



Cher Gorman

WOLF
island

Loose Id

Praise for the writing of Cher Gorman

Wolf Island

Wolf Island is full of fascinating characters who entice you to turn the page to see what happens next.

-- Sue Viders, co-author of *The Complete Writer's Guide to Heroes and Heroines*

From the first pages of *Wolf Island*, author Cher Gorman grabs hold of the reader with a spooky tale filled with plot twists and surprises that will keep you up all night.

-- Becky Martinez, author of *Love On Deck* (Wings Press)

Cher Gorman makes a dark and passionate debut with *Wolf Island*. Great characters, solid storytelling. Definitely an author to watch.

-- Sage Grayson, author of *White Rage* (Changeling Press)

Rich in detail, Cher Gorman's *Wolf Island* brings gothic mystery back in style with a story that will keep you reading long past your bedtime.

-- Lucynda Storey, author of *Simply Irresistible* (Loose Id)

WOLF ISLAND

Cher Gorman

Loose Id
www.loose-id.com

Warning

This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. Loose Id e-books are for sale to adults ONLY, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

* * * * *

This book is rated:



For explicit sexual content and graphic language.

Wolf Island

Cher Gorman

This e-book is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Published by
Loose Id LLC
1802 N Carson Street, Suite 212-29
Carson City NV 89701-1215
www.loose-id.com

Copyright © September 2005 by Cher Gorman

Excerpt of *Fifty Cents for Your Soul* copyright October 2004 by Denise Dietz

All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the purchaser of this e-book ONLY. No part of this e-book may be reproduced or shared in any form, including, but not limited to printing, photocopying, faxing, or emailing without prior written permission from Loose Id LLC.

ISBN 1-59632-144-X

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Lorri-Lynne Brown

Cover Artist: Scott Carpenter

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my personal hero and husband, Mike, and our amazing daughter, Lilly, who never stopped believing in me. Thank you to the management staff at Loose Id for taking a chance on a new writer and to my brilliant editor, Lorri-Lynne Brown, for agreeing to take me on. Thank you to my wonderful critique partners, Becky Martinez, Lucynda Storey, and Sue Viders, without whose ingenious insight and support this book would not have been possible. A very special thank you to Margie Lawson and Tami Cowden.

Chapter One

A castle in Maine? She'd had no idea they had castles in America.

Abigail Chapel stood on the massive stone front porch of Morgan's Keep on Wolf Island. Around her, the wind sighed, bringing with it the scent of rain-washed pine and earth. Now sunlight warmed her back and shoulders, but failed to ease the jolt of nerves edging up her spine.

Where's the moat and drawbridge with knights standing guard, or the captured princess calling down in hopes of rescue from one of the towers?

Abby smiled at her foolish thoughts and looked at the thick stone walls. "What are you doing here?" she murmured absently to herself.

The door appeared impenetrable, made of gray metal with huge silver studs hammered into its surface. A dark iron knocker carved in the shape of a wolf's head, with bared teeth and eyes fashioned of amber-colored stone, stared back at her.

Adjusting the strap of her purse and lifting her hand to grasp the knocker, she paused as a cloud passed overhead, blocking the sun. The shadow darkened the wolf's eyes until they appeared black and hard. A cold draft of air crept over her slim body. A tinkling sound like chimes drifted to her ears, along with a man's subdued but evil laugh.

Her hands started to shake, and sweat beaded her brow. The next moment, the sun's rays streamed down warm and mellow. She blinked rapidly and swallowed. The wolf's eyes appeared golden once again, and the chilling plume of air vanished.

Hysterical laughter bubbled up from her throat. She clamped a hand over her mouth and breathed deeply through her nose. A minute, maybe two, passed before the giggle dissipated and her heart stopped flopping around in her chest.

With a slight tremble in her hand, she touched the wolf's eyes. They felt solid and unmoving beneath her prodding fingers. She saw no evidence of a device of any kind that might project the laugh she'd heard or produce an icy draft.

However, since she'd been scared out of her white leather flats, Devlin Morgan, the castle's owner, had some explaining to do. Abby raised her hand, gripped the knocker firmly, and rapped on the door. Metal clinked against metal. While she waited for someone to answer the door, she turned and gazed at the village that spread in the valley below her.

Peaked roofs in soft colors huddled closely together along the southernmost shoreline, and craggy gray rock surrounded much of the island.

She'd lifted her hand to knock again when the door swung open. A tall man wearing nothing but a maroon towel filled the doorway.

