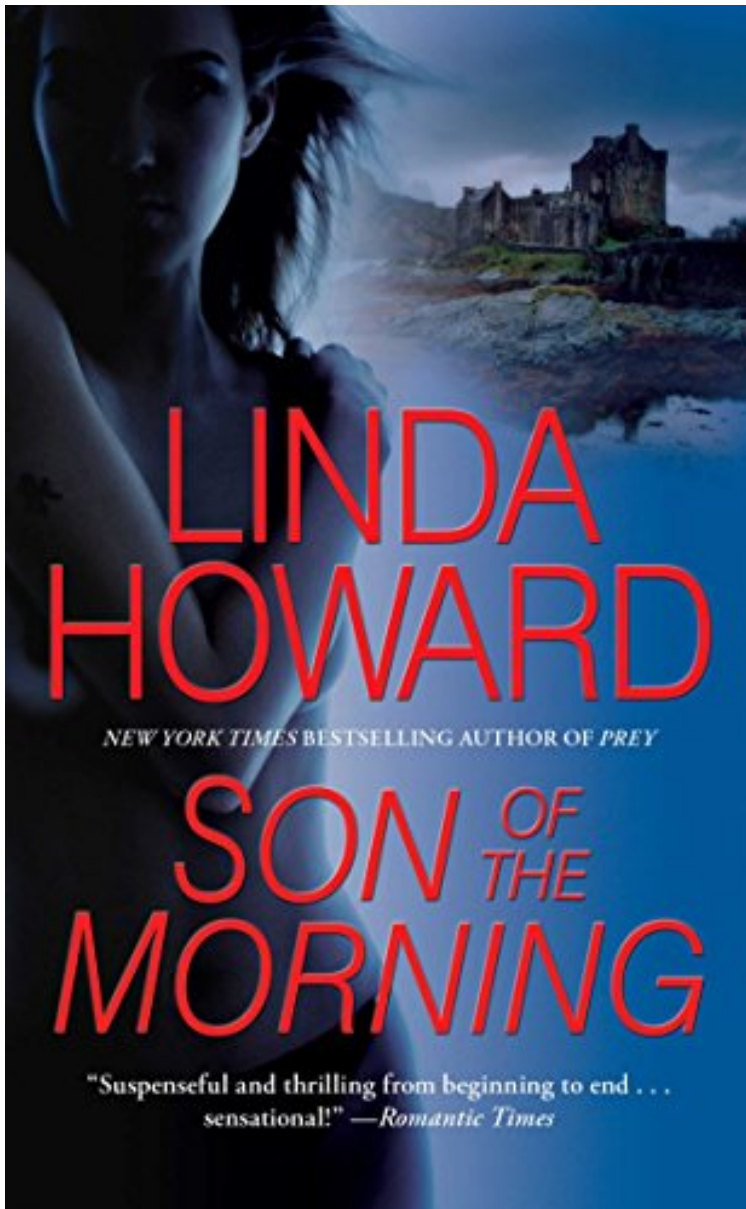


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Son of the Morning (Pocket Books Romance) (English Edition)



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Description : Description du produit A scholar specializing in ancient manuscripts, Grace St. John never imagined that a cache of fragile, old documents she discovered was the missing link to a lost Celtic treasure. But as soon as she deciphers the intriguing legend of the Knights of the Templar -- long fabled to hold the key to unlimited power -- Grace becomes the target of a ruthless killer bent on abusing the coveted force. Determined to stop him, Grace needs the help of a celebrated warrior bound by duty to uphold the Templar's secret for all eternity. But to find him -- and to save herself -- she must go back in time. Summoning the magic of an arcane ritual, Grace steps back to the barren hills of 14th-century Scotland, enduring the perils

of an untamed land to confront Black Niall, a fierce man of dark fury and raw, unbridled desire. Driven by a mix of fear and passion, Grace enlists this brazen knight to join her in a modern-day search for a killer. In their quest to protect a timeless secret, they uncover a love for all time -- and a deadly duel of honor that risks everything they have.

