

SEQUESTERED HEARTS

by
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2007

CHAPTER ONE

Are you sure you're ready for this?" Cori Saxton sighed. Her agent and good friend Gretchen had asked the same question several times during today's conversation. Tucking the phone between her ear and her shoulder, she leaned back and balanced her chair precariously on two legs. She had been lounging on the deck at the rear of her house, trying to soak in a few hours of solitude before her tranquility was destroyed by a reporter from *Canvassed* magazine.

She didn't get outdoors often enough, Cori reflected, staring out across her sloping back lawn. A fieldstone path wound through expertly manicured grass the color of deep emeralds. Midway down the path she'd created a small sitting area with stone benches and shade trees.

She'd owned the fifty acres in upstate New York for almost five years, having fallen in love with both the property and the house the first time she'd seen it. She was visiting the previous owner, an architect friend who had designed and built the house for his wife. Sadly, they didn't get to enjoy their dream retreat for long. Carol had died of cancer only two years after its completion and Anthony decided he could no longer live in their home without her. When Cori heard he was looking to sell, she'd jumped at the chance.

The edge of her property ran to the riverbank, where a sizable dock housed her latest acquisition, a Chaparral Signature 276 she'd purchased earlier in the spring. She had only taken the sleek white craft out a few times. It had been an impulse purchase. She'd seen

a similar boat in the marina last year and simply had to have one. It wasn't hard to justify the extravagance; her last day sailer had been fine for the short visits that were all she'd ever managed to arrange, but things were different now.

She'd had big plans for the upstate hideaway, but it was hard to justify time out when her career had finally taken off. She was expected to maintain a certain degree of visibility and her plans had fallen by the wayside. In the past few years, she had rarely gotten the opportunity to spend more than a weekend at a time here. *Not anymore*, she thought wryly. For once her life was her own and she was going to stay out of town for as long as she wanted. Today's interview was the one concession she was willing to make right now, and only because she had her own ideas about how the interview was going to work.

Cori checked her wristwatch and glanced down at her tank top and nylon running shorts. Her unwelcome visitor was due in just a couple of hours. She supposed she should go indoors, take a shower, and change into clothing suitable for an heiress-turned-artist.

"Well," Gretchen demanded.

"They're just going to keep calling until I give them something," Cori finally answered. "Besides, the interview was your idea. Now you're trying to talk me out of it?"

"I know. I guess I was just worried that maybe I had pushed you into it. What are you going to say?"

"I'll think of something." In fact, she had already settled on the carefully constructed fiction she wanted this reporter to circulate. Apart from Gretchen, very few people knew the truth behind her self-imposed exile, and she intended to keep it that way.

"Well, be careful," Gretchen warned. "You know Mitchell Gardner. He's not going to send a junior out to interview you."

"I know, I know." Cori searched her memory for the name she'd seen in the e-mail confirming the date and time of arrival at the airport. "The guy is a freelancer. Bennett McClain. Henry is picking him up at the airport."

Henry and his wife Alma owned the property next to hers, and she'd hired them to look after her house and grounds during her long absences. Alma stocked the pantry when Cori was planning a visit,

and Henry helped her out with odd jobs and errands while she was there.

She'd felt a little guilty asking him to collect her visitor today, but she was aware that, being retired, he and Alma could use the income these small services provided. And besides, the last thing she wanted was to be stuck in a car with this reporter for a forty-minute drive.

"Don't worry about me," she told Gretchen. "I have everything under control."

"Don't forget who you're talking to. I know just how out of control you feel right now." Gretchen's voice softened. "Call me if you need anything. And make nice with him. Okay?"

"I'll work on it." Smiling, Cori hung up. She wasn't exactly known for her tact when dealing with the media, but this time she intended to try.

Weeks of continuous questioning about her supposed disappearance had grated on her nerves, and giving some kind of answer seemed like the best way to put an end to the speculation, once and for all. She really didn't understand what the big deal was anyway. She'd only been out of circulation for two months, yet everyone was acting like the art world had stopped because she was no longer a fixture at every gathering. Had she been so completely defined by her social activities that no one could understand her just needing a break?

Even as she asked herself the question she knew the answer. She had. And the truth was, it was more than just needing a break that had sent her running from her life.

