HARLEQUIN®

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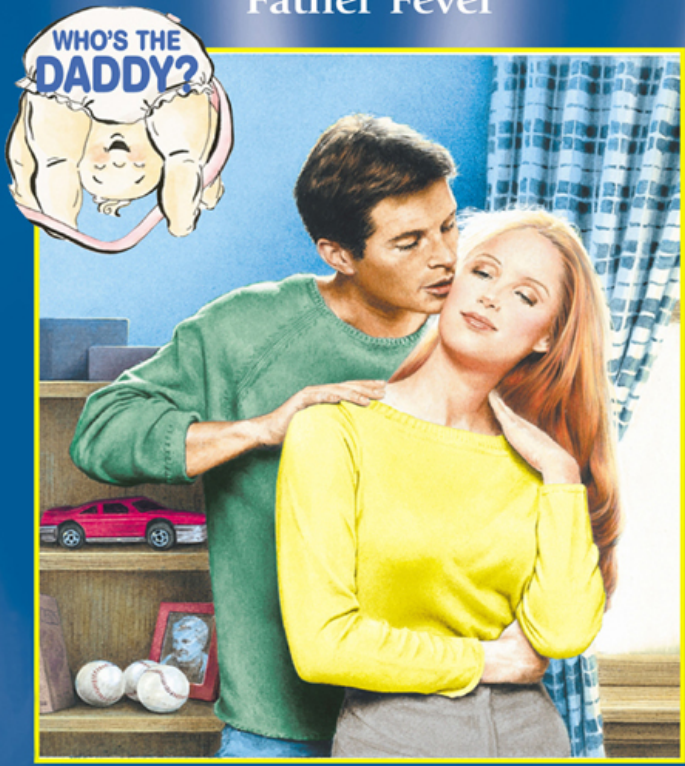
November

AMERICAN Romance®

MURIEL JENSEN

Father Fever



Muriel Jensen
Father Fever

Аннотация

Three identical sisters, three handsome bachelors and one enchanted night–nine months later, one woman is about to become a mother, but WHO'S THE DADDY?3 to 1 odds: fatherhood!David Hartford had met a beautiful and mysterious woman one fateful night, but she'd disappeared before the sunrise. And then he'd seen a picture of the missing woman, very pregnant, and knew he had to find her–for the baby had to be his!David had stolen Athena Ames's heart that night, but they hadn't made a baby. When a chance encounter brought them together again, David demanded the truth. But Athena had secrets to keep and a mystery to solve–how could she tell him she had two identical sisters…and one of them was pregnant?But who was the daddy?

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“The very talented Muriel Jensen has a definite skill for penning heartwarming, humorous tales destined to remain favorites….”

—Romantic Times Magazine

Dear Reader,

Here we are in Dancer’s Beach again with Peg and Charlie, parents of the McKeon brothers from the original WHO’S THE DADDY? series.

Also at the beach are the new residents of Cliffside, a home on the bluff outside of town. They are David Hartford, Trevyn McGinty and Bram Bishop—all recently retired from the CIA. They host a masked ball dressed as the Three Musketeers and cross paths with identical triplet sisters dressed as a Regency miss, a flapper and a southern belle.

Seven months later one of the women is rescued from the Columbia River very pregnant and suffering from amnesia. But which of the three sisters is she? And the question everyone is asking is who’s the daddy?

I hope you enjoy finding the answer!

Best Wishes,

Dear Reader,

November is an exciting month here at Harlequin American

Romance. You'll notice we have a brand-new look—but, of course, you can still count on Harlequin American Romance to bring you four terrific love stories sure to warm your heart.

Back by popular demand, Harlequin American Romance revisits the beloved town of Tyler, Wisconsin, in the RETURN TO TYLER series. Scandals, secrets and romances abound in this small town with fabulous stories written by some of your favorite authors. The always wonderful Jule McBride inaugurates this special four-book series with Secret Baby Spencer.

Bestselling author Muriel Jensen reprises her heartwarming WHO'S THE DADDY? series with Father Fever. Next, a former wallflower finally gets the attention of her high school crush when he returns to town and her friends give her a makeover and some special advice in Catching His Eye, the premiere of Jo Leigh's THE GIRLFRIENDS' GUIDE TO…continuing series. Finally, Harlequin American Romance's theme promotion, HAPPILY WEDDED AFTER, which focuses on marriages of convenience, continues with Pamela Bauer's The Marriage Portrait.

Enjoy them all—and don't forget to come back again next month when another installment in the RETURN TO TYLER series from Judy Christenberry is waiting for you.

Wishing you happy reading,
Melissa Jeglinski
Associate Senior Editor
Harlequin American Romance

Father Fever
Muriel Jensen

www.millsandboon.co.uk

To Jeff and Cheryl at Coffee An'.
Thanks for all the fun over breakfast!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

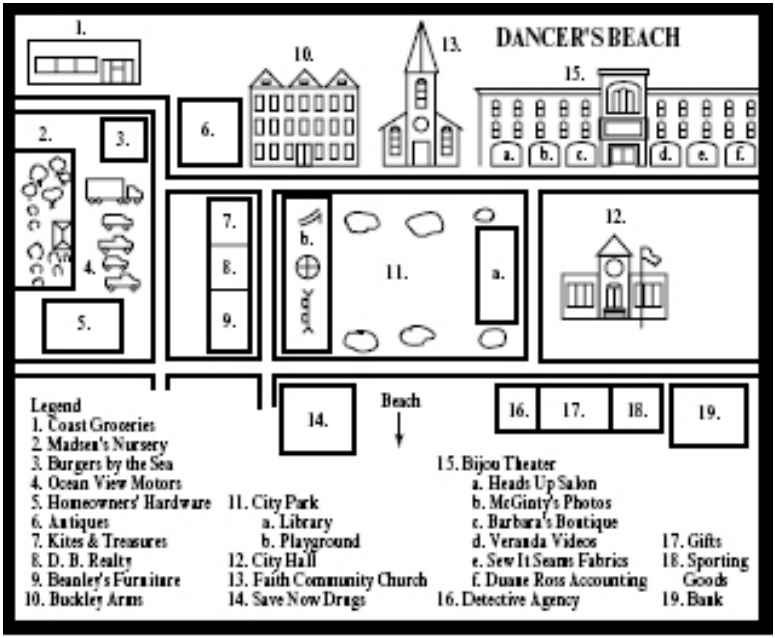
Muriel Jensen and her husband Ron live in Astoria, Oregon, in an old Four-Square Victorian at the mouth of the Columbia River. They share their home with a golden retriever/golden Labrador mix named Amber, and five cats who moved in with them without an invitation (Muriel insists that a plate of Friskies and a bowl of water are not an invitation!)

They also have three children and their families in their lives —a veritable crowd of the most interesting people and children. They also have irreplaceable friends, wonderful neighbors and "a life they know they don't deserve but love desperately anyway."

Books by Muriel Jensen

HARLEQUIN AMERICAN ROMANCE
73—WINTERS BOUNTY
119—LOVERS NEVER LOSE
176—THE MALLORY TOUCH
200—FANTASIES & MEMORIES
219—LOVE AND LAVENDER
244—THE DUCK SHACK AGREEMENT
267—STRINGS
283—SIDE BY SIDE
321—A CAROL CHRISTMAS
339—EVERYTHING
392—THE MIRACLE
414—RACING WITH THE MOON
425—VALENTINE HEARTS AND FLOWERS
464—MIDDLE OF THE RAINBOW
478—ONE AND ONE MAKES THREE
507—THE UNEXPECTED GROOM
522—NIGHT PRINCE
534—MAKE-BELIEVE MOM
549—THE WEDDING GAMBLE
569—THE COURTSHIP OF DUSTY'S DADDY
603—MOMMY ON BOARD*
606—MAKE WAY FOR MOMMY*

