

Chapter One

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Speeding away from the island, the boat bumped over the surface of the sea as though it were a washboard. The violent jolts and loud slaps, steady and rhythmical, drove the Mozart out of her head and stilled her fingers' movement on the imaginary keyboard she had made of the railing. She loved the wild violence of the wind tearing through her hair, whipping into her eyes. It helped her forget that stifling house, clearing her head of its suffocating opulence, its demand that all speech be muffled, all laughter be smothered. As far as she could tell only her music ever pierced its hush. The staff crept about so silently, their voices so discreetly lowered, that she could not imagine that any of them had the faintest breath of life in them. How different from her grandmother's house, where people sang and laughed and joked—outside her grandmother's presence, of course, but perceptibly, all over the house—and where there had been those who would tease her, making her giggle and shriek until her throat was too full of phlegm to talk. There were none like that here. But then, except for one woman, the entire staff consisted of men. What else could you expect from a house full of males?

Gray and heavy, the horizon stretched endlessly, looming low over the waves spuming sick green-gray and brown foam. She would ask him to replace the worst of her tutors. It was worth a try. He had said, after all, that if she “gave them a chance” a while longer and she still could not stand them, he'd consent to their being replaced. Of course he didn't want to bother. That was the real reason behind his reluctance to change them. She had given up on persuading him to any larger concessions. He certainly wouldn't let her return to Barbados; nor would he let her return to Crowder's, which though horrible was not quite as bad as exile here. She saw now that she could have gotten



used to Crowder's, could have gotten used to all the nonsense enforced at schools—for then, at least, she wouldn't have been so alone, so swallowed up by silence as she was here.

Alexandra blinked and held her face tight to keep the threatened tears at bay. “Don't feel sorry for yourself, it does no good,” she imagined Mama saying to her. And she reminded herself: You're a woman now, Alexandra. You're sixteen. Self-pity is childish. And it could be worse.

Could it? Alexandra found that hard to believe. Even her mother admitted it was bad. But then the very thought of being around him turned Mama's stomach. He wasn't as bad as he'd first seemed, though. Once you understood how sad and lonely he was, it was easy to see why he got so nasty at times. He needed someone to take care of him.

But not me, Alexandra protested under her breath. Not me, I hardly know him. If Elizabeth hadn't left him like that, everything would have been all right. He claimed Elizabeth owed him an infinite amount of loyalty and gratitude. Elizabeth's letter, though, put it differently. Alexandra's heart lifted at the thought that Elizabeth had cared enough about her to risk sending it. Elizabeth had been worried that she might feel abandoned by her, had wanted her to know that things were more complicated—and uglier—than she, Alexandra, would ever know. Surely Elizabeth had been right to go like that if there were no other way for her to have gotten free of a burden she could no longer bear? Mama had been so evasive, so cagey when talking about Elizabeth. And then had suddenly given her that shivery serious look and said, “It will be up to you now, Alexandra. Without Elizabeth to manage him you'll have to learn how to do it. You know how he feels about me. There's only you, now.” And then all that talk about Daniel, about how Papa had “given up on him.” Mama always talked in that vague, hard-to-understand way whenever the subject was something important, as though she didn't really want her to understand.

Alexandra realized that some of the wet was not sea spray, but rain. In this climate she always felt chilled to the bone—except, of course, when sitting in the bath or sauna or before a wood fire. Even during the summer she'd found her fingers cold and stiff enough to make playing difficult. But no one else up here seemed to notice the cold. They said that sometimes it snowed here. What would it be like,



snow on the ocean and on the beach? Would ice cover the rocks even with the surf crashing over them? Alexandra stared down into the water and thought of how cold it must be. Hypothermia in ten or fifteen minutes, Peters often mumbled at her to try to get her to stay inside the cabin. “Don’t want to fall in, Ms. Sedgewick, do you. Hypothermia in ten or fifteen minutes for someone with *your* build.” Of course he just wanted to make her uncomfortable. Mama had explained about how Papa’s Higgins-run staff would regard her as a nuisance and possible threat.

Everything was so complicated, so *dark*. Not like Barbados where everything was light, simple, open, *warm*. Most of the people on Papa’s staff were just plain creepy. *Whatever you do, darling, don’t ask questions about anything you don’t understand. Security people don’t like questions.* So she followed Mama’s advice and tried figuring things out for herself. *Security people*, Mama said: even though he was “on leave,” probably for good. And when explaining about why everyone was after Elizabeth, Mama had said that as far as Security people were concerned, once a Security person always a Security person: retirement or leave only referred to stopping work, not stopping being that kind of person, anymore than someone could stop being an executive. Elizabeth, for instance, would always be an executive, no matter that she had gone renegade. Certain things were immutable.

Alexandra spotted land. Finally! The cold had been close to driving her into the cabin, but she knew she could hold out the few minutes more. These Wednesday afternoon runs to the mainland were always the same, of course, but they broke the dullness and silence and sameness of the house. What if she went the other two afternoons a week, too? Would she still feel that way? For Peters the run was probably boring, maybe even irksome. How many times had he done it in his life? But of course being sub-exec and male he might stop in at that tavern down the block from the post office, which would give him an interest. Did Peters do those sorts of things? According to Nicole, all Papa’s gorillas sat around gambling and drinking all the time they weren’t on duty. And went to the mainland once a week to visit the town’s only prostitute. Shivering, Alexandra pulled her cape more tightly around her body. A cup of hot cider would be perfect now. She’d have Peters make her something hot on the way back. Tea,



probably, would be all they'd have available. Mama, of course, would know how to go about stocking up this boat if she knew she'd be riding in it once a week. Well, she'd just have to make herself learn to do those things, too. No one was going to do them for her.

The motor cut out. The rush of silence roared in Alexandra's ears as the boat drifted toward the dock and the now-operating magnetic field in the prow drew the boat into the berth. Smoothly, with the usual audible snick and whine, the boat's lock engaged. Alexandra disembarked, walked the few steps to the autos parked only yards from the dock, and snuggled down into the little one-seater. She drove to town, aware that as usual the buses leaving from the fish processing plant were about half a minute's drive to the east. Had Peters (or whoever else had been coming in for the mail and supplies all these years) always timed it so that one came to the intersection of the town's main street with that road going out to the factory just before all those buses did? *She'd* never know, because she'd never want to make as much conversation with Peters as would be necessary to elicit such information. Those buses going to and from the factory must be the most stir—apart from the islanders' visits—the town ever experienced. Nicole said there was no longer any vid reception this far out in the wilds, so that left only the radio, a slow version of the internet, and DVDs. How did the people living here stand it? No wonder they never smiled at her when she smiled at them. They'd probably forgotten how. Like everyone (except on rare occasions, Nicole) in that house. No wonder Papa said he was “in exile.” No one could possibly *choose* to live in such a place.