Impressions hit her at once. Wet, wavy raven hair dripped water onto his incredibly handsome face. Brawny shoulders and arms. Broad chest. Thick, dark hair glistening with water droplets spread over hard, muscled pectorals. Slender waist. A line of black hair trailed down an abdomen rippled with muscle and disappeared beneath the edge of the towel. He smelled wonderful, like water and earth and man.

"Who are you?" His deep, masculine voice was commanding.

For a moment, she couldn't speak. *I've never seen such a man in my life!* She struggled to reply, but only managed to utter a rather pathetic-sounding squeak. What in blazes was the matter with her?

Dark brows arched over eyes the color of new leaves, and his full mouth twisted in irritation. "Well?"

Pull yourself together. Acting like a bubble-headed schoolgirl wasn't going to help her find her sister. Abby cleared her throat. "Are you Mr. Morgan?"

"Yes. Who are you?"

"Abigail Chapel."

He straightened his shoulders and frowned at her. "I told you on the phone, your sister isn't here anymore."

"Yes, I know, but I need to ask you some questions."

He grasped the door. "I answered them already. Go home, Ms. Chapel. You're wasting my time."

Before he could shut the panel in her face, Abby reached out and laid her palm on the door. "Please, wait."

He widened his stance, with his big feet firmly planted and the muscles in his legs cording with strength. The towel tightened, molding the maroon material to his genitals and pulling her attention downward. Feeling her cheeks grow hot, she shifted her gaze back up to his. His scowl gave way to a hint of amusement in his eyes.

The sound of a clock tower resonated from the village below and floated on the air. "I can't. The last ferry left at four-thirty." She'd intentionally waited until after it left to approach the castle. "I received a call from my sister's boss. He told me he hasn't heard from Miranda in several days. She hasn't checked in with her workplace or any of her friends. The last time we spoke, she said she would call me back in a couple of days, but she never did. I'm very worried about her."

He stepped back, as if to close the door, and she gripped his wrist firmly. To her surprise, the heat from his skin pulsed thick and smooth into her fingers. Abby sucked in a breath and snatched her hand away. Her heart beat so hard, she thought it might burst. "Do you have any idea where she is?"

Devlin shrugged his shoulders. "How should I know?"

His obvious unconcern irked her. He must know something. "If you don't let me in and answer my questions regarding my sister, I assure you I'll go straight to the police."

He raised his brows. "The police?"

Abby lifted her chin. "Yes. I must find my sister."

Devlin swept his gaze over her, and his eyes softened. He no doubt took in her disheveled appearance. "Rough crossing?"

His gentle query soothed her for the moment. "Yes, rather choppy with deep swells." To say the least.

At that moment, a small orange kitten twined between Devlin's legs. A pale blue cast enveloped one of the animal's front legs.

Devlin knelt, scooped up the kitten, then rose to his full height. The kitten nestled into the crook of his arm while he stroked its head tenderly with his fingers. The ball of fur closed its eyes and purred loud enough for Abby to hear. "This one had a rough start, too." He ran the tip of his finger lightly over the cast. "Tree limb fell on his leg. No choice but to let the vagabond stay a while."

If he allowed an injured kitten to stay, surely he would let her in for just a few minutes. "Does that mean I can come in?"

"You're not a helpless kitten. If you want to go to the police, go ahead. I have nothing to hide. Check with Corinne at Wolf's Lair. She'd love to have someone from England to talk to."

With those last words, he slammed the heavy door in her face.

With the towel still wrapped around his waist, Devlin looked out the window in his office on the first floor of the castle and watched Abby as she walked to her car. Absently, he stroked his hand over the soft fur of the kitten still snuggled in his arms. Abby tossed her purse inside, then climbed in and shut the car door. He kept his eye on her until she drove to the end of the castle's drive and turned right onto the long, twisting road that led to the

village. Devlin's mind crowded with the memory of a pair of bright violet eyes and a sweet mouth made for kissing.

Abigail Chapel spelled trouble. When she touched him, the strength and warmth of her hold made him feel something he'd never experienced with another woman.

An emotional connection. And it scared him to death.

He'd been careful not to develop any serious relationships with women, especially women who were interested in love, hearth, and home. He dated occasionally and slept with a woman or two he met on business trips or vacation. Just a little fun in the sack and no strings, because no woman could ever accept the shadow of his past. He headed upstairs to change and tried in vain to put Abigail Chapel out of his mind.

* * * * *

Abby stood with Sheriff Jake Dutton outside the castle, waiting for the door to open. He wore the standard sheriff's uniform. In his late forties to early fifties, he was still attractive; he'd probably been quite the ladies' man when he was younger. But there was padding around his waist now, and his light brown hair was thinning on top.

