

NO EASY TARGET

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CHAPTER ONE

San Diego Zoo

Not mine!

Don't get angry. Margaret Douglas tried to make the thought soothing. But there was little you could do to soothe a female tiger as bad-tempered as Zaran. Margaret had only just forged the link between them and it would take time and patience to influence her. Even now the Sumatran tigress was baring those sharp white teeth and glaring menacingly at her. She was probably not going to listen. *I'm just asking you to consider that the cub might be your own. Everyone here at the zoo appears to think so.*

Stupid. Not mine.

Margaret tried something else. *Let me try to help you remember when the cub was born. It might—*

NOT MINE!

The thought was immediately followed by a roar. The tigress's green eyes were blazing as she gathered the muscles in her powerful body and then bounded at top speed across the cage toward Margaret!

Zaran's lunge just missed Margaret as she dove out of the cage and slammed the gate behind her.

Margaret drew a deep breath as she got to her feet and stared back at the roaring tiger through the bars.

Close. Very close.

Not polite, Zaran. I'm just trying to help.

The tigress was still pawing through the bars at her. *Stupid!*

"What the hell are you doing?" One of the zookeepers was striding toward Margaret. "You volunteers are supposed to feed and water the animals, not get them all upset."

He evidently hadn't seen her in the cage, thank heavens. "The tigers are a little testy, aren't they?" She smiled. "I wasn't feeding her. I was just thinking about cleaning her cage. Maybe I'll wait for a while."

"You shouldn't be near her anyway. Why do you think she's not in the habitat? The vets are having problems with her. She's not been accepting her cub."

"Right. Sorry." She started to walk toward the road. "I'll go help out at the vets clinic instead."

She glanced back over her shoulder at the tigress. *But think about it, Zaran. I'll get back to you later.*

Not mine!

We'll see. . . .

Not exactly a successful session with the tigress, she thought ruefully as she paused to get a Coke at a refreshment stand. But no one else at the zoo had gotten any response at all and they might give up soon. She couldn't let that happen. It would have a lifetime of consequences for that cub. She would just have to let Zaran settle down and then go back later and try again.

Her phone was vibrating in her pocket and she vaguely remembered it also doing that when she'd been in the cage with the tigress. Not surprising that she hadn't paid any attention to it.

She pulled it out and checked it.

A text from Eve Duncan.

CALL ME.

She smiled as she dropped down on one of the green park benches at the side of the road. She hadn't talked to Eve in too long a time. Eve could be demanding, too, when it suited her, but she was one of Margaret's few friends. And she'd much rather try to soothe Eve than that tigress. She started to dial Eve's number at the lake cottage.

"No arguments, Margaret," Eve Duncan said firmly after making her wishes known. "I want you here at the lake cottage by the end of the week. I'm going to prepay an airline ticket to Atlanta for you, and Joe will pick you up at the airport. I'd do it, but I don't want to expose Michael to some of those germs floating around airports."

"And you can't bear to leave the baby yet," Margaret teased. "How old is he? Six months?"

"Six months going on six years," Eve said softly. "He's totally amazing, Margaret. You'll see when you get here. Yes, I'm besotted, but at least I'm trying to expose him to other people and experiences. That's why I'm demanding your presence. He should get to know my friend Margaret, who helped saved both my life and his big sister Cara's. How soon can you get here? What are you doing now?"

"I'm working at the San Diego Zoo. But it's mostly volunteer." She thought about it. "Four days' notice. But you don't have to buy me a ticket. I know a pilot for a movie company who has a studio in Atlanta whom I can hitch a ride—"

"No," Eve said immediately. "No hitching rides with anyone. Not safe. Joe lectured you about that the last time." She paused. "Is it that you don't have ID in your own name to get on a commercial plane?"

"Don't worry about it. This pilot is a good guy and he owes me for—"

"Hush, Margaret," Eve said resignedly. "Under what name should I buy this ticket? And don't give me any bull about it not being necessary. Someday I'm going to persuade you to tell me

what's going on with you, but I owe you too much to force it right now. I just want you here to meet my son. What name?"

Eve wasn't going to be dissuaded. Oh, well, she really wanted to see Eve's baby. She'd find a way to reimburse her later for the airline ticket. "I've always liked the name Margaret Rawlins."

"You've got it," Eve said. "It will be at Delta Airlines in four days." She was silent an instant. "Everything okay with you, Margaret?"

"Everything's always okay with me. What could be wrong?"

"That's what I want to know. You're the closest thing to a Gypsy that I've ever met and you're always operating under the radar. Put those two things together and it usually spells trouble."

"Not for me. It's all in the attitude. I'll see you in a few days, Eve."

"Yeah, take care, Margaret." She hung up.

And I'll probably be bombarded with subtle and not-so-subtle questions when I reach the lake cottage, she thought as she hung up. No problem. She was used to fielding questions, and Eve would be so involved with that new baby and her career as a top forensic sculptor that she wouldn't press it too far.

Baby.

That reminded Margaret of Zaran and the brand-new tiger cub. She needed to find a solution on how to make the tigress accept the cub before she left for Atlanta. Which meant she should get working on it right now. If she couldn't work out the problem with a few suggestions to the vet about the way to handle it, she might have to pull an all-nighter on her own. Tigers were never easy. Females were twice as difficult when they were as unstable as Zaran.

So get moving so that she could finish her job before she left to go to see Eve and her son, Michael. She finished her Coke, got to her feet, and headed for the clinic. She could feel the happiness zinging through her at the thought of all the new things on the horizon. Babies and tiger cubs and friends she could love and trust. She wished she could explain to Eve that, in the end, nothing else

was really important. All the fear and the running could be handled as long as she kept one truth in mind.

Life is good.

Summer Island

Caribbean

“Yes, I see him now, Officer Craig. He’s near the exercise fields, talking to one of the techs.” Dr. Devon Brady’s narrowed gaze was fixed on the tall man in khakis and a black shirt, who was talking to Judy Wong beside the high white wooden fence. His back was to her, but she knew a great deal about body language, and she relaxed a little. “No sign of aggression that I can tell, but you were right to let me know he was on the island. I don’t know how the hell he got this far without a security escort.”

“I don’t know, either,” Craig said grimly. “He flew in early this morning and just slipped under the radar. Johnson was on duty at the airport terminal and said he seemed to be a nice guy and that the Gulfstream he was flying was pretty awesome. He didn’t seem a threat to the clinic.”

“That’s not good enough,” Devon said sternly. “He could be anyone from a rival researcher to a journalist. The Logan Institute doesn’t want publicity about our work here. We’re doing terrifically well and we want to keep it that way. How did he slip away from Johnson?”

“He doesn’t know. Johnson turned his back for a minute and he was gone. We’ve been looking for him ever since.”

