



## Return to Santa Flores

By Iris Johansen

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Jenny Cashman longs to escape the refined, rarified air of her exclusive Swiss education. At nineteen, she's desperate for independence—and to once again see the man she loves. So she sells her belongings, leaves Europe, and heads to Las Vegas. The sight of Steve Jason's newest palatial hotel and casino thrills Jenny—but not as much as the sight of the man himself. Steve came to her rescue after her father died, paying for her years of expensive schooling. Now, she must convince him that she's old enough to make her own decisions . . . including about her passion for him.

Steve Jason is a powerful mogul, a man who came from nothing and made a name for himself in the industry before he was thirty years old. He takes great care to keep all emotional involvement with others to a bare minimum—with only one exception. Jenny has always been incredibly important to him. But how can he keep her safe when she seems oblivious to her own stunning beauty and the reactions she gets from other men? It will take all of Steve's resolve to protect her—especially from his own desires.

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## Editorial Review

About the Author

**Iris Johansen** is the *New York Times* bestselling author of many novels, including *Killer Dreams*, *On the Run*, *Countdown*, *Firestorm*, *Fatal Tide*, *Dead Aim*, and *No One to Trust*. She lives near Atlanta, Georgia.

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One

He was the most beautiful human being she had ever seen.

The first tentative rays of the sun bathed the white sand with a radiant glow and cast a patina of gold over the figure of the man. He appeared to reflect not only the glow of the sun but a boundless vitality.

Apollo, she thought again in breathless admiration, as she had the first time she had seen him four days ago. It had been sunrise then, too, as he strode along the beach like a god from Olympus, not noticing her sitting with her back pressed against the stone sea wall. His eyes were a brilliant sapphire blue in a face of lean classical perfection. His hair was dark gold and seemed to radiate the morning light. He was dressed in dark bathing trunks, and his tall muscular body had a virile toughness that was as striking as the handsomeness of his face.

She'd never spoken to him, content to sit and watch each day as he walked briskly down the beach from the hotel, throwing his towel on the sand and entering the water with a pagan enjoyment that was more sea god than sun god. But she knew that she must speak today.

"Don't go into the water."

The man whirled, startled, his eyes wary, his face suddenly taut and dangerous. The tough menace of his stance frightened her for a moment, but as he observed the small figure sitting cross-legged in the sand, he relaxed and raised an eyebrow quizzically.

"Were you speaking to me?" He gazed curiously at the little girl. She couldn't have been more than nine, he thought. She was a fragile-looking child, her thin face dominated by enormous gray eyes framed with sweeping black lashes. Her long, straight dark hair was pushed carelessly away from her face and hung in a shiny curtain to her waist. The eyes were almost silver, he noticed absently, as she continued to gaze at him with quaint solemnity.

She nodded, and lowered her eyes to the sand castle she was building so painstakingly, cutting a window in a turret with one careful finger. "Don't go into the sea today," she repeated, not looking at him. "Portuguese man-of-war were sighted yesterday afternoon just off the coast. Esmeralda told me that they can be dangerous."

"Indeed they can," he said wryly. Since he'd extended his operations to this small island in the Bahamas, he had heard much of this deadly sea life, whose poison attacked the nervous system causing severe illness and in a few cases even death. "And who, pray, is the knowledgeable Esmeralda?"

"Esmeralda Haskins. She's a maid at the hotel." The child explained matter of factly, gesturing to the large

gleaming white building at the far end of the beach. “She’s engaged to Joe St. Clair. He’s a fisherman.”

“And I presume it was Joe, the fisherman, who told Esmeralda, the maid, about the man-of-war,” he surmised, his lips quirking.

“That’s right.” She added another window to the castle.

He wondered why he was standing here, trying to converse with this taciturn elf. He was not a man who had any time for children, but there was a grave maturity about this one that was intriguing. He speculated on which one of his hotel staff had fathered the child. It was unlikely that she was the child of a guest. The faded blue shorts and shirt she wore were definitely shabby. It wasn’t plausible that anyone who could afford the luxury rates at the Santa Flores Hotel and Casino would dress their offspring so poorly.

“Aren’t you a little young to be out here alone at this hour?” he asked.

She looked up. “I’m eleven,” she told him seriously. “I look younger because I’m small for my age.”

“Won’t someone be worrying about you?” he persisted.

The long, dark lashes masked her eyes as she looked down again, her hands busy in the sand. “No.”

He shrugged and picked up his towel, making a mental note to find out who was so negligent as to permit a child of eleven to wander unsupervised on a deserted beach at dawn.

As he turned to go back to the hotel, the child spoke again. “You work at the hotel, don’t you?” The silver eyes were gravely enquiring, the small hands clasped serenely on her crossed knees.