A feeling of triumph at convincing the sheriff to come with her made Abby straighten her shoulders in confidence. Devlin would *have* to answer her questions now.

The door to the castle swung open, and Devlin scowled down at Abby from his exalted height. No towel. Jeans covered his hips and thighs, and a dark blue shirt concealed his upper body. She found him just as appealing with his clothes on. Not a good reaction to have, considering that he might know something about Miranda's disappearance. His green gaze flicked from her face to the sheriff's. "Jake, is there a problem?"

Sheriff Dutton placed his hands on his hips and cocked his head to one side. "Dev, Ms. Chapel seems to think you know more than you're telling about her sister, Miranda."

Funny, when the sheriff dropped his *r's*, it grated on her, but she found it charming in Devlin.

Devlin shot Abby an irritated glance, then looked at the sheriff. "Really."

"Ayuh." The sheriff nodded. "I need to ask you a few questions."

A muscle worked in Devlin's jaw. He swung his gaze to Abby and then back to the sheriff. "Go ahead."

"How long was Ms. Chapel here?"

"One week."

Abby crossed her arms over her chest and began tapping her foot. *Ask him something important.*

"Where did she go?"

Devlin frowned at her tapping foot, spared her a patronizing look, and then directed his attention back to the sheriff. "I don't know. She didn't leave a forwarding address. Is that all?"

She'd had enough. Abby stepped forward. "No, that's not all. The last time I spoke with her, she told me you had blood on your hands and chased her. Whose blood?"

Uneasiness crossed the sheriff's face as he looked at Devlin. "You had blood on your hands? When?"

Devlin's eyes gleamed with frustration as he glanced from the sheriff to Abby, but his face remained calm, implacable. "Remember the little kitten you saw earlier?"

Abby nodded.

"I found him that night, pinned under a fallen tree limb. On the way back from the village, I heard the little thing mewling in the grass on the side of the road. When I wrestled with the limb, I got my clothes dirty and some of his blood on my hands." Sarcasm dripped from his voice. "I'd just brought him home and was about to call the vet when your sister came barreling in through the front door -- pale, out of breath and, by the looks of her, pretty spooked. I went after her to find out why the devil she was so frightened."

Abby looked him directly in the eye. "How could a kitten have that much blood?"

"She just thought she saw more blood. Understandable, considering your sister was so skittish that night. Satisfied?"

She wasn't even close to being satisfied. "Not hardly. Why was she frightened?"

He glanced away for a moment, then looked back at her. "There was a bad storm that night. It blew in with a lot of lightning, and Miranda got caught in it. It shook her up a bit, that's all."

"Miranda wasn't one to be afraid of a storm."

"Then maybe you should ask her when you see her."

Abby felt down to her bones that Devlin knew why Miranda had been so frightened that night. Why wouldn't he tell her? All the more reason for her to gain entrance to the castle.

"I spoke to Corrine at Wolf's Lair, and she doesn't have a room available until Friday evening. This is Sunday. She told me that Morgan's Keep offered a haunted weekend once a month during the summer, and since there are no other rooms available on the island --"

Devlin wiped a huge hand over his delectable face. "We've already had guests this month. It's always the second weekend of the month. Come back in August."

She couldn't wait that long to search for clues to Miranda's whereabouts. "I've already taken leave from my job. Besides, there won't be another ferry until the morning."

"And how is that my problem?"

Abby propped her hands on her hips. "It's your problem because Miranda was last seen at *this* castle."

"I already told you what happened. Now, go home."

"I'm not leaving until I find Miranda. If you allow me to stay two nights, you'll have every opportunity to prove to me that your story is valid."

"I don't need to prove anything."

"On Saturday, if I'm convinced, I'll leave. I'm only asking for two days." She couldn't believe she was making these demands.

"Dev," the sheriff began, "why not let her stay? This will give her some time to put her doubts to rest about you having anything to do with Miranda's disappearance."

Devlin relaxed his shoulders and exhaled. "Fine. I'll even waive the fee. But you only have one night. In the morning, I'm putting you on the first ferry back to the mainland. Understood?"

Don't bet on it. She turned to the sheriff. "Thank you for coming up here, Sheriff."

"My pleasure, Ms. Chapel. Dev." He gave Devlin a wink and headed for his car parked next to Abby's rental. She leaned down for her bags, which sat at her feet. When Devlin didn't budge, she cocked a brow and said, "Well?"

His handsome mouth pressed into a grim line. He dropped one hand to his side and turned his head. "Otis." His voice echoed through the castle's interior.

