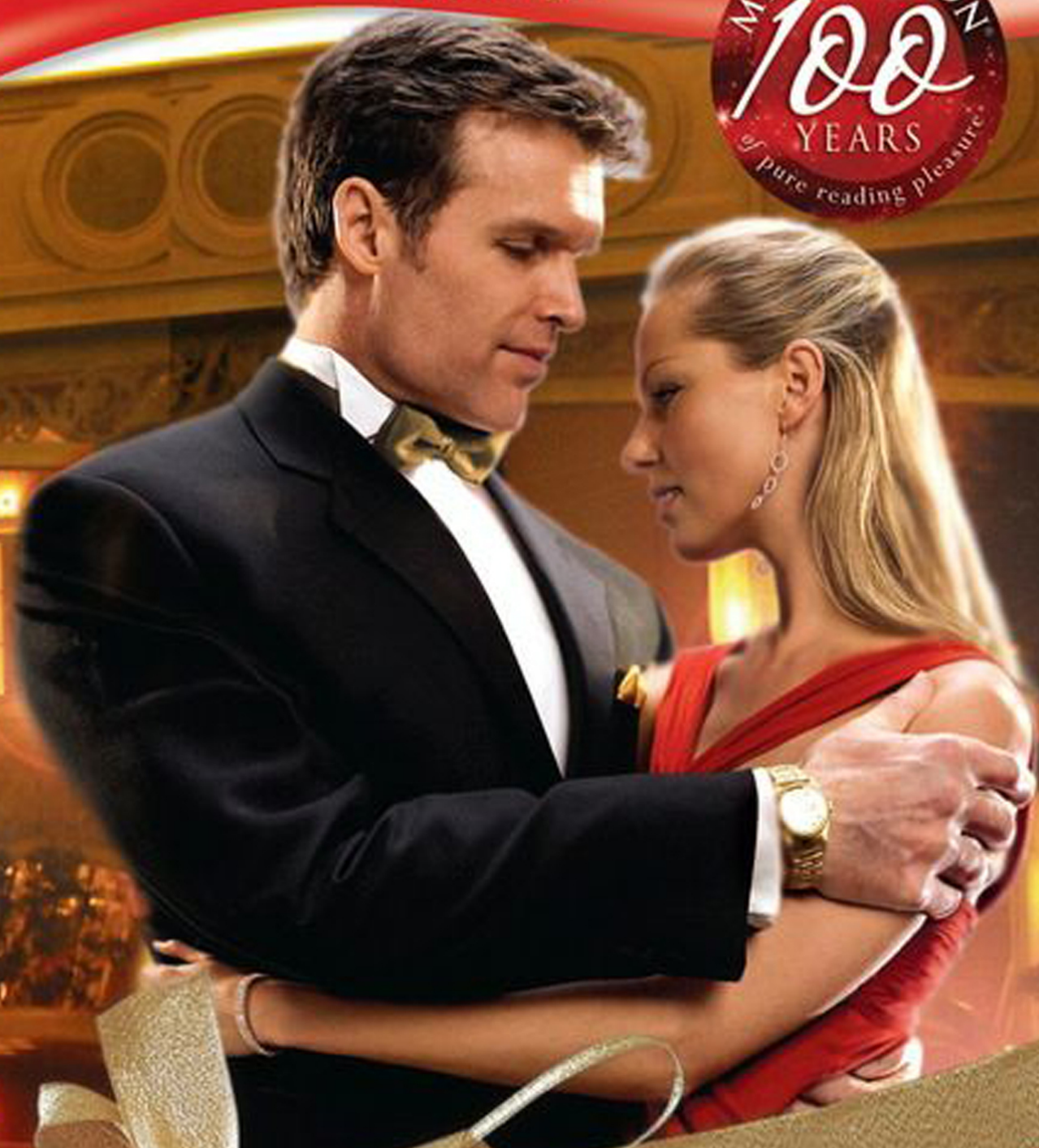


Captured by the Billionaire

Maureen Child

Sold into Marriage

Ann Major



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**Captured by the Billionaire /
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**Captured by the Billionaire / Sold Into Marriage / M. Child —
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Be swept away by passion... with intense drama and compelling plots, these emotionally powerful reads will keep you captivated from beginning to end. Captured by the Billionaire Maureen Child Billionaire Gabriel Vaughn had all but forgotten the past... until Debbie Harris arrived at his luxury resort. She'd walked away from him once, but now he wasn't letting her leave his island without exacting his own brand of revenge – the ultimate seduction. Sold into Marriage Ann Major Christmas Eve. Paris. Two strangers' eyes meet. So romantic. Yet Josie didn't know her encounter with Adam Ryder was far from accidental. She could not regret the passionate evening she and Adam had shared – until she learned who he was. What was she to do now that she was pregnant?

Содержание

Captured by the Billionaire	6
Sold Into Marriage	7
MILLS & BOON	8
CAPTURED BY THE BILLIONAIRE	9
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	38

Captured by the Billionaire by Maureen Child

"I own this island and everything on it," Gabe said. "Including, at this moment, you."

She stepped back and stared at him as though she'd never seen him before. Shaking her head, she whispered, "You can't be serious about keeping me locked up like this."

"Sounds like I'm serious to me."

She still looked damn good. He remembered the feel of her, the taste of her and, as something like hunger surged through him, Gabe had to admit that keeping her there had probably been a mistake.

She continued to stare at him, and Gabe almost felt a flicker of guilt. Almost. Then he remembered that one night ten years before, she'd walked away without a backward glance.

"I can do whatever I want to, Deb. This is my island. I make the rules."

Sold Into Marriage by Ann Major

"Don't you dare think of ever touching me again!"

He froze. "Josie, I can explain."

"Lucas told me you didn't approve of me. You came here to get rid of me, didn't you? That's why you watched me, why you slept with me. All you ever wanted to do was to make me feel cheap and bad and ruin things for Lucas and me. Well, you succeeded."

"No! I would have left you alone last night. But you had to come back out and kiss me. You seduced me."

"So this is all my fault? I hate you!"

"Right. That's why you made love to me all night long." Adam flung his card on the table. "If you change your mind after you calm down, you've got all my numbers. Call me."

MAUREEN CHILD

is a California native who loves to travel. Every chance they get, she and her husband are taking off on another research trip. An author of more than sixty books, Maureen loves a happy ending and still swears that she has the best job in the world. She lives in Southern California with her husband, two children and a golden retriever with delusions of grandeur.

You can contact Maureen via her website [www. maureenchild.com](http://www.maureenchild.com).

Captured by the Billionaire

MAUREEN CHILD

Sold Into Marriage

ANN MAJOR



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MILLS & BOON

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CAPTURED BY THE BILLIONAIRE

by
Maureen Child

Dear Reader,

Just imagine...the guy you broke up with ten years ago is suddenly back in your life. And not only is he as gorgeous as he ever was, now he's a billionaire! He owns the world's most fabulous resort – complete with his own island!

In *Captured by the Billionaire*, Debbie Harris and Gabriel Vaughn have a few things to work out. Like ten years' worth of anger and a whole lot of desire that's still simmering. So naturally, Gabe does the first thing he can think of to keep her on his island.

He has her arrested.

Not the fastest way to a woman's heart, but Gabe really had a mind of his own while I was writing this book. He even surprised me once or twice. Not an easy thing to do!

I do have to say, though, that during the writing of this trilogy, I absolutely loved the time I spent at Fantasies resort. It's everything a vacation should be. Romantic, opulent, seductive. Makes me want to pack a bag and head for the Caribbean myself.

I hope you enjoy your stay at Fantasies as much as I have!

Love,

Maureen

To Susan Mallery

A great friend, a wonderful writer and a woman
who always knows just what to say.

You're always there when you're needed.

Thanks for everything.

One

"Oh, God, I'm in *jail*." Debbie Harris curled both hands around the bars of her cage and gave them a frustrated shake. They clanked a little and the sound seemed to echo eerily around her. "I'm a *criminal*. I'll have a *record*."

Her forehead thumped against the bars and the fear at the base of her throat squeezed tight, nearly shutting off her air.

Okay, Deb, she told herself firmly, get a grip. This is all a mistake. It'll be straightened out in no time. You're not in the Big House, for heaven's sake.

In fact, the jail cell was more Mayberry than Oz. The whitewashed walls were clean and sparkling, and the cot was covered by a red-and-white quilt. There was a table and chair on one wall and a toilet and sink hidden behind a partition. The cell next to hers was empty and there was a closed door between her and the office where her jailer sat.

She scowled at the closed door because she couldn't do anything else. The man who'd locked her in here had been very polite but completely uninterested in listening to what she had to say. He'd simply closed the door to her cell and left her alone to wonder what in the hell had happened to land her here.

Outside the barred window, the tropical sky was a brilliant blue dotted with huge, fluffy white clouds, and the sun's rays fell in golden stripes across the red-concrete floor. She rested her forehead briefly against the cold bars and closed her eyes, remembering just how she'd ended up a prisoner.

After nearly four weeks on the private island, staying at the fabulous Fantasies resort, Debbie had packed her bags and headed for the tiny airstrip to go home. Back to her life in Long Beach, California. Where, it turns out, she should have *stayed*.

She'd filed through security along with everyone else leaving Fantasies that morning. The lines were long, even on this tiny island, as suitcases were checked while their owners moved through a metal detector.

Then she'd come to the Customs agent and everything had gone straight downhill. As he checked her passport, Debbie'd watched as his smiling brown eyes had gone flat and cold. He looked at her, checked her name again and frowned.

Interesting that despite knowing she hadn't done a darn thing wrong, she'd instantly felt like a diamond smuggler or something. A wash of guilt and worry had smashed over her and when the agent motioned to a uniformed police officer to pull Debbie out of line, she'd felt the first jolt of real fear.

"What's going on?" She looked at the officer who had a firm grip on her elbow as he took her aside for questioning. "Is there a problem? Can you tell me what it is?"

He didn't speak until he got her away from the crowds. Now everyone thought she was a terrorist or something.

"You are Deborah Harris?" The officer's voice was quiet but no less demanding.

"Yes."

"American?"

"Yes." She avoided looking at anyone else, but she felt their stares on her. Lifting her chin, she squared her shoulders, looked directly at the man questioning her and tried to project an air of outraged dignity.

Not so easy to do when you were scared to death.

She wanted to shout, *I'm innocent*, but she had the distinct feeling no one would believe her anyway.

"There seems to be some difficulty with your passport," he was saying.

"What? A difficulty? What difficulty? It was fine when I got here."

"I can only say what I have been told by Customs."

"That's ridiculous." She tried to take it from him, but he whipped it back and out of her reach. Okay, this was fast moving from a little scary to downright terrifying. "Look, I don't know what's going on, but I've done nothing wrong and I've got a plane to catch."

"Not today unfortunately," he said with a shake of his head. "If you would please come with me..."

It wasn't an invitation.

It was an order.

Debbie seriously wished she had left Fantasies a week before, with her friends Janine and Caitlyn. If her best friends were with her, she wouldn't be worried. Janine would make some smart-ass remark and Caitlyn would be charming the Customs guy. Between the three of them, they would have had this all straightened out in a heartbeat.

But her friends were home, each of them no doubt all wrapped up in their wedding plans. God, it had seriously been a heck of a month. They'd come to Fantasies, the three of them together, to splurge on themselves.

