



The Ugly Duckling

Iris Johansen

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DEAD AIM

“Smoothly written, tightly plotted, turbocharged thriller ... Megaselling Johansen doesn’t miss.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Readers will stay up all night reading this cat-and-mouse chase.”

—*Booklist*

“The nonstop action and slick plotting won’t disappoint.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

NO ONE TO TRUST

“With its taut plot and complex characters, [*No One to Trust*] is vintage, fan-pleasing Johansen.”

—*Booklist*

“Fast-moving plot ... another zippy read from megaselling Johansen.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Gritty, powerful and fast-paced, *No One to Trust* starts off with a bang and never lets up... This is one thriller that will keep you on the edge of your seat.”

—*Romantic Times*

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—*Booklist*

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—*Publishers Weekly*

“[Johansen] doesn’t let her readers down.”

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—*Booklist*

“A compelling tale.”

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“Thrilling ... will have fans of the author ecstatic and bring Ms. Johansen new readers.”

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—*Library Journal*

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—*Kirkus Reviews*

THE UGLY DUCKLING

“Outstanding. A real page-turner. Many will add [Iris Johansen’s] name to their list of favorite authors.”

—Associated Press

AND THE DESERT BLOOMS

THE TREASURE

TOUCH THE HORIZON

GOLDEN VALKYRIE

CAPTURE THE RAINBOW

A SUMMER SMILE

STORMY VOWS / TEMPEST AT SEA

STALEMATE

AN UNEXPECTED SONG

KILLER DREAMS

ON THE RUN

COUNTDOWN

BLIND ALLEY

FIRESTORM

FATAL TIDE

DEAD AIM

NO ONE TO TRUST

BODY OF LIES

FINAL TARGET

THE SEARCH

THE KILLING GAME

THE FACE OF DECEPTION

AND THEN YOU DIE

LONG AFTER MIDNIGHT

THE UGLY DUCKLING

LION'S BRIDE

DARK RIDER

MIDNIGHT WARRIOR

THE BELOVED SCOUNDREL

THE MAGNIFICENT ROGUE

THE TIGER PRINCE

LAST BRIDGE HOME

THE GOLDEN BARBARIAN

REAP THE WIND

STORM WINDS

Iris Johansen

THE UGLY DUCKLING



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THE UGLY DUCKLING

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Prologue

Greenbriar, North Carolina

“I didn’t mean to break it.” Tears were running down Nell’s cheeks. “Please, Mama. I was holding it and it just fell.”

“I told you never to touch my things. Your father gave me this mirror in Venice.” Her mother’s lips were tight with anger as she looked at the broken handle of the pearl-encrusted mirror. “It will never, never be the same.”

“Yes, it will. I promise.” Nell reached out and tried to take the hand mirror. “I didn’t break the mirror, just the handle. I’ll glue it. It will be exactly the same.”

“You’ve ruined it. What were you doing in my room anyway? I told your grandmother never to let you in here.”

“She didn’t know. It wasn’t her fault.” The sobs were choking her. “I just came to—wanted to see—I made this wreath of honeysuckle from the fence and—”

“I see you did.” Her mother disdainfully touched the flowers in Nell’s hair. “You look ridiculous.” She held the mirror up before Nell’s face. “Is that what you wanted to see? How silly you look.”

“I thought I’d look ... pretty.”

“Pretty? Look at yourself. You’re plump and plain and you’ll never be anything else.”

Mama was right. The girl in the mirror was plump, her eyes swollen and bloodshot. The bright yellow blossoms Nell had thought so beautiful looked limp and pitiful tucked in her untidy brown hair. By wearing them, she had made even the flowers seem ugly. She whispered, “I’m sorry, Mama.”

“Was that really necessary, Martha?” Her grandmother stood in the doorway. “She’s only eight years old.”

“It’s time she learned to face reality. She’ll never be anything but an ugly little mouse. She has to deal with it.”

“All children are beautiful,” her grandmother said quietly. “And if she’s a little plain now that doesn’t mean she’ll stay that way.”

Her mother snatched up the mirror again and held it before Nell. “Is she right, Nell? Are you beautiful?”

Nell turned her head to avoid her reflection.

Her mother turned to her grandmother. “And I don’t want you filling her head with stories and fantasies. Ugly ducklings don’t become swans. Plain children usually grow up to be plain adults. She’ll have to be content with being neat and clean and obedient to be accepted.” She took Nell’s shoulders and looked directly into her eyes. “Do you understand, Nell?”

She understood. By accepted, Mama meant to be loved. She would never be beautiful like Mama, so she must make them all love her by doing whatever they wished.

She nodded jerkily.

Her mother released her, grabbed her briefcase from the bed, and moved toward the door. “I have a meeting in twenty minutes, and you’ve made me late. You must never, never com

into this room again.” She glared impatiently at Nell’s grandmother. “I can’t understand you not watching her more closely.”

