

Sunset in Old Savannah by Mary Ellis
Secrets of the South Mysteries ~ Book 4

CHAPTER ONE

September

If ever there was a perfect time for Beth Kirby to get out of town it was now. While other parts of the country were enjoying the first crisp days of fall, the streets of Natchez, Mississippi could melt the rubber off her worn-out tires. Her mother's hints that she should attend dance lessons with them at the community college had become insistent demands. After all, lots of eligible men were taking lessons these days. Rita's criteria would include any unmarried male between twenty-five and sixty who's still breathing without mechanical assistance. Then there was the obstruction of justice charge pending against her in district court. Despite her current partner's assurance, the D. A. wouldn't drop the second degree felony until her former partner withdrew his complaint. And nasty Jack was living up to his reputation by taking his sweet time.

So why do I feel so uneasy? Beth parked in the shade and headed toward the back entrance of Price Investigations, only to be intercepted by her partner.

"I see you're here on time for a change." Michael Preston practically levitated from his shoes with excitement.

"I'm always on time, give or take ten minutes." She stepped around him on the metal steps. "Could we *not* act like sixth-graders on a field trip to Graceland?"

Michael kept pace at her heels. "I thought you couldn't wait to get out of Natchez for a while. Are you homesick already?"

"Hardly, but I know better than to get my hopes up too soon." Beth pulled open the door and waved him in.

Always the gentlemen, Michael refused to precede her inside. "You first, Miss Kirby."

"*One* of you should come in," called the office secretary. Maxine dragged Beth across the threshold by her sleeve. "Nate's chomping at the bit to deliver some good news."

Before she could free her arm from Maxine, Nate hollered from his office. "That you, Beth and Michael? Grab a cup of coffee and get in here."

"Donuts, Miss Maxine?" Michael produced a bag from behind his back. "Cream-filled with icing and chocolate sprinkles—your personal favorite."

Maxine snatched the bag from his fingers. "Be still, my beating heart."

Beth rolled her eyes as she filled her mug. “Bring me a donut, too,” she called over her shoulder. Belatedly, she remembered eating most of Nate’s M&M’s and then neglecting to replace the bag.

Their boss straightened in his upholstered leather chair, looking tan and well-rested after his three-week vacation at the beach. “Make yourselves comfortable. I’m sorry that yesterday’s staff meeting deteriorated into an impromptu celebration, complete with mystery guests from all over the state.”

Beth took the chair closest to the door. “Never apologize for a party during work hours.”

“It’s not every day we hear a honeymoon was an unqualified success. A new baby on the way—congratulations, Nate.” Michael leaned against the windowsill, two donuts in one hand, coffee in the other.

“He and Isabelle have been married for two years, Einstein. It’s not like they’re rookies—” Recognizing the indelicate ground on which she tread, Beth swallowed a gulp of coffee. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean...”

“No problem,” laughed Nate. “The pregnancy came as a pleasant surprise, but enough about that. While Isabelle and I were sightseeing, I found a case for both of you.”

“Your wife said you were quite a hero in Mobile.” Beth reached for Michael’s second donut. “Chased some thug for three blocks, tackled him, and returned a little old lady’s purse to her.”

With his face turning a rosy shade, Nate waved off the praise. “I did what anyone would have done.”

“I don’t think so. Most bad guys pack loaded guns these days.” Beth sucked the cream from the donut’s center.

“Fortunately, this particular miscreant carried no weapon to ruin my honeymoon or the other couple’s anniversary celebration. The woman’s husband offered me a reward, but I refused. Instead, I gave them some of our business cards to pass out when they got home, in case their friends need a good P.I.”

“Is Mobile anywhere near Talladega?” asked Michael. “I’d love to see a Nascar race.”

“It’s not, and the case isn’t in Mobile.” Nate took a tablet from his briefcase. “The couple I helped, Mr. and Mrs. Baer, had been vacationing in Mobile, but they live on the East Coast in Savannah. Thanks to the Baers talking up our talents, you two are going to a charming city steeped in history and home of the famous Oglethorpe Town Squares.”