“In a manner of speaking,” he said coolly. “But why do you assume that? I could be a guest.”

She shrugged. “It’s too early for hotel guests. In a place like this they stay up as long as the casino’s open, and then they don’t get out of bed until noon the next day.”

“You’re very well informed,” he said mockingly. Then he caught himself, amazed that he was talking to this child as if she were a contemporary.

She was gazing at him thoughtfully, noting the mockery and accepting it with composure. But he had the odd sensation that she was withdrawing within herself, much like a night blooming cereus that folds up its petals when exposed to the powerful light of the sun.

It was suddenly intolerable that he might have hurt this strange waif. He smiled with a heart catching warmth that would have astounded the few who claimed they knew him. “I didn’t thank you for telling me about the man-of-war,” he said. “You might have saved my life.”

She shook her head, but said nothing.

“My name is Steve Jason,” he added coaxingly. “Don’t you think it’s about time we introduced ourselves?”

“I’m Jenny,” she said hesitantly. “Jennifer Antonia Cashman.”

“I’m very happy to meet you, Jennifer Antonia Cashman.”

She studied him for a moment as if wondering if she could put her trust in him, then she smiled. He caught his breath involuntarily. It was an incredibly lovely smile, lighting up the somberness of her thin, gypsy face with a special fascination. “And I’m very happy to meet you, Steve Jason,” she answered with old-fashioned formality.

He lingered, oddly reluctant to leave her here on her own. “Why don’t you walk back to the hotel with me?” he asked. “Your parents will expect you for breakfast, surely.”

She shook her head, surveying her sand castle again. “I’ll stay here a little while, thank you.”

“Well at least tell me your parents’ names and what they do, so I can tell them where to find you,” he said in exasperation.

“That won’t be necessary.”

“Answer me, Jenny,” he ordered.

He thought for a moment that she was going to defy him. Then she looked up at him, her silver eyes steady. “My father is Henry Cashman. He’s a gambler.”

A puzzled frown wrinkled his forehead. “Do you mean he’s a dealer at the casino?”

Jenny shook her head. “No, he doesn’t work at the hotel,” she said softly. “He just gambles.”

Suddenly the child was on her feet and was flying down the beach toward the hotel, her dark hair floating behind her like a glossy banner.

Steve Jason gazed after her quicksilver figure, startled momentarily by the abruptness of her departure. Then, his sapphire eyes thoughtful, he slung his towel around his neck and started to walk slowly back to the hotel.

“Why are you staring at me like that, funny face?” Steve asked idly, letting the white sand pour slowly from his cupped hand. “Do I have a smudge on my face?” He was sitting beside little Jenny, his face lifted to enjoy the caress of the early morning sun. He had been conscious for some time of the surreptitious glances she had been giving him. He had grown used to the tranquility of the child and no longer thought it unusual. This sign of self consciousness in her aroused his curiosity.

“I was thinking that you reminded me of someone,” she confessed awkwardly.

He raised his eyebrow inquiringly.

“Apollo,” she said with a rush, her thin face suddenly pink.

He exploded with laughter and her face turned even redder. He controlled his amusement with an effort, knowing the fragile dignity of the child. A strange friendship had grown between them in the past week. Every morning she was there by the sea wall, and he had become accustomed to joining her after his swim

and watching the sunrise before he returned to the hotel.

Jenny was a completely restful companion. She rarely spoke, and when she did, her conversation was never banal. She listened with such receptive interest that he found himself rambling on about subjects completely outside her experience. She had an almost crystal transparency, and was the most totally honest person he had ever known. If she didn't wish to answer a question, she would simply remain silent. If she did speak, the answer would be completely truthful, even if it caused her discomfort as this one obviously did.

"You do look like Apollo," she insisted. "I noticed it the first time I saw you."

He was not embarrassed by the comparison. He knew without vanity that he was good looking. It was a fact that he used with the same cool calculation as he did every other asset he possessed.

"He's an old buddy of yours?" he teased.

She looked up at him scornfully. It was unusual for him to talk down to her. "I saw his picture in a book," she said sternly. "It was a statue in a place called the Vatican."

"Isn't that a little heavy reading for an eleven year old?"

"It wasn't a real book," she explained. "It was in one of the guide books I collected in Rome."

It was the first time Jenny had volunteered any information about her background. She seemed to live tot...

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Have you spare time to get a day? What do you do when you have more or little spare time? Sure, you can choose the suitable activity to get spend your time. Any person spent their very own spare time to take a stroll, shopping, or went to the particular Mall. How about open as well as read a book allowed Return to Santa Flores? Maybe it is being best activity for you. You understand beside you can spend your time with the favorite's book, you can smarter than before. Do you agree with their opinion or you have some other opinion?

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