Chapter 1

Kate Shayne picked her way across the cobbling of bricks, remains of someone's earlier ill-laid attempt at blocking in a patio where the bedroom ell jutted from the main house. Coffee-colored water - run-off from the downpour that had passed about an hour before - traced gaps between the bricks and trickled into a long puddle on the bare earth of the yard. The sun pressed around her, sponging moisture back toward the heavens and making the late November heat even more oppressive. As she started to step across the puddle, she became aware of four dark slabs.

"What…?"

She stopped, stepped back, then crossed to where they leaned against the off-white plaster of the house and reached out to touch one. "Mbayo!" she yelled, snatching her hand back.

An immediate clopping of hard soles against cement sounded from the direction of the kitchen, and in a moment a dark face appeared in the doorway. "Yes, Madame?" The two words spoken in accents of the local French held the appropriate balance between respect and question.

"These - when did they come?"

"The boy brought them this morning. I told him he should leave them there."

Kate nodded approval.

"He said the chair maker himself will come to see you tomorrow in the afternoon."

Kate nodded again and turned her palm so Mbayo could see the brown smudge. "His boys didn't polish them enough." A quick smile erased her seriousness. "Ask Jonas to brush them."

Full lips broadening into a grin, Mbayo clipped her head in understanding and said, "Yes, Madame, I'll tell him."

Kate turned to resume her interrupted errand, then as if in afterthought added, "I'm going to get a pineapple. Jonas can gather the others after he's finished with the chairs. And… Oh, by the way…"

With a start she realized what she'd forgotten. "Please tell Marie to see me.

"Marie?"

"The girl from Kato village. In fourth form. The one…"

In her mind Kate again saw the girl collapse across her desk, heard the thin voice, felt the too-thin arms. "Yes, Madame, I know the girl."

"Tell her to stop." A warning cut across her mind: What'll George say? She knew what he'd say. Clearly knew. They'd agreed. Their budget was already stretched beyond its limit. Nevertheless, she continued to speak, pronouncing the next four words with determination. "On her way home."

When Mbayo disappeared into the house, Kate shoved aside thoughts of her promises to George and stepped back to study the chair pieces. Oversized eyes dominated the triangular mask face chiseled into each of the two backrests, their empty slits staring from between large, smooth lids, down past the pointed chin and onto the scene below. "Nice."

She spoke aloud, though now she was her own audience. The simplicity of the work pleased her. "Very African. Very…"

In one a woman, arms smooth and firmly muscled, worked at her pounding while in the other a man sat idly holding his drinking calabash.

Typical.

Her one-word judgment included more than the artistry.

A pattern of diagonal chiselings framed the edge of the solid wood; a similar pattern covered the seats. Two pieces, back and seat, fit into a stylized version of a traditional village chair. "But of course he would bring them now when he can ask a higher price/' She half laughed - money was always a topic to be discussed whether between husband and wife or between vendor and vendee - and she went back to the puddle and rinsed the sticky brown stain from her hand. Village markets were stocked with brown shoe polish, though few customers owned shoes to polish, and that quirk of third-world marketing gave local artisans a bargain-priced product for staining their woodcraft.

At noon, briefly, and in the later afternoon, Kate's was a familiar figure in the well-tilled garden filling the lower half of their large enclosed yard, and she turned now in that direction. She walked with a firm step, though her right foot tended to droop. "Anatomy's all wrong," a specialist had remarked jovially about it when she was much, much younger. "As long as you can walk and have no pain, don't worry." So she walked and didn't worry, and life had taken her many places, even to this mission station where now the full skirt of her cotton shirtwaister swished against the sides of her boots as she strode through the heat.

With the beginning of the rains, the banana plants along the edge of the Shayne garden had plumped into a robust green, their long,

broad leaves fanning up and out into an almost impossible-to-see-through thicket between their place and that of their neighboring missionaries, the Parmers. A hoe lay at the base of the nearest plant, its handle jutting into the path. "Will that boy ever learn?" Kate muttered, bending to retrieve the tool Jonas had left lying where he'd dropped it. As she straightened, the handle pushed against a large banana leaf, folding it into a spout. A gush of collected rainwater dumped against her neck, breaking into a dozen downward slithers.

"Oh!"

Her breath sucked sharply, and she lurched sideways. She heard another shriek, short and staccato. Hers! And she felt herself sliding toward the next banana plant. Her boots plowed the loose, damp earth, scooping a personal-sized slippery-slide, and when she finally scooted to a stop, she lay inches short of the banana plant, still holding the hoe.

"Oh!"

This time the single word was both observation and expletive. She sat there for a moment, then drew a long, deliberate breath, pushed herself to her knees, and stood. She swatted at obvious mud that clung in gross chunks to her dress. And then she turned again toward the pineapple patch.

A stretch of sandy soil flanked the mission houses. It grew excellent pineapples, and the new seasons crop ranged from rosy pink flowerettes to robust, full-shouldered fruit. The spikes of several larger plants stabbed at her legs, but she pushed past them toward the far corner where she knew a particularly large pineapple waited, ready-ripe. She stopped short. Jonas!

There was no answer. "Jonas!" She yelled even more loudly.

"Yes, Madame." The gardener suddenly appeared at the corner of the house. "What is it?" He carried his mpanga, the thick-bladed, heavy-handled knife with which he cut wood, edged flower beds, weeded…

"Look!" Kate pointed.

Jonas broke into a run, his bare feet shushing through a puddle in the low swoop of the yard, the chest of his navy-blue work coveralls bagging open. When he reached Kate he, too, stopped and stared. "No! Madame! It cannot be!"

"When?" She fastened him with her one-word question.

A sudden sallowness flushed under the deep chocolate of his face. "They were here yesterday. In afternoon. I swear." His words gulped in short sentences that tended to bump one into the other. "I came

myself. And I see them. Right there." His gaze was fixed on the sharp-pointed milky-green spikes that flared out as protectively as always from the plants in the soldier-straight rows. But the pineapples were gone. He pushed through the spikes and stopped when the outlines of his bare feet met an interlacing of footprints coming and going. Then he pointed. Strands of wire hung loosely around a gap in the hedge fence.

"Thieves in night." He spoke slowly now. "In our village these weeks we having many thieves. Very bad these times."

"Very bad!"

Kate's eyes held her gardener's face, but he did not look up. He wouldn't, she knew that already. Among his people it was neither polite nor proper to look directly at anyone to whom you must show respect; neither to an elder, neither to a mother who was not your own; not even to an employer whose dress was caked with mud.

"You will repair the fence," she finally said after thinking through the futility of all the other things she would have liked to say.

"Yes, Madame. I will mend it." Then he looked up and almost met her gaze but instead looked past her to some distant point. "Thieves in night. They very bad."