrowed her gaze and nodded. "I see. That's how it is, is it?"

As much as she hated to admit having claustrophobia, she nodded.

"You must come in. My son will never forgive me if you should come to harm."

"I'll be all right." Maybe Mike's mother wasn't such a bitch after all, not if she cared about his feelings, as was apparent from her words and expression. "I just can't."

The thought of being locked inside, not knowing what was happening outside ... What if there was a fire? She tried to swallow—but couldn't.

Inside the confines of the safe room, Lilith leaned against the wall. "My, my, I had no idea my niece had such a human failing," she drawled.

"Yes, I'm human," Gwyneth snapped. "Want to go into *your* failings, dear aunt?"

Lilith pouted. "Some other time, perhaps. I, for one, am staying in this safe room until this horrific incident is resolved."

"Fine," Gwyneth said between gritted teeth, "please, do."

Elinor Carlton sighed. "All right, Gwyneth, if you insist, but it's quite safe. Separate air supply and communication system."

Gwyneth shook her head. "Please, shut the door and let me be."

The armored steel door closed with a quiet *whoosh*.

A hard chill shook her body. They could stay locked up like animals in a cage. She'd already been locked up enough for a lifetime. She'd just take her chances out here.

Slipping off her spike heels, she crouched low and made her way through the hall into Mr. Carlton's study.

In her absence, the windows had been covered with steel shutters, pierced only by observation points. Several computer screens displayed dizzying points of light—points of light that moved.

"My people will have the situation under control within ten minutes." Wearing a headset phone, George Carlton was calm and collected as he reported to whom?

Ten minutes? Gwyneth wondered. Could they hold out that long?

She eased out of the study and slipped into the next room, just in time to see Mike catapult through the French doors. As soon as he'd cleared the opening, two security men slammed the doors shut behind him. One of the men touched a nearby wall sconce, and a metal barrier slid into place.

"Omigod. Mike, are you all right?" Gwyneth kneeled down beside him, preparing to check for wounds.

"Dammit! Why aren't you in the panic room?" Gun in hand, he inched his way behind a sofa. "Stay down," he ordered.

"All right, all right. You don't have to yell."

"And keep your head down."

Irritated at his high-handedness, she still complied. "Give me a gun. I can shoot."

He glared, his handsome face hardening into planes of disbelief. "This isn't the time to play cops and robbers. Stay down and—"

"Shut up?"

Giving her a curt nod, he turned to one of the security men. "Hicks, we need to get behind them."

"You can't go out there. You'll get killed!" she cried before she could stop herself. Had she just squealed like some hysterical female in a B movie?

Hicks smirked, but thankfully made no comment. Mike's gaze narrowed, and he shot her an expression that clearly told her, 'Shut up.'

This time, she did.

"We'll use the tunnel," Mike said. "Exit two will position us to their rear."

Hicks nodded. "Sounds like a plan."

"McKenzie and Bauer, stay here. Rest of you, come with me."

Gwyneth jumped up, ready to follow him.

Mike grabbed her arm. "Where the hell do you think you're going? *Stay here*. Don't you understand plain English?"

"You *said* 'rest of you'—I thought you meant me, too."

"Cut the crap, Gwyn." His face softened. "Promise you won't do something stupid."

"Technically impossible ... doing something stupid, I mean." She lifted her chin a notch.

"I'm not convinced. I'll tie you up if I have to."

"All right."

"And keep your head down!"

"You covered that already. But the windows are covered with steel."

"But the entire house isn't. They're using some pretty heavy firepower. Get down behind the sofa. These men don't have time to watch your butt."

"I'll keep an eye on her," Detective McKenzie offered from her crouched position in the far corner.

"Thanks, Detective."

Mike pivoted on his heel to leave, but stopped. He turned back to Gwyneth when his father bellowed, "What're you waiting for—an engraved invitation?"

Her heart plummeted. There would be no good-bye kiss—not in front of all the men. She gave herself a mental shake. This wasn't good-bye. Mike would be right back. He'd be fine.

Forty-two

Marina looked down at the shredded pieces of paper in her hands; she'd tortured the tissue beyond recognition. "I want to know who sent you."

The grim man shook his head. "You have no need for that information."

"What should I call you? You don't have to tell me your name. I just n-need to call you something. *Hey, you* doesn't seem appropriate."

His mouth twitched. Was he trying to smile? Even so, it wasn't much of an improvement.

"Hmm." Just how far could she go, anyway? "I believe I'll call you Henry."

"Henry? You think I look like a Henry?"

"Well, beggars can't be choosers ... Henry. Besides, it's a regal name. There were several British kings called that."

"So I've heard."

Adam walked into the living room, his eyes wide with curiosity. "My daddy's name is Mike."

"Yes, I know."

"You know my daddy? He used to be a p'liceman. Some people call them cops, but they don't like to be called that." He shook his head. "Now my daddy's a private eye. You know what that is, Mr. Henry? He finds stuff for people. Sometimes he finds people who got losted, too."

Mr. Henry's mouth twitched again. Actually, Marina thought, it was more like a spasm or seizure of his facial muscles.

Still not a pleasant sight.

Staring at her through narrowed lids, Henry nodded. "Cute kid."

"Adam, go back to your room." She asked, "That is all right, isn't it?"

"Sure."

His dark eyes wide, Adam glanced from Marina to Henry, then back at her again.

"Go on."

"Okay, but I'm *hungry*. I'll even eat that old soup I'm so hungry."

"Okay, go sit down, and I'll warm it up." She turned to Henry. "Would you like some soup? I could make a salad. And toast some French bread."

"I'm not here for dinner."

"But you have to eat, don't you? Or maybe you're going to leave us in peace real soon."

"That's always an option. A *final* option."

"Oh." For a second, she thought her heart would stop. Her stomach tightened into a rigid knot, and nausea threatened to overwhelm her.

A final option.

* * * *

"Unbelievable!" Rocky banged his fist against the steering wheel. "Finding a parking place in this city is impossible."

Dammit." Twice around the block of Marina's apartment building and nothing. Hell, he'd just double-park. Let 'em tow it. He'd sort it out later.

He pulled the SUV over beside a delivery truck, shut off the motor and jumped *out*.

The doorman ran up to him. "Hey, bud, you can't leave it there."

"I'll be right back."

"Who're you here for?"

"I left something in Miss Vadim's apartment."

The doorman looked Rocky up and down. "I'll let her know you're coming."

"Don't bother." He dug in his pocket, pulled out a twenty and offered it to the doorman.

The doorman shook his head. "I gotta call her. I'll lose my job."

Rocky heaved a sigh of resignation. "All right, here." He handed the doorman a hundred-dollar bill. "It's a surprise."

"You're the second surprise for Miss Vadim today. What's up? Her birthday or something?"

"Wh—uh, yeah, that's it. My sister already here?" he asked.

"Nah, 'nother big fellow like you."

"Big like me?" Rocky's heart hammered in his chest. Something was definitely wrong. "Must be my brother," he bluffed.

"Well, have a good time then."

"Yeah, thanks," Rocky told the doorman, then sprinted for the elevator. Taking deep breaths, the adrenaline rush

slammed him in the gut. His breathing eased, and the energy surged—enough to leap a building in a single bound.

He jabbed the elevator button. "Come on, come on."

* * * *

Her head still aching from her fall, Gwyneth crept toward Detective McKenzie's corner.

"Why didn't you go into the safe room and ride this out?" McKenzie asked from her vantage point.

Gwyneth ignored the detective's question and asked one of her own. "You came armed to a dinner party?"

"I'm a peace officer. I'm supposed to be armed at all times."

"Yeah, Miss High-and-Mighty Lawyer." The sheriff patted his gun. "That's how it is with us peace officers. We carry real guns."

"I really appreciate your enlightening me on that aspect of your job description, Sheriff Bauer." Honestly, did every man in the world have to treat her like a six-year-old child?

On hands and knees, she crawled to a window and eased her head over the sill. "I want to see what's going on."

McKenzie glanced at Gwyneth. "If you know what's good for you, you'll keep your head down like your boyfriend told you." The detective then took a peek. "Hell!"

The room exploded above Gwyneth's head. Chunks of plaster rained down, and a beam fell to her left, missing her by inches. Brushing the dust from her eyes, she looked around. The outer wall of the room had a large gaping hole.