Each of the three friends had been engaged and then dumped over the course of the previous year. So they'd decided together to take the money they had been saving for the weddings that hadn't happened and blow it on a treat for themselves. They'd had a wonderful time, until their threesome had slowly been splintered by the arrival of the loves of Janine's and Caitlyn's lives.

Caitlyn had ended up engaged to the very boss she'd come here to get away from and Janine... Debbie sighed wistfully. She'd talked to Janine only the day before and found out that her British lover had followed her home to Long Beach, California, just to propose. Now Janine was preparing to move to London, Caitlyn was planning the wedding her mother had always dreamed of and, apparently, Debbie was going to prison.

Sure. Her friends found love and she was getting a mug shot.

Life was fair.

“There’s been a mistake,” she said, digging in her heels when the officer, in his sparkling white uniform, tried to steer her through the terminal door. “If you’ll just check again...”

“There is no mistake, Miss Harris.” He was tall, with skin the color of smooth milk chocolate and brown eyes that looked at her as if she were an interesting bug. He was stronger than he looked, too. Her attempts at squirming out of his grasp failed miserably. “I am with the island security force. You must come with me.”

“But my bags—” She flung a look over her shoulder at the bustling little airport.

“Will be retrieved from the plane, I assure you.” His voice was musical, but there was no smile in his eyes. He kept walking, his grip on her elbow decidedly firm, just in case she should make a break for it.

“I’m an American citizen,” she reminded him, and hoped that tidbit of information would do some good.

“Yes,” he said as he tucked her into the passenger seat of a red-and-white Jeep. “I am aware.”

While he walked around to the driver’s side, she considered jumping out of the Jeep and making a run for it. But where would she go? Where *could* she go? They were on an island. The only way off was by boat or plane. She slumped in her seat and waited until he was sitting beside her to say, “What’s going on? Can you at least tell me that?”

He shot her a sympathetic look, but shook his head. “I must report to my superiors. They will decide what to do.”

“Who’re *they*?”

He didn’t answer her, just fired up the little car and steered it down the long road leading back to the village that spilled out at the foot of Fantasies. Wind in her face made her eyes water, but Debbie knew real tears weren’t far off. Her stomach was churning, her palms were damp, and a tight knot of fear was lodged firmly in her throat.

She was on her own.

And she had had no idea what was going to happen next.

Sighing, Debbie came up out of the memories, looked around her and fought the fear still crouched inside. It had been two hours since the guard had locked her in this cell. She hadn’t seen anyone. Hadn’t been allowed to call anyone.

What were the laws on a privately owned island? Did she even *have* rights? No one was speaking to her. No one seemed to care that she’d been locked away. It was as if they’d turned the key and forgotten all about her.

“I could die right here,” she muttered, looking now at the cozy little cell as if it were a dungeon with manacles hanging from its mold-covered damp walls. “Die and rot. No one would know. No one would wonder what happened to me and—”

She stopped abruptly and got a firm hard grip on her imagination. “For heaven’s sake, Deb. Let’s not get crazy here. Janine and Cait will miss you. You haven’t dropped off the edge of the world. And you’re not the Prisoner of Zenda or something. This is all a mistake. You’ll be going home soon enough.”

She sounded sure.

She only wished she were.

Voices drifted to her from the outer office. They were muttering, but at least she felt as if she wasn’t alone on the face of the planet. “Hello? Hello?”

She grabbed her cell bars again and rattled them viciously. “Who’s there? I need to make a phone call! I need to talk to *somebody*.”

The outer door swung open slowly and Debbie took a deep breath. She was going to be firm. She would insist on speaking to the owner of the island. Demand that they straighten this mess out

and let her go. No more feeling sorry for herself. From now on, she was going into battle mode. She'd been standing up for herself for years. And this was no time to quit.

She braced herself for whatever was coming. At least, she'd thought she was braced. But how could she ever have been prepared to see the man who walked through that door and looked at her through hard, green eyes.

He wore black slacks and a long-sleeved white shirt with the collar open at the neck. His long, sun-streaked brown hair hung loose, almost to his shoulders and when he smiled, Debbie felt a jolt of something hot and rich that she hadn't experienced in nearly ten years.

"Gabe?" she whispered, hardly able to believe her own eyes. "Gabriel Vaughn?"

"Hello, Debbie," he said, and his voice was as deep as she remembered it. "Long time."

She blinked at him and watched as he strolled casually across the jailhouse floor toward her cell. Despite her situation, emotions charged through her system, nearly battering her with memories and images of what she and Gabe had once shared. She couldn't help it. Just looking at his face was enough to wipe away the years between and remind her all too clearly of the last night she'd seen him.

The night he'd asked her to marry him.

The night she'd said no and walked away.

Now, his footsteps sounded loud against the concrete floor. When he came closer to her, the slanted bars of sunlight outlined him, keeping his face in shadow. "Looks like you've got some trouble, Deb."

"You could say that," she admitted, and when he didn't speak again, only stared at her, she kept talking, as though she couldn't stand the tense silence that stretched out between them. "It's all a mistake, obviously. I mean, I haven't done anything wrong..."

"Haven't you?"

"No." She didn't like the speculative tone of his voice, as if he were wondering just what kind of criminal she'd turned out to be. "It's some mix-up with my passport or something and they brought me here to talk to the owner of the island. But he hasn't come around and I've been here two hours already and—"

He braced one arm on the bars of her cage and looked down at her, with something like amusement flickering in his eyes.

"What're you doing here, Gabe?" she asked as a slow curl of suspicion unwound in the pit of her stomach.

"Here on the island? Or here in the jail?"

"*Here*," she said. "At the jail. Why're you here?"

"When there's a problem, I get called in to handle it," he said, lazily pushing away from the bars to wander back and forth in front of her cell again.

"Oh." Debbie's gaze followed him as he walked to the far end of the jail, then turned and strolled back again, like a man in absolutely no hurry at all. Of course, why would he be bothered? *He* wasn't the one in the jail cell. Impatience fluttered to life inside her. "So you're the police chief or something?"

One corner of his mouth quirked. "Or something," he allowed as he stopped directly opposite her and stared down into her eyes. "We don't really have a police force on the island. Just security. If we happen upon some real criminals, we hold them here until we can ferry them over to Bermuda. But the little stuff, we handle ourselves."

"And what am I?" she asked. "Small stuff or ferry-worthy?"

"Well, now, that's something we have to figure out, isn't it?"

"Gabe," she said quickly, "you know me. You know I'm not a criminal. Heck, I don't even *jaywalk*."

His smile faded and he shook his head. "Ten years ago, I could have said I knew you. At least, I thought I did at the time..."

He let that statement hang there for a moment and Debbie knew he was remembering their last night together ten years ago. Just as she knew he wasn't smiling at the memory. She'd turned down his proposal, despite the fact that she'd loved him madly. She'd walked away from him when everything in her had yearned to be with him.

"Gabe," she said softly.

"But now," he quickly interrupted whatever she might have said, "who's to say? It's been a long time, Debbie. People change. Maybe you've become a master thief."

"I have not."

He shrugged. "Or a smuggler."

"Gabe..."

Fixing his gaze on hers, he said, "Look, bottom line, you're not going anywhere until the owner of the island says you are. He makes the rules here."

Debbie's hands tightened on the slick, cold metal bars. She wouldn't be getting any help from her long-ago lover. She could see in his eyes that he wasn't exactly thrilled to be seeing her again. So, fine. She'd handle this on her own. All she needed was five minutes with the mysterious island owner and she knew she could talk her way out of this mess. But it would help if Gabe would at least give her a little information on who she might be facing.

"So there's no police here. No courts. Just some rich guy who owns his own little universe?"

"Pretty much."

"So he's like a king?"

"He thinks so."

He gave her a quick grin and just for an instant her fear eased off. Gabe was a good guy. No matter how things had ended between them, she knew he'd never let her come to any real harm.

Of course, she *was* still in jail.

"Fabulous." Anxiety churned with anger and became a frothy, unsettling mix in the pit of her stomach. "Is he reasonable? Will he listen to me?"

"Probably depends on what you have to say."

"Damn it, Gabe, at least tell me what he's like. What I can expect."

A slow, lazy smile curved his mouth and his green eyes darkened until they were the color of shadow-filled forests. "I think you should expect to be staying at Fantasies for a while, Deb."

"What?" Her stomach dipped again and her mouth went dry as she watched his features tighten. "I can't stay. I have a life. A job. Responsibilities."

"All of which will just have to wait until you're allowed to leave."

Debbie snorted despite the trickle of fear dripping through her bloodstream. "Allowed to leave? What? You think the island's owner can somehow keep me here?"

Gabe lifted one shoulder in a shrug that said clearly he didn't care one way or the other. "You're the one in the cell. What do you think?"

"He can't hold me in here forever," Debbie argued. "He can't just kidnap people and—"

"He didn't kidnap you," Gabe reminded her, "you came here on your own."

Her hands tightened on the bars. "And now I want to leave."

He grinned at her, but the shadows in his eyes remained dark, fathomless. "Hell, Deb, you're the one who taught me that you don't always get what you want."

Guilt pinged inside her despite her own precarious position. "Gabe, this isn't about us. But I can see that you're still angry about how we left things. And if you need to hear me say I'm sorry, then I am. Sorry, I mean. I wasn't trying to hurt you that night and—"

He laughed out loud, the sound rich and booming as it rattled through the tiny jail like a party with nowhere to go. Shaking his head, he said, "You're amazing, you know that? Deb, do you really think I've been pining away for you for the last ten years?"

Frowning and feeling just a little foolish, she said, "No, but—"

“I moved on a long time ago, babe.” His gaze speared her. “Until you showed up here, I hadn’t given you a thought in ten years.” Wow. That little dart hit home. Debbie didn’t like knowing that he’d never thought back. Never remembered. But how could she expect differently? Just because she’d spent a lot of nights over the years, wondering if she’d made a huge mistake in leaving him...didn’t mean he would have felt the same.

After all, it was *she* who’d ended everything between them. Why would he want to remember having his heart handed to him?

Gabe planted his feet wide apart, folded his arms across his chest and studied her for a long, thoughtful moment as his smile slowly faded. “You’re right about one thing, though. This isn’t about us.”

Nodding, she told herself to let go of old times. To put the past where he had—behind them. All that mattered at the moment was the fact that she was in *jail*, for Pete’s sake.

“Fine.” Debbie let go of the cell bars, stuffed her hands into the back pockets of her jeans and rocked back on her heels. “Then why don’t you tell me why the island’s owner sent you here in his place? Why isn’t he here himself if he’s so interested in talking to me?”

“What makes you think he’s not here?” Gabe’s voice came low, a whisper of ice.

She looked past him, as if she could stare through the closed door to the outer office beyond. “He’s out there? Then why...”

“Didn’t say that.”

Debbie’s gaze shifted back to him and it felt as if there were a couple dozen lead balls rolling erratically around at the pit of her stomach. The truth slowly, inexorably, dawned on her and as it did, she noted that Gabe’s green eyes went colder, darker, as silent seconds ticked past. “You mean—”

He stepped closer to the bars, looked her up and down, then his gaze locked with hers. “*I mean*,” Gabe said, “I own this island and everything on it, babe. Including, at the moment, you.”