Devon didn’t like that, either. People who just flitted away from experienced security personnel could be either very clever or exceptionally well trained. This man had evaded the hunt of the island’s very efficient security team for the past few hours, so he might be both. “Then you’d better have a few refresher training sessions with your men. And get some people down here right away.”

“I’ll come myself.” He hung up the phone.

He knows his job is on the line, Devon thought. Craig was a good man, but this breach should never have happened. Just because they weren't dealing with biological agents or weapons on this island, everyone tended to let down their guard occasionally. They thought that just because the people here were working with very special dogs and documenting their unique, sometimes almost incredible abilities, there was no real threat. But industrial espionage was entirely possible considering the groundbreaking results they were getting working with the dogs these days.

And men like the one she was approaching now managed to take advantage of that carelessness. She studied that body language again.

No aggression, but something else . . .

Persuasion. He was bent toward Judy Wong and every line of his body was focused and aimed at her. He could not have been more intent or interested.

And Judy was responding. Oh, yes, she was definitely responding to that persuasion. She was looking up at him and she was smiling, her cheeks flushed, and she appeared a little starstruck. No, more than a little.

Not good.

She increased her pace. "Judy, do you need me?" she called. "Do we have a problem?"

"No." Judy looked startled. "Everything is fine, Dr. Brady. I was just explaining to Mr. Lassiter what my job is with the dogs. He was interested in how I—"

"I'm sure he was," Devon said drily. "But suppose I explain it to—is it Mr. Lassiter? You need to get back to the morning exercises, Judy."

The man turned, and for the first time she saw his face. "John Lassiter. And you must be Dr. Brady, who is in charge of the clinic and research facility. Judy is a great fan of yours." He smiled. "Did I step on toes?" He turned back to Judy. "I didn't mean to get you in trouble. I was just so interested. Forgive me?"

“Sure.” Judy grinned and turned back to the exercise field. “Anytime.”

No doubt she would have forgiven him if he’d nailed her to a cross, Devon thought sourly. Lassiter wasn’t movie-star handsome, but that was a fascinating face. Pale green eyes, high cheekbones, and wonderfully shaped lips, not more than thirty-something, but he had a few threads of silver in that dark hair. But it wasn’t that face so much as the powerful charisma he exuded. She found herself being drawn as Judy had been.

“Please don’t be hard on her,” Lassiter said gently. “She’s a nice girl. I’m sure you’re lucky to have her.”

“Yes, I am. And I don’t appreciate your taking up her time with your questions. What are you doing on this island, Mr. Lassiter?”

He smiled. “Not trying to extract research secrets. I’m sure you do fascinating, humanitarian work here, but I have no interest in it. Actually, I’m here to try to locate a former employee of your clinic. I should probably have gone to your office in the beginning, but I thought I’d amble around and see if I could find out a little on my own.”

“We don’t encourage ‘ambling,’” she said coolly. “We work very hard here and strangers tend to be a disturbing influence.”

“Oh, sorry, then I won’t waste your time. Suppose we go to your office and I’ll ask my questions and then get out of your hair.” His smile remained, but Devon was aware of a subtle change in attitude. He had seen that she wasn’t responding to that personal magnetism and had discarded it and gone on to the next stage of getting what he wanted. “I’m sure you’ve sent for security by now. But you don’t really want them to get in our way when it would be so easy to end this by answering a few questions.”

“I don’t mind them getting in my way.”

“But I do,” he said softly. “So please accommodate me. Only a few questions.”

There was just a hint of steel beneath that velvet softness, and she stiffened. “What questions? What employee?”

“Margaret Douglas.”

She tried to keep her face expressionless. “I haven’t seen Margaret in a couple years. I believe she’s left the area. However, I don’t know. She’s never requested a reference.”

“And you haven’t been in contact with her? Strange. Judy was telling me that you were good friends when she worked here.”

“Once someone leaves a job, they often cut off relationships. Why do you want to know where she is?”

“I may want to offer her a position.” He tilted his head. “You see, we both have questions. We should really go up to your office at the clinic and discuss it.”

She hesitated, gazing at him. Cool. Very cool. The threat was subtle, but she could sense its presence. He appeared to be as many-faceted as a glittering kaleidoscope. And who was to say that he wouldn’t discover another way to find Margaret if Devon didn’t satisfy him.

And the last thing Margaret needed was to have to deal with a threat like John Lassiter.

So maybe she should expose herself to the threat and try to find out more to tell Margaret when she warned her.

“Whatever,” Devon said casually as she turned away. “I can give you an hour or so before my next appointment. But I can tell you now that I’m not going to prove very helpful to you.”

“I appreciate your time, Dr. Brady.” He fell into step with her and that smile had returned. “And you can never tell. I’ve found when it concerns Margaret Douglas, I always need to make it a practice of taking what I can get.”

San Diego

Three Days Later

Margaret’s phone rang as she was walking out the door to go for her shift at the zoo. She glanced at it casually and then stiffened warily.

Devon Brady.

It might be nothing, but she never liked to get a call from Summer Island. They were too close to what she considered ground zero, only several hundred miles from the place where all the nightmares had begun. And that made the threat not only to Margaret but to everyone on the island itself.

And this was Devon Brady. Margaret considered her a friend, but as head veterinarian at a cutting-edge experimental station that dealt not only with taking gigantic steps in improving health but actually extending the life of the dogs in her care, Devon was far too busy for casual chitchat.

Well, then don't waste her time.

She accessed the call. "Hi, Devon. How are things down there? I've been thinking about going back to the island for a month or two, if I'm still welcome. How are the goldens doing? Still as much—"

"Don't come," Devon said curtly. "Don't come anywhere near here, Margaret. We had a visitor three days ago."

"Visitor." Her hand tightened on her phone. "Who?"

"John Lassiter. Do you know him?"

Relief. "I've never heard of him. Maybe it will be okay."

"He doesn't look okay to me," she said grimly. "He looks like big-time trouble. He talked to a few of the techs before I even knew he was on the island and managed to dazzle them a bit. Then he went on the offensive from the minute he sat down in my office. He's sharp as a stiletto and he's used to getting his way. He moves from strength to strength. Tough. Very tough. I had a few problems fending him off."

Margaret had trouble believing that and it made her nervous. She knew that Devon was a powerhouse of both efficiency and skill. "What kind of questions?"

"All about you. He gave me some bull about wanting to hire you for a job on his property in Texas. Where you are now. Where you came from. Who you associated with while you were on the island. Whether you had any off-island visitors. It went on and on." She paused. "I didn't tell him anything and I got rid of him as soon

as I could. But that wasn't the end of it. He evidently doesn't like being frustrated. Because we had a security break-in the next night."

"What?"