610—MERRY CHRISTMAS, MOMMY!*
654—THE COMEBACK MOM
669—THE PRINCE, THE LADY & THE TOWER
688—KIDS & CO.*
705—CHRISTMAS IN THE COUNTRY
737—DADDY BY DEFAULT**
742—DADDY BY DESIGN**
746—DADDY BY DESTINY**
756—GIFT-WRAPPED DAD
798—COUNTDOWN TO BABY
813—FOUR REASONS FOR FATHERHOOD
850—FATHER FEVER**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9. Beanley's Furniture
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14. Save Now Drugs
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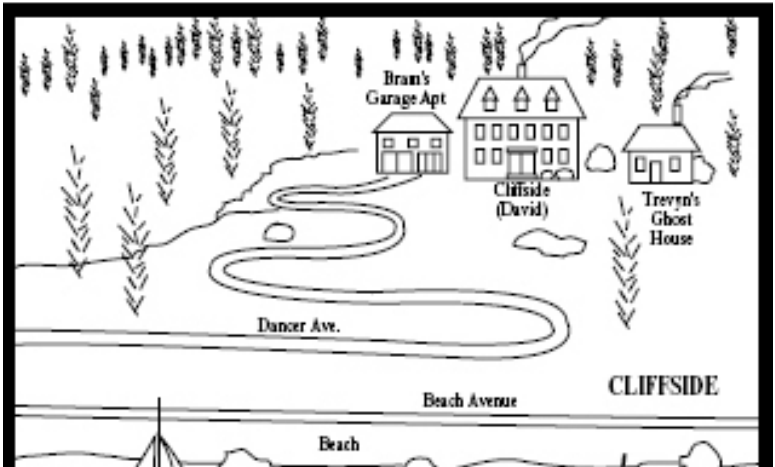
b. McGinty's Photos
c. Barbara's Boutique
d. Veranda Videos
e. Sew It Seams Fabrics
f. Duane Ross Accounting
16. Detective Agency
17. Gifts
18. Sporting Goods
19. Bank


Bram's
Garage Apt
Cliffside
(David)
Trevyn's
Ghost
House
Dancer Ave.
CLIFFSIDE
Beach Avenue
Beach

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Prologue

February

"I feel like someone in a crowd of suspects," Alexis Ames said to her sister Athena, "in the last scene of a murder mystery where the detective gathers everyone into a room and says, 'I've called you all here…'"

Athena smiled at Alexis's gravelly voiced imitation of a fictional detective. But as she looked around at the austere surroundings in the small law firm's conference room, she couldn't make the same connection.

They sat at a long, glass-topped table in a pearl-gray room whose color seemed to bring the gunmetal Oregon winter sky right indoors. Or maybe it was Aunt Sadie's death that made the world a dull, monochromatic place.

Athena shook her head. "Those things usually take place aboard a glamorous yacht, or in a warm library with a fireplace and antique furniture." Here there weren't even draperies on the windows, only chic vertical blinds in the same cold shade.

"And there are only three of us," Augusta, the third sister, argued in a hushed tone. "Hardly a crowd."

Alexis sighed. "I know, I know. And there hasn't even been a murder. Just a…death. Remember how Aunt Sadie always used to say she wanted to die in bed?"

Athena couldn't hold back a smile at the memory. "Yes," she

replied. “And then she’d add, ‘Mel Gibson’s bed.’”

They laughed together for a moment, the first time they’d laughed since meeting at the airport hotel yesterday afternoon.

“I know it’s small comfort,” Alexis said, “but she died doing what she loved. Hawaii was her favorite place in the world. She loved relaxing in Lahaina and taking a plane to Oahu to go shopping for us.”

“Yeah.” Athena was unable to find comfort in anything. A woman in the prime of her maturity at just over sixty should not be entombed in the wreck of a tiny commuter plane at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean.

Sadie Richmond, long retired from a career as a Broadway dancer, had always provided the love, compassion and understanding that her sister—their mother—was incapable of giving. Athena and her sisters had spent spring breaks and summer vacations at her place on the beach where she encouraged them to explore their feelings, their talents and their hopes for the future.

“I can’t believe we’ll never see her again,” Augusta whispered. She was the sensitive one who taught third grade and was in tune with her students. She wore an ankle-length flowered dress and strappy sandals. Her long red hair was piled into a loose bundle, tendrils spilling from her temples and the nape of her neck.

Alexis patted Augusta’s knee. “I’ll paint her portrait for you,” she promised, then smiled ruefully, “if I ever recover my skills.” Alexis was an artist and, if she was to be believed at the moment,

an artist who could no longer paint. But she looked the part in a silky white blouse with billowing sleeves, and black pants and boots. Her hair, the dark-flame shade of red they all shared, fell to the middle of her back in ripples and waves. She wore no bangs and a frown now marred her forehead.

"It's just a slump and you'll get over it. No one can be brilliant all the time." Athena spoke with the same conviction she used in the courtroom. She was the practical one, the one who tried to have the answers.

Alexis gave her a look that said as clearly as words, A lot you know. You don't have an artistic bone in your body. Her eyes swept over Athena's blue suit and simple white blouse, over her hair caught in a thick knot at the back of her neck and added silently, Just look at the way you dress.

Athena didn't bother to argue. Her professional mode of dress helped her hold her own in negotiations and litigations dominated by men. It was an unfortunate truth that women who dressed with any style in the courtroom were often accused of doing so to distract or confuse.

She hadn't expected the severe suits to invade her private life as well, but now that she'd opened her own office, she had very little time for one anyway. And what private time she did have was spent in the company of other lawyers. However unconsciously, the sexless suit seemed to have become who she was.

As she studied her sisters, beautiful and curvaceous and alight

with the gentle qualities of womanhood, she compared their attributes and appearance with her own steely determination to succeed. She felt as though they had acquired the womanliness she'd always admired in Sadie.

She'd wanted to be a lawyer even as a child, but she hadn't imagined that work would be the only thing in her life.

"Whoa!" Alexis whispered as a balding, mustachioed man pushed open the door. "Heads up! It's Poirot!"

The man's mustache was more of a simple brush than Poirot's elaborate handlebar affair, but he was dark and small and close enough in appearance to the fictional detective for them to appreciate the whimsy. Athena was grateful for the light moment considering their sad purpose in being here.

The man walked into the room with a sheaf of papers and stood across the table from the sisters as he introduced himself.

"Good afternoon," he said in slightly accented English that only served to heighten the Poirot effect. "Welcome to Portland. I'm…"

Then he seemed to forget who he was as his eyes went from Alexis to Athena, back to Alexis, on to Augusta, widening with every pass. "I'm, ah…"

"Bernard Pineau," Athena said, taking charge. She'd been born nineteen minutes before Alexis, and thirty-seven minutes before Augusta. She'd always thought of herself as the eldest. "You're Bernard Pineau. Didn't Aunt Sadie tell you we're identical triplets?"

“She did, yes,” he replied with a self-conscious laugh. “But knowing that and seeing it for oneself are two very different things. Please, pardon me for staring.”

Athena nodded. As children, she and her sisters had grown accustomed to the gasps and stares their identical appearances created. But now with careers on opposite coasts and Alexis on another continent, that seldom happened. There were moments when she missed it.

Athena introduced herself, then Lex and Gusty.

Pineau shook hands across the table and took his chair.

“You must be the lawyer from Washington, D.C.,” Pineau guessed, focusing on Athena. She wouldn’t have cared that he’d guessed, except that she knew he’d done it after a glance at her suit jacket—all that was visible above the table. It made her feel morose.

“Sadie was very proud of you,” he added sincerely.

Resentment fell away and she experienced a moment’s comfort. “Thank you.”

He studied the other two women, then smiled at Alexis. “You have the studio in Rome?”

Alexis nodded. “I do.”

“I have your Madonna 4 in my study at home,” he said. “Sadie gave it to me for my birthday. My wife and I treasure it.”

Alexis was surprised. “I’m glad. Aunt Sadie was my self-appointed PR person and one-man sales force.”

“She was.” He turned to Augusta.

“I’m the teacher,” she said. “In Pansy Junction, California. Third grade. I love it.”

He smiled indulgently at her. Augusta always inspired smiles.

Then he folded his hands atop the documents he’d brought with him and asked solicitously, “Would you like coffee before we begin?”

Three heads shook.

“We’ve just had lunch,” Athena explained.

He nodded. “Then, before we begin, let me offer my condolences on the loss of your aunt. I met her just a year ago when we first worked on this will, and I found her to be a most charming and enlightened woman.”

Athena opened her mouth to speak and discovered she had no voice.

“Thank you,” Alexis said. “We did, too.”

Pineau squared the pages on the table and began to read the formal legalese. “I, Sadie Richmond, being of sound mind…”

He read on and Athena and her sisters exchanged grim glances. There was no avarice here, no eagerness to know what Sadie had left to whom. Just a still profound disbelief that she was gone and a willingness to carry out her wishes.

“To Athena,” the lawyer said, turning over a page, “I leave my Tiffany watch with the diamond fleur-de-lis in the hope that looking at it will brighten her tight schedule. I also leave her my aquamarine-and-diamond bar brooch to dress up her serious suits.”

Athena closed her eyes and saw images of her aunt wearing the brooch on the shoulder of a smart black dress, on the lapel of her burgundy wool suit, on the blue blazer she'd worn to the Dancer's Beach Regatta every summer.

Tears welled in Athena's throat but she swallowed them.

"To Alexis," Pineau continued, "I leave my entire collection of berets because she always complimented me on them and has the flair to wear them, herself. And I want her to have the Degas in the upstairs hall because she might have posed for it."

Athena remembered the gilt-framed painting of a ballerina executing a grand jeté and thought the gift appropriate. Alexis always moved as though in ballet slippers.