Two

Her eyes went wide and horrified and Gabe wasn’t ashamed to admit, at least to himself, that he was enjoying this. He could almost see her thoughts flashing through her mind as her features shifted from amazed to confused to fury all in the blink of an eye.

Of course, being Debbie Harris, it didn’t take her long to erupt.

“Are you *nuts*?”

He laughed shortly. “Is that any way to talk to your jailer?”

She stepped back from the bars and stared at him as though she’d never seen him before. Shaking her head, she whispered, “You can’t be serious about keeping me locked up like this.”

But he was.

Gabe hadn’t seen Debbie in ten years and he hadn’t been lying when he’d told her he hadn’t given her much thought in all that time. At least, he admitted, not until she and her girlfriends had shown up here on his island.

And from the moment he’d seen her, all he’d been able to think about was Deb. Irritating as hell, but there it was. He wasn’t a man to be led around by his hormones and it was lowering to admit even to himself just how much he wanted her. After all, he had a life. A plan. And she had no part in any of it. And yet...

He let his gaze sweep over the bars of the cell before sliding back to her. “Looks like I’m serious to me.”

She still looked damn good. The cute girl she’d been ten years ago had become a gorgeous woman. Her curves were lush, her long blond hair lay in soft waves down to the center of her back and her tanned skin was the color of warm honey.

He remembered the feel of her, the taste of her and as something like hunger surged through him, Gabe had to admit that keeping her here had probably been a mistake. Damn it, he could have

been rid of her. She'd been at the airfield, leaving, walking out of his life again, yet when he'd been handed the opportunity—he'd had her stopped.

He still wasn't sure why, exactly.

"What kind of game are you playing?" Her voice was just a hiss of fury.

"No game," he said tightly. That much was true at least.

"Of course it's a game," Debbie countered. "Your guy at the airport said there was a problem with my passport. We both know that's a lie."

"Not a lie. Usually, it's a ruse. Something the guards tell a suspect to keep them calm while they're being transported here."

"A *suspect*?" She shrieked that last word and then stopped, looked at him hard and said, "What do you mean *usually*?"

Gabe wandered the jail area, looking around as if inspecting the cells to make sure they were just as they should be. "It seems," he said quietly, idly, as if he couldn't be less interested himself, "there's a jewel thief working the resorts in this area."

"What does that have to do with me?"

He smiled and let his gaze slide up and down her body before spearing into hers again. "This particular thief is about five foot four, long blond hair, blue eyes..."

She swallowed hard, shook her head and said, "You can't possibly believe I'm a jewel thief."

No. He didn't. But when the notice from the British authorities had crossed his desk, he'd looked at it like a gift. Stupid. He couldn't afford to have her here. Especially now.

But he hadn't wanted her to leave, either.

One shoulder lifted in a lazy shrug. "You do fit the description."

"So do a lot of people."

"Yes," he said, smiling again. "But you're here. On the island. And we were asked to keep an eye out for a woman matching that description and detain her if necessary."

"Detain," she repeated, her voice sounding a little hollow. "Here? In jail?"

"If you're innocent," he started to say.

"If?"

"If you're innocent," he said again, "I'm sure this will be cleared up in a few days."

"Days?"

"Is there an echo in here?" he wondered out loud, hiding his amusement. "You'll stay as a guest of Fantasies until the authorities have been notified and proper steps are taken."

"What steps?"

He shrugged again and stared directly into her wide, scared eyes. "Fingerprinting, no doubt. You'll have to be investigated."

"You're kidding me. You don't seriously believe—" She moved up to the cell bars, grabbed hold of two of them and squeezed hard. "Gabe, you know I'm not a thief."

"No, I don't," he said reasonably, enjoying the heat of her temper. God, arguing with Deb had always been fun. "For all I know, you are this master thief the British authorities are looking for."

"British?"

He shrugged. "Apparently the thief ran through several estates in England before moving on to the island resort towns."

"I've never *been* to England," she argued.

Gabe smiled and turned to face her. "And I'm supposed to take your word for that?"

"Why wouldn't you?"

"I can't risk allowing a wanted criminal to escape the island."

"Oh, for—"

"So," Gabe said, walking toward her again with slow, measured steps, "until we get this straightened out, you'll be staying right here at Fantasies."

“You can’t keep me here, Gabe.” She stopped dead at the far end of the cell and glared at him. “You’re wrong about that.”

She gaped at him and started pacing again.

He leaned one shoulder against the cold, steel bars and watched her as she stalked the confines of her cell. The heels of her sandals clicked frantically against the cement floor and the look she shot him should have fried him on the spot.

“I’m not guilty of anything and you can’t hold me here against my will.”

“I can do whatever I want to, Deb. This is my island. I make the rules.”

“There are laws about kidnapping.”

He chuckled. “Nobody kidnapped you.”

She gritted her teeth, hissed in a breath and then spoke in a deliberately patient tone. “You can’t just hold a person in jail because you feel like it.”

He smiled, waved one hand to encompass the tidy jail cell and said, “Clearly, I can.”

Sighing, she slid one hand through her hair, pushing it back from her face. “What’s really going on here, Gabe? We both know I’m not this jewel thief, so why’re you really doing this to me?”

There were too many reasons, he thought, and scowled as the humor he’d found in the situation moments ago drained away. He didn’t owe her any more of an explanation than the one he’d given her. He had the right to hold her on the island until the authorities notified him otherwise. Still, if he kept her around for too long, things could get sticky.

He pushed away from the bars, stuffed his hands into the pockets of his slacks and said, “We can talk about this later.”

“No, there is no later. I have a plane to catch.”

“Actually, you don’t,” he said, watching her, “your plane’s gone.”

She just stared at him and Gabe almost felt a flicker of guilt. Almost. Then he remembered that one night ten years before, she’d walked away from him without a backward glance. And that memory was enough to steel him against the sheen of tears glittering in her eyes.

He only hoped it would be enough to help him hold out against the low, distinct throb of need pulsing inside him. “Look, as I see it, you have two choices,” he said quietly. “You can spend your time on the island here, in this cell...”

She swung her gaze in a wide arc, taking in her surroundings in a heartbeat. He knew exactly what she was thinking. It didn’t matter that the tiny jailhouse was a pleasant enough place. There were bars on the doors and windows and being locked away wasn’t a good thing, no matter how nice the accommodation.

Which is how he *knew* she’d choose door number two when presented with it.

“Or,” he said, meeting her gaze when she shifted it back to his, “you can come back to the hotel with me.”

“With you.”

“As the owner of the island, I can release you into my custody.”

“Custody.”

He grinned. “There really is an echo in here, isn’t there?”

“Funny.” Debbie watched him warily. “And if I’m in your custody, what exactly does that mean?”

“It means,” he said, his voice low and dark, “you would be staying in my suite. Where I can keep an eye on you, until the matter is resolved.”

“Why can’t I have my old guest room back?”

Because he wanted her close, damn it.

“A wanted criminal?” he countered, lifting one dark blond eyebrow. “I don’t think so.”

“We both know I’m not guilty of anything.”

“All I know is, you’re in jail and I’m in charge,” he said. “Up to you, Deb. Spend a few nights in a cell or come with me now.”

She looked from him to the cot behind her and back again. She studied his face and said, “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“Shouldn’t I be?” he countered, giving her a lazy smile that didn’t even try to disguise his amusement.

Debbie stared at him for another long minute. She could hardly believe any of this was happening. Gabriel Vaughn was the owner of Fantasies? The *owner* of his own, private island?

Ten years ago he’d had big plans and little else. Debbie had loved him madly back then, despite her own fears of a future that had looked shaky at best. Now, he was clearly more successful than even he had dreamed.

And she was literally at the mercy of a man who had every right to still be furious and bitter at the way she’d ended things between them.

This so didn’t look good.

Her mind racing, Debbie tried to slow her thoughts down and slide them into some kind of order. By all rights, she should be on a plane home, having a tropical drink right now, served by a smiling flight attendant. Instead she was standing in a cell, facing down the man she’d once thought she would love forever.

But the truth was, she thought as she looked at him on the other side of the bars, she couldn’t see anything of the Gabe she had known in the man watching her now. This man was cold. Even his smile was like ice.

She shivered, moved away from the cell door until the backs of her knees hit the quilt-covered cot behind her. Then she simply dropped to the narrow mattress and stared up at him. “I think I’ll stay here,” she said quietly.

Something in his green eyes flickered and she was pretty sure it was surprise. “You’d prefer a jail cell to the hotel?”

No, she thought wildly, somehow terrified of spending the night behind bars. “Yes.”

“Fine,” he said shortly, already turning for the door that led into the outer office. “If you change your mind, have one of the men call the resort.”

“I won’t change my mind, Gabe,” she called as he opened the door and stepped through.

He stopped, turned his head to look at her and said thoughtfully, “You said that once before. A long time ago. But you changed your mind anyway. I think you will this time, too.”

Then he left, closing the door behind him.

And Debbie was alone.

In the middle of the night, Debbie was wishing she were alone.

She sat up straight on her narrow cot and threw a furious look at the man in the adjoining cell to hers. The guards had brought him in an hour ago and he hadn’t been quiet for a moment since.

“*We will, we will, rock you!*” The best that could be said about his singing voice was that it was loud. The worst was, he kept running through every eighties song his blurred mind could recall. And the words he didn’t remember, he made up.

Debbie’s head was pounding and her eyes felt gritty. She was so tired she could hardly think and knew she wasn’t going to get any sleep at all. Not with the drunken lounge singer keeping her awake.

“Hey, honey,” the man crooned suddenly as he leaned on the bars separating their cells. “Got any requests?”

“Yes,” she snapped. “How about you shut up now?”

He grinned sloppily. “Don’t know that one. How ’bout *‘you’re just too good to be true...’*?”

“Oh, God.” Debbie cupped her hands over her face and sighed heavily while she was serenaded. She couldn’t take this. Even facing down a cold-eyed Gabe would be better than being stuck in this cell with a drunk wannabe crooner.

Besides, there was no telling who the guards might bring in next. And with both cells occupied, the guards would start doubling up. Who knew who might be Debbie's roommate by morning?

Mind made up, she jumped off the cot, crossed to the cell door and shouted, "Guard! Guard!"

She'd never thought she'd be in this position. It was like she was living an old movie. All she needed was a tin cup to rattle across the bars. She was humiliated and scared and tired, and all she wanted to do was to go home. But since she couldn't at the moment, the hotel would be way preferable to life in a cage. Damn Gabe for being right.

When the security guard opened the door and looked in at her, she could have wept with gratitude. "Would you call Gabe for me? I mean, Mr. Vaughn?"

"What do you wish to tell him?" the man asked, pitching his voice to be heard over the strains of "Every Breath You Take," now being slaughtered by Debbie's cell mate.

She shot the drunk another furious glare, then turned back to the guard. "Tell him...tell him I changed my mind."

* * *

Debbie stepped into Gabe's suite at the hotel and could hardly notice any of the plush surroundings, since her gaze was locked on him. He wore nothing but a pair of black silk pajama bottoms that dipped low over his hips.

His broad, bare chest was tanned and sculpted as if out of bronze. His long, dark-blond hair hung loose and was tousled enough to tell her he'd gotten out of bed to answer her cry for help. The lights in the room were dim and the sheer drapes were pulled open, allowing the moon and starlight to drift inside on a wash of silver.