Prsentation de l'diteurNew York Times bestselling author Linda Howard captivates readers in the deeply romantic tale of a contemporary woman who unravels an extraordinary mystery from the pastby living it. A scholar specializing in ancient manuscripts, Grace St. John never imagined that a cache of old documents she discovered was the missing link to a lost Celtic treasure. But as soon as she deciphers the legend of the Knights of the Templar -- long fabled to hold the key to unlimited power -- Grace becomes the target of a ruthless killer bent on abusing the coveted force. Determined to stop him, Grace needs the help of a warrior bound by duty to uphold the Templar's secret for all eternity. But to find him -- and to save herself -- she must go back in time . . . to fourteenth-century Scotland . . . and to Black Niall, a fierce man of dark fury and raw, unbridled desire. . . .comAll of Linda Howard's novels are wonderful but this exceptional time-travel is her first foray into paranormal romance--and it's not to be missed. Grace St. John, a scholar, unwittingly discovers the Knights of Templar's secret treasure. Suddenly, her life is upturned when she spies her boss murdering her husband and brother. With no reason to live, except to extract vengeance, Grace becomes a fugitive of the law as she attempts to find an explanation for this horrible act. Grace simultaneously translates 14th century medieval documents written by Black Niall. This embittered knight reaches into Grace's subconscious and the two begin to share dreams 700 years apart.ExtraitChapter 1April 27, 1996A low, coughing rumble announced to the neighborhood that Kristian Sieber was home from school. He drove a 1966 Chevelle, lovingly restored to all its original gas-guzzling, eight-cylinder power. The body was a patchwork of different colors, as the parts had been taken from the corpses of other Chevelles, but whenever someone commented on the multicolored car, Kristian would grumpily say that he was "working on it." The truth was, the exterior didn't bother him. He cared only that the car ran the way it had when it was new, when some lucky, macho guy had thrilled every girl around with its growling power. In the instinctive, primal, murky way of males, he was certain all that horsepower would overcome his image as a nerd, and all the girls would flock to his side, wanting to ride in his supercar.So far it hadn't happened, but Kristian hadn't given up hope.As the rumbling car passed her house and turned at the corner, Grace St. John hastily took one last bite of the stew she had prepared for supper. "Kristian's home," she said, jumping up from the table."No kidding," Ford teased. He winked at her as she grabbed up the case that contained her laptop computer and the multitude of papers she had been translating. The sides of the supple leather case bulged outward, so crammed was it with notes and disks. She had unplugged her modem earlier, wrapped the cords around it, and placed it on top of the case. She cradled case and modem in her arms as she leaned over to reach Ford's mouth. Their kiss was brief, but warm."It'll probably take a couple of hours, at least," she said. "After he finds out what the problem is, he wants to show me a few new programs he has.""It used to be etchings," her brother Bryant murmured. "Now it's programs." The three of them took most of their meals together, a convenience they all liked. When Bryant and Grace had inherited the house from their parents, they turned it into a duplex; Grace and Ford lived in one side, and Bryant in the other. The three of them not only worked for the same archaeological foundation, but Ford and Bryant had been best friends since college. Bryant had introduced Ford and Grace, and still patted himself on the back for the outcome of that introduction."You're just jealous because you can't hack it," Grace said, poker-faced, and Bryant groaned at the pun.Her hands were full, so Ford got up to open the kitchen door for her. He leaned down to kiss her again. "Don't get lost in Kristian's programs and lose track of time," he cautioned, his hazel eyes sending her a very private message that, after almost eight years of marriage, still thrilled her to her toes."I won't," she promised, and started out the door, only to halt on the top step. "I forgot my purse."Ford picked it up from the cabinet and looped the strap over her head. "Why do you need your purse?""The checkbook's in it," she said, blowing a strand of hair out of her eyes. She always paid Kristian for his repair services, though he would gladly have done it for free just for the joy of fooling around with someone else's computer.His equipment was expensive, and his skill better than any she had seen at computer or software companies. He deserved to be paid. "Plus I'll probably buy him a pizza.""As much as that kid eats, he should weigh four hundred pounds," Bryant observed."He's nineteen. Of course he eats a lot.""I don't think I ever ate that much. What do you think, Ford? When we were in college, did we eat as much as Kristian?"Ford gave him a disbelieving look. "You actually asking me, when you're the guy who once ate thirteen pancakes and a pound of sausage for