She parked outside the post office, within three yards of its door in case the call included parcels, as often happened. She hopped out of the auto and glanced up and down the street. Not a soul, of course: only a mangy, one-eyed, marmalade tom watching her from the window of the hardware store. Sighing, Alexandra pulled open the heavy glass door. Vernier, seated on her stool behind the counter and listening (as usual) to a soap on the radio, watched her come in. Alexandra wondered if Vernier had ever in her life cracked even one smile—even as a kid, which Alexandra found hard to believe someone as spare and gray and sere as the postmaster had ever been...

“Good afternoon,” Alexandra said, approaching the counter.



“Afternoon, Ms. Sedgewick.”

Alexandra handed her the large leather bag. “It’s a pretty chilly day,” she said.

Vernier grunted, then turned away from the counter and shuffled into the back room. Alexandra leaned against the counter and stared at the pictures of vid-stars plastering the walls of Vernier’s domain. In one picture a man and a woman—dressed like executives—gazed into one another’s eyes as they held glasses of champagne in toasting position. Did the people who wrote or designed such things realize the preposterousness of it? If they did, they must be terribly cynical, laughing up their sleeves at the millions who were addicted to such images. If they didn’t, they were pretty out of it. Either way, the picture made Alexandra queasy.

Vernier returned with the leather bag hooked over her shoulder. “Here’s all the flat stuff,” she said, dumping the bag onto the counter. “But there’re some packages, too.”

She couldn’t recapture last week’s excitement over all the parcels that had come for her birthday, but there might still be other things for her. The scores and compact discs she’d ordered in September, for one thing. Or clothing. Mama and Grandmother were always sending her clothing, though it was doubtful she’d be getting anything from them so soon after her birthday.

After a long, boring five minutes Vernier finally appeared with a dolly-load of parcels. Flipping a section of the counter up to let herself out, she wheeled the dolly out into the customers’ side. When Alexandra reached for the leather bag, Vernier said sharply, “I’ll get that as long as I’m taking all this stuff out to your vehicle. You can hold the door open for me.”

Alexandra moved ahead of Vernier, pushed open the door, and stood outside with her back against it while Vernier trundled past. Alexandra then unlocked the carrier set into the roof of the auto and watched as Vernier unloaded the dolly into it. “See you next week,” Alexandra said when Vernier had finished.

“Good-bye, Ms. Sedgewick.” Vernier turned and went back into the post office. Alexandra looked up and down the deserted street, got into the auto, and started the motor. Vernier was the only woman



other than Nicole she had seen in the last two months. But she was so aloof she might as well not even be there.

Alexandra spent the return crossing inside the cabin with Peters, sipping tea and sorting the mail. Her haul was above average—letters from Grandfather Raines, Sarah, and Mama, and two packages. She would wait until she got home to open anything. Having Peters there would ruin everything. Except for a letter for Professor Hands, the rest of the mail was for Papa, of course.

As they docked, Alexandra observed the small jet parked next to her father's at one end of the landing strip. No one ever came to the island—not even Mama. In fact, Mama sent her letters to the Georgetown house, from which they were forwarded, precisely because Papa insisted that the tightest secrecy of his whereabouts be maintained. She stared hard at the plane, and her pulse quickened. Could he have changed his mind and allowed a visit here? As a special—late—birthday present? He was always giving her things for no reason at all. Maybe he had finally figured out that visits from Grandmother or Mama would be better presents than things like jewelry.

Alexandra went in as usual through the northeast door. Higgins was waiting for her. “Your father asked me to tell you that tea with him is canceled today and that he won't be able to see you until dinner.” He spoke stiffly and kept his eyes fixed on a spot on the wall behind her. But then he never made eye-contact with her. The only person Higgins ever seemed to actually look at was her father.

“That plane outside...?”

Higgins's pasty face gave nothing away. “A visitor who's with your father right now.”

“Oh,” Alexandra said. “I see.” She moved past him and slowly ascended the staircase. At the landing she paused for a moment to listen to the silence before heading to the east wing. She would light the fire in the Music Room and read her letters and have tea there. It would be fun skipping those long two-plus hours with him.

In the east wing the wind howled and the waves seemed almost to be thumping the house. Alexandra went into the Music Room and dumped her mail and parcels on the sofa. Before even taking off her cape she went to the fireplace, grabbed one of the long matches from the basket on the mantelshelf, and crouched to light the ready-laid



fire. But she froze when she heard the word “Weatherall” eerily projected within the cavernous hollow of the fireplace. “Hill wants to know whether it’s possible she could still get into Security’s system if she tried to,” the same voice went on. It must, Alexandra thought, be coming from the Small Study, which was directly below the Music Room, somehow carried up by the shared chimney. They must be standing right by the fireplace, or maybe sitting in the padded leather chairs flanking it.

Her father’s rumble was much lower, much less audible. Alexandra strained to hear. “. . .likely. If you want to be sure, you’ll have to. . .the whole damned system.” Alexandra could barely make out her father’s words.

“Would it be possible for her to dip into files and then destroy them afterwards?” the other man said, *his* voice clear and distinct.

“If she can get in at all, yes,” her father said, his voice appreciably louder. “Why, has a file disappeared?”

“Several recon satellite picture and analysis files, all of them to do with those training camps the Free Zone bitches are operating. Whoever broke in wiped every damned file, right after which the aliens zapped every fucking one of our recon sats.”

After a few very long seconds, during which Alexandra remembered her mother’s warning that she not under any circumstances listen to anything to do with Security business, not even if her father wished her to—*The less you know, the safer you are. You never know, Alexandra, you never know what to expect. You mustn’t eavesdrop, you mustn’t let him talk to you about any of it. Clear?*—her father’s voice, unusually loud and distinct, floated up the chimney: “I suggest you take it that there’s a serious likelihood she’s gone to work for the aliens, Wedgewood. That kind of coincidence can’t be accidental.”

“There’s more, sir,” the other voice said.

“Go on.”

“The aliens have been making one strike a month against corporate targets. For four consecutive months they’ve hit in descending order of importance companies Booth has major holdings in. Nobody knows for sure how much he’s lost, but it has to be considerable. Probably between twenty-five and thirty-five percent of his entire holdings.”