Licks of flame, fed by the inrush of air from outside, danced and snaked across the floor toward her.

"Gotta get out of here," she gasped, then looked over at McKenzie who lay immobile under one of the oaken beams.

"McKenzie!" Gwyneth climbed over the timber and knelt beside the detective.

"Sheriff, help me!" Gwyneth shouted.

No response.

Black smoke began to choke her breathing. She had to get out of there, but she couldn't leave the injured woman behind to die. Tugging on the beam, she grunted with the effort. It moved less than an inch.

Okay, think. Lever and fulcrum? She looked around, straining to see through the dense smoke. Something. Anything.

A groan. Gwyneth renewed her efforts. At least McKenzie wasn't dead. And no way would she leave the detective to the flames.

"McKenzie, can you help me?"

"Ugh..."

Gwyneth fumbled blindly through the ever-increasing, thick smoke. Her lungs burned with each breath. "Come on. We've gotta get moving."

Her hand fell across a thick, heavy object. She tugged it free, then wedged it under the beam. With all her might, she shoved, and it moved. Again, she put all her strength into prying the beam off McKenzie, grunting with the effort.

Finally, the detective's body was free. "Can you move?" Gwyneth asked, gasping for air. She pulled air into her lungs

The Man For The Job
by Marie-Nicole Ryan

and coughed. A wave of dizziness swept through her head and left her reeling.

It was too late. They weren't going to make it. As she fell, a pair of strong arms grabbed her.

"Mike, thank God. Help McKenzie—"

"Think again, Blondie."

Gianni Damico's face swam before her smarting eyes.

Forty-three

Marina looked around her small, efficient kitchen. Now, where was a good poison when she needed it? Maybe she could feed Henry something that would make him sick long enough for her and Adam to get away. First, she'd have to convince him to eat something. But if she tried too hard, he'd get suspicious.

How much time did she have, anyway? Who was he, and why was he here? It just didn't make any sense. Maybe it had to do with Mike. After all, Henry had admitted he knew Mike. Maybe from when Mike was on the force?

She had to do something. She couldn't just sit around and wait for him to fall back on his final option.

Spices? Was there anything besides red pepper she could use?

Syrup of ipecac. That's it. Now if I can just get into the bathroom. Oh, how stupid. The cold-eyed man sitting in her living room wasn't going to fall for the oldest trick in the book. Or would he?

"Adam, you sit here and eat your soup. Mommy has to talk to Henry."

"Okay, Mommy."

Marina slipped into the living room. "Henry, is it all right? I need to go to the restroom." She looked down at the floor as if embarrassed.

His eyes narrowed. "Don't try to pull anything, Miss. You have a nice, young boy. I'd hate for him to have an accident."

His words shook her to the core—chills followed quickly by a flash of anger. How dare he threaten her son? She wished she had a gun. She'd shoot the S.O.B. without a moment's hesitation. But she didn't have one, so she'd better make do with syrup of ipecac.

"I'll just be a minute."

Henry frowned, but gave her a brief nod.

Marina walked into the blue and white-tiled bathroom and locked the door behind her. She turned on the water faucet. Let him think she was modest and shy. Easing open the medicine cabinet, she grabbed the small bottle of poison antidote and secreted it in the pocket of her khakis. Remembering her cover story, she flushed the toilet, waited a second, then turned off the water faucet.

All she had to do now was get him to eat some soup laced with ipecac, or maybe he'd prefer coffee with her special ingredient. It wouldn't take long before old Henry started tossing his cookies.

* * * *

Rocky stepped out of the elevator at the seventeenth floor—Marina's floor—and glanced around; he couldn't just go up and knock on the door.

Concentrating, he recalled the façade of the building. It had small, covered terraces on the upper three floors. Perhaps he could gain entry from a neighbor's terrace.

Yeah, sure. Someone was going to let him into their apartment and watch while he crawled from one balcony to another—seventeen stories up.

God, he hated heights. He'd rather face down ten hoods with automatic weapons than climb a ladder.

But while he was standing here with his thumb up his butt, someone had gained access to Marina's apartment. Who and why?

First, he tried Marina's neighbor on the left. He knocked and waited. Footsteps.

"What do you want?" a woman asked.

"I'm a security guard. I need to speak to you."

The door opened a crack, blocked by a chain. An elderly woman peered out at him. "You're not one of our guards. I know them all."

"Please, wait. Let me explain—"

Too late. She slammed the door in his face.

Couldn't blame her, but she'd probably call the police on him. Better get a move on.

Let's try the other one then. He strode down the hall to the neighbor on the right. Again he knocked. And waited.

No answer. No footsteps.

"Perfect." He reached into a hip pocket and pulled out a case of lock picks. Less than sixty seconds later, he was inside. "Geez, I hope Marina's got better locks on her doors."

He walked over to the balcony, opened the door and stepped outside. Assailed by the city noises and traffic, he took a breath to steady his resolve. "Don't look down."

But he had to look over at Marina's terrace. He guessed it was about ten feet from her neighbor's, with a narrow ledge that ran between the two.

Rocky looked down at his size thirteens and shuddered.

He reckoned his chances of inching his bulked-up body across the ledge were slim to none. Still, he didn't have a choice. Whoever had dropped in to "surprise" Marina and Adam was in for a surprise himself.

Rocky took a deep breath and swung his leg over the terrace railing.

* * * *

Gwyneth felt someone half-dragging, half-guiding her along through the haze. "McKenzie," she croaked, "...the fire—"

"Fire's out, Blondie, so shut it."

She struggled to take a deep breath, but couldn't fill her lungs. It hurt too much. "I can't breathe."

"*Sure* you can. You're running your mouth, aren't you? Try not moving your jaw."

Maybe he had a point. She tried pulling away from his firm grasp. "Where're you taking me?"

"Give it up. *You're* taking me to my wife."

"I don't know where she is."

"*Sure* you do. You filled her head with nonsense. She wants to divorce me." He sounded genuinely outraged.

Gwyneth dug her heels into the green turf. "Women don't like being knocked around, Damico. You should've tried to control your temper when you had the chance. She's going to divorce you, and there's not a damn thing you can do about—"

He gave her a rough shove, but she was on a roll. "You're going to prison for this. Home invasion and kidnapping—now

that's a federal crime. You'll be an old man by the time they let you out."

"Shut up!" He gave her another shove. She stumbled and fell, pulling Damico down—and on top of her.

"Clumsy bitch."

"Get off me, you creep." She pummeled his back and jammed her knee into his groin.

He howled, grabbed his genitals and rolled over on his back.

She scrambled to her feet—and found herself peering into the barrel of a gun held by a hooded man.

"Not so fast."

* * * *

Down in the dimly lit tunnel, part of the labyrinth beneath the Carlton estate, Mike stopped at the exit which would place him and his father's men behind the attackers. This particular exit opened just inside the boxwood maze. All they had to do was follow the maze to the point where another exit was concealed in the dense growth, discernable only to those who knew of its existence. Once they emerged from the maze, they would be behind the choppers, and the element of surprise would be on their side.

"Who d'you think's behind this?" Hicks asked.

"Don't know for sure, but my money's on Gianni Damico."

"The wise guy?"

"Yeah. Damico and I knocked heads while I was on the force. He's got a personal grudge against Gwyneth, too. Plus, the guy killed last night was Damico's mouthpiece."

Mike continued, "Even before I left the force, I heard that Damico had branched out and added arms-dealing to his usual activities."

"That'd explain the firepower."

"Yeah." Mike nodded at the ten men. "Let's roll."

* * * *

Rocky inched his way toward Marina's balcony. "At this rate, I oughta get there in about an hour. Don't look down. Don't look down. It's only seventeen stories. Not like I'm on the frigging Empire State building. Yeah, right. Seventeen. Might as well be a hundred."

His heart hammered in his chest like he'd already run a marathon. Keeping his eyes away from the street below, he felt his way along the narrow ledge. Never had twelve inches seemed so small.

He paused in his journey to take a deep, cleansing breath. That was supposed to help, right? Hell, no. If he missed the ledge, that deep breath would be his last.

Some hero. Spiderman, he wasn't.

As his body clung to the side of the building, his weapon dug into his back.