"Only the file cabinet containing your records. Not that there was much in them anyway. You made sure that they were pretty scanty before you left the island. But he must have wanted to know every single detail about Margaret Douglas." She paused. "One other thing. I think he managed to hack my phone. Which means that he has your phone number. And if he's as sharp as I think he is, he might be able to trace your phone location. I thought you should know."

"Yes, I should." She could feel her heart start to pound. Calm down. John Lassiter. As she'd told Devon, she didn't know the name. He didn't have to be connected to Stan Nicos, the monster who had tormented and almost broken her. "Thanks for calling me, Devon. I'm sorry you had to go through this."

"Don't be ridiculous," Devon said bluntly. "Besides your being the best tech I've ever had, or ever hope to have, I don't want you to end up in the same shape we found you when we stumbled over you on that beach. I didn't think you were going to make it."

"I wouldn't have if it hadn't been for you. I've told you how grateful I am."

"Not grateful enough to tell me who did that to you."

"It's my problem, Devon." That had been such a close call. One of many since she had escaped from Nicos. It seemed as if he had been on her heels forever. "I wasn't going to involve you or anyone at the clinic. You got me well again; you gave me a job. I wasn't going to repay you by heaping that kind of ugliness on you." She added drily, "But it seems I may have done it anyway. I was hoping that he'd give up the search. It's been over three years."

"He?" Devon didn't wait for an answer that she knew wouldn't be forthcoming. "Look, if you don't want to talk to me about it, that's fine. But I'm going to give you the same advice I gave you two years ago when you came to us. Talk to the police. Or I'll do it for you."

“Not an option. But you might make sure that island security is doubled for a while. I don’t believe they’ll bother you again if they think they’ve found out everything you know, but don’t take chances.”

“You’re the one who shouldn’t take chances. Look, I’m sending you a photo of Lassiter that I managed to take before he took off after grilling me. We ran down the name that Gulfstream he was flying was registered under. It was a corporate registration in California. Still under Lassiter. And I notified our security chief, Craig, to run a check on him after he left my office that first day. I wanted to be able to give you the entire background before I called you. I’ll let you know what he finds out.”

“That’s good.” She had a sudden thought. “But I’m getting rid of this phone. I’ll call you with a different number as soon as I buy a new one. How long ago did you find out you were hacked?”

“I just discovered it this afternoon, but I think it must have happened sometime after the break-in. It was very slick. Lassiter didn’t want me to know that he’d managed to do it.”

And that meant that this Lassiter had had more than twenty-four hours to trace her cell phone location. He could be listening now. “I’ll call you,” she said quickly. “Thanks, Devon.” She hung up and drew a deep breath. She could feel her palms damp with sweat.

Close. Nicos hadn’t been this close to her since Santo Domingo. How had he traced her to Summer Island? She’d thought she’d left everyone safe when she’d hopped that flight off the island. She hadn’t even let Devon take her to that hospital in San Juan after she had found her. And she had been very careful not to leave any paperwork that might lead anyone to her since then.

It had happened. Nicos had evidently sent a particularly efficient bloodhound and tracked her down.

Stop worrying about how it happened. Accept it. Do what’s necessary.

Her phone was pinging and she accessed the photo Devon had sent her.

John Lassiter.

He was half turned away, but he was gazing with a faint mocking smile at the camera, as if he'd known Devon was taking the photo.

As if he'd wanted her to take it.

And he appeared to be everything that Devon had said he was.

But she didn't recognize him, she realized with relief. It wasn't that he was traveling under a false name; he hadn't been on Nicos's island when she'd been there. The relief lasted for only the briefest moment.

That didn't mean Nicos might not have hired Lassiter after she had escaped from Vadaz Island. Since she had never set eyes on him, he had no other reason that she could see to go after her.

It had to be Stan Nicos. Nicos, with his fat wallet and hideous soul, had found a man as talented and corrupt as himself to hunt her down. Nicos, who controlled the major percentage of drugs and arms that made their way from South America to the rest of the world, wouldn't have found it that difficult. Just a small job in the scheme of his crime network, but he'd given the order to go and find her.

To bring her back to that house on the hill, as he'd told her he would.

Blood on the black-and-white tiles of the guest house.

"Too late." Nicos met Margaret's eyes. "Remember this, Margaret."

His gun pointed execution-style at Rosa's head.

"Please, Margaret." Tears running down the young girl's cheeks. "Make him stop. I'm begging you. I don't want to die. He'll listen to you."

Blood on the tiles. Blood on the tiles.

Don't think of that day. It had taken her years to move beyond it and come to terms. No, that was a lie. She had never come to terms with anything connected to that day or Stan Nicos. It still haunted

her dreams and it only took a chilling threat like this to bring the memories flooding back to her.

She swallowed hard. Okay, Lassiter represented a threat and she had to deal with it. It wasn't as if she hadn't had to run from Nicos before. But that had been during the early years, when she had been skipping from island to island in the Caribbean, just trying to stay one step ahead of him. Once she'd managed to come back to the United States, it had been merely a question of, as Eve had said, staying under the radar.

So that's what she had to do again. Just get out of here and lose herself as she'd done so many times before. Stay away from the friends she had made over these last years to protect them. After a while, maybe she could afford to make contact again.

So text Eve and tell her that she wouldn't be able to meet her Michael yet. If she didn't, Eve would start to worry, and that would mean that she would be likely to start a hunt of her own. But not with this phone. She just hoped Lassiter hadn't been able to tap her calls for the last two days.

Get moving. Time to get out of here.

She turned and headed for her closet across the room. She could be out of here and on the road within thirty minutes. She pulled out her backpack and started stuffing it with clothes from the paper grocery sacks on the floor. It took her only a few moments and then she headed for the bathroom. Toothbrush, comb, hairbrush, soap, washcloth. Anything else she could do without or pick up later. It was amazing what you could live without if you were forced to do it. She had found that out when she had lived those years in the woods. Sometimes it was even emancipating not to be dependent on—

She stopped.

She had caught sight of her face in the mirror as she turned to leave the bathroom. Good God, she was a mess. Her lips were tight and the blue eyes looking back at her were wide with strain. She looked pale, tense, and on edge.

No, be honest, she looked scared.

Nicos has made me look like this, she thought with self-disgust. Three years and he could still cause her to feel this fear. She wasn't that kid any longer; she was over twenty. He shouldn't still have this effect on her. Three years and he could cause her to run like a rabbit because he'd sent some creep after her who had even been able to intimidate Devon.

Okay, she would run because it was the smart thing to do. But she was no rabbit and she would not abandon the things she had to do before she had to leave. It shouldn't take that long. Her duties at the zoo could be done by someone else, except for that tiger cub. It had become clear that no one else could do that adjustment but her. She'd stop on the way out of town and spend enough time to try to reconcile the tigress to her cub.

She was already feeling better because of the decision, and the woman in the mirror was no longer looking like someone she wouldn't want to know.