A tear fell down Alexis's cheek and Augusta covered her hand with her own.

"To Augusta, I leave my doll collection and the Steiff bear she cuddled with when her sisters were too much for her."

Gusty nodded, her lips trembling dangerously. Alexis patted her back.

"I wish the girls to share whatever they would like of my clothes and my jewelry, then donate the rest to a women's shelter. I apologize to them for the paltry contents of my savings account, but they know how I've loved my travels. I wish it and my few stocks to be divided equally among them."

Pineau paused to take a breath.

Alexis and Augusta leaned back in thought and Athena let her mind drift to her favorite memory of Sadie. She was striding

ahead of them up the beach at Cliffside, wearing pedal pushers and a T-shirt, her graying blond hair tied up in a scarf as she led them in the collection of shells and other ocean treasures.

Athena was lost in the moment, unaware that Pineau hadn't covered everything until he said, a little quickly, she thought, "And to David Hartford, I leave Cliffside and all its furnishings."

Athena's eyes flew open. She turned to her sisters and saw the same shocked surprise she felt mirrored in their faces. There was a moment of stunned silence, then a loud and simultaneous "Who?"

"David Hartford," Pineau repeated, tapping the document with the tips of his fingers. "A friend, apparently."

The women stared at one another again. Athena, caught completely off balance, struggled to think.

But Alexis didn't stop to think. "I've never heard of him," she said, leaning forward across the table. "A friend from where? Dancer's Beach?"

Pineau shook his head. "She didn't say where she met him."

"She never mentioned him to us." Augusta looked from one sister to the other. Heads shook confirmingly. "You have to contact him about the will, Mr. Pineau," Athena pointed out, an unidentified but unsettling suspicion forming in the pit of her stomach where her grief for Sadie ached. "You must know where he lives. And why isn't he here?"

"I have contacted him. He lives in Chicago, but he wasn't able to come to the reading. So, I've faxed him everything he has to

know, and transferred the house into his name."

Augusta and Alexis gasped simultaneously.

"When did Aunt Sadie change the will?" Athena asked. "We know that two years ago when we were all together at Christmas, she intended to leave Cliffside to the three of us. Not that we care about possession, but…it was a family home. Who is this guy?"

"This will…" Pineau began.

"What do we know about him?" Augusta interrupted. "I mean, she loved telling us stories about her life in Dancer's Beach. She lived very quietly, except for hosting some local events because Cliffside was so big. I can't believe she'd have become that close to someone without telling us. And if we've never heard of him…"

Pineau shook his head apologetically. "My job isn't to investigate the beneficiaries of a will, just to see that the deceased's wishes are carried out."

"When did she change it?" Alexis asked again.

"As I said before," Pineau replied patiently, "we drew up this will a year ago."

Athena stood in agitation. Alexis got to her feet and began to pace.

"I don't understand," Augusta said from her chair. "Where would she have met this Hartford guy?"

"Maybe on one of her trips," Alexis suggested, stopping in the middle of the carpet. "He's probably one of those gigolos who preys on older women and gets them to sign over their life

savings. Or their house."

"Ladies, I know you're disappointed about Cliffside," Pineau said quietly, "but your aunt was very calm and clearheaded when she made the change. I think she truly wanted Mr. Hartford to have it. And I personally think she was too clever a woman to be fooled by a charlatan."

Athena frowned at him. "But we don't know for certain, do we, because you haven't conducted an investigation of any kind."

Alexis gasped and snapped her fingers. "Maybe he wants Cliffside for the smugglers' stairs!" she said to Athena. "I mean, apart from the fact that it's a wonderful property."

"That's right!" Augusta cried.

Pineau looked puzzled. "What stairs?"

"When we were children," Athena explained, "we discovered a door in the basement at Cliffside that led to a stairway through the cliff down to the beach. Sadie padlocked it, telling us that during Prohibition in Grandpa Richmond's day, booze had been smuggled in that way. Maybe Hartford is planning to put the house to a similar use. Drugs, maybe?"

"Ladies—" Pineau pleaded.

"I know, I know." Athena cut him off. "It's not your job to check him out, but maybe it's ours. Think about what's happened here! Our aunt dies in the crash of a light plane shortly after she wills the family home to a total stranger?"

"It's been a year since she changed the will," Pineau pointed out again, reasonably. "We have no reason to believe the plane

crash wasn't a simple accident. And Hartford wasn't a stranger to her."

She ignored his attempt at reason and turned to her sisters. "Until the authorities can bring up the plane and prove to me that the crash was an accident, I think this Hartford bears looking into. What do you say?"

Augusta nodded. "Let's do it. I took a couple of weeks' leave."

Athena turned to Alexis. "What about you, Lex?"

Alexis shouldered a large soft leather pouch. "My time's my own. I'm in. Where do we start?"

"What's Hartford's address?" Athena asked Pineau

Pineau tapped the document on the table. "As of the moment I notified him, his address is Cliffside, Dancer's Beach, Oregon.

Chapter One

David Hartford surveyed the wide living room of his new home and thought it looked comfortable, if not exactly true to a period or a style. He'd put some of the pieces he'd inherited into storage to make room for some of his own things. When he had time to think about it, he'd decide what to do with them.

It had been a week and a half since Aunty's attorney had called him to let him know he'd inherited a two-acre estate overlooking the Pacific Ocean and he still couldn't quite believe it. He'd grown up in a house three times this size, but it had never been a home, and he'd never felt as comfortable in it as he did here after barely a week.

His inheritance included this twelve-room Colonial Revival home, a guest house, an apartment over a four-car garage, and a small forest of firs, ash and oak tucked around the back of the property in a half-moon embrace. A shaggy lawn stretched thirty yards in front of the property to the edge of the cliff that rose fifteen feet above the ocean. Shrubbery he couldn't identify provided protection from the cliff's edge.

And it was all thanks to the gratitude of a woman he'd never met, a CIA agent code-named Aunty who'd been his phone and radio contact on several jobs for the Company. He'd helped save her life in Africa when she'd been trapped in the path of a rebel advance, but he'd called in mercenaries to bring her out,

so technically, they'd saved her life. That detail hadn't mattered to her, according to Aunty's attorney, who'd notified him of his windfall.

David was grateful, of course, and aware that the gift couldn't have come at a more fortuitous time.

Life as a CIA agent had lost its glamour for him and his team after the fiasco in Afghanistan, and now the three of them were starting over as "civilians."

So the large, comfortable furniture from his Chicago apartment now sat among a little round mahogany table, an old Windsor piano from the turn of the century, a curio shelf that now held his collection of hand-carved decoys. A large armoire removed from the bedroom had become a perfect entertainment center. The attorney had sent him a list of things willed to other beneficiaries and David had those shipped off to him.

He punctuated that observation with a sneeze. He held a folded handkerchief to his nose and thought it ironic that someone who'd survived spring and summer in Illinois as a boy without succumbing to allergies should be felled by the mold and mildew of an Oregon winter. Trevyn McGinty and Bram Bishop walked through the open front door, each with an armload of folding chairs borrowed from city hall's meeting room.

"Are you going to help us?" Trevyn asked, moving on through to the dining room and shouting back over his shoulder, "or are you just going to stand there and congratulate yourself on making points with the mayor of Dancer's Beach just two days after

moving to town?"

Bram followed Trevyn with a tauntingly disparaging glance in David's direction. "He's going to stand there," he said. "He thinks that just because he's letting us live with him for a couple of months that indentures us somehow. Tell us again—" his voice rose as he went into the other room "—how we ended up having to host a party for two hundred people when we know absolutely no one here!"

There was the clatter of metal on metal as they began to open the chairs.

David pocketed his handkerchief and went into the large dining room that accommodated a table that seated twenty. For the purpose of the party, he'd distributed those chairs around the living room and placed the table at the side of the room for buffet service.

He helped place folding chairs. "Because Aunty always hosted the historical society's masked ball every year and her…passing left them high and dry a mere ten days before the party."

They exchanged grim glances. Trevyn and Bram had worked with Aunty, also.

Trevyn sighed and looked around the room. "She was so no-nonsense on the job," he said with a reminiscent smile. "It's weird to think that she had this beautiful home and willingly left it for… what? We were looking for excitement, but what is a sixty-year-old woman looking for?"

"Some kind of fulfillment, maybe," Bram guessed. "You

could tell by the way she worked she wasn't the kind of woman who did nothing but golf."

They were all quiet another moment, then he put a chair in place and asked briskly, "There's no Elk's hall or armory or anything in town where they could have had this affair? They had to have it here because that's the way they've always done it?"