Her father made a barking sound Alexandra identified as a laugh. “That cinches it, Wedgewood. There’s no other way the aliens could know his portfolio. She kept tabs on it, I know that for a fact. And if there’s anyone that bitch would be after—besides myself—it would be Booth...Booth first, and then me.”

After a long pause the other man said, “Hill is pressuring me to divulge your whereabouts. He’s damned anxious about you.”

“Hill can fuck himself.”

“He’s been breathing down my neck on this. And considering his shake-up—which is still on-going—it’s not clear I won’t be canned, too, if I don’t give him *something*.”

“Balls. He’s purged everyone who’s demonstrated long-term loyalty to Weatherall. You weren’t one of them. He knows he can’t run the Company without the help of old-timers. He’ll keep you on at least until he thinks he’s figured out how to run Security Services. Not that he’ll ever be able to, not Hill. After all, *we* told *him* how to run the Justice Department. And Booth knows squat about Security.”

“It’s a godawful mess, I have to say that.”

“Damned straight it is.”

There was a silence. Alexandra, noticing that her thighs had cramped, scratched the tip of the match over a brick, watched the match flare into flame, and touched the flame to the screws of paper nestled among the kindling. She stood up and stepped back from the fireplace. She shouldn’t have listened, she thought. If he were to find out... Pushing aside the ugly memory of the scene they’d had over Elizabeth, Alexandra backed away from the fireplace and glanced over her shoulder at the closed, though not locked, door. Someone could have come into the room and caught her eavesdropping. She had been stupid, terribly stupid. She picked up the remote to the compact disc player and cued up the recording of Avison concerti. Then she took her handset from her pocket and ordered tea. Finally, she turned to the parcels. The largest one held scores. She glanced through them and laid them aside. If the visitor continued to occupy Papa, she could sight-read through some of them after dinner. The other parcel, she saw as she stared at the address label, had originally been sent to Crowder’s, and had then been forwarded to Georgetown, and from there to here. Odd. Surely everyone who knew she had gone to Crowder’s knew she



had left there not long after she'd arrived. It must have been a mistake by a service-tech who'd been given the old address through carelessness. That kind of thing sometimes happened.

Pulling the plastifoam away she found four elegant, leather-bound books. She opened one of them and saw that it had been specially done with thick vellum pages and old-fashioned type. She'd seen such books in the library downstairs and also in the Georgetown house, but had never owned one. As she leafed through the one titled *The Oppoponax*, a slip of flimsy fell out. Curious, Alexandra unfolded and read it.

9 October, 2086

Alexandra,

I didn't forget your birthday, love. This should reach you by the thirteenth, though I can't be sure. I'm sorry I won't be there to sponsor you at the Diana. But of course Felice will see to that for you.

I think of you often and wish I could be there to see you come into your womanhood. You have wonderful experiences ahead of you, for however the fixed males want us to envy their lack, the fact is that we, not they, have the joy of incomparable pleasure, and this is something it is impossible to regret, however much they would like us to.

You must immediately destroy the wrappings the books came in (and don't even look at the data markings on the label if you haven't already done so), as well as this flimsy—unless, of course, you choose to betray me, but I don't believe for a minute that you would.

I hope, love, that your exile from Barbados is growing less painful with time. You must keep remembering that when you come legally of age you will have the right to choose. And in the meantime, seize whatever pleasure comes your way, in whatever form. And don't forget your

Elizabeth, who cares for you.

Alexandra held the flimsy to her cheek. She wished she could keep it, but she knew it would be too dangerous for Elizabeth if she did. After reading it



over one more time she wadded it up and gathered the wrappings and mailing label. These she carried to the fireplace.

She hesitated. Before consigning them to flames, she pulled out the mailing label and stared at it. Regina, Saskatchewan, the label named the parcel's point of origin. Alexandra threw everything into the fire, seized the poker, and moved the papers around until they had all burned. Then she set the firescreen in place and returned to the sofa. How could she explain such lovely books to Papa? But he never went into her bedroom suite. And besides, he would probably assume Grandmother or Grandfather had given them to her. It would never occur to him that Elizabeth might contact her.

Saskatchewan. . . Elizabeth was in Saskatchewan now. That earlier letter had been from Ontario. But how dangerous, her sending things to Crowder's: if Alexandra had not been the one to get the mail today, her father might have seen the parcel and expressed curiosity. Or someone at the Georgetown house might have opened it. Tears came into Alexandra's eyes. Elizabeth must care a great deal for her to take that kind of risk.

She picked up the books without even looking at the other three titles and carried them to her room. She would not risk the chance of someone's seeing them in the Music Room.

When she returned, wearing a shawl instead of the cape and with her hair freshly brushed, she found that the tea tray had been left on the coffee table. Brioche and jam, of course. Nicole always made brioche for Wednesday tea, poppy-seed cake for Thursday, and custard tart on Mondays. The other days were "free days," as Nicole called them. When Alexandra had asked her why on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays she invariably baked the same things for tea, Nicole had said, "How should I know what's going through your father's head? Maybe it's the only way he can keep track of the days of the week. You think of a better answer than that, tell me. Or better yet, ask him why yourself. I'm just the cook here. I do what I'm told to do."

"Just the cook," though, apparently carried clout within the household power structure, for Alexandra had noticed how careful her father's gorillas were to stay out of her way—though their inclination, as unfixed males, was otherwise. Probably it was difficult to get a cook as good as Nicole to live in this godforsaken place. Since Alexandra



had taken over the household accounts from Higgins, she knew that Nicole got paid three times as much as any other service-tech in the household. That kind of salary told its own tale.

Alexandra set the tray down on the rug in front of the fire and settled against a pile of cushions to munch the buttery brioche, sip the tangy herb tea, and read her letters. If it were always like this she might not mind being here. But tomorrow they'd be back to the same old dreary routine, lessons in the morning, piano practice in the afternoon, and her father in the evenings. How nice it would be to snuggle up beside Mama or Grandmother right now, with Mama laughing at something droll her latest girl had been saying, while the girl winked at her, Alexandra, as though to laugh at all of them—herself, Mama, and Alexandra. Would those days ever return? Probably not. Everything would be different when she came of age. She would be a fully grown woman then, and Mama would probably act toward her the way Grandmother acted toward Mama.

Alexandra pressed back her tears—stupid self-pity! she scolded herself—and opened Grandfather's letter first. She would save Mama's for last. They were so silly they invariably made her laugh.