A pigeon flew by—and landed on the ledge between him and Marina's balcony. "Dammit. You lousy, shittin'..."

More than anything, he wanted to kick the damn bird off the ledge. Hell, it could fly. But he couldn't command the muscles necessary to take his foot off the ledge.

And while he was here having a near panic attack, there was no telling what was going on inside the apartment.

He took another step sideways. The bird would have to move sooner or later. Wouldn't it?

He gave the pigeon his evil eye, but the damn bird wasn't impressed. It just sat there.

Another side step. And another.

The pigeon ruffled his wings—Rocky held his breath, but it didn't move another feather.

"Dammit. One of us is moving," he told the damned bird. "And since you can fly, I figure it oughta be you."

Dark, beady eyes stared back at him.

He took another step, his thigh muscles beginning to tremble with the strain it took to move. What a chicken-shit he was.

He shuffled another step sideways—and the bird flew off the ledge.

All right.

In slightly less time than it would have taken him to climb Mt. Everest, he made it to Marina's terrace. Another deep, breath and he clambered over the ledge. Now if he could just tell what was happening inside the apartment. No need to endanger Marina and Adam by rushing in with guns blasting. But the longer he waited, the greater the danger.

* * * *

Marina cleared away Adam's dinner things. "I want you to go to your room."

"Aw, Mom."

"Now," she told him firmly. "You can watch TV or read a book." She didn't want her son around when Henry realized what she'd done.

After Adam padded off to his bedroom, she went back into the living room. Henry sat unmoving, his hands folded across his stomach. "I know you must be hungry. You might as well eat something. The soup is already hot and—"

"Not necessary."

"But you look like you could use something to eat. Heaven only knows how long you'll be here. I mean..."

"Well, I guess I could have a bowl."

Or two, she finished silently. "Why don't you come into the dining room? I'll bring it to you." She'd already heavily laced the remainder of the soup with the ipecac. She'd even sampled it—just a tiny bit—to make sure of the taste. Luckily, the aromatic seasonings masked the emetic's syrupy flavor.

She carried a generous bowl of soup and set it on the table in front of Henry. "I could fix you a sandwich. A bowl of soup isn't enough for a big guy like you."

"No, thanks. This is fine."

She set a crusty loaf of French bread down beside the bowl of soup and waited while Henry picked up his spoon. "Aren't you going to eat?" he asked.

"I can't. I'm too nervous."

A cold, appraising glint appeared in his eyes as he lay down his spoon. "Join me. I insist."

"Of c-course." Her stomach yah-yahed, and she fought the urge to crumple, but she sat down just the same. Her hands shook as she reached for a slice of the crusty bread.

"What's the matter? Don't you like your own soup?"

"Of course. It's just, I'm not used to being in situations like this."

"I'd like to see you eat some of the soup." He shoved the bowl in her face. "Try mine."

Nodding, Marina took his spoon and sampled it, actually managing to maneuver the spoonful of soup to her mouth without spilling any of it.

"Mm. It's good. Really." Now how long before she started throwing up? She'd outsmarted herself. Well, it wouldn't kill her, but Henry would soon guess what she'd done. And then what would he do?

* * * *

As far as Rocky could tell, Marina's apartment was quiet. Maybe too quiet.

He jerked his weapon from the holster. By habit, he ejected the clip, checked it, then jammed it back in the grip. Pulling back on the slide, he chambered a round.

Crouching low, he risked a peek through the patio door. Nothing. Oh God, what if he was too late?

He strained, listening for the slightest sound. A shadow cast on the wall, and he jumped back.

It was Adam ... walking into the living room and wiping his mouth on the back of his hand.

Good sign? If the boy was all right, then Marina had to be okay, too. He watched as Adam crawled up on the sofa and reached for the remote control.

Normal activity. Good. Still, he waited.

The Man For The Job
by Marie-Nicole Ryan

Marina came into the living room. He could hear her low-pitched voice through the glass, but not clearly enough to make out what she was saying. He started to knock on the window, but stopped when a man came into view.

Rocky knew him—or at least, he knew the type. A wise guy. Armed, but from the economy of his movements, he didn't need a gun. His body was a weapon.

Marina and Adam were in deep shit.

Forty-four

Gwyneth glared back at the gunman. Hands clenched at her side, she yelled, "I've had enough. I've had my head banged against a brick wall and been knocked down a flight of stairs. And just to make my weekend really special, I spent the night in jail on suspicion of murder. If you want to kill me, get in line."

Still writhing on the grass, Damico screamed, "Bitch!"

She glanced over her shoulder at Gianni. "Call me that again, and I'll personally castrate you with my dullest fingernail file." She crouched by the mobster. "And believe me, Gianni boy, nothing would give me greater pleasure." She straightened up, then drew her foot back—

The pressure of cold metal at the base of her neck brought her up short. "Turn around. Nice and easy."

"I hardly ever do anything nice and easy." She turned to face the mobster's henchman. "Not my style." She batted her eyelashes and gave him what she hoped was a 'come hither' smile. If he came just a little more hither, he'd join his boss on the ground.

The gunman motioned with his weapon. "Stay back, Blondie. I've already seen what you can do with those long legs."

"Can you blame me?" she asked with a seductive shrug. "I've had a rough week. Surely you understand."

One corner of his mouth quirked up. "I understand you think you're working me, but you're wasting your time. Now head for the chopper. We're going for a little ride."

* * * *

Safe on Marina's balcony, Rocky planned his next move. *Gotta distract him. Can't just go barreling in with little Adam sitting right there on the sofa.* Rocky bent down, picked up a potted plant and heaved it at the window he'd passed beneath during his time on the ledge. *THWACK!*

The glass didn't break, but it made a hell of a satisfying racket. He watched and waited as the wise guy drew his weapon and rushed down the hall.

Now or never. Rocky stepped forward and tapped on the patio door.

Marina whirled around, her eyes wide with fear. He motioned for her to let him in. Her sweet mouth dropped open. She nodded and signaled for Adam to hide behind the sofa as she raced to the door. Rocky nodded his approval.

Opening it, she began, "I'm so—"

Over Marina's shoulder, Rocky saw the hit man return. Shoving her aside, he brought up his gun and fired.

Marina's intruder ducked and stepped back, but he moved too late. A gout of blood spurted from his neck as he fell backwards into the hallway with a heavy, muffled thud.

"Stay back," Rocky warned her. He stepped over to the fallen man and kicked away his gun. Crouching beside the body, he felt for a pulse. None. "He's gone."

"Omigod! I-I have to get Adam out of here."

"Take him to his bedroom while I call the police."

Marina nodded and sped away. "Come on out, son. It's all over."

A very wide-eyed boy crept from behind the couch. "Don't look, baby." Marina picked him up, stepped over the body and carried the child down the hall to his room.

When she returned, Rocky slipped his cell phone back in his pocket. "Is the little one all right?"

"Yes. Did you call the police?"

"Yeah. They'll be here in a few minutes. There's a station house nearby."

She heaved a sigh, then gazed up at him, her warm, brown eyes glistening with unshed tears. "How did you know to come back? I've never been so glad to see anyone in all my life."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him on the cheek. "How can I ever thank you?"

Rocky grinned down at her. "It's okay. No thanks needed. I should've stayed with you and the boy." He placed his hands on her shoulders. "Are you sure you're all right? Did he hurt you?"

"No, we're both all right. Thanks to you. I don't know how much longer we would've been, though. Henry was the scariest man I've ever seen."

"Henry?"

"That's what I called him." Marina clasped her hands together in a nervous gesture. "Made him seem a little more human."

Without warning, her face grew pale. She bent over and grabbed her stomach. "I-I have to go."

"It's just nerves," he told her. "You'll be all right, just take some deep breaths."

"No," she gasped, "I dosed his soup with ipecac, but I outsmarted myself. He made me eat some to prove it was all right." She clamped her hand over her mouth and ran down the hall.

Rocky shook his head and marveled at her audacity.

She tried to poison the creep. What a woman.

* * * *

After exiting the tunnel, Mike turned to his left and ran along the path of the boxwood maze. He motioned for his father's security force to follow him. The labyrinth made a perfect camouflage, concealing them from the invaders. The walls of maze extended up at least ten feet. Long ago, he'd learned the ins and outs of this warren of paths. As a kid, he'd hidden in the dense depths whenever he'd gotten in trouble.