breakfast?" "I did?" Bryant frowned. "I don't remember that. And what about you? I've seen you down four Big Macs and four large fries at one sitting." "Both of you ate as if you had tapeworms," Grace said, settling the discussion as she went down the steps. Ford closed the door behind her, his chuckle rich in her ears. Thick, resilient grass cushioned her steps as she walked across their backyard, then angled her steps in a shortcut through the Murchisons' overgrown lawn. They had taken a month's vacation in South Carolina, and weren't due to return until the end of the week. It was a shame; in seeking warm weather, and spring, they had missed it at home. It had been an unusually warm April, and spring had exploded in Minneapolis. The grass was green and lush, the trees leafed out, flowers were in bloom. Even though the sun had set and only the last bits of twilight remained, the evening air was warm and fragrant. Grace inhaled with deep delight. She loved spring. Actually, she loved every season, for they all had their joys. Kristian stood in the Siebers' back door, waiting for her. "Hi," he said in cheerful greeting. He was always cheerful at the prospect of getting his hands on her laptop. He hadn't turned on a light. Grace entered through the dark laundry room, passing through the kitchen. Audra Sieber, Kristian's mother, was sliding a tray of rolls into the oven. She looked up with a smile. "Hello, Grace. We're having lamb chops tonight; would you like to join us?" "Thanks, but I've just finished eating." She liked Audra, who was comfortably fifty, slightly overweight, and completely understanding of her son's obsession with gigabytes and motherboards. Physically, Kristian was just like his father, Errol: tall, thin, with dark hair, myopic blue eyes, and a prominent Adam's apple bobbing in his throat. Kristian couldn't have looked more like the prototypical computer nerd if he'd had the words stenciled on his forehead. Remembering his appetite, Grace said, "Kris, this can wait until after you eat." "I'll fix a plate and carry it up," he said, taking the case from her arms and cradling it lovingly in his. "That's okay with you, isn't it, Mom?" "Of course. Go on and have fun." Audra aimed her serene smile between the two of them, and Kristian immediately loped out of the kitchen and up the stairs, carrying his prize to his electronics-laden lair. Grace followed him at a slower pace, thinking as she climbed the stairs that she really needed to shed the twenty extra pounds she'd gained since she and Ford had married. The problem was, her work was so sedentary; a specialist and translator of old languages, she spent a lot of her time with a magnifying glass going over photos of old documents, and very occasionally the actual papers themselves, but for the most part they were too fragile to be handled. The rest of the time she was working on the computer, using a translation program that she and Kristian had enhanced. It was difficult to burn many calories doing brain work. Earlier that day she had been doing just that, trying to access the university's library to download some information, but the computer hadn't obeyed her commands. She wasn't certain if it was a problem with the laptop itself, or with the modem. She had caught Kristian at home for lunch, and arranged for him to take a look at it when his classes were finished for the day. The delay had almost driven her mad with frustration. She was fascinated by the batch of documents she'd been translating for her employer, the Amaranthine Potere Foundation, a huge archaeological and antiquities foundation. She loved her work anyway, but this was special, so special that she was almost afraid to believe her translations were correct. She felt almost...pulled, drawn into the documents in a way that had never happened before. The night before, Ford had asked her what the documents contained, and she had reluctantly told him a little about them -- just the topic. Usually she talked freely with Ford about her work, but this time it was different. She felt so strongly about these strange old documents that it was difficult to put it into words, and so she had been rather casual about the whole thing, as if it wasn't even particularly interesting. Instead, it was...special, in ways she didn't fully understand yet. She had translated less than a tenth of the whole, and already the possibilities were driving her half mad with anticipation, swirling just beyond comprehension, like a jigsaw puzzle with only the border assembled. In this case, though, she had no idea what the finished product would look like, only that she couldn't stop until she knew. She reached the top of the stairs and entered Kristian's bedroom. It was a maze of electronic equipment and cords, with just enough room for his bed. He had four separate phone lines, one each to the one laptop and two desktop computers he owned, and another to a fax machine. Two printers shared the duty among the three computers. One of the desktops was on, with a chess game displayed on the monitor. Kristian glanced at it, grunted, and used the mouse to move a bishop. He studied the results for a moment, before clicking the mouse and turning back to the puzzle at hand. He pushed a stack of papers to one side and moved another onto the bed. "What's it doing?" he asked as he opened the case and removed her laptop. "Nothing," Grace said, taking another chair and watching as he swiftly unhooked the other desktop's electrical umbilical cords from power port and modem, and plugged in hers. He turned it on and it whirred to life, the screen flickering to a pale blue. "I tried to get into the university's library this morning, and nothing happened. I don't know if it's the unit or the modem." "We'll