[ii]

Before going down to dinner, Alexandra phoned Higgins for possible instructions, but Higgins said only that she'd be dining with her father and that she was to go down to the Small Study just before eight as usual. From her dressing-room window Alexandra could see the plane down on the landing strip, so she knew the visitor hadn't left. It had been months since dinner on weeknights had included anyone other than herself and her father. It felt like years, though, when she thought of it. She'd dined with her father every night since that single week with Mama in Montreal in July. The addition on Saturday nights of whomever of her tutors happened to have stayed on the island for the weekend made little difference, for they were all subdued around him. It had been three months since that week with Mama. It felt like an eternity: time passed excruciatingly slowly here.

At three minutes to eight by the jeweled watch her father had given her for her birthday, Alexandra tapped on the closed door of the Small Study, turned the ornate glass and brass doorknob, pushed the



door open, and stepped in. They had the gas lit in here instead of the electric lights, imbuing the room with its full gothic flavor. Alexandra glanced at her father's face first, to gauge certain things: his mood, his level of inebriation, his attitude toward the man seated in the other padded leather chair. Given the conversation about Elizabeth she had overheard, Alexandra expected to find his mood horrible. But when he saw her the corners of his mouth contorted in the grimace Alexandra had come to accept as a smile, so she knew that against all odds his mood was *good*—and that for some reason he was pleased to see her.

“Alexandra, I'd like you to meet Philip Wedgewood. He's Director of the Division of Security Central in Security Services.”

Wedgewood rose to his feet. Conscious of her duty, Alexandra stared into the chilly blue eyes and offered her hand. He gave off creepy vibes as only Security people did, and his handshake was limp and clammy. Alexandra covertly wiped her hand on her thick Shetland and angora tunic and returned the empty formula demanded by his saying he was pleased to meet her. She tried to remember an occasion on which she had seen a male executive shaking hands with her mother, but none occurred to her.

Papa moved toward her, explaining that they would dine in the Informal Dining Room. Grimacing with another of his grotesque smiles, he put his hand on her shoulder. Her shoulder stiffened; and it took her great effort to push back the automatic surge of adrenalin any male's touch inevitably provoked in her. Although—since Mama had explained about the conditioning her years of self-defense courses had set in place—she understood why she had this response, still she found it difficult to control. She always had to rein herself in to keep from making a physical defense response. As for Papa, he didn't understand, he only thought her shy or—sometimes—willful. And she didn't know how to explain to him without aggravating what Mama said was his most sensitive spot: his lack of knowledge about executive ways. Anyone raised as an executive would understand and would not need to be told about conditioning. It was precisely because of misunderstandings like this that they were doomed always to be uncomfortable together.

They had the gas lit in the dining room, too, as well as the candelabra on the table. In such light her father's face looked almost attrac-



tive, for it softened the severity of its bone structure, the harshness of the way he held his jaw, and the tightness around his eyes. The other man looked uneasy when Penderel appeared with the soup: perhaps he, too, found the butler's Victorian get-up strange? Alexandra knew for a fact that the professors found the extreme Victorianism weird, but naturally their experience would be limited. If Wedgewood found it strange...perhaps it *was* strange? She tried to imagine her mother in this setting, but failed. Mama would clash, jarringly—making either the Victorianism absurd or her own style ridiculous, depending on whether the gothic ambiance was stronger than that her mother carried around with her. But of course such a showdown would never take place.

“So,” he said when they'd started their soup. “My daughter and I have been following the account in the *Executive Times* of the trials and tribulations of restoring the Ballanchine. What's DC gossip got to say on the matter?”

Alexandra stared at him. Since when did her father care about ballet? And then it occurred to her: this must be his social persona. It couldn't be for Wedgewood's sake, not considering everything she'd overheard earlier. So did that mean it was for hers? She grew confused as she tried to understand what was going on.

Between spoonfuls, Wedgewood said, “Then you know the last EMP just about wiped out all plans to revive it—as well as all the other pre-Blanket performing institutions. But the story is that Ferguson's son is really hot on ballet—he is in fact on the Ballanchine board—and is pushing Ferguson to giving them preferential treatment on the basis of the importance of keeping up morale and tone in DC.”

Ferguson, Alexandra guessed, must refer to Jason Ferguson, the Secretary of Energy and Technology.

“But will that be enough to rescue any of the season?” Papa asked skeptically.

Wedgewood smiled. “Perhaps not, but our dear darling Lennox is involved, too.”

Papa scowled. Alexandra braced for a storm: obviously Wedgewood was not to be counted on to maintain the status quo. “What does that traitorous bitch have to do with it, and what would it matter if she were involved, anyway?”



Before answering, Wedgewood dabbed his napkin to his lips and drank from his water glass. “A great deal. She has some bee in her bonnet about ballet, too, and is also on the board. But as for her pull, well it’s considerable, especially now that she’s served Booth so well.”

Her father glared down the table at her. “Stop dallying, Alexandra, and get this stuff cleared. I think we’ve all finished?”

Alexandra pushed the call button and glanced over at Wedgewood. No one had finished, certainly not Wedgewood or herself. Mama had told her she changed courses too fast, that people liked a little lag, especially after the soup. But they hadn’t even finished their soup. Penderel came in and cleared their plates. Alexandra gestured to him to pour out more wine.

When Penderel had gone, her father said, “It’s a wonder Booth didn’t try to foist her off on Hill.”

Hill, Alexandra thought, must refer to the Acting Chief of Security, formerly the Attorney General. She coughed, trying to call attention to her presence so that they wouldn’t say things they didn’t want her to hear. Apparently she succeeded, for Wedgewood looked pointedly at her and then back at her father.

But— “I have full confidence in my daughter’s discretion, Wedgewood,” Papa said, staring down the table at her. He said it as though it were an important revelation, as though it signified a great deal. And the look he was giving her... He turned his stare onto Wedgewood, whose austere lips had pursed into even meaner thinness. “One wonders why Booth would find it necessary to reward her. After all, she *did* very little—and precisely because Weatherall was wary of her connection with Booth.”

“Bullshit,” Wedgewood said. “Who the hell do you think did all the fingering for Booth before Hill was brought in? No one with any Company feeling would have betrayed it to an outsider the way she did. That bitch started with Baldrige and worked her way down. None of us are happy to see the kind of chaos we have to deal with now, believe me. I wasn’t a fan of Weatherall and her people, but I sure as hell wouldn’t have fingered them the way that bitch did.”