"Thanks for bringing her up, Emil," Gabe said, and shook the guard's hand before seeing him out and closing the door behind him.

Debbie stood in the middle of the living area and dared not take her eyes off of Gabe for an instant. When he met hers, she read annoyance and pleasure in those dark green depths and found herself shifting uncomfortably beneath his steady regard.

"Fine," she said on a sigh. "You were right. I changed my mind."

He leaned back against the door, folded his arms across his chest and crossed his feet at the ankle. Studying her for a long minute, he said, "I'm tired. It's been a long day. We'll talk about this in the morning."

"Okay, good," Debbie said, and finally took a moment to glance around her. "Just tell me where to sleep and I'll get out of your way."

"My room's through there," he said, pushing away from the door and pointing to a door on the far side of the long room.

"Uh-huh. Where's mine?"

He smiled. "With me."

"Now wait a damn minute," Debbie said, shaking her head. "I didn't agree to—"

"Dial it down, Deb," he cut her off quickly. "Like I said, it's been a long day. I'm tired. I'm not arguing with you about this."

"Fine. I'll sleep on the couch."

"Don't have one." He started across the room, moonlight playing on his bare skin like a lover's touch.

"Don't have a—" She took a quick look. Chairs. Dozens of chairs sprinkled around the wide room, clustered in conversation groups, but no sofa. "What kind of a person doesn't have a sofa?"

"Me. Now come on."

"I'm not sharing your bed, Gabe."

"To *sleep*, Deb." He opened his bedroom door and scowled at her. "And you damn well are. I'm too tired to go chasing you across the island if you should try to escape."

"I'm not going to escape."

“Damn straight, you’re not. Now come on.”

Her insides squirmed uneasily. Sharing a bed with Gabe had not been a part of this deal. But she wasn’t sure how to get out of it and, damn it, she was tired, too. After all, he hadn’t been the one trying to sleep on a narrow, lumpy cot in a jail cell for the past several hours.

She started across the room, keeping her gaze fixed with his. “No false moves.”

He choked out a short laugh. “Don’t flatter yourself, babe. You’re not that hot.”

“Thanks very much.”

“No more talking. Sleep now. Talk tomorrow.”

“Fine.”

She stepped into his bedroom and almost sighed. The room was huge, with an empty fireplace on one wall, a set of French doors leading to a wide stone terrace on another and floor-to-ceiling bookshelves on a third. An open doorway led to what must be the bathroom, and moonlight drifted in through the terrace doors, laying an invitation across a bed as big as a football field.

Every cell in Debbie’s body groaned in anticipation. But as Gabe walked around the edge of the bed to the left side, she swallowed hard. He pushed those silk pajama bottoms down and off and stood there naked, watching her.

“Do you mind?” she said quickly, turning her gaze away, but not before her mouth went dry and her stomach did a quick spin and lurch. God, he was still gorgeous.

“You’ve seen me naked before.”

“Yeah, but do you have to be naked *now*?”

He laughed, got into the bed and pulled the white duvet up over his hips. “Like I said, I’m tired. Now get into bed and go to sleep.”

“I can’t sleep with you naked.”

“And I can’t sleep with me in clothes. Guess who I’m more worried about.”

“No guess required,” she muttered, and walked around to the other side of the immense mattress. Stepping out of her sandals, Debbie thought seriously about sleeping in her clothes, but then decided that would be stupid. It wasn’t as if Gabe was even interested in her. And if he did make a move, she could stop him.

Would stop him.

So keeping her eyes averted, she undid the button and zipper on her shorts and slipped out of them, letting them fall to the hardwood floor. Then she sat on the bed and swung her legs up.

“That’s it?” he asked in a low-pitched grumble. “You’re gonna sleep in your shirt and bra?”

“I’m very comfortable,” she lied, laying her head down on a feather pillow that felt like heaven.

“Right. Whatever.” He blew out a breath, rolled to one side and warned, “Don’t try to leave the room, Deb. I’m a light sleeper.”

“I remember,” she said softly into the silvery darkness. Whether he heard her or not, she couldn’t be sure. And a moment or two later, she didn’t care. She fell into sleep like a rock dropping into a well.

Three

Debbie sighed in her sleep, rolled onto her side and cuddled into the warm, hard body beside her. Her head nestled in the curve of a strong shoulder, she kept her eyes closed despite the wash of light she sensed beyond her eyelids.

Morning, and she wasn’t ready to get up and go to work. Her mind drifted, focused and drifted again. She was just so comfortable she didn’t want to think about moving just yet. She’d much rather

—
“Comfy?”

She knew that voice.

Her eyes flew open even as she practically flew back and away from Gabe’s warm, naked body. Amusement colored his features but something deeper flashed in his eyes. Hunger. She recognized it because it was sputtering into dancing flames inside her own body.

“What were you doing?” she demanded, shoving one hand through her hair while she scooted back to the edge of the mattress.

“Sleeping. What were *you* doing?” One corner of his mouth quirked into a half smile that tugged at Debbie’s insides just as it once had.

God, ten years and he could still make her quiver with a look. What was it about him that she’d never found in anyone else? And how was she going to stay close to him without getting *close* to him? What a mess.

“Nothing,” she muttered thickly. “I wasn’t doing anything I was just—nothing.” She slipped out of bed, grabbed up the shorts she’d taken off the night before and tugged them up over her white lace panties. She didn’t feel safe until she had those shorts zipped and buttoned.

For heaven’s sake, she’d been practically laying on top of the man. All cuddled in like she belonged in his arms. He’d felt strong and warm and...safe. But hey, a person couldn’t be held responsible for what they did in their sleep, could they?

He propped himself up on one elbow and the thick white duvet fell down his body to puddle just at his hips. Debbie closed her eyes tight and prayed he wouldn’t move any more. She just wasn’t up to another peek at a naked Gabe.

He grinned then, as if he knew just what she was thinking.

“If you’re interested in a little morning wake-up, all you have to do is say so.”

“I’m not interested, but thanks for the generous offer,” she quipped, and hoped to heaven her voice didn’t sound as shaky as it felt. “That—” she waved one hand at him “—didn’t mean anything and you don’t have to look so pleased with yourself.” She swung her hair back from her face and tried to look a lot more self-controlled than she felt at the moment. “I was sleeping. Didn’t realize that was you next to me and—”

“Ah.” He interrupted her again and threw back the duvet in one easy motion.

Debbie swallowed hard, but refused to close her eyes. She wasn’t going to let him know that his nudity bothered her.

Man, he looked really good.

“So what you’re saying,” he continued as he stood and stretched lazily, “is that in your sleep, you’ll snuggle up to whatever warm body’s available?”

“Yes.” She frowned, distracted by the play of golden sunlight over his bronzed, rippled chest and abdomen and his hard and ready—*don’t look*. “No. That’s not what I—” She blew out a breath, forced herself to keep her gaze locked with his. “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“Is that wrong?” He grinned at her.

Debbie crossed her arms over her chest and tapped the toe of one foot against the gleaming hardwood floor. “Yes. *All* of this is wrong.”

Staring at her, he reminded her, “You were the one cozying up to me, Deb. Wasn’t the other way around.”

“I’m not talking about that,” she snapped, then sighed heavily. “Do you mind getting dressed?”

“Am I making you nervous?”

She smirked at him. Not for all the money in the world would she admit to him that he wasn’t making her nervous at all—he was making her very...needy. “No. It’s just not easy holding a conversation with a naked man.”

One eyebrow lifted. “We don’t have to have a conversation...” “Oh, yes we do.” Fine. If he wouldn’t get dressed, she’d turn around. No point in making herself crazy by trying to avoid staring at all of that tanned, muscled skin. No tan lines, either. God. Did he sunbathe naked, too? Oo-oh. She closed her eyes and muffled a groan at the mental image rising up in her brain.

To cool herself off, to try to gather up the tattered threads of rational thought, she started talking again. “Last night, I agreed to come here because I didn’t want to stay in the jail.”

“So?”

“So...” Debbie stared at the painting on the pale blue wall opposite her. A beach scene at sunset, with deep, rich colors streaming across a canvas sky and drizzling onto ocean waves whipped by an unseen wind. “So how long do I have to stay here?”

She heard him moving around the room behind her and only hoped that getting dressed was part of his game plan.

“That depends.”

“On?”

“On how long it takes for you to be cleared of suspicion.”

“Oh, come on, Gabe.”

When he didn’t answer, she whirled around, saw that he’d pulled on those silky pajama bottoms, and blew out a grateful breath. Then she followed him as he walked out onto the tiled terrace off the bedroom.

The shining red tiles felt cold beneath her bare feet, but the sun was already climbing in a cloudless blue sky. In the distance, the ocean stretched out in front of the resort and flashes of colored sails on swift-moving boats caught her eye. Directly below them and to the left was a golf course, so deep and rich a green it almost hurt to look at it, and on the right, stone paths wound through carefully tended shrubs and flowers, leading to the pool area and the beach beyond.

“This place is amazing.”

He swiveled his head to look at her. A brief smile curved his mouth then disappeared an instant later. “Thanks. I like it.”

She smiled and shifted her gaze to the sweep of green where a couple of early golfers were steering a red-and-white cart down a path. “You used to talk about having a place like this. Remember?”

She flicked a glance at him in time to see his smile fade and a shutter drop over his eyes. “I remember. Look, Deb. I’m not interested in a forced march down memory lane, all right?”

“Yeah, sure.” His instant withdrawal stung a little. But could she blame him?

He pushed off the railing, walked into his bedroom and threw words back over his shoulder like crumbs to a hungry pigeon. “I’ll contact the authorities in Bermuda. See if they’ve got any more information on the jewel thief.”

“Gabe, you know that’s not me. Right?”

He stopped and glanced at her. “Doesn’t matter what I know, Deb. All that matters is what you can prove.”

“How’m I supposed to prove I’m innocent?”

Nodding, he acknowledged, “Good question. You should get to work on that right away.”

“Aren’t you going to help me?”

“I’m letting you stay with me.”

She shot a look at the mile-wide bed and then looked at him again. “Yeah, about that. Is there a guest room—”

He laughed. “Why in the hell would I bother to have a guest room in my suite?” Shaking his head, he waved both arms and reminded her, “I live in a hotel, Deb. All the rooms here are guest rooms.”

Good point. “Okay, let me have my old room then.”

“No can do.” He opened the top drawer of a sleek, polished dresser, pulled out a pair of black boxers, then slammed the drawer closed again. “As long as you’re here, you’re my responsibility. You stay where I can keep an eye on you or you go back to jail. You choose. Right now, I’m gonna grab a shower, then get to work.”

She really hated this. Hated that she was caught up in something she couldn’t control. Hated that she needed Gabe and *really* hated that he was so getting a charge out of giving her a hard time

over it. And she hated knowing that she sort of felt *safe* with Gabe. She wasn't nearly as scared as she should be, because Gabe was right here, snarling at her. And looking way too sexy.

But she had no other choice. No way was she going back to jail. So she'd have to find a way to stay with Gabe without giving in to the feelings he could still inspire in her.

Sure.

No problem.

Oh, she was in serious trouble here.

"Fine," she said on a deep breath. "I'll stay."