find out right now." He knew his way around her menu as well as she did; he clicked onto the one he wanted, then double-clicked on the telephone icon. He dialed the number for the university's electronic library, and ten seconds later was in. "Modem," he announced. His fingers were practically quivering as they hovered over the keys, "What did you want?" She leaned closer. "Medieval history. The Crusades specifically." He scrolled down the list of offerings. "That one," Grace said, and he clicked the mouse. The table of contents filled the screen. He scooted away. "Here, you take over while I try to find out what's wrong with the modem." She took his place in front of the computer, and he switched on a lamp on the desk, automatically pushing his glasses up on his nose before he began dismantling the modem. There were several references to the military religious orders of the time, the Knights Hospitaller and the Knights Templar. It was the Templars she wanted. She clicked onto the appropriate chapter, and lines of information filled the screen. She read intently, looking for one certain name. It didn't appear. The text was a chronicle and analysis of the Templars' contribution to the Crusades, but except for a few grand masters none was mentioned by name. They were interrupted briefly when Audra brought a filled plate up to Kristian. He positioned it next to the disassembled modem and happily munched as he worked. Grace went back to the main list and chose another text. Sometime later she became aware that Kristian had evidently either repaired her modem or given up on it, for he was reading over her shoulder. It was difficult to pull herself out of medieval intrigue and danger, and back into the modem world of computers. She blinked to orient herself, aware of the strangely potent lure of that long-ago time. "Could you fix it?" "Sure," he replied absently, still reading. "It was just a loose connection. Who were these Templar guys?" "They were a military religious order in the Middle Ages; don't you know your history?" He pushed his glasses up on his nose and flashed her an unrepentant grin. "Time began in nineteen forty-six." "There was life before computers." "Analog life, you mean. Prehistoric." "What kind of gauges are in that muscle-bound thing you call a car?" He looked chagrined, caught in the shameful knowledge that his beloved chariot was hopelessly old-fashioned, with analog gauges instead of digital readouts. "I'm working on it," he mumbled, hunching his thin shoulders. "Anyway, about these Templar guys. If they were so religious, why were they burned at the stake like witches or something?" "Heresy," she murmured, turning her attention back to the screen. "Fire was the punishment for a lot of crimes, not just for witchcraft." "Guess people back then took their religion seriously." Kristian wrinkled his nose at the electronic display of a crude drawing of three men bound to a center pole while flames licked around their knees. All three men were dressed in white tunics with crosses emblazoned on their chests. Their mouths were little black holes, opened in screams of agony. "People are still executed because of religion today," Grace said, shuddering a little as she stared at the small drawing, imagining the sheer horror of being burned alive. "In the Middle Ages, religion was the center of people's lives, and anyone who went against it was a threat to them. Religion gave them the rules of civilization, but it was more than that. There was so much that wasn't known, or understood; they were terrified by eclipses, by comets, by sicknesses that struck without warning, by things we know now are normal but which they had no way of understanding. Imagine how frightening, and deadly, appendicitis must have been to them, or a stroke or heart attack. They didn't know what was happening, what caused it, or how to prevent it. Magic was very real to them, and religion gave them a sort of protection against these unknown, frightening forces. Even if they died, God was still taking care of them, and the evil spirits didn't win." His brow furrowed as he tried to imagine living in such ignorance. It was almost beyond him, this child of the computer age. "I guess television would've given them a real spasm, huh?" "Especially if they saw a talk show," she muttered. "Now there are some evil spirits." Kristian giggled, sending his glasses slipping down his nose. He pushed them up again and squinted at the screen. "Did you find what you want?" "No. I'm looking for mention of one particular Templar -- at least, I think he was a Templar." "Any cross-references you can check?" She shook her head. "I don't know his last name." Niall of Scotland. She had already found his name several times in the portion of the documents written in Old French. Why wasn't his surname recorded, in a time when family and heritage were so important? From what she had gleaned from her translations so far, he'd been a man of immense importance to the Templars, a Knight himself, which meant he was well born and not a serf. Part of the documents were also in Gaelic, strengthening the unknown tie with Scotland. She'd read up on Scotland's history in her encyclopedia, but there hadn't been any mention of a mysterious Niall at all, much less one in the time frame of the Templars' existence. "Dead end, then," Kristian said cheerfully, evidently deciding they had wasted enough time on someone who had died even before the age of analog. His blue eyes sparkled as he moved his chair a little closer. "Want to see this cool accounting program I've worked up?" "I don't think the words cool and accounting go together," Grace observed, keeping her expression deadpan. Shocked,