She was gone.

Her grandmother held out her arms to Nell. She meant to comfort, to ease the hurt, and Nell wanted to go to her, to bury her face in her shoulder. But there was something she must do first.

She turned back to the dresser and carefully gathered the pieces of the broken mirror. She would glue every piece with great care so that no one would ever know it was broken. She must work hard and be very clever and very good.

Because she was an ugly duckling.

And she would never become a swan.

June 4
Athens

Tanek wasn't pleased.

Conner could tell as he watched Nicholas Tanek stride out of customs. Tanek's expression was impassive, but Conner had known him long enough to read his body language. Tanek's power and presence were always evident, but not the impatience.

It had better be good, Tanek had told him.

It wasn't good, but it was all Conner had.

He ambled forward and smiled with effort. "Pleasant flight?"

"No." Tanek walked toward the exit. "Is Reardon in the car?"

"Yes, he arrived from Dublin last night." He paused. "But he can't go to the party with you. I could wangle only one invitation."

"I said two invitations."

"You don't understand."

"I understand that if it's a hit, I'm without a backup. I understand that I pay you to do as you please. Tell me, tell you."

"The party is for Anton Kavinski and the invitations were issued three months ago. He's the president of a Russian state, for God's sake. It cost me a fortune to get even one." He added hurriedly, "And you may not need Reardon. I told you the information may not be accurate. Our man only found a computer message at DEA headquarters that indicated this party on the island of Medas *might* be hit."

"That's all?"

"And a list of names."

"What kind of list?"

"The names of six guests. No one that we can identify as players except one of Kavinski's bodyguards and Martin Brenden, the man who's giving the party. One name was circled for special attention. A woman."

"What makes you think this is a hit list?"

"Blue ink. Our man has a theory that Gardeaux's orders are color-coded to define action to be taken."

"Theory?" Tanek's voice was dangerously soft. "I've come all this way for a theory?"

Conner moistened his lips. "You told me to let you know anything that came up about Gardeaux."

The mention of Philippe Gardeaux had the desired effect of tempering Tanek's annoyance. Conner saw with relief. He had learned that no effort was too great, no action too minor, if it concerned Gardeaux.

"Okay, you're right," Tanek said. "Who sent this computer message?"

"Joe Kabler, the head of the DEA, has a paid informant in Gardeaux's camp."

"Can we get the informant's name?"

Conner shook his head. "I've been trying, but so far no luck."

"And what's Kabler going to do about this list?"

"Nothing."

Tanek stared at him. "Nothing?"

"Kabler thinks it's a list of bribery targets."

"He doesn't believe in the 'deadly blue ink' theory?" Tanek asked sarcastically.

Conner drew a breath of relief as they came abreast of the Mercedes. Let Reardon deal with him; they were two of a kind. "Reardon has the list with him in the car." He hastily opened the back door. "You can talk to him while I drive you to the hotel."

"Howdy, cowboy." Jamie Reardon's Irish brogue was blatantly at odds with the assumed western drawl. "I see you left your boots at home."

Nicholas Tanek felt a little of his impatience ebb as he climbed into the car. "I should have brought them. Nothing like boots to kick ass."

"Mine or Conner's?" Jamie asked. "Must be Conner's. No one would want to damage my venerable ass."

Conner gave a nervous laugh as he pulled out of the parking space.

Jamie's long face lit with mischief, his sly gaze on the back of Conner's head. "But I can see how you'd be displeased with Conner. It's a long flight from Idaho for no good reason."

"I told you it might be nothing," Conner said. "I didn't tell him to come."

"You didn't tell him not to," Jamie murmured. "Isn't silence assent, Nick?"

"Knock it off. I'm here now." Nicholas wearily leaned back on the leather seat. "Is it for nothing, Jamie?"

"Probably. There's no sign the DEA is taking it seriously. Kabler's certainly not spending government funds to get an invitation to Medas."

Another blind alley. Christ, Nicholas was tired of it.

"But getting away from those wide-open spaces is good therapy for you," Jamie said. "Every time you come back from that ranch, you look more like John Wayne. It's not healthy."

"John Wayne has been dead a number of years."

"I told you it wasn't healthy."

"It's healthy spending your life in a pub?"

"Ah, Nick, you never understood. Irish pubs are the cultural center of the universe. Poetry and art flourish like roses in summer, and the conversations ..." He half closed his eyes savoring the memory. "At other places people talk, in my place they have conversations."

Nicholas smiled faintly. "There's a difference?"

"The difference between deciding the fate of the world and buying a new video game for the kid." He lifted a brow. "But why am I wasting my time describing such beauty to you? You have only steers to talk to in that savage Idaho."

"Sheep."

"Whatever. It's no wonder cowboys are reputed to be strong and silent. Their vocal cords are atrophied from disuse."

"They have the usual verbal skills."

Jamie snorted.

"The list," Conner prompted.