Abby listened to the sound of steady footsteps from inside. A rather wiry black man, with a tuft of salt and pepper hair on his head that looked like steel wool, stopped next to Devlin. From the sound of his steps, she had expected him to be large and muscular like Devlin. "What we got here?" He studied Abby with obsidian eyes. "You huntin' up them ghosts too?"

His voice contained a lilt that Abby was able to identify as Southern, but the accent was harder to place right away. Figuring out dialects and regional influences in speech was a hobby of hers, and she would figure it out, given time. Abby attempted a smile. "No, I need a place to stay for a couple of nights."

"Ms. Chapel will be staying with us, for one night only. Put her in one of the guest rooms." With those last words, Devlin turned and disappeared down a darkened hallway.

Devlin's overwhelming presence, the shadow of secrets lurking in his sexy eyes, still lingered in her mind and threatened to slide under her skin. Inwardly, she shook herself. Just because the man was drop-dead gorgeous didn't mean she should let it go to her head.

As for Otis, he projected a palpable aura of suspicion despite his affable expression, and would probably be no help in locating her sister.

Abby remembered a snippet of the conversation she'd had with Miranda about Devlin. "*Whatever is going on here, Abby, the people in the village are behind Devlin one hundred percent. They never say anything derogatory, no matter how hard I pry.*"

She had to come up with a darn good reason why she absolutely must stay at the castle beyond one night.

When she walked inside, trepidation crawled over Abby's skin. She gazed at the castle's interior, and to her relief, Morgan's Keep wasn't the evil-lurking-in-every-corner castle she'd expected it to be. Marble floors gleamed in the foyer; walls were paneled in mahogany. No smoky torches or cobwebs trailed along the ceiling or walls. Electric sconces cast comforting light into the darkness.

As she and Otis ascended the wide, curving staircase, she studied the portraits lining the wall. "Are these pictures of the former owners before Devlin purchased the castle?"

Otis chuckled, glanced briefly at the paintings, and continued up the staircase with her small suitcase clutched in his bony hand. "The Morgan family built this place in 1702."

"Oh, so these are Devlin's ancestors." Abby stopped in front of a portrait of a woman clothed in a parchment-colored dress that just covered her knees. Hair the color of golden autumn leaves flowed about her shoulders. The woman's gaze seemed fixed on some distant point beyond the boundaries of the frame. In her hand, she held a wind chime.

Abby's heart quivered at the sight. "Otis, why is this woman holding a chime?"

He stopped at the top of the stairs. "Not for me to say. Your room's this way, chère." Otis turned and walked down one of three hallways that led away from the top of the staircase. Abby wanted to question him further, but perhaps she should wait until she knew him better.

Otis set her case by the guestroom bed, which was dressed in a gold-and-white striped coverlet. Creamy moiré silk spread over the walls, and a small stone fireplace graced the far wall. A perfect room for a guest.

He gestured with his right arm. "Bathroom's through there. We eat at six-thirty. Mr. Dev don't like people to be late. We eat in the small dining room off the kitchen. At the bottom of the stairs, take the hallway to the right. It'll bring you straight there." He nodded toward a phone on the nightstand. "You get scared, see a ghost or something, pick up the phone and give me a holler. I'll come runnin'." He chuckled and left the room.

As soon as he closed the door, Abby scooted across the room and pressed her ear to the thick wood. The sound of his laughter faded. Was it his laughter she'd heard on the porch? She waited a moment, then opened the door and looked out into the hallway. She glanced at her watch. Dinner in a half hour. No time to waste.

She stepped into the hall and closed the door behind her. Abby wandered down several corridors, mindful of her direction. Maybe she should have brought along a bag of breadcrumbs to drop at her feet. She smiled at her own whimsy. It wouldn't do for her to get lost. No doubt Devlin would come to fetch her.

He drew her to him like a fire on a cold night, but that fire would burn if she ventured too close. Abby rubbed her fingers against the fabric of her garnet-colored cotton skirt. His warmth, the desire she'd felt when she touched him, remained.

Did he have something to do with her sister's disappearance? She may not have found anything concrete with which to implicate him yet, but there was a strong possibility he was involved. Miranda's words reverberated through her mind. *"I'm not sure about Devlin. One minute, he makes me want to trust him, and the next, I know he's hiding something. I believe he's connected somehow to the murder of Alice Howard, a young woman who once lived on the island."*

Devlin's handsome face and bedroom eyes appeared with vivid clarity in Abby's head, nearly making her sigh, before unease settled in her stomach. How could she be attracted to him when Miranda believed he might be linked to a murder? And what about Miranda's disappearance? Was he connected to that, too? She shook the image of Devlin from her mind. She needed to focus on her goal of finding Miranda.