It was as though she weren’t there, Alexandra thought. Not that she had any idea what they were talking about: maybe that’s why he had decided they could talk about such things in front of her?



“Booth will learn his mistake eventually,” Papa said in his sneering voice. “He thinks he can gut Security without damaging his own interests. But consider, Wedgewood: since the Blanket we alone have kept control over the masses. Com & Tran won’t be able to work their magic, not without a functioning national vid system. That’s been made abundantly clear. As for his control over the Executive—Military will surprise them all, I’ve no doubt. We both know what happens when Military is left unbridled by Security’s countervailing weight.”

With Penderel’s return, they fell silent. To Alexandra’s uneasy surprise, Penderel set the usual bouquet of parsley by her plate as he did every night when he served the entrée. Would her idiosyncrasy be tolerated with a guest present?

“So Lennox, you say, is adding her push to getting the Ballanchine going.” Papa resumed the previous subject as he conveyed meat from the serving dish Penderel held out to him to his plate. “When is it thought there will be a first performance?”

“They’re trying for New Year’s, I gather,” Wedgewood said.

Penderel moved around the table to serve Wedgewood. “Then we must look into getting tickets for opening night, don’t you think, Alexandra?” Her father floated an eerie smile down the table at her.

What *was* it that was going on? He’d never shown any interest in such things before. And now they might be going to DC to watch a dance performance? “I’d love to go,” Alexandra said. “I have only the foggiest memories of seeing the Ballanchine before the Blanket.” It had been Marie who had taken her to some matinee performances, Alexandra remembered. Marie...Marie who had been so nice to her when everyone else had been so nasty. Marie hadn’t liked Daniel at all.

Penderel came around to her and held out the serving dish. Alexandra took the fork in her fingers and said, very low, “Don’t forget to change the wine before you leave, Penderel.” Penderel wasn’t used to serving more than two people at once. And Papa usually took charge of the wine himself. She sighed as she watched Penderel taking away her used wine glass. What would Mama say about her drinking wine? Nothing good, that was certain. Two glasses with dinner every night. Papa considered abstinence from alcohol nonsense and somehow personally inconvenient to himself. *With the kind of life you’re going to be*



leading, Alexandra, a knowledge of and taste for wine will be essential. What did that *mean*? How little she understood of life with her father. Without anyone to explain it to her would she ever lose her confusion? Or was this what it was like being grown up? Everything had been so simple before. And now daily everything grew more complicated.

When Penderel left the room and the men lapsed back into their “shop talk,” Alexandra munched her parsley, confident they’d never notice. They were off in another world, one wholly foreign to her. Which was as she preferred it.



Chapter Two

Hazel slipped her thumb and index finger into the space between two cedar slats in the closed blind and nudged them apart; leaning forward, her nose and forehead grazing the blind, she peered down at the street and swept her gaze as far in either direction as she could. She saw nothing of significance. Only Shirl's van, parked halfway down the block, keeping its usual lonely vigil.

The sight did not ease her anxiety.

Hazel walked back to her chair and stood motionless. Staring down at the book lying on the seat, abandoned, she rubbed her arms and sighed. Reading was hopeless. She'd been over the same page four or five times already. A cup of tea, maybe? Making it would at least give her something to do.

On her way downstairs the thought came to her that she could not go on living this way. Bad enough that they spent so much of their existence taking security precautions, which had the effect of fostering the most obsessive and paranoid mind-set imaginable. But Liz's new habit of staying out past midnight two or three times a week frayed Hazel's nerves as security routines did not. The first time Liz had done it, Hazel had called her, to make sure she was all right, and Liz had taken that tone of exaggerated patience that hinted that Hazel's concern smacked more of jealousy than actual worry. And so Hazel had resolved never to call to check on Liz's safety again. But each time, as the hours crawled by, Hazel worried that something *had* "happened." And each time she realized her powerlessness: realized that she would have no way of knowing for certain until it was too late, to help Liz—or herself. For presumably if they caught Liz, Hazel's own safety would be compromised, too. And each time Hazel told herself that such speculations and worries were nonsense, that she should simply go to sleep in her own bed and stop fussing over a woman who knew well how to take care of herself.



Not that she'd ever been able to fall asleep before Liz had finally come home.

Hazel filled the kettle and switched it on. And she thought again about moving out. Liz claimed that she, Hazel, was as much a quarry as she herself. But then Liz felt acutely responsible for having “dragged” her (as she insisted on putting it) into peril, and her sense of responsibility tended to make her over-protective. Hazel knew that if she were to tell Liz she was moving out, Liz would instantly object that her, Hazel's, safety would thereby be compromised. But surely there must be a way of taking care of her own safety without living with Liz?

Hazel looked through the selection of teas and settled on an herbal orange blend. She had to admit that the house tended to spook her and that that probably fed her unease about Liz's staying out late. Although she was the occupant most often present in it, this house had never felt like “home.” Its style and size struck her as foreign, as belonging to someone she was only visiting. And Gillian—their “inside security”—in her room at the back seemed more a member of the household than Liz, who mostly came home only to sleep. Surely hotel accommodations would be more appropriate to Liz's habits than any house.

Yeah, but a hotel would be too risky.

The kettle's whistle startled Hazel. Jumpy mouse, she scoffed at herself, switching it off. She poured the boiling water over the tea bag and paced the kitchen, waiting for the tea to steep. After only three minutes, she fished the tea bag out of the cup. She hated strong tea, while Liz insisted on it. But then Liz liked straight lime juice, while she, Hazel, loathed undiluted fruit juices of any sort. And Liz was decidedly sexually promiscuous, while she, Hazel—

That's enough, Hazel.

Hazel turned off the kitchen light and moved slowly through the first floor of the house, checking. Checking for what? she asked herself. Shying away from the question, she halted her prowling and drove herself back upstairs. *Drink your tea and go to bed, Hazel. This is nonsense.*

Hazel was still wide awake—thinking that lying in the dark made her anxiety worse—when Liz arrived home sometime after 1:30. Hazel listened to her go into her own room first before crossing the



hall to Hazel's. Seeing Liz silhouetted in the doorway, Hazel sat up. "It's okay, Liz, I'm awake," she said.

"But darling, why are you in here? It's silly, you know, when you always end up in my bed."

Liz was right, of course: except during that one monster of a quarrel that had gone on for two days. But lying in that big empty bed would have made the waiting worse. "I feel swallowed up when I'm in your bed by myself," Hazel said. She swung her feet onto the floor and grabbed her robe to protect her naked body from the chilly air, then followed Liz back across the hall.