He strained, listening for what he couldn't see...

Gwyn's voice. "I'm not going anywhere with you. If..."

What in damnation was she doing outside? She was supposed to be inside with Detective McKenzie and the sheriff. Had she lost her last bit of common sense? Why was she challenging armed gunmen? He whipped around another corner to the left, ran down the grassy path, turned right, then left, then another left.

Finally, he reached the rear of the maze. One panel of boxwood was false. He reached into the bush and activated the mechanism. The panel slid open with the barest rustle of fake greenery.

His heart nearly stopped when he saw a gunman and a smiling Gwyn. Smiling? Amazed, for a second, he watched. Four of Damico's henchmen littered the ground, unmoving. Damico himself was on the ground, struggling to his feet, but doing a piss-poor job of it.

"Cover me," Mike whispered to Hicks.

Hicks nodded.

Mike slid from the hedge, creeping forward, closing the distance between him and the gunman.

* * * *

Gwyneth stood her ground, facing Damico's henchman. "I'm not very fond of helicopters. I don't understand the physics that—"

A none-too-gentle shove in the belly with the gun barrel and a terse, "Shut it," gave her pause, but not for long.

For some strange reason, she wasn't afraid. After all, Damico wanted something from her—the location of his wife. Small matter that she didn't really know. Sylvia would've been moved to another location soon after she'd been dropped off at the way station. Damico wouldn't kill her as long as he thought she knew his wife's location, but if he realized she was telling the truth, her chances of survival would take a steep nosedive; he'd have her killed just for the hell of it.

"Leave me the hell alone. I'm not going anywhere with you. You'd do better to pick up your dickless boss and get him the hell out of here, before..."

Over the gunman's shoulder, she saw Mike and several black-clad security guards materializing, like a mirage, from the back of the maze.

Distract him. Yeah. Gwyneth reached for the clasp on her skirt and undid it.

"What the hell?" The gunman's eyes widened as the skirt slithered to the ground in a silken pile. She stepped free of it. "Like what you see? There's more..." Crossing her arms in front of her body, she prepared to pull off the silk top as Mike advanced, coming up behind the hooded gunman without his ever noticing.

"Drop it, dirt bag."

The gunman whirled, fainted and rolled into a ball before leaping to his feet like a *Cirque du Soleil* performer.

Mike evaded the gunman's maneuver with a jumping sidekick. It landed solidly in his solar plexus.

"Ooph." Damico's henchman hit the ground, but not before he managed a powerful back fist to Mike's left jaw.

Mike shook his head to clear it, then spun and delivered a high, roundhouse kick to the side of his opponent's head.

Damico's man hit the grass with a thud. He didn't move. His lids fluttered, then closed.

Mike rubbed his jaw. "Good choice, dirt bag."

Forty-five

Watching Mike in his man-with-a-mission mode, Gwyneth stood back and resisted the urge to run and throw her arms around him.

He nodded toward the gunman on the ground. "Hicks, take care of that one, while Mr. Gianni Damico and I have a long talk."

"Yeah, we'd better talk," Damico growled. "If my man in the city doesn't hear from me in fifteen minutes, your little boy and his pretty mama are gonna meet with an unfortunate accident. I understand they live on the seventeenth floor. Long way to fall."

Blood pounded in his ears; Mike grabbed Damico by his lapels and shook him. "You sorry piece of shit! If anything happens to my son or his mother, I'll rip your fucking heart out—"

"And I'll fry it for breakfast," Gwyneth finished.

"You and who else, bitch?" he snarled.

"Never let it be said I missed an opportunity like this." Gwyn drew her foot back and kicked Damico in the groin again.

Damico turned pale and wheezed, "Police brutality..."

"I don't work for the police." Gwyn favored her victim with the wide smile that Mike loved. "And I don't have to follow their rules."

Mike clenched his fists. Was Damico bluffing about having someone ready to kill Adam?

He had to be. Jerking the cell phone from his pocket, he punched in Rocky's number, his heart slamming against his chest like an Uzi out of control. Finally he heard Rocky's gruff voice, "Yeah?"

"Everything all right? Damico said he had a man—"

"Taken care of. Your kid and his brave mama are just fine."

"You're sure?"

"He's already been picked up."

"Thanks. Listen, I've got to finish here, but you'll stay with them—just in case?"

"Sure, no problemo."

Mike disconnected and let out a sigh of relief. His son was safe.

* * * *

The security guards and newly-arrived sheriff's deputies rounded up the rest of Damico's men—those who were still alive.

Detective McKenzie came limping out, her gun drawn. "Guess I'm a little late."

"Are you all right?" Gwyneth ran over to her. "I was afraid—the fire—"

"I'm fine. The sprinkler system kicked in. Can't say the same about the sheriff. The explosive device was closer to his position."

"He's not...?"

"No, but close enough. The paramedics have already taken him to the hospital."

"What about everyone else?"

"They're okay. That fancy panic room lived up to its reputation. Separate ventilation and electrical systems—I've never seen anything like it. Couple of casualties in security, but Dr. Morgan is handling those."

"What about you? You're limping."

The detective shrugged, her face twisting into half smile, half grimace. "Really, I'm fine. At least, I will be after I take a bottle of ibuprofen."

* * * *

Mike's gaze roved up and down Gwyn's body, pausing for a brief moment at the scrap of lace covering the blond curls at the apex of her smooth thighs.

God, what a sight. Who else but Gwyn would strip to distract a gunman? "You're okay?"

"Obviously," she told him cheekily, "except for a slight draft." She bent over, picked up her skirt and quickly fastened it around her waist.

He grinned. "You didn't have to do that on my account."

McKenzie cleared her throat. "Well, on that note, I guess I'll escort Mr. Damico here to the station."

Mike nodded. "I don't suppose I could have a word or two with him before you take him in? There's something else I need to know. It's important."

The detective shot him a suspicious glance. "You're not planning on extracting a little revenge on him, are you?"

"Like he doesn't deserve it?" The corner of Mike's mouth drew up in a wry smile. "Just a couple of questions, that's all."

"I'd like to ask him a couple of questions myself." Gwyn advanced on the handcuffed mob boss.

Damico's face twisted into an ugly snarl. "Keep that crazy bitch away from me!"

"Hold on." Mike snatched her by the wrist. "The detective doesn't want him damaged beyond repair."

"I wasn't going to hurt him—not anymore that is." She walked over to Damico. "How do you like it, Gianni? A little of your own medicine. Sylvia was right to leave you, you piece of dog shit."

Damico's face turned red and twisted with rage. "Bitch."

"I told you once. I don't like that word." Gwyn rushed at Damico, fists clenched.

"Gwyn, no." Mike grabbed her by the shoulders. She turned on him, blue eyes blazing.

"Let me go!"

"Go inside and calm down. Let McKenzie and me take it from here."

Gwyn turned and glared at Damico. "You get to live another day, dirt bag."

"*Dog shit? Dirt bag?* Where did a fine counselor like you pick up such language?"

"Too much television?" she sassed with a wide grin.

* * * *

After Gwyn had returned to the house, Mike turned to Damico. "All right. I want to know one thing. Did you put a contract on Gwyn?"

The mob boss remained silent. His answer, a dead-eyed stare.

"Come on. It's an easy question. I'm sure you're smart enough to understand it."

"Lousy cop has-been." Damico spat on the ground.

"Yes or no?" Mike insisted. "Did you order a contract on Gwyneth Wells?"

"No, but I should have. Damned interfering bitch."

Standing to the side, her arms folded across her chest, McKenzie asked, "Why should we take your word for it?"

"Okay, I had a man following her. She's my wife's lawyer. I just wanted to keep an eye on her so that if Sylvia took off, I could maybe find out where she was." Damico leveled his steely gaze at Mike. "If I'd taken out a contract, she'd be dead."

"What about your guy in the alley? He nearly killed her."

Gianni shrugged. "Let's just say he misinterpreted my instructions."

Mike's gut clenched. Gwyn had come so close to dying in that alley.

He glared at the mobster. "Rot in hell, Gianni."

Gianni glared back. "I'll be out in less time than it'll take'em to do the paperwork."

