

ALSO BY IRIS JOHANSEN

Close Your Eyes (with Roy Johansen)

What Doesn't Kill You

Bonnie

Quinn

Eve

Chasing the Night

Shadow Zone (with Roy Johansen)

Eight Days to Live

Blood Game

Deadlock

Dark Summer

Quicksand

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Pandora's Daughter

Stalemate

An Unexpected Song

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Fatal Tide

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The Search

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The Face of Deception

And Then You Die

Long After Midnight

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Midnight Warrior

The Beloved Scoundrel

The Magnificent Rogue

The Tiger Prince

Last Bridge Home

The Golden Barbarian

Reap the Wind

Storm Winds

Wind Dancer

SLEEP NO MORE

IRIS JOHANSEN

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A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

Many, many thanks to my son, Roy, for all his help with creating our very special Kendra. She is difficult, complex, and definitely a challenge, and yet he handled her with cleverness and originality. Working with him to meet that challenge was one of the great joys of writing this book.

**SLEEP NO
MORE**

CHAPTER

1

Seahaven Behavioral Health Center

Santa Barbara, California

1:40 A.M.

THE KILL SHOULD BE RIDICULOUSLY EASY.

Not really worthy of his talents, Drogan thought as he moved silently down the hall. It was all a question of timing. The nurse who was usually on duty at the desk of this private wing had left on her break three minutes ago and would not return for another seventeen minutes. Another nurse from the ward on the third floor, who was scheduled to cover her absence, was due to make a routine check in about ten minutes. No other coverage was considered necessary since the patient was always heavily sedated. He'd have to be out of here by then. The nurses at Seahaven were always as punctual and routine-oriented as everyone in the plush mental hospital. They had good jobs and wanted to keep them.

Too bad. The private nurse's job taking care of the woman in that suite down the hall was about to come to an abrupt end.

He stopped before Beth Avery's room and carefully, silently, opened the door. The lights were out in the room, but Drogan could see her heaped beneath the covers on the bed across the

room. She should be sleeping well; he'd been told they always gave her extra drugs at night.

Including this night, her last night.

He took the hypodermic out of his jacket pocket.

Yes, it was too easy, he thought. Any of her doctors or nurses could have given her the fatal injection. She was drugged and helpless. Why pay a hit man to do the job?

Because they had no guts, he thought contemptuously. Because Dr. Harry Pierce, with all his fancy degrees in psychiatry, was a coward who wouldn't risk his fine career and put his neck on the chopping block. That took nerve and skill and the ability to take the final step. Drogan possessed all three qualities, and that made him a giant far above these ineffectual assholes.

Ten minutes. Make the kill and get out of here.

He glided toward the bed.

What did you do, Beth Avery? Why do they want you dead? Are they tired of dealing with you? Not that it mattered. As long as he got his money, that was his only concern. Still, it was curious . . .

He had reached the bed. He put out his hand to shift the blanket so that he could make the injection. Then he would wait until he was sure that the stuff had worked. A less professional man would just take off, but he was proud of his work ethic.

It would take several seconds, but he'd be able to tell when she died. He knew death. It was an old friend.

He flipped back the cover.

Shit.

No Beth Avery. Pillows. Three pillows.

Pain.

He staggered back as he was struck from behind with the base of a lamp.

He fell to his knees as the room whirled around him.

A woman . . .

Tall, slim, dark brown hair, in her thirties . . . Beth Avery. He'd been given a photo of her. The target.

She had the lamp lifted to strike him again.

"No way, bitch." He lunged forward and brought her down. He had dropped the hypodermic when he fell and he lunged for it.

She brought her heel down on the syringe, smashing it. Then she pushed him away and rolled away from him.

God, she was strong, he realized dimly. Avery was supposed to be weak and drugged, but she was as sleek and muscular as a young lioness.

But a lioness can be taken down like any other cat. His hands closed on her throat. Die, bitch.

She butted her head against his nose as hard as she could.

Damn her. He could feel the blood spurt from his nostrils as his hands loosened from her throat.

She tore away and jumped to her feet. She grabbed the lamp and swung it again.

