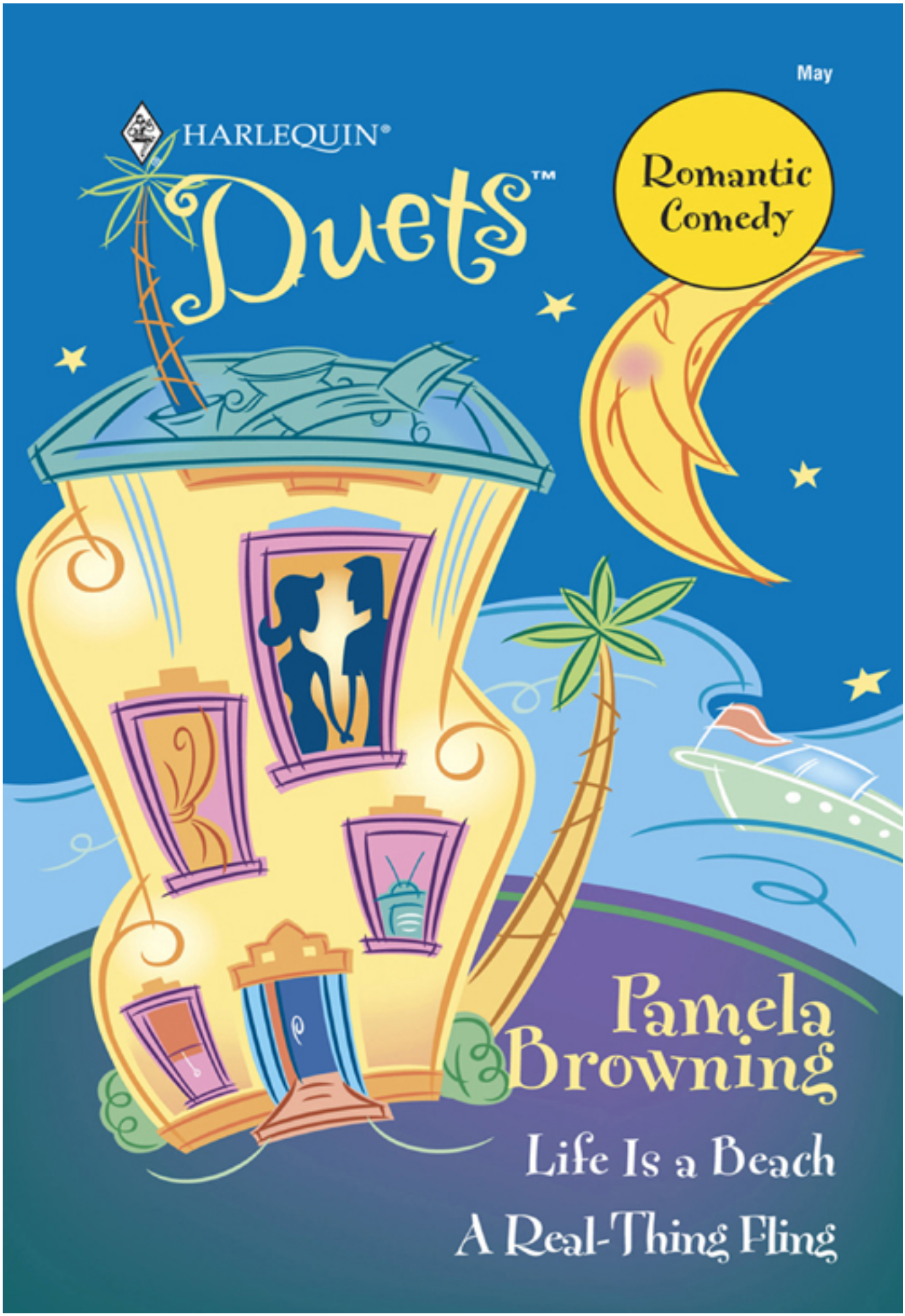

May
HARLEQUIN®
Duets™
Romantic Comedy
Pamela Browning
Life Is a Beach
A Real-Thing Fling

Pamela Browning

Life Is A Beach: Life Is A Beach / A Real-Thing Fling

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Life Is A Beach: Life Is A Beach / A Real-Thing Fling /
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Life is a BeachHunky rancher Slade Braddock is tired of roping the wrong female, so he signs on as a client at Rent-a-Yenta matchmakers of South Beach, Miami. He's willing to leave it to the professionals to find him a mate! Karma O'Connor is desperate to make a successful match for Slade, her, gulp, only client. Why, she'll even go so far as to date him herself…hey, it's a tough assignment and some gal's gotta do it!A Real-Thing FlingKarma's sister is in town mixing business with pleasure. Azure O'Connor is to consult with a local high-flying businessman. Little does she realize that the businessman is Leonardo Santori, aka Lee Sanders, the beach bum she met at Karma's wedding and affectionately nicknamed Lust Puppy. He doggedly pursues Azure–but will it be a real-thing fling?

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Содержание

Life Is a Beach 6
Contents 7
“I’ll challenge you to a game of Scrabble,” Slade ventured. 8
Books by Pamela Browning 9
1 10
2 19
3 27
4 37
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 48



Two brand-new stories in every volume…twice a month!

Duets Vol. #99

Veteran Harlequin author Pamela Browning makes her Duets debut this month with a delightful, splashy Double Duets volume. Sisters Karma and Azure O'Connor undergo their share of woe with men in this pair of fun, quirky stories set in trendy South Beach, Miami. Enjoy Life Is a Beach and A Real-Thing Fling!

Duets Vol. #100

Duets is having a celebration this month! This smile-inducing series, featuring gifted writers and stories, is one hundred volumes old. Look for two terrific tales by fan favorites Jennifer Drew and Holly Jacobs. You'll Be Mine in 99 and The 100-Year Itch are both set in the crazy small town of Hiho, Ohio, where anything can—and will!—happen when people fall in love. Happy reading!

Be sure to pick up both Duets volumes today!

Life Is a Beach
A Real-Thing Fling
Pamela Browning



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Contents

Life is a Beach
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
A Real-Thing Fling
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Epilogue

Life Is a Beach

“I’ll challenge you to a game of Scrabble,” Slade ventured.

Karma nodded and they settled down on the couch with the board between them. The room was illuminated only by the dim wavering light from the hurricane lamp nearby. Outside the wind rattled away and the ocean waves repeatedly battered the pilings beneath them. Every so often, the house would draw itself up, suck in its breath and give a shudder.

Karma tried to ignore the hunky cowboy opposite her and studied the letters in her rack before slapping down the word east. Slade promptly added the letters B and R, making it breast.

She raised her eyebrows.

“It’s a word, right? It’s legal.” His expression was one of pure amusement.

Karma added an O and one S, then a second S, making toss. Ah-ha, she thought, he’s beat.

Slade reached over and, using an S, a K, followed by an I, he answered her with kiss.

“Which,” he said softly, with the sexy look that she was coming to know so well, “wouldn’t be a bad idea.”

Dear Reader,

There I was on a flight to Miami reading the airline in-flight magazine. There she was, a professional matchmaker, smiling up from the page in all her glossy perfection. Cool job, I thought.

I recalled an elderly friend telling me how her happy marriage had been arranged by a yenta, the yiddish term for the neighborhood busybody who excelled at finding marriage partners. The phrase Rent-a-Yenta sprang into my mind, and thus the Rent-a-Yenta dating service was born.

As you read the stories of Karma and Azure O’Connor, the heroines in my Double Duets volume, I hope you’ll agree with me that even if true love comes along only once in a blue moon, it’s always worth the wait!

Best wishes and happy reading,



Books by Pamela Browning

HARLEQUIN AMERICAN ROMANCE
786—RSVP…BABY
818—THAT'S OUR BABY
854—BABY CHRISTMAS
874—COWBOY WITH A SECRET

For Judith Arnold, who knows from bubbeleh and blintzes, and for the guy who walks like John Wayne.

1

SLADE BRADDOCK WAS JUST a big old lonesome cowboy, and he was bound and determined not to be that way for much longer.

Big? Well, that was one thing he couldn't change, he reckoned. He was six foot three, so tall that he kept bumping into things in his cousin Mack's houseboat, where he had squatter's rights for as long as it took to find himself a wife.

Old? He was thirty-five, which was part of the problem. All the young women in Okeechobee City, Florida, were married. The older ones tended to mother him. So even though in some circles cowboys were said to be babe magnets, Slade had not found this to be true. He had heeded his cousin Mack's suggestion to seek out a Miami Beach dating service.

Lonesome? The dating service should take care of that.

Slade sauntered across Toy Boat's salon, which was a high-class word, he figured, for a living room. He twirled his Stetson off the wall sconce where he'd tossed it after getting royally drunk with a couple of rowdies from South Beach last night, and he stopped for a moment to squint critically into the floor-to-ceiling wall mirror.

Yeah, he looked all right. He wasn't suave. He wasn't dapper. He was a little worn and tattered around the edges. But he'd do. The woman he was looking for wouldn't mind that a scar bisected his left eyelid, and she'd let him love her the way a woman was meant to be loved. He wanted a shy, sweet, old-fashioned girl to take back to Okeechobee City with him, to help him run the ranch. A small woman who would make him feel manly. And he'd find one before he left Miami Beach. He was determined.

He was so determined, in fact, that as he was striding purposefully toward the deck, he forgot about the low doorway and whacked his head.

A COWBOY DRESSED OUT in full regalia was not exactly what anyone expected to see ambling down a street in Miami's trendy South Beach on an ordinary morning.

But that was exactly what Karma O'Connor saw. This guy looked as if he'd galloped in fresh off the range after herding a bunch of cattle or chasing rustlers or something.

"Your aunt Sophie, she wanted you to inherit the business," said Uncle Nate as he admired the new brass plate beside the door.

Rent-a-Yenta, it said. Karma O'Connor, Matchmaker.

Very reluctantly, Karma peeled her eyes away from the cowboy and bent down to bestow a quick kiss on the little man's cheek.

"Thank you, Uncle Nate," she said warmly. "You could have closed up Aunt Sophie's office. You two could have let me go on being unemployed instead of scooping me up practically out of a welfare line and—"

"Never," said her great-uncle. "A girl like you should have a chance. Sophie thought about leaving the business to your cousin Paulette, but, well, she respected you, a single girl trying to make it on her own."

"Paulette is single. She's trying to make it on her own, too."

"Ah, Paulette. She's a go-getter, that one."

Privately Karma thought that her cousin Paulette was an overbearing little snip. She adopted an expression of mock dismay. "Hey, Uncle Nate—you're hurting my feelings. Aren't I a go-getter, too?"

He blinked up at her, a wizened little gnome with eyes that crinkled charmingly around the edges. "You are, bubbeleh, you are. Sophie said you reminded her of herself when she was young," and with that pronouncement, he launched into an emotional reminiscence about his late wife, who had died six months before.

Karma listened, and she agreed with Nate that her great-aunt had been a kind, charming, and, in fact, brilliant woman. While Nate rattled on as was his wont, she distracted herself from his monologue by searching for the cowboy's Stetson above the sleek blond heads of a bunch of roller-skating beach bunnies.

The hat was there, all right. It shaded the cowboy's face so that she gleaned only a quick impression of craggy cheekbones, a strong straight blade of a nose, and a tan that put those beach bunnies to shame. Wide shoulders, too. And, farther down, slim hips slung with a pair of well-worn jeans. Almost as if he knew she was watching him, the cowboy headed in her direction.

"How cool is he?" she murmured to herself in awe.

"It's hot today like always in Miami," Nate said as he eased himself down on the bench beside the door to the corridor that led to her office.

Karma kept forgetting that she had to speak loudly so that her uncle could hear. He wore a hearing aid but often forgot to turn it on.

"No, I wasn't talking about the weather. I was admiring that cowboy heading our way."

Nate scoffed at this. "You should be thinking about business, not some meshugeneh cowboy. Like I told you before, Sophie managed to make fifty good matches a year and you haven't made any yet."

"I wish I could have trained with her for a while," Karma said wistfully. Unfortunately Aunt Sophie had been too sick during her final illness to work, and the business had gone downhill fast.

"An apprenticeship with my Sophie might have helped. Then again, maybe not. No offense, Karma dear, but a two-time college graduate like you doesn't necessarily know the human factor."

"My degrees are in psychology," Karma reminded him gently as the cowboy continued toward them.

"Psychology, shmycology. You got to know people. Not that you don't," he added hastily. "Sophie thought you had potential. 'That girl has real potential,' she'd always say after we saw you at one of those family dinners at your parents' house."

This was nice to hear, but Karma couldn't remember a single one of those dinners in which she'd been able to get a word in edgewise, what with all the big talkers in the family. She'd always been the quiet one, the too-tall sister who passed the hors d'oeuvres while her three siblings noisily showed off their piano-playing and dancing talents.

And since when had any of her relatives thought she was anything but a loser compared to her talented and brilliant sisters, not to mention that colossal suck-up, Paulette? "I hope I can live up to your expectations," Karma murmured.

Truth to tell, her full attention was drawn to the cowboy. In a tropical climate where people customarily wore sandals or even went barefoot, this man was clomping along Ocean Drive in cowboy boots. A couple of children hung back on their mothers' hands and stared.

"Come along, Chuckie," urged one of the mothers, tugging.

"Aw, Mom, I want to see the cowboy."

So did Karma. She wanted to see him up close. And it looked, at this very moment, as if she might have that opportunity.

His boots were finely tooled leather, elaborated worked. She'd heard you could tell a lot about a cowboy by his boots. These were clearly expensive, maybe even hand-made, and definitely too dusty. The boots didn't jingle, however. This cowboy wasn't wearing spurs. Which she supposed made sense, since she didn't see a horse around anywhere.

"I guess I better stop talking about Sophie, I'm getting hoarse."

"Horse?" Karma said, caught off guard.

"Yeah, my throat itches. Sit down for a minute, Karma, while I catch my breath."

Karma felt her own breath grow shallow as the cowboy's gaze fell upon her. Up it went, then down. Never mind that this took a few embarrassing seconds because of her height. Was she blushing?

No, she wasn't that susceptible to nuanced glances. She was twenty-seven years old and the veteran of more than one ill-fated heavy relationship. She was dedicated to carving a career for herself out of the match-making business. So why did this man make her heart beat like—well, like thundering cattle hooves?

Because he was possibly the handsomest man she had ever seen. Because his cowboy boots had stopped right in front of the bench. Right in front of her.

The cowboy stuck a hand in one of his back jeans pockets and rummaged around. Going to roll a cigarette, Karma thought. That's what cowboys always did in the movies, and the movies were the only place she'd ever seen a cowboy. She watched spellbound, expecting him to extract a fistful of rolling papers and some tobacco. Instead he pulled out a red bikini bra. A very ample red bikini bra.

He stared at it and then, with a puzzled and pained look, he crumpled it up and stuffed it back in his pocket.

As Karma watched, her mind was racing faster than a spooked mustang. She wasn't exactly thinking about this cowboy. What she was thinking was that things never came easily to her. Not graduating from college nor getting a master's degree, and certainly not holding a job. People always thought that if you were a natural blonde, you were home free in life. Well, nothing was free, and at the moment, Karma didn't have a real home. What she did have was a couple of possibly useless degrees in psychology, a generous great-uncle and a third or fourth chance to make something of herself.