David shook his head. "Invitations had already gone out. Many to out-of-town people who are summer residents of Dancer's Beach. Calling to change locations would have been too complicated. So the mayor stopped by while the two of you were still driving the U-haul in from Chicago and asked me if I'd consider saving their hides. Since all three of us will be doing business in this town in one way or another, it seemed like the sporting thing to do."

Trevyn unfolded the last chair. "What do you know about these historical society types?"

David stood back to survey their work. "Not much, except that I imagine they'll be Mrs. Beasley's vintage—middle sixties—so don't get your hopes up for a lap full of beautiful young things. But they might prove to be potential clients for your photo studio."

"Hope so." Trevyn flattened the seat of a chair in a corner, his expression suddenly serious. "I can't believe Aunty left you all this—or how lucky we are that you're still looking out for us even though we're not in the field anymore."

David moved a floor lamp aside several inches to make room

for the chair. “We’ve been on so many rotten jobs together, it seems like now that we get to live real lives, we ought to at least start out together.”

They’d shared experiences over the past few years that made men closer than brothers. In good times, they’d been an efficient, effective machine that did the government’s dirty work.

In bad times, they’d shared one another’s pain, nursed one another’s wounds, and on a few occasions, saved one another’s lives.

The experiences made transitioning into normal, everyday life difficult. And an exercise best shared with friends. “Well, how come he got the guest house and I got the room above the garage and a daily dose of carbon monoxide?”

Bram was putting him on. He’d done his job fearlessly on their last mission when everything had gone bad on them. He was a couple of years older than Trevyn and David and had seen far more action—too much, maybe—but there wasn’t a selfish bone in his body.

“It keeps you out of the way,” David replied. “You know, like the crazy relative nobody wants to talk about.”

“Would you really rather have the guest house?” Trevyn asked Bram, still serious.

Bram shook his head at Trevyn, then grinned at David. “He’s so easy. No, I don’t want the guest house. I’m very comfortable in my apartment. I don’t need a dark room and space to store all the contraptions you’ve got. I’ve got my office downtown and when

I come home, all I need is room for the television, a coffeepot and a bed."

The three loped out of the house to the truck Bram had used to pick up the chairs from the party supplier. There were another dozen to unload. A pewter sky spit rain and blew a cold wind around them.

"Did I tell you I got a case?" Bram asked as he leaped into the truck to hand chairs down. "It's just a divorce case surveillance, but detective work has to start somewhere."

"At least you found an office and got it open in three days." Trevyn took two chairs in each arm and started backing toward the house. "I've found a photography studio, but it'll be weeks before I get it in good enough shape to open the doors." He turned and hurried into the house with his burden.

David watched him go, concerned about his carefree attitude, so at odds with the burden he carried inside.

"He's going to be all right. Stop worrying," Bram said, handing David down a pair of chairs.

"He won't talk about the mission," David disputed. "That isn't healthy."

Bram grinned at him. "You're a writer," he said. "You have to understand everything. You have to know every little detail and how it relates to every other one. But some of us aren't like that. We just let it be and go with it. He's healing. His nightmares have stopped. He no longer gets times and places confused. Stop worrying."

David walked back to the house with the chairs, thinking Bram was right. The three of them had been living in David's Chicago apartment since their "retirement" two months ago and he and Bram had been awakened half a dozen times by Trevyn's nightmares of that last mission.

David and Trevyn had been paired up by the CIA years ago, the natural combination of a writer and a photographer to seek out intelligence and bring back information. They'd held regular jobs between CIA assignments, David writing a column for the Chicago Tribune, and Trevyn working as a photojournalist. The publisher, an old military man, knew about their part-time work for the government.

On their last mission, they'd been sent into Afghanistan to track Raisu, an infamous terrorist thought to be hiding somewhere in the Paghman Mountains north of Kabul.

Bram, a security expert with fifteen years in the military and five with the Company, had been assigned to keep them safe.

They'd hired a young native man as their guide, and his sister as their translator. Bram hadn't liked their dependence on anyone outside their small unit, but the terrain and the language were difficult and they'd had no choice.

Trevyn had formed a particular attachment to Farah, the translator, and when she'd wanted to go ahead of them to provide a distraction as David and the team approached, Trevyn had refused her. But despite all they'd heard about male dominance in Middle Eastern cultures, it apparently hadn't applied in her

case. She'd gone ahead of them anyway.

The whole thing had gone to hell within a minute of their arrival. She'd been one of the first to die.

Their escape had been a grisly ordeal. When they'd finally reached Pakistan and safety, Trevyn didn't speak for days afterward.

They'd been debriefed, then all three had resigned.

Bram had no life to go back to, and Trevyn, though now pretending to be his old self, had seemed fragile to the two of them. By mutual consent, the three decided to stay together until they could decide what to do with the rest of their lives.

The Chicago Tribune had called David wanting to know if his award-winning social observations column would begin the following week.

As he thought about it now, it was odd how clearly he'd known he could never go back to that column. With wit that had been a gift from his father, and charm that was half natural, half manufactured, he'd written columns three times a week on life in Chicago.

He'd done it kindly, warmly, affectionately, as though life in Middle America was the most important thing in the world.

But since Afghanistan, he was less intrigued and amused by life than he was weary of what people did to each other. He had a perspective—more suited to the novel he'd been working on in his spare moments for the past year and a half. It was based on personal experience but fictionalized to protect the security and

anonymity of the Company.

He found that he had a new confidence, and a new vulnerability that made him at the same time brave and uncertain—a good perspective from which to create a fictional hero.

In the house, Trevyn took the chairs from him and pointed to the large country kitchen that opened off the dining room. “Should we put chairs in there?” he asked. “Just to make sure we have enough seating?”

“Sure.” David pointed to the far end of the kitchen, where a sofa and a lamp made a small reading area. “Put them there, so they won’t be in the caterer’s way.”

Trevyn did so, and when Bram returned with the last of the chairs, he set them up opposite the sofa.

“So, you were telling us,” Bram said with a grimace, “there will be no single women at this do?”

David shrugged. “Maybe. The whole town is invited, so if there are beautiful, unattached women around who have nothing better to do on a rainy Saturday night than attend a party thrown by the historical society, your dream woman might just appear.”

“What’s she like?” Trevyn asked. “Black belt? Rapid-fire pistol champion?”

Bram grinned. “While strength is sexy, I want a woman who makes love not war. I’ve had it with conflict.”

“Amen,” Trevyn agreed. “I want one who finds me irresistible.”

“And on what planet would that be?” David asked.

Trevyn gave him a mirthless smile. “I’d take exception to that, but you’re my landlord. What else do we need to do?”

David shook his head. “Nothing. Go relax for a while. Does the costume fit?”

“Pretty well. The sleeves are a little short, but the ruffles cover it.” He frowned good-naturedly. “I can’t believe I’m doing this for you.”

“You’re doing it for yourself. Remember the historical society people are a good connection for you. Think of all those grandchildren they’ll want you to photograph. Your costume fit, Bram?”

“Yeah,” Bram replied. “Thanks to the fact there are no orangutans in my family, my sleeves fit fine.”

“Funny.” Trevyn headed for the door. “When are the caterers arriving?”

“About an hour before,” David replied. “Six or so.”

Bram followed Trevyn out the door. “Hoping to find your dream girl and a great cook all rolled up into one?” he asked.

Trevyn’s answer was bitten off by the closing door.

David went upstairs to shower, but he hesitated by the master bedroom window to look out on the ocean that stretched to the horizon.

He used to have a dream girl, he thought, as he watched the quiet sheet of gray silk, nothing moving on its surface but one lone seagull bobbing with the waves.

A woman he’d thought filled those requirements had been part

of his life until last summer when she'd left him. She'd been a dramatic brunette, intelligent and sophisticated, and as work driven about her post as women's news editor as he was with his column.

They'd had an ugly fight when his young brothers had come to visit and she'd considered it an imposition on her social schedule. He'd realized then how little he'd meant to her, except as an escort people noticed.

Now he had a completely different vision of the woman he wanted to share his life. Someone warm and soft who could laugh and smile and to whom sophistication didn't mean being scornful of everyone who didn't have it.

But would that kind of woman want him?

He'd changed a lot over the past few years. He had dark places in his soul. He had memories that were hard to live with. He had hatreds.

He tore himself away from the window and headed for the shower, telling himself that Dancer's Beach was his opportunity to change all that. And he had friends to help him—friends who had things they wanted to change, too.

And maybe he'd get lucky about the woman.

It could happen.

Chapter Two

"I want to go on record as saying this is insane," Gusty said from the back seat of a little blue import Athena had rented when they'd first arrived in Portland. "And that I want to know the truth about these guys as much as you do, but I'm just not sure I can carry off the plan."