“Like in *Midnight in the Garden in Good and Evil?*” asked Mike. “I read that book years ago. A couple of scenes kept me up all night.”

Beth swiveled to face her partner. “That book was fiction. Let’s stick to reality. What kind of case?” she asked, turning back to Nate.

“Surveillance. A friend of Mrs. Baer hired our agency to check up on her husband. Take some pictures; discern the facts, but we are not to intervene. You’ll create a file to present to her. What she does with it is her own business.”

Uggh,” moaned Beth. “Spying on somebody’s spouse? Sounds like a job for Sleaze Incorporated.”

Nate’s jaw twitched, while he shifted in the chair. “The last time I checked, Miss Kirby, my name’s on the paychecks around here. Which means we need to generate cash flow so those aforementioned paychecks don’t bounce.”

“She didn’t mean anything by that,” said Michael. “Beth just talks without thinking. Could you throw me the donut bag, Miss Maxine?”

Beth would love to put her partner in his place, but unfortunately, Michael was right. “Sorry, Nate, spending time in jail affected my judgement.”

“According to my sources, we were incarcerated for less than twenty-four hours. Your judgement must have been faulty long before that.” Nate reached for another donut. “What you need—what you both need—is a vacation. This new client has offered a hefty fee, plus a generous per diem for expenses. I would go myself, but Isabelle is eager to sleep in her own bed. I heard that Savannah is a lovely city with plenty to see and do, so tie up loose ends here within the next few days. I’ll handle anything that comes up while you’re gone.”

Michael scratched his scalp. “I’m confused. Are you giving us a free trip or a case to work?”

“It will be both. Plan to be gone a week to ten days, but the case shouldn’t take longer than a few days. With the generous per diem, you can stay someplace nice and enjoy some R&R with all expenses paid.”

Beth drained the last of her coffee. “It takes *two* PI’s to snap grainy photos of a philandering husband?”

The legs of Nate’s chair hit the floor with a bang. “First of all, those photos had better not be grainy. Secondly, we don’t know that anybody is philandering. And if this assignment is beneath your dignity, you can always collect unemployment until something that meets your standards rolls in. What’s the matter with you? I told you, the trip will be a mini-vacation since the work shouldn’t take more than a few days.”

From the corner of her eye, Beth caught Michael shaking his head. How on earth could she admit the truth—that she hated spying on people who might be stepping out? “My mother has been asking that question for years.” Beth rose to her feet. “I would love to go to Savannah. Michael and I will do a great job. Our

new client will be pleased-as-punch when we leave.”

“That’s better.” Nate pushed his notes across the desk. “Here’s the information you’ll need. Keep in touch. Call me at least every other day.”

“Are we driving or flying?”

“Your choice—fly and rent a car in Savannah or drive one of yours.”

“Fly,” said Michael.

“We’ll drive separately,” she said simultaneously.

When the partners turned to face each other, Beth was quicker with an explanation. “Two cars will allow some personal free time. What if I want to go shopping while you search for the perfect work-out gym?”

“Shopping for what—Cheetos and Diet Coke?” Michael quipped. “I’ve never known you to shop, Kirby.”

Nate wrote out a check and tore it from the pad. “This is part of the advance. Work out the details on your own and remember to save receipts. I’ll tell Mrs. Evelyn Doyle you’ll be there in a few days to introduce yourselves and outline the services that we’ll provide.” Nate’s forehead furrowed into deep creases. “Tell me now if this is a bad idea. If you two can’t play nice, I’ll send one of you on assignment while the other takes time off.”

Michael shook his head like a balky mule. “We got along fine when you were gone. Beth and I will sort out any concerns she might have.”

She glanced sideways to make sure Michael hadn’t been replaced by a politician on the campaign trail. Considering she would be the one taking time off, Beth smiled as widely as her lips allowed. “Don’t you worry ‘bout us. We’ll do the agency proud without unnecessary gunplay or public embarrassment.”

“Fine, when can you leave for Savannah?”

“I could be ready tomorrow.” Michael answered without thinking.