It connected, and he fell backwards.

She ran out the door.

Gone. She was gone.

Rage and humiliation tore through him as he struggled to his feet.

"No you don't." He reached the hall in seconds and caught sight of her turning the corner. She was obviously heading for the emergency exit. He'd chase her down the flights of stairs and grab her before she reached the lobby exit. She didn't realize how well the privacy of that stairwell would work for him. The kill was supposed to look like a natural death, but he'd worry about that later. It wasn't his fault that Beth Avery wasn't what they'd told him and

had taken him off guard. That damn Pierce could just rig something that would keep all their asses out of trouble. He couldn't worry about that right now. The bitch had made a fool of him. She had hurt him physically and stung his pride. He wasn't going to stop until she was dead.

Find her.

Catch her.

Kill her.

BETH OPENED THE DOOR of the linen closet a tiny crack, watching him jerk open the emergency door down the hall and start down the stairs.

Him. She didn't even know who he was. He had tried to kill her, and she didn't know his name.

Crazy. As crazy as the doctors here sometimes called her. Not to her face, they were always gentle and kind to her face. But she had heard Pierce laugh and whisper behind her back.

She wasn't crazy, and she wouldn't let them put her to death like some rabid dog.

The man who had tried to kill her must have reached the second flight of stairs by now. She opened the linen-closet door and flew to the freight elevator around the corner. She punched the button for the basement.

Slow . . . The elevator was so slow. What if he found she wasn't in the stairwell or the lobby and ran down to the basement? He could be waiting for her when the elevator door opened.

The elevator stopped.

She held her breath, bracing herself.

No one. The parking garage was brightly lit, but there were

no security guards or parking attendants. Billy had told her that the area closed down at ten at night, and she should be safe.

Still, relief flooded her as she punched the elevator button to send it to the top floor before she left the elevator. She hadn't been sure about anything. She ran down the concrete walk toward the door that led upstairs to the parking lot.

Unlocked, as Billy had told her it would be. One flight upstairs, then another unlocked door that opened to the rear grounds of the hospital. The hospital was built on the edge of a cliff above the sea, and she could hear the sound of the surf on the rocks below. Freedom was beckoning. Why not try to just keep on running?

No, Billy had told her that they would catch her if she took this way out.

Red herring, he had said. Be clever. Trust me.

But she was so afraid. Her hand instinctively reached up to clasp the gold key on her necklace. Help me . . .

But the key was only a symbol, and Billy was the only one who could help her now. Do exactly what he said.

She turned away from the cliff and back toward the corridor leading to the elevators. She deliberately left the door cracked open so that they would think she'd already left the hospital. Then she ran back toward the elevators.

Red herring. Go back upstairs to the third floor, where Billy would meet her. Billy would help her. Trust him . . .

RUN.

Billy had worked his magic. He had not asked questions, had not even let her speak. He had just grabbed her hand and pulled

her from the corridor into the room. He had told her exactly what they would have to do to get her away, and they had done it. She had been too frantic to even be afraid. A few minutes after she entered the room, she was outside the gates of the hospital.

Then she was running across the manicured green lawns toward the woods.

Her heart was beating hard as she reached the shelter of the trees. No one was behind her. No one had seen her.

Free. Am I free? Will I ever be free? What the hell is free?

But she had to do everything Billy had told her to do. Make the call. She reached into her jacket pocket and drew out the prepaid phone Billy had given her and dialed the number he had given her. "I'm in the woods, Billy. I'm making my way toward that motel you told me about, where the Greyhound bus stops. I don't think I was followed." She drew a long breath. "You didn't let me tell you, Billy. You were right. There was a man . . . he was going to kill me."

"I told you that I thought it would be tonight after I overheard that last phone call. You should have believed me."

"It was . . . hard. It didn't make sense. But I did what you said about the pillows and everything."

"But instead of running to me right away, you had to stick around and see for yourself. Thank God, you were at least ready for him." He muttered a curse beneath his breath. "I could have gotten you out of there a lot easier if you'd trusted me before this."