Athena sighed into the rearview mirror, in no mood for Gusty's naive sense of morality. Most people thought it came from dealing with young children, but Athena had known Gusty had this flawless moral compass since she'd been a child herself. Right now, though, she looked more like a conscience-stricken Scarlett O'Hara, sitting moodily in a corner of the back seat, the hoop skirt of her green dress poufed out around her. She fiddled with the ribbons of the green bonnet in her lap.

Her costume was part of the plan.

"Gus," Athena made herself say patiently. "We have to go to this party, otherwise we'll never know if Aunt Sadie's death was truly an accident. If she gave the house willingly to this Hartford guy, or if she was coerced. You can do this."

"It's dishonest."

"So are they."

Athena had received a fax yesterday from Patrick Connelly, a detective who did work for her office and whom she'd asked to check out David Hartford. After waiting a week with her

sisters in a downtown hotel, she'd found Patrick's fax contained confusing and unsettling news.

David Hartford, thirty-four, graduate of exclusive Claremont School for Boys, of U.C.L.A. with B.A. in Sociology, Chicago Tribune columnist since 1991. Took up residence at Cliffside a week ago, according to public utilities services established in his name. Two friends or associates also in residence.

Trevyn McGinty, 32, B.A. in Journalism from Cornell. Camera bum until hired by Chicago Tribune in '93.

John Bramston Bishop, 37, born in Boston, joined U.S. army at eighteen, served ten years until age twenty-eight. No information until current address.

Athena—strange gaps in more recent information on all three. Part of the reason this took so long. Curious, unexplained absences. For long periods, it's almost as though they cease to exist. Best I could do on short notice.

One more interesting detail. Hartford is hosting the local historical society's annual masked ball fund-raiser, usually held at Cliffside. According to an article in the paper eulogizing your aunt and "canonizing" Hartford, Mayor Beasley of Dancer's Beach asked him to host the party since your aunt's death left the event homeless. He generously agreed. He's either a pillar-of-the-community type anxious to fit right in, or a supremely deft con artist.

Notify if you want me to pursue.

Pat.

“Oh-oh,” Lex had muttered as she read over Athena’s shoulder. “Now there are three of them at Cliffside?”

“What kind of absences, do you suppose?” Gusty asked over Athena’s other shoulder. “I wonder if they went to prison, or something.”

Athena shook her head. “That would be on record. It’s the criminals who don’t get caught who know how to cover their tracks. Damn it.” She’d hoped the information would be more definitive so she could contact the police and charge the new owner of Cliffside with something substantial.

Obviously, she was going to need more information before she could do that, and it was going to take a hands-on approach.

“We’re going to the costume party,” Athena had said authoritatively.

“Oh, no,” Augusta had groaned.

But Alexis was in agreement and, as had happened throughout their childhood, Augusta had been forced to go along or be left behind.

They’d reached the coast by noon the following day, and found a costume shop in Lincoln City not far from Dancer’s Beach. The chatty clerk told them the historical society party was responsible for the thin selection of costumes left. Then she added, without realizing how they valued the information, “The hosts will be dressed as the Three Musketeers.”

“We’re not going to get away with this,” Augusta complained anew. “Some of these people might remember us as children.”

“The masks will conceal our identities,” Athena argued confidently. “We came here a few times as adults, but usually on such quick visits, we never even got to town. If anyone saw us all together, or if we were dressed the same, they might recognize us, but we’ll be dressed differently and our eyes will be covered.”

Alexis frowned. “What difference does it make if we’re recognized or not?”

Athena glanced impatiently at her sister. “If we’re recognized, then Hartford and his friends will know who we are and whatever information they might have shared with us is down the tubes.”

Alexis made a face. “And you think if they don’t know who we are, they’ll eagerly tell us they’ve coerced an old woman into leaving Hartford her house?”

“No,” Athena replied with a huff, “but if they’re being hit on by women who flatter them and hang on their every word, they might loosen up and let information slip.”

Gusty groaned, “I hate this.”

“Got to give you credit,” Alexis said, patting Athena’s shoulder. “That’s a plot worthy of Mom’s manipulative schemes.”

Athena bristled but remained calm. She had a lot to do tonight, and she couldn’t do it with half her mind distracted by old sibling rivalries.

Then Alexis continued. “You remind me a little of her lately with that severe expression when you’re…”

That did it. Athena pulled over, the surprised driver behind her leaning on his horn as he swerved around her on the wet road.

Athena glowered at Alexis. “I bear no resemblance whatsoever to Mom,” she said loudly. “But if you think so, you can just get out of the car!”

Alexis blinked at the outburst. “Calm down. It was a harmless obser—”

“You’re never harmless!” Athena shouted. “You’re always likening me to Mom in subtle little ways and you know I hate it!”

Alexis’s mouth settled into a grim line. She unlocked her door. “Fine,” she said stiffly. “I’ll just…”

As she tried to open the door, Gusty reached over the seat and locked the door. “Come on, Athena,” she said quietly. “Lex didn’t mean it.” She gave their sister a scolding look. “You know how she is.”

“I don’t,” Alexis retorted. “How am I?”

“Determined to blame us,” Gusty said quietly, “because Mom wasn’t the mother you wanted her to be. You were always sure that if it had been just you alone, she’d have loved you. You think we crowded that out, but we didn’t. She just didn’t have love in her.”

Alexis folded her arms and stared out the windshield. “That’s a little oversimplified.”

Augusta shrugged. “Most things that are big on the outside come down to one very simple thing on the inside.”

Athena, a little startled by that profound observation, leaned back with a sigh as traffic sped past.

“You pick on Athena most,” Augusta went on, “because Mom

loved her most—or, at least as much as she was able to love anyone. She thought you were a dreamer and I was a coward. She had no use for us."

Athena closed her eyes, trying to blot out the memory of that beautiful woman who'd failed them at every turn.

"What does it say about us," she asked no one in particular, "that she still dictates our behavior toward one another after all these years?"

"That we're normal," Augusta replied. "A lot of people don't have anyone to work through the past with."

Alexis frowned at her. "I hate it when I'm angry and you just flatten out the source of it with logic and understanding."

Augusta smiled in the face of her exasperation. "No, you don't. You really love me and Athena, you just deal with your own rejection by trying to reject us in return. But we're here for you whether you like it or not."

Alexis turned to Athena, a new alliance formed in their amazement over Augusta. "Where did this Pollyanna come from?" She shook her head. "I can't in all conscience leave you alone with her."

Athena felt the turmoil always created inside her by the mention of their mother settle down into the acceptance she always thought she'd mastered but hadn't quite.

"Okay. But, I'm not like her." She didn't have to specify who she meant.

"I know," Alexis replied. "I'm just…jealous."

Athena raised an eyebrow in astonishment. “Of what?”

“Your ability to get on with it. I still wonder all the time what I did wrong.”

“The same thing we all did,” Athena replied. “We challenged her position as most beautiful and adored. We didn’t mean to, but we were born with her looks and we were children. We stole the show. She couldn’t forgive us for that.”

“And she couldn’t love us,” Augusta finished. “It’s nothing we did. The sooner we all come to terms with that, the sooner we find relationships, let love into our lives. Move on.”

“After we get the truth out of the Cliffside gentlemen,” Athena said. She reached a hand toward each of her sisters. “Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

“Agreed.”

They stacked hands in the ritual sharing of an oath—in the tradition of the Three Musketeers.

ATHENA STOOD on Cliffside’s wide doorstep, tugging at the neckline of her Regency period gown. Her hair was partially concealed by a beaded cap that left only a few red tendrils showing.

The cut of her gown made her bosom swell above the low neckline and she was wishing that the costume had come with a shawl.

Lex pulled her hand away.

Athena held up her white silk mask while Lex tugged down on the neckline of her dress. “I thought you wanted him to be so

captivated by you that he'll tell you everything. Showing bosom does that to a man."

"Easy for you to say." Athena indicated the relatively high neckline of her simple, slip-style flapper dress. "You're covered."

Lex put her fingertip to the hem of the dress that fell above midthigh. "If I showed any more leg, this would be a chemise!"

Gusty fidgeted with the strings of her bag and looked anxiously toward the window where revelers could be seen laughing and dancing.

"Relax!" Athena ordered. "You're going to be fine. You look so sweet and innocent, the one you get will spill his guts to you."

The door was opened by a pretty but considerably mature Marie Antoinette who'd eaten a little cake herself.

She looked first surprised, then smiled widely. "You must be those pretty girls in the chamber of commerce office!"

Athena, Lex and Gusty smiled in unison.

Marie Antoinette opened the door wider, inviting them inside.

Athena felt a virulent stab of nostalgia. The house was so familiar and…not. She looked around her and recognized the armoire that had been upstairs, the little round mahogany parlor table. But the sofa and chairs were new, as was the artwork on the walls.

And the duck decoys.

Nostalgia turned to anger—and that steadied her and brought her back to her purpose. What kind of a mean man would hunt ducks?