Forcing herself out of her deck chair, she went into the kitchen and refilled her iced tea then wandered into her spacious living room. Large expanses of floor-to-ceiling glass along its northeastern wall let in natural light as well as affording a perfect view of the river. Cori had furnished the room in varying shades of olive and taupe, accented with deep purples. The hardwood floors had been stripped and refinished to a warm honeyed oak. She sank down into her favorite sofa, a surprisingly comfortable piece despite its minimalist lines, and gazed out at the river, taking stock of her life.

Normally, she tended to avoid idle reflection even when she

felt stressed. She preferred to distract herself from her problems and never had any trouble finding someone willing to party, especially if it was on her dime. She also had enough of a perspective on reality to know that most of the planet would be thrilled to have “problems” like hers. Cori had been born into privilege and was well aware of how easy that made her life in most of the ways that mattered. Her family’s money and stature was long established. As a child, she had heard the phrase “the Connecticut Saxtons” attached to her name so many times that she was nine years old before she realized that not everyone had their families referenced that way.

High school had taught her that her parents’ name afforded her the freedom to do exactly as she pleased with little consequence, and she had taken full advantage of that fact. Only recently had she begun to understand that never having to take responsibility for anything meant missing out on some key learning experiences, among them that money and good looks could only get you so far, and some things were completely out of your control.

Cori’s mind drifted to the reason for her seclusion, then just as quickly retreated as anger and helplessness flooded her. In hindsight, she could see that being an only child hadn’t taught her how to deal with pressure any more than it had taught her the give-and-take of intimacy with other people. She was far too used to having everything her way. Her every whim had been indulged by her parents, and she’d quickly learned that even if she couldn’t rely on her family name for a free pass, her looks carried a certain amount of weight.

Contemplating the past few years, she was suddenly painfully aware that she had wasted time she could have spent much more productively, time she would never get back. It had never crossed her mind that she would one day nurse regrets about the lifestyle she’d enjoyed since her teens.

The partying ways that had begun in high school had continued through college and over the years that followed graduation. She had spent a year in Paris, studying art at École des Beaux-Arts and having lovers in various European cities. Cori had never made any secret of her escapades, much to her mother’s consternation. Her

father, however, didn't seem bothered by the accounts of her success with women. That had never surprised her. Adam Saxton wasn't concerned with anyone's opinion about him. It was one of the few points they agreed on—that and their passion for their respective livelihoods. But her father's idea of success was measured in dollar signs, which made it difficult for him to understand Cori's artistic ambitions. Still, he tried. He'd even attended a few of her shows, and one of her more sedate pieces occupied a place of honor in his office.

Cori's mother had always been the one who worried about appearances. Catherine Saxton had been born into society life and had done her best to groom her daughter for the same. Cori's resistance to her efforts was a constant source of conflict between them, and her refusal to hide her sexuality stretched the limits of her mother's tolerance on a regular basis.

Catherine had even gone so far as to suggest Cori marry an acceptable young man and carry on her affairs with women discreetly on the side. At the time, Cori had laughed off the idea as absurd and made sure she was photographed the next night in an obvious clinch with the daughter of a prominent local politician. Flirting just on the safe side of her mother's disapproval was second nature. Catherine pushed and Cori pushed back, and in the end they would agree to disagree.

This delicate balance was upset when Cori sat her mother down just before the latest trip upstate and told her the truth about her present situation. It had been Gretchen's idea; she was always trying tactful interventions to bring them closer together. *You only have one mother. Unconditional love is a gift.* Cori could repeat the lectures in her sleep. She supposed the conversation had gone as well as could be expected. Her mother had cried and then railed against the medical profession. By the end of the conversation she'd decided that what was really lacking was adequate funding for research. Cori had spent the next thirty minutes talking her mother out of organizing a fund-raising dinner. She now treated Cori with kid gloves, acting as if she was fragile and avoiding confrontation at all cost. Cori was stunned. It seemed this one aspect of who she

was suddenly defined her completely; she couldn't even count on her own mother to treat her as if she was normal. Would she spend the rest of her life being viewed as damaged?

Cori set her iced tea on the nearest coffee table, swung her legs up onto the sofa, and settled back into the deep cushioning with her eyes closed. She kept expecting to wake up one morning and find her life was just the same as it had been for most of her twenty-nine years. Today was the first day she'd truly understood that wasn't going to happen and even if it did, something in her had changed. She would not be able to pick up exactly where she left off, even if she wanted to. And lately she wasn't so sure she did.