"It didn't make sense," she repeated shakily. "Why, Billy? I never hurt anyone. Why would they want to kill me? And why now? I've been here at the hospital for years. What did I do that made them want to get rid of me now?"

"I don't know, Beth. I only found out bits and pieces of what's going on. Stop asking questions and concentrate on just getting

away. But you've got to remember everything I told you. They'll be hunting you down. From now on, don't trust anyone." He paused. "Not even me."

"Of course I trust you." If she didn't trust Billy, then she was absolutely alone, and the thought frightened her. "You always told me to trust you."

"That's over. You can't trust me any longer. I won't let them catch you by using me. You're safer if you realize you can't depend on anyone but yourself. I gave you the tools to save yourself, now do it. You don't need anyone."

"Then why do I feel as if I need you, Billy? Dammit, I don't *know* anything. It's as if I've been lost at sea for all these years, and now that I've come back to port, everything I knew is gone, and I'm lost again."

"Then change it to suit yourself. You can do it. I've seen how you meet a challenge. Are you at the motel yet? There should be a bus leaving there in ten minutes."

"I think I see the neon sign."

"Hurry. You have to get out of the area right away. They'll be searching the grounds for you for quite a while. They won't expect you to have a plan."

No, why expect a plan from a crazy woman, she thought bitterly. "I am hurrying." She was almost running. "I'll call you when I reach—"

"Don't call me. I won't answer. You're on your own." He hung up.

On her own. The words sent panic racing through her. She suddenly felt terribly alone. Billy had tried to warn her he couldn't be there for her, but she hadn't wanted to believe him. He was the only one at the hospital who cared anything about her. He had helped her shake off the drugs, talked to her, made her aware of

what they were doing to her. He had been her friend. If she didn't have Billy, she had no one.

Calm down. What was different? She couldn't remember when she hadn't felt alone. No, when they'd used the heavy sedatives on her, she hadn't felt anything but a blurred sense of contentment. She hadn't felt loneliness or sadness or fear. It was only when they started lessening the doses that she'd begun to feel the emotions that everyone else felt, the emotions that made them human beings instead of mindless robots.

She felt a wild burst of anger as she remembered the little cups of pills handed her by the nurses. The shots administered to calm her when she was calmer than anyone on the medical team who'd clustered around her, smothering her.

Now she could see the Greyhound bus drawn up before the motel entrance. Her hand in her pocket closed on the scrap of paper with the address scrawled on it. She started toward the bus at a dead run. She was not going to miss that bus. It was going to take her to a new life, a new start.

She was *not* mindless. She was *not* crazy.

And she would not let those bastards rob her of either her mind or her life.

Lake Cottage
Atlanta, Georgia

RUNNING.

Panic.

The trees were all around her, tall shapes in the darkness. Eve could hear the sea crashing against the rocks though she couldn't see it from here. But she had seen it from the hospital every day

for all those years. Sometimes, she'd even been permitted to go down to the shore. But there was always a price.

Always something she had to give up in return.

No one behind her yet.

But how did she know?

Run faster.

Her breath was coming in gasps.

Did she hear someone? A crackling of leaves under a heavy footstep. He'd been a big man. She'd barely managed to get away from him. Could she get away from him again if he caught her? She didn't want to die.

She wouldn't die.

Just run faster.

Fight them. Don't let him kill her.

That bus was right ahead.

Get on it. Lose herself. But she was already lost. She'd been lost as long as she could remember.

Run!

"Eve, wake up!"

A hand grasping her shoulder.

He'd caught her! Fight him.

"Eve, dammit, wake up."

Joe.

She opened her eyes to see him leaning over her. "Joe?"

Joe. Not the man with the syringe.

The lake cottage, not the hospital by the sea.

No one chasing her through the woods.

"Shh." Joe was holding her close. "Just a dream, Eve." He kissed her temple. "But it must have been one hell of a violent one. It took me a couple minutes to bring you out of it. And you almost knocked me out."

Her arms clung to him with all her strength. Safe. Joe would keep her safe.

“Hey, it’s okay now.” He brushed back her hair from her face with a gentle hand. “I’ve never seen you like this after a nightmare.”