"Ah, he wishes his summons to be validated," Jamie said. "He's afraid of you, you know."

"Nonsense." Conner's laugh was a little too hearty.

"I tried to tell him you're no longer in the business, but I don't think he believes me. I do hope you'd wear the cowboy boots. They're so wholesome and unthreatening."

"Stop it, Jamie," Nicholas said.

Jamie chuckled. "Just a bit of humor." He added in a tone inaudible to Conner, "I've never liked liking for the shifty rabbit. Every time he jumps, he makes me want to skin him."

"You don't have to like him. He has an inside man with the DEA."

"For all the good it's done us so far." Jamie reached in his pocket, drew out a folded piece of paper, and handed it to Nicholas. "And this looks like another blank."

"Who's giving this party?" Nicholas said.

"A banker. Martin Brenden, vice president of Continental Trust. Continental Trust is going after Kavinski's overseas investments. Brenden's rented this palace on Medas for the weekend and is throwing the party in Kavinski's honor."

"And what connection does Brenden have with Gardeaux?"

"None that we can trace."

"Kavinski?"

"Possible. Since Kavinski was elected president of Vanask he's become a major deal maker above and under the table. He may have offended Gardeaux by refusing to let drugs into Vanask." He paused. "But his name wasn't on the list."

"Then I'd bet on Kabler's interpretation. Bribery. He's been head of the DEA long enough to sift the chaff from the grain, and he's a shrewd bastard."

"Does that mean you're not going to Medas?"

Nicholas thought about it. It was probably a waste of time if Gardeaux's message was just a payola list. He had gone on too many wild-goose chases on the chance of finding the key to nail Gardeaux.

But if it was a hit list, then one of the intended victims might know something he could use. Besides, if Gardeaux wanted them dead, then Nicholas damn well wanted them alive.

"Well?" Jamie prompted.

"How do I get to this Medas?"

"There are boats bringing the guests from the dock at Athens. They start leaving at eight tonight. You just show up with an invitation."

"And I wonder how many of Gardeaux's men bought invitations as I did."

"I checked out the guests," Conner said. "Everyone who accepted is legitimate."

Maybe. "Any other way to get on the island?"

Conner shook his head. "It has a rocky coastline that's accessible only by the one dock. Medas is postage-stamp size. You can walk around the entire island in under an hour. Besides the mansion where the party's going to be, there's only a few other outbuildings."

"And Kavinski's security men will be guarding the dock," Jamie said. "It doesn't seem to be a situation Gardeaux would choose to rid himself of enemies." He smiled. "On the other hand, Kaifer seemed an impossible target, too, and we managed it."

"We were lean and hungry," Nicholas pointed out. "These days Gardeaux is a fat cat who

prefers to wait outside the mouse hole for his prey. But I suppose I'll go and check it out."

"I could go. Or you could send someone else."

"No, I'll do it myself."

"Why?" Jamie's gaze narrowed on his face. "Could it be that you're growing restless in the wilds?"

God, yes, he was restless. Restless and impatient and wanting this over. He was no closer to bringing Gardeaux down than he was a year ago.

"You're too used to walking on the edge," Jamie said lightly. "And you'll never be anything but lean and hungry, my lad. I admit I miss it, too, at times." He sighed. "Unfortunately, it's deplorably true that one can have only so many conversations."

"I don't miss it. I just want Gardeaux."

"If you say so."

"I'll need a report on all the names on the list."

"It's already on the desk in your hotel room. As you'll see, there doesn't seem to be any common thread connecting the names."

No, Medas was going to be a snarl of inconsistencies and guesses and maybes.

But the circled name on the list that Conner had mentioned might indicate something prime prospect or prime target. Either way, she merited attention. He unfolded the paper Jamie had given him.

The name that topped the list was both circled and underlined.

Nell Calder.

June 4

Medas, Greece

"I saw a monster, Mama," Jill announced.

"Did you, love?" Nell placed a white hyacinth to the left of the lilac in the Chinese vase and tilted her head appraisingly. Yes, perfect. She reached for another lilac as she glanced at Jill standing in the doorway. "Like Pete, the magic dragon?"

Jill looked at her in disgust. "No, that's a pretend monster, this was a real one. A magic monster. With a long gray nose and eyes like this." She formed a circle with her thumb and forefinger, and then, judging the circle too small, used her other hand to make the eyes larger. "And a humped back."

"Sounds like an elephant." One more delphinium and the arrangement would be finished. "Or maybe a camel."

"You're not listening to me," Jill said. "It was a man monster and he lives in the caves."

"The caves?" Fear leapt through Nell. The flowers instantly forgotten, she whirled to face her daughter. "What were you doing there? You know Mr. Brenden told you that you weren't to go into the caves. The real estate agent told him the sea rushes in, and bad tides could sweep you away."

"I just went in a little way." She added virtuously, "And then Daddy called me and I came right back out."