She tilted her head and made a face at her reflection. Hey, you've had it too easy lately. We can get through this. Just stick with me, kid.

She opened the bathroom vanity drawer and took out the small wallet photo album and stuffed it in her pocket. You could do without most things, but memories were important and photos helped. Same for music. She took out her iPod and earphones and jammed them in her other pocket. Then she took the SIM card from her phone and smashed the phone against the porcelain bathroom sink until it was in pieces. She'd pick up her new phone at that shopping center near the zoo. She slipped on her backpack and headed for the door.

As usual, she had left nothing behind that meant anything to her, nothing that could show anyone who she was or where she would go next.

A broken phone, a few dishes in the cabinet, a couple paperback books.

Try to put that together and find me, Lassiter.

She didn't look back as she slammed the door behind her.

Lassiter isn't going to like this, Neal Cambry thought, as he looked around Margaret Douglas's one-room studio flat. He had orders to locate the woman and not let her get away. But she had clearly abandoned this place. Bite the bullet. Call Lassiter and let him know that Margaret Douglas was in the wind again. He reached for his phone.

"We have a problem," he said when Lassiter answered. "She's not here. I talked to her landlord and she slipped an envelope in his mailbox with this week's rent this morning. No forwarding address."

Lassiter was cursing. "Of course there's no forwarding address. She never leaves one. Did you search her apartment?"

"I'm there now. There's not much to search. It's pretty basic, a minimum studio apartment. I can't find any leads."

"Look harder. I'm on my way there from the airport now. I'll be there in fifteen minutes. Find something by the time I get there." He hung up.

Cambry flinched. When Lassiter gave an order, he expected it to be obeyed and the impossible to become possible. And he had only fifteen minutes to make that happen. Ordinarily, he looked upon working for Lassiter as a challenge; the money was excellent and his employer was usually not unreasonable. Besides, they were friends, and he owed him big-time. But *usually* wasn't in Lassiter's vocabulary where this woman was concerned. He was totally committed to finding her and nothing was allowed to get in his way. Lately, Cambry had actually found himself feeling sorry for Margaret Douglas.

But not sorry enough to pit himself against Lassiter unless it was absolutely necessary. They went back a long way and in Afghanistan he'd become fully aware of both his potential and ruthlessness. No way that Cambry would take his money and not turn in full value. That would be most unwise.

So find something that would make Lassiter believe he was earning that money.

Fifteen minutes.

“She smashed her phone.” Cambry handed Lassiter the remains when he walked into the apartment. “She did a good job. It’ll be hell checking her directory history.”

“I managed to get a lot of info from the tap I put on it after Summer Island. I’ll get my San Francisco office to put it on priority,” Lassiter said. “What else?”

“Just a few paperbacks.” He handed them to Lassiter. “Two mysteries and a how-to manual on how to set up a Wi-Fi system. She bought them at a used-book store in the Gaslamp Quarter.” He hesitated. “That’s how the entire apartment is set up. Everything cheap and secondhand. Her landlord said that she never had visitors and he had no idea where she worked. I asked if he’d made a copy of her driver’s license, so we could at least get her photo, but she told him that she’d lost it and hadn’t gotten her replacement.”

“I have her photo now.” Lassiter handed him a copy of a small faded photo. “I got it from one of the people she worked with on Summer Island. I suppose her landlord didn’t even make her fill out a reference or credit application?”

“How did you know?” Cambry shook his head. “He said that he usually did that, but he kept putting it off. He said he knew that she would pay her rent.” He met Lassiter’s eyes. “He trusted her. He liked her. He said he was sorry to see her go. Kind of a surprise.”

Not to Lassiter. It was the first time Cambry had been directly involved in the hunt, but this was old news to Lassiter. “She manages a great con wherever she goes. I ran into the same thing down in the Caribbean. I couldn’t break through that protective wall she builds around herself.” His lips tightened. “I was forced to take alternate steps.”

“I won’t ask you what they were,” Cambry said with a grimace. “But any con she’s working evidently isn’t bringing her any money.” He was looking down at the photo of the fair-haired girl in jeans, sandals, and blue chambray shirt. “This is Margaret Douglas? She’s

not much more than a kid. She looks like some fresh-faced college girl. She kind of . . . glows, doesn't she?"

That had been Lassiter's first thought, too, and he had tried to dismiss it immediately. He'd been having enough trouble keeping his perspective in the past months. He'd seen photos of Margaret before while he'd been on the hunt for her, but they'd all been scratchy, out of focus, and faded. He knew Margaret Douglas didn't like her photo taken. This one that he'd talked Judy Wong into giving him was . . . different. As Cambry had said, her blue eyes were shining with humor and she looked tanned and glowing, as if lit from within. Her smile was luminous. Even her pale brown hair was sun-streaked and seemed to glow. "It was taken three years ago."

"She doesn't look more than eighteen or nineteen. That means she was even younger when she was living with Stan Nicos."

"He has a reputation for liking them young. The son of a bitch has whores imported from bordellos in Bogotá who are much younger than that. And she must have been very satisfying. He kept her for nine months and he's been searching for her ever since she left him."

Cambry slowly shook his head. "If she was only a kid, maybe she had a reason to want to start a new life. Why else would she have been running all this time?"

"I don't know and I can't let it matter. He wants her back. That's what I have to concentrate on. She's the key, the only one I've found. That's what *you* have to concentrate on."

"I believe in new starts, Lassiter. You gave me one."

It wasn't the first time he'd said something like that. "Drop it, Cambry," he said. "The circumstances were different with you. In this life we have to pick and choose. And I can't afford to choose Margaret Douglas this time. Decisions always have repercussions. She'll have to live with the decision she made when she went to live with Nicos all those years ago. He probably dangled a few expensive baubles and she—"

"'Expensive baubles?'" Cambry chuckled. "Look at this place.

I've seen better apartments in the L.A. housing development where I grew up. She sure isn't into luxury."

"No?" Lassiter's lips twisted. "You should have seen the guest-house where Nicos was putting her up before she decided to part company with him. It was very impressive." He looked around the flat. Cambry was right. It was clean but shabby and completely without personality. That very lack of comfort made him more frustrated. He had spent the last year trying to track down Margaret Douglas, but she had been like a ghost. She had carefully erased her presence wherever she had traveled. In a world that ran on bureaucracy and documents, he had been able to find only the flimsiest of paperwork pertaining to Douglas. A few photos. No fingerprints. He had traced her movements through five towns in the Caribbean, and it was only when he reached Summer Island that he'd found anything concrete to use to find her. "Okay, I admit she's clearly trying not to do anything that will draw Nicos's attention to her again."

"Then why not try something else?" Cambry said quietly. "I've never seen you like this before. I thought you'd give up when you couldn't locate Margaret Douglas after you checked out Santo Domingo and Curaçao. But you just went on and on, until it became an obsession. Why, Lassiter?"