"We'll see about that." McKenzie turned him over to one of her deputies. After the mob boss was lead away, she turned

to Mike. "What do you think? Did he put out a contract on Gwyneth or not?"

"I'm inclined to believe him."

"Who offed Klein? Like the wise guy for that?"

Mike shook his head. "I doubt it. I think I know who did, and if I'm right, it'll lead to whomever's still after Gwyn."

"That's what you were going to reveal tonight—before it hit the fan?"

"You going to stick around for the fun?"

"Yeah. Guess I ought to." McKenzie nodded toward the house.

"In fact, you'd better give some TLC to your lady. She probably has a real good case of the shakes about now."

"Think so?"

"I'm sure of it. Unless I'm mistaken, she's not used to helicopter invasions and shootouts."

* * * *

Inside the Carlton mansion, Gwyneth found the servants bustling around, clearing up the damage caused by Damico's explosive invasion.

Approaching the housekeeper, she asked, "Is everyone really all right?"

Millie stopped sweeping and stared. "Yes, no thanks to you."

Gwyneth's mouth dropped open. "Me?"

"This is all your fault," the housekeeper replied with a sweeping gesture that took in the entire room. "This lovely

house was a quiet retreat before you came on the scene. Now it's—"

"My fault?" Gwyneth tamped down the ready response and closed her mouth. In a way, the housekeeper was right. Richard's death and Damico's attack would've never happened if she'd stayed in New York.

"I don't have time to gab. I have work to do, and I'd like to get to it." Millie grabbed the broom and started sweeping in jerky, angry movements.

"Of course." Gwyneth backed away. Obviously, the housekeeper had taken a dislike to her, and there wasn't much she could do about it. Not that it really mattered.

She walked into the spacious hallway and found Mike's mother directing the cleanup detail like a World War II general ready to charge a German-occupied hill.

"Simmons, see what you can salvage of dinner. Our guests still have to eat."

The servant nodded and rushed away to the kitchen.

"Harris, see that the table in the dining room is set, and," she turned to a third, "Thomas, get Millie in here."

Seconds later, Millie ran into the hallway. "Yes?"

"Call Dodd. Tell him to come 'round and start repairing the damage done to the landscaping by those dreadful helicopters. And that terrible hole in the wall—it must be corrected tonight. Call that fellow who worked on the summer house." Elinor paused. "Oh, yes, his name is Wilson. Call him."

A quick nod and Millie rushed to the telephone.

Gwyneth took a deep breath. "Is there something I can do?"

"Why, my dear, don't you think you've done enough?"

"I'm so sorry. I know this would never have—"

"No, no. You misunderstood. Make no apologies. One of the guards told me of your performance. It was quite daring of you. I would never have thought to distract a gunman in quite that way." Mike's mother smiled. "But then I suppose these old bones wouldn't be very distracting, now would they?"

"Well, I'm sure—" Gwyneth broke off, unable to erase the sudden image of Lady Elinor's stripping down to her knickers while held at gunpoint.

"No need to answer that question, my dear. Although in my day..." Elinor Carlton's hazel eyes twinkled.

"You were stunning. You still are."

"Now I *know* my son must marry you."

"But we barely know each other—less than a week."

"Sometimes it doesn't take any longer than that."

"Did you feel it that soon with Mr. Carlton?"

"Oh, no." Elinor shook her head, her eyes assuming a faraway expression. "It took at least two weeks with George and me. He was arrogant and so convinced of his desirability. I disliked him on sight."

"But that's the way it was with Mike and me. Must be a family trait."

"No doubt."

* * * *

After Damico and the last of his men had been carted away by the authorities, Mike strode into the house, marveling at the degree of order the well-trained servants had already managed. His mother's doing, he'd bet dollars to doughnuts.

He discovered Gwyneth and his mother with their heads together, laughing.

Hmm. Might not be such a good sign.

"The two women in my life—and you're laughing. Should I be worried?"

His mother flashed him a knowing smile. "Most assuredly, my son."

Gwyneth slipped her arms around his waist. Desire flared and staggered him as she pressed against him.

"Yes, we were discussing some traits you and your father share—from the gene pool, no doubt."

"Gene pool traits?" Mike tried to breathe and settled for gasping. "Sounds serious."

Gwyneth giggled, then tried for a serious expression. "Definitely."

Mike inhaled the scent of his woman. "Mm, you smell so good. Feel good, too."

"Mike, your mother's standing right here."

She gave a dismissive wave. "Never mind me. I've matters to attend."

"Before dinner, I still want everyone gathered in the salon," Mike told her.

She nodded. "I shall see to it."

Once his mother had left them alone, Gwyn asked, "We're still going ahead with your plan?"

"No time like the present," He nuzzled her neck.

She pulled back and pierced him with her level gaze.

"Please be careful. The murderer is still here, and you could be in danger."

"I'm more worried about you. You've already been attacked once today. I don't want you to be alone anywhere—with anyone, but my mother or father. They're the only ones I trust."

"I think your mother actually likes me."

"Good. She's hell-on-wheels if she thinks you don't measure up. But I wasn't worried. I knew she'd love you like I do."

Gwyneth sighed. "How do you know you love me?" she faltered, then dropped her tone a notch. "I mean what do you love about me?"

Mike gazed into Gwyneth's shining blue eyes. "I just know."

"That sounds awfully female, Mike. What *do* you know?"

He grinned, stalling for the words that would make sense to this level-headed woman of his. "I know that you make me forget the mistakes I've made. You give me hope that I won't make more. You make me *feel*. That's your greatest gift. I'm alive again."

Nestling against his chest, she murmured, "Aw, there's such a softy under that arrogant jerk I just met four days ago."

"Watch it, counselor. This is all going to my head."

"Yeah, and I know which one." She pressed against him.

"God, you are so—"

The Man For The Job
by Marie-Nicole Ryan

Behind him, his mother cleared her throat, stopping his imminent attack of purple prose.

"Shall we start pulling everyone into the salon?" she asked.

Mike nodded. "The sooner, the better." He pulled Gwyneth even closer. "Come on, counselor. Let's rid the world of some trash."

Forty-six

As Mike's official eyes and ears for the evening, Gwyneth took her place in a comfortable armchair while the evening's guests filed into the salon. Aunt Lilith came first, followed by her attorney, Paul Winston. Looking entirely too stylish, Detective McKenzie talked quietly to Mike. Neither of them seemed to be paying any attention to the gathering of suspects.

Elinor Carlton entered along with the sullen housekeeper, Millie. "Michael didn't tell me how long this experiment will take, but I think we should make ourselves comfortable."

Gwyneth's aunt spoke first, "I think this is a ridiculous imposition. I don't care what kind of experiment he has in mind."

"Have something to hide?" Gwyneth asked in an undertone.

"Don't be ridiculous," her aunt replied with a huff and toss of her long, auburn hair.

Pretty Dr. Tara Morgan rushed in and sank into the chair opposite Gwyneth. "Am I late? Sorry."

Mike turned to the new arrival, his smile a shade too luminous to suit Gwyneth. "Just in time."

Maybe he was just being polite, but she wished he wouldn't smile so readily at every pretty woman he met.

Mike's brow furrowed while he glanced around the room. Who was he looking for now? And why couldn't he just trust her with his game plan?

"Where's your son, Mrs. Sand?"

The little weasel—did Mike suspect him?

"I'm here. Miss me, Mikey?" Edmund stood in the arched doorway with a wide smirk plastered across his baby face. "Quite a bit of excitement here today. Are your house parties always so much fun?"

The caterer's man, Reggie, came up behind Edmund. "Bollocks! You should've seen the blighter. 'E 'id in the pantry and squealed like a little rat rooting among the veggies. Right amused, I was."

Cousin Eddie drew himself up to his full, but insignificant height. "Liar. You're the one squealing for his mum when we were invaded."

"Now 'oo's going to believe a right prat like you?"

Mike clapped his hands. "All right. If I may have your attention for a few minutes. In the absence of Sheriff Bauer, Detective McKenzie has allowed me some leeway in investigating two areas of inquiry."

Aunt Lilith gave a theatrical groan. "Just once, I'd like to have dinner this weekend."

"Dinner will be served shortly," Elinor assured them. "I do appreciate your patience and cooperation."