"Daddy took you there?" Dammit, Richard should have watched her more closely. Didn't he know that an island posed all sorts of dangers for a four-year-old? Nell knew she should have gone with them when they all decided to take that stroll along the beach. Richard

always became distracted when he was surrounded by Brenden's coterie. He always had to be the best, the most charming, the funniest, the cleverest in any group.

What was she thinking? Nell wondered guiltily. Richard didn't have to be the best; he was the best. Jill was her responsibility and she should have gone with them and taken care of her instead of hiding back here and playing with the flower arrangements for the party. "You mustn't go into the caves. It's not safe. That's why Daddy called you back."

Jill nodded. "Because of the monster."

"No." Jill was a sensitive and imaginative child, and this particular fantasy had to be nipped at the start. Nell dropped to her knees on the Aubusson rug and gently grasped Jill's shoulders. "There was no monster. Sometimes shadows look like monsters, particularly when you're in a spooky place. Remember when you wake in the middle of the night and think there are bogeymen under the bed? Then, when we look, there's nothing there?"

"There was a monster." Jill's lips set stubbornly. "He scared me."

For an instant Nell was tempted to let her continue to think the monsters existed if the idea would keep her out of the cave. But she had never lied to her daughter before and she would not start now. She would just have to never let Jill out of her sight while they were on the deserted island.

"Shadows," Nell repeated firmly, and for reinforcement added, "Isn't that what Daddy said when you told him about the monster?"

"Daddy didn't listen. He told me to hush. He was busy talking to Mrs. Brenden." Jill's eyes filled with tears. "And you don't believe me either."

"I do believe you, but sometimes there's—" She couldn't go on with Jill looking at her with those reproachful brown eyes. She gently stroked back the straight, silky brown bangs from Jill's forehead. His China doll, Richard called her, because of her straight, short bob. But there was nothing fragile about Jill. She was sturdy and as apple-pie American as Nell could make her. "Suppose we go down to the cave tomorrow morning and you can show me the monster and we'll chase him away."

"You won't be afraid?" Jill whispered.

"There's nothing to fear here, baby. It's a good place for children. The sea and the beach and this lovely house. You'll have a wonderful time this weekend."

"You won't have a good time."

"What?"

Jill's gaze held hers with an oddly mature shrewdness. "You never have a good time. Not like Daddy."

Never underestimate the wisdom of children, Nell thought wearily. "I'm a little shy. Just because I'm quiet doesn't mean I'm not having a good time." She gave her daughter a hug. "And we always have a good time together, don't we?"

"Sure." Jill's arms slid around her neck. She cuddled closer. "May I come down to the party tonight? Then you'll have somebody to talk to."

Jill smelled of sea and sand and Nell's lavender soap she had begged to use in her bath last night. Nell's arms tightened around her for a moment before she reluctantly released her. "It's a grown-up party. You wouldn't like it."

And neither would she. She had grown accustomed to her duties as Richard's wife and could usually fade into the background, but that would be difficult to do this weekend.

plain wren would stick out like the proverbial sore thumb among the socialites and celebrities. Martin Brenden had invited to the island to meet Kavinski and dazzle him into signing with Continental Trust.

“Then stay with me,” Jill coaxed.

“I can’t.” She wrinkled her nose. “Daddy’s boss wouldn’t like it. This is a very important night for Daddy, and we both have to help him.” She saw her daughter’s face begin to cloud again, and said quickly, “But I’ll bring you up a tray of goodies before you go to sleep. We have a picnic.”

The anxiety immediately vanished. “And wine?” Jill asked eagerly. “Jean Marc’s mother lets him have a glass of wine every evening for supper. She says it’s good for him.”

Jean Marc was the son of the housekeeper who reigned supreme in their apartment in Paris, and Nell was hearing a good deal about the rascal. “Orange juice.” To stave off an argument, she added quickly, “But if you eat all your supper, I’ll see if I can find a chocolate éclair for you.” She stood up and pulled the little girl to her feet. “Now, go run your bath while I take this flower arrangement downstairs. I’ll be back in two minutes.”

Jill gazed solemnly at the Chinese vase and then smiled luminously. “It’s pretty, Mama. Even nicer than when they were in the garden.”

Nell didn’t agree. She always thought it was a shame to pick flowers. Nothing was more beautiful than a garden in bloom. Like the garden of the bed-and-breakfast she had painted when she was going to school at William and Mary. Mists and rich colors and all the textures of morning ...

She felt a sharp pang and quickly shied away from the memory. She had no reason to pick herself. Richard had never denigrated her paintings as her parents had done. After they were married, he had even encouraged her to continue with her work. She just had no time. Being the wife of an ambitious young executive seemed to occupy every hour of the day.