“We still have paperwork for the last case. Then there’s the small matter of criminal charges still pending against me. I’d hate to flee across state lines as a fugitive. Plus my girlfriend’s wedding is on Saturday. I don’t want to miss it.”

“Fine, but plan to leave on Sunday. I’ll let Mrs. Doyle know and call Chief McNeil and the Adams County District Attorney to make sure all charges have been dropped. “Now get out of here.” Nate pointed at the door. “I don’t want my crack detectives to hear me begging and pleading.”

“Thanks, I owe you one.” Beth picked up the notebook.

“No, Miss Kirby. You owe me one hundred fifty-seven.” He motioned for his door to be closed.

On their way out Maxine jumped to her feet as Michael passed her desk. “Let me know if I can print directions or set up hotel reservations.”

Amazing what donuts on a regular basis can do around the office, thought Beth.

“You’re a gem, but my new car has state-of-the-art GPS.”

“If Michael tries to make a wrong turn, the car ignores him and does what’s right.” Beth winked at her.

The fifty-something secretary’s eyes grew round. “Is that true?”

“She’s pulling your leg, Miss Maxine. Hold down the fort while Beth and I do the agency proud.” Michael opened the door and waved Beth through like a trained dog.

“Don’t take any wooden nickels,” Beth said to Maxine.

“What’s the matter with you?” Michael asked the moment the door closed behind them. “I thought you would be eager to get out of Natchez, away from Detective Lejeune. Now you’ve got a week to let things cool down.”

“I am eager, but I don’t like taking photos of someone cheating on their wife.” Beth kept walking until they reached the street.

“You didn’t do anything wrong. You need to get over this...hang-up you have.”

“You’re right. I was expecting...a better case, that’s all.” Beth lifted her hair off her neck. Only two minutes without air conditioning and it felt hot and heavy against her skin.

“A case is a case. You want to get something to eat?” Michael glanced at his watch, doubtlessly an expensive gift from his parents.

“Thanks, but I need to get my oil changed and stop at the drug store. Then I must figure out what to wear to meet some rich, society lady.”

“Pack some casual clothes too, since we’ll have free time. Is there a Six Flags close to Savannah? I haven’t been on a roller coaster in ages.” Michael rubbed his palms together.

Beth laughed in spite of herself. “Why am I not surprised you love amusement parks? Okay, if there’s an amusement park we’ll go. But you better not throw up on my shoes.”

“Not this trained professional.” He wiggled his eyebrows. “Are you sure we need two cars in Savannah? Parking could be expensive and hard to find. The more we economize the more per diem we’ll have for the fun stuff.”

Beth pondered his logic. Although the thought of crossing three states with a new partner made her teeth ache, Michael was right about parking in historic places. During her three visits to New Orleans’ French Quarter, she received two tickets and had her car towed to the impound lot.

“You win. Pick me up at nine on Sunday and not a minute before. I’ll need

that long to pry myself loose from my parents. Whoever said, ‘you can never go home again’ must have been talking about adult children.”

“Your parents are great! I’m even getting used to Rita’s cooking.”

“Let’s switch places for a month. I’d happily live above a law office across the street from Blues and Biscuits. Live music and good food—what else does a girl need?”

Michael started his car with the press of button. “What does your gut say about our new client? Does Mrs. Doyle want us to lay groundwork for a lucrative divorce settlement?”

Beth focused on a freighter on the river. “Maybe she just wants to know what’s going on.”

“Nobody pays a hefty advance unless they’re fairly certain about the outcome. It’s really a shame, but for us, it’s just another day in the exciting life of a P.I.”

“Yep, that’s us, all right. Pick me up on Sunday, and save room in your car for my stuff. I’m not holding my suitcase on my lap for four states.”

“Three states—Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia.” Michael ticked off the names on his fingers.

“Four, what about South Carolina?”

“You do realize Savannah is in Georgia.”

“Of course, I do,” she lied. “Just save me some room.” Beth jumped into her car and drove away, feeling cranky for no particular reason. Yesterday, she told their boss she could no longer work in Natchez. Today, she was thumbing her nose at an expense paid trip to a place she always wanted to visit.