The same kind who'd cheat a helpless old woman out of her house!

"Food's in the dining room." Marie Antoinette pointed with a fan that appeared to be Japanese. Then she tapped it against her chin as she surveyed the room. "Let's see if I can find you one of our hosts."

"Oh, don't worry about us," Athena said. "You go back to the party."

"I can't just leave you…" she began to protest, then the doorbell rang.

Lex shooed her toward the door. "Go. We'll be fine."

"I'm not fine," Gusty said under her breath when Marie Antoinette went to the door. "I'm terrified!"

"Just stick to the plan," Athena said patiently. "Make friends with him, try to draw him out. If it doesn't work, simply wander away. We'll all meet back at the car at the bottom of the driveway."

Lex closed a cold hand over Athena's arm. She pointed discreetly toward the far edge of the living room where a Musketeer was surrounded by a pair of cowgirls, Abraham Lincoln, and Star Trek: The Next Generation's Captain Picard.

"There's one," she whispered.

"Go, Gusty," Athena said. "Before you lose your nerve."

Gusty closed her eyes, drew a deep breath, gathered up her skirts and floated off in his direction.

Lex turned to Athena in surprise. "She did it! I didn't think

she'd do it!"

"Of course she did it. She always comes through for us. She's just not as foolish as we are. Look!"

Athena turned her sister toward the kitchen from which a Musketeer emerged with a champagne glass in each hand. Without prompting, Lex placed herself in his path. "Hello!" she said. "Is one of those for me?"

The Musketeer handed her the glass and gave her his full attention as she tucked her hand in his arm and began to chatter as they walked toward the sofa.

Athena wandered through the dining room, then the kitchen, in search of the third Musketeer. Her heart was pounding in her chest. Though she'd denied it to Gusty, this scheme was chancey, but since the direct approach wouldn't work, she couldn't think of any other way to find out who David Hartford was, why Sadie had left him her home, and whether or not he'd had anything to do with her death.

DAVID TOOK ANOTHER antihistamine, knowing it would do nothing to combat the exhaustion he felt. After being up half the night getting ready for the party, a pill that would make him even drowsier was the last thing he needed. But he'd been sneezing nonstop since before the party started half an hour ago, and he was afraid he was besmirching the heroic image of the literary Musketeer.

He replaced his itchy wig, adjusted his beard and mustache and put on the mask. Then, with a flourish to put himself back

in character, donned his hat.

He was halfway down the stairs when he spotted her.

From his vantage point some distance above her, all he could see was red hair trapped in some kind of beaded net, the tip of a pert little nose, and the soft, beautiful swell of breasts rising out of the top of her dress. The breath caught in his throat and his heart lurched. For a moment he couldn't move. All he could do was stare down on her and take in the exquisite perfection of the view.

Then she turned as though she sensed his presence and caught his eye.

Not that he could see hers, or she his—not behind the masks. But there was something in the way she turned to look up at him, something in the small smile that curved her lips that told him she'd been waiting for him.

Probably not deliberately, but now that she'd seen him, she wanted to know him. Just as he wanted to know her.

He walked down the stairs and around the railing to where she stood. He removed his hat, again with a flourish, and gave her the bow he'd seen in movies.

"Mademoiselle," he said. "D'Artagnan at your service."

She smiled teasingly. "Technically, D'Artagnan wasn't one of the 'three' Musketeers."

He made a tsking sound. "But we're not being technical tonight, we're being fanciful."

"My apologies, monsieur." She curtsied, arms gracefully held

out. “I am…Constance.”

Well. D’Artagnan’s love. She was willing to play his game.

And the rest of her—what he could see of her—was just as beautiful as his aerial view had been.

Her face was oval shaped, her lips like a small heart above a pointed little chin. She wore a black ribbon with a cameo on a slender neck fringed with fiery red tendrils of hair that had escaped the beaded headpiece.

He peered into her mask. “Blue or green eyes?” he asked. “Ah. Blue. Dark blue. But no freckles with that hair?”

She laughed lightly. He loved the sound of it.

“No, mercifully,” she replied. “Though there are a few on my back.”

“You must show me,” he teased.

At which point she turned and obligingly lowered her head, revealing slender shoulders dusted with little honey-colored dots.

It was all he could do to stop himself from lowering his lips to a small scar he saw there. He’d been celibate a long time, but he hadn’t realized it had been this long.

“Are you hungry, Constance?” he asked briskly.

He saw her blink once. “Famished,” she replied.

“Then come with me.” He tucked her arm into his and walked her toward the buffet table in the dining room. He handed her a plate.

The spread was impressive. There were large succulent prawns on ice, fancy meat and pastry roll-ups, several fruit salads,

vegetable sticks and luscious chocolates.

While she pondered the table, he went into the kitchen to snatch two glasses and open a bottle of champagne. He returned to find her plate holding a very modest amount of shrimp and raw vegetables.

He led the way back to the stairs, walked halfway up, then settled them comfortably on a carpeted stair, letting his legs stretch down to make room for hers.

"Tell me, Constance," he said, placing the glass on the stair and pouring champagne, "Are you a member of the historical society?"

She bit a shrimp in half, then shook her head as she chewed. "No. But I'm glad I happened to be here for the party."

"You don't live in Dancer's Beach?"

"I'm…visiting."

"Family?"

"Friends."

"Friends are important," he said. "I value mine."

She nodded. "The other two Musketeers?"

He laughed. "You noticed. I guess the costumes are corny, but we saw them and sort of related, I guess."

"To the fight against despotic evil?"

"Nothing so noble," he denied candidly. "To the camaraderie, the tankards of ale, the wenching."

She tsked. "Wenching isn't healthy."

"Yeah, well, like a lot of men, I talk more than I do."

He drank his champagne to cover his close observation of her as she admired the elegantly carved stairway. He was trying to imagine her without the mask.

"I don't recall that the Musketeers had such elegant surroundings," she said.

"Mmm." He refilled her glass, then his own. "When we're not Musketeering, we need someplace comfortable to be."

"But this is so big."

"I know. It needs children, parties."

"Do you have them?"

He smiled. "The children? No. No wife yet, either, but I'm looking."

"Ah." She took another bite of prawn. "The prospective Mrs. D'Artagnan might be here tonight." She pointed with her glass toward a very attractive woman dressed as Cleopatra. "The Queen of Egypt is very fetching."

He glanced at the woman, agreed with a nod, then turned back to his plate. "But there are all those palace intrigues and I understand she has something going with the Emperor of Rome. Are you single?"

She nodded absently, then asked, "Do you know anything about the history of this wonderful house?"

"Just a little," he replied. He didn't want to talk about the house, he wanted to talk about her. And him. "It was built before the turn of the century by someone who married into the Buckley family that founded Dancer's Beach."

“It’s nice to have a house with history. Are you the owner?”

“I’ve just recently moved in with a couple of friends.” All he could think about was how beautiful this woman was, even with half her face covered. “We’re not very settled yet, but we’re working on it.”

“What do you do, Mr…?”

“D’Artagnan,” he replied, liking the mystery. He didn’t have to share his past, his fears, his regrets. “I’m a defender of France, a—”

She put a hand on his arm to stop him and he felt the small, sizzling jolt of it go right to his heart.

“No,” she said seriously. “What do you really do?”

There was a subtle urgency in her voice that alerted him to something, he wasn’t sure what.

But she smiled sweetly at him, and he decided it was the sudden rise in volume of the room’s noise level. Too many years as a secret agent had left him with a certain paranoia that was difficult to shake.

The musicians had arrived and set up in the conservatory off the living room. Their tuning up rivaled the laughter and conversation of the hundred or so guests moving through the first floor.

A mellow mood settled over him and suddenly the last place he wanted to be with this woman was wedged on a stair in a room grown so loud that conversation was becoming difficult.

“Will you come upstairs with me?” he asked.

It wasn't until he saw the flash in her eyes, even behind the mask, that he realized how that abrupt question must have sounded.

"No, no, no," he assured her quickly. "I meant upstairs to the sitting room. I can't even hear myself think down here."

She continued to look suspicious.

Oh, no, he thought. She'd been so warm and interested in what he had to say a moment ago. That careless question couldn't mean the end of what had seemed so promising.

He remembered her interest in the house—though he was suddenly having a little difficulty focusing on the details that might interest her—and said quickly, "And I have more to tell you."

"About what?" she asked a little stiffly.

"About the house. About…why I'm here."

She sat still for one more moment, then she picked up her plate and stood. "All right," she said. "I'd love to hear more."

AT LAST! Athena thought. The prospect of information she could use!

She preceded him up the stairs, then waited at the top for him to take the lead. He'd left the little reading alcove near the head of the stairs, she noticed, a half-moon-shaped spot where the railing looped out to look down on the floor below.