She jumped up from her seat, feeling absurdly like a jack-in-the-box. She said to the cowboy, "Sir, I don't suppose you could use the services of a matchmaker, could you?"

He looked her over. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking. "That's exactly what I need," he said.

"You've come to the right place," Karma said, praising whatever gods were in charge of lucky coincidences.

The cowboy angled his head toward the shiny new sign on the building behind them. "That your place?"

"Yes. As of two months ago." She held her breath, half expecting him to walk away.

"The thing is, you'll have to tell me something. Just what exactly is a yenta?"

Nate stood up. "It's a Yiddish word. In Jewish communities, where marriages used to be arranged, you would go to a yenta that you trusted to find the right person for you. It's a family tradition, like with my Sophie. She was a good businesswoman, Sophie was. Knew how to change with the times."

"So Rent-a-Yenta is a dating service?" the cowboy asked politely. His voice was deep and rich, slightly raspy. It reminded Karma of Clint Eastwood's but with considerably more expression.

Nate's head bobbed up and down. "Yes, you might as well think of a yenta as someone who matches people up with their significance."

The cowboy looked slightly confused.

Karma found her tongue. "He means their significant others," she injected hastily.

"Hmm," said the cowboy. He appeared to be thinking this over.

Two things occurred to Karma in the next stretch of thirty seconds or so. One was that she wanted to make a success of this matchmaking business that had so providentially and unexpectedly landed in her lap. The other was that this was a client—a real walking, talking, live client.

"Won't you come into my office?" she asked, smooth as silk. Despite the bra in his pocket, this man needed her services. He'd said so.

"Sure," said the cowboy. He had a way of smiling that lifted one corner of his mouth and cocked the opposite eyebrow, and the effect was intriguing.

"I'll just amble along," said Nate. "Leave you to business." Karma knew he was running late for his daily game of pinochle at the café down the street.

"If I'm interrupting," said the cowboy.

"No, no, you two go right ahead," said Nate. He patted Karma's arm. "See you tomorrow, bubbeleh."

"Well," Karma said as she watched Nate disappear in the throng of people on the sidewalk. She spared a look at the cowboy. He looked more resigned than eager, which was typical of the clients that she'd dealt with so far. She supposed that resignation was the last step before jaded. She hated jaded. It was so hard to win those folks over.

She aimed her brightest smile up at him. Up at him was a miracle, since she was almost six feet tall herself. Ever since puberty, her smiles had been mostly aimed downward. "Follow me," she said.

Karma had been told that she had nice hips. This was a good thing, considering that the cowboy's eyes never left them as they walked up the flight of stairs to the tiny cubicle that was Rent-a-Yenta. She'd rather have him staring at her hips, or, more accurately, her derriere, than, say, her feet, which were overly large. Or her mouth, ditto. Or her breasts, which weren't. That bikini bra in his pocket had looked like about a 38DD.

She dug the office key out of her purse and promptly dropped it.

The cowboy immediately bent down and picked it up. He didn't immediately straighten, however. That took a while. His eyes moved up, up, studying her ankles, her calves, and what he could see of her thighs, which was probably too much considering the fact that her skirt was very short. She had a hard time finding clothes that were long enough.

"Thanks," she said dryly as he handed her the key. At the moment that their hands touched, their eyes locked. His were the bluest eyes she'd ever seen. They were brilliant, sparkling like sunlight on the sea, heating up like a blue flame. They took her breath away.

She made herself shove the key in the lock, but the door opened before she turned the key. She'd better get that lock fixed one of these days, but it was low on her list of priorities since there wasn't much worth stealing in the office at present.

The cowboy was right behind her. She followed his gaze as he took in the half-painted lime-green wall, the plastic bead curtain that screened off the supply closet, the TV alcove for viewing client videos. She supposed the decor was startling, but this was her style. After downsizing the office into a mere one and a half rooms due to lack of funds, she'd painted over plain vanilla walls, banished Aunt Sophie's heavy mahogany desk, thrown out the dusty chintz curtains at the windows so she could look out at the multicolored pastel facade of the Blue Moon Apartments across the street where she lived.

"You—um, well, you could sit down," she said.

He looked puzzled. Oops! She'd forgotten that she'd sent the couch and client chairs out for cleaning yesterday. The only places to sit were on a couple of floor cushions that she'd brought over from her apartment and her desk chair.

Omigosh, she thought, if I sit in the chair he'll be able to look right up my skirt.

"There, ma'am?" the cowboy asked politely, staring down at the nearest floor cushion, the bright orange one.

"Why, yes," Karma said, acting as if nothing was amiss. "I'll take the pink one."

Looking disconcerted, the cowboy lowered himself to the indicated cushion. The position he took, knees upraised, back straight, strained the jeans tight against his thighs and calves. He didn't look at all comfortable. What he did look was sexy.

Karma's secondhand 1940s rattan desk was covered with an assortment of papers, old diet-drink cans, a dried-up paintbrush, and a dead hibiscus blossom awash in a jar lid half full of water. Karma yanked a form from a stack and, trying not to appear as ungainly as she felt, she also sat down on a cushion. Maybe she was crazy for going ahead with this. Maybe she should tell this man to come back tomorrow when the couch would be here and the chairs would have been delivered. But to dismiss him might mean losing him, and the business couldn't afford that. Clients had been very few and far between, and this might be her last chance to succeed. At anything.

"What do I have to do to sign up?" asked the cowboy.

Karma fumbled in her tote bag for a pen. “At Rent-a-Yenta we chronicle your personal information, collect a registration fee and then we videotape our clients. We’ll study our database and pull up clients of the opposite sex that we think would be a good match for you.” There was no “we”; there was only her. But she thought it sounded more impressive than admitting that she did everything herself.

“And I get to watch videotapes of the clients you pick?” He looked visibly cheered by the thought.

“Right. And they’ll watch videotapes of you.”

“Okay. That sounds like a good way to go about it.”

“Oh, it is, I assure you.”

After he wrote out the check, he folded his arms across his chest. A very broad chest. “Well, let’s get started.”

“Name?” she asked brightly.

“Slade,” he said.

“Is that your first name or last?”

“Slade’s my given name. Braddock’s my last.” His voice rumbled deep in his throat.

“Slade Braddock,” she repeated, liking the sound of the name almost as much as the way he said it. She wrote his name down on the form.

“Age?”

“Thirty-awful.”

She blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Thirty-awful. Too old for the young ones, too young for the older ones.”

She tried not to smile. “Should be thirty-awesome, if you ask me,” she retorted before she thought. She was always retorting before she thought, and before the words were out of her mouth, she wished she hadn’t said that.

He grinned, expanded it to a smile, then let out a hearty guffaw. She tipped her head uncertainly.

“That’s pretty good,” he said. “Thirty-awesome. I’ll remember that one.”

She wanted to laugh, too, but this was a client. She cautioned herself to remain businesslike, but her next words sounded like a reproof. “Are you going to tell me your age, or should I leave this line blank?”

He sobered up then. “I’m thirty-five,” he said. “Now I’ve told you my age, how about you telling me yours?”

“You’re not supposed to ask a lady that,” she said.

“But I just did.”

Those eyes again, piercing right through her. They demanded an answer. “I’m twenty-seven,” she said.

“A good age,” he said thoughtfully.

She made herself look down at the form. “Address?”

“Sunchaser Marina. Route three, Okeechobee City.”

“That’s the whole address?”

“That’s two addresses.”

She forced herself to look at him. “Let’s get this straight. What’s your primary mailing address?”

“That would be the Okeechobee City one, ma’am. The marina one’s sort of borrowed.”

This, then, explained the cowboy outfit. Okeechobee City was cattle country, a small town on the shores of Lake Okeechobee some miles west of Palm Beach, that much she knew.

She wrote down both addresses. She knew the Sunchaser Marina well; she’d bicycled past it many times. It was home base for pleasure yachts, houseboats and assorted other watercraft, all of them expensive, none of them suited to a guy who dressed like he’d recently thundered on horseback

right out of a John Wayne movie. Bermuda shorts in assorted pastel plaids and Gucci loafers with no socks were the preferred mode of dress at Sunchaser Marina.

Slade Braddock shifted on his cushion. She'd better rush this along or he might cut the interview short.

Karma fixed the cowboy with what she hoped was a serious and businesslike gaze. "And what brings you to Rent-a-Yenta?" she asked.

"I want to get married," he said doggedly. "I'm ready to find myself a bride."

Karma swallowed. She wasn't accustomed to clients who came right out and stated their purpose. Most of them weren't too sure what they'd be getting into when they signed with her, and they usually said something vague. "Introduce me to somebody nice to date," was the usual statement. Sometimes they added embellishments, such as "He has to have a platinum Visa card with his picture on it," or "I don't go out with anyone who doesn't know how to refold a map," but that was about as specific as they got. No one, in the months since she'd become a match-maker, had flat out said, "I want to get married."

Slade Braddock looked so earnest that Karma was sure he meant it.

"To what kind of woman?" she blurted.

"Oh, I've got a woman in mind. I can describe her if you like," he said as a dreamy expression filtered out the fire in those remarkable blue eyes.

This wasn't standard operating procedure, but Karma was fascinated by his honesty. Honesty was all too rare in this business, she'd learned. "Go ahead," she said, realizing that she was holding her breath. She let it out slowly, wondering if it was too much to hope that he'd describe a five-foot-eleven natural blonde with large feet, green eyes and breasts slightly on the small side.

"She'll have light hair. Yellow, like sunbeams. Kind of like yours, only straighter." He studied her. Appraised her. She didn't know exactly what that look meant, but she took it that he didn't exactly disapprove of what he saw. Until he went on talking, that is.

"She'll be tiny. A little bird of a woman. And her voice will be sweet. Maybe she'll like singing in the church choir."

Karma couldn't sing a note. And tiny she wasn't. As her hopes faded, she said stoically, "Go on."

"She'll be comfortable on the ranch, know how it works. Or be willing to learn. I don't expect her to rope and brand cattle, but she should understand that this is part of what I do. And she'll be crazy about me. From the very beginning if possible. I aim to have me a wife by this summer."

"What's happening this summer?"

He looked at her as if she was crazy for asking. "Why, our honeymoon. I've already signed us up for an Alaskan cruise."

"Oh." Karma was nonplussed.

He zeroed in on her astonishment. "What do you mean, 'oh'?" Is there something wrong with that?"

"Occasionally a wife likes to help choose the honeymoon spot," Karma said, holding back the sarcasm with great effort.

She judged from the perplexed expression in his eyes that this had never occurred to him.

"I figured that if the woman loves me, then anyplace is all right with her. For the honeymoon, I mean."

She took pity on him. "In some cases, that's true," she relented, and his smile warmed her heart.

Her heart had no place in this. She willed it to stop leaping around in her chest and pretended to make a notation on the form. But as she concentrated on her task, one side of her was having an argument with the other side. Sounding very much like her aunt Sophie, the yenta side counseled, "You've got yourself a client. You've got a paying customer on the hoof. Don't scare him away." The Karma side hissed, "Stupid! This is a really great guy. Why give him away to someone else? Why not keep him for yourself?"

A disturbing thought. She'd given up on men two or three relationships ago.

She cleared her throat. She cleared her mind. Or attempted to, anyway.

"Mr. Braddock. This is certainly enough information for me to match you up with some charming clients."

He beamed. "Now that's good news." He produced a money clip and peeled off several bills. "Here's the registration fee."

Karma's eyes bugged out at the wad of cool cash. Most people paid with a credit card. Most people didn't carry that much money around.

He put the money back in his pocket. "I can't tell you how downright scared I was coming in here today. I'd rather face a nest of full-grown rattlers than do this, I can tell you."

She turned the full wattage of her best smile on him. "Oh, everyone feels that way at first, I'm sure. The next step is, of course, our videotape session. Normally I'd be able to do that today, but my video camera is out for repairs. So I hope it will be convenient for you to come back tomorrow?" She'd play soft sitar music on the boom box, wear something flowing. She'd make carob-and-pine-nut brownies and serve them with flair. She'd—but of course she wouldn't. She wasn't in the market for a guy, even one as appealing as this one.

Slade Braddock unfolded himself from the floor cushion, rising with spectacular grace. He looked down at her, a half smile playing across his well-sculpted lips.

"No problem, but why don't you stop by the marina this afternoon? There's a video camera on the houseboat. No point in wasting time. Got to get me a bride by June, you know?" His smile so unnerved her that she levered herself upward, stumbling over the corner of the cushion and catching herself on the doorknob, barely averting an unladylike sprawl across her desk.

"You okay?" he asked, frowning slightly.

"Y-yes. And where will I find you at the marina?"

"I'm staying on what they call Houseboat Row in a floating palace called Toy Boat. Silly name, isn't it?"

"Well," Karma said, unsure how to answer this. She didn't want to hurt his feelings. Guys sometimes got very attached to their boats.

"I didn't name it. That honor belongs to my second cousin's wife. Renee thought it was cute." He grinned, and Karma was totally charmed. Never mind that he had already told her the type of woman who appealed to him, and never mind that she wasn't it. All her misgivings about men evaporated in that moment.

"I'll be glad to stop by the marina," she said. "Would five o'clock suit you?" She'd bring hors d'oeuvres, wear something revealing. She'd—yeah. She'd make a fool of herself. Again.

"Five o'clock. Right. Thanks, Ms.—O'Connor, is it?"

She scooped one of her cards out of the jumble on her desk. "Karma O'Connor. Like on the sign out front."

He looked at the card, looked at her. "Nice name, Karma. What does it mean?"

"Destiny," she said, staring him straight in the eye, and despite her reservations, in that moment she was certain that she had found hers.

AFTER SLADE HAD LEFT HER OFFICE, Karma immediately dashed across the street to the Blue Moon, where she rented a tiny three-room pad.

The Blue Moon was exactly the kind of place Karma would have chosen to live even if it hadn't been right across the street from Rent-a-Yenta. The building had seen its heyday in the late 1940s. It was painted pale pink, the doors and windows were outlined in aqua, and a lavender-blue stripe circled the top of the building. A blue bas-relief half moon hung over the door. Karma had heard the place variously described as "an iced pastry," and "a Wurlitzer jukebox done in pastels." After the heavy dark brick of her apartment block in Connecticut, she loved it.

Goldy, manager, desk clerk, custodian and security officer all rolled into one, sat inside the doorway behind a counter. She glanced up from her knitting with rapid-blinking brown eyes. Her short spiky hair gleamed in the sunlight from the nearby window; it was an energetic shade of copper this week. In the background a radio blared some sixties girl group singing, "Today I Met the Man I'm Going to Marry."

Was the song an omen? Maybe. Karma believed in omens.

"Hi, Goldy, anything new?"

"I read the tarot cards for you today. Something big's coming up. Something major." Her voice was tiny, like a little girl's.

"Like being able to pay my office rent?" Slade Braddock's registration fee made that a sure thing.

"Hmm. Could be bigger than that." Goldy set aside her knitting and adjusted the voluminous folds of one of the huge flower-print muumuus she liked to wear.

"Nothing's bigger than paying the rent."

"I thought since you gave up the five-room office suite, you'd be okay."

"Only if I bring in more business. Things fell apart fast when Aunt Sophie was sick. She may have left me her business, but I've got to revive it. After quitting a market research job, being laid off from Psychtronics Magazine and getting fired from The Bickerstiff Corporation, it's a welcome opportunity."