She made a face at the vase as she picked it up. If she had not been forced to spend an afternoon doing Sally Brenden’s flower arrangements, she could have sketched that beautiful shoreline. But that would have meant going with the Brendens and Richard for that walk along the beach. She would have had to smile and chat and bear Sally being gracious to her. Sally’s subtle tyrannies were a welcome alternative to her company.

Nell brushed her lips across Jill’s brow. “Lay out your pajamas and don’t go near the balcony.”

“You’ve already told me that,” Jill said with dignity.

“I told you not to go into the cave too.”

“That’s different.”

“No, it isn’t.”

Jill started toward the bathroom. “Caves are neat. I don’t like balconies. I get dizzy looking down at the rocks.”

Thank heaven for small mercies. She couldn’t believe Sally had given them, a couple with a small child, a suite with a balcony overlooking that rocky shore. Yes, she could believe it. Richard had told Sally years before that he loved the view from a balcony, and Sally always tried to please him. Everyone tried to please the golden boy.

“You should see the boatload of security men Kavinski sent ahead. You’d think he was Arafat.” Richard blew into the suite like a strong breeze. He glanced at the flowers. “Pretty.”

You'd better get them downstairs. Sally mentioned there wasn't a bouquet in the foyer."

"I just finished it." She was making excuses again, she realized with annoyance. "I'm not professional. She could have had someone come out to the island from Athens to do them."

He kissed her cheek. "But they wouldn't be as pretty as yours. She's always saying how lucky I am to have such an artistic wife. Be a love and hurry them down to her." He headed for the bedroom. "I have to shower. Kavinski should be here within the hour, and Martin wants to introduce me to him over drinks."

"Do I have to go? I thought I'd show up just for the party."

Richard thought about it and then shrugged. "Not if you don't want to. I don't think you'll be missed in the crowd."

Relief flowed through her. It was much easier to fade into the background during a party. She turned toward the door. "Jill's running her bath. Will you keep an eye on her until she comes back?"

He smiled. "Sure."

He was dressed in white shorts and shirt, his brown hair rumpled and his lean cheeks flushed by the sun. He always looked wonderful in a tuxedo or a business suit, but she liked him best like this. He was more approachable, more *hers*.

He made a shooing motion with his hands. "Hurry. Sally's waiting."

She nodded and reluctantly left the suite.

She heard Sally's sharp, birdlike voice before she started down the curving marble staircase. She had always thought that tiny voice incongruous in a woman almost six feet tall and lean and sleek as a panther.

Sally Brenden turned away from the servant she had been scolding. "There you are. It's about time." She took the vase away from Nell and placed it on the marble table beneath an elaborately gilded mirror. "I'd think you'd be more considerate. It's not as if I don't have enough to worry about. I still have to speak to that little man who's going to shoot off the fireworks, talk to the chef, and I'm not even dressed yet. You know how important this night is to Martin. Everything has to be perfect."

Nell felt the heat flush her cheeks. "I'm sorry, Sally."

"An executive's wife is important in advancing his career. Martin would never have become vice president if I hadn't been there helping him. We don't ask much of you, do we?"

Nell had heard this self-laudatory lecture many times before. She felt a ripple of annoyance but quickly smothered it. "I'm sorry, Sally," she repeated. "Is there anything else I can do to help?"

Sally waved a beautifully manicured hand. "I've invited Madame Gueray to the party. Make sure she's comfortable. She's deplorably awkward in public."

Elise Gueray was even more shy and out of her element at a party than Nell. She didn't mind that Sally usually gave all the misfits to her. She received a deep satisfaction from making their way easier and less painful. God knows, she'd have been passionately grateful to anyone who'd have eased her way during those first few years after she had come to Europe.

"I don't know why Henri Gueray ever married her." Sally glanced at Nell with guilelessness. "Yet you so often see these powerhouse men with meek, inadequate wives."

A swift jab and then a turn of the knife. Nell was too accustomed to barbs to give Sally the satisfaction of reacting. "I found her very pleasant." She turned away and moved hastily.

toward the staircase. "I have to get back to Jill. She has to have her bath and dinner."

"Really, Nell, you should get a nanny."

"I like taking care of her myself."

"But she does get in the way." She paused. "I spoke to Richard about it this afternoon, and he agrees with me."

Nell went still. "Did he say that?"

"Of course, he realizes that the higher up he moves in the company, the more duties will be expected of you. When we get back to Paris, I'll contact the agency I used when Jonathan was a child. Simone made sure he gave me no trouble at all."

And Jonathan was now a thoroughly obnoxious and rebellious teenager hidden away in a boarding school in Massachusetts. "Thank you, but I'm not that busy. Perhaps when she's a little older."

"If Kavinski can be persuaded to give us his foreign investments, Richard will be in line to manage them. You'll be expected to travel with him. I think he's quite right to break in a nanny before she becomes a necessity." She turned away and moved toward the ballroom.

Sally was acting as if it were already settled, Nell thought frantically. She could not give her daughter up to one of those serene-faced women she had seen walking with their charges in the park. Jill belonged to her. How could Richard even consider taking her away?