Hazel climbed into the massive, extra long bed and watched Liz undress. "Just a quick run under the shower, darling, and I'll be finished," she said. Probably, Hazel reflected, to get the smell of the other woman off her. Liz wouldn't have cared for herself. Her thoughtfulness about such things never failed to impress Hazel, and all the more since Liz had never before engaged in the kind of stable relationship they now shared.

When Liz came out of the bathroom she stood for a few seconds near the foot of the bed fluffing her short thick mop of golden hair, then stretched from toes to ceiling, momentarily goddessesque in the display of her proportions and visible physical strength. "So! To bed!" She laughed. "Lord what a long day it's been!"

Hazel grinned. "You look as though you could go on for hours more."

Liz threw back the covers on her side of the bed, sat down on the edge, slung her long legs up into the bed, and pulled the covers over her body. "So have you figured out what I'm going to do about Simon's proposal?" she asked, rolling onto her side to face Hazel. She touched Hazel's cheek in a caress and combed her fingers through Hazel's hair.

"You're asking my opinion?"

Liz wrinkled her nose. "Now don't tell me you're just a secretary, darling. Of course I'm asking your opinion! That's not so odd, is it?"

No, not so odd, not when they were in bed. It would have been odd, though, if Liz had asked her in another context. "I don't think it's a good idea for us to get mixed up with Simon in any way," Hazel said, watching Liz's lively aquamarine eyes for signs of agreement or



disagreement. “Security is after her as much as they’re after us. Maybe even more. By forming a tie with her we increase our vulnerability to being found.” Hazel hesitated. “And there are other reasons, too, but I doubt they’d appeal much to you.”

Liz’s lips thinned. “Moral reasons, you mean.”

Hazel did not deny it.

“But what about the possible benefits?”

“It’s too risky,” Hazel said. “Besides, if the Co-op people found out we were doing business with Simon, we could lose their goodwill. And I don’t think we want to do that, do we.” Hazel hated always having to put things in terms of practical advantages versus disadvantages, but she got nowhere in discussions like these unless she did.

“You’re probably right,” Liz said, drawing her palm down Hazel’s back and cupping her buttock. “Better that I sleep on it and tackle it in the morning. Turn out the light, darling, and scoot over here so we can cuddle.”

Hazel hesitated. If she didn’t bring up the subject of moving now, she might not get another chance for a while, for most nights Liz had too much on her mind to be easily approached about anything other than work-related matters. “There’s something we need to talk about,” she said—and bit her lip when she saw the familiar smooth mask slide over Liz’s face. She probably didn’t even realize that she was wearing it, Hazel thought. A sort of *what now?* expression of forced patience and forbearance. Though it wasn’t as though she ever made scenes, Hazel thought.

“You’re sure it has to be now, darling? It’s so late.”

“Please, Liz. It’s important. You see, I think it would be best if I moved out. I’ve been thinking, and I realized that it wouldn’t change things very much, it would just mean—”

“Wait a minute,” Liz interrupted, sitting up. Her voice acquired an edge. “Before you go any further, tell me *exactly* what this is all about.”

Hazel sat up, too. The way Liz’s eyes had narrowed and her nostrils were flaring suggested anger. It was sometimes hard to tell with her—especially at the beginning of quarrels—when anger seethed below the smoothly veiled surface. “It’s just what I said, Liz. I think it would be best if I moved out.”



“Why? Is there some problem between us you’ve been hiding from me?”

“Not that *I* know of,” Hazel said, irritated at Liz’s assumption that if there were a problem it would be up to her, Hazel, to identify and reveal it.

“Then why are you threatening to move out?”

“Why are you talking about threatening?”

“Answer my question.”

That was a typical executive order if she’d ever heard one, Hazel thought. Why did Liz always have to lapse into that attitude whenever she felt she’d lost control over her? “Is that an order, Madam?” Hazel inquired ironically. But at the fleeting expression of hurt that flitted across that beautiful face just before it shuttered itself, Hazel regretted having indulged her angry impulse. “I’m sorry, Liz,” she whispered, putting her hand on Liz’s hard-muscled forearm. “I didn’t mean that. But I hate it when you take that tone with me.”

“Tell me why.” Liz’s face had turned to stone, and her arm rock-like in its rigidity.

Hazel drew a deep breath. “Tonight, like all the other nights you’ve stayed out late, I worried about you. Maybe it’s the lack of any time-frame, or something like that. But whatever it is, it upsets me. If we lived apart I wouldn’t have that problem. We could spend most nights together and then, on the other nights, since I wouldn’t be lying awake listening for you, it wouldn’t matter.” But even as Hazel expounded this plan a niggling doubt crept in: would she instead lie awake the entire night instead of a few hours, since she wouldn’t know until the next day whether Liz had gotten home safely?

Liz’s eyes flashed in blue fury. “You know how much I hate being manipulated, Hazel. You think I don’t see through your ploy? I told you, didn’t I, that if my trysting upset you I’d give it up. Why can’t you just come right out and say that you’re jealous? I’ve already told you I’d understand if you were. It’s not as though I can’t live without trysting. I went almost ten years living in near-celibacy because of the damned job. But we’ve already been through this. What’s the point? Are you trying to punish me for even having the desire to tryst?”

Hazel shook her head. “No, no, you’ve got it all wrong, Liz. Maybe I don’t understand your desire for it, but I don’t find it threatening,



either. You're very considerate about the way you do it. And besides, you've made your feelings for me clear."

"Then what is this threat about moving out for if not to get me to stop?"

"I don't want you to stop," Hazel said, trying to keep her voice steady. "I think that would be a mistake. Eventually you'd resent me for imposing that kind of restriction on you. I don't think of my idea as a threat, but as a solution. We'll still see one another as much as we always do. It's not as though we spend that much time here together. You're hardly ever home, you know. Instead of coming here, you could come to my place."

Liz's hands, lying on top of the covers, clenched into fists. "I've told you how important it is to me that we live together."

"But Liz." Hazel spoke in a murmur, making her voice as reassuring as she could. "We *will* be living together, almost exactly the same as we always have. With only that one difference."

"Bullshit. Let's at least be clear about the fact that our relationship would undergo a major change if we began living apart. So you win. I'll give up the trysting. And now can we turn off the light and go to sleep?"

"That's not what I want, Liz," Hazel said, determined to make Liz see that she was not proposing this out of jealousy, that she was not attempting a covert manipulative strategy. "I—"

The light went out.