"Glad that's settled. Call downstairs. They probably brought your bags from the airport last night."

"Okay, then what?"

He shrugged. "Take a shower. Get dressed."

"And then?"

"Hell if I know."

He turned to walk into the huge bathroom jutting off the master bedroom and stopped when she called, "But what am I supposed to *do* about all this?"

He sighed and said, "I'll make some calls later. See what I can find out."

"Thanks."

He didn't answer, just walked into the bathroom and closed the door behind him.

Alone again, Debbie looked around the empty room and wondered just how long she was going to be a prisoner in this palace.

* * *

"*Jewel thief?*" Janine's voice shrieked over the phone line and Debbie felt better just hearing her friend's fury. "Is he crazy? You're no thief."

Smiling, Debbie leaned back in her chair and took her first easy breath since being stopped at the airfield the day before. It was good to hear someone else's belief in her. "Thanks."

"Everybody knows you're too clumsy to be a jewel thief," Janine added. "You'd never make a living."

Debbie scowled at the phone in her hand and muttered, "Thanks again."

"Well, come on," Janine said on a laugh now, "you've gotta admit, jewel thieves have to be sneaky. You trip over your own feet."

"Okay," Debbie said, hoping to cut short Janine's amusement. "But let's pretend the authorities don't know that I'm a clod and figure out how I can prove to them that I'm not this thief they're looking for."

The restaurant by the beach was, as with most everything else at Fantasies, done in a red-and-white decor. White tables shone in the sunlight, red carnations sprouted from white vases in the center of every table. The servers wore Hawaiian-print shirts, also in red and white, and the crowd around Debbie was relaxed, celebratory.

As she had been only a few days ago.

That was, until she'd been arrested.

"Oh, God." Debbie stifled a groan.

"Right, right. But whatever happened to innocent until proven guilty?"

"Wish I knew."

Janine heaved a sigh that carried all the way from Long Beach to the beachside restaurant on Fantasies. "You say the owner of the resort is helping you?"

"That's what he says," Debbie told her, but privately she wondered. Gabe had no reason to be kind to her.

But she'd done what she'd believed she had to do to save both of them from more pain further down the road back then. Did she wish things could have been different? Of course. But that didn't change a damn thing, did it?

"You don't think he is?"

"I don't know." Debbie grabbed her glass of iced tea, took a long drink to ease the tightness in her throat and kept her gaze focused on the beach, so she didn't have to look at any of the other people seated in the restaurant. "I really don't."

She took a breath and blew it out in a rush. "Janine, it's Gabe."

A second passed, then...

"What? *Gabe*? You mean the owner? *Gabe*?"

"Yes, yes and yes."

"Oh, crap."

"Exactly." Debbie traced the tip of one finger through the water ring her iced tea had left on the glass tabletop.

"Is he still mad?" Janine asked.

"He says no."

"Well, of course he's gonna say he's not still angry. If he was still mad ten years later that makes him either a psycho or a big weenie."

While Janine ranted, Debbie's brain raced. Of course her girlfriends both knew about Gabe. They'd met him a few times back in the day, though she and Gabe had mostly preferred being alone back then. But her girlfriends had consoled her after the breakup and whenever she'd doubted the decision she'd made, they'd assured her she'd done the right thing.

"I can't believe Gabe owns Fantasies," Janine was saying. "And that we never saw him while we were there. Was he hiding? Is he hideously disfigured or something?"

"A million times no," Debbie said on a groan.

"Still hot, huh?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Well..." Janine's voice went thoughtful. "This puts a new spin on things, doesn't it?"

"Kind of, I guess. But the point is, I don't know what to do. Should I get a lawyer or something?"

"Beats me," Janine admitted, then offered, "I'll ask Max. Maybe he'll have some clue."

"Okay, good." That was something concrete. And hey, got them off the subject of Gabe and her own brief incarceration. "And speaking of Max, everything okay with you guys?"

"Only slightly wonderful," Janine said, and Debbie heard the near purr in her friend's voice. "He's helping me pack for the move to England—no, wait. Make that, he's paying people to help me pack."

"Works just as well."

"Yeah. He's really great, Deb. I mean, amazing and he's gonna fly you and Cait to London for the wedding, which is turning into like a three-ring circus, by the way, because Max is this big deal in business over there and—"

"That's great, honey," Debbie cut her off without a qualm. After all, she was delighted her friend was so happy, but she had the little problem of oh, say, *prison* facing her at the moment. "But selfishly, back to me..."

"Right, right. Okay, I'll talk to Max. Then I'll call Cait. Maybe Lyon can do something, too."

Her other best friend, Caitlyn, was now engaged to her boss, Jefferson Lyon, who had plenty of connections in fairly high circles, so Debbie was prepared to take all the help she could get. Even if it was so damned embarrassing to have to ask for that help.

"Great. Fabulous. Now everyone will know I'm a felon." Debbie's chin hit her chest as visions of herself dressed in an old movie version of a black-and-white-striped prison uniform flashed through her mind. "I don't look good in horizontal stripes."

Janine laughed, clearly understanding exactly what her friend had been talking about. “Horizontal stripes are *nobody’s* friend. Don’t worry, Deb. We’ll get this straightened out in no time. Until then, try to enjoy yourself. You’re still at Fantasies. Make the most of it. And, hey, maybe you should make the most of being close to Gabe again.”

Her body sizzled. Not a good sign. “That’s so not gonna happen.”

“Well, at least keep him *happy*, since he’s the guy in charge of the jail key!”

“Right.” She hung up, listened to the sigh of the waves rushing toward shore, the screech of the seabirds, and the conversations ebbing and flowing all around her. Enjoy herself. Sure.

No problem.

Gabe had plenty to keep him occupied. Even with a first-class manager and staff, there was work to be done. But doing that work while his brain kept circling around Debbie was no small task.

He knew damn well she wasn’t a jewel thief. The only reason she was still on his island was that he wasn’t finished with her. Yet. And if she thought she was trapped here, then so much the better.

Leaning back in his office chair, he swung around to look out the wide window behind him. His view of the golf course and the ocean beyond didn’t soothe him as it usually did. Normally, he reveled in the knowledge that he’d made all of his crazy-ass dreams come true. He’d built an empire out of luck, talent and sheer grit, and he enjoyed the hell out of his life. It was everything he’d always planned for it to be.

But now, with Deb here on his island, he had the chance to settle a score that had niggled at the back of his mind for far too long. Ten years ago, she’d taken his heart and crushed it. Now, she was going to see just what kind of man she’d helped to create.

Ever since he’d seen her with her girlfriend down at the pool, he’d been thinking about her. Remembering things he hadn’t allowed himself to recall in years. And if there was one thing he’d learned, it was that looking back served no purpose at all. The only thing that mattered was the present and the future you created for yourself.

Still...

There was a part of him that called for vengeance. Fate had handed him a golden opportunity and he hadn’t become the success he had by ignoring quirks of fate. Besides, in that small, dark corner of his heart, he wanted to make Debbie sorry she’d ever walked away from him. And until he’d done that, he wouldn’t let her go.

“Mr. Vaughn?”

His assistant’s voice cut through his thoughts and Gabe turned to scowl at the woman standing in the open doorway. About fifty years old, she was tall, thin and so organized, she would have made a great general. She’d been with him for the last five years and probably knew even more about his businesses than he did. “What is it, Beverly?”

“There’s a woman here to see you. A Debbie Harris?”

He smirked. Debbie never had been a patient woman. “Send her in.”

Almost before the words were out of his mouth, Debbie was slipping past Beverly and striding into the office. “Thanks, Bev. That’s all.”

The woman sniffed in displeasure, but backed out and closed the door. When she was gone, Gabe fixed his gaze on Debbie and wished he didn’t care about how good she looked. She was wearing a soft, blue sundress with thin straps over her tanned shoulders. The hem of the dress hit her midthigh and her heeled sandals gave her an extra inch or two of height. Her blond hair was pulled into a silver clip at the nape of her neck and hung in loose waves down to the center of her back.

And his only thought was, he’d like to bury his hands in that hair, pull her head to his and—maybe keeping her here hadn’t been such a good idea after all.

“What is it, Deb?”

“Gabe, I need to know what you’re doing about this.” She moved around the office, trailing her fingers across glossy tables, stopping to peer at the jam-packed, rigidly aligned bookshelves and

then moving eventually to the wall of windows behind him. She stared out at the opulent view and while she looked at the ocean, Gabe looked at her.

“I made a few calls,” he lied smoothly. There was no one *to* call. The authorities weren’t really interested in her. Her resemblance to the jewel thief supposedly running around the islands meant nothing to them. Gabe was the only thing keeping Debbie on this island. And she wasn’t going anywhere until he was good and ready to see her leave.

“And?” she asked.

“And... nothing so far.” He saw the helplessness glint in her eyes as he added, “The authorities are looking into the situation.”

She shook her head slowly, sadly. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

A quick twist of something that might have been guilt shot through him as fast as a lightning flash. He ignored it. “Don’t worry.”

“Easy for you to say.”

Easier than she knew.

She chewed at her bottom lip in a nervous gesture he recognized and Gabe knew how worried she was. Guilt threatened again and was ruthlessly squashed. Hell, he wasn’t hurting her. He was just giving her a hard time for a few days. Soon enough, she’d be back to her life and he’d have had the revenge he was due.

Watching her, as she stood so closely and yet so far from him, it finally came to Gabe just how to exact the payback his pride demanded. He was going to seduce her. Make her want him as he had once so desperately wanted her. And when she was limp with desire, ready to beg him to take her back...he’d cut her loose as surgically as she had done to him so long ago.

If that meant he would be forced to hold her captive on the island for a while longer, then that’s just what he’d do. As he’d already told her...he owned the island and everything on it. Here, *he* made the rules.

“I called my friend Janine,” she was saying, “and she said she’d get her fiancé to look into this for me, but I don’t know what Max can do.”

“Max?” he asked.

“Max Striver. He’s—”

“I know Max,” Gabe interrupted, and wondered if his old friend really had taken the plunge and proposed to the cute little brunette he’d spent so much time with in the last few weeks.

“You know him?”

“For a few years. And I never would have thought he’d get married again. Are you sure about this?”

“Hmm? What? Oh, yeah. Apparently he followed Janine home to Long Beach and proposed. They’re getting married in London in a few weeks.”

“Amazing,” he mused, sitting on the corner of his desk. Of course, looking back, he could see that Max had been drawn deeper and deeper into the relationship with the woman he’d been paying to pretend to be his wife. Strange that now she’d be his wife for real. “He always said he’d never marry again.”

“People change,” she said lightly.

“Apparently.” He shouldn’t have been so surprised, really. He’d known that Max’s father had been after him to marry and start building on the family dynasty.

Debbie was staring at him, a question in her eyes. “You never got married?”

“No.” He stiffened, then forced himself to release the swift punch of tension gripping him. He hadn’t thought of marriage again until recently. But that wasn’t part of this conversation.

“Gabe...”

“Forget it,” he said, not wanting to hear her explanation of why she’d turned down his marriage proposal ten years ago. It was over. And now, his life was different. *He* was different. He wasn’t an

eager young man following his heart anymore. Now he made decisions based on logic. Cool, clear logic.

“We should talk about it,” she said. “About what happened between us.”