"I know you're all curious," Mike continued, "why I've requested this particular group of people to be here tonight."

Sighing, Gwyneth's aunt studied her long, manicured nails. "Not really—unless you're under some illusion that you're Lieutenant Columbo. Although, I don't see a tatty trench coat or a chewed cigar."

"And here I thought I was more the Sam Spade type." Mike stopped to give the witch aunt one of his most charming smiles. "Point of fact, I'm puzzled by your presence here this weekend. Is it just a coincidence that you sought an attorney who's one of my father's oldest friends?"

"Paul came highly recommended."

"Who recommended him? I would think that someone with your history of legal problems would already have counsel on retainer."

"Well, if you must know, my last attorney recommended him for my particular problem."

"Which is?"

"A matter of inheritance."

"From who?"

"That is a very impertinent question. I don't wish—"

"Very well, madam, you don't have to answer. I'll answer for you. First, you're angry that your mother cut you out of her will, then your sister—Miss Wells' mother—followed suit."

"There were some personal items that I thought I should have—things that I could leave to my son, Edmund."

"More than a few items, I'd say. What about Gwyneth's considerable fortune?"

"There was a bit of money—not that much."

"Cynthia Wells' estate was worth ten million dollars. Nothing to sneeze at."

"That much, really?"

"And people have a way of dying when they're around you, don't they?" Mike ticked them off. "First, your little sister,

then two—or was it three—of your husbands, including your son's father."

"And your point is?"

"That you're a black widow. You've murdered more than once and wouldn't hesitate to murder again."

"Supposition, Columbo, supposition. I thought this little gathering was about Mr. Klein's murder, not my poor choice of husbands."

"Could be they're related. I don't believe in coincidence."

"It's immaterial to me what you believe." She turned to her still silent escort. "Paul, I want you to sue this-this upstart for slander and defamation."

"Now, Lilith, calm down." Paul Winston rolled his eyes. "Let's hear the rest of his presentation. I find him informative."

Eyes and ears indeed. Only Gwyneth's long experience with clients and never revealing what she really thought kept her mouth from dropping open.

Mike turned to her cousin. "And, Eddie, have you taken after Mommie Dearest? Would you like to inherit the lovely Gwyn's sizable fortune? Surely you know, what her father left her makes her mother's inheritance look like chump change."

"Really?" Edmund smiled. "Cool."

"Cool, huh? Cool enough to shove her down a staircase? I mean, if your cousin broke her neck, who would inherit?" His attention whipped to Gwyneth. "Who stands to inherit your estate?" he asked without warning.

"Until Richard died, he was. We rewrote our wills, making each other the beneficiary..." her voice faltered as the truth

hit her; she'd omitted a very necessary legality. "And I haven't rewritten mine yet."

"You're Klein's heir?" McKenzie interrupted, surprise written across her face.

"He said I was."

"We're right back where we started. That gives *you* a motive." McKenzie frowned and shook her head. "Now I have to check into the will issue."

"No, it doesn't. I have more money than I could spend in three lifetimes. Richard's estate ... It isn't—wasn't an issue."

"No, it's more likely that Gwyneth's estate is the issue."

"Now wait a minute, guv," the caterer interrupted from where he hovered in a corner, "wot the 'ell am I doing 'ere? I never saw this bird before last night in all me life."

"Then why did you try to kill her with the lobster bisque?"

Indignation swept across his plain face. "Nothing wrong with me bisque. Wot you mean?"

"Gwyneth's *allergic* to shellfish, and it's a known fact that you were aware that two guests were allergic to shellfish. And you had the seating diagram."

"W-well—" Reggie stuttered.

Mike made a sudden turn toward the housekeeper. "As did the housekeeper, you, Miss Grayson."

"Now, why on Earth would I want to kill Miss Wells with the lobster bisque—of all things? I'd like to think I could be more creative than that."

"Why? I can think of at least one reason. Why don't you tell everyone your real name?"

"Millicent Grayson." Her tone developed a definite sarcastic edge, like maybe she was ready to bite someone. "You already know my name."

"No, I mean your given name at birth."

The housekeeper glared at Mike. "Caitlin."

Caitlin? The name sent Gwyn's head spinning. Caitlin was...

"And, Mrs. Sand, wasn't your first husband's name Gray?"

"Hmm. It was so long ago..." Lilith hesitated, appearing to give the question due consideration.

"I can tell you what his name was, if you can't remember," Uncle Wil sputtered from the foyer, his face red and fire in his eyes.

Gwyneth hadn't noticed his arrival.

Hail, hail, the gang's all here.

Her aunt cast a venomous glance at Uncle Wil. "Why, yes, I believe it was," in a tone so casual, you'd have thought she was ordering a salad at the Four Seasons.

Uncle Wil arched an eyebrow. "Gwyneth, meet your cousin."

"My *cousin?*" Confused, Gwyneth looked from her uncle to the housekeeper. "Caitlin Gray, but that's the name of my half-sister."

"Very good, Gwyneth." Lilith smirked. "About time you caught on. Your father was such a charming man—so charming, I had to find out for myself."

Gwyneth took a deep breath and fought the nausea roiling in her stomach. "Y-you slept with my father and passed his daughter off as your husband's?" Still confused, she

continued aloud. "I always knew about Edmund, but I never knew you had a daughter."

Her aunt tossed her hair and laughed. "After my first husband ... died, I fell on hard times, so I gave her up for adoption. Your father saw to it that she had a good home and education."

"No wonder my mother hated you."

"Enough, Gwyn." Mike leveled his gaze at her. "You can tell her how you really feel later. We need to continue. I knew there was something familiar about our efficient housekeeper. You both have the same blue eyes and bone structure."

Mike continued, smiling at them all, "And now we have another person who has good reason to wish Gwyneth harm. Framing her for murder would do the trick, wouldn't it?"

Reggie Gruhn tapped Mike on the shoulder. "Now see 'ere, mate. I've nothin' to do with this dysfunctional family of murderers. Looks like I'm off the 'ook."

"Not so fast. Detective McKenzie, I think you might want to investigate Mr. Gruhn's connection to Gianni Damico."

"No way. I 'ad nothing to do with Unc—" The short, stocky man clapped his hand over his mouth.

"Care to finish that statement?"

McKenzie whipped out her handcuffs. "Mr. Gruhn, I must advise you of your rights."

Gruhn's face blanched, then deepened until he was a dark red. "No, it's not my fault. I told 'im 'is plan was starkers, but 'e wouldn't listen."

"Accessory before the fact," McKenzie finished, then jumped in with a question of her own. "What else did your uncle have planned?"

"I'll tell ya, but not without a deal from the DA."

"Nice job, Mike," Paul Winston spoke. "You've connected everyone in this room to Gwyneth, but she's still alive. Klein's the one who's dead. Who killed *him*?"

"In a minute, Paul. There's one more connection. Funny you should be the one to bring it up. As Mrs. Sand's attorney, *you* would stand to receive a fat retainer and a good percentage of any spoils should Gwyn meet with an unfortunate accident."

Shivers shook Gwyneth to her very bones and settled in the pit of her stomach. Nearly everyone in the room had a good motive for wanting her dead. Not a comforting situation. Not at all.

"But," Paul argued, "what about Klein? Or are you still fishing?"

Mike grinned at his father's old friend. "Guess I can't pull the wool over your eyes, can I?"

"All this blathering about Gwyneth and how everyone would be better off with her dead—a fact with which I can't argue—but who killed that unfortunate young man?" Aunt Lilith asked.

"Someone who loved him and feared losing him." Mike turned and stared at Gwyneth.

Her hand went to her throat. "Me? Have you lost your mind?"

Forty-seven

Gwyneth swallowed the lump in her throat. But Mike wasn't looking at her—he was looking beyond her at ... Caitlin, her eyes, widening at the accusation and the color draining from her face.

Surely not.

"Caitlin, why don't you tell us how you and Richard planned it? Once Gwyn made Richard her heir, she was dispensable, wasn't she? At least, that's how *your* plan was supposed to work."

"This is bogus," Caitlin hissed. "You don't know what you're talking about. And you're ready for the funny farm if you think you're going to pin this murder on me."

"Shut up, Caitlin," Lilith warned. "Paul, she wants a lawyer."