He wouldn't consider it. Jill was everything to her. She did everything he asked of her, but he couldn't expect her to—

"Don't let the old witch bother you. She just wants to see you squirm." Nadine Fallon was coming down the steps. "Bullies always pounce on the gentle ones. It's the nature of the beast."

"Shh." Nell glanced over her shoulder, but Sally was already gone.

Nadine grinned. "Want me to spit in her eye for you?"

"Yes." She wrinkled her nose. "But somehow she'd find out and then Richard would be upset."

Nadine's grin faded. "Then let him be upset. He should know you're no match for her. He should be the one spitting in that barracuda's eye."

"You don't understand."

"No, I don't." She passed Nell and continued downstairs in a cloud of Opium perfume and Karl Lagerfeld chiffon—red-haired, beautiful, exotic, totally confident. "I learned a long time ago back in Brooklyn that she who doesn't fight back gets squashed."

Nadine would never get squashed, Nell thought wistfully. She had fought her way from Seventh Avenue to be one of the top runway models of Paris and never lost that earthy humor and boldness. She was invited everywhere, and Nell had run into her more and more frequently of late. Richard called her "designer window dressing," but Nell was always glad to see her.

Nadine glanced back over her shoulder. "You look great. Lost a few pounds?"

"Maybe." She knew she didn't look great. She was as plump as when Nadine had seen her last month, her slacks were rumped, and she hadn't had time to comb her hair since the morning. Nadine was just trying to soothe her after that malicious savaging by Sally Brenden. Why not? Size six could afford to be kind to size twelve. She felt a rush of shame at the thought. Kindness should always be valued and never looked at askance. "I have to see

Richard right away. I'll see you later at the party."

Nadine smiled and waved.

Nell took the stairs two at a time and ran down the long hall. Richard wasn't in the sitting room. She could hear him humming in the bedroom. She paused outside to steel herself and then threw open the door. "I don't want a nanny for Jill."

Richard turned away from the mirror. "What?"

"Sally said you were considering a nanny. I don't want one. We don't need one."

"Why are you upset?" He turned back to the mirror and straightened his tie. "It was just an idle discussion. It's not good to smother children with attention. All our friends have help. A nanny is something of a status symbol."

"You *are* considering it."

"Not without your consent." He put on his tuxedo jacket. "What are you wearing tonight?"

"I don't know." What difference did it make? She always looked the same anyway. "The blue lace gown, I guess." Her hands clenched at her sides. "I don't smother Jill."

"The blue is a good choice. That scalloped neckline makes your shoulders look wonderful."

She crossed the room and laid her head on his chest. "I want to take care of her myself. You're gone so often and we're company for each other." She whispered, "Please, Richard."

He stroked her hair. "I want only what's best for you. You know how hard I work to make sure you and Jill have a good life. Just help me a little, Nell."

He was going to do it, she realized in despair. "I try to help you."

"And you do." He pushed her away and looked down into her face. "But I'm going to need more from you." A flicker of excitement lit his face. "Kavinski's the key, Nell. I've been waiting for six years for an opening like this. It's not only the money, it's the power. There's no telling how far I can go now."

"I'll work harder. I'll do everything you tell me to do. Just let me keep Jill."

"We'll talk about it tomorrow." He kissed her on the forehead and turned away. "Now I'd better get downstairs. Kavinski will be here any minute."

She stared numbly at the door after it closed behind him. They would talk tomorrow and he would be gentle and firm and a little sad that he couldn't do what she wanted. He would make her feel guilty and helpless and, when they returned to Paris, he would buy her favorite yellow roses and take care of the interviewing of the nanny himself in order not to distress her.

"Mama, my bathwater's getting cold," Jill said reprovingly. She stood barefoot in the doorway, wrapped in a huge pink towel.

"Is it?" She swallowed to ease the tightness in her throat. She would enjoy this precious time with Jill and try not to think of tomorrow. Maybe they wouldn't get the Kavinski accounts. Perhaps Richard would change his mind. "Then I guess we'd better warm it up and get you in it."

"Yep." Jill turned on her heel and vanished into the bathroom.

"**Y**ou look like a princess." Jill rocked back and forth in her bed, hugging her knees.

"Not likely." Nell gently pushed her down on the pillows and pulled up the blanket. "Now don't try to stay awake. Take a nap and I'll wake you when I bring our picnic. One of the

maids will be right outside in the sitting room.” She teasingly ruffled her daughter’s hair.
“Just in case you see any monsters.”

“I did see him, Mama,” Jill said gravely.

“Well, you won’t see him again.” She kissed her forehead. “I promise you.”

She had reached the doorway when Jill called, “Remember the wine.”

Nell chuckled as she shut the bedroom door. Jill would never suffer from either shyness or inability to assert herself.