"You know why."

"I thought I did when it started. Somehow I became lost along the way."

"Too bad. Because I can't afford to stop now. Time's running out and she's the only card I have left to play. Do you think I've been focusing solely on Margaret Douglas while I've been searching for her? I've contacted everyone I could, pulled every string, but I've come up zero. It *has* to be her." He looked him in the eye. "Do you want to back out?"

Cambry shook his head. "I wouldn't do that. I owe you too much. I just don't want anyone hurt who shouldn't be hurt."

"It will be up to her. I'll work with her, if she'll work with me."

"But you don't think she'll agree to work with you?"

After months of hunting and investigating everything about her, Lassiter knew that she wouldn't. "Maybe you can change her mind. I'll let you try, Cambry. She's been on the run for over three years. It's not likely she'll stop." He went to the window and looked down at the street. "And, as I said, time's running out."

"I know." Cambry sighed. "I might give it a whirl, but you'd have a better chance." He suddenly grinned. "And you were talking about cons? Who's better at it or has more experience than you? Besides, you seem to know her inside and out."

Inside and out, Lassiter thought wryly. Sometimes he thought that was true. After all the people he'd talked to about her, all the apartments and flats where he'd searched and tried to build a picture of the person who was Margaret Douglas. He knew her favorite pieces of music, he knew she liked comedy and adventure movies and shied away from anything sad. He knew she could drive a car but seldom did because she needed a license, and that required documents. He knew that she drew people to her but was wary about taking lovers.

And he knew a few other rather bizarre and interesting things about her that he had not shared with Cambry.

He knew all those things, but he'd never heard her voice and only recently had seen a decent photo of what she actually looked like.

"It won't work," he said. "I want it too much and I've waited too long. I'm past the point of persuasion where she's concerned." He shook his head. "And if she doesn't agree, then I'll use her anyway. I've gotten this close and I'm not letting her skip away into the sunset again." He turned and strode toward the door. "She's *mine*."

"Not if we've lost her again," Cambry said.

"I haven't lost her yet," Lassiter said over his shoulder. "She was in this apartment only a few hours ago, before her friend Devon sent her flying away in panic. I have a few more places to search before I give up. I believe I found out more about her on Summer Island than she'd want me to know. . . ."

CHAPTER TWO

San Diego Zoo

1:35 A.M.

Margaret watched the night security guard turn off his flashlight and get back in his vehicle after checking out the cages. He would be going to the habitat area next, she knew. She had at least three hours before he'd come back here on his rounds. She stepped out from the shadow of the enclosure she'd ducked into when she'd seen the security guard approaching.

Three hours should be enough. She'd been working for the last six after the zoo had closed for the evening.

And I've done the best I could, Margaret thought, gazing warily at Zaran, the beautiful, fierce tigress in the big cage.

Okay, now for the test.

Margaret drew a deep breath and then pressed the gate release on the door that separated Zaran's cage from that of the smaller cage occupied by her cub.

Zaran knew that the cub was there. Would she go to the cub or ignore him? She'd had a particularly difficult birth and they'd been separated for days. After that, the damage had been done; from

the time they were reunited, she'd refused to accept him as her own. Once she'd even tried to maul him.

If Zaran chose to go to him, would she kill him?

There was nothing Margaret could do now if Zaran made that decision but go into the cage after her. She could only hope that the tigress had paid attention to what she'd told her over and over and would be able to get over that irrational antagonism.

The tigress was moving slowly into the cub's cage.

And Margaret quietly opened the gate to Zaran's cage and crawled into it. She should at least get in a closer position if she had to make an attempt to stop Zaran.

Zaran stopped just inside the cage, looking at the cub.

Margaret said quickly, *Yours*.

The tigress hesitated. *Not mine*.

Oh shit, Margaret thought.

No, remember? We talked about it. Yours.

Zaran just stared at the cub.

Dammit, Margaret thought in frustration. She had spent hours linked to Zaran, subtle persuasion alternating with less subtle domination. But it was difficult to dominate any tiger, much less one as stubborn as Zaran. The tigress was not only bad-tempered; she was obstinate as the devil.

Okay, be patient.

I went over and over with you what happened that night the cub was born. It wasn't his fault they took him away from you.

Your fault?

No, not mine. She'd better edge quickly away from that idea in case Zaran again decided she was the enemy. *But now you've got him back.*

Zaran stood there gazing at the cub without enthusiasm.

Margaret tensed, getting ready to follow Zaran into the cub's cage.

Keep calm. Spend a little more time.

Five minutes passed.

Ten minutes.

The tiger still didn't move away from the gate.

Then, abruptly, Zaran crossed the cage and plopped down beside the cub. But she still didn't touch it.

Yours? Margaret asked.

Impatience from Zaran. As if the question was stupid. *Mine.*

Margaret drew a deep breath of relief. So far, so good. Now just a little more time to monitor the situation.

An hour later, Zaran started to feed her cub.

Margaret's muscles relaxed and she slowly got to her feet. It would be all right now. Zaran had forgotten that first animosity and she would accept the cub. Now Margaret had to get out of this cage before Zaran decided she also had to be a protective mother to her offspring. It was possible that she would ignore Margaret's previous interaction with her if primitive instinct took over. Zaran hadn't shown signs of being particularly stable.

Margaret silently backed out of the cage and jumped to the ground. She swung the gate shut behind her.

"Don't move. Not a muscle. I don't want to hurt you." The barrel of a pistol was pressed into the middle of her back.

Oh shit.

Nicos.

Not Nicos's voice. But what the hell did it matter? It was probably the other one that Devon had called her about. She had a gun in her back.

She swung her left foot back and connected with his shin. Then she ducked sideways and started running. She heard him cursing as he ran after her. At least he hadn't shot her.

Yet.

If she could make it to the habitat, then she could hide until he—

He tackled her. She fell to the ground, striking her cheek on the cement.

Pain.

Dizzy.

She rolled over and socked him in the jaw. She followed it with a right hook to the stomach. Then she lifted her knee and struck with vicious force between his legs.

He grunted in pain at that last blow and his hands closed on her throat. “Be very still,” he said through his teeth. “Or I’ll go for the carotid and you’ll be out for a long, long time. I’m tempted to do it anyway. You’ve annoyed the hell out of me, Margaret Douglas.”

Tempted, but he hadn’t done it, and if she wasn’t unconscious, she might be able to find a way to escape from him. “Let me up. You weigh a ton. You’re hurting me.”

“And you nearly cracked my jaw,” he said sarcastically. “Besides that more painful injury. You may be small, but you’ve been taught well. Nicos?”

Nicos. Use Nicos.