Maybe there is something wrong with me.

On the drive to the mediocre section of town, Beth tried to remember any head traumas suffered over the years. Yet every previous bicycling, white water rafting, or rock climbing incident had injured an arm or leg, not her cranial capacity. Part of the problem was Michael Preston. Although his skills as a P.I. had improved tremendously, there was just something claustrophobic about him, as though personal space meant your position in the grocery store line.

Beth walked into the kitchen of the small bungalow where she’d been born and found her parents at the table, sipping coffee.

“Home so soon?”

“Any word about your new case?”

“Are you ready for lunch?”

As her parents hurled questions at a furious pace, Beth summarized the developments at Price Investigation in a few concise sentences. Then silence

reigned as Rita Kirby digested the information and Stan Kirby rubbed his jaw sagely.

“Nate wants you to drive across country with a handsome young man and spend the next ten days in close proximity?” asked Rita. “He sees nothing amiss with that idea?”

Beth smiled, both at her mother’s thought process and her use of the word *amiss*. “Nate needs us in Savannah for a case, but if you’d like to call the folks at *Inside Edition*, I want a cut of the action.”

Rita clucked her tongue. “Make all the jokes you want, missy, but mark my words. Your new partner might have other ideas in mind. Hopefully, Mr. Price won’t put you in the same hotel room.” Rita’s face flushed from the mental image.

“Of course not.” Beth pulled a Coke from the fridge. “Don’t you worry; I’ll have my guard up whenever Michael steps within ten feet.”

“That’s my girl!” said Stan. “We raised you right.”

“Yes, you did.” Beth kissed her mother’s forehead and fled up the steps before she exploded. She loved her parents and didn’t want to argue, but moving back home hadn’t been easy. With any luck, Mrs. Doyle would keep them busy until Christmas, tracking down missing dogs or spying on her neighbors.

She didn’t need to worry about getting too close to someone at work again.

CHAPTER TWO

Despite the fact they only had to cross three states, the drive from Natchez to Savannah took over eleven hours. Michael would have stopped several hours ago, but Beth insisted: “Let’s just get there. Then we can relax.”

“Finally, we’re here,” he moaned as they passed the “Welcome to Savannah” sign. “Are you ready to relax now?”

“I’m ready to drop over dead. How could sitting in a car be so exhausting?” Beth yawned.

“It’s caused by oxygen depletion throughout the body due to inactivity. We should have stopped every hour and ran in place for a few minutes.”

Her second yawn was even louder than the first. “It was a rhetorical question. Let’s just find a hotel.”

Michael pulled into the exit lane and slowed his speed. “Looks like we have a Holiday Inn Express, Best Western Plus, Hilton Garden Suites—”

“Pick one, I don’t care. We can find something different tomorrow.”

Michael turned into the Courtyard Suites, parked close to the registration desk, and pulled two suitcases from the trunk. “I’ll get us rooms, while you stretch your legs.” When he returned with key cards in hand, Beth was sitting on a low brick wall, her feet in the fountain.

“Nate said this town is charming and historic.” She kicked up a froth of water. “So far it looks like every place else in America.”

“That’s because we’re still in the suburbs. Reserve your judgement until we reach downtown.” Michael handed her a key and her bag. “You’re in 208. Call me in the morning. We’ll meet for breakfast.”

“Thanks for driving the lion’s share,” she said. “Your car makes me nervous.”

“Not a problem. Get some rest, Beth. Tomorrow we meet the client and go to work.” Michael watched her trudge into the lobby like a middle-aged woman with bad knees. *What was going on with her?* Usually his partner had more energy than a hamster on his wheel.

On the drive, Beth said little and must have read the same page in her book five times. But at least they hadn’t bickered along the way. That would’ve driven him crazy. He usually enjoyed working with her and she’d taught him plenty during his first month on the job. As partnerships went, they each brought different skills to the table.

Something had crawled up her pant leg, but whatever it was wasn't his problem. He loved working as a private investigator. He aimed to do a great job in Savannah and earn the trust and respect of his boss. Beth could either snap out of her funk or sulk alone. Michael Preston also planned to enjoy himself in one of America's most beautiful cities. His days of being a boring, weak, kick-sand-in-the-face accountant were long gone.