Her smile vanished as she passed the mirror in the hall. Only her daughter would see anything princesslike in her appearance. She was a little over five seven but definitely plump rather than Junoesque. Plump and boring and plain as grass. Her features were nondescript, except for a nose that turned up instead of fading into the boring sameness as the rest of her face. Even her short brown hair was boring, the same pale acorn shade of Jill’s without childhood’s sheen. Plain.

Well, Jill thought she was beautiful, and that was enough for her. Not that Richard didn’t think she was attractive. He had once told her she reminded him of a country quilt—enduring, traditional, and beautiful in its simplicity. She wrinkled her nose ruefully at her reflection before moving quickly toward the door. She didn’t know one woman in the world who wouldn’t rather be a glamorous silk sheet than a country quilt. But plain women had one advantage; no one ever noticed when they entered or left a room. She would have no trouble escaping the ballroom with Jill’s picnic supper.

She stood at the top of the marble stairs, looking down at the crowded foyer.

Music.

The scent of flowers and expensive perfume.

Laughter and conversation.

Dear God, she didn’t want to go down there. The tall, carved doors leading to the ballroom were thrown wide open, and she could see Richard standing in a corner, talking to a tall bearded man with a ribboned chest. Kavinski? Probably. Martin, Sally, and Nadine were also crowded around him, and Sally’s expression was almost fawning. Nell would be expected to meet Kavinski later, but she would only be in the way now.

Her gaze searched the room, and she finally spotted Madame Gueray in the shadow of the French doors. Elise Gueray was fiftyish, thin, and trying desperately to blend into the white velvet drapes. Nell felt a swift rush of sympathy. She knew that frozen smile and hunted expression; she had seen it in her own mirror.

She started down the stairs. Let Richard charm Kavinski and wheel and deal with everyone else in sight. Helping Richard by making that poor woman less miserable was much more to her taste.

“*Mon Dieu*, the man should have a rose in his teeth,” Elise Gueray murmured.

“What?” Nell put a lemon tart on the tray. She had promised Jill a chocolate éclair, but she couldn’t see any on the buffet table.

“You know, like Monsieur Schwarzenegger in that movie where he played the spy who could do everything except fly?”

She vaguely remembered the movie and huge Schwarzenegger tangoing with a rose in his

teeth. “*True Lies?*”

Elise shrugged. “I never remember titles, but Schwarzenegger is hard to forget.” She nodded at someone across the room. “And so is he. Do you know who he is?”

Nell glanced over her shoulder. The man Elise was indicating did not have Schwarzenegger’s height or bulk, but she could see what Elise meant. Dark-haired, middle thirties, with a face more arresting than good-looking, he exuded total self-confidence. He would never be caught in a situation he could not control. No wonder Elise found him fascinating. For people like her and Nell, such assurance was as appealing as it was unattainable. “I’ve never seen him before. Perhaps he’s in Kavinski’s entourage.”

Elise shook her head.

She was right, Nell realized. This stranger would not travel in anyone’s wake.

“Are you that hungry?” Elise’s gaze had shifted to Nell’s tray.

Heat scorched her cheeks. “No, I thought I’d take a selection up to my daughter.”

Elise looked stricken. “I did not mean—”

“I know.” Nell made a face. “I don’t exactly look underfed.”

“You look very nice,” Elise said gently. “I did not mean to hurt you.”

“You didn’t.” She grinned. “It’s my predilection for chocolate cake that hurts me. It’s comforting as a security blanket.”

“And do you need comforting, my dear?”

“Don’t we all?” she evaded, then said more firmly, “No, of course not. I have everything you could possibly want.” She added softly, “If you have time, I’d like you to meet my daughter tomorrow.”

“I would enjoy that very much.”

“Oh, there are the eclairs. She loves eclairs.” She added the pastry to the treasures on the tray before turning back to Elise. “Will you excuse me? I’d like to take these up to Jill. I told her to take a nap, but she’s probably still awake.”

“Certainly. I’ve taken too much of your time. You’ve been very kind.”

“Nonsense. I’ve enjoyed it. I should be the one to thank you.” It was the truth. Once her shyness was dispersed, Elise Gueray revealed herself to possess both humor and wit. She had made the past few hours pass pleasantly enough. Nell picked up the tray. “If I don’t see you later this evening, I’ll call you after breakfast tomorrow.”

Elise nodded, her gaze going to her husband across the room. “I doubt if I’ll be here when you return. Henri will be ready to leave soon. He only thought it important he meet Kavinski.”

Nell edged around the crowd, her brow creased in a frown of concentration as she balanced the heavy tray.

The wine.

She stopped short outside the ballroom doors.

Oh, why not? A few sips wouldn’t hurt Jill; Europeans fed it to their babies all the time. She wanted Jill to be happy tonight. Who knew how many more opportunities they’d get to just be together?

She ducked back inside the ballroom. Champagne. Even better. As she grabbed a glass of champagne from a passing waiter, the tray she was balancing in her other hand wobbled.

