

WHERE LEMONS BLOOM – Blair McDowell

Chapter One

Fear, stark and vivid, flashed through her. She thrashed in the turbulent water, trying to push herself to the surface. The unyielding rip-tide pulled her relentlessly down, twisting and turning her body. *Head toward the light*, her instincts screamed as she struggled against the undertow. It was no use. Her lungs were burning, bursting for air. Desperate for breath, she inhaled water.

“Come on, damn it. Spit up the water! Breathe!”

Water gushed out. Eve gasped painfully for air. She coughed. More water trickled out. She could breathe again.

Dimly she realized she was lying on her back on the beach. Someone was straddling her and pushing. Rhythmically pushing, pushing.

She lay still for a moment. She was alive. Her lungs and throat burned, but she could breathe. Who was pushing on her? It hurt. Another push. She coughed up more water.

Then it came back. Barbados. She was in Barbados. The undertow...She'd been swimming in the ocean since she was a child but this time...

She opened her eyes to a frowning face hovering close over her.

“Just stay as you are for a few minutes. I've called for help. But I think you've gotten rid of most of the water you swallowed. How do you feel?” The voice was deep, masculine.

“I've been better.” Her throat was raw, her speech, raspy. “I almost drowned, didn't I?”

The man stood and looked down at her. “Yes, you did. Fortunately I saw a rogue wave take you, and I'm a strong swimmer. Didn't you know this stretch of shoreline is unsafe? There are signs posted all along the beach.”

“I was just trying to get away from...” What had she been trying to get away from? It was too much effort to remember.

“The hotel pool would have been the safe place to swim.” He extended his hand to her. “Do you think you can stand?”

She grasped his hand and tried to pull herself to her feet. Her knees buckled. His arms came around her, scooping her up and holding her effortlessly against him. She was dimly aware of a broad naked chest, of strong arms supporting her.

“It's okay,” he said. “I've got you.”

Eve started shivering in spite of the heat of the tropical sun.

“Shock,” he muttered. “Where are the damn paramedics? I called them ten minutes ago. We need to get you warm.”

With her in his arms, he started striding down the beach. Eve was barely conscious of entering one of the beach cottages, of being held under a hot pulsing shower, then gently dried and tucked into a warm bed and cocooned with blankets. Her teeth stopped chattering as her body gradually warmed.

She resurfaced slowly. She wiggled her fingers and toes. She was alive. She remembered her panic in the swirling water. But she was safe, safe and warm now.

He was bending over her. Her eyes focused on his face. Sharply chiseled features. Dark eyes, their expression warm, concerned. His face was unlined, but his short curly hair was a startling silver. She'd seen him earlier, a lone sun worshiper, lying on the beach.

“I see you've decided to rejoin the living.” His frown turned to a smile as he spoke.

It was a very nice smile. His rather forbidding face changed when he smiled. She flushed as

she realized she was staring at him.

“I don’t know what happened to the paramedics,” he said. “Would you like me to take you to the hospital? I’d be happy to do so.”

“I don’t think it will be necessary. I think the worst is over. How could I be so cold in the tropics?”

“Our bodies react strangely to shock. Are you warm enough now?”

A sudden chill shook Eve again.

“Brandy,” he said. “As good as a shot of adrenaline.”

With the easy grace of a leopard, he walked over to the table and poured amber liquor from an open bottle into a water glass. He looked like a large jungle cat, hard chest, corded arms and legs, all sleek skin and taut muscles.

“Drink,” he said. “Think of it as medicine. I think I’ll join you. I don’t have the excuse of shock, but it’s been an eventful afternoon.”

He went back to the table, poured himself a generous drink and returned to stand over her. “It’s not every day I pull a mermaid out of the sea.”

“Thank you. I’m grateful you were there.” She took a sip of the burning liquor. “I don’t even know your name.”

“What’s yours?” he parried.

“Eve.”

He laughed. “Then mine must be Adam.” He leaned over the bed and touched his glass to hers. “Here’s to an afternoon in Paradise.”

Eve sat up and realized with a small gasp she was naked under the covers. She pulled the sheet hastily around her. “You undressed me?”

“Forgive the indiscretion. I didn’t want to put you in my bed in a wet bathing suit. I might want to sleep in it later. The bed, I mean, not your bathing suit.”

“Of course.” A flush rose to her cheeks. “I’m sorry to put you out like this.”

He gave her a devastating, very masculine grin. “You haven’t put me out. In truth, I haven’t enjoyed myself so much in years. I can’t remember the last time I had a beautiful woman naked in my bed.”

“Oh!”

“Sorry. I’ll get you something to put on. He turned to a luggage rack and riffled through neatly folded items in his bag. “Here.” He held up a large, long-sleeved shirt. “This should be big enough to cover you adequately.”

Eve took the garment from him and reached out to take the hand of the man who had saved her life. The shirt dropped unnoticed to the floor as she slid over to make room and pulled him down to sit beside her.

He perched on the edge of the bed, looking distinctly uncomfortable.