“Yes.” There were some elements of truth to the word. Nicos had been instrumental in making sure that she could protect herself. She wasn’t sure what Nicos had told him, but he might be a weapon she could invoke. “And you’d better be careful. He wouldn’t like anyone to hurt me.”

“Really?” He smiled down at her. “You just said the wrong thing, Margaret.”

His hands moved, adjusted, wrenched.

Darkness.

Rocking.

She knew that slow, rocking rhythm.

A boat.

She was on a boat.

Keep her eyes closed until she knew what she was facing.

“You’re awake.” It was the last voice she’d heard before the darkness. “Stop pretending. Open your eyes. I’m getting a little bored with waiting, Margaret.”

She slowly opened her eyes. Pale green eyes, lean tan face, high cheekbones. His dark hair had a few strands of gray at the temple. “Who are you?”

“I think you’ve guessed by now.” He tilted his head. “I never intended that you not know who I am or I would have furnished your vet friend with a false ID. Who am I, Margaret?”

“John Lassiter.” She moistened her lips. “And I thought I knew why you were looking for me, but I’m not sure now. You didn’t like it when I told you Nicos wouldn’t like you hurting me. You did it anyway. I’m confused.”

“I’m a little confused myself.” He took a knife from his pocket and cut the ropes binding her wrists. “But I’ll just make adjustments and I suggest you do the same. It will be much less painful for you.”

She reached up and rubbed her neck. “You knocked me out.”

“I warned you. I’ve had a rough couple days. I don’t make false threats. You managed to say just the wrong thing at the wrong time.” He smiled faintly. “Oh, well, I had to find a way of getting you to this ship anyway. That way, I could just pretend you were drunk.”

“How long was I out?”

“Two hours.” He stood up. “We need to talk, but I’ll let you recover a little first.”

“No,” she said fiercely. “You can’t do this to me without an explanation. You can’t do it to me at all. We’ll talk now.”

He stared down at her. “Have it your own way. I was actually trying to be considerate.” He sat back down. “Heaven forbid that I antagonize a woman who’s crazy enough to crawl into a tiger’s cage.”

That surprised her enough to cause her anger to ebb a little. “You saw me with the tigers?”

“I was there watching for a while. I would have found it interesting if I hadn’t been afraid that you’d get yourself killed and spoil all my plans.”

The sheer coolness of that answer brought the anger back in full force. “Plans? I thought you were one of Nicos’s men who had come to find me, but you aren’t, are you? The wrong thing that I said was that Nicos would be angry if you hurt me.” She was

trying to put it all together. “That means that you don’t like him and want to do anything you can to hurt him or make him angry.”

“Don’t like him?” Lassiter repeated, tilting his head as he thought about it. “You might say that. But, to be more accurate, I’d be pleased to send your old friend to the depths of hell and spend eternity stoking the flames.”

“He’s not my friend.”

“That appears to be debatable. Nicos seems to think that he is. According to my information, he definitely wants to reconnect with you.”

This might be even worse than she’d thought. “Is that what this is all about? You think that you can hurt him by hurting me?”

“It occurred to me, but it’s not my style. I prefer going directly to the source. Stan Nicos is at the top of the heap of the world’s scum. He’s into drugs, arms smuggling, vice . . . you name it, he does it. You may have been his favorite toy, but you don’t compare in scope, Margaret.”

“Then why am I here?”

“Because, unfortunately, Nicos has built himself an impenetrable fortress on his island of Vadaz in the Caribbean. Which makes it difficult for me to get my hands on him or any of the information I need. I’ve been trying to use bribery, influence, or more violent and infinitely more satisfactory methods for the last eighteen months to find a way to get to the son of a bitch. No luck. I’d almost run out of patience.” He smiled. “But then I heard about you.”

“He doesn’t care anything about me.”

“Correction. He cares something for you. I don’t know exactly in what way. But he’s been searching for you since you left him three years ago. His orders to his men were to find you and that you weren’t to be hurt.”

“That would only last until he got his hands on me. He wants to hurt me himself.”

“But he wants you. That’s the key to everything. And if he wants you, I can use you to get to him.”

“I won’t go back to Nicos. I won’t be your damn key.” She

struggled to sit up on the bed. “For all I know, you’re as bad as he is. No, you’re probably worse. You don’t even know me and you’re ready to turn me over to him.” She could feel the heat in her cheeks and her eyes were blazing at him. “I won’t be a key. I won’t be a game piece. I won’t be anything but a human being trying to live my life as best I can. Go send Nicos to hell without using me. When I left him, I swore I’d never let him take me back to that island. There’s nothing you can do or say that would make me change my mind.” She glared at him. “Do you think I’d let you do it because you’ve got some kind of vendetta going against him?”

“Evidently not. If I found out one thing from trying to find you, it was that you didn’t want to be found. It was reasonable to assume Nicos was the one you were hiding from. But I’m afraid that all the hiding is over. I’ve got to bring you out in the open.”

“There’s no way on earth I’ll let you do that.”

“Look, I won’t let him hurt you.” He leaned forward, his face taut, intense. “I’ll protect you, but you have to help me get to him.”

“Do you think I’d believe you?” she asked shakily. “I’ve been to Vadaz Island. I know Nicos. I’ve seen him do things to people that— I’ve *tried* to stop him and I couldn’t do it. I won’t go back and have it start all over again.”

He stared at her for a moment and then muttered a curse. “You *will* go back. Get used to the idea.” He got to his feet again. “It will be your choice whether you cooperate or make it hard on yourself.”

“You’re not listening. I won’t go. Nothing will make me go.”

He shrugged. “I’m sorry you feel that way. It’s no surprise to me, but I was hoping. Think about it.” He turned away. “You’ll find your backpack in the bathroom over there. Make yourself as comfortable as you can. The only thing I removed was that new phone you appear to have bought yesterday. I didn’t want to tempt you. And we’ll make sure that we don’t leave any phones or weapons around that might also prove troublesome.” He opened the door to reveal steps leading up to the deck. “Neal Cambry, one of my employees, is on the bridge. You’ll be getting to know him in

the next few days. I told him to get under way in the next thirty minutes.”

“‘Under way?’” She sat up straighter. “Where are you taking me?”

“Down the coast to southern Mexico. Then we’ll take a flight out of there to Vadaz Island in the Caribbean. We won’t land on the island itself, just close enough so that I can deal with Nicos.”

She stiffened. “No!”

“Yes. You’ll go where I tell you to go.” He started up the stairs to the deck. “Even if you don’t cooperate, I’ll try to make it as painless as possible. It might not be as bad as you think it will be. I might just be able to dangle you in front of him.”

“That’s supposed to reassure me?”

“It’s the best I can do. I don’t want anyone to get hurt if I can prevent it. You have the freedom of the ship . . . within certain limits.”

“Freedom shouldn’t have limits. I won’t go.”