"We traced a call to this house that took place before Klein showed up, demanding to see Gwyn. Was he asking for directions, or was he just lonely?"

Caitlin's face flushed red.

Mike continued, advancing toward her. "Give it up. We already have records of your calls from here to Klein's apartment. You were in love with him. So why kill him?"

Her mouth tightened into a thin line. "I didn't."

"Were you afraid he wouldn't share Gwyn's estate after all? Your father paid for your education, didn't he? But he didn't leave you anything in his will like he did Gwyn—his legitimate daughter, the one he really loved."

Gwyneth used years of control to hold back her admiration. Damn, he would've made a great prosecutor. The man had a definite flair for the dramatic. Juries would love him.

"That galled you," Mike continued. "Didn't it? Your father ignored you, and you didn't trust your lover to share the wealth either, especially if you thought he was falling in love—with your half-sister." Mike rammed each point home by pointing at Caitlin.

"She had everything, didn't she? Everything you ever wanted. The love of your father. All that money. And finally, Richard. It was more than you could stand. So you slipped into the kitchen, stole the knife and plunged it into your lover's back."

"No!" Caitlin drew back, glancing from side to side.

Would her half-sister try to run? Wild hope faded from Caitlin's face as two more officers stepped into the salon.

"Y-you don't have any proof." Caitlin straightened and took a deep breath. "You need proof to arrest me."

Mike shrugged and took a nonchalant step closer. "I'm sure all we have to do is search your room and find the gray dress you wore when you stabbed your lover."

"I was *here* all evening. There were guests everywhere. Surely someone would have noticed if I were wearing a blood-soaked uniform. We certainly saw his blood all over *her* dress," Caitlin's voice rose with a note of hysteria.

"But, you're just a servant. No one would notice if you slipped away for a few minutes. You had just enough time to kill Klein and change. And that's what you did. The only thing

you forgot was the cameo pin you wore on your collar earlier in the evening. You didn't have it on later."

Mike glanced at Gwyneth. "You have your sister's sharp eyes to thank for that bit of information."

"You bitch. This is all your fault." Tears welled in Caitlin's eyes. "I never would—" She stopped a second before incriminating herself.

"Detective McKenzie, do you have a search warrant?" Mike asked.

"Oh, yeah."

"The DNA evidence will confirm everything. And it doesn't take weeks like it used to."

"Miss Gray, I'm taking you in for further questioning." McKenzie proceeded to read Gwyneth's sister her rights.

While Gwyn struggled to process the information Mike had dumped on everyone without warning, she nibbled thoughtfully on a fingernail.

Aunt Lilith shrugged and made the symbolic gesture of washing her hands. "Well, I guess that's that."

"She's your *daughter!*" Gwyneth jumped up and faced her aunt, "And 'that's that'?"

"Well, I mean, I'm no longer under suspicion." Lilith turned to her attorney. "I'm ready to leave, Paul. This weekend has lasted long enough. Perhaps we could have dinner in DC."

Mike stepped in front of her aunt. "Not so fast. Your entire family was part of a conspiracy to murder Gwyneth. Detective, I think we're going to need more than one squad car to haul these people."

"As you suggested, they're outside."

Lilith turned to Edmund. "Keep your mouth shut. It's all circumstantial."

Paul Winston sidled up to Mike. "Now, Mike." The attorney's tone was quiet and measured as if he were remonstrating with a jury. "Surely you don't mean me as well? I only met Mrs. Sand three days ago."

Mike shook his head. "Be glad. She's hell on husbands. Her estate-planning problems are the least of her worries. She needs a criminal attorney now."

Before Caitlin was taken away, Gwyneth turned to her. "You really wanted to kill me? For money? And Richard? He wasn't worth it."

"Shut up. Yes," Caitlin hissed, "it was all about you. Everything's always been about *you*. I've hated you all my life—precious Gwyneth who had everything, while I was just a dirty, little secret."

Hatred had poisoned and destroyed her half-sister. Gwyneth shook her head. "I'm sorry." If she'd just sought out her sister before all this, would Richard still be alive? Was she partially responsible? She couldn't deny it. She was.

* * * *

As the last of the squad cars disappeared, Gwyneth leaned against Mike's strong shoulder and sighed.

"Your aunt's too smart. She'll lawyer up." Mike added with a wry grin, "But Eddie will spill his guts. He's as spineless as a jelly fish. The authorities will get something close to the truth from him, provided he's granted immunity from prosecution."

"He's an accomplice before the fact." Gwyn rubbed her forehead and frowned. "Okay, but who tried to poison you and who pushed me down the stairs?"

"I'm guessing your sister did both. Little Eddie doesn't strike me as the physical type. Your sister is spontaneous—impulsive."

"Family trait?"

"I'd say so."

"So Edmund was actually giving Caitlin an alibi instead of giving himself one?"

"That'd be my guess."

"Hmm." Gwyn chewed her bottom lip for a second before blurting, "You know what I have to do, don't you?"

Mike rolled his eyes. "Don't tell me, counselor. You're going to represent Caitlin. I'll go with you." He took Gwyn by the arm and guided her back to the house. Her skin, warm and soft, enticed him. Her scent filled his senses, reminding him of their last time together. And if he knew his woman, her mind was strictly on the case. It would be hours before...

Apparently oblivious to his gathering desire, Gwyn picked up her pace. "I'm not licensed in Virginia, but I can do the initial prep and see that she's represented properly. All I need is a legal pad and a briefcase."

Mike sighed. "Shouldn't be a problem. There's plenty of office supplies on hand. My father could outfit a publishing company with his bulk buying."

Gwyn stopped and shot him one of those looks. He knew what came next.

"You know, you have to make peace with him."

"Peace?"

"Well, a truce at least."

"Easier said than done, counselor."

"Just try, because if it doesn't happen this time, it might never happen. Even I can see your father's not in good health. You wouldn't want to live with that regret on your conscience the rest of your life, would you?"

There was some truth to her words, he had to admit. Could he swallow his pride and attempt to heal the breach between him and his father? "You have a point. It'd make my mother happy."

"She's not the only one."

"Now wait a minute. He was damned rude to you."

"That's old news." She gave him a knowing smile. "He approves of me."

"How do you know?"

"I know," she replied archly.

He backed her against the front door. "Self-confident lady, aren't you?" He snaked his arms around her waist and pulled her closer.

The door swung open. His mother. "Ah, there you are. We're about to have what's left of dinner."

"Thank you, Mother, but we're going down to the jail. May Gwyn borrow a briefcase and a legal pad?"

"Of course." His mother glanced over her shoulder, opened her mouth, then closed it. "Silly me. I was about to call for Grayson or whatever her name is. I suppose I'll just see what I can find myself."

"Thanks." Amused, he doubted his mother could find her way to the kitchen, much less the storeroom.

"Michael, your father would like to see you. He's in the study." She gave him an encouraging smile then rushed off. Maybe she didn't want to witness the carnage.

He took a deep breath. "Guess the time is right."

"You know it is. I'll just wait here."

"This won't take long. He'll yell at me, and I'll get mad—about thirty seconds."

"You have to make an effort. Be the bigger man."

"I don't know if you're a good influence on me or not, but you're a good woman."

"I know."

Resisting the urge to take her against the wall, he kissed the tip of her nose. "Behave yourself."

The feline, self-satisfied smile of every woman who knows her power over her man crossed Gwyn's lips. "You know it, big boy."

Mike pulled away, squared his shoulders and clenched his jaw. He might as well get it over with.

To his surprise, his father met him at the door. "Come in, Mike."

Mike nodded. "Sir."

Instead of taking his usual place behind his desk, George Carlton motioned for Mike to have a seat on the soft, leather sofa at the end of the room and followed him.

"Would you like a drink, sir?" Mike asked.

"You don't have to play bartender. I was impressed by your performance. You did a good job." He hesitated a beat, then added, "You made me proud."

Proud? Mike shook his head. Maybe his hearing was off.

"Did you hear me?" his father asked.

"I *thought* I heard you say you were proud of me, but I'm sure I'm mistaken."

His father cleared his throat. "I know we haven't gotten along. I'm a cranky old man. Cut me some slack."

"Uh, of course." His father's comment was almost humorous. Had his old man had another stroke? "Are you all right, sir?"