She had never felt like this. “I hit you?” She shook her head to clear it of the last vestiges of sleep. “Lord, I’m sorry, Joe. It was so real . . .” She sat up in bed and ran her fingers through her tousled hair. Her scalp was as damp as if she’d really been running through those woods. “It still seems that way.” She drew a deep breath. “I think I need to get a drink of water and some fresh air. Go on back to sleep.” She swung her feet to the floor. “It’s almost dawn, and you have to be at headquarters in a few hours. I’m sorry I woke you.”

“Don’t be silly,” he said curtly as he sat up in bed. “What does that matter? You’re upset. You’re still shaking. I’m not about to go peacefully back to sleep. What kind of nightmare was it?” He paused. “Bonnie?”

It was natural that he’d jump to that conclusion. Her daughter, Bonnie, had been kidnapped and murdered many years ago when she was only seven years old, and it had been the tragedy of Eve’s life. She and Joe had searched all those years they’d been together for both Bonnie’s killer and her body, and they had only recently been found. There had been many nightmares during those first years after Bonnie had been taken from Eve. Later, there had been other dreams of her very special child that had been sad but strangely comforting. And then, crazy as it seemed, she and Joe had become convinced that those were not dreams at all but visits from the spirit of her Bonnie. Dear God, how long it had taken her to accept that impossible concept. “Not Bonnie.” She slipped on her robe. “I’ve not dreamed of Bonnie since

we found her body a few months ago.” She tried to smile. “I miss her, Joe.”

“She knows,” he said quietly. “She’ll come back to you, Eve.”

“Well, she’s taking her time about it. I think she’s trying to cut me loose. She’s always worried that I think too much about her and not enough about you and Jane. She says ghosts should never have top priority.” She shook her head. “It’s not true. I know how lucky I am to have you in my life. I just want it all.”

“Perfectly natural.” He tossed the sheet aside. “Go out on the porch. I’ll get your water.”

“Joe, I don’t need you to wait on me,” she said in exasperation. “You’re treating me like a kid. It was only a nightmare.”

“Shoo.” He gently swatted her behind as he passed her on the way to the bathroom. “Get moving. And don’t stop at your worktable on the way to the porch and do a few more touches to that reconstruction.”

He wasn’t going to pay any attention to her. No one could be more stubborn than Joe. Particularly when it came to guarding and caring for her.

She left the bedroom and headed down the hall toward the porch. She slowed as she glanced at the forensic reconstruction on the dais on her worktable. It was the skull of a little unknown girl Eve had named Janelle when she had begun to work on it two days ago. When she had first started her career as a forensic sculptor after Bonnie had been taken, she had begun giving the skulls names as a gesture of respect, and she had never stopped. Janelle’s skeleton had been found scattered in a quarry in Indiana, and the Indianapolis police had no idea of her identity and sent the skull to Eve for help. So far, the only thing that Eve could determine was that she was Asian and approximately nine years old. But it had only been two days, and the depth measurements had just

begun. When they were completed, she would start the actual sculpting with the clay, and soon she would have a face whose features resembled those of the child before she had been murdered and thrown into that quarry.

“We’ll get there, Janelle,” she murmured. “You’re important. No one had the right to throw you away. I’ll bring you home.”

“Out.” Joe had caught up with her, and his hand was beneath her elbow. “Another minute, and you’ll be over there working.” He opened the front door. “You’ll probably do it anyway, but I’m going to make sure you’re okay first.”

“I’m okay. For heaven’s sake, it was only a nightmare. I’d probably be better off working and forgetting about it.” She took the glass of water he handed her and went out on the porch. The air was clear and cool, and the waning moon cast silver paths on the lake. She immediately felt the sense of serenity that she always did when she looked out at the familiar woods bordering the lake.

Run.

Through the woods.

The sound of the sea on the rocks.

No, that was the nightmare. Forget it. She was being foolish to let it bother her. She took a long drink of water. “You don’t have to stay out here with me. I’m okay now, Joe.”