A split-second later the phone chirped. Hazel heard Liz groping on her night table for her handset. "Weatherall here," Liz said, her voice cold, crisp, efficient. After a few seconds her voice went on, "All right, here's how we'll handle it. You call Gillian and have her take the rear first floor. I'll take the front. You'll circle around outside, examining every bush, every square foot of sod surrounding the house. How many do you think there are?" In the pause, Hazel, her heart galloping in fear, gasped for breath. Liz spoke again: "All right. So we'll play it cautious. Stun weapons only, Shirl. And now, let's do it." Hazel heard Liz replacing the handset. "You'll have to carry a stun-gun, Hazel," Liz whispered. "We have no choice since we don't know how many of the bastards there are."



So the moment they'd always feared had arrived. Just like that, without warning, in the middle of the night. Her teeth chattering, her knees shaking, Hazel got up, put on her robe, and took the stun-gun Liz pressed into her hands. "It's set and ready to go, darling. Promise me you won't hesitate to use it?"

"I promise."

"That's my Hazel," Liz said softly, bumping her nose into Hazel's face then quickly brushing her lips over Hazel's cheek. "I'll go downstairs first, darling. You'll position yourself at the top of the stairs and listen as hard as you can. Listen for anyone getting in through the second-story windows. And listen to my movements. Clear?"

"Understood," Hazel whispered, but Liz had already begun moving away. Hazel crept after her, groping carefully to avoid crashing into the furniture. The pounding of her heart seemed to shake her entire body. The time they'd planned and hoped against had finally arrived: anything could happen. *Anything*. And she, Hazel, was worse than useless. What if this had happened an hour earlier, before Liz had returned home? Probably she'd have been used as a hostage. That was how those people operated.

Those people: intruders in their house, at that very moment. Hazel, slipping down the hall, strained to hear; but Liz moved soundlessly, in spite of her size. Remembering Liz's skill, speed, and sheer physical power, Hazel's confidence in Liz's ability resurged. Between Liz, Shirl, and Gillian, surely one intruder, no matter how invincible, could be handled.

Her knees strangely wobbly, her arms and legs weak and trembling, Hazel steadied herself against the banister, waiting for Liz's orders. Except for her mediocre ability to aim and fire a stun-gun, she was useless. But it was conceivable that that one little thing might be required as back-up.

Hazel jumped when she heard a crash. What should she do? What *could* she do besides stand motionless, listen, and wait? There followed a thud, a clang of heavy glass or pottery breaking, a sharp cry—not Liz's, Hazel thought. Then: "Hazel!" *That* was Liz's voice. "Come into the study."

Hazel sped down the stairs, her heart beating faster, faster—sweat lathering her body, trickling down her ribs. She burst into the study



and Liz's voice—Hazel could see nothing of her location—said quietly, “There’s a flashlight in the top right-hand drawer of the desk, Hazel. Get it out, would you.”

Groping her way through the dark to the desk, she cried out in startlement.

“What is it?”

“I’ve stepped in glass, I think.”

“Damn,” Liz said. “And of course you’re barefoot.”

Hazel reached the desk, opened the drawer, and felt around in it until her hands encountered a plastic tube that could only be a flashlight. “I’ve got it, Liz.”

“Good. Turn it on and find us. We’re in the corner farthest away from the door.”

Us?

Hazel felt for the button and switched on the light; she played its beam around that corner until it fell on Liz’s face. Liz squinted, and Hazel lowered the beam. Liz, she saw, was straddling a man lying prone, her feet gripping his knees, her hands pressing both of his into the small of his back. “What I want you to do now, Hazel, is come here, put your stun-gun a few inches from the back of his head, and fire.”

Hazel’s throat closed. “My god, Liz,” she started to protest. “Can’t you just handcuff him?”

“It’s the only way we can be sure of handling him safely, Hazel. Do it quickly, before I wear out. I can’t maintain this hold forever.”

Hazel’s stomach pitched, and her hands shook; she played the light on the floor, glittering with shards of glass, to guide her way. With each step she took she imagined slivers of glass being driven further and further into her feet. Certainly there were enough discrete points of pain for that image to represent a possible reality. When she reached Liz, she first knelt, then fell back on her heels, for her knees were shaking.

“Do it, darling,” Liz urged.

Hazel sucked in a deep, shaky breath, moved her right hand until the stun-gun was only inches from the man’s left ear, and pulled the trigger. She looked away as he started flopping about in a stun fit.

“Keep the light steady,” Liz said sharply.



Hazel pocketed the stun-gun and shifted the flashlight into her right hand. As Liz cuffed their intruder, Hazel noticed that she hadn't a stitch on her body.

"Okay, darling," Liz said when she had finished. "Give me the flashlight. I want you to stay here with him while I check out the rest of the house. Don't hesitate to fire if you think you see another intruder. Though getting stunned is an unpleasant experience, it's not ultimately harmful." That, Hazel thought as she heard Liz moving away, must refer to the possibility of her shooting Shirl or Gillian by mistake.

When the man stopped flopping and flailing, Hazel reminded herself that he was cuffed, and she had the stun-gun, and that he must be terribly disoriented and probably didn't even know where he was. His breath came in gasps. After about a minute he started moving around, presumably because he had become aware that his hands were bound. Hazel felt sick as she imagined the sorts of things that must be going through his mind. How long would it take before he remembered what he had been doing and where he must be? Lying in the dark with a fractured short-term memory would be scary for anyone, even an SIC officer.

Into the silence marked only by the man's gasping and flailing and her own harsh breathing and loud heartbeat came a distant splintering of glass, a loud crash, the pounding of feet running through the house, and then, long seconds later, Gillian's voice bellowing "I've got the bastard!"

Perhaps half a minute later—though it seemed an eternity—Liz returned. "The Women's Patrol have just arrived, Hazel. They're scouring the area looking for possible back-ups to the three we've caught."

"Three?" Hazel said faintly.

"Three." Liz's voice was grim. The beam of the flashlight played over the debris of glass and pottery littering the floor. "What a mess!" She picked her way toward Hazel and the intruder. "Has he recovered from the charge yet?"

"I think so," Hazel said, wondering what he was making of their conversation.

When Liz reached her she handed the flashlight to Hazel. "I want you to shine it on him so I can see what I'm doing."



Hazel focused the beam on the intruder. He lay still now, his head turned away from her. Suddenly, Liz swung her leg forward—away from the man’s body—and then drove her heel backwards, into his flank, with tremendous force. He yelped at about the same time Hazel cried out, “Liz!”