“No point,” he said. “It’s over and done. Let it go. I have.”

Four

Gabe insisted they have a late dinner at Fantasies’ rooftop restaurant.

Debbie wanted to be doing *something* about her predicament, but since Gabe said all that could be done was being done, she’d had little choice but to try to relax. She wore the strapless, short black dress she’d brought with her on vacation, because it was the only dressy thing she had. But she also loved the way it fit, smoothing over her curves and flaring into a swirling skirt three inches above her knees.

Gabe’s green eyes had fired when he first saw her in it and that little jolt of confidence had done a lot for her.

Now, they sat at a private table, on the corner of the roof, with a wide, black sky glittering with stars above them. The moon’s reflection danced on the surface of the ocean and a soft breeze twisted the candle flames into a frenzied dance. The table was spread with a pristine, white-linen tablecloth and sported a single red rosebud in a crystal vase as a centerpiece. While the other people at the restaurant chatted and laughed, Debbie watched Gabe and wondered how he’d come so far in only ten years.

Physically, he looked much the same—long, thick, dark-blond hair, streaked gold now by the sun, a tall, lanky body that belied the strength in him. His face was sharp angles, piercing green eyes and a mouth that had, long ago, been able to reduce her to whimpers in seconds.

When she had known him, he’d been mostly a jeans and T-shirt kind of guy. Yet tonight, he wore a finely tailored tuxedo and looked as though he’d been born to it. In fact, with that long hair, pulled back at the nape of his neck, his high cheekbones and steady eyes, he looked both elegant and dangerous.

Enough to bring most women to their knees.

And she, Debbie thought, was no exception.

There was an air of tightly leashed power about him now that he hadn’t had ten years ago. She’d noticed how the staff at Fantasies practically came to attention when he entered a room. He seemed to know every employee by name and every one of those employees jumped into action when he quirked a finger.

And she wondered again if there were some remnants of the man she’d once known beneath the veneer of sophistication he carried now.

“What’re you thinking?” he asked, and she just barely caught the low rumble of his voice over the hum of conversations surrounding them.

Debbie smiled, reached for the glass of chilled white wine in front of her and took a sip to ease the dryness in her throat. “Just that you’ve changed a lot.”

There was no answering smile in his eyes, but he nodded his head in acknowledgment. “I had plans. I saw to it that they succeeded.”

If there was a barb in that statement, Debbie chose to ignore it. After all, ten years was a long time. Maybe he really had let the past go. Shouldn’t she do the same? “I don’t understand, though, how you did it? How’d you accomplish so much so quickly?”

He shifted his gaze to a nearby waiter, subtly signaled and had the man bustling over to top off their wineglasses. When the waiter had retreated again, Gabe said, “A combination of hard work and luck.”

“I’m guessing that’s the short version.”

Briefly, his mouth curved into a half smile. “It is.”

“How about the other version?”

He took a breath, blew it out and said, “There were a couple of lean years. Took a job in the Middle East, working security for the oil fields. Big money, not a lot of places to spend it.” One shoulder lifted in a shrug. “I banked my pay, invested most of it.”

Debbie lifted her wine again. “You can’t tell me you did all this on simple investments.”

“Hardly.” He lifted his own wineglass, studied the straw-colored wine as it was backlit by the flickering candles and continued as if he were talking to himself rather than to her. He took a sip, set the glass down and leaned back in his chair.

“Several years ago, I met a guy who had an idea for some computer thing.” He smiled ruefully and shook his head. “Didn’t understand then what it was all about, still don’t, really. But he seemed to know his stuff. He needed backing, I took a shot on him and hit the jackpot.”

He told the story so simply, but she could see him in her mind’s eye. Working in the Middle East, saving his money, investing it, taking a chance on another man with a dream. And finally, making all of his plans come true. A swell of admiration filled her as she remembered all the nights they’d spent talking about their dreams, their hopes.

He’d done everything he’d once talked about.

Accomplished so much.

“And then you bought the island?”

He let his gaze sweep the crowded rooftop restaurant before looking back at her. Pride shone in his eyes as he said, “Yes. I redid the hotel, renamed it and opened for business five years ago.”

“It’s a beautiful place,” she said, and wished she didn’t feel as though she were talking to a stranger. “You’ve really made something here, Gabe. Something people all over the world talk about.”

The waiter approached again, served their meals, then dissolved into the background as silently as he’d arrived.

“What about you?” Gabe asked as she picked up a fork and lifted a bite of her pan-seared halibut. “What’ve you been doing since I last saw you?”

She chewed, swallowed and said, “I still live in Long Beach. I own a travel agency there.”

“So you’ve done well.”

Nodding, Debbie let her pride in her business fill her. True, she hadn’t succeeded on the grand scale that Gabe had, but she’d made a good life for herself. One that was safe. Secure. And that was all that mattered to her. “Do you ever get back home?”

“No,” he said, biting off the single word. “I left Long Beach ten years ago—”

He broke off and Debbie winced. She knew when he’d left. After their last night together, when she’d turned down his proposal. She’d tried to see him a few days later. To try to explain. To make him understand that it wasn’t because she didn’t love him.

But he’d already left and even his younger brother hadn’t known where he’d gone. At least, Devlin Vaughn hadn’t wanted to tell her.

“I went to your house,” she said, wanting him to know that she hadn’t simply turned her back on what they’d had. “But Devlin told me you were gone.”

“No reason to stick around, was there?” He sliced off a piece of his swordfish and ate it. Then he gave her a small smile. “Don’t look so guilty, Deb. You did what you had to do. So did I.”

True, she had. She’d wanted to be with him, but her own fears hadn’t allowed that choice. If her heart still hurt for chances missed and roads not taken, that was something she’d simply learned to live with.

But her throat was tight and swallowing wasn’t easy. So she forgot about dinner for the moment and had another sip of wine. “Well then, tell me what Dev’s up to. Is he here working for you?”

“No, Dev runs his own businesses. He went into the military not long after I left. When he got out, he started a security firm—Top Dog. He keeps a team here on the island to work for the celebrity guests, but he’s based out of L.A.” Now his smile was genuine and even Debbie could see that the Vaughn brothers were as tight as they’d always been.

“Say hi to him for me when you see him next.” Her fingers tapped restlessly on the tabletop as nerves jittered through her system. Didn’t seem to matter that she kept trying to relax. Her body simply wouldn’t allow it.

“Sure. Look.” He leaned across the table again and reached out to lay one hand over her dancing fingers. “I know you’re worried about the situation, but you’re just gonna have to trust me. You couldn’t do it ten years ago. Try harder now.”

She frowned at him. “Gabe, I’m *trapped* here. Hard not to be a little on the anxious side.”

“Trapped?” he repeated.

“I can’t leave, can I?”

“No.”

“Then...” She pulled her hand out from under his, picked up a braised carrot and took a small bite.

The candle flames threw dancing shadows across his face and his green eyes caught with the tiny fire. “I’ll do what I can to help. I already told you that. And there are worse places to be stuck.”

“I know that, it’s just—”

“You never could stand not being in control,” he mused, and eased back in his chair.

“So much for not talking about the past, then,” Debbie pointed out.

He tipped his head. “You always were stubborn, Debbie. Determined to have things your own way.”

“So were you.” She waved one arm, encompassing their lush surroundings. “You built a world just the way you wanted it to be. How is that any different from me?”

“Suppose it’s not,” he agreed. “But in this case, what you want has to wait on a few other factors.”

She dropped her fork and it clinked musically against the fine china. “No one is really going to believe I’m the jewel thief, are they?”

He shrugged negligently, as if it didn’t matter to him one way or the other. “The authorities have to check it out.”

“And how long is that going to take?”

“Things move a little slower in the islands.”

“Fabulous.”

He laughed shortly. “I can promise to be an understanding jailer.”

Debbie looked across the table at him and wished she could see into his thoughts. His smile was cool, pleasant, but his eyes held secrets and that bothered her more than she cared to admit. Just the night before he hadn’t seemed so eager to make her happy. Hadn’t he said something like, *I own everything on this island, including you?* So what happened to change his attitude?

“Something wrong?”

“You tell me,” she said, pushing her plate away since clearly she wasn’t going to be able to swallow anything beyond her wine. “Why’re you being so nice all of a sudden?”

He reached up, loosened the tie at his neck and then undid the top button of his dress shirt. Instead of making him look more relaxed, it only served to make him appear edgier. Sexier, God help her. Her palms went damp and her mouth went dry.

His eyes glittered and his features stiffened. “Maybe I just don’t see any point in being enemies.”

She wanted to believe him. She wished she could. “Really?”

“Really.” Gabe looked at her for a long, silent minute. He heard the hope in her voice, saw the vulnerability in her eyes. And he knew this was going according to plan. She was trusting him. Of course, what choice did she have?

She watched him and his gaze slid over her in appreciation. His body reacted in an instant. She was beautiful. Enough to take a man’s breath. She was made for moonlight. Her skin seemed to glow, her eyes shone and her mouth...

He pulled in a breath, reminded himself that this was just a ploy. He was here to lower *her* guard, not his own. He was being nice, as she put it, with that single goal in mind. And he was a man who never gave up once his course was set.

He wanted her.

Hell, he'd always wanted her. From the very first time he'd laid eyes on her. She'd been only eighteen years old, and his blood had pumped and his brain had dissolved. She had been the one sure thing in his life.

Until she'd walked away.

Now, he had her right where he wanted her. And he was going to seduce her into thinking all was forgiven. He was going to make her want him as she once had. And then when he'd had her under him, over him, every way he could think of, he'd be the one to walk away.

With that thought in mind, he took a sip of wine, arched his gaze into hers and said, "So you never got married, either, huh?"

She blinked. "Wow. There's a change of subject."

He shrugged. "Just a question."

"Right. Okay." Nodding, she sipped at her own wine and said, "No, I never married. I was engaged earlier this year, though."

Something inside him fisted. He didn't like how it affected him to know that she had found a man she loved enough to say yes to. A man she apparently had loved far more than she had him. Strange that after all this time, he would even care. But there it was. "So you managed to say yes to a proposal, after all."

She flushed and shot him a quick look. "Gabe."

He shook his head, forced himself to smile. "But even after saying yes, you backed out. Haven't changed much, have you, Deb?"

"I didn't back out."

"Really? So where's your husband?" Gabe looked past her at the crowd as if searching for a particular face before shifting his gaze back to hers.

"I said *I* didn't back out."

"Ah," he smiled then, "so he turned the tables on you, did he?"

"No." Scowling now, she blew out a breath and said, "It just didn't happen."

"Why not?"

He watched her, saw emotions churning in her eyes and couldn't identify any of them. There had once been a time, he thought, that he knew what she was thinking. That they were so connected, they could have completed each other's sentences. But that time was long gone.

She shifted uncomfortably in her chair. Her fingers swept up and down the stem of her wineglass and her mouth firmed fiercely as if she were biting back words that battled to get free. Finally, though, she met his gaze and said quietly, "I found out that Mike was already married. To two other women."

"Ah..." Despite the fury trembling in her voice, he heard the pain, too, the humiliation, and a small part of him was glad of it. Why should he be the only one to remember how it felt to have someone you loved pull the rug out from under you? Besides, he wasn't here to sympathize. "So you chose badly, *again*."

She took another sip of wine. "All those years ago, Gabe," she said, "we were too young."