"Maybe you should have your chakras read, get some direction. I have time late this afternoon." Goldy's shtick was anything New Age, and she never let anyone forget it.

"Can't. I'm busy."

"Well, there you go. Business must be picking up," Goldy said with an air of idle speculation, which was how Karma knew that Goldy, from her vantage point by the window, had seen Slade Braddock.

"I have a new client," Karma said reluctantly.

"Is he anyone that Jennifer might be interested in?" Jennifer was Goldy's niece, and she'd signed up with Rent-a-Yenta the first week after Karma had taken over. Jennifer was hard to place because she had no real interests other than herself. Her favorite pastime seemed to be playing "Boxers or Briefs" while guy-watching with her best friend Mandi on Collins Avenue, and Karma privately thought that her brain was so empty that she ought to wear a Rooms for Rent sign on her forehead.

Karma managed a casual shrug. She couldn't see Slade Braddock with Jennifer. Or maybe she didn't want to.

"Well, how about Mandi?" Goldy asked.

Karma had experienced some success in placing Mandi, who also lived in this apartment house, but most guys backed off after they realized that artfully streaked hair, acrylic fingernails, and weekly massages did not come without a steep price.

"Could be," said Karma noncommittally. She turned to go.

"Oh, by the way, Geofredo's probably in your apartment right now. He's respraying the whole third floor."

Karma stopped and frowned. "I told you I didn't want that exterminator guy coming into my place. You know I don't believe in killing anything."

Goldy spared her a meaningful look. "You told me you had a family of roaches living under your refrigerator."

The roaches were palmetto bugs, enormous and all too prevalent in the state of Florida. These were big brown insects the size of hummingbirds, and they also flew. For palmetto bugs and spiders, which creeped her out bigtime, Karma was able to relax her standards slightly as long as she didn't have to do the killing.

Goldy said, "You tell Geofredo to check the supply room on your floor for spiders."

"Will do."

Karma started up the stairs to the third floor; there was no elevator in the building. She figured the stairs were good exercise, which she needed now that she was going to be sitting behind a desk every day. Not that she had done much sitting so far, since the chair was usually piled high with papers. Most of the hours she had put in at the Rent-a-Yenta office had been spent painting and cleaning, with an occasional client thrown in for good measure.

Speaking of clients, Goldy's niece Jennifer was skipping toward her down the stairs, probably on her way home from visiting Mandi. Jennifer's hair was long, straight, and bouncy. She wore a tight cutoff Planet Hollywood shirt with low-slung white capri pants that showed off her silver navel tassel.

"Hi, Karma," she said, stopping before they passed. "Hey, are those real?"

"Are what—?" Karma began before she realized that Jennifer was unabashedly staring at her breasts.

Karma shook her head as if to clear it. Was she supposed to answer such a question?

"I don't mean the boobs, silly. If they were fake, you'd have chosen bigger ones. No, I mean the nipples."

"What?" Back in Connecticut, where Karma came from, people didn't ask such personal questions.

"Oh, well, I guess they must be. Forget I asked—I was only wondering if your nipples were fake because I'm going to buy some if I can figure out where to get them, and I thought you could tell me."

"Sheesh, Jennifer, what are you talking about?" Karma had thought, erroneously it appeared, that she had outgrown being freaked by the wacko characters in Miami Beach.

Jennifer tossed her head so that her hair gave off the overpowering scent of mango-coconut shampoo. "Nipples, silly, you can buy fake ones to stick on. My own are kind of puny, and the idea of all these guys I'm going to meet through Rent-a-Yenta has been making me think. Do I want a steady boyfriend? Yes! Do I want to use every means at my disposal to attract one? Yes! Guys love huge nipples, Karma, believe me. It's a major drawing point. Point, that's funny!" She laughed uproariously.

Karma made herself keep a straight face. "I can't help you, sorry. But if I were you, I'd try that place advertised on the big billboard near the airport—The Booby Trap 'n Boutique." The billboard featured an overendowed winking woman wearing nothing but a large pink feather.

"Oooh! Good idea! Thanks, Karma." With that, Jennifer resumed her skipping down the stairs, and Karma readjusted her blouse so that it didn't cling.

The exterminator, Geofredo, was backing into her apartment with his bug-spray equipment as she arrived. Karma considered if maybe this was the man she was going to marry, like in the song. She also considered readjusting her blouse so that it did cling, but she quickly gave up the idea until she knew more about him.

As he went around her apartment spraying and smiling shyly between squirts, Karma decided that if this guy had any intention of marrying her, he wasn't letting on.

He gave her one last bashful smile at the door. "Hasta la vista? Baby?" he said, looking more tentative than forceful.

"Don't forget about the spiders in the supply room," she said, doing a finger-play demo of the kindergarten song about the itsy-bitsy spider. "In el rooma de supply." This was the best shot she could give Spanish; she'd taken French in high school.

Geofredo shoved the bug bomb he was carrying into his pocket and grinned widely, exposing a row of teeth as white and as straight as a row of Chiclets. "Spi-der," he said, mimicking her actions. "Araña." That's when Karma spotted the wedding ring on the third finger of his left hand and realized that he wasn't the man for her.

"Hasta la vista to you, too," she told him, and then she shut the door behind him fast.

Besides, she really dug cowboys. Or at least she had ever since she'd set eyes on Slade Braddock.

2

SLADE SETTLED BACK in a deck chair, popped the top off a Guinness, and resigned himself to listening to intermittent jabber and Cuban music wafting over from D Dock. He was trying his best to impersonate a yachtsman, but even after two days in residence on Toy Boat, he felt like an interloper. The habitues of the Sunchaser Marina were a tight-knit group. They didn't so much ignore him as act as if he didn't exist.

Well, his clothes might have had something to do with it, but whenever he shucked the jeans and boots for one of Mack's designer swimsuit outfits, he felt like a complete idiot. Silver reflecting sunglasses and a cabana shirt thrown open at the throat weren't his style.

Still, he might have gotten along with his companions better last night if he'd been dressed in Miami Beach mode. The two guys he'd met at the beach had taken one look at his boots and hat and mistaken him for a rube. They'd invited him along on a little bar-hopping jaunt, set him up with a sumptuous redhead at a party, and tried to steal his money in a back alley. Bad mistake. The guys were nursing aching heads today, no doubt, and not as a result of hangovers. As for the redhead, she'd split, yelling at the top of her lungs. Good riddance.

He was by nature soft-spoken and quiet, and he was well aware that it gave him an advantage to be seen as naive. He'd never thought it necessary to advertise the fact that he'd graduated from the University of Florida and been a star on the rodeo circuit for a couple of years afterward.

Slade Braddock had seen enough of the world to appreciate who he was and where he'd come from, which was why he knew he wanted to live in Okeechobee City for the rest of his life. Here in Miami Beach, he felt misplaced. Like a fish out of water, so to speak. He didn't belong here, he didn't really want to be here. He'd made progress today, though. He was on the way to finding himself a wife.

The marina was bustling with activity as boats came back from fishing trips, people returned to their houseboats from their day's activities, and fishermen weighed in their catch. The breeze felt good after this typically stifling September day; it wafted with it the scent of the ocean. Across Biscayne Bay, an orange sun cast the skyline of Miami into golden relief, and Slade was momentarily homesick. To his way of thinking, sunset in the Glades was a much more inspiring sight.

He allowed himself to daydream as he thought about the wife he had come here to find, heard her soft voice whispering in his ear. It would be good to have a wife at last, good to have a sweet little cutie to laugh with in bed at night, to cuddle happily for a few quiet moments in the morning before he rode out to check the fences and the herd.

He pictured the Diamond B Ranch in his mind—brilliant blue sky, acres and acres of green grass punctuated by palmetto hummocks, and in the distance, Everglades saw grass shimmering green and yellow in the bright sunshine. It was a special place, that ranch, carved out of the Glades by Slade's grandfather, built to its present greatness by his father, and he wanted a special woman to share it with him.

Slade spotted Karma O'Connor as she rounded the curve from the parking lot on her bike. Now speaking of women, there was an interesting one, he thought. But quirky. Karma didn't at all resemble the wife he intended to find—she was too tall by far, and not fragile. Definitely not fragile. The word he would choose to describe her would be robust. He did have to admit that her hair was much the same color as what he had in mind. It wasn't straight though, and he had a thing for fragile-looking women with long straight blond hair—Southern-belle type, if possible. On the other hand, on Karma that bouncy mop of curls looked good.

He stood up to get a better look at her, and to his surprise, she didn't stop pedaling when she reached the grassy strip dividing the parking lot from the dock, nor did she stop on the narrow band of asphalt that passed for a sidewalk. She rode her fool bike right onto C Dock.

He treated himself to another swig of beer as she bent her head down in determination and kept pedaling past the line-up of houseboats, a big Amazon of a woman. The boards of the dock creaked under her bike wheels. That fluttering purple thing she wore scared a lazy pelican off one of the weathered pilings, and the bike's back wheel clipped a bait box, but still she pedaled on.

Slade couldn't figure for the life of him what kind of garment Karma was wearing. You could see through part of it, but not any part that mattered—the sleeves and at least the bottom part of the legs were transparent like a nightie. He remembered her legs. He'd gotten a pretty good gander at them when she was walking up the stairs to her office this morning. And her hips, ditto. They'd looked like a couple of melons in a croker sack. Very firm melons.

Then: disaster. Slade saw what was going to happen before Karma did. An elderly guy named Phifer in C-22 was making repairs to his boat, puttering around on deck as he had all afternoon. Phifer must not have seen Karma because he tossed a line toward the dock. The line seemed to hover for a moment before it descended, a kind of slow motion free-fall, and as the rope looped toward her through the air, Slade yelled, "Look out!"

Karma looked up. The trouble was that she looked up at Slade all the way down in Slip 41, not at the line, which fell neatly over her foot, snagging both it and the bike pedal in a kind of a bungee hang-up. Karma went flying. So did the bike—both of them right into the drink with a huge splash.

Slade was up and off Toy Boat in a flash. But by the time he reached the space where Karma had gone in, all that was to be seen of either her or the bike was a circle of purple chiffon floating on the top of the water.

She surfaced right away, sputtering and flinging a tangle of hair out of her eyes.

"I'll throw you a life ring," Slade hollered, grabbing one from a hook on one of the pilings and tossing it at her.

She yelled back, "I can swim," but when the life ring landed beside her, she latched on to it anyway and began kicking in the direction of the dock. By this time, bystanders had gathered. "What happened?" asked the old guy who'd thrown the line.

"She was riding a bike. Lost control of it," Slade said, not wanting to get into a conversation with Phifer. At present he was much more interested in Karma, who was now treading water directly below him. "Swim over to the piling, I'll lean down and give you a hand up."

She looked wary. "I can't do that. I don't have on anything but my underwear. That's my sari," and she pointed at the purple chiffon, which was being borne away by the outgoing tide.

"What'd she say?" asked Phifer.

"I believe she said she's sorry," Slade told him.

"I should think she's sorry," huffed Phifer. "Riding a bike on the dock."

The other onlookers agreed with him, and one by one they wandered off to their barbecuing or their beer on ice or whatever it was that they'd planned to do. "Me, I've got fish to clean," Phifer said grumpily before slapping off down the dock in his worn old boat shoes.

No one else came over to see what was going on, which told Slade something about how these Miami Beach people lived. Sure, Miami Beach folks lived a laid-back lifestyle, but in his opinion, they should have more concern for their neighbors. In Okeechobee City, this situation would have drawn a bunch of spectators, all of whom would feel inclined to give advice and, probably, help. But then, Okeechobee City was a small town. Miami Beach was not.

He turned his attention back to the woman in the water. She was floating amid the flotsam, including but not restricted to a tangle of dirty fishing line, and assorted fish parts. "Um, ma'am?"

"Yes?"

"Did you really say that you don't have on anything but your underwear?" he asked.

"Do we have to keep talking about it?" she said.

He was sure that this was a rhetorical question, so he decided to change his tack. "You can't stay in there forever."

"Wait and see," Karma said, and he thought she looked kind of comical in her determination. The key parts of her anatomy that he could see under the surface of the water looked nicely shaped and tan. Why they were tan, he could only speculate. Maybe she did a lot of topless sunbathing, like some of the models he and his companions of the night before had seen on South Beach yesterday. He tried not to think about Karma with no top on, but the image stuck in his mind.

As if she could read his thoughts, Karma hugged the life ring to her chest, covering up what was interesting him. "I'll come out when it gets dark. I'll slink away into the night. Look, why don't you forget you ever met me? I'm sure you can find another matchmaker in this town."

Slade had no interest in shambling through the whole dating service sign-up process again. It was embarrassing enough to have to enlist help to find a wife in the first place. Besides, at the moment he was fascinated by Karma O'Connor, though he couldn't quite figure out why. Mascara was running down her cheeks in rivulets, and she'd lost an earring. But with her hair plastered to her head like that so that he wasn't distracted by her wealth of curls, he could better assess her beauty. And Karma was beautiful. Her complexion was pink-and-white and flawlessly textured; her nose was aristocratically narrow. She also had very white and very straight teeth. As a connoisseur of horseflesh, he knew you could tell a lot about an animal by its teeth.

This, however, was a woman. A woman in distress. He said as comfortingly as he could, "Don't go anywhere. I'm going to get a robe and throw it down to you."

Karma opened her mouth, then shut it abruptly just prior to being sloshed by the backwash from the propeller of a passing outboard. Before she took it into her head to object, Slade took off at a trot back toward Toy Boat, passing Phifer on the way.

"Fool woman. Had no business riding a bike on the dock," grumbled Phifer, who by this time was tossing fish heads to a circling flock of gulls.

When Slade returned with one of Mack's monogrammed white terry cloth robes, Karma had moved to the piling and had commenced clinging to a metal ring affixed to the post.

Slade bundled the robe into a neat ball. "I'm going to throw this down, and you can put it on. Then you can come out of the water," Slade said.

Karma said something like "Hmmpf," and he tossed the robe down. He tactfully turned his back as she put it on, but he heard her splashing around and it seemed to take her an overly long time to get into the robe. "Everything all right?" he called over his shoulder.

"You must realize," she said, "that this thing has soaked up a ton of water. Yes, I've got my arms through the sleeves, if that's what you want to know, but I think it's going to pull me under. Like an anchor."

Slade turned around. She was suitably swathed, but she was now riding slightly lower in the water and her expression was anything but pleasant.

He knelt down on the dock, held his hand out to her. She grabbed it.

He supposed that it was some peculiar flight of fancy that tied in with his earlier fantasy about finding the right woman for him, but all the same, he could have sworn that a bolt of electricity flashed through their connected hands. It was so strong that he almost let go.

But he didn't let go. He hung on for dear life even as he tried to sort this thing out. He concluded as he gave a mighty heave and yanked her up onto the dock that he had been mistaken. He couldn't possibly have felt anything. He was out of his mind for thinking so. He wasn't at all attracted to this woman. She wasn't his type.

And yet when she stood dripping in front of him, her eyes searching his face, he did feel something, an emotion that he finally identified as relief. No harm had come to her and he was glad. That was all.

"I guess I can say goodbye to that bike," Karma said ruefully.

"Well, maybe not. I'll see if the marina manager can do anything about it," he told her.