Was she alive or dead?

The thought of losing her sister filled her with incomprehensible grief. She hated the thought of being totally alone in the world. After her mum's death, she struggled to keep herself busy so she wouldn't have to think about the holes in her life. What would she do with another hole?

Scrape. Click.

Abby's heart lurched. She turned, but saw no one behind her in the hallway. She smiled to herself while her heart stopped flipping about. This was a castle. Of course there would be strange noises.

She continued down a couple more hallways before she noticed a door standing ajar. Light spilled through onto the wide, wood floor, and with it, the haunting strains of a violin. Anticipation, curiosity, and a deep longing she didn't understand warred inside her chest. She peered through the doorway.

Devlin stood in front of a large floor-to-ceiling window, eyes closed, a violin cradled in his big hands and a look of profound peace on his face.

Abby backed away slowly. The floor creaked. He turned his head and stared at her with eyes narrowed in annoyance. She gasped. "I'm sorry. I must have made a wrong turn. It's rather easy to get lost in this place." She spun on the balls of her feet.

"Ms. Chapel. Wait." She halted at the sound of his demanding voice. "I'll walk you back to your room."

She turned her head and looked at him over her shoulder. She wanted to sail down the hallway back to her room, but she forced herself to stand and face him. After all, he knew why she was here. "Okay."

She waited until he had placed the violin into its case and stepped out into the hall. His big hand wrapped around her elbow, and his touch evoked an unfulfilled yearning. Had those hands harmed Miranda?

By the time they reached her room, Abby's heart thrashed against her ribs and her breath shuddered from her lungs. She stepped quickly inside. "Thank you. I'll see you at dinner." Before she could close the door, he strode over the threshold and sprawled in a wing chair by the fireplace. His green gaze assessed her from head to foot.

"Do you mind?"

A sardonic smile traced his lips. "No, I don't mind at all. Come here, Abby."

Chapter Two

"I want to change before dinner."

A gentle bend of his lips set her heart to racing again. "We don't dress for dinner here. Come sit down."

He stretched his legs out in front of him and crossed his ankles. She noticed he wasn't wearing socks. The sight of those bare male ankles made her remember seeing much more than just his ankles. Her pulse fluttered. She needed to stop this insane attraction she felt for him. How would she ever manage to find out about Miranda if she allowed Devlin to charm her like this?

She should grab her still-packed suitcase and scurry back to England, because the chemistry that arced between them frightened her and made her feel guilty at the same time. However, running away wouldn't solve Miranda's disappearance. And she had never run from responsibility or family obligation. No way would she start now.

"What I'd really like is a tour of the castle." Nervously, she fingered a button on her blouse.

"Why are you so tense about having a man in your room?"

She'd never had a man in her room. None of the men she'd associated with in the recent past would dream of coming into a woman's room without an invitation. They were all quiet, boring men.

Men with respectable jobs and impeccable reputations.

Safe men.

Not like this man. Devlin was anything but safe. He exuded danger down to the soles of his worn, leather loafers. "I'm not tense."

"Good. For a minute, I thought you were afraid of me."

She straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin. "I'm not afraid of you, but I do think you're hiding something."

"Really? Like what?"

She cocked her head to one side. "How much time did you spend with my sister while she was here?"

He flashed a devastating grin that almost buckled her knees. "Do you want it in exact hours and minutes?"

Abby fought back an answering smile. Danger and charm added up to a lethal combination. "What about that nonsense on the front porch, the cold air and the crazy laugh? Do you enjoy frightening your guests?"

He pursed his lips and glanced away, but not before she saw concern flicker briefly through his eyes. What was he concerned about? Devlin rose from the chair and paced to the doorway while keeping his thoughtful gaze pinned on her. He swept his arm out through the door in a broad gesture.

He'd said earlier that he had nothing to hide. If that were true, why wouldn't he answer her questions?

Abby walked to his side. "You first. I insist."

Wicked humor glinted in his eyes, framed in thick black lashes. His gaze slid to her mouth and lingered. Would he try to kiss her? Would she let him? Yes -- no -- maybe. What was she thinking? *Did Miranda have this same reaction to him? Is this how he gets to people?*

He stepped into the hallway and, thankfully, her more rational side shifted back into place.

Wide corridors with floor-to-ceiling windows showcased a magnificent view of the castle grounds. Dark green draperies, held back with thick gold ropes and tassels, hung on either