Kristian stared at her. He blinked several times making him look like a myopic crane. "Are you kidding?" he blurted. "It's the greatest! Wait until you see -- wait. You are kidding I can tell." Grace's lips curved as she deftly tapped keys, backing out of the university's library system. "Oh, yeah? How?" "You always tighten your mouth to keep from smiling." He glanced at her mouth, then quickly looked away, blushing a little. Grace felt her own cheeks heating and carefully glued her eyes to the screen. Kristian had a tiny crush on her, based mostly on his enthusiasm for her expensive, powerful laptop, but on a few rare occasions he had said or done something that bespoke a physical awareness of her as well. It always disconcerted her; she was thirty years old, for heaven's sake, and was certainly not a femme fatale by any stretch of the imagination. She considered herself very ordinary, with nothing about her to inspire lust in a nineteen-year-old -- though God knows, almost anything female and breathing could inspire lust in a nineteen-year-old boy. If Kristian was the stereotypical image of a computer nerd, she'd always thought she looked the typical shy academic type: dark brown hair, impossibly straight, which she had long ago given up trying to coax into curls and now wore pulled back into a single thick braid; light blue eyes, almost gray, usually framed by reading glasses; no makeup, because she didn't know how to apply it; sensible clothes, tending toward corduroy slacks and denim skirts. She was hardly the stuff of an erotic dream. But Ford had always said she had the most kissable mouth he'd ever seen, and it flustered her that Kristian had looked so pointedly at her lips. To distract him, she said, "Okay, let's see this hotshot program." She hoped the Chevelle would work its macho magic soon, and lure into Kristian's orbit some smart girl who appreciated both horsepower and multitasking. Looking grateful for the change of subject, he opened a plastic case and removed the diskette, then inserted it into the disk drive. Grace scooted to the side, giving him better access to the keys. He directed the computer to access the disk in the A drive, there was some electronic whirring, and a menu appeared on the screen. "What bank do you use?" Kristian asked. Grace told him, frowning as she scanned down the menu. Kristian zipped the cursor to the item he wanted, clicked on it, and the screen changed again. "Bingo," he crowed as a new menu appeared, this time of bank services. "Am I slick, or what?" "You're illegal, is what you are!" Appalled, Grace watched as he chose another item, clicked on it, then typed "St. John, Grace." Instantly a record of her checking account transactions appeared on the screen. "You've hacked into the bank's computers! Get out of there before you get in big trouble. I mean it, Kris! This is a felony. You told me you had an accounting program, not a back door into every bank in the area." "Don't you want to know how I did it?" he asked, clearly disappointed that she didn't share his enthusiasm for the deed. "I'm not stealing or anything. This lets you see how long it takes each check to clear, so you can establish a pattern. Some places only deposit once a week. You can get a better handle on your cash flow if you know how long it takes for a particular check to clear. That way, if you have an interest-bearing checking account, you can time your payments so your average balance doesn't dip below the minimum." Grace simply stared at him, amazed at the wiring of his brain. To her, money matters were a straightforward affair: you had X amount of money coming in, and you had to keep your expenses below that amount. Simple. She had long ago decided there were two types of people on earth: math people, and non-math people. She was an intelligent woman; she had a doctoral degree. But the intricacies of math, whether it dealt with finance or quantum physics, had simply never appealed to her. Words, now...she reveled in words, wallowed deliriously in the nuances of meaning, delighted in the magic of them. Ford was even less interested in math than she was, which was why she took care of the checkbook. Bryant tried; he read the financial section of the newspaper, subscribed to investment magazines -- in case he ever had enough money to invest -- but he didn't have a real grasp of the dynamics. After fifteen minutes of wading through one of his investment magazines, he was tossing it aside and reaching for something, anything, on archaeology. But Kristian was a math person. Grace had no doubt he'd be a billionaire by the time he was thirty. He would write some brilliant computer program, wisely invest the profits, and retire happily to tinker away at more innovative programs. "I'm sure it's a real boon to depositors," she said dryly, "but it's still illegal. You can't market it." "Oh, it's not for public knowledge, it's just goofing around. You'd think banks would have better security programs, but I haven't found one yet that's much of a challenge." Grace propped her chin on her hand and eyed him. "My boy, you're either going to be famous, or in jail." He ducked his head, grinning. "I've got something else to show you," he said enthusiastically, his fingers darting over the keyboard as he exited the bank's accounting records. Grace watched as the screen changed rapidly, flickering from one display to another. "Won't they be able to tell you've been in their files?" "Not with this baby. See, I got in through a legitimate password. Basically, I put on an electronic sheepskin, and they never knew a wolf was prowling around." "How did you get the password?" "Snooping. No matter how coded the info, there's