“Liar.” His arms slid around her from behind and he pressed his cheek against her hair. “I can see the pulse pounding in your temple. You’re still jumpy. Just relax and stop trying to cheat me of being with you. Moments like this are good.”

Being with him was always good, she thought as she leaned back against him. She could feel the warmth of his lean, muscular body through his brown terry robe, and that warmth was flowing into her, bringing the contentment and love it always did. They

had gone through tough times during the years they had been together. Joe was a brilliant detective with the Atlanta Police Department, and she had her own career as a forensic sculptor. Along with demanding careers, they were two people struggling against death and loss and trying to grow and make it through the storms to a brighter life together. But the love had always been there. Love and passion and humor, and all the things that made the battle and the life together worthwhile. “Okay, have it your own way.”

He chuckled. “And your way.”

She nodded. “My way.” She turned and went into his arms. She loved the feel of him. He was strong and warm and good. When they were like this, she felt as if he was flowing into her and filling every emptiness in her heart and soul. All was right with her world.

Alone.

Always alone.

So hard to hide when there's no one to care if you live or die.

Why couldn't she shake off the memory of that damn dream? she thought impatiently. That terrible loneliness had nothing to do with her or her life.

“You're tensing again.” He pushed her back away from him, and his hands cupped her face. “I think it's time you talked it out.” He was studying her expression. “Yes, definitely tense. This isn't like you. You're sure it wasn't Bonnie?”

She shook her head. “I wouldn't lie to you, Joe.”

“Or Jane? You're not worried about Jane?”

She grimaced. “I'm always worried about Jane.” Jane MacGuire, an artist, was their adopted daughter and had been working in Scotland for months. It was sometimes difficult

remembering that Jane was an adult and no longer the street kid they'd taken into their home all those years ago. "But that goes with the territory when you love someone. I know Jane can take care of herself." She smiled. "Are you going to go down the list of family and friends? Stop analyzing, Joe. There wasn't some mysterious trigger that caused that dream. It was just one of those nutty chase-and-pursuit nightmares."

"Someone was chasing you?"

"Yes." She frowned. "No."

"Well, that's clear."

"I told you it was nutty. I'm not sure it was me that was running." She shrugged. "But it must have been me because I was so afraid."

"Why?"

"Joe, drop it."

"No, I don't like you to be afraid even of things that go bump in the night. It's not like you. In fact, it's damn weird. Talk it out. We'll get rid of it."

That was just like Joe, she thought. Face it, solve it, then send it on its way. It was how he'd become a great police detective: it was how he lived his life. Except he'd never sent her on her way, thank God. He'd kept her close to his heart, and she was grateful every day of her life that she spent with him.

"Okay, I'll talk it out. But there's nothing that really makes any sense. I was running through the woods, and I—"

He nodded at the trees along the lakeshore. "Those woods?"

She shook her head. "And no lake. There was an ocean . . ."

"What ocean?"

"I don't know. Stop interrogating me. I was being chased, and I was trying to catch a bus. It was . . . bizarre."

"What was bizarre?"

“Stuff I was thinking. Most of it didn’t make any sense. Except for the fear. I knew I had a reason to be afraid. That’s all I can remember. See, just a string of disconnected thoughts and emotions.” She gave him a quick, hard kiss. “There, I’ve talked it out, and I’m much better. Now let’s go to bed and see if you can go back to sleep.”

He shook his head. “No, I’m not sleepy. Let’s sit over there and cuddle for a while.” He was leading her toward the porch swing. “Don’t worry, I’m through cross-examining you. I just thought it might help. We’ll talk about Bonnie and Jane and you and me.” He pulled her down beside him and drew her into the curve of his arm, with her head in the hollow of his shoulder. “Or maybe not talk at all. We’ve both been pretty busy lately, and I’ve missed this.”

So had Eve. She could hear the beating of his heart, and it seemed to be beating within her, too. She always felt closer to Joe in special moments like this.

She had always been alone.

She was more alone now than ever.

That poignant thought from the nightmare again. It just proved how disjointed and foolish it had been. Eve had never been less alone in her life. She had Joe and family and friends she loved around her. Life was never perfect, but loneliness was no longer one of her problems. She pushed the memory away, firmly blocking it.