"You're making this damned difficult, Mike."

"This what?"

"This peacemaking thing your mother insisted on."

"So, it wasn't your idea?"

"Not exactly, but she's right. You've made your own life your own way—much like I did. I've been harsh at times—all right, more than harsh—but I've always wanted only the best for you."

"And Gwyn? You've given up on my marrying Marina?"

"I have. Your Gwyn's ... a keeper."

Mike eyed his father. "You're a leg man, too. That's it, isn't it?"

George sputtered, "Don't be ridiculous." But the twinkle in his father's eye told the truth.

"We have that trait in common, sir."

"Stop the 'sir' crap. Why don't you call me 'Father' or 'Dad'?"

"I thought 'sir' was more respectful."

"Bull! We both have to compromise. If I stop busting your chops every time you set foot in this house, I think you can call me 'Father'."

Mike swallowed the lump in his throat. And his eyes were absolutely not ready to tear up. "I can manage that—Father."

"Good." His old man's voice grew gruff and husky. "I don't think I can take any more of this warm, fuzzy stuff right now. Find that girl of yours and show her how much you love her."

Mike laughed. "That's one order I won't have any problem following."

He left the study. And his old man was actually laughing. Amazing.

He found Gwyn in the foyer, briefcase in hand. "I take it things went well."

"Yeah, they did. But I'm gonna be real pissed if I dreamed it."

"You didn't. I hear him. He's still laughing."

Forty-eight

Gwyneth walked into the interview room. Caitlin was seated, head buried in her hands, and her shoulders were trembling. "Caitlin?"

Her sister looked up, her eyes red and swollen, but her gaze was stony and full of hatred. "What the hell do *you* want?"

"They tell me you asked for an attorney, so I came." Gwyneth patted the briefcase.

"Why? To gloat?"

"Just what I said. It was a crime of passion. You weren't thinking clearly. He'd mistreated you. I think we can get the DA to reduce the charges—voluntary manslaughter or, worst case scenario, murder two."

"Why would you, of all people, want to help me? I tried to frame you. Richard and I wanted to—" Caitlin stopped. "For God's sake, are you that stupid?"

"No. I guess I've always been drawn to hopeless causes—and I owe you."

"Damn straight you owe me." Caitlin stood up. "And acting holier-than-thou, volunteering to be my attorney? Helping to get my sentence reduced? That's just a sop to your conscience. I'll still do hard time. None of it will bring Richard back," she wailed.

"I'm not licensed in Virginia, and I don't blame you for being skeptical." Gwyneth sat down. "But I can help prepare

your defense until I can find you someone who can represent you. I owe you that much."

Still ashamed of her casual attitude, she continued, "I never bothered to look you up after our father died. I guess I didn't want to be reminded of his infidelity. It broke my mother's heart and killed her."

"Your mother was a drunk."

Gwyneth swallowed her anger, forcing it down. "Not until our father betrayed her. Look here. I want to help you. The rest is immaterial."

"Great. So, now you can go home and sleep at night. You've done your best for your poor, illegitimate half-sister. Well, I might not be here if you hadn't had all our father's attention."

"All his attention? You didn't know our father. I doubt he spent any more time with me than he did with you. He was so concerned with making money. He never attended a dance recital, never made it to graduation—not even law school. I spent my life trying to dazzle him with my achievements, but it was a waste."

"Poor thing, he just left you a fortune." Anger twisted Caitlin's face into an ugly mask. "He didn't leave me a damned dime."

"I should've looked you up and given you a share. It might've kept you from killing Richard. He was a jerk, but I didn't want him dead." Gwyneth shook her head in disbelief at the results of her father's affair so long ago. "But why did you kill Richard? I still don't understand that."

"He was falling in love with you. I could hear it in his voice." Caitlin sat down again, as if her admission had sapped all her energy.

"No, he wasn't. He just didn't want to lose his chance at my trust fund."

Caitlin raised her chin a defiant notch. "He told me *you* were terrible in bed. At first, it was all he could do to keep it up. But then, when you broke up with him, he started acting like he was jealous."

"He was always about the *money*. You should've been more patient."

"If I had, you'd be dead."

"Maybe. But you're the one facing a murder charge, and I'm an attorney who has a personal interest in your case. Think about it."

Gwyneth stood up and walked to the door. "Guard!"

"Wait."

Turning slowly, Gwyneth looked at her sister.

"All right, I-I want you to help me."

Gwyneth walked back to the table and sat down across from her sister. She took a pen and legal pad from the briefcase. "Now, let's go over it—from the very beginning."

* * * *

Two hours later, Mike shut the bedroom door behind him. He pulled Gwyn into his arms. "Alone at last."

"Uh-huh." She emitted a purr that sent a surge to his groin. "Am I wrong?" she asked, looking up at him with troubled blue eyes.

He sighed. Alone didn't mean he was going to get lucky any time soon.

"No, just a little crazy, but you have a big heart."

Mike took her trembling chin in his hand and gazed down into her eyes. "You know, she'd have cheered you all the way to the gas chamber."

"I know. But I can understand why she hates me."

"She's a killer."

Gwyn bristled in his arms. "And as such, she's entitled to the best defense possible."

"And that has to be with your help?"

"Yes."

"She needs an attorney with experience in capital cases."

"And I've prosecuted capital cases. I know the system."

"You're actually going to help get her off?" *What was it about lawyers? How could Gwyn possibly help defend someone so obviously guilty?*

"Not off—not completely. I don't think any lawyer could do that. But in her own way, Caitlin's another woman who's been abused and ignored—first by our father, then Richard. I have to try. I bear some responsibility in this. I should've tried to find her after father died and shared the estate with her. I could've prevented all this."

"You're naïve. Greed is greed. Half your estate wouldn't have been enough. Not with mother Lilith whispering in one ear and Richard in the other."

"Maybe."

"Not maybe."

"I'm still going to help her."

Mike sighed. "I know. I'm already resigned to the hours this case is going to take you from my side."

"You seem to know an awful lot tonight, Mike Carlton. What else do you know?"

"Hmm." He kissed her, full lips, then pulled back to gaze into her eyes. "I know that I love you, in spite of your prickly personality—not to mention that you're the highest maintenance female I've ever known."

Gwyn pulled back from him, arching an eyebrow. "Oh, I guess I should just be *grateful* that you're willing to put up with what are really minor eccentricities."

"Damn straight." Mike's arm around her waist was strong, but tender. "Even though I risk death every time I get near you?"

"Risk death?"

"Yes," she purred, "from my heart speeding up so fast I can't breathe."

"Then, for the sake of your heart—I suppose I should give you up?"

"Like hell, you will." She ran a fingertip lightly across his mouth, tracing the curve of his sensual bottom lip.

Mike swallowed and shook his head. "Counselor, your language has taken a turn for the worse."

"It's the company I keep." She gazed up into his eyes of lake green.

"Then, I guess it's downhill from here, 'cause I'm not going anywhere. And neither are you." He backed her against the door.

Gwyneth chewed her bottom lip. "What about your son? Do you think he'll accept me?"

"He will. He's a good kid. You and Marina reached some kind of agreement, didn't you?"

"Yes, I like her. There's just one more thing. Unless I'm mistaken, Adam's going to end up with two new stepparents, not just one. That's a pretty big adjustment for a small boy."

"He's a little boy who's always been surrounded by love. I don't see that changing, do you?"

"No, not as long as we take it slow. I don't want to overwhelm him."

"Taking it slow..." He let out a sigh and cupped her breast. "Isn't my best event."

Gwyneth giggled. "You know, sometimes you talk too much."

Mike inclined his head and effectively silenced her chatter with his lips.

"Why don't we go to bed ... sometime tonight?" she teased.

He growled softly, his breath warm on her neck. "Let's play detective and new client."

"Only if *I'm* the detective and *you're* the client."

Mike pulled her to him and laughed aloud. "Oh, yeah, I can't think of anyone I'd rather have for my private eye."

The Man For The Job
by Marie-Nicole Ryan

Meet Marie-Nicole Ryan

Marie-Nicole Ryan is a nurse who has always loved reading romance and mysteries. She lives and works in Nashville, Tennessee. Her son thinks it's cool that she's an author. Her Chow Chow, Tazz, has no comment. This is her third published novel.

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