always a back door. Not that your bank has very good computer security," he said with obvious disapproval. "If I were you, I'd consider moving my account." "I'll think about it," she assured him, with a baleful glare that had him grinning again. "That's just part of the program. Here's the accounting system." He pulled up another screen and motioned Grace closer. She obligingly scooted her chair forward an inch or so, and he launched into the intricacies of his digitalized baby. Grace paid attention, because she could easily see it was a good system, deceptively simple to execute. He had programmed it to compare the current entry against past entries in the same account, so if anyone accidentally typed in, say, "\$115.00" instead of "\$15.00," the program alerted the user that the amount wasn't within the previously established range, and to check for an input error. "I like that," she mused. She had always paid bills and done her bookkeeping the old-fashioned way, by hand and on paper. However, she was completely at home with computers, so there was no reason for her not to do their household finances electronically. Kristian beamed. "I knew you would." His long fingers stroked the keys, downloading the program into her hard disk. "Its name is Go Figure." She groaned at the sly corniness of it, the groan changing midway into a laugh. "Do me a favor. When you get busted for playing around in the bank's computers, don't tell the feds that I have a copy of the program, okay?" "I'm telling you, it's safe, at least until the banks change all their passwords. Then you simply won't be able to get in. I could get in," he boasted, "but most people couldn't. Here, let me give you a list of the passwords." "I don't want it," she said quickly, but Kristian ignored her. He rifled through a stack of papers and plucked out three sheets of closely printed material, which he stuck in her computer case. "There. Now you'll have it if you need it." He paused, staring at the computer with the ongoing chess game. His opponent had made a move. He studied the board, head cocked slightly to one side, then he chortled. "Aha! I know that gambit, and it won't work." Gleefully he moved a knight and clicked the mouse. "Who are you playing with?" "I dunno," he said absently. "He calls himself the Fishman." Grace blinked, staring at the screen. Naw, it couldn't be. Kristian was playing with someone who had probably chosen that Net name with malice aforethought, to trick people into making just that assumption. The real Bobby Fischer wouldn't be surfing the Net looking for games; he could play anyone, anywhere, and get paid huge amounts of money for doing it. "Who usually wins?" "We're about even. He's good," Kristian allowed as he rehooked his other desktop. Grace opened her purse and pulled out her checkbook. "Want a pizza?" she asked. His head cocked as he pulled his mind back from cyberspace to check the status of his stomach. "Boy, do I ever," he declared. "I'm starving." "Then call it in; this one's on me." "Are you going to stay and split it with me?" She shook her head. "I can't. I have things waiting for me at home." She barely controlled a blush. Ford would have roared with laughter if he'd heard her. She wrote out a check for fifty dollars, then pulled out a twenty to pay for the pizza. "Thanks, buddy. You're a lifesaver." Kristian took the check and tip, grinning as he looked at it. "This is going to be a good career, isn't it?" he asked, beaming. Grace had to laugh. "If you can stay out of jail." She placed the laptop in the case and balanced the repaired modern on top of her unzipped purse. Kristian gallantly took the heavy case from her and carried it downstairs for her. Neither of his parents was in sight, but the sounds of gunshots and a car chase drifted from the den and pinpointed their location; both of the older Siebers unabashedly loved Arnold Schwarzenegger's action movies. Kristian's gallantry lasted only as far as the kitchen, where the proximity to food reminded him of the pizza he hadn't yet ordered. Grace retrieved the computer case from him as he halted at the wall phone. "Thanks, Kris," she said, and left the same way she had entered, through the darkened laundry room and out the back door. She paused for a moment to let her eyes adjust to the darkness. During the time she had been with Kristian, clouds had rolled in to block most of the starlight, though here and there was a clear patch of sky. Crickets chirped, and a cool breeze stirred around her, bringing with it the scent of rain. The light from her kitchen window, fifty yards to the right, was like a beacon. Ford was there, waiting for her. Warmth filled her and she smiled, thinking of him. She began walking toward her home, stepping carefully in the darkness so she wouldn't stumble over some unevenness in the ground, the soft spring grass cushioning her movements in silence. She was in the Murchisons' backyard when she saw someone in her kitchen, briefly framed by the window as he moved past it. Grace paused, frowning a little; that hadn't looked like either Ford or Bryant. Oh, Lord, they had company. Her frown deepened. It was probably someone interested in archaeology or associated with the Foundation. College kids pondering a career in archaeology sometimes dropped by to talk, and sometimes she was the one they wanted to see, if they were having a problem with Latin or Greek terms. It didn't matter. She didn't want to talk shop, she wanted to go to bed with her husband. She was reluctant to go in, though of course she would have to; she couldn't stand out there in the dark waiting for whoever it was to leave, which could be hours. She edged to the right, trying to see if she recognized the visitor's car, hoping