"I loved you."

"And I loved you."

"Not enough."

"You're wrong," she said. "But love isn't everything."

Now she reached across the table toward him, but Gabe pulled his hand back.

He resented her bringing their shared past back to gnaw at him. For years, Gabe had deliberately kept those memories in lockdown, refusing to think about them, refusing to wallow in what he had concluded had been a mistake, right from the beginning. The past had no part in his life. His present was just as he wanted it and his future was planned out.

And she wasn't a part of it.

Yet, just by being here, she was neatly undoing all of those carefully arranged locks he'd put in place. But damn, if he was going to make it easy on her.

"We keep heading down that road and I'm just not interested in the past, Deb. It was a long time ago and we're different people now. You said it yourself. People change." He stood and shoved both hands into the pockets of his tux. Looking down at her, he said, "Stay. Enjoy your dinner. I've got some things to look into."

"Gabe, don't go."

The softness in her voice pulled at him. The yearning in her eyes tugged at something deep inside. He didn't want to be tugged, but no way would he be the one to bend in this little contest.

He lifted one hand to her face, stroked his fingertips along the soft, smooth line of her jaw and said, "I'll see you later."

* * *

"You want me to *what?*"

Gabe leaned back in his desk chair and looked up at his head of security. Yes, his brother, Devlin, kept a team of private security on the island, but this man, Victor Reyes, worked for Gabe. Victor had been in charge of island security for four years now and in that time, he and Gabe had become friends.

"I want you to make sure Debbie Harris knows she's being watched."

Victor was a tall, muscular man with a fierce expression, forbidding personality and black, glittering eyes. It was usually enough for him to simply show up and anyone causing trouble at Fantasies was quickly convinced to change their mind. "Can I ask why?"

"She thinks she's under suspicion of being the jewel thief wanted on the islands."

Victor's eyes narrowed. "You have reason to believe she's the thief?"

"No." Gabe got up and turned to face the wide bank of windows behind his desk. "She's not a thief. But I'm not ready for her to leave the island just yet and I'm willing to do what I have to do to keep her here."

There was a long moment of silence and Gabe knew that Victor was considering his next words before he spoke. A careful man. "I guess you've got your reasons."

"Yeah, I do."

"All right, then," Victor said. "You're the boss."

Gabe glanced over his shoulder at the other man. "But you don't think it's a good idea."

"You don't pay me to think, Gabe," Victor said, folding massive arms across his chest. "But if you want my opinion, no. It's not the best idea you've ever had."

Probably not, Gabe thought, turning back to stare out at the spread of the world he'd built stretching in front of him. Would have been smarter to let Debbie go never knowing he was on the island. But this felt right. He'd learned long ago to listen to his instincts, so he was going to go with that. There was a score to be settled between him and Debbie Harris.

Turning around, Gabe faced his old friend and nodded. "You're probably right, Vic. But we're gonna do this my way."

"Okay by me. But what're you going to do about Ms. Madison?"

"Huh?" Gabe felt the world tip slightly, but looked at his friend and asked, "What're you talking about? What's Grace got to do with this?"

Victor shook his head and pulled a PalmPilot from the pocket of the lightweight jacket he wore to cover up the gun at his hip. Turning the device on, he scanned the screen, looked up at Gabe and said, “According to the schedule, Ms. Madison’s due to arrive in three days.”

“*Damn it.*”

How could he have forgotten this? Grace’s visit had been arranged more than a month ago. But then, in the last month, he hadn’t thought about much more than Debbie Harris. Hardly surprising he’d forget about other plans when he was so wrapped up in his scheme for revenge.

Muttering dark threats just under his breath, Gabe shoved one hand through his hair, then kicked the edge of his desk. “I forgot all about her.”

Victor chuckled and put his PalmPilot away.

“This amuses you?” Gabe asked, his voice a thin, cold ribbon.

Victor wasn’t cowed, though. They’d been friends too long. He simply smiled and said, “You’ve got Debbie Harris staying in your suite...and in three days, your *fiancée* shows up. What’s not amusing about that?”

Gabe scowled at him. Grace wasn’t his fiancée. Not officially. He hadn’t proposed, though he and Grace had reached an agreement the last time she’d visited. *Debbie*. Without even trying, she was messing with his life. “We’re not engaged. Yet.”

“Oh, well, then. No problem.”

Gabe slumped back into his desk chair. Disgusted, he glanced at his friend. “You’re fired.”

“Hell, boss, you can’t fire me. I’m the only friend you’ve got left.”

Five

Gabe had come a long way from Long Beach, CA. Mingling with the rich, the powerful, the famous, he was completely at home. He wore a tuxedo as though he’d been born to it and used a smooth, practiced charm on the “beautiful” people surrounding him. And while he looked relaxed, Debbie could see, even at a distance, that his gaze was sharp as he swept the room, making sure everything was as it should be.

Then a glamorous brunette in a fire-engine-red dress that dipped low over her huge, had-to-be-man-made breasts and ended high on her thighs, leaned into Gabe and whispered something in his ear. He gave her a slow smile that set off a bubble of something hot and ugly in the pit of Debbie’s stomach. She didn’t have the right, of course, to care that he was smiling at a woman who clearly didn’t know the meaning of the word “subtle.”

But that didn’t seem to matter. When the brunette dipped her head and looked up at him through her lashes, Debbie muttered, “Oh, for God’s sake. What is this, Seduction 101?”

At least Gabe wasn’t buying what the woman seemed so intent on selling. He smiled again, then turned his attention back to the older, sophisticated couple standing on his right. The brunette pouted for a minute, then slipped into the crowd.

“Happy hunting,” Debbie whispered as she watched the scene play out from the doorway of Fantasies’ main club. A swirl of nerves jittered through her stomach and had her taking a long, deep breath in a futile attempt to settle herself.

Gabe may completely be at ease here, but she felt as out of place as a discount store in Beverly Hills. She knew she was here under false pretenses. After all, the people crowding this club were wealthy, pampered. She owned and operated a travel agency in Long Beach. She couldn’t be more different from Fantasies’ usual guests.

Nerves rattled through her again and she tried to ignore them. DJ-driven music pumped through cleverly disguised speakers on the dark-red walls and candlelight waned and flickered on every tabletop. On the dance floor, couples swayed in sensuous patterns, conversations and laughter rose and fell like waves on the ocean, and amid the sea of people, Debbie felt suddenly alone.

The only person she knew here was Gabe, and he was more or less a stranger now, anyway. Ten years was a long time and what they’d had together then had nothing to do with today.

Her hair was swept up into a tangle of curls and the soft kiss of an air-conditioned breeze brushed the back of Debbie's neck. She shivered a bit, but knew it had little to do with the cool air and more to do with the uneasy situation she found herself in—depending on a man who had no reason to think well of her and no way of getting back home.

“Deep thoughts?”

Gabe's voice rumbled across her nerve endings and she jolted a little as she turned to find him standing right beside her. His green eyes shone with an emotion she couldn't quite identify and the subtle, spicy scent of his aftershave seemed to reach out for her. The man was a walking hormone assault.

“I didn't hear you come up.”

“Looked like you were too busy thinking to hear much of anything.”

“I guess so,” she admitted, keeping her gaze locked with his.

When he smiled, the secrets in his eyes shifted, softened. Then he held one hand out to her and as she took it he said, “You look beautiful.”

The deep, sapphire-blue dress fit snug to her curves, as if it had been designed especially for her. It snaked down her hips and belled around her knees to fall to the floor in a fluid sweep of silky fabric. She'd never owned such an amazing dress and still wasn't sure she should have accepted it.

She'd found it laid out for her on Gabe's bed—and the shoes and matching bag were alongside it. Logically, she knew that buying her this dress had been no more to him than picking up a quart of milk at the corner grocery. But illogically, she felt wrong wearing a dress given to her by a man who didn't even like her.

Swallowing hard, she said, “Thank you for the dress, Gabe. Really. It's beautiful. But—”

“If you're about to tell me I didn't have to do it, save your breath.” He tucked her hand through the crook of his arm and led her into the crowded club. “I wanted you here tonight and you needed something appropriate.”

Meaning nothing she'd brought with her would do. Well, hard to be insulted by the truth. But still, it irritated her to have to acknowledge it.

“Thanks, anyway.”

“You're welcome.” He looked down at her, smiled again and Debbie's knees went a little wobbly.

A simple hormonal reaction, she assured herself as he steered her toward the dance floor. Didn't mean a thing. Then he pulled her into the circle of his arms and slid into the crowd of slowly moving people on the gleaming wood floor.

His arms felt good—right. She moved against him and memories crowded her mind. Memories of a slow dance with him on the Long Beach pier one cold, autumn night ten years ago. The moon had been out, casting shadows over them and the dozen or so people joining them on the pier.

The scent of the sea had whipped around their bodies, the sweet rush of love had flowed between them. He'd smiled at her then, just as he was now, and when he'd kissed her, she'd known she loved him.

“You're thinking again,” he whispered, bending his head to hers so that his voice and his breath caressed her ear, sending another shiver over her body.

“Just...remembering,” she said, her hand on his shoulder tightening, to help her balance.

“The pier.”

Her head tipped back and she stared up at him, surprised somehow, that he'd allowed himself that memory. Hadn't he made a point in the last couple of days, of telling her that he had no interest in the past?

“You remember?”

He moved her into a slow turn, his arm about her waist squeezed, pulling her closer to him. Close enough that she felt the hard ridge of his body pressing into hers.

“Just because I don't want to think about the past doesn't mean I've lost the memories.”

“They’re good memories,” she said, and watched sadly as the shutters dropped over his eyes again. He was still here, with her, but his emotions had closed down, shutting her out, shutting out anything that might have been warming between them. And something inside her was sorry for it.

He stared at her, his gaze moving over her face with the sureness of a touch. “Not all of them.”

“No,” she admitted, hardly noticing the blur of motion from the dancers moving past them. They were nothing more than a wash of brilliant colors, blending together into a swirl of distraction. “But most of them are good, Gabe. Do we have to lose it all because of the way it ended?”

“I found out a long time ago that it’s better that way. Cleaner.”

His arm still held her close, belying the distance in his words. “But emptier.”

“The present’s full enough for me,” he countered.

“Is it?” She tore her gaze from his long enough to look around the crowded club, to take in some of what he’d built before meeting his gaze again. “You fill it with people like the brunette in the red dress and that’s all you need?”

His mouth quirked. “You jealous of the brunette?”

“Oh, please.” Irritation spiked because, yes, she *had* been jealous, even if it hadn’t lasted long. “If those boobs are real, I’ll eat my pretty new dress.”

He laughed out loud and the sound of it rolled over the music and settled over her like a blessing from the past. God, she’d loved the sound of his laughter. And his smile had always been enough to light up every corner of her heart. How could she have forgotten? Self-preservation, that’s how, she reminded herself. If she’d spent the last ten years remembering what she’d given up, she’d never have been able to be happy.

“Ashley Strong is a very nice woman.”

Debbie gasped and looked past his shoulder as if she could spot the woman. “That was Ashley Strong? The actress?”

“You didn’t recognize her?”

“No.” And she didn’t see her now. Debbie’d been too busy being sickened by the woman’s blatant attempt at seduction to pay much attention to who she might be. She looked up at Gabe. “But now I know for *sure* those boobs aren’t hers.”