He didn’t answer as he disappeared from view.

Tough. Very tough. That’s what Devon had said, and she was right. Margaret couldn’t remember meeting anyone harder or more ruthless. Nicos had been ugly and full of malice, but Lassiter appeared infinitely more dangerous. His determination seemed absolute. He might say he regretted doing this, but he wasn’t going to waver. She had seen it in every line of his face and body. Stop shaking. She could find a way to get away from him. She just had to look the situation over and then make her move.

They were on a ship. They weren’t supposed to get under way for another thirty minutes. How close were they to shore? She was a very good swimmer. That was how she’d escaped Nicos’s island and later managed to swim to Summer Island from that fisherman’s yacht all those years ago.

Okay, look the situation over, but she had a few minutes to rest and gather her strength. And try to gather any information she could about John Lassiter.

She looked around the bedroom. Good size. Fine polished

teakwood. Probably a yacht, not a cruiser. Everything appeared top-of-the-line . . . and that meant money. So did the fact that Lassiter had been able to bribe answers about her from Nicos's men.

She got to her feet and steadied herself. She was still a little stiff from being tackled by Lassiter. She went to the door across the cabin. A hallway with two doors opening off it. More bedrooms? That meant even more expense. If Lassiter was Nicos's enemy, then he might have the funds to take him down. It must have frustrated him to find out that fear of Nicos had proved an even more powerful weapon than money when he had gone after him. She checked the drawers of the bedside table. Nothing. Should she go down that hall and search the other bedrooms?

No time. She had to find out if getting off this ship was possible before they put out to sea. She headed for the steps leading to the deck. She was still a little dizzy, but she could function.

She took a deep breath as the cool air hit her when she reached the deck. Her gaze flew to the bridge and she saw John Lassiter standing at the wheel with a tall, sandy-haired man. When Lassiter saw her, he inclined his head mockingly and said something to the man next to him.

Okay, her freedom of the ship evidently extended up here on the deck. She whirled to face the shore. Lights sparkled like a diamond chain along the bank. But those lights were a long way away from the ship, which would discourage most people. She could see why Lassiter had felt secure in untying her and giving her the run of the ship.

Too great a distance?

She would have to take a minute to decide. She had swum that far before, but she was tired and that was always a factor. If she passed up this opportunity, she might find another that was safer.

Or she might not.

Lassiter had seemed very determined and she didn't know if he—

"Hello." The sandy-haired man who had been talking to Lassiter was coming toward her. "I'm Neal Cambry." He smiled. "Don't

worry. You're going to be fine. Just do what Lassiter tells you to do. You probably think he's been a bit rough on you, but he didn't really hurt you, did he?"

"Yes," she said bluntly. "And I don't intend to do anything that either one of you tells me to do. Why would you think I would?"

"That's what Lassiter said you'd say." He sighed. "Change your mind. It will go much better for you."

"No, it won't. And I won't change my mind. I'm not going back to Stan Nicos." She was feeling panic at the thought and tried to keep it from showing. "That's not an option."

Evidently, she hadn't entirely succeeded, because he said gently, "Look, you can work this out with Lassiter. Don't be stubborn. He doesn't want to hurt you. Talk to him. As long as he sees a way for him to get to Nicos, he'll make it as easy on you as he can."

"That's what he told me," she said bitterly. "I believe the word he used was *dangle*. It's a word that didn't impress me."

He grimaced. "At least, he's trying to be honest with you. Lassiter can coax the birds from the trees if he puts his mind to it. He's chosen not to do that with you."

She remembered that Devon had said something about how Lassiter had managed to mesmerize the people at Summer Island. She definitely had not seen that side of him. "No, he preferred knocking me out and kidnapping me."

"He would have used money, if he'd thought you'd take it," Cambry said quietly. "He said he couldn't take a chance that you'd bolt again. Time was running out."

"He was right. I wouldn't have taken it." Her gaze was on the lights on the shore again. It would be difficult, but she could make it. When she reached the shore, she could disappear and be safe. "And I have a right to do anything I want to do without him interfering." She turned away from him. "And I won't have you interfering, either, just because he pays you a fat check to do it. Now will you stop talking to me and just leave me alone?"

He hesitated. "Sure." He turned and started back toward the bridge. "But think about what I said. Calm down and find a way

to come to terms. Lassiter knows what a son of a bitch Nicos can be. He's just not letting himself think about it in connection with you. He doesn't believe he can afford it."

She turned back to face those sparkling lights. She could do it. She was healthy and strong. She knew that endurance and will were everything. She had only to set her mind and never give up.

She kicked off her shoes. "He can't afford it? Too bad. Because there's no way on earth I can afford to go back to Nicos." She started at a run toward the rail. "So screw both of you."

She heard him call out as she threw her legs over the railing and dove into the water.

Cold. Very cold. Breathtakingly cold.

Not good.

The waters off San Diego were often mild and warm. But not if the currents disturbed those temperatures. Then they could be cold . . . and treacherous.

She'd be better once she started to move.

She struck out for the shore.

Yes, that was better. It was chilly, but not too bad. It was the shock that had made the temperature appear dangerous.

"Margaret!" She heard someone dive off the ship behind her.

Lassiter. Cursing.

"What the hell? Do you have a death wish?" Lassiter said between his teeth. He was only a few yards behind her. "First those tigers and now this?"

"I'm probably a better swimmer than you are. I can make it to the shore. I've done longer swims. That's how I got off Nicos's island. And if you try to stop me, I'll fight you and we'll both probably drown. You wouldn't want that after you went to all this trouble." She concentrated on shutting out the cold and taking long, easy strokes. "You'll probably give up before I do. I have motivation, and you're just a bad guy trying to do a bad thing." She looked at him over her shoulder. "But maybe your friend will rescue you if he sees you drowning. I won't."

"You might be a better swimmer than I am, but the water's

too cold tonight,” he said quietly. “There’s no way you can make the shore.”

“It’s not that cold. Maybe a little under sixty degrees. It just seemed that way at first. I’ll make it.” She forged ahead in a breast-stroke. “But I can’t waste my breath talking anymore.”

“Have it your way.”

“I will. I won’t go to—”

Concentrate. Even strokes. Breathe deeply. Keep moving. Keep the blood circulating. It wasn’t cold enough to give her hypothermia, but the temperature was always a factor on a long swim.

She could hear Lassiter behind her, but he was no longer speaking. He was a very strong swimmer, she realized vaguely.

But so was she, and all she had to do was keep this pace going.

The shore was much closer now.

Just keep her arms moving. She could make it.

Her body felt heavy, cold, but if she moved faster, that would take care of that.

It wasn’t really cold. It was just creeping up on her because she was getting tired.

The lights were closer. . . .

Her arms were moving slower now.

Make them go faster to fight the cold.

She could do it.