that it belonged to one of Bryant's friends. If so, she could signal her brother to take his friend into his side of the house. Her familiar Buick sat in the carport, and beside it was Bryant's black Jeep Cherokee. Ford's scratched and dented Chevrolet four-wheel-drive pickup, which was used for field work, was parked off to the side. No other vehicle occupied their driveway. That was strange. She knew they had company, because the man she'd so briefly glimpsed had had sandy-colored hair, and both Ford and Bryant were dark-haired. But unless it was a neighbor who had walked over, she had no idea how he had arrived. She knew most of their neighbors, though, and none of them fit the description of the she'd seen. Well, she wouldn't find out who he was until she went inside. She took a step toward the house and suddenly stopped again, squinting through the darkness. Something had moved between her and the house, something dark and furtive. A chill ran down her spine. Icy shards of alarm ran through her veins, freezing her in place. Wild possibilities darted through her mind: a gorilla had escaped from a zoo...or there was a really, really big dog in her backyard. Then it moved again, ghosting silently up to her back door. It was a man. She blinked in astonishment, wondering why someone was skulking around in her yard, and going to the back door instead of the front. A robbery? Why would any thief with half a brain break into a house where the lights were still on and the occupants were obviously at home? Then the back door opened, and she realized the man must have knocked on it, though softly, because she hadn't heard anything. Another man stood in the door, a man she knew. There was a pistol, the barrel long and curiously thickened, in his hand. "Nothing," the first man said, his voice low, but the night air carried the sound. "God damn it," the other man muttered, stepping aside to let the first man enter. "I can't stop now. We'll have to go ahead and do it." The door closed behind them. Grace stared across the dark yard at the blank expanse of her back door. Why was Parrish Sawyer there, and why did he have a pistol? He was their boss, and if he'd called to let them know he was coming over, for whatever reason, Ford would have called her to come home. They were on cordial terms with Parrish, but they had never socialized; Parrish played in the more rarefied stratosphere of the rich and well connected, qualifications Grace's family didn't have. "Do it" -- that was what he'd said. Do what? And why couldn't he stop? Puzzled and uneasy, Grace left the shadows of the Murchisons' yard and walked across her own. She didn't know what was going on, but she was definitely going to find out. While she had been cooking earlier she had opened the kitchen window so she could enjoy the freshness of the spring day, and it was still raised. She plainly heard Ford say, "Damn it, Parrish, what's this about?" Ford's voice was rough, angry, with a tone in it she'd never heard before. Grace froze again with one foot lifted to the first step. "Where is she?" Parrish asked, ignoring Ford's question. His voice was indifferent and cold, and the sound of it made the hairs lift on the back of her neck. "I told you, the library." A lie. Ford was deliberately lying. Grace stood still, staring at the open window and trying to picture what was happening on the other side of the wall. She couldn't see anyone, but she knew there were at least four people inside. Where was Bryant, and the man she'd seen enter the kitchen? "Don't give me that shit. Her car's here." "She went with a friend." "What's this friend's name?" "Serena, Sabrina, something like that. Tonight's the first time I've met her." Ford had always thought fast on his feet. The names were enough out of the ordinary that it gave the lie a bit of credence, where a plain Sally wouldn't. She didn't know why Ford was lying, but the fact that he was doing it was enough for Grace. Parrish had a pistol, and Ford didn't want him to know where Grace was; something was very wrong. "All right." It sounded as if Parrish exhaled through his teeth. "What time will she be back?" "She didn't know. She said they had a lot of work to do. When the library closes, I guess." "And she carried all of the documents with her." "They were in her computer case." "Does this Serena-Sabrina know about the documents?" "I don't know." "It doesn't matter." Now Parrish sounded a little bored. "I can't take the chance. All right, stand up, both of you." She heard chairs being scraped back, and she moved silently to the right, so she could see inside the window. She was careful to stand back, so if anyone glanced out the window she wouldn't be framed in the pool of light. She saw Bryant, shirtless, his hair damp; he must have just gotten out of the shower, which told her that Parrish and the other man had arrived not long before. Her brother's face was drawn and pale, his eyes curiously blank. Grace moved another step, and saw four more people. There was Ford, as pale as Bryant, though his eyes glittered with a kind of anger she'd never seen before. Parrish, tall and sophisticated, his blond hair expensively styled, stood with his back to the window. The man she'd seen earlier stood beside him, and another man stood just inside the interior kitchen doorway. The man at the doorway was armed; his pistol, like Parrish's, was silenced. The third man would also be armed, Grace thought, since the other two were. She didn't know what was going on, but she was sure of one thing: she needed the police. She would call them from the Siebers' house. She took a cautious step backward. "Go into the bedroom, both of you," she heard Parrish say. "And don't do anything stupid, like trying to jump one of