Her aunt's cane-seated rocker was gone, but in its place was a high-back leather chair and matching ottoman. The stained glass lamp depicting birds in flight, which she'd always admired as a

child and had looked forward to sitting beside one day, stood nearby.

But D'Artagnan was moving along the corridor to a room at the far end. They passed several bedrooms on the way, but she knew that the sitting room he was heading for connected to the master bedroom.

His step was unsteady, she saw, as he changed course ever so slightly to avoid collision with the doorway. She wondered what accounted for that. He'd had several glasses of champagne while they were sitting on the stairs, but the glasses were small. He hadn't eaten, though, and champagne did have more of a kick than other types of alcohol.

There was a green futon where the gold brocade settee had been. Her aunt used to read them bedtime stories in this room when she and her sisters were very small, then they would all scamper off to their own bedrooms.

She put her plate on a low bamboo table and sat down.

He refilled their glasses, sat beside her on the futon, then raised his glass to hers. "To new discoveries," he said.

"Discoveries?" she questioned.

He clicked the rim of his glass to hers. "You. I've been looking for you."

She felt a moment's trepidation. Did he know her plan? He couldn't possibly. "You have? Why?"

He put a hand to the beaded headpiece that covered her hair and touched gently. "Because I need you," he whispered,

suddenly urgent, intense. “Where…have you been?”

There was sincerity in what she could see of his eyes. Tenderness in his touch. Response rose in her, instinctive and as urgent as he sounded.

She put her glass down and reminded herself sharply of why she was here. And that this could be the man who’d coerced her aunt out of her home, possibly even caused her death. At the very least, he was one of Hartford’s friends. She had to know more.

She took a prawn from her plate and put it to his lips. “I think you need something to eat,” she said. “Come on. Take a bite.”

He nipped the edge of the prawn with his teeth and drew it into his mouth. “I don’t remember these being this good,” he said, “until you touched them.”

“You were going to tell me about the house.” She drank from her glass to encourage him to drink his, on the principle of in vino veritas.

He obliged her. “It’s a place,” he said, his voice very quiet as he concentrated on her, “for lots of children. For visiting grandparents. For friends to sleep over and for club meetings and loud Christmas parties.”

For a moment she couldn’t reply. She’d always thought that, too, but as long as she’d been coming here, it had housed only Aunt Sadie and a cook-housekeeper. She’d looked forward to herself and her sisters and their families giving it the bursting-at-the-seams hilarity it deserved.

But did he own it? Was he Hartford? “Then, it’s your home?”

she asked.

He didn't seem to have heard her.

"I never had that," he went on. He took her glass from her and put it with his on the table. He sloshed a little and she reached forward instinctively to mop up the liquid with a napkin, but he stopped her, catching her hand in his and leaning her back into his other arm.

"My house was empty. Of everything. Three times bigger than this but…" He sighed and closed his eyes for a moment. "No laughter. No music. No voices in the dark."

Athena was struck by that description. She could hear the silence he described. And for one surprisingly clear moment, could imagine a small boy alone in a big, dark house, surrounded by that silence.

She could feel his loneliness.

He tugged at her headpiece. "Can we take this off?" he asked.

She forced her mind away from him and back to what she was trying to do here. She pulled off the headpiece and let her hair fall.

"It's…beautiful," he said softly, pulling her into his arms and rubbing his cheek against it. She was beginning to lose her focus. She didn't want to know that he'd had an empty, lonely childhood. She didn't want to feel sympathy for this man.

She wanted to know if he owned the house, and if so, how he'd gotten it and whether or not he'd had anything to do with the plane crash that killed Sadie.

“D’Artagnan!” she said sharply, for want of his real name.

“Here, Constance,” he said, falling onto his back and bringing her with him. “I’m yours.” He held her face in both his hands and kissed her.

He smelled of toothpaste and champagne and an herbal aftershave. He was ardent and tender at the same time, and even in this slightly tipsy state, he was completely competent and masterful.

Then, while she was distracted by her own loss of equilibrium even though she was the sober one, he slipped up her mask and smiled as he looked into her face.

“I knew it,” he whispered. “Beautiful. Beautiful.” Then he winced, closed his eyes and muttered a quiet expletive.

She pushed up against his shoulders. “What?” she asked in concern.

He ran a hand over his face. “Allergy…medication,” he said, shaking his head as though trying to clear it. “Champagne. Bad.” He expelled a sigh as he held on to her with one hand, trying to sit up.

She tried to help by pulling on his arm but didn’t have sufficient leverage. He caught a fistful of her slip, exposed by her awkward position, and tried to draw himself up with it, but the combination of medication and alcohol was too strong and he fell backward, ripping off a large piece of silk.

Athena punched his shoulder once. “Wake up!” she demanded. “I want to talk to you!”

His eyes opened languidly and he caught her fist and kissed it. Then he was out like a light.

She could have wept with frustration.

She reached for his mask, wanting at least to know what he looked like, sure that would help her somehow. But she heard voices on the other side of the door. And it wasn't locked.

She looked at the state of her costume, her host and the fact that she wasn't even invited to this party, and decided that retreat was the wisest course of action.

At a knock on the door and a questioning "Hello?" she bolted, heading for the French doors that she knew led out to a veranda with stairs down to the backyard. Thanks to the rainy February night, the party would not have spilled outside.

She heard the sitting room door open when she was halfway down the stairs and ran through the darkness without looking back. She knew the way. She'd run down this road where she'd left the car a hundred times as a child.

But never with a man's kisses stinging her lips, and a piece of her slip still caught in his hand.

Chapter Three

September

Where did he go from here?

David reread the three paragraphs on his monitor for the sixth time.

Jake stared moodily out the back window of the cab as it made the turn to Janie's bungalow. He hadn't had a letter in months, but then he hadn't written her, either. Life had been too hard, too dark to chronicle it for her.

The cab pulled up in front of 722 Bramble Lane. Jake paid the driver and stepped out.

Janie was sitting on the front steps with a cup of coffee and a book. She looked up at the slam of the car door, froze for a moment, then dropped the book and the coffee.

The cursor blinked at the indent on the next paragraph as he waited for inspiration.

She ran into his arms?

He ran into hers?

She walked inside and slammed the door?

Jake pounded on the door?

David hadn't a clue. He was writing the last chapter of his novel, trying to make his hero's personal dreams come true after the hell he'd put him through in the previous three hundred pages.

But David couldn't guess how Janie would react after she'd

been skillfully wooed, willingly seduced, then left to fend for herself while Jake answered the CIA's call after assuring her he was through with the work.

As he'd done at least once a day for months, he thought back to the costume party last February, and the woman who'd appeared in his living room like the realization of a dream.

He remembered her smile, the shape of her chin, snippets of their conversation. There were gaps in his memories. The champagne, the antihistamine and only four hours of sleep the night before had combined to knock him on his butt, but he recalled one crystal clear glimpse of her.

A heart-shaped face. Eyes the color of his favorite chambray shirt. A smile that tripped his pulse. And breasts that spilled out of her Empress Josephine dress like exotic blooms.

He could close his eyes now and catch the rose-and-spice scent of her that had clung to him when he'd awakened in the sitting room. He'd been alone on the futon with part of her slip caught in his fist and the taste of her on his lips.

He couldn't remember what had happened, but he could imagine. The first few minutes of their meeting were clear in his memory—and he'd been plotting her seduction since then.

He remembered taking her upstairs, pouring more champagne, taking her in his arms and…had he told her about his lonely childhood, or had he just dreamed that? He couldn't be sure.

But he wished he could be sure he hadn't hurt her, offended

her, upset her.

He'd tried to find her, but without a name or any idea what she did or who the friends were she was visiting, it had been impossible.

Even Mrs. Beasley hadn't known who she was, though she remembered the dress. She'd arrived with friends, she said, and that was all she knew.

David got up from the computer and went downstairs to the kitchen to pour a cup of coffee and read the editorial page and his horoscope. He forced himself to write three pages every morning before allowing himself that luxury. Otherwise, he'd find a dozen excuses to keep him from the computer.

He'd submitted a full synopsis and three chapters of the novel to an agent in New York, primarily as a way to make himself finish it.

Writing columns, though putting him under the stress of three weekly deadlines, had been easy compared to writing fiction. And in a way, his work as a government agent had been the same. He'd had a clear subject, his own observations and feelings to draw from, input from other people.

In writing fiction, he sat there all alone, except for the demanding blink of the cursor. There were no source materials. Everything came out of his heart or his head and usually lived there behind closed doors, resisting his every effort to force them open.

When the doors did open, the material came at him

haphazardly. It made him hurt, made him laugh, made him angry, made him wish he'd chosen to do anything but be a writer.

Until he put just the right words together and made a nebulous thought clear in a beautiful way. And then it was all right. He was all right.