“Roll over,” Liz ordered him.

The man lay still. “More of the same?” Liz said, her voice harder than Hazel had ever heard it.

“No, Liz, don’t!”

“Hold the light steady, Hazel. It’s all we’ve got since these animals cut the power line into the house.” Without warning, she kicked him in the same place, with even greater force. This time the man screamed, and his breath came in sobs.

“For godsake, Liz!”

“Broken ribs are painful. And he knows that punctured lungs are even worse,” Liz said in that same hateful voice. “Roll over, boy, or there’ll be more.”

“Can’t move,” the man gasped. “Need medical attention.”

“As soon as you’re cooperative,” Liz said.

Hazel, shivering, decided that if Liz moved to kick him again she’d interpose her own body between them. It was obvious she’d seriously hurt him.

The man turned his head toward Hazel, then slowly rolled over, away from them, so that the unhurt side of his body absorbed the pressure of the roll. Each groan and gasp the man made inscribed Hazel’s body with traces of excruciating sympathetic pain. At last he lay on his back, his arms and hands under his body, his face rigid. Liz bent over him; Hazel braced herself to make Liz stop, but Liz only rifled his pockets. “Shine the light on my hands,” she said. Hazel obeyed and saw that Liz held a thin leather wallet. Liz opened the wallet and whistled. “Pretty confident, weren’t you, carrying your ID around like this. Navy, is it. I’m actually quite surprised.” In addition to the photocard Liz was examining, Hazel also saw his yellow plastic. He was a professional, then, whoever he was. “Unless of course this is a dummy photocard made up by the Company,” Liz said. “I’m sure a short interrogation will settle it. But first you’re going to tell us what



the set-up is outside. What your back-up is and who and how many people are working on this little operation.”

“Just the three of us,” the man gasped.

“Shine the light on his face, Hazel.”

Hazel obeyed, but said, “Liz, you mustn’t hurt him any more. Promise me you won’t.”

“Let me handle this, Hazel. Just hold the damned light, that’s all I ask.”

The man’s face suddenly clenched, and he screamed.

“Stop it, Liz!” Hazel shrieked the words, raising her voice above the horrible sound coming out of the man. She leaned forward and grabbed at Liz’s arm.

“Damn it, Hazel, hold the light on his face!”

“Stop hurting him, Liz!”

“If you can’t do that one simple thing I’m asking of you, leave the room,” Liz said coldly.

The horrible sound still hadn’t stopped. “I swear to you, Liz, if you don’t stop it, we’re through,” Hazel burst out. “I swear it!” She knew she couldn’t physically stop Liz from doing whatever it was that was making the man scream. Their relationship was all she had to bargain with.

“Is that an ultimatum?”

Hazel swallowed. “I wouldn’t be able to live with you or myself if—”

“For the birthing fuck, girl, this man is our enemy. Do you know what they’d be doing to us if we hadn’t stopped them?”

“That’s irrelevant,” Hazel said. “I mean it, Liz. I’m deadly serious.”

Hazel heard movement and sensed that Liz had stood up. “All right, Hazel.” The anger was raw in her voice. “We’ll talk outside.”

Hazel lit their way over the glass-strewn floor, her heart pounding as violently as it had when she’d been waiting upstairs in the dark. As soon as they stepped into the hall, Liz closed the study door. Liz took the flashlight from Hazel and held both of Hazel’s wrists in her other hand. “Now listen to me, Hazel.” Her voice was low and even. “We could still be in quite a lot of danger if these naval intelligence boys are part of a larger team ready to close in on us when they don’t



hear from the first three by a certain time. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes, Liz, I understand. I'm not the fool you seem to think me."

"Then you must also see that I have no choice but to get information out of this one."

Hazel wished they could see one another's faces. "I won't stand by while you torture him, Liz."

"That's melodramatic exaggeration, Hazel. You don't understand a thing about any of this. I suggest you go out to the kitchen and sit with Gillian and leave this to me."

Hazel leaned against the wall for support. Her knees shook so, she thought they might buckle. "I meant what I said, Liz. I'm not going to close my eyes to it."

"Didn't I just explain to you our situation, Hazel? Let me put it plainer: it's us or them. Would you rather be the one screaming in pain? Because believe me, that's what would happen to us—and worse—if they manage to capture us."

Hazel swallowed. "I understand all that," she whispered. "But that doesn't mean we have to be like them. What does it make us if you carry out and I stand by as an accessory to torture—"

"Stop saying that," Liz hissed at her.

Hazel's voice trembled. "I'm just calling it what it is."

The words hung in the air, almost palpable between them. Finally, Liz said, "What am I to do instead, Hazel? Tell me that."

"Set a trap for the others. You said the Women's Patrol had arrived. And I'm sure Shirl has called in reinforcements, too. Or else we could just leave this place." Hazel inhaled shakily. "My god, Liz, you don't know that he's going to tell you anything. He'll probably hold out as long as he can. And even if he does tell you something, how will you be able to believe anything he says?"

"I just don't see any other way," Liz said wearily.

"I can't accept that. It's wrong, Liz. And I think a part of you knows that, too. Everything between us will be spoiled if you go through with what you've started. I can *feel* it. Whatever kind of rationalizing you do, there's no getting around what I'm feeling."

Another long silence fell between them, and Hazel knew Liz was thinking. She became aware of the murmur of voices somewhere in



the back of the house, of Liz's breathing, and of the smell of Liz's sweat mixed with the elusive perfume she always wore.

After a long time, Liz lifted Hazel's wrists and brushed her lips over Hazel's fingers. "You win, Hazel," she whispered. "You win. But I hope we don't regret it." Liz drew Hazel close in a tight hug, and again Hazel realized that Liz was stark naked. When Liz stepped back, she said, "Go out to the kitchen and tell the Women's Patrol we need a mobile med-unit."

A stream of tears gushed from Hazel's eyes. She snatched at Liz's hand. "I love you, Liz," she whispered.

Liz squeezed her hand, then released it. "Go now, darling. I'll return to our prisoner and try to think what to do next." Doubt snaked into Hazel's mind, but she realized there'd be so little time for Liz to do anything much that such suspicion was unfair.

She groped her way to the kitchen, moving painfully on her cut soles, trying to compose herself before facing the others. They didn't know Liz as she did. The best thing, she thought, would be to wipe what had just passed between her and Liz out of her mind, out of her memory.