She cuddled closer to Joe, her gaze on the moonlight on the lake.

No panic. No danger. No wrenching loneliness.

Not here with Joe.



"I'VE LOST HER," Drogan said, when Dr. Harry Pierce picked up the phone. "It's your fault, Pierce. She wasn't what I expected. I would have handled it entirely differently if I'd realized that she wasn't what you told me."

"Excuses, Drogan?" Pierce asked softly. "What a tough guy you are when you can't even handle a woman who's spent almost two decades in an institution. You were recommended very highly, but I suppose they were wrong."

"I'll handle her, but I'll handle her my way. I shouldn't have trusted a man who doesn't have the guts to follow through on a job. You've probably been collecting from the Avery family for years, and you still have to come to me when they want to pull the plug on sweet Beth."

"Why should I trust you? You failed me. I'd do better hiring someone else."

"Go ahead. But I'll still go after her and cut her throat. I'm not going to take you or anyone else telling me how that crazy drug addict got the best of me." He paused. "And after that, I may go after you, Pierce. Did it occur to you that the Avery family might be tired of dealing with you? After the woman is dead, you'll be useless to them. Yes, I think I may contact them and see if they need me to tie up a loose end."

"Stay away from them," Pierce said harshly. "None of this must touch them. Do you think they won't take both of us down if they see a threat? Do you know the kind of power they have?" He drew a deep breath. "Maybe I was hasty. We can work together. I've already had that mess in her room cleared, and I've put out the word that she's run away from the hospital. It shouldn't take you long to find her. She won't be able to think straight with all the drugs we pumped into her. You probably scared her, and

she panicked. I don't even know how she managed to get away from the hospital without someone's seeing her."

"Bullshit. She didn't act scared."

"As I said, panic. She's like a child, and she'll have no idea how to hide from you. But when you find her, no violence, no slitting her throat. It has to be a tragic accident brought on by her mental condition. One that could be expected from a woman who has delusions and could suffer disorientation when faced with having to cope with the outside world."

"Tragic accidents can be violent . . . and painful. You're a doctor. You can make it look like anything you want it to be."

Pierce didn't like the sound of that. He had heard some strange things about Drogan when he had hired him. "Look, I won't tolerate any of that voodoo stuff I was told you like to pull on occasion. That's not what I hired you to do. It has to look natural, dammit."

"And it will if she doesn't make me any angrier than I am right now. If she does, then I may have to introduce her to the Snake God. I'll tell you when I get close to her." He hung up.

Problems. I don't need these problems, Pierce thought with irritation as he pressed the disconnect. He liked his comfortable life and the generous favors thrown his way by the Avery family. He couldn't see why Nelda Avery had decided that Beth Avery had to die. He'd had Beth under control all these years, and she hadn't bothered anyone. He had even tentatively suggested that they keep the present arrangement in place.

"Have you told the old bitch yet?" Stella Lenslow stood in the doorway. In her nurse's uniform, she should have looked crisp and businesslike, but the white made her red hair blaze in contrast, and she exuded an overpowering sexuality. "No, I can see you haven't. You still have your head on your shoulders." She closed

the door behind her. "I told you that you should do the job yourself."

"Or give it to you." His lips twisted. "I can't see you taking a risk that could cause you to end up on death row. You have a very good sense of self-preservation. So don't tell me what to do, Stella."

"But you like me to tell you what to do." She crossed the room and stood before his desk. "When it pleases you."

And most of the time, everything she did pleased him. They had been together for six years, and he'd found her sexual appetite as voracious as her greed. She'd been his "patient" since her parents had brought her to him for private therapy after a run-in with the law for prostitution. She'd only been seventeen at the time and totally out of control as far as her parents were concerned. Upright, churchgoing people, they had been frightened and bewildered by their daughter, who had been a bad seed all her life. Even as a small child, she had been totally remorseless and without conscience, and, lately, she had begun to terrorize them. The Lenslowes didn't know how to deal with someone who had no sense of right or wrong and could not be taught. They had come to the point that they had only wanted to get rid of her and salvage the remainder of their lives. They had eagerly accepted Pierce's suggestions as to how to do it and were probably lucky they'd washed their hands of her. Pierce had diagnosed her as an incurable sociopath during the first month of therapy. But he had no problem with that when she provided him with such intense and extreme entertainment. "Well, you're not pleasing me at the moment. I told you to give Beth enough pills to put her out. You didn't do it."