Karma shrugged, sending a veritable Niagara sluicing over his bare feet. “Come on,” he said, shaking his feet to rid them of water. “I reckon we can find you something warm and dry to wear.”

She walked glumly and wetly beside him back to Toy Boat. “I brought some things,” she said. “They’re at the bottom of the bay along with my bike.”

He stepped down onto the boat first, handed her onto the deck. “What things did you bring?”

“Crackers. Spicy tofu-cilantro garlic spread. Things like that.”

Slade had never heard of spicy tofu-cilantro garlic spread, but it sounded downright unappetizing. He hadn’t thought this was a social call. Wasn’t it supposed to be business? To videotape him so she’d have something to show her female clients as a kind of sales pitch? He narrowed his eyes at her. She was now dripping all over the teak deck.

“Maybe you could, uh, wring yourself out,” he ventured.

She eyed the yards and yards of wet white terry cloth doubtfully. She made as if to wring out one side of the robe, but he quickly directed her toward the side of the boat. “Over the side,” he said helpfully. “If you don’t mind. These teak decks take a heap of maintenance, according to Mack.”

“Who’s Mack?”

“The cousin who belongs to this boat.”

“And where is he?”

“I dunno. He made it rich selling off his share of the family land, used the money to buy this boat and a lot of other things. I expect he and Renee are flying around in his Lear jet.”

“A Lear jet,” Karma repeated.

“Yeah, well, Renee hates flying in it.”

“That’s why it’s important to find the right wife,” she said. “That’s why you came to Rent-a-Yenta. So that you wouldn’t find someone who isn’t suited to you, that is.” She reached up and fluffed her hair, which was already drying in the breeze off the bay.

Slade thought it was cute that even now, sodden and miserable and annoyed about losing her bike and the tofu whatever, this woman could still inject a plug for her business into the conversation.

“Let’s go into the master stateroom. Mack’s wife’s clothes are there. Maybe some will fit you.” He realized when she shot him a skeptical look out from under her eyelashes that this might sound like a come-on. “You can go in there alone. I’ll stay right here on deck like a gentleman.”

She looked heartened by this statement. “No funny business?” she asked.

“No funny business. I’ll even leave the boat, walk over to the marina office and see if I can rustle up the head honcho around here, ask him about your bike.”

“That might be a good idea,” she allowed, and so as she made her way through the salon, scattering a narrow path of water droplets on the woven-to-order rug, Slade went to find the marina manager, who might know what you had to do to salvage sunken bicycles.

WOW, KARMA THOUGHT AS HER eyes popped at the sumptuous master stateroom. Slade Braddock certainly wasn’t slumming. The boat looked like a picture right out of an upscale travel magazine, the kind of publication she’d read maybe once in her whole life. There was teak everywhere, and cove lighting, and some kind of pale shimmery fabric draping the portholes. The bed was huge and covered with a subtly patterned spread. The bouquet on the built-in dresser was composed of fresh flowers and hothouse variety at that.

She walked across the cushy seafoam-green carpet to the closet and flung the door open. Inside was a whole wardrobe of clothes arrayed on matching padded hangers. She pulled out a dress and a pair of slacks; they looked as if they’d been made for a midget. Slade’s cousin’s wife was apparently a nutritionally challenged size two.

All right, so she couldn’t wear these clothes. She threw open the next closet and found more promising duds; the trouble was, these were Slade’s.

She yanked a worn denim shirt out of the few hanging there and held it up for inspection. It was the typical Western-style shirt with two pockets in front and a yoke in back. It snapped instead of buttoned. The best part about it was that it would fit her.

Well, almost, anyway. After a longing look at the shower in the adjoining bathroom and mindful that Slade hadn't said she could make use of it, she shrugged out of the wet robe and into the denim shirt. It came down to the middle of her thighs.

A glance into the full length mirror on the inside of the closet door reassured her that the shirt covered all the important points. She bent over experimentally and realized that she'd have to find something to wear underneath it. She kept looking and settled on a pair of stretchy black exercise tights that tumbled off the closet shelf. They probably belonged to the petite Renee, but they stretched to cover Karma's long legs.

She decided that there was nothing to be done about shoes, since her own sandals were swimming with the fishes at the bottom of the bay and none of the ones here fit. But she could do something about her bedraggled hair, and that was to dry it with the use of a hair dryer that was conveniently mounted next to the sink in the bathroom, which she supposed, since it was on a boat, would properly be called the head.

The only head she was prepared to worry about at the moment was her own. She wore her hair shoulder length, and when wet it tended to frizz. The dryer had one speed—hot. That frizzed her hair even more, and when she was finished, she looked as if she'd just unplugged herself from an electrical socket.

Never mind, she told herself. You've already blown any chance you might have had with Slade Braddock. She cast one last resigned look into the mirror and went outside to wrap this up.

When she emerged from the salon onto the deck, Slade looked up appreciatively from the magazine he was reading.

"This belongs to you," she said apologetically, lifting the edge of the shirt.

"I never filled that shirt out so well," he said.

"What did you find out about my bike?" She was worried now about how she would get home. She didn't have cab fare, and it was a long walk back to the Blue Moon.

"The manager's son is a certified scuba diver, and he'll go down to look for it tomorrow morning. No problem. You'll get it back. Come and sit down, you might as well relax. Care for a beer?"

"No, thanks. I want to videotape while we've still got good light."

"There's the camera. I set it up on the tripod."

The camera stood on one corner of the deck. Karma went over to inspect it, surreptitiously looking Slade Braddock over as she pretended to note all the buttons and knobs on the camera. He wore only jeans and a white T-shirt, and instead of the boots, he wore deck shoes.

Under that T-shirt, his chest muscles rippled as he stood up to stretch. He was tall, even without his boots. Taller than she was, which was really saying something.

"Need any help in figuring it out?"

"This is different from mine," she managed to say although her mouth had gone dry.

"I've used this camera a few times before, so let me show you how it works." He closed the gap between them in a few steps, a maneuver that somehow mysteriously caused her heart to speed up. This attraction to a client, she knew, was wildly inappropriate. She shouldn't be breathing hard and heavy merely because he was standing close to her. It was unprofessional, it was unlike her—and it was a great way to be feeling after a long time without a special man in her life.

"This is the way you adjust it," Slade said, stepping behind the camera to demonstrate, "and this is the button you press to make it start."

While he was concentrating on the camera, her gaze lingered for a moment on the cleft in his chin, drifted slightly higher and came to rest on his lips. She did not want to concentrate on his lips. Or any of the rest of him. Which was why she didn't think she could go through with this.

"Do you still want to do this videotaping, or would you rather stop by my office and do it another time?" she said on a note of desperation. Using her work to advance her own personal agenda with this man had been a mistake. She needed to go home and calm herself with some deep breathing exercises, maybe on the beach so the salt air could become a type of inhalation therapy. She needed a soothing cup of herbal tea. Maybe she even needed to have her chakras read.

"The camera is ready to roll," Slade pointed out with a twinkle. "You gonna deprive me of my first, last and only chance to be a star of my own video?"

"Um…no." Because she didn't know what else to do, she edged around the back of the camera and fiddled with the lens.

"Hey, didn't I explain it right?" Slade asked. "I've already focused it on that chair over there. What do you say I sit down and we get on with it?"

She punched a button by mistake, and the camera made a frenzied whirring sound. "What's that?" she said in alarm.

"Easy there," Slade said. He slid around behind her. The heat of his body sizzled right through the denim shirt she wore.

"I—I—" she stammered, forgetting what she had been about to say.

"Let me check to make sure it's still in focus," he said, and he bent and fit his eye to the camera. Karma was treated to a view of how his hair curved along his nape.

"Now," Slade said as he straightened. "Wait till I'm seated, and then push the red button." His body brushed against hers as he edged past her and out of the tight corner. As he passed, she was assailed by pure, clean masculine odor. Not fragrance, as in aftershave or cologne, but a natural male scent of musk and a couple of other unidentifiables. This disconcerted her almost as much as his touch. She'd expected him to smell good. But not great.

He smiled in that engaging way of his, one eyebrow cocked, one corner of his mouth higher than the other. She had noticed his smile before; why did it seem so appealing now?

She made herself concentrate. Peer through the lens, focus, and next all she had to do was push the little red button. It was when she looked up that she realized with astonishment that Slade had gone all remote. His face was immobile, his eyes glazed over. He looked like a clone of Mount Rushmore.

It had happened before: Freeze-up. Some people might be affable and congenial as all get-out before you switched on the camera, but as soon as they realized they were being taped, they were afflicted with the inability to move their tongues and lips in any semblance of casual conversation. They became so self-conscious in front of that lens that nothing, but nothing, could make them snap out of it.

This was all she needed. At the moment she wanted to get this taping over with and scurry home to the Blue Moon, which seemed like a safe haven after this debacle.

"Slade," she said, because she'd learned in some psychology course eons ago that using a person's name gave you an edge, made him really pay attention to you, "we're just going to chat normally."

He nodded, but stiffly.

"So," she said as she pulled a chair over to one side of the deck out of camera range. "How about stating your full name first?" This was usually easy for clients who were wary of the camera. People always were able to say their own names with a minimum of stage fright.

"I thought we already did that." His tone was flat, his voice expressionless.

"Excuse me?"

"On the form you filled out today. I gave you my name."

"This is for the tape."

"Uh."

"So go ahead and tell me your name." She smiled her encouragement.

"My name's Slade Braddock. Do I need to spell it?"

This was proving to be even more difficult than she had anticipated. “No, that won’t be necessary.” She could edit out the comments that didn’t need to stay in. She’d had to edit like crazy for Jennifer and Mandi, especially Jennifer, who had given a very realistic imitation of an orgasm on tape. Or maybe it wasn’t an imitation—who knew?

“Now, Slade, we’d like to know what you do for a living.”

He stared at her for a moment. Not that she minded. She liked it when he looked at her. But they weren’t getting anywhere with this video.

“Slade?”

He licked his lips. “I guess you know I don’t like this much.”

“That’s okay. Just answer the questions the best you can.”

“You wanted to know what I do for a living?”

“Yes.”

“I run a herd of cattle up Okeechobee way.”

It was like pulling teeth to get the man to talk. If she hadn’t known he was perfectly capable of conversation, she’d be willing to quit. Some part of her was exultant at this development, though. The worse he looked on the video, the less appealing he’d be to the likes of Jennifer and Mandi. Still, it was her duty as the matchmaker to display him at his best.

Maybe if he talked about his work in more detail, he’d forget his self-consciousness.

“And what kind of cattle are they?”

“Why, they’re Braford cattle, most of ’em.”

“I don’t believe I’ve ever heard of that breed of cattle.”

“That means they’re part Brahma, part Hereford. Braford.”

He’d warmed up a little, but not much. “And how big is the herd?”

“Oh, it’s plenty big.”

“Perhaps you could describe the ranch,” Karma said encouragingly.

He smiled genuinely for the first time since the interview had started. “Well, there’s a big old house. Not real old, mind you. My daddy built it in fifty-eight, so it’s got what they call mod cons. It overlooks a pond where you can see ibises and great blue herons and sometimes a little ‘gator that we call Abner. Cute little guy. ‘Course, Abner could be a girl. Hard to tell. There’s a barn beyond the live oak trees, and you can just barely see it through the Spanish moss. That’s where the horses stay, and once we had some goats. They sure were fun to raise. And—”

He went on about the chickens that his mother had kept and how he liked to gun his pickup through the ditches, and all Karma could think of was that now that she’d gotten him started, he was going to be hard to shut up. His face was lit up, alive, and he was so sexy when he talked about something that was clearly near and dear to his heart. She couldn’t imagine why this man hadn’t been scooped up by some girl, someplace, some time ago.

“And I guess that’s about all you’ll be wanting to hear about the Diamond B Ranch.” He looked slightly embarrassed.

“Our clients might like to know more about Okeechobee City,” she prodded gently.

“Well, Florida is a major beef producer in this country. Lots of grass up Okeechobee way, and it grows lush and green all year ’round. Why, the western states have nothing on us, since we had our own range wars, rustling, and fence-cutting to worry about back in the late 1800s. Life on the north side of the lake has calmed down a tad now, but it’s still cow country. And how do I fit in? Admirably. Right now, I’m just one lonesome cowboy lookin’ for a wife,” he said.

“Your hobbies? The things you like to do in your spare time?”

“I don’t know if you want to hear about that.” He gazed down at his feet.

“Of course we do. Our clients like to get an idea of what they might be talking about on a date if they choose to follow up on you.”

“Oh, okay, then I might as well tell you. I like to watch birds. That’s my hobby.”

She wouldn't have been surprised if he'd said he liked to practice bull riding or steer roping or even sky diving, but bird watching? There was no way she would have guessed that this big rawboned cowboy was interested in birds, of all things. She had to admit that she was fascinated.

"I like to get up in the morning, walk out into the sunrise when it's just skimming a bit of gold light over the pond. That's when I see the best ones. I saw a rare roseate spoonbill a couple of weeks ago. They're about as fanciful as a bird gets. You ever seen a picture of one?"

Karma shook her head, entranced.

"They're bright pink in color, kind of like a flamingo. Prettiest thing you ever saw, but a roseate spoonbill has got a funny clown face. Almost makes you laugh when you see it."

"I see," said Karma. What she saw was a man who felt passionately about something that was important to him. If she had thought that Slade Braddock was shallow, and she conceded that maybe she had, she knew better now.

"But I'm sure you don't want to hear anything more about that," he said, lapsing into silence.

"Oh, no, I was interested. It's just that—that we don't like to let our videos get too long. A short interview usually lets our clients know enough to make a choice." She got up and stopped the camera, removing the cassette. "I'll take this back to the office and edit it. I should be able to offer this for my female clients to view next week."

"Next week! What do you mean, next week?"

"I have to process your application. I need to check out references, edit the videotape—"

"You need to find me a wife," he interrupted.

Her chin shot up. "That's exactly what I'm planning to do. And if you'll stop by the office tomorrow, I should have my psychological profile forms back from the printer. You'll need to fill one out."

"Psychological profile?"

"I'm a psychologist by training. The profile is something new that I've added to Rent-a-Yenta for the betterment of our services."

"All right, all right. I'll fill out the form. But what am I supposed to do between now and the time you set up my first date?"

Karma looked at him. She looked at the water and the sunset and the boats out on the bay. She looked back at Slade and said the first thing that popped into her head.

"You could have your chakras read," she said.

3

HIS SECOND CHAKRA was twisted. At least that's what Goldy told him.

"Excuse me?" Slade said, feeling foolish.

Goldy sniffed. "The second chakra is the center of sensation and feeling. It's blocked."

He didn't see how his second chakra could be blocked, since when he glanced over at Karma, who was fiddling with flowers in a vase on the file cabinet, he felt a definite sensation. He likened it to the way a bull must feel when he saw a cow after a long dry spell. Only cows didn't have calves like Karma's. Her legs were shapely and well-defined in those tights she had borrowed from Renee's closet.

He forced his attention back to Goldy, who had tilted her head and was toying with the strands of beads around her neck.

"And what do I do to unblock my, um, chakra?" he said distractedly.

"Embrace the flow," Goldy said.

"Embrace the flow," he repeated. Needing more guidance than he was getting from Goldy, Slade glanced at Karma, who nodded in agreement. Her hair rippled into motion, and he had the sudden inspiration that if he tried to run his fingers through it, she'd let him. Not here, of course. Not now. But sometime.