The tray was taken from her. “May I help you?”

Arnold Schwarzenegger. No, at closer range he resembled no one but himself. Very high impact. That confidence was overpowering and she instinctively wanted to escape it. She pulled her gaze away from his. “No, thank you.”

She tried to take the tray, but he held it out of her reach. “I insist. It’s no trouble.” He strolled out of the ballroom and she was forced to hurry after him. “Where is this assignation to take place?”

“Assignation?”

He glanced down at the tray. “He must have a hearty appetite.”

She felt the heat sting her cheeks. Twenty-eight years old and she was blushing. She muttered, “It’s a treat for my daughter.”

He smiled. “Then I assume the assignation is still to take place in a bedroom, and you will never make it up the steps with the champagne *and* the tray.” He moved across the foyer and started up the staircase. “I’m Nicholas Tanek, and you are ...?”

“Nell Calder.” She found herself running after him. “But I don’t need help. If you’ll give me —”

“Calder? Richard Calder’s wife?”

He was surprised. They were always surprised Richard had chosen her. “Yes.”

“Well, he appears too busy to help you. Permit me to substitute.”

He was clearly not going to be dissuaded. She might as well let him have his way. It would be the quickest way to rid herself of him. She followed him up the steps and found herself watching the smooth flexing of his shoulders and buttocks. Both were sleekly muscled and extremely admirable.

“How old is your daughter?”

Her gaze guiltily flew upward, but he was still looking straight ahead, she realized with relief. “Jill’s almost five. Do you have children, Mr. Tanek?”

He shook his head. “Which way?”

“Right.”

He asked, “Are you with Continental Trust too?”

“No.”

“What do you do?”

“Nothing. I mean—I take care of my daughter.” When he didn’t comment, she found herself continuing on. “I have quite a few social duties.”

“I’m sure you’re very busy.”

But not like the women in his world. She was sure they were all sleek and gifted and as confident as he.

“You’re American?”

She nodded. “I was raised in Raleigh, North Carolina.”

“That’s a university town, isn’t it?”

“Yes, my parents taught at Greenbriar University just outside Raleigh. My father was president of the college.”

“It sounds like a very ... secure life.”

He meant boring. She bristled. “I enjoy small towns.”

He glanced back over his shoulder. “But, of course, it can’t compare to the life you lead now. I’m told Continental Trust’s European headquarters is in Paris.”

“Yes, it is.”

“And it must be pleasant being able to visit places like this. Luxuries can be very important.”

“Can they?”

“I was speaking to your husband earlier in the evening. I’d judge permanent life in a palace would suit him very well indeed.”

“He works hard to earn any luxuries we enjoy.” His idle probing was beginning to annoy her. He couldn’t really be interested in either Richard or her. She changed the subject. “Are you in banking, Mr. Tanek?”

“No, I’m retired.”

She stared at him, puzzled. “Really? You’re very young.”

He chuckled. “I had enough money and decided not to wait for a retirement party and a gold watch. I now own a ranch in Idaho.”

He had surprised her again. She would never have thought he was the type to wander far from the urban life. “You don’t seem—”

“I like the solitude. I grew up in Hong Kong, surrounded by people. When I was in a position to choose, I opted for wilderness.”

“I’m sorry, it’s none of my business.”

“No problem. I have nothing to hide.”

She would wager he had a great deal to hide, she thought suddenly. He was a man who buried everything beneath that smooth surface. “From what business did you retire?”

“I dealt in commodities.” He asked, “Which door?”

“Oh, the last one on the left.”

He moved swiftly down the corridor and stopped before the suite.

“Thank you. It wasn’t necessary, but I—”

He had opened the door and was striding in, she realized in astonishment.

The Greek maid hurriedly sat upright in the chair.

“That will be all,” Nicholas Tanek said in Greek. “We’ll call you when we need you.”

The maid walked out of the suite and closed the door.

Nell stared at him, stunned.

Tanek smiled. “Don’t be alarmed. My intentions are above reproach.” He winked. “We’re not unless you call avoiding a very boring party reproachful. I saw you bolting out the door and needed an excuse to get away for a while.”

“Mama, did you bring—” Jill stood in the doorway, her gaze on Tanek. “Who are you?”

He bowed. “Nicholas Tanek. You’re Jill?”

She nodded warily.

“Then this is for you.” He presented the tray with a flourish. “Mead and ambrosia.”

“I wanted eclairs.”

“I believe we have those too.” He swept toward her. “Where will we dine?”

Jill studied him for a moment and then capitulated. “Mama and I are going to have a picnic. I put a blanket on the floor.”

“Excellent idea. You’re obviously ahead of us.” He started setting the paper plates down on the blanket. He said over his shoulder, “You forgot the napkins. We’ll have to improvise.” He disappeared into the bathroom and returned a minute later with a pile of tissues and two

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