As the Beechcraft twin-engine turboprop lurched in the turbulent sky, Bennett McClain's stomach went with it. She'd looked up her destination, Ogdensburg, on the Internet the night before and was not surprised to find a small dot that was barely even on the map along the upper edge of New York state. *Christ, from the map I could barely tell if the place was still in New York or in Canada.* So she shouldn't have been surprised when she changed planes in Syracuse and found her next mode of transportation was propeller-driven.

Staring out the window, she wondered once again how she had let herself get talked into this assignment. She'd been dead set against it from the moment she'd heard the details from Mitchell Gardner, senior editor of *Canvassed*, an up-and-coming art magazine she'd written a couple of features for. The only reason she had even agreed to entertain the possibility was that Mitchell was a good friend. She still couldn't understand why he was so determined to run with a piece on Cori Saxton.

In the past five years, the woman had gained fame as a gifted artist. Ben had read various flattering reviews about her work and her talent, and had always wondered just how much the Saxton name contributed to the breathless awe of these pieces. Descriptions such as "edgy" and "brave" were routinely applied to her paintings, and the art establishment seemed to have reached the consensus that

she was “brilliant.” Of course her hard-living, reckless lifestyle had attracted almost as much publicity as her art, and it seemed Cori never shied from a camera, even when it caught her in a compromising position with one woman or another.

Ben wasn’t alone in wondering when the woman found time for painting, but Cori Saxton’s detractors were silenced when, with each successive show, her pieces seemed to surpass those of the last. Strangely, the self-promoting artist hadn’t been seen at any of her customary haunts in two months. Ben wasn’t losing any sleep over her disappearance. It made a pleasant change not to see the usual society pages shots of her at this party or that with a drink in her hand and a glassy look in her eyes.

“So what?” she’d told Mitchell when he dragged her into his office to pester her to do the story. “She’s probably in rehab or something, and I don’t write gossip column stuff.”

“As if I would ask.” Mitchell acted wounded. “There’s a story here, Ben. Everyone knows Cori Saxton wouldn’t just drop off the face of the earth for no good reason.”

“Maybe she wants some privacy for a change,” Ben suggested, doubting it. Publicity was oxygen for women like Cori. Without it they wilted. This had to be some kind of stunt. Maybe she’d decided to reinvent herself as reclusive and mysterious, only to find that got old after a few weeks and she now needed to be the center of attention again.

“If she wants privacy all she needs to do is say so,” Mitchell said snippily. “The fact that she won’t even make a statement through her publicist means everyone wants to break this one. And the good news is,” he smiled arrogantly, “we’re the people she’s going to talk to.”

“What makes you think that?” Ben asked.

“I have a friend who knows her agent. To make a long story short, Saxton agreed to an exclusive with *Canvassed*.” He rushed on before she could respond. “She wants final approval. She says it’s a deal breaker—”

“You have to be kidding me.” Ben was ready to walk out. She had not spent the past ten years building a reputation as a first-rate journalist to have her work rewritten until it read like a lame puff

piece. Mitchell knew that, and he should have thought about it before he called her.

He waved at her to sit down. “Ben, hear me out.”

“I said no. I will not do a story contingent upon the subject’s approval. I don’t have to do that anymore, Mitch.”

These days she didn’t have to take assignments she didn’t want and she didn’t have to write to please someone else. She had no plans to be used as a mouthpiece by a spoiled socialite turned “artist.” If that’s what Cori Saxton was looking for, she was going to be disappointed.

Mitch wasn’t about to let her out the door. “Ben, the magazine is not doing as well as projected. I really need this, and you’re the only one I trust to get me a decent story even with her right of approval. I’m asking you for a favor.”

His gently pleading tone kept Ben in her seat, against her better judgment, listening to him map out the details. Mitchell had sunk his life savings into this magazine. Ben couldn’t let him lose it without trying to help. They’d known each other for thirteen years, and in that time he’d always helped her out as she built her career.

Knowing she would regret it, she had relented in the end, and now, less than a week later, she was on the smallest plane she had ever seen, headed for God knows where to attempt to interview a woman she gathered was suddenly allergic to publicity but still couldn’t fade happily into anonymity. Mitchell had given her a file containing background on Cori, a plane ticket, and instructions to stay as long as she needed to in order to get the right stuff.

Cynically, she thought ten minutes would probably suffice for the life story of Cori Saxton. As for whatever spin the woman wanted to put on her exodus from the city, Ben could hardly wait to hear it. So far this week, she hadn’t seen enough television to get her fill of banality. She was counting on her subject to remedy that.