us. I can't tell you how very painful it is to be shot, but I'll be forced to demonstrate if you don't cooperate." Why was he making them go to the bedroom? She had heard enough to know that she was the one he really wanted, and he seemed to be concerned about the documents she carried. If Parrish wanted the documents, all he had to do was say so; he was her boss, and she worked on the assignments he gave her. It would break her heart to give up the tantalizing papers, but she couldn't stop him from taking them. Why hadn't he just called, and told her to turn them over tomorrow morning? Why had he come to her house with a gun in his hand, and brought two armed thugs with him? None of this made sense. She started to walk quickly back to the Siebers' house, but impulse led her around the corner of the house to where she could look into the bedroom window. She waited for the light to come on, waited to hear voices in the room, but nothing happened, and abruptly she realized Parrish had taken them to Bryant's bedroom, on the other side of the house. Given the configuration of the house when they had divided it, Bryant's bedroom was at the back of the house with the kitchen. Parrish would have had to take them up the hallway to the front of the house, then through the connecting door into Bryant's part of the house and back to the bedroom. As quickly as possible Grace retraced her steps, taking care to remain in the deepest shadows. A water hose was curled like a long, skinny snake around the protruding outside faucet; she skirted it, and also sidestepped a big sifting board one of the men had propped against the house. This was her home; she knew all its idiosyncrasies, the little traps for the unwary. She knew where the squeaks in the floor were, the cracks in the ceiling, the ruts in the yard. Light was already shining from Bryant's window. She pressed her back against the wall and sidestepped until she was right beside it. She moved her head around, slowly, trying to move just enough that she could see inside. One of the men stepped to the window. Grace jerked her head back and stood rigidly still, not even daring to breathe. He jerked the curtains together, shielding the window and darkening the spill of light. Blood thundered in her ears, and sheer terror made her weak. She still couldn't breathe; her heart felt as if it were literally in her throat, suffocating her. If the man had seen her she would have been caught, for she couldn't possibly have moved. "Sit on the bed," she heard Parrish say over her pounding heartbeat. Grace's lungs were finally working again. She gulped in deep breaths to steady her nerves, then once again shifted position. The curtain hadn't quite fallen together. She moved so she could see through the slit, see Ford and Bryant -- Parrish calmly lifted his silenced pistol and shot Ford in the head, then quickly shifted his aim and shot Bryant. Her brother was dead before her husband's body had toppled to the side. No. No! She hung there, paralyzed. Somehow her body was gone, vanished; she couldn't feel anything, couldn't think. A dark mist swam over her vision and the unbelievable scene receded until it was as if she saw it at the end of a long tunnel. She heard them talking, their voices oddly distorted. "Shouldn't you have waited? There'll be a discrepancy in the times of death." "That isn't a concern." Parrish's voice; she knew it. "In a murder-suicide, sometimes the killer waits awhile before killing himself -- or herself, in this case. The shock, you understand. Such a pity, her husband and brother conducting a homosexual affair right under her nose. No wonder the poor dear got upset and went a little berserk." "What about the friend?" "Ah, yes. Serena-Sabrina. Bad luck for her; she'll have an unfortunate accident on the way home. I'll wait here for Grace, and you two wait in the car, follow Serena-Sabrina." Slowly the mist cleared from Grace's vision. She wished it hadn't. She wished she had died right there, wished her heart had stopped. Through the gap in the curtains she could see her husband sprawled on his back, his eyes open and unseeing, his dark hair matted with...with -- The sound rose from her chest, an almost silent keening that reverberated in her throat. It was like the distant howl of the wind, dark and soulless. The pain ripped out of her. She tried to hold it back with her teeth, but it boiled out anyway, primitive, wild. Parrish's head snapped around. For a tenth of a second -- no more -- she thought that their gazes met, that somehow he could see through that small gap into the night. He said something, sharply, and lunged for the window. Grace plunged into the night. Copyright 1997 by

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