The phone rang and Goldy answered it. She became involved in a conversation that looked as if it might be prolonged.

"Movement would help," Karma said to him as she plucked dead leaves off the flowers in the vase. "To unblock your chakra, I mean."

"Movement? Like walking? Talking? Riding a horse?"

"No, nothing like that. The kind of movement that frees up blocked emotions. You could join a yoga class."

Slade shook his head to clear it. This didn't eliminate his growing attraction to Karma, however, and he had to remind himself sternly that she wasn't his type. This conversation was more than enough proof of that.

"What is yoga?" he asked. He had a vague idea that it was something that Hollywood types did when they came out of drug rehab.

"The word yoga means 'yoke,'" Karma said. "It's a discipline that yokes the individual with the divine through practice that joins our mundane and spiritual lives."

"Okay, so explain what a chakra is."

"Chakra means 'wheel' or 'disk.' A chakra is the sphere of bioenergetic activity coming from major nerves in the spinal column. You have seven chakras stacked in a column of energy from the base of your spine to the top of your head."

It was worse than he thought, this stuff, plus if there had been chakras wrapped around his spine, he was sure they would have been shaken off by all that rodeo riding he'd done.

Karma kept talking, and she might as well have been speaking a foreign language. "What goes on in the chakras influences our minds and bodies. Maybe Goldy can explain how your second chakra is blocked."

Goldy rolled her eyes at them and pointed at the phone while mouthing the words, "New tenant." Slade ran an impatient hand through his hair and wondered distractedly if he could get a takeout somewhere around here for dinner—a nice quiet dinner during which he could enjoy his own company.

"We could go to the delicatessen on the corner. I could explain more about your second chakra," Karma said, looking him straight in the eye. This statement was a direct answer to his unasked

question, and for a moment he thought she might be able to read his mind but immediately discarded the notion. He was letting all this New Age stuff get to him, which was ridiculous.

"You want to?" Karma gazed at him hopefully.

He hadn't a moment ago, but it struck him that her eyes had green depths that he hadn't noticed before, and her neck was extremely graceful, putting him in mind of a snowy egret's. Plus, all else aside, he was hungry.

"I sure do," he said, and he was rewarded by a megawatt smile.

"I'll run upstairs and change clothes," she said.

"Is that necessary? You look fine."

"Well," Karma said, glancing down at what she wore, "these clothes aren't mine."

She had already gone upstairs and come back down earlier wearing a pair of sandals on her previously bare feet, whose toenails were lacquered sugar-pea green with silver sparkles. He had an idea that if Karma disappeared into the mysterious upper levels of the Blue Moon Apartments, he would have a long wait before she reappeared. She would want to wash her hair, dry it, and slather on makeup. She would agonize over whether to wear the red outfit or the hot-pink outfit and decide after half an hour to wear the blue-and-green print one instead. In the meantime he would have to be polite to Goldy, who sounded like Minnie Mouse on helium. And that was presuming that she got off the phone; if she didn't, he'd have to rock back on his heels and pretend to admire what appeared to be distressed panels of coat-hanger art on the wall.

"You're gorgeous just the way you are," he said, appropriating Karma's arm and propelling her toward the door. He even waved goodbye to Goldy in a way that he hoped inspired trust and confidence.

"Shall we take the car?" He'd left his Chevy Suburban at a parking meter.

"Oh, let's walk," Karma said, and he swung into step beside her.

He realized before they had taken five steps that people noticed Karma. Men stopped and did a double take after they'd passed; some of them gave her a quick once-over as soon as they saw her. It must be because she was so all-fired tall. She'd dominate any group; she'd stand out in a crowd. He walked taller himself because he was walking beside her, and before he knew it, he was taking pride in being with her. He didn't mind being envied by other men; in fact, he kind of liked it.

"You see, you have to release emotional energy to free the body from its grip," Karma said, marching along to the beat of a steel-drum band playing reggae on the street corner.

"I don't think my emotional energy needs to be released," he ventured.

"That's what people think. But we all have repressed emotions."

"Do you?"

"I'm not so different from everyone else," Karma said seriously, though this was a statement he could have refuted. There was no opportunity, though, because they had reached the delicatessen. He opened the door for her, and she sailed through, hair bouncing, breasts ditto. A guy on the way out gaped at her.

"Would you look at that," the guy said to his friend. "Would you look at her!"

This was a compliment, but Slade was sure that Karma hadn't heard it. Or if she had, she was playing it cool.

Once they were seated in the restaurant booth, Slade studied the menu. He was in the mood for a big broiled steak, but there wasn't anything remotely resembling one on this menu. Instead there were things like a corned beef-with-chicken liver sandwich on pumpernickel, and cheese blintzes, and humongous desserts with names like Double Chocolate Disgrace. On the table were two bowls in a metal holder, one containing small whole pickled green tomatoes, the other containing sauerkraut.

The waiter returned, and Karma ordered a veggie-and-cream cheese sandwich.

"Are you ready to order, sir?" The waiter stood with his pencil poised.

"What do you recommend?" Slade said, throwing himself on the waiter's mercy.

"We just made a batch of fresh chopped chicken livers. The chicken liver sandwich is very good."

The idea of eating a whole sandwich made of chicken livers made Slade slightly sick to his stomach, so he glanced wildly at the menu and chose the first thing he saw, corned beef on rye.

When the waiter had left, Karma ladled sauerkraut into one of the small bowls stacked on the table. "Want some?" she asked.

Slade shook his head. "I never liked sauerkraut, and I can't imagine eating green tomatoes."

Karma pulled a face. "I can't imagine not eating them. I'm a vegetarian, so maybe that's why."

"You don't eat any meat?" He'd never known a vegetarian before; he'd always thought such a person must be slightly deranged. Not to scarf down a thick prime rib, drowned in natural gravy? Not to sink your teeth into a big juicy burger with all the trimmings? Never to know the joys of pork tenderloin cooked on a grill, or leg of lamb, or succulent spare ribs?

"Nope, no poultry, no mammals. I eat fish, though. I love fish."

Fish. He'd been known to eat catfish in the Glades, and he liked a tuna sandwich now and then, but he couldn't imagine fish as a steady diet.

"I've never eaten in this place," he said, looking around at the clientele, who ranged from jewel-encrusted elderly matrons with shellacked hair to sunburned tourists whose skin looked like raw hamburger.

"My uncle—you met him this morning—and my aunt used to like to bring me and my sisters here when we visited as children. I guess I came by my liking for Kosher food naturally, since my mother was Jewish."

He welcomed the chance to know more about Karma's personal life; he couldn't imagine what could produce a woman like this.

"With a surname like O'Connor, your father was Irish, right?"

"Mmm-hmm. He and my mother married in college. Both families predicted the marriage's immediate failure, but my parents had four daughters, including me, and lived happily for years. Until my mother took up cake decorating, that is, and they split up. She changed her name to Saguaro, like the cactus, and moved to Arizona."

"They divorced because she became a cake decorator?"

"Kind of." Karma seemed reluctant to elaborate.

"I've heard of many reasons to divorce, but that one takes the cake." He grinned at her, pleased with his play on words.

The corners of her mouth twitched as if she were suppressing a smile. "Dad didn't approve of Mom's new occupation. You see, she worked for a bakery that specialized in cakes that look like body parts." She looked embarrassed and seemed as if she expected him to be shocked, but he was still operating in the dark.

"You don't mean—"

"I do mean," she said. "The body parts weren't arms and legs, if you get my drift."

He did. He tried to picture in his mind a cake that looked like a pair of breasts or—well! He cleared his throat.

"So, uh, what does your father do?" he asked, sensing that they had reached a conversational cul-de-sac.

"My father found a new life after Mom left. He works on a cruise ship, plying wealthy widows with booze and blarney while pretending to enjoy teaching them the tango."

Slade chuckled. "We should all be so lucky."

Their food arrived, and they dug in. Once the corned beef sandwich had taken the edge off his hunger—and it was a delicious sandwich—Slade managed with some difficulty to overcome his aversion to the subject of his chakra.

"Suppose you tell me more about my second chakra. Like, where it is, for example."

"Your second chakra is located in your abdomen."

"Why would it have problems?"

Karma inhaled a deep breath, and looking as if she doubted the wisdom of explaining, she plunged ahead anyway. "Well, you know how these days we store information on disks—with computers, I mean? I told you that chakra means 'disk.' So it stores information, too. If a chakra is blocked, it needs reprogramming."

"Reprogramming," he repeated, thinking that this was worse than he thought.

"The issues of the second chakra are change, movement, pleasure, emotion. If the chakra is blocked, it can be difficult to form attachments, difficult to experience the right emotion. I can match you up with the perfect person," she said, "and if you can't change, or get no pleasure out of the relationship, or can't emote—"

"Emote?" Slade said, wary about this new direction she was taking. All he wanted was a wife. He didn't expect to have to change, and he wasn't sure where movement fit into this whole thing, and he wanted to feel pleasure, but wouldn't that come naturally when he found the right person?

"You want to run that by me again?" he said.

"Emotion is a building block," Karma explained before she took the last bite of her sandwich.

"I see," he said, turning this over in his mind.

"Are you sure you don't want one of these tomatoes?" Karma said, shoving the dish across the table at him.

"No, thanks. And just between you and me, I think this whole chakra stuff is a bunch of nonsense."

Karma stopped conveying a tomato from the dish to her plate and let it drop with a weary thump back into its dish. "Great," she said. "Fine. See if I try to help you any more."

"You're supposed to find me a wife," he said, losing patience.

Karma started to slide out of the booth. "Don't you think I know that? Don't you understand that this is what our conversation is all about? Don't you think the fact that you haven't managed to turn up a likely candidate so far might have something to do with some kind of—of mind block?"

"I don't see the connection," Slade said honestly and a little desperately as he slapped a large bill on the table and followed Karma as she charged out of the restaurant.

"You wouldn't, since your chakra has for all intents and purposes shut down," Karma said. Her long legs ate up the sidewalk as she barged her way through bunches of blondes and a gaggle of tourists all gawking and talking excitedly.

Slade caught up with her. "You told me that I'm supposed to express emotion. Wouldn't you say I'm expressing emotion by telling you how I feel about all this chakra-babble?"

She slanted a look toward him. "What do you think emotion is?" she shot back.

He had to think about this for a moment, but the answer seemed clear enough. "Well, I'd say that emotions are instinctual reactions," he said.

She seemed taken aback, surprised at his response. "Okay. At least you know one when you see one," she conceded. "That's a start. To take it a bit further, our feelings are our unconscious reaction to situations or events. We organize our feelings through emotion. We can choose the way we react to emotions, but the feelings themselves are quite separate."

Karma had slowed her pace was now walking almost sedately at his side.

"My emotional response to all this is that you and me should go in one of these bars and discuss this over a drink or two." Karma looked at him with rank skepticism. "So I can learn more about this," he amended.

Ahead of them, a group of people spilled out onto the sidewalk from a neon-lit doorway. "How about here?" he said.

He thought he might be becoming more sensitive to others' emotions when he recognized a whole raft of them flitting across Karma's mobile features. Confusion, distrust, sheer terror—not to

mention a brief blip of yearning over-laid with what he thought might be desire. But desire for what? For a beer? For his company? For more, even, than that?

"We can stop for a drink," she said. "I don't want to be out late, that's all."

He took her elbow, and she tensed as if she might shake his hand loose although she did not. They made their way into the club, where hot salsa music accompanied scantily clad bodies gyrating on a minuscule dance floor. Karma slid into a booth, and he slid in beside her.

"How do you know so much about all this chakra stuff, anyway?" he asked her after they'd ordered drinks.

She smiled at the waiter as he slid her glass of white wine toward her. "I guess you could say I was born into the territory. My parents met on a commune in the late sixties. My sisters and I were raised on soybeans, sprouts, tofu and a lot of other things that you've probably never heard of. Chakras, yoga, the freedom to be you and me, and so on. Commune life ended when we all had to go to school and they moved us to Connecticut where my father got a job in an aircraft factory."

"That sounds normal enough," he allowed.

"Oh, but there's more. Life in suburbia was modified by my parents' history. Jewish woman married to an Irish Catholic and spending their marriage's first years grubbing around in an organic garden equals not just your ordinary family."

"Are your sisters like you? Do they have unusual names like yours?"

"My oldest sister is named Azure, the youngest one is Isis, and the middle one is Mary Beth."

"Karma, Azure, Isis, and Mary Beth?" he said, smothering a chuckle at the incongruity of it.

Karma picked up on his amusement. "Go ahead. Laugh if you want to. We're used to it."

"Where did the Mary Beth come from?"

"Mary Beth was named after the midwife who rode five miles on a snowmobile to deliver her. Consequently, Mary Beth has always considered herself lucky that she was born in the middle of the worst winter storm to hit upstate New York in twenty-three years."

"Are their occupations as interesting as yours?"

"Isis is married to a dentist and they're raising his three sons by his first wife, all model students and soccer enthusiasts. Azure is a management consultant based in Boston. Mary Beth is a rabbi. I love to ride by her synagogue and see 'Mary Beth O'Connor, Assistant Rabbi' on the sign outside. I imagine that the unexpected juxtaposition of our Irish surname to the title of assistant rabbi merits a few second glances from passersby." Karma grinned.

Slade laughed. He couldn't help but be charmed by this woman with her tumultuous hair, offbeat personality, and unusual background. It occurred to him that he hadn't met an interesting woman in ages. Years. It was why he had come to Miami Beach. It was why he had signed up with a dating service.

"What about you?" she asked.

"I'd say we've pretty much covered that during the interview."

"Not about your childhood. Or your family," she pointed out.

Slade took a sip of his beer before answering. "Grew up in Okeechobee City, went to college, worked the rodeo circuit for a while and eventually came back to run the family ranch. My dad is ready to retire from ranching. He and Ma can't wait until I come home with my fiancée so they can do some traveling."

"This fiancée you hope to find," Karma said carefully. "Do your parents have right of refusal? I mean, what if they don't like her?"

"They'll like anybody who decides to put up with me. They're so eager for a daughter-in-law that they'd accept the bride of Frankenstein if she'd marry me."

"I hope I can do better for you than that," Karma said seriously.

He was about to say, I hope you can, too. However, he looked at Karma, really looked at her in that moment, and something in her expression made him bite back the words. He thought she looked regretful, even a trifle upset.

"Now about the way I move," he said after they had watched the dancers for several minutes. "Why don't you let me show you that I know how?"

She regarded him with a puzzled expression. "Excuse me?"

"Let's dance. In the interest of freeing up my chakra, of course."

"Don't make fun of it," Karma said sharply. "If you don't believe in the theory, fine. Lots of people do, that's all."

"I guess I need to know more about it before I make up my mind. But for now, what about dancing?"

Karma bit her lip. "Well," she said. "I was thinking it was time for me to go home."

"You won't turn into a pumpkin, Cinderella. Humor me."

"Any reason why I should? You're my client. I'm not supposed to—"

"But that's exactly the point. I am your client."

"I should be finding the perfect date for you. I shouldn't be out having a good time and forgetting that this is a business relationship." She seemed troubled.

"Are you having a good time, Karma?" he asked softly, letting the words sink in. Because I am, too. I'd have a better time if you'd dance with me."