Eve smiled at his reticence. She reached up to touch his silver curls. So soft. Without stopping to think, she slid her hand around his neck and brought her lips up to his. He tasted of salt and sun.

He stiffened. Gently he disengaged her arms and stood up, putting distance between them. “If that was thank you, you’re welcome. I’ll go out on the veranda while you get into the shirt.”

She was shocked to hear herself say, “No. Stay. Please stay.”

He looked at her, one eyebrow raised in question.

Eve took a quavering breath. She raised her eyes to his and plunged into speech. “Stay. Please. Just lie down with me and hold me.” She held up her arms, unconscious of the sheet

falling away. "I need to feel human warmth. Just put your arms around me and hold me."

He gazed down at her for a moment, reluctance written in the down-turning of his lips. Then he gave a sigh and disappeared into the bathroom. When he came out he had taken off his wet bathing trunks and put on cut-off denims and a plain white T-shirt.

He lay down beside Eve, carefully keeping the covers between them, and pulled her gently to him so she was cradled in his arms.

She snuggled down, warm, safe, glad to be alive.

Her mind whirled. How had she ended up here, in a strange man's bed? Eve struggled to piece it all together. The flight from Washington...how much champagne had she consumed? Her glass had been refilled several times. On holiday for the first time in years, she'd felt like celebrating. She remembered how her laughter had bubbled up as she'd glimpsed her first sight of Barbados, this emerald green island in a sea so blue it seemed surreal. She'd peered out the window of the plane, craning her neck to keep the scene in view, feasting her eyes on the brilliant colors, sighing as the strain of the past five years faded away.

Her hotel was a delightful surprise. She wasn't sure what she'd expected, but not this exotic setting, a separate cottage with everything so open, so tropical.

Her rescuer's cottage was much like hers. A high mahogany four-poster bed draped in mosquito netting, louvered windows opened to tropical breezes, and a ceiling fan circling lazily. Outside the open door, lay a garden lush with hibiscus and oleander and fragrant frangipani. Beyond the flowers, the thin line of the beach and the surf. How beautiful it was. Beautiful, but for her, almost deadly. She shivered.

He brought the covers more tightly around her and pulled her closer. His warmth seeped into her, surrounding her as she lay cradled in his embrace. Tension slowly drained from her body. If she could just stay like this forever, in this place, in this man's strong arms...

She tried to compose her scattered thoughts. How had it happened? She'd wanted a swim. She had put on her bathing suit and stepped out of her cottage. That much she remembered clearly.

Kites. It came flooding back. No, not kites, rectangular parachutes, in every color of the rainbow, at least thirty of them, in wild array, soaring over the sea, moving in breathtaking swoops and swirls and dives, guided by their youthful riders. Eve laughed with the joy of the scene as some of the windsurfers were briefly airborne while others rode the waves, all propelled by the trade winds. They rose and descended with reckless abandon. She gasped as one crashed, but the surfer was up on the board again and back into the fray a moment later. She'd seen pictures of them on the website for the hotel, but nothing had prepared her for this kaleidoscope. How she wished she could join them. They seemed so young, so carefree.

She'd have to walk some distance down the shore to avoid the wind surfers. She stepped out onto the beach and hastily stepped back. The sand was blistering underfoot and the mid-afternoon sun was still punishingly hot. She went back into her cottage to put on her wide brimmed hat and slip her thongs on her feet. That's better, she thought.

Giving the colorful parachutes one last look, she walked down the beach to find a place where it might be possible to swim without fear of being hit by a stray surf board. As she rounded the point, leaving the surfers behind her, Eve saw she was not alone even here. A man was stretched out on a rush mat, his arm thrown over his eyes. Had he been her rescuer?

She'd dropped her towel on the beach at some distance from the solitary sun worshiper, and placed her sunglasses, hat, and thongs on it. Where were those glasses and hat and thongs now? Probably still out there on the beach.

In her mind's eye, she was once again at the edge of the churning white water. The surf was high, but she'd swum in high surf all her life. She'd never been afraid of the ocean. She knew how to dive through the line of breakers. Once past them, she could float on gentle rollers.

Now hip high in the water, she casually studied the wave pattern. Suddenly, her feet were yanked out from under her as if by some giant hand. She relived her terror as the undercurrent took her and a wall of water crashed over her head.

Eve shivered uncontrollably and moaned, experiencing again that stark moment.

He tightened his strong arms around her. "Hush, you're safe now. Sleep."

Eve came back to the present and nestled down to relax against him. Gradually the all-enveloping warmth from his body seeped through her. She slept.

She roused to find her head resting on his broad shoulder, to feel his warm arms encircling her, her leg thrown over his, the covers thrust aside. His eyes were closed, but there was tension in every line of his body. He was not sleeping. She slid her hand under his shirt, splaying her fingertips over the hardness of his chest muscles, threading them through the curls she found. His breath caught and a muscle clenched along his jaw.

Her hand wandered lower and slid inside his jeans. Ignoring his sharp intake of breath, she touched him gently. He came to life instantly.