When Michael answered his phone the next morning, at least his partner sounded in a better mood. "Good morning. Where are you? Are you ready to get something to eat?" she asked.

"I'm in the fitness room, finishing my workout. They have a decent assortment of machines and they're open twenty-four hours."

"Why did I even ask? I'm in the restaurant. Should I wait or go ahead and order?"

"I'll shower before we check out, so order me something healthy. I'm on my way." When Michael found Beth in a back booth, she was sipping coffee and studying a map. "Are you getting a feel for the area?" He filled an empty mug from the carafe.

Beth peered over the top of her magnifying glasses. "Nate said we were going to East Coast, as in beach. The only waterfront I can find is a landing on the Savannah River."

"The founding fathers built the city upriver so commerce would be protected from the ravages of storms and tides. Savannah was designed with twenty-seven town squares, each uniquely landscaped. Twenty-two have survived." Michael flipped over her map and tapped his index finger. "There's the Atlantic Ocean and the closest beach in on Tybee Island."

"Did you stay up all night reading tourist brochures?" Beth refilled her mug.

"Pretty much. I'm so excited I couldn't sleep. I've never been to Georgia."

"Me neither. I thought Savannah was in South Carolina until yesterday."

"You were close. The palmetto state is right across the river." Michael tapped his finger a second time as the waitress delivered their breakfast.

"Biscuits and gravy with cheesy grits," he muttered. "This is your idea of eating healthy?"

"Are you forgetting the orange slice?" Beth pointed at the fruit before adding a liberal amount of salt to her grits.

"Eat fast. I want to check out another place to stay before we call Mrs. Doyle."

"What's wrong with right here? We have free Wi-Fi and free parking. There's a pool, and the price includes breakfast."

“The rooms are fine, but I want to be in the historic district. We can run every morning at dawn, heading in a direction until we’ve checked out every square.”

“Or I can sleep in and you can text me photos.” Beth ate a greasy piece of bacon.

“Suit yourself.” Michael ate a spoonful of grits and grabbed the biscuit to eat plain. “See you in an hour in the lobby.” After his shower, he found his partner in the lobby, punctual for the second time that day.

Beth scrambled to her feet. “I called Nate to let him know we’re here and I called my mother. Rita wants me to bring home a bowl of Savannah peas and carrots. Can you believe such a request?”

“Actually I can, since you two share plenty of DNA.” Michael picked up her suitcase. “I have narrowed our search to one likely candidate.”

“You pick, because the hotel is way more important to you.” Beth climbed into the passenger side and rolled down the windows. “I will close my eyes until we get there.”

Fifteen minutes later, Michael stopped in front of an elegant hotel facing the river. “We’re here,” he sang out.

“Part of the Hilton chain,” she read, squinting at the sign. “Have you lost your mind? What kind of bite will this take from our expense allowance?”

“A tad over a hundred a night, including breakfast, but the location can’t be beat. The city shuttle stops right in front for sightseeing. They have a gym, a heated pool, and a kitchen in every suite.” Michael neglected to mention how large the *tad* was in this instance.

Beth lowered her sunglasses with one finger. “You do remember the part where Nate said we’re on a case, right? Why do we need kitchens? Neither of us cooks and I don’t plan to learn anytime soon.”

“Let’s give it a chance. If you hate it, we can look at others.” Michael pulled into a parking spot.

Beth climbed out, stretched, and let her gaze soar upward eight stories. “I’m willing to check out the rooftop, nothing more.”

After she saw the pool and lounging area with several fire pits, along with a view of half the city, Beth was hooked. “What do you think, Miss Kirby?” Michael asked on the elevator ride down.

“Not a bad place to hang our hats. Let’s see if they have any rooms left.”

“They do. I put a hold on two this morning.” Michael didn’t dare meet her eye.

“My, aren’t you the confident one. At least we’re in the heart of downtown.