After a moment's hesitation during which Karma seemed to weigh the pros and cons, the pros must have won out. She got up and Slade followed her onto the crowded dance floor. No sooner did they get there than the song that was playing stopped and segued into a smooth ballad.

He took her in his arms, liking the solid feel of her, liking the way she melted into him. She was lighter on her feet than he would have expected, and he led her to the center of the floor where lights from a revolving glass ball overhead played across her features.

"So, Karma, tell me—do I move all right?" he asked after they'd been at it for a few minutes. He was teasing her to see what she'd say.

He expected a saucy retort, maybe a challenge. But she surprised him. "Oh, yes," she murmured.

"So do you. But in case I don't express myself enough to bring my most repressed feelings out into the open, what should I do?"

"Our previous discussions make me suspect that this is an insincere question."

"Insincere is as insincere does," he said.

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that I asked for advice, and if I take it, you'll know that I'm far more interested than I've let on."

"This is a verbal sparring contest."

He tightened his arm around her waist. "At the moment, it's more physical than verbal as far as I'm concerned."

"Yikes," was Karma's inelegant remark. "Double yikes."

"So?"

"Well, if you really want to do something about movement and gain a little inner peace as well, you could try yoga, like I mentioned before."

"And where would I learn this yoga?"

"We hold yoga classes on the roof at the Blue Moon on Tuesday nights. Eight o'clock sharp." She spoke with a breathy little hitch in her voice that he found unbelievably sexy.

He pulled her even closer, felt her breasts pushing against his chest. "And you will be there, I suppose."

"I suppose. I mean, definitely. Unless I have something else to do."

What would this woman do in her spare time? he wondered. Make tofu-cilantro goodies such as the ones she'd lost at the bottom of the bay along with her bicycle? Hang out with Goldy in the lobby of the Blue Moon? Go on a date?

It occurred to him that Karma O'Connor might have a boyfriend. Or worse. She might be engaged. If she ran a dating service, she could have her pick of clients.

"You're not taken or anything, are you?" he demanded out of the clear blue, surprising himself as well as her.

"Taken?" She moved away and blinked at him. He noticed that her eyelashes were curly and long.

"As in going steady. Or engaged. Or something," he said, stammering around and feeling stupid.

"No." She moved closer now, tightening her arm across his shoulders. This gave Slade an exultant feeling that he would have been hard put to describe. He knew she wasn't his type. But he also knew that he might have a chance to get lucky for tonight. Or maybe the next few nights, if he played this right.

Not that it was only sex he was interested in. He wanted to know what made Karma O'Connor tick. He wanted to know why she thought the way she did, why she danced with her eyes closed. He wanted to know why she was running a place called Rent-a-Yenta and what she'd done before that. He wanted to know—

"You could come tomorrow night."

He had to think for a few seconds to put this statement in its proper context. "To yoga class, you mean."

"Yes, it would be good for you."

"If I promise to be there, will you leave here with me now?" he said, sounding more urgent than he intended.

"And where would we go?" she asked. In another woman, this might have sounded coy, but he didn't think Karma was capable of coyness.

"Somewhere away from the music, the smoke and other people. A walk on the beach, maybe."

"You like walking on the beach?"

"I think so. I haven't had many chances to do it." Well, there was last night, but he'd rather forget that whole fiasco.

"It's another way to bring movement into your life. Okay, you're on."

They broke apart, and Slade felt a pang of regret for the fact that he no longer held Karma in his arms. Watching the way she moved as they traversed the area between the dance floor and the door was some compensation, however, and putting his arm around her once they were outside on the sidewalk was even more.

They had turned to walk down the street toward the beach when he caught a glimpse of red hair sprouting from a knot on top of a head. The woman under the hair was on her way into the club that they had recently left, and it wasn't just any woman. It was, he realized with a sinking heart, the woman he'd met last night, the one who had accompanied the men he was with into the alley as they tried to rob him. The woman whose bikini top had ended up in his pocket.

There are certain moments in life that you can see coming from a distance away, and when that happens, the best thing to do is avoid them at all costs. And he didn't want to meet up with this redhead, whose name, he recalled, was Brenda.

But it was too late. Brenda had already seen him. Not that he was all that inconspicuous, as tall as he was and with the flamboyant Karma O'Connor on his arm.

"You!" Brenda shouted. "Come back here!"

"Looks to me like we'd better get out of here," he muttered close to Karma's ear. Fortunately at that moment a bunch of men wearing red fezzes on their heads tumbled out of a charter bus between him and Brenda, who let out a squawk of outrage.

Karma craned her neck. He had no doubt that she could see over the heads of the men in the red hats.

"That woman," she said. "Is she trying to talk to you?" Brenda hollered something, the words indistinct.

"I think so," Slade said. "We'd better run for it."

He hadn't anticipated the effect these words would have on Karma. Instead of agreeing with him, or better yet putting one foot in front of the other as fast as could be managed, she dug in her heels and said, "Why?"

"Because that woman and her companions tried to rob me last night. Because I decked the two guys, and she went off screaming down an alley."

Karma narrowed her eyes. "What preceded this? I mean, why would you—"

Yesterday replayed itself in Slade's memory. Plenty had happened, but there was no way he could explain it to Karma in the few moments remaining before Brenda clawed and climbed her way over the wedge of men who were still good-timing their way out of that bus.

"It was a matter of survival," he said. "Let's go!"

Karma was not to be hustled, however, and to his horror, he saw four of the men lifting Brenda up and passing her over their heads until she was gently set down on the other side of their still-moving line.

Brenda let out a little "Yow!" of triumph and bounced toward them. "Slade! Isn't that your name?" she said, sparing a quick assessment of Karma, who stood mutely at his side.

Slade tried to edge away, but Karma was firmly rooted in place. She was staring at Brenda's chest, which was a fine example of silicone art at its worst.

"You have my bikini top," Brenda said without further preamble. "I want it back."

"I don't—"

"You do! You grabbed it up off the floor when I was dancing! I saw you!"

"But—"

"Hef gave it to me as a token of his esteem when I was Playmate of the Month!" Brenda was getting decidedly red in the face, almost as red as Slade remembered the disputed bikini top to be.

"Slade, is any of this true?" said Karma through tight lips.

"Some of it," he admitted.

"Great. I've just signed up a pervert at Rent-a-Yenta," Karma muttered under her breath, but at least his admission did what he hadn't been able to do. It got Karma moving. She set off down the sidewalk at a pace that could only be described as rapid.

Slade turned to face Brenda, thinking that he might be able to talk her into being reasonable. "Your swimsuit top is at the houseboat. Stop by tomorrow and I'll give it to you."

"No," said Brenda, stubbornness flaring in her eyes. "I want it now."

"Tomorrow. No problem," he said, backing away as placatingly as he could.

"Now! We're going there right away! If you think I'm going to let you keep any article of my clothing for any length of time, you're nuts. After what you did to my friends—"

"They deserved it," he told her. "They tried to take my wallet."

"I don't care," Brenda said, on the verge, he was sure, of another tirade or maybe hysterics from the look of her. But then fate intervened in the form of a very large woman walking a very large and very hairy dog, which began to sniff around Brenda's feet in the way that dogs checked out fireplugs.

Uh-oh, thought Slade as the dog lifted its leg and Brenda curdled the air around them with a high-pitched scream. The dog panicked at the sound of Brenda's ungodly shriek, and it began to run around in circles. The woman yanked on the leash and yelled, "Heel! Heel!" Brenda kept on screaming. And he, Slade, made tracks.

Fortunately there were a lot of strollers out indulging in South Beach ambiance and the brine-scented night air, and fortunately, he spotted Karma's head about a block away. By the time he'd caught up with her, she had exceeded loping speed and was jogging along quite efficiently.

"Karma," he said, grabbing her arm. "I can explain."

"No explanation necessary. I saw you pull that red bra from your pocket this morning when you stopped to inquire about Rent-a-Yenta."

"It's not a bra. It's a bikini top."

"It serves the same function. Don't worry, I'll refund your registration fee."

"I don't want a refund," he said, glancing over his shoulder as Brenda's screams abruptly stopped. "I want a wife."

"Fat chance," Karma said.

He saw that red topknot flopping its way toward them. "I don't want to talk to this woman. I can explain. Where can we hide?"

"Like they say, you can run but you can't hide," Karma said grimly.

"It was all a fluke. I grabbed her bikini top off the floor when she threw it off while she was dancing on the hood of a cut-down '57 Chevy that was used as a couch in an apartment with some strange people I didn't know. It's true, I swear it."

Karma stopped dead in her tracks in front of a yellow-stuccoed apartment house and stared at him. "That story sounds absolutely too bizarre to be made up," she said.

"I didn't make it up. I have no interest in Brenda. Isn't there somewhere we can go?"

Karma's eyes moved sideways and took in their pursuer, who was now only half a block away. They were standing in the slim shadow of a palm tree, so there was a chance that Brenda hadn't actually seen them yet.

"In here," said Karma, yanking him into the lobby of the yellow-stuccoed place. Slade had the impression of dusty potted ficus trees and tables piled high with dog-eared magazines. A bunch of elderly men sat around tables playing dominoes.

"Hello, Karma dear," one of them said, his words punctuated by the sound of dominoes slapping on wood. "Your uncle Nate is out."

"I think he went somewhere with Mrs. Rothstein. He borrowed my Old Spice," said another. The rest of the men barely looked up.

"I'll just drop by his apartment," Karma said, edging toward the elevator and pulling Slade along with her. The men, focused on their game, barely paid attention.

Slade darted an anxious look at the front door. No sign of Brenda, or had she already passed by?

The elevator door opened, and Karma tugged Slade into it. "It's okay. We can cut through my uncle's apartment to the fire escape. From there we can—"

"I appreciate this," Slade said. "You don't know how much."

Karma stared straight ahead. "Don't try to weasel your way back into my good graces," she said. "I can't place any weirdos with my female clients."

He looked over at Karma, a slight smile playing across his lips. "I am entirely normal," he said. "In every way." Her mouth was unusually full, and her cheeks were flushed. Without knowing why, he bent his head, hesitated and kissed her full on the lips.

He thought she might have gasped beneath his mouth, but he was so intent on lengthening and deepening the kiss that he wasn't sure. What he was sure about was that her lips were softly pliant, her mouth was warm and willing, and she was one sensuous woman.

The elevator bumped to a stop, and he released her. Without saying a word, she walked out. He followed her, his mouth tingling, his ears ringing. And all from just one kiss.

Looking rattled, Karma led him into her uncle's apartment and raised a window before turning to face him. "You shouldn't have done that," she said.

"It was good for me. Wasn't it good for you?" He affected an air of studied innocence.

"It was unnecessary and uncalled for. And—"

"—and very nice," he murmured, gazing deep into her eyes, which dazzled him with their complexity of feeling.

She bit her lip and appeared to collect herself. "Let's go," she said, and she stepped out onto the metal fire-escape stairs.

"Now what?"

"We go that way," she said, pointing toward the next roof.

It was easy, clambering across the roof, and the next one, and the next. Throughout their curious journey, with the city of Miami Beach spread out before them, with the scent of the sea in his nostrils, all he could think was that he wanted to kiss Karma again. And soon.

"This is the Blue Moon," she said when they had reached a roof where lawn chairs were set along the edge of the building facing the ocean. The chairs on the sun deck were occupied by couples doing—well, who knew what? Slade had an idea, but he doubted the advisability of asking Karma if she would like to indulge. He was pretty sure she'd say no.

Karma marched across the roof and opened a door leading to a narrow hallway inside. "I suppose you want to be invited into my apartment for a drink or something," she said, squarely facing him under the glare of an unshaded bulb dangling from the ceiling.

"Yes," he said because he had never wanted anything so much in his life. "Yes, I reckon I would like that just fine."

Karma sighed and massaged the back of her neck. "I'll have to think this over," she said. "I don't know."

"I'll call you tomorrow," he said.

"You might want to come in to the office and look at some of my female clients' videos," she said.

"I thought you fired me," he said. "As a client, I mean."

"I did. But now I think you're okay."

"Because I kissed you?" he said, opting for the bold approach.

"No, because I believe that you didn't have any psycho reasons for having that bra—"

"Swimsuit top."

"—swimsuit top in your pocket. I saw your expression when you pulled it out this morning. You looked surprised. That's enough for me."

At the moment, screening videos of her other Rent-a-Yenta clients didn't appeal to him at all. "How about lunch tomorrow? Or dinner?"

"Or yoga? Remember, I said we'd have a class here tomorrow night."

She must be testing him. He didn't want to go to a yoga class. He hated anything New Age. But he did want to see Karma again, and desperately.

"I'll be there," he said.

She favored him with a decisive nod. "Good. Now I'd better walk you out of the building. Goldy doesn't take kindly to unescorted men rambling around in here."

They walked down four flights of stairs and found Goldy in the lobby, sitting behind her desk watching TV.

She looked up briefly, showing absolutely no surprise that the two of them had descended from on high rather than walking in the front door.

"Your aunt Sophie is here," she said.

Karma's eyebrows flew up. "My aunt Sophie is dead."

"Well, she's here anyway." Goldy gestured in the direction of a cardboard bucket of the same ilk as the ones that fast-food fried chicken came in.

"What in the world are you talking about, Goldy?"

"Your aunt Sophie. They delivered her ashes. That's them right there."

4

THE NEXT DAY WHEN KARMA met her uncle Nate at the neighborhood ice-cream parlor, she informed him about the fried chicken barrel now reposing on top of her refrigerator.

"Okay," he said, "so I should have ordered an urn. But what difference does it make? Sophie wanted her ashes scattered in the ocean. She loved the ocean."

Karma took time out from licking her raspberry frozen yogurt on a stick. "And you're going to scatter them, right?"

Nate looked uncomfortable. "No, not me. You, Karma."

Karma stopped stock-still in the middle of Ocean Boulevard. "Why me?"

"I pretend like she's buried. I go to the cemetery every day to see her grave, God rest her." He pulled her out of the path of a speeding dune buggy. "You should watch where you're going, Karma. I don't want to be going to any more funerals for a while."

They resumed their stroll. "With me out of the way, you could give Rent-a-Yenta to Paulette," Karma said while thinking that scattering Aunt Sophie's ashes was something Nate should do.

"I don't want you out of the way, Karma. Your cousin Paulette was second choice. Anyway, she already has a job counting money for a big Wall Street firm."

Lucky Paulette, Karma thought glumly. She probably had a boyfriend, too. But not someone as handsome and charming as Slade Braddock, she'd wager. Not that Slade was her boyfriend, but he had kissed her. He was a good kisser, too.

"Anyway, Karma, I like to go to the cemetery and look at Sophie's grave. I sit there for a while and I talk to her."

"Aunt Sophie doesn't have a grave. She's in that fried chicken barrel."

"Barrel? Don't call it a barrel. It's a fried chicken bucket. Sophie wouldn't need a barrel. She was as slim on the day she died as she was on the day I married her. And anyway, I picked out a grave that looks like it could be Sophie's. Sometimes I drive Mrs. Rothstein to the cemetery, too, so she can visit her husband's grave nearby. There's a pretty bottle-brush tree, and we like to sit under it on a nice wrought-iron bench. Let me have my fantasy that Sophie is there, bubbeleh. Don't spoil it for me."

"But Uncle Nate—"

"Your aunt Sophie was my life. I miss her." Nate wiped a tear from his eye.

Karma slid an arm around his shoulders. "She'd want you to make a new life, Uncle Nate."