"I gave her plenty." She dropped down onto the chair beside his desk. "Don't blame me, Harry. Just tell me when you're going to get her back. I don't like the idea of her running around

out there. It could cause trouble if anyone connects me with her. They'll find out I'm not a real nurse. I'm still on probation, and they could send me to prison. I like it just fine here."

Because he took such good care of her, he thought dryly. He bought her whatever she wanted. He'd even given her the perfect job for her temperament. She dealt out medicines and gave the shots. She liked the feeling of power over the patients.

She liked the feeling of power, period.

"I'll get her back. But you'd better keep a low profile for a little while. I'm trying to keep the media from finding out that we've lost her, but I had to tell the staff when we were searching for her. Someone may talk." He smiled. "And you never bothered to make any friends among the other employees. You'll probably be a target."

"Low profile?" She shook her head. "Not me. I won't fade away for anyone. That's for other people. That's for that mousey, plain excuse for a woman who you're trying to run to ground." She wrinkled her nose. "I never did like her."

"You never like anyone. You don't know what it means." He raised his brows. "But that usually means you did something that wasn't quite ethical. What did you do, Stella?"

She shrugged. "I cut down her drugs a little."

"In hopes that it would cause her to go into withdrawal and experience severe pain. You are a complete bitch, my darling."

"She's nothing. She was like a dummy. She annoyed me. I wanted to see her hurt." She added quickly, "But she had a full dose last night, just as you told me."

"That had better be true."

"I got tired of everyone tiptoeing around and treating her like a princess. She was only a zombie." She met his gaze. "You should know that's all she was. You're the one who made her like that."

But she had never confronted him with that fact. She was proving unpredictable and therefore dangerous. He might have to do something about Stella. "Stay away from the media. Don't answer any questions." He reached for the phone. "And get out of here while I call Nelda Avery."

"I want to stay."

"I know. You'd enjoy seeing me uncomfortable. I won't let you have that pleasure." He stared her in the eye. "Go upstairs to my apartment and take off your clothes. Lie down naked on the bed and wait for me. After I get through talking to the Grand Dame, I'm going to need a release. I'm going to screw you until you won't be able to crawl out of that bed. I'm going to make you scream, Stella."

She moistened her lips. "Is that a threat? I can always go you one better. Why not do it on the desk while you're talking to her? I could strip down now if you weren't afraid someone would walk in on us."

She would do it, and he was tempted. "Get out of here. Do what I told you."

"Whatever." She stood up and sauntered toward the door. "Good luck, Harry. Don't be too long, or I might get bored and leave."

That wasn't going to happen. She understood the rules. Sex anytime, any way he wanted it. "You won't leave." He reached for his phone. "You like it here, remember?"

He watched the door close behind her before he began to dial the number. He was already feeling the tension that usually gripped him when he spoke to Nelda Avery. She always made him remember that she controlled almost every aspect of his life. Over the years, she had gradually become the puppetmaster who pulled the strings. He could visualize her sitting in her elegant house in

Charleston, dressed in a designer business suit, her carefully coifed brown hair with only a few threads of gray. She was in her seventies but looked much younger, and her gray eyes were the coldest he had ever seen. She didn't tolerate mistakes, and those eyes were going to be icy before he was done with her that day.

It was going to be a hellish call.

Keep the feeling of dominance and lust he felt toward Stella in the forefront of his mind. Think about what he was going to make her do. She was a woman like this ice queen to whom he was going to have to submit for the next few minutes. Substitution. Release. He would get through this.

Nelda Avery was on the line.

"Nelda, I'm afraid there's been something of a glitch. Nothing irreparable, but it will be a little . . ."