Do you suppose Mrs. Doyle lives in one of those fancy mansions we passed? I love the wrought iron fences and flagstone courtyards, but could you imagine the upkeep on those places? My dad complains about cutting the grass once a week. Here, every inch of the yard is a manicured flower garden.”

“Most people probably have gardeners. About Mrs. Doyle....” Michael waited until they reached the lobby to continue.

Beth’s chin snapped up. “What about her? Are we fired already? She hasn’t even met us yet.”

“Mrs. Doyle will see us at two o’clock, so we have plenty of time. Turns out, however, she lives on Tybee Island, not in the city.”

“Then why are we *here*? Let’s find something cheap on the beach. Neither of us needs a kitchen.”

“This is where the action is, Beth, the lifeblood of the city. Something cheap on the beach is what you do with girlfriends.”

They glared at each other for several moments before she relented. “Fine, for a couple of nights. But if the location proves inconvenient, *I’ll* find us something else. Remember, this is a partnership.” Beth glanced at her watch. “You go check us in. I’m taking the newspaper up to the rooftop. After twelve hours in a car yesterday, I need some time alone.”

Michael didn’t argue. In fact, he understood perfectly. Hadn’t his ex-fiancée told him he was too demanding, too invasive? And toward the end, too much like gum stuck to her shoe? He had no desire to repeat the mistakes of his past. Instead he waited in this room and then texted Beth when it was time to meet him at the car.

When she arrived at the car, Beth didn’t inquire about her suitcase or mention that she wanted to change clothes. He, on the other hand, changed shirts three times.

“Won’t you be hot in that sport coat?” she asked, climbing into his car.

“Maybe, but I wanted to make a good impression. Aren’t you curious about your suitcase?”

“I figured you stuck it in my room. I always carry a toothbrush and paste in my purse. Those and my hand sanitizer are all I need. Except for my Glock,” she added.

“You’re *packing* to visit a sixty-year old woman?” Michael turned on the car’s GPS already programmed with the address.

“Nope, it’s still locked in the trunk. But why leave a weapon at home if you’re licensed to carry?”

“Our assignment involves surveillance, not tracking down a dangerous

fugitive,” he murmured.

“A private investigator never knows what the case will entail. I believe in being prepared. In your case, however, leaving your gun at home was a prudent choice.”

Since that’s exactly where his weapon was, Michael let the snide comment pass and admired the scenery for the sixteen-mile drive along Highway 80.

Beth’s wish to visit the beach was soon granted. Mrs. Doyle lived in a gated community that backed up to the glorious Atlantic Ocean. Michael stopped at the security booth at her enclave’s entrance. “Michael Preston and Elizabeth Kirby of Price Investigations,” he said to the guard. “We’re here to see Mrs. Evelyn Doyle.”

After a few taps on his tablet, the guard pressed a button. “Go right in, sir, miss. Mrs. Doyle lives at the end of Oleander Lane on the left. She’s expecting you.”

Michael watched the man touch the brim of his hat in the rearview mirror. “Wow, a real live guard instead of a keypad on a metal post. Real estate just notched past the million-dollar mark.”

Beth issued a sound similar to a snort. “Paying all that money for the privilege of living by water? How nice could the view be?”

“We’re about to find out.” Michael turned into a wide drive to a house with an amazing amount of glass, considering how close it sat to the ocean. After the formal, walled gardens in Old Savannah, this landscape contained mainly palmetto palms, huge clumps of pampas grass, and some kind of flowering vine which climbed over anything stationery.

When they knocked, surprisingly a small, silver-haired woman answered the door. Judging by her clothes, she was not hired help. “Mr. Preston, Miss Kirby?” she asked. “I’m Evelyn Doyle. Thank you for being so prompt.”

“It’s our pleasure,” he said as they entered a tiled foyer with a soaring ceiling but no furniture. Art adorned the walls, some in groupings, some that took up an entire wall.

“You’ve got quite a collection of prints.” Beth leaned perilously close to one sweeping panorama of wind and sky. “Are these all from the same person?”