He sighed. "I know, I know. That's true." He cheered up slightly. "So when can you scatter the ashes?"

Karma finished the rest of her frozen yogurt and tossed the stick in a trash can painted with a purple palm tree. "I don't know. I'll have to figure out a way. I think I'll need a boat, since you can't really toss ashes from shore without the prevailing winds throwing them back at you."

"You let me know what you're going to do."

"I will, Uncle Nate. Thanks for the frozen yogurt." She bent and kissed him on his wrinkled cheek.

"You've got your yogurt class tonight, don't you?"

"Yoga. I practice yoga. I eat yogurt." Her uncle had never been able to tell the difference between yoga and yogurt, which had been endearing at first, but now it was beginning to wear on her.

"Okay, yoga. Didn't I hear that the big cowboy was coming to class?"

"Where did you hear that?" Karma uttered in surprise.

"Goldy mentioned it. Is it true?"

"I invited him. Not sure if he'll be there tonight," she hedged.

Nate's eyes twinkled. "He will be. I saw the way he looked at you the other morning."

"From your mouth to God's ears," Karma said, but Nate only laughed.

"That's my line," he said, and it was true. Her uncle was always saying that.

After she and Nate parted company at the corner, Karma walked slowly back to her office, wondering where would be the best place to hire a boat. She was still mulling this over as she climbed the stairs. The door swung open before she inserted her key.

"Hi, Karma." Jennifer, the same Jennifer who was eager to find a date who was husband material, had parked her sexy self in front of the TV in the alcove where clients were welcome to browse through videos of possible matches. "Aunt Goldy sent me over to take delivery of the couch and chairs for you, and I figured it's a chance to check out new prospects. I've just met one, in fact."

"Oh?"

"He said his name was Slade Braddock. He was looking for a psychological profile form and took one off your desk. I hope that's okay."

Karma's spirits fell. She wished she hadn't missed him. "I guess it's all right. Um, Jennifer, why aren't you at work?"

"I switched to the night shift."

"They have night shifts for ear piercers?"

"Uh-huh. That's when all the teenagers come in, and we're having a special—two for the price of one."

"Two ears? You charge per ear?"

Jennifer rolled her eyes. "No, silly. Two people for the price of one. You should come get your ears pierced while the sale's on. Your belly button too. I'm not supposed to do belly buttons, but I'd make an exception for you."

Ouch! But, "I'll think about it," Karma said. To her dismay, the very video cassette that Jennifer now cradled in her eager little hands was labeled Slade Braddock, Client 1811.

"This guy was soooo cool. I think I'll pop this cassette in the VCR and see what he has to say."

"I haven't edited it yet."

"I don't care. Want to watch it with me?"

Karma shook her head. "I've got things to do," she said.

Jennifer leaned forward, her breasts surging out of her vee neckline. They were conical in shape and tanned all over, at least from what Karma could see, which was considerable. Furthermore, it looked as if Jennifer had succeeded in her quest for artificial nipples. They were standing up straight and proud. Did guys really like that look? It seemed that as a matchmaker she ought to know such things.

Jennifer noticed her scrutiny. "Yes, Karma, I did get them. Do you want to know where? I could—"

"No, thanks," Karma said hastily.

Jennifer treated her to a knowing smile. "They'd help you in the guy department, believe me. By the way, I took a message for you." She bounced over to the desk and ripped a pink message sheet off a pad. "The caller said she was your cousin Paulette. She said she was recently fired from her job in New York and wants you to call her back."

"Paulette? Call her back?" Despite Karma's immediate sympathy for anyone who'd lost a job, this wasn't anything she wanted to do. Paulette had been the butt of jokes from Karma and her sisters during their childhood. Karma knew she had never been completely forgiven for dipping the sleeping Paulette's hand in a pail of warm water on the first night of sleep-away camp when they were both eight; Paulette had wet her bed, which was what Karma had been assured would happen. After that, Paulette's nickname around camp had been P. P., which ostensibly stood for her initials, since her full name was Paulette Parham. But all the campers had known what the nickname really stood for, and the counselors probably did, too.

"Come on, Karma, sit down and watch with me." Jennifer tugged Karma into the alcove and pushed on her shoulders until she sat on the chair.

"Roll tape," Jennifer sang out as she pushed the play button, and Slade's face popped up on the screen. A good-humored face, an animated face—until Karma asked him the first question and he froze up.

As Slade hemmed and hawed his way down into the conversational skids, Karma slid a glance in Jennifer's direction to gauge her reaction. "Not much of a talker," was all she said.

"Mmm," Karma said noncommittally.

"Still," Jennifer mused as Slade started running on about birds, "he's a hottie. I can't see what's the big whoop about roseate spoonbills and great blue herons, they sound boring to me, but I think I'll give Mr. Slade Braddock a whirl."

Karma's heart sank.

Jennifer switched off the tape. "Set it up for Friday night, won't you, Karma?"

"Well, I—"

"I mean, why not?" Jennifer skewered her with a look.

"I'll have to check to see if he's busy," Karma hedged, getting up and shuffling through a pile of papers on her desk.

"Aunt Goldy says she's met him. She says he's nice. What do you think? Are we well suited, he and I?"

"Why don't I study your personality profiles in relation to each other and get back to you on that? Of course, I won't see his until he brings it back."

Jennifer shrugged, which went a long way to show off her breast assets. "Oh, don't bother with that psychology stuff. I want to go out with him. Friday night is good because my mother is trying to set me up with her best friend's son, Sheldon. If I already have a date, Mom won't insist." She flipped her hair back off her shoulders, and Karma was nearly blinded by the shimmer of it in the slant of sunshine coming in the window. Slade, she thought sourly, would go crazy at the sight of Jennifer.

"So do you promise to set it up?"

"All right," Karma said reluctantly. "I'll do it."

"Tell Slade to pick me up at seven," Jennifer said airily on her way out the door.

When she had gone, Karma collapsed onto her desk chair and pillowed her head on her arms in dismay at the thought of setting Slade up with Jennifer.

"Well, he may be a client, but Jennifer won't like him," counseled the Aunt Sophie side of her. In fact, the voice in her head sounded so much like her aunt's that Karma's head jerked up in surprise.

Whereupon the Karma side of her cautioned, "Why wouldn't Slade like Jennifer? She's blond, sexy and eager."

Unfortunately it was the Karma side of her that made the most sense.

Still and all, Friday was still four days away. Karma could only hope that Jennifer, who could usually be counted on to show her fickle side, would decide before then that Slade wasn't a real possibility.

SLADE BRADDOCK SHOWED UP at the rooftop sundeck yoga class right on time that night. He strode in wearing those cowboy boots, jeans and a white T-shirt that made his tan look darker than ever. He nodded to Karma, balancing his hands on his hips and looking the group over.

"Who is that?" Mandi asked as she unfurled her purple yoga mat.

"Oh, just someone I invited to join us," Karma answered.

"Mmm-mmm. I sure would like to hear him say, 'You know you want it, baby. You know you do.'" Mandi lowered her voice in imitation of a male consumed by lust, which might have been funny if Karma were in the mood for it.

"Don't they all say that to you?" Karma asked innocently. Mandi let out a sort of halfhearted giggle as Karma unfolded herself from her mat, where she had been sitting in Half-Lotus position. She strolled over to where Slade stood.

He grinned at her, the light in his eyes rivaling the moonlight spilling down from a clear night sky, his grin revealing teeth that gleamed whiter than the promise of any toothpaste commercial on TV. “Didn’t think I’d show up, did you?” he asked.

What to reply? She had and she hadn’t, both at the same time. One thing for sure, she had developed a dry mouth from merely being in his line of sight, and at that moment, she wasn’t sure she’d be able to open it to speak.

“Uh, glad to see you,” she managed to say after what seemed like a couple of eons. Slade looked out of place, she thought, in those jeans. “Be better if you’d worn fewer clothes,” she said, not realizing until the words were out of her mouth how they sounded.

His delighted laughter boomed out over the assembled regulars, most of whom were gawking at him with their jaws hanging down to their knees. Which was not an approved yoga pose as far as Karma knew.

“Most things,” Slade said wickedly but in such a low tone that the others couldn’t hear, “are better without so many clothes. You mind telling me which items you’d like me to discard first?”

She blushed. She couldn’t help it. “Your boots for a start,” she said crisply.

The instructor, a powerful bare-chested yogi from The Om Place whose previous address was listed as an ashram in India, sauntered over. “A new student?” he asked in precise tones as he inspected Slade from head to toe.

“Prashant, this is Slade. Slade, Prashant.” Karma made her introductions as quickly as she could and scurried back to her mat.

“How do you happen to know that big hunky guy?” Mandi wanted to know. Her favorable assessment of Slade and his muscles and his tan and his white, white teeth was undisguised and avid.

“Oh,” Karma said with a vague wave of her hand, “we met on the street.”

Jennifer arrived, running late as usual. She stopped to talk to Karma. “Isn’t that Slade Braddock talking with Prashant?” she asked, aiming a come-hither look and up-standing nipples in his direction.

“Yes,” muttered Karma. “I’m afraid so.”

“Should I introduce myself? Or do you want to do it?”

“After class,” Karma told her.

“Mmm,” said Jennifer, her gaze still on Slade. “Boxers for sure.”

“Briefs,” Mandi corrected. “He’s a briefs kind of guy.” Having made that pronouncement, Mandi leaped up, her melon-sized breasts jostling each other for room under her Om Is Where The Heart Is T-shirt. She undulated over to the corner where Slade was approaching the stack of spare mats.

“Need some help?” Mandi asked.

Karma wondered, Help? Help with what? Deciding whether he wanted a blue mat or a purple one? Putting one foot in front of the other until he reached the rest of the group? Oh, pu-leeze!

Karma shut her ears to the byplay between Slade and Mandi and forced herself to breathe deeply, trying to find her center. The trouble was that by the time Slade, looking like every dream man in every one of her fantasies since she was twelve years old, began to spread his mat out beside hers, her center seemed to have moved downward considerably to that warm place between her—

“Karma,” Slade whispered under his breath while fielding admiring glances from virtually every woman present without so much as acting as if he noticed. “Karma, what am I supposed to do?”

She opened her eyes. “What Prashant says.”

“Oh,” Slade said in a puzzled tone. He glanced from her to Prashant. “He likes you, I think.”

“Prashant? That’s doubtful.”

“He certainly came running when he saw us talking. Defending his territory, maybe?”

The observation was too ridiculous to be worthy of reply, and Karma was saved by Prashant’s settling down on his own mat at the front of the group and welcoming them all to the lesson.

Prashant began the class by chanting an Om. “Allow yourself to go with the flow, and then you will find what you’ve been looking for,” he said afterward with reverence.

“I’ll be damned if I think that’s going to get me a wife, which is what I’m looking for lately,” Slade muttered under his breath. Karma threw him a reproachful look.

“Well, don’t I have you to find me what I’m looking for?” he whispered.

“Go with the flow anyway,” she whispered back.

Prashant coached them through a few simple warm-ups. With Slade beside her, Karma, for the first time ever in yoga class, found it difficult to concentrate. As they progressed through various poses, he doffed his shirt, revealing a torso that was leaner, harder, and more muscular than she could have imagined. And she had been imagining it plenty, starting from the first moment she saw him.

It was an intense class, and the members of the group, most of whom were intermediate students, flowed from pose to pose with little recovery time in between. Sun Salutation, Warrior, Downward-Facing Dog…and Slade, who seemed to be struggling valiantly to keep up, looked slightly more musclebound with each pose. Musclebound was not good with yoga. Flexible was good. Agile was good. Slade seemed to be neither.

“Are you doing all right back there, Slade?” Prashant asked once, and Slade replied with what looked like a grin superimposed on a grimace. “Fine,” he gritted through clenched teeth, but the next pose, a backbend, drew an incredulous intake of breath from him as he lay on his back and attempted to lift himself up.

“Karma, you are the best at backbends. Will you please demonstrate?” suggested Prashant.

“Well, I—” she began, but Mandi said, “Yes, Karma, do!” and was rapidly echoed by Jennifer.

All eyes were upon Karma, but the only ones that mattered in that moment were Slade’s. He lay on his mat looking up at her with a challenging grin, and all she could think at the moment is that if they were in bed, this is what he would look like—well-muscled and fit, his grin fading into passion as he reached for her and pulled her down across his body, the better to kiss you, my dear.

“Backbends are important,” intoned Prashant, breaking into her reverie. “They help our bodies release emotion in a positive way.”

“Wouldn’t backbends be good for me?” Slade urged. “Since my chakra is blocked, I mean?”

He might have something there, but the thing that finally decided Karma was that if she were in a backbend pose, she wouldn’t have to look down at him and thus wouldn’t be tempted to reach over and unbutton his jeans, a behavior that surely would be frowned upon.

Karma forced herself to lie down on her mat; she closed her eyes and inhaled a deep breath, then exhaled as she firmly planted her hands behind her ears and her feet flat on the floor. While inhaling the next breath, she hoisted herself up into a backbend, keeping her eyes closed and wishing she’d never invited Slade to class. Slowly she walked her feet in a bit closer and arched her back even more, thrusting her breasts up. She knew that the quickly inhaled breath next to her came from Slade, and too late she realized that she was exhibiting more of the very thing that he probably wanted to see if Jennifer were correct in her thinking. Karma was wearing a thin exercise bra along with tight shiny leggings. Neither did anything to disguise her womanly attributes. This could be good. This could be bad. But all she could think about at the moment was that she wanted to get out of this pose.

As she began lowering herself to her mat, she was horrified to hear the separation of stitches somewhere along her front. Then she felt a quick rush of air in a private place and realized with horror that her leggings had split somewhere south of her belly button.

Thump! She hit the floor abruptly and sat up, yanking her mat up to cover herself.

“Excellent,” Prashant was saying. “Only next time do not come down so quickly. You could get dizzy that way.”

“Oooh, Karma, did you rip your new leggings?” Mandi said in a loud voice.

“Oooh, Karma, that’s too bad,” echoed Jennifer.

"I—I think I'd better go change clothes," Karma said, running the words all together and hoping she wasn't wearing the panties with the lace panel in front. They would reveal too, too much.

She scrambled to her feet, clutching her mat in front of her as she sidled sideways toward the door. Slade was staring at her, his eyes wide, a devilish grin on his face. Without a single word to him, she turned and darted inside the building.

"Unfortunate," she heard Prashant murmuring. "Shall we try the backbend one more time and then rest for a few moments in Child's Pose before our final relaxation?"

Karma slammed the door behind her and looked down. Sure enough, more of her was exposed than Slade Braddock needed to see. She owned one pair of lace panties, only one pair, and guess what?

She was wearing them tonight.

Unexpectedly she burst into tears. Prashant was right—backbends promoted the release of emotion. Too bad that in her case, backbends made her blubber.

SLADE DRAGGED HIS ACHING carcass along to the Blue Moon's lobby after the class. He was still reeling from his meeting with someone who had claimed that she was his Friday night date, a woman who had introduced herself as Jennifer Something and looked so artificial that she terrified him. He couldn't believe that Karma would set him up with someone completely wrong for him, someone that he would never in a million years take home to introduce to his parents. He'd fled as fast as it was possible to flee without being downright rude.

Goldy hunched in her chair behind the desk, knitting. She blinked at him over the top of her half-glasses when he entered the lobby.