She was almost there.

“That’s enough,” Lassiter said roughly. He had caught up with her and she saw his expression. Angry . . .

“Get away from me. I’m almost there.”

“Yes, dammit, you are. I didn’t think— But not close enough. You won’t make it. You’re probably already suffering from a mild form of hypothermia. Hell, probably so am I. But I’m stronger than you are. Your arms are going to give out and you’ll drown.”

“No. You’re not stronger. I don’t need you. I don’t need anyone. I can do it. Get away from me.”

“My God, I almost wish I could.” His lips twisted. “But I didn’t go to all this hassle to have you drown on me just because

something in me wants to see you make it. Don't fight me, Margaret."

"Get . . . away . . . from . . . me." She tried to push him away.

"You keep ignoring warnings. This time, I really regret that you're doing it."

Her head snapped back as he struck her on the chin.

Pain.

That heavy, cold water.

Darkness.

She woke up on a bunk on the ship, naked, coughing, and shivering as Neal Cambry piled blankets on top of her.

"Keep still," he said. "I've got my orders. I'm to get you warm and I'm not to let you jump off the ship again. I intend to do just what Lassiter told me to do. He's not in great humor at the moment. He wasn't pleased that I let you go for a swim."

"Where . . . is . . . he?"

"Trying to warm up, too. You were both in pretty bad shape." He supported her while she drank the hot tea he held to her lips. "You're very stubborn, you know."

"Could—have—made it."

"A matter of opinion," he said. "But I lean toward Lassiter's. I think you were going down for a long fall."

She shook her head.

He chuckled. "Okay, maybe not. Argue with him." He tossed a San Diego Zoo nightshirt on the bed beside her. "I found this in your backpack. Pretty flimsy, but I thought you'd be more comfortable." He headed for the steps leading to the deck. "I'll be right back. I'm going to make sure I complete that second order and get far enough to sea so that you won't be tempted to try to swim to shore again."

"We can't stay . . . out to sea forever," she called after him as she pulled the nightshirt over her head. "Sometime I'll get another chance."

"I'm sure you will." Lassiter was coming down the stairs. He

was wearing a dark blue crew sweater and jeans and his hair was still wet. “I just hope you have better sense next time.”

“Self-preservation is always sensible.”

“Exactly.” He sat down in the chair beside the bed, his gaze going to her zoo nightshirt. “That has elephants instead of tigers. Why?”

She frowned. “What difference does it make?”

“Curious. I only wanted to make sure you hadn’t abandoned your allegiance.”

“It was on a sale.”

“Money can move mountains. Or tigers.” He tilted his head. “You look like a drowned rat.”

“I didn’t drown. I wouldn’t have drowned. I would have made it.”

“I’ve heard that mantra before.” He smiled faintly. “You almost had me believing it.”

“It’s only important that I believe it.” She could hear the engine start and felt the ship’s motion escalate. “You won’t be able to keep me prisoner until you can turn me over to Nicos. There are all kinds of ways that I can get away. You can see how much trouble I am.”

“Yes, I can. A great deal of trouble.”

He didn’t seem as angry this time. Or it could have been how exhausted she was. She could barely keep her eyes open. “Then wouldn’t it be better just to forget about me?”

“You’ve made that extremely difficult to do.”

“Surely I’m not worth it. You’ve probably already paid too much to try to find me.”

“Considerable. Let’s just say, to me you’re a jewel beyond price.”

“Bullshit. Nicos wouldn’t think so. He has a price for everything. Why do you want to get to him anyway?”

“We’ll discuss it tomorrow. You’re about to go to sleep on me, and I’d find that very rude.”

“I won’t go to—” She yawned. “Well, maybe I would. It’s all your fault. Everything is your fault. . . .”

“We’ve already established that fact.” He tucked the blanket around her shoulders. “Tomorrow we establish what we intend to do about it.”

“You can’t keep me,” she said drowsily. “And I could have made it. . . .”

“She’s asleep?” Cambry asked as Lassiter came up on deck. “I think she’ll be okay by tomorrow. She seems pretty resilient.”

“That’s an understatement,” Lassiter said drily. “She’s a combination of rubber and cast iron.”

“She came close to making it to shore. Guts. Pure guts.” Cambry smiled. “I admit I was rooting for her.” He slanted a glance at Lassiter. “I think you were, too.”

“Maybe. But then I would have made it an empty victory by capturing her again. I still need her. I still have to have her.” He looked out at sea. “You know she’s my way to Nicos. That’s not going to change.”

“But it’s going to get harder for you. You saw what she’s made of tonight. You’re getting to know her. Rubber and cast iron. Not a bad combination.”

“It can’t change, Cambry,” he repeated. “I can’t let it change.” He moved down the deck. It had been a rough night and these last hours had been filled with an incredible mixture of emotions. He’d expected the anger and frustration; he hadn’t expected the admiration . . . and the curious sense of pride he’d felt in that sea while swimming behind Margaret.

Forget it. He should go to bed and stop thinking of Margaret’s face in that last moment, when she was almost beyond exhaustion and pain. No surrender, even then.

I’m almost there. I can make it. . . .

When Margaret woke the next morning, she was sore in every muscle. She flinched as she struggled out of bed.

But she had slept well and deeply and she was thinking clearly, which hadn’t been the case last night. Okay, it was a new

day. She might be on her way to Nicos, but she wasn't there yet. Think positive. Shower and shampoo so that she would no longer look like a drowned rat. Then confront Lassiter and start asking questions.

She jumped out of bed and headed for the shower.

ALSO BY IRIS JOHANSEN

- | | |
|--|------------------------------|
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| <i>Close Your Eyes</i> (with Roy Johansen) | <i>The Face of Deception</i> |
| <i>What Doesn't Kill You</i> | <i>And Then You Die</i> |
| <i>Bonnie</i> | <i>Long After Midnight</i> |
| <i>Quinn</i> | <i>The Ugly Duckling</i> |
| <i>Eve</i> | <i>Lion's Bride</i> |
| <i>Chasing the Night</i> | <i>Dark Rider</i> |
| <i>Shadow Zone</i> (with Roy Johansen) | <i>Midnight Warrior</i> |
| <i>Eight Days to Live</i> | <i>The Beloved Scoundrel</i> |
| <i>Deadlock</i> | <i>The Magnificent Rogue</i> |
| <i>Dark Summer</i> | <i>The Tiger Prince</i> |
| <i>Quicksand</i> | <i>Last Bridge Home</i> |
| <i>Silent Thunder</i> (with Roy Johansen) | <i>The Golden Barbarian</i> |
| <i>Pandora's Daughter</i> | <i>Reap the Wind</i> |
| <i>Stalemate</i> | <i>Storm Winds</i> |
| <i>An Unexpected Song</i> | <i>The Wind Dancer</i> |

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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