“These are *paintings*, Miss Kirby, not prints. The one you’re admiring is an Edward Droege, done right here on Tybee Island. In the living room I have a Mary Cassatt and a John Singer Sargent if you’re partial to American Impressionists. I also have a Wassily Kandinsky and a Marc Chagall if the Expressionists are more your cup-of-tea.”

“Show me all of them. Lead the way,” said Beth. She gave him a wink when Mrs. Doyle turned her back.

They were led past a gourmet kitchen on the left and a dining room suitable for dinner parties of twenty on the right. In the two-story living room at the rear of the house, it wasn't the artwork which commanded their attention. The entire back wall was an expanse of glass, from ceiling down to the high-polished wood floor. The ultra-contemporary house sat on a bluff a dozen feet higher than the dune line, with views of the seacoast stretching for miles in both directions, unimpeded by other homes. Offshore, shrimp boats bobbed in the waves, while gulls and pelicans soared on air currents and dived into the surf for fish.

"Wow," Beth said. The single word, although inadequate, was rather appropriate. "Do you ever get tired of this view?"

Mrs. Doyle joined her side. "Not yet, and I've lived here thirty-two years."

"Aren't you worried about a storm breaking all this glass? God forbid," Beth added hastily.

"When my husband had the house remodeled, he insisted on adding roll-down hurricane shutters. You can't see them from inside, but with the touch of a button, the house turns into a fortress."

"Would you mind demonstrating?"

"Not at all." Mrs. Doyle walked to a brass panel in the corner of the room and pressed a button. As promised, shutters rolled into place, obliterating every view of sea and sky. As the room darkened, the sound of the surf died away.

"Amazing. This certainly isn't a house you would ever want to leave," said Beth.

"The *house* isn't what I'm worried about, Miss Kirby, if that's what you're implying. I don't want to see my marriage of forty years end." Mrs. Doyle's tone turned icy.

Beth opened her mouth to comment, but Michael interrupted. "I'm sure that's not what my partner meant. We both simply love your home. Now, so we don't tie up your entire afternoon, tell us how Price Investigations can help."

"All right, have a seat, please." Mrs. Doyle pointed at chairs and then perched on the arm of the sofa. As long as you guarantee complete discretion, I'll get right to the point. Privacy is of utmost importance. That's why I dismissed my maid for the day. And that's why I brought in out-of-town investigators."

"You have our word," Michael replied while Beth nodded her agreement.

"I believe my husband is having an affair. I don't think it's been going on very long, but I want it to stop. Get me photographs of his indiscretion so there could be no denial, along with names, dates, times, and background information on this...woman." Mrs. Doyle looked from one to the other.

"That shouldn't be difficult, ma'am," said Beth.

“Good. I’ve written down my husband’s pertinent information, such as the make, model, and license number of his car, along with the address of his downtown office, the country club, our church, and a few places Lamar frequents.” She pulled a sheet from a drawer under the table, along with a photograph of the two of them. “If you have any questions, call me on my cell. Never leave a message on the home phone or with a member of my staff.” Mrs. Doyle rose stiffly to her feet.

Beth took the paper to skim. “Thank you. This should be enough to get started.”

“You can trust us to protect your privacy.” Michael extended his hand, which the woman clasped briefly.

Beth dropped their business card on the coffee table. “Our cell numbers are on the card. We’ll be in touch in a few days. And you can be assured of our discretion.”

“Thank you, if you would be so kind to see yourselves out.” For the first time, Mrs. Doyle’s composure slipped. She sounded close to tears.

On their way to the door, Beth stopped abruptly and turned around. “I’m really sorry about this. No wife should have to go through such an ordeal.”

Mrs. Doyle, looking like a wren perched on the sofa, smiled. “Thank you, Miss Kirby. It’s kind of you to recognize what a loss this is for me.”

“Call us if you need anything. And regarding your art collection? I like that painting that was done locally best.” Beth hooked her thumb toward the foyer. “That seascape gives a feeling of freedom, that once the storm passes, a brand new world will be left in its wake.”

Evelyn Doyle hesitated, as though considering the painting in question. “Very true, as long as a Category Five hurricane doesn’t take away everything you hold dear.”