But every morning was a fresh struggle. Every day he had to figure out just how he'd done it the day before.

He poured some Colombian roast into a plain brown mug and carried it to the living room coffee table where he'd left the paper.

He turned on the television for the noise. Dotty, his housekeeper, was away for a few days, Trevyn was somewhere in a remote spot of the Canadian mountains, taking pictures for a calendar, a commission he earned every year. With Bram in Mexico on a case for his already thriving detective agency, Cliffside was quiet as a tomb.

He folded back the editorial page as the weather report promised another week of Indian summer for the Oregon coast. Then the newscaster's voice said, "We'll show this item one more time for those of you who are joining us late or missed last night's report. This woman was found in the Columbia River off Astoria by a pilot boat. She's in fair condition at Columbia Memorial Hospital in Astoria, but cannot remember her name, where she lives, or how she ended up in the water. The Coast Guard reported no capsized boats or distress calls."

David looked up from the paper, his attention snagged by the story—and felt his heart stall in his chest. He got up, knocked

over his coffee in the process and stood stock-still in shock.

The grainy photo of the woman remained on the screen while the newscaster pleaded for anyone who knew this woman to contact the Astoria police.

The photo showed a woman on a stretcher, long red hair wet and lank against the pillow, her eyes closed. Her features were difficult to distinguish, but he knew the shape of that face, the delicate point of the chin. It was Constance! And her stomach mounded up under the blanket covering her, clearly in a very advanced state of pregnancy.

His heart hammered its way into his throat. Oh, God.

In his fuzzy memories of that February night, he saw her lying atop him, her hair free of the confining headpiece. He'd been filled with lust for her and she'd been so warm and responsive.

Though he struggled to remember, he still couldn't recall what had happened after that.

Until he awakened later that night with part of her slip in his hands and her scent clinging to him.

"If anyone has any information about this woman, please call the Astoria police."

After all this time! After all his efforts to find out who she was! Pregnant and with amnesia?

He tucked the pad under his arm, grabbed his keys, his cell phone and his jacket as he raced out to the garage. He climbed into the silver-blue sedan between Trevyn's truck and Bram's Jeep and dialed the number from the broadcast before racing

down the road to the highway.

His conversation with the officer to whom his call was transferred was surreal.

"I'm calling about the young woman fished out of the Columbia River last night," he said, trying to sound calm rather than the way he really felt.

"Your name, sir?"

"David Hartford from Dancer's Beach. Is she all right?" he demanded.

"I believe so. You know who she is?"

"Yes." He knew who she was. She had walked out of his dreams, lived in his heart.

"And what's her name?"

"I…ah…don't know."

"But I thought you knew her."

"I do. She came to a party at my home. But we were all wearing…masks." It wasn't until he got to the last word in his explanation that he realized what this must sound like to the officer. "It was a fundraiser," he added lamely, "for the historical society."

"I see. And she didn't tell you her name?"

"No, I was dressed as a Musketeer and she…" He could feel his credibility diminishing. "No, she didn't."

"I see. Then, how do you feel you can help?"

He hadn't really considered that. He'd just wanted to see her. "I can take care of her," he said, "until you find out who she is."

"We can't release her into your custody, sir, if you're not a relative."

"But you don't have a relative if you don't know who she is! What'll become of her when she's ready to leave the hospital?"

David was at the highway now and had to concentrate to turn into the morning rush-hour traffic.

Fortunately the officer didn't have an answer for that until David was comfortably ensconced in the stream of cars driving north.

"I'll have to look into that for you, sir."

"Thank you," David said. "I'll be there in three hours."

"It's a long drive from Dancer's Beach, sir. Take your time. We'll be here."

ATHENA SAT IN THE BACK of a cab taking her from the Astoria Airport at the Coast Guard Air Station to Columbia Memorial Hospital. She folded her arms against the need to hold on to the front seat and shout "Faster! Faster!"

She couldn't believe that she'd seen her sister on the news, pale and limp and pregnant, dragged out of a river like an old boot. She couldn't imagine what had happened.

And she wasn't entirely sure which sister this was. She and Alexis and Augusta talked on the telephone once a week, but she hadn't seen either of them since their masquerade party fiasco in February. They'd met up again at the car that night as planned, both Lex and Gusty convinced that the Musketeers could not have been involved in anything illegal.

“He was too considerate,” worldly Lex had insisted of her Musketeer.

“Too…sweet,” Gusty had sighed.

The following day, they’d all returned home and Athena had spent the next month determined to find incriminating information on David Hartford. She’d hounded Patrick until he’d used every last source he knew, and still his results were unsatisfactory. He could find nothing on Hartford or his friends to take to the police.

“Hartford seems to be a paragon of virtue and journalistic skill, Bishop was decorated several times in the army, and McGinty was simply a drifter when he wasn’t taking brilliant pictures.”

“But what about the gaps in time you can’t account for?” she’d asked.

He’d sighed. “I’ve done everything, Athena. It’s just not there.”

“But how can that be? I thought with all our information on the Internet, everyone’s life story was vulnerable to everyone else’s scrutiny.”

“I don’t know. I’ll keep looking, but be prepared for it to take a while.”

That had been seven months ago.

Athena was trying to accept the situation, to convince herself that their aunt had left the house to Hartford just because she’d wanted to.

And then she’d watched the ten-o’clock news while on her

treadmill and stared at her sister's face on television. But the photo was grainy, though a very distinct pregnancy was clear. She'd heard her own little cry of surprise.

She'd called Gusty and gotten no answer. And there was no one at the school at that hour.

Then she'd called Lex in Rome and the message on her answering machine said—in English and in Italian—that she was off on a sketching trip to try to reinspire herself and would be out of touch for a week. Alexis, in a creative mode, always sought privacy.

So, who'd been pulled out of the river? The picture had been so unclear, and even under good conditions she and her sisters could misidentify one another from a distance.

And what on earth had whoever-it-was been doing in Astoria, Oregon? And pregnant?

Athena had called the hospital to say she was the sister of the mystery woman, and canceled the next few days' appointments. She'd taken the red eye to Portland, then an early-morning commuter flight from Portland to Astoria.

She had no love life, she told herself, but she had a family life that was complicated enough to keep four people busy.

The cab pulled up to the covered main entrance of the hospital. Athena paid the driver, then leaped out while he retrieved her bag from the trunk. She ran to the main desk, told the clerk who she was, and was treated to one startled moment of staring.

“We’ve been expecting you, Miss Ames,” the clerk said, then called someone. A policeman appeared a moment later. He was tall and slender and probably in his late thirties. “Officer Holden,” he said, hands resting on the creaky leather of his belt. “Would you come with me, please?”

“I’ll watch your bag,” the clerk promised.

Athena handed it over the counter.

“It’ll be right back here when you return.”

“Is my sister okay?” Athena asked the officer as she followed him. “Last night’s news report said she was in satisfactory condition.”

“She…was fine when the nurse looked in on her at 6:12 a.m.,” he replied, a little evasively, Athena thought.

“You say that as though you think her condition might have changed,” she said as she chased his long steps down the hall.

“Well, I think what’s happened suggests that she was feeling much better.”

“What do you mean? What’s happened?”

He pushed open the door to Room 115. Inside was an empty, unmade bed.

“She seems to have run away,” Officer Holden said.

Athena stared at the empty room, sunshine streaming in through the window and across the rumpled bedclothes, and felt her heart sink like an anchor.

“You must be her twin,” the officer said. “I spoke to her briefly last night, and though she looked a little the worse for her

experience—you're identical."

Athena heard the question though her brain wasn't focused enough to process an answer. She felt herself nod—yes, they were identical—but her mind was occupied with more important questions about what had happened. Why did she leave? Where would she go? And who was it—Gusty or Lex?

And the most nagging question if not the most important—who'd fathered her sister's baby, and why hadn't she told her sisters about it?

Then she heard a man's voice speaking to Officer Holden and looked up, thinking it was the doctor.

But it wasn't. This man wore jeans and a gray cotton sweater. He looked grim until he caught sight of her, then a smile smoothed the worry lines on his forehead. He came toward her and caught her arms, his grip firm as he pulled her to him. "You're all right!" he said, wrapping his arms around her. "You looked so pale and weak on television, I thought…"

She stood in limp surprise in his arms, then he stiffened suddenly and held her away from him. A new frown appeared between his eyes as he looked her over. "You're not pregnant," he said in what sounded like confusion.

He looked into her eyes and she felt the contact like a physical touch somewhere deep inside where she already felt lost. "I don't understand."

Frankly, neither did she.

"Miss Ames," the officer said, "this is David Hartford, an

acquaintance of your sister. Mr. Hartford, Athena Ames, our mystery woman's twin."

Hartford! The name reverberated in her brain while she forced a polite smile and shook his hand. The Musketeer who owned Sadie's house!

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