"How was the yoga class?" she asked brightly.

"I think," he said slowly, "that I'm feeling freer all the time." This was not necessarily untrue, though what he was feeling freer about was pursuing Karma. She might not be the sort of woman he had hoped to find in Miami Beach, but she had certain—attributes, all of which had been more in evidence tonight than at any previous time.

"I received a lot of energy in the class," he offered helpfully. And a novel view of Karma, he thought to himself.

"That's good," Goldy said, and she beamed.

"There are a few things I'd like to discuss about it. About the expression of this energy, I mean. But Karma won't answer my knock."

"Maybe she's not in her apartment."

"She left class early. Did you see her go out?"

"No, I didn't see Karma leave. Not that I would, necessarily. Not if she went out the back. She often slips out that way to walk on the beach, especially when she's feeling all mellow from yoga class. The door's down that hall." Goldy inclined her head toward her left.

"Thanks, Goldy," Slade said. He grinned at her, and she grinned back.

"You know, Slade, I seem to recall that you live on a boat."

"At the moment, that's so," he said.

"Karma has need of a boat. She wants to scatter her aunt Sophie's ashes at sea."

Goldy's intent was not lost on Slade. She was giving him another boost, a clue as to what he could do to capture Karma's attention, possibly even her undying gratitude.

"Like I said, Goldy, thanks. I owe you."

"Remember, you can't escape your Karma." She winked.

He winked back before loping off down the hall.

The door at the Blue Moon led to a narrow alleyway that culminated at a boardwalk leading down to the sand. The beach at this hour was deserted except for a lone figure walking along the high tide line about a hundred yards south. Karma.

He jogged to catch up with her. As he approached, she wheeled around, startled. Her eyes were wide, her lips parted. Her hair stood out around her face and seemed to snap and crackle with energy. He thought he had never seen anyone more beautiful in his life.

The breakers were rolling in at a fast pace, giving rhythm to the night. This part of Miami Beach seemed far away from the hoopla of South Beach night life.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded, stopping dead in her tracks.

He thought he saw the tracks of tears dried on her face, but perhaps he was mistaken. "I came to offer my services," he said.

Karma started to shake her head, but on the off chance that she wouldn't object, he captured her face between his hands. "Or rather," he added, captivated by the confusion this brought to her eyes, "the services of my boat."

"I don't need—" but she stopped talking in midsentence, all the better for him to explain.

"So you can scatter your aunt Sophie's ashes," he said gently, moving his head closer and tilting it into kissing position.

"How did you know about that?" she breathed, and her breath was sweet and soft upon his lips. Her eyes were deep and unfathomable, and she didn't pull away.

"When a person opens himself up and begins to receive energy, all sorts of things happen," he murmured, and then he kissed her.

As soon as his mouth touched hers, he wanted her. He wanted her with all the passion and depth of a man in full pursuit even though he warned himself again that she wasn't his type. Yet the image of her nipples straining against the fabric of that brief top she'd worn to yoga class was burned into the part of his brain that governed reason and good sense; he wanted her. Perhaps this lustful feeling was the ultimate expression of the energy he was experiencing?

Slowly his lips explored hers, and before he knew it his tongue was seeking new territory and his hands were tangled in her hair. She was a full participant, her tongue meeting his, her teeth nibbling at his lower lip, her hands pressing against his back to draw him closer.

When she pushed him away it was with less conviction than he had expected.

"You're a client," she said, the words approximating a gasp of passion. "I shouldn't be doing this."

"If you'd like, I'll resign as a client," he said. "I could be just plain Slade Braddock, man on the loose."

She braced her hands against his chest and shoved, forcing him to take a step backward.

"More like Slade Braddock, man on the make," she said.

"Anything wrong with that?" he asked amiably.

"You're supposed to go out with Jennifer on Friday night."

"She told me. What if I don't want to go?"

"That will get me in trouble with Jennifer, not to mention Goldy, who is her aunt. Don't do that to me, Slade."

"Goldy is the one who told me you might be on the beach."

"She may not know that Jennifer has dibs on you."

"I have free will. I can see—or not see—any woman I please. So do you want to go out in the boat with me or not?"

"A houseboat isn't something you'd take out to sea," she said, casting a look in his direction. He didn't know the meaning of that look, but it was definitely not one that said go away, so he kept walking along beside her.

"Toy Boat has a dinghy," he told her.

"So you're planning on rowing out to sea? That's not advisable, you know. The waves can get pretty big offshore."

"Maybe it isn't called a dinghy. I don't know because I'm not that experienced a boater. It has a motor."

"And what strings are attached to this offer?"

"Absolutely none. Maybe while we're in the boat we could talk about freeing me up. Maybe we could talk about freeing you up."

He saw her rolling her eyes. "I'm as free as I want to be," she said. She swiped at her nose with a tissue that he hadn't realized she carried in her hand, increasing his suspicion that she'd been crying.

"Maybe that's the problem. You need to feel attached to someone," he said hopefully. She could be lonely, he supposed. She could be shedding a few tears because she had no one to walk with on the beach on a beautiful and romantic night such as this one, which could play into his purpose really well.

"I don't think I want to be attached in the way you're thinking about."

"Perhaps you need to free up your chakras, all seven of them. Have you ever thought about giving yourself permission to feel, Karma?"

She shot him a skeptical glance.

Realizing that this line of discussion wasn't going any further, he changed the subject. "How far do we walk? When do we turn around and go back?"

She seemed on the verge of smiling when she looked up at him. "Why? Too much exercise for you, cowboy?"

"Not at all," he said firmly, wishing suddenly that she could observe when he and Lightning, his prize quarter horse, were cutting cattle. She'd see that he was a superior athlete, an experienced horseman. He was out of his element in sea-sand-sky territory, that's for sure.

"I usually stroll to the next lifeguard station, then head back. You're welcome to go back now, if you like. These walks of mine are usually solitary."

"Too bad," Slade said.

"Not really. Solitude is good sometimes."

"Karma, when a woman looks like you, acts like you and kisses like you, there's no reason to be alone."

She emitted an exasperated sigh. "Maybe I want to be alone. Maybe I like it that way."

"And maybe I'm the king of Siam, but I don't think so."

"I don't think there is a king of Siam anymore. For that matter, there's not a Siam anymore. It's called Thailand these days."

"You get my point," he said.

They had almost reached the lifeguard station, and Karma slowed down. She drew a deep breath before speaking. "I know what you were looking at in yoga class tonight when I was doing that backbend, and I might as well tell you that unless you concentrate on being centered, you're not doing your blocked chakra any good."

He turned back toward the Blue Moon when she did and wondered what she would do if he kissed her again. He decided not to chance it. "I believe I feel my chakra becoming unblocked," he said, not believing that he was actually speaking these words that flowed so easily from his lips. "I feel a certain—a certain—" He struggled to think of something that would convince her that he was making progress.

"A certain letting go?" Karma supplied.

He grinned and punched a fist into his opposite hand. "That's it! A 'letting go'!"

"Maybe it is working. Maybe you are getting better. Backbends are good for releasing emotion."

She walked on, a frown marring her features. "You'll have to keep doing yoga. It will help you dramatically."

Maybe his muscles would stop screaming out in agony by next Tuesday night, maybe he'd be able to twist himself into a damned backbend—a real one this time, not a weak imitation.

"I should practice," he said. "Other than backbends, I'm not sure what poses would be best, though, so perhaps you could help me."

"No funny business if I do," she said firmly.

"What do you mean, funny business?" he replied, all innocence.

"Kissing me," she said. "Becoming unduly familiar."

"Now wait a minute. I don't want to make promises I can't keep."

"If I'm going to find you the wife you want, you can't sully the process," Karma said in a reasoning tone.

He didn't know what to say to that. The kind of wife he wanted had slipped his mind. The sweet, delicate little Southern-belle type didn't seem so desirable anymore. He knew he should ask when he could view some videos of female Rent-a-Yenta clients. He knew he should be more eager to make contact with other women. He ought to be encouraged by the thought of having a date with Jennifer. And yet when he stole a glance over at Karma walking along beside him, when he took in that curly blond mass of hair and those breasts straining against the cotton of her blouse, when he thought about what had been revealed through those lace panties when her leggings split—well, she was the one he wanted to know more about. She was the one for him.

At least for the short term.

When they reached the boardwalk, he stopped to pull on his boots. As if against her better judgment, she waited for him.

"How about if I pick you up Thursday afternoon at three to scatter your aunt's ashes?" he asked, taking the bold approach.

She looked down at her bare feet. "I don't know if I can be ready by three. I have work to do in the office."

"Three-thirty, then."

"Well, only if you learn how to motor that boat."

"I'll learn." Slade finished pulling on the boots and stood up. At the moment that he was ready to slide his arms around her, she stepped up on the boardwalk. It was an evasion, but he wasn't going to let her get away with it.

"Not so fast," he said, the words coming out more gruffly than he had intended. He grabbed her wrist, the handiest thing to grab, and twisted her around. His heart was thumping against his ribs as he pulled her close. He'd bet his last dollar that her heart was hammering, too.

"Slade," she said, the word more of an assent than a denial. And then he kissed her thoroughly, liking the way her head was on a parallel with his because of the increased height standing on the boardwalk gave her. If she were tiny, like the woman he'd come here to find, kissing her wouldn't be nearly as satisfying. As it was, when he opened his eyes they were gazing directly into hers. He liked what he saw there because it wasn't anger or defiance or anything but a kind of hushed acceptance of what was and maybe could be.

He released her reluctantly and dug a paper out of his back pocket. "I brought you my psychological profile," he said. "It, um, may give you clues to my emotional identity." He wasn't sure what an emotional identity was, exactly, but it was the kind of term Karma would use.

She merely stared at him, then took the sheet of paper from his hand. It quivered a bit, and not entirely from the ocean breeze.

"See you tomorrow," he said, and then she was off, scampering up the boardwalk like a runaway heifer.

All in all, he thought jubilantly as he headed for the parking lot, the evening had gone tolerably well. Except for yoga class, and even that had had its redeeming features.

Like lace panties that left little to the imagination.

HE KNOCKED ON KARMA'S DOOR at three-thirty on Thursday afternoon. She opened it, clutching a flyswatter in one hand.

"I'm chasing a palmetto bug," she said, leaving the door open and taking off into the tiny kitchen, which he could see courtesy of a pass-through to the living room.

He closed the door. "I learned how to run the boat," he called after her. His words were followed by a loud Splat!

"Good," she said distractedly. "Damn! I missed it."

"Didn't I hear something about an exterminator service around here?"

"Yes, which is personified by a guy named Geofredo. He's tried his best, and now the exterminating is up to me. The thing about palmetto bugs is that you can't treat them nicely. One becomes two, which become four, and pretty soon you've got a bunch. It used to be against my core beliefs to kill anything, but I've had a change of heart." She flicked the flyswatter back and forth.

"Why?"

"Because this particular roach and his kinfolk were waving their feelers at Aunt Sophie's bucket," Karma said, angling her head toward it. The bucket sat on top of the refrigerator amid a tangle of dish towels, a blender base, a potato ricer and a tape deck.

"Fear not. Bwana will hunt down palmetto bug. Bwana will kill."

Karma shook her head. "Thanks, but this is my fight. If he'd only show his face, I'd nail him."

"I think I see him poking out from under the baseboard." The palmetto bug—an enormous one—scurried across the kitchen floor, straight toward Karma.

"Eek!" she squealed, backing fast and furiously until the back of her knees hit the couch. She rallied, feinted, and swung the flyswatter down hard.

"Dead," she pronounced solemnly. She scooted the carcass out the sliding glass door with one foot. "How about some lunch?"

He rocked back on his heels. "It's not the most appetizing idea at the moment. Anyway, it's a little late for lunch."

"Call it an early supper if you like. I haven't eaten because I've been busy trying to balance my checkbook all day." She went into the kitchen and began shoving pots around on the stove. "I've made linguine," she called over her shoulder. "With shrimp sauce."

He noticed with bemusement that she had set the table with turquoise-blue place mats and yellow plastic plates. There were napkin rings that looked like carved fish painted red and pink, and she'd stuck a branch laden with white oleander blooms into an old wine jug. The effect was, well, interesting.

He sat down at the table, and she bore a huge platter of pasta into the little dining area. While he was waiting for her to pour iced tea, he had a chance to look around the apartment. Furniture consisted of what appeared to be flea-market finds, but it was a creative mix. An old couch had a fringed silk shawl thrown artistically across the back, and a shelf on one wall held bottles and jars in jeweled colors, which were lit from within by tiny Christmas tree lights. A coir rug was underfoot, and his sharp eyes didn't miss the fact that the binding was ripped in the corner behind the rocking chair that almost, but not quite, hid the imperfection from view.

"Nice place," Slade said. He meant it. It looked comfortable and reflected Karma's personality.

"Thanks. I hit a dozen yard and garage sales when I arrived here. I didn't move much down from Connecticut with me since I wasn't sure I'd stay."

"Why not?"

She shrugged and sat down across from him. "I didn't know if I could make a go of the business. I still don't. There's so much to do that I hardly have time for anything but work."

She passed him the linguine, and he helped himself. "As busy as you are, you wouldn't have had to provide food," he said.

"It's the least I can do when you're going to so much trouble for me."

As she tucked into the food, he studied her. She was wearing a knit short-sleeved polo shirt, yellow, and navy-blue shorts, and her hair was pulled into a ponytail. She looked wholesome, like

a camp counselor, but her expression was decidedly businesslike. Taking his cue from her, he concentrated on eating and making small talk, which turned out to be enjoyable enough. He told her that her bike had been retrieved from the bottom of the bay, and she seemed relieved. She was even grateful when he told her that he'd asked the marina manager's son to make sure it was rideable and to fix it if it was not. They talked about her uncle, who seemed special to her. It occurred to him as he helped her clear the table that he was really enjoying her company.

By the time Karma climbed into the Suburban beside him clutching the bucket of her aunt's ashes firmly between her breasts, Slade had already planned what they would do when they returned from their task. They'd have a late dinner on the houseboat, then a walk in the moonlight alongside the bay and perhaps a nightcap before he took her home. And maybe, if he got megalucky, he wouldn't have to take her home. There was plenty of room in the master stateroom's bed for two people.

The runabout, fourteen feet long, was painted in the houseboat's colors and had been given the cutesy name of Toy Boat's Toy, which was no doubt the idea of Mack's wife Renee. Karma smiled when she saw the name lettered on the stern, though, and then she spotted her bike, which he had propped against one of the pilings near the houseboat's mooring.

"The bike looks fine," she said, giving it a quick once-over before climbing down the ladder to the runabout. "Maybe I'll ride it home."

Maybe not, Slade thought involuntarily as he steadied the runabout. After the romantic evening he'd planned, she might want to rethink things.

Phifer had shown him how to start a cold outboard, for which Slade was grateful since his knowledge of boats was sadly limited. Phifer had also loaned him charts and had given him instructions about where to go. As Slade, feeling optimistic about the afternoon and evening to follow, aimed the runabout's bow toward Key Biscayne, Karma settled herself and her aunt's ashes in the middle of the boat facing him.

There were a number of boats on the bay, as usual. Karma angled her head so that the sun's rays fell more evenly on her features, and Slade made himself concentrate on working the throttle as they chugged past Key Biscayne and out into open water.

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