She held her breath. What was she doing? She didn't come on to strange men. To any man.

"Don't," he commanded. "I can't do this. You don't know what you're asking. You're experiencing an aftermath of shock. You don't know me from...Adam."

She rushed into speech, afraid if she stopped to think she wouldn't have the courage to continue. "I need to feel alive again. Please."

His hands touched her face gently and he drew back. "I know you think you want this," he said, his voice hoarse with frustration, "but you won't be happy about it tomorrow."

"If it weren't for you, I wouldn't have any tomorrows. I need this. I need you. I know you want me." Eve touched him intimately again and gave a low laugh. "You can't hide something like that."

He looked at her for a long moment, then stood, stripped off his clothes and moved to his suitcase to retrieve a condom. Back on the bed beside her, he brought his lips gently to hers, just the whisper of a kiss.

Then he was on top of her, his knee pushing between her legs as he kissed her savagely, his tongue assaulting her mouth, then moving down her body tasting and nipping as his busy hands caressed and invaded.

Her soft moan seemed to fuel his attack on her senses. What had she unleashed? Eve was unable to repress her cries as her body arched and responded in dimly remembered ways to the passion coursing through her. It had been so long.

He entered her and her mind went blank of all but the feeling of climbing, climbing...reaching for...

She convulsed and climaxed in his arms, the sensation prolonged unbearably as he moved in her, drowning her cries with his mouth on hers.

When he collapsed over her, Eve was utterly depleted and complete at the same time. It had never been like this. Never.

Finally her breathing slowed to some semblance of normal. He lay beside her, his arm still under her, holding her close.

"They call it 'the little death,'" he murmured.

“Who...?” Eve had difficulty focusing on his words.

“Poets. John Donne. Shakespeare. Others. The little death. It’s as close to paradise as most of us will ever come. So, my Eve, are you satisfied?”

“For the moment.”

Her body was still giving her little aftershocks of pleasure. So this was what it’s supposed to be like? She’d lived with a man for almost a year, expected to marry him. But she’d never felt anything like this. She’d never experienced anything so all-encompassing, so soul shattering, before. It was incredible.

They must have slept. Eve roused sometime after dark to feel his hands gently exploring once again, his lips touching her face with feathery kisses. She slid her hand down his body to find him in throbbing readiness.

He stilled his hands and lips, and, braced above her, asked permission with his eyes.

“Yes, oh yes,” she responded to his unspoken plea.

She awoke with a start and propped up on her elbow. What time was it? The faint blush of early morning light crept through the louvered windows.

There was something she had to do. What was it? It came rushing back. Of course, the *Wind Surf*. At one p.m. today she was to board a ship for a fourteen-day transatlantic crossing. Her lips curved in a small smile. Fourteen days on a sailing ship and then three months in Europe.

She glanced down at the man sleeping deeply beside her, as memories of the night came flooding back. What had she done? Had sex with a man whose name she didn’t even know? What had she been thinking?

Trying to steady her erratic pulse, she slipped out of the bed carefully so as not to waken him. She retrieved the shirt she had dropped so carelessly on the floor the afternoon before and slipped it over her naked body as she crept silently to the door. On the verandah, she looked around to get her bearings. She was in her own hotel complex. Her cottage was just a little way down the beach. She started running and didn’t stop until she closed the door behind her, breathless, her heart pounding, safe in her own room.

The phone on the bedside table buzzed. Luc Manzel grabbed it, checked to see who was calling and looked furtively at his sleeping wife. He slipped out of bed, moved quickly and quietly into the bathroom, closing the door behind him. “I’ve told you never to call this number! What part of ‘never’ don’t you understand, Monica?”

She rushed into speech, her voice shaking. “Adamo is here. I saw him. I saw him today.” Her voice rose in panic. “How’d he trace me here? How’d he find me?”

“Take it easy, baby. Did he see you?”

“No. I don’t think so. I was just dropping a friend at the airport, and I saw him in my rear-view mirror. He was getting into a taxi right behind me. Somehow he’s found me.” She started to cry.

“Calm down. You don’t know he’s after you. You don’t know anything. But even if he’s found you he can’t do anything. Did you happen to catch where he was heading?”

“I heard him say ‘Surfers’ Paradise’ as he was getting into the cab.”

“Good girl. I’ll have someone check him out. Just stay out of sight for the next couple of days. Chances are he’s just taking a vacation in Barbados. Lots of people do. I’ll look into it and get back to you. And don’t call me at this number again.”

Late the next afternoon, in his office on the sixteenth floor of the Conti Building in Manhattan, Luc received the phone call he'd been waiting for.

"He was there all right, boss, right where you said, but he checked out before we got there, shortly before noon. There's no trace of him after he left the hotel. He wasn't on any of the outgoing flights today. He seems to have just disappeared."

There was a moment's silence while Luc stared sightlessly out the window, thinking. "Did you check with the taxi driver who picked him up?"

"Um, no..."

"Do so and get back to me immediately." He severed the connection. Idiots. He was surrounded by idiots.