He laughed again and swept her into a wide turn, his hand firmly on the small of her back. “Damned if I haven’t missed that smart mouth of yours, Deb.”

“You missed me?”

His smile faded and the shutter over his eyes snapped into place. “For a while, I missed you with every breath I took. But it’s different now.”

“Maybe,” she said, and held on to his shoulder tightly. “You say your present’s very full. Yet I watch you working the crowd, Gabe, and I see you surrounded by all of these people, but you’re not actually connected to any of them.”

One corner of his mouth quirked. “How do you know?”

“Because I know you. You’re here, but you keep yourself separate from everyone else. I can see it in your eyes.”

He frowned at her now and the arm around her waist eased off just a little. “You used to know me, I grant you that. But it’s been a long time, Deb. I’m not the man you knew. You should trust me on that.”

The music ended and without another word he guided her across the floor to the owner’s table, set in the shadows along the far wall and closed off from the rest of the guests. She slid in, then watched him as he took his place beside her. There was an open bottle of champagne chilling in a silver ice bucket waiting for them. Gabe reached for it, filled two crystal flutes and handed one of them to her.

“So what do you say, you let go of the past and take me as I am today.”

“I thought I was.”

“Not really.” He turned the flute in his long fingers, stroking the fragile crystal stem with concentration enough to make Debbie remember how it had felt to have those fingers moving over her skin. His gaze turned to hers. “You see me, but you also see the shadow of a man who once loved you.”

Those words jabbed at her insides like thorns pricking her skin.

“I’m not that man anymore.”

“I know that.”

“I wonder.”

She took a sip of champagne, letting the icy froth caress her dry throat. Around them, the club patrons partied, oblivious to the whispered conversation flowing in the shadows.

“Oh, I know you’re not *that* Gabe.” Debbie looked at him and said, “If you were the man I remember, you would have been doing more to help me out of this mess.”

He eased back against the red-leather banquette. Lifting one arm to drape along the back of the booth, he turned in his seat to face her completely. His features were smooth, even, betraying nothing of what he was feeling. “I told you it would take a few days.”

“You haven’t heard anything new?”

He paused, took a drink of champagne, then shook his head. “Nothing.”

“And you haven’t tried.”

“Are you under the impression I’m trying to keep you here?” he asked.

“I’m not sure,” Debbie admitted. “But I know there’s more going on than you’re telling me.”

“You’ve a suspicious mind,” he quipped. “Strange, I don’t remember that about you.”

“And that’s not really an answer,” Debbie countered, tipping her head to one side to study the elegant, sexy man sitting so close to her. “You talk, but you don’t really say anything. I don’t remember you being so...flexible.”

He laughed shortly, set his glass down and leaned in toward her. His eyes became the world. Those deep, green eyes that had once captivated her, that had once held all of the world she’d ever wanted.

“What do you want from me, Deb?”

“Your help.”

“You’ve got that,” he said easily, letting his gaze sweep briefly to the swell of her breasts. “Anything else?”

Her mouth watered and a flicker of heat licked at her insides. There was too much she wanted and couldn’t have. Mostly, she thought, *him*. She wanted him every bit as much as she once had. “Gabe...”

He reached for her hand and smoothed his thumb across her palm. She shivered, closed her eyes and hissed in a shaky breath.

“This isn’t about the past, Debbie,” he said. “This is about now. About tonight. About us and what we could share together.”

Tempting. So tempting. To forget about all the worries niggling at her. To forget that she was trapped by losing herself in Gabe.

“You’re thinking again,” he said, a small smile curving his lips.

“And I shouldn’t?”

He lifted her hand to his mouth, kissed the palm, nibbled at her skin and Debbie felt herself melting. Heat swamped her, need crashed through her and her brain short-circuited. If he’d been trying to keep her from thinking, he was doing a good job.

Sliding toward her on the booth seat, he pulled her close, wrapped one arm around her and looked into her eyes as he said, “Sometimes, it’s better to just shut down your mind and let your body take over.”

God knew, his own body was more than ready. Since the moment he’d seen her again, he’d wanted her. And now, as Victor had reminded him only that afternoon, Gabe was running out of

time. Soon enough, he'd have to let her go. But not before he'd had her again. Made her regret ever walking away from him.

Her blue eyes were wide and easily read. There was passion and confusion and enough desire to turn the burning embers inside him into an inferno. Gabe stroked his fingertips along the nape of her neck and felt the tremors that rocked her move through him, too.

Just touching her inflamed him. She was the only woman he'd ever known who could make his body hard with a look. His plan to seduce her and then discard her was suddenly taking on a life of its own. He wanted her now more than he ever had. Ten years ago, he'd had her for his own and lost her.

Tonight, he would reclaim her.

"Stop thinking, Deb," he whispered, and bent his head to kiss the curve of her neck. She shivered, and sighed a little, the tiny sound slipping inside him.

The taste of her filled him. The scent of her surrounded him. And there in the shadows, he felt a surge of need he'd never known before. Pulling her in closer, he wrapped his arms around her, lifted his head long enough to look down into her eyes. Then slowly, he lowered his mouth to hers. One brush of his lips across hers and her breath puffed out on a half sigh.

"Gabe..."

"Shh..." He slid his left hand down her rib cage, following the line of her body, feeling her breath shudder in and out of her lungs. She went limp in his grasp as she leaned into him and Gabe knew he had her. Knew that she wanted him as much as he needed her.

His mouth claimed hers. He used his tongue to part her lips and at the first taste of her, he felt the years roll back. And the crowded club became a lonely beach in California. She moved into him and her body fit with his as well as it ever had. As if they'd been made for each other, two pieces of the same puzzle. Two halves of the same whole.

And yet, even as those thoughts rushed through his mind, Gabe forced them away. This wasn't about kismet. Fate. Love. This was about revenge, pure and simple.

He wanted her gasping, writhing beneath him. He wanted her hot and needy, and when he took her to the precipice and over, he wanted her trembling for more. Only then would he be able to walk away, knowing that *she* would be the haunted one now. Knowing that she would spend the next ten years thinking about him, wondering what might have been.

She tore her mouth from his. "Gabe, I—"

"No thinking," he reminded her, sliding his left hand up now to cup her breast. Her nipple was hard, pressing against the cool silk fabric and responding to his touch eagerly. His thumb and forefinger tweaked and pulled at the so-tender bud of flesh and Debbie twisted in his grasp. Her eyes closed on another sigh as she moved into him, losing herself in the shadows. Giving herself up to his touch.

"That feels..."

"Amazing," he finished for her, then took her mouth again, this time with more need than tenderness. With more hunger than care. He needed, so he took. He wanted, so he claimed. His tongue clashed with hers, his breath mingled with hers. Her sighs became his as he devoured her, taking all she offered and demanding more.

He slipped his left hand beneath the bodice of her dress to cup her bare breast in the palm of his hand. He kneaded her flesh, tugging at her nipple until she groaned into his mouth and arched into him.

Shadows danced around them, fed by the candlelight, softened by the whirl of bodies on the dance floor. There was a partition, separating his table from the rest of the club, but Gabe knew it wasn't enough. The crush of the crowd was only a few feet away.

For what he wanted from Debbie, he required privacy. He needed her naked and moving beneath him. Her hand cupped his cheek as he kissed her and the simple feel of her hand on his face fired his blood and brought an ache he hadn't known in years to the corners of his heart.

At that stray thought, he instantly pulled back from her. He didn't want his heart touched. He wasn't looking for affection. *For love*. All he wanted from her was the physical. The slide of her body over his. The taste of her flesh in his mouth. The sound of her sighs in his ears.

"Gabe," she said a little breathlessly, "is everything all right?"

"Fine," he lied. "But we need to get out of here."

She licked her lips and his gaze fixed on that simple, innocent action. His body tightened and his blood rushed through his veins.

"Yes," she said. "Let's go. Now."

Just what he wanted to hear.

Sliding from the booth, he held out one hand to her and when she slipped her hand into his, he tightened his grip and tugged her to his side. He hooked his right arm around her waist and held her close as they started through the crowded club.

He led her through the mass of people, threading his way with a single-minded determination that had stood him in good stead over the past ten years. He knew what he wanted and how to get it, and never let anything get in his way.

Tonight was no different.

He told himself the rush of expectation filling him was no more than the knowledge that he was about to get his revenge on her. And he was sticking to that story.

When they were free of the club and headed across the lobby to the bank of elevators, the concierge called out to him. Gabe waved him off, tucked Debbie even closer to him and hurried his pace.

"I feel like I can't breathe."

He glanced down at her, saw the shine in her eyes and the high flush on her cheeks and nearly kissed her. But once he started kissing her again, he wouldn't stop. His fingers pressed into her side, sneaking up to stroke the side of her breast. She groaned quietly, bit her bottom lip and gave him a shaky smile.

"I know just how you feel," he said, and quickened his pace even further. The heels of their shoes clicked rhythmically against the tile floor and sounded, to Gabe's fevered brain, like a clock ticking off the seconds until he could have her naked and panting beneath him.

Past the bank of guest elevators was the private car that went directly to the owner's suite. Gabe pulled his key card from his breast pocket, swept it through the reader and then pulled Debbie into the elevator as soon as the doors parted for them.

When the door swept quietly closed and the elevator began its climb, Debbie moved into his arms. He pulled her in tightly to him, wrapping his arms around her middle and holding on as if the touch of her meant life.

She moved against him and he remembered vividly, wildly, how out of control and frenzied their lovemaking had always been. He'd never found that passion with anyone else. Never known again the flashing heat of desire that overpowered all of a man's senses at once.

With Debbie there was heat, fire, explosive need. She slid her hands beneath his tuxedo jacket and ran her palms over his shirtfront. Even through the fine linen fabric, he felt the sizzle of her skin on his and relished the flames, knowing that she was burning for him. Knowing that she was feeling exactly what he wanted her to feel. He walked her backward until she hit the wall, and took her mouth with his in a fierce kiss that demanded and gave and demanded again.

Her breath puffed against his cheek. She leaned into him, arching her hips into his as if looking for the release that was so very close.

He tore his mouth from hers, tasted the line of her throat and felt her pulse pounding erratically. He had her. Had her hungry for him, wild for him.

What he hadn't counted on, though, was his own need. His own desire nearly swamping him. He had counted on the fact that he could reach her as he once had. But he'd never expected to feel any stirrings himself. He'd thought only to have her, ease his body's ache and make her whimper for him.

But there was more going on here. There was more pushing through him and he didn't like it—didn't want to admit it, despite the clamoring of his own blood and the hammering pound of his heartbeat.

No, he told himself. He was in this for one reason.

Payback.

“Now, Deb. Right here, right now.” He couldn't wait any longer.

She looked into his eyes and whispered, “Yes, Gabe. Right now. Please, right now.”

He reached down, gathered up the hem of her sapphire-blue gown and lifted it, sliding his hand along her leg, higher, higher. She trembled, spread her legs farther apart in silent invitation and when he cupped her heat, he felt a jolt of surprise.

“No panties?” One eyebrow lifted as he cupped his hand over her again.

She gasped, then smiled and shrugged. “Panty lines.”

“Let's hear it for tight gowns,” he said, and stroked the hard bud of her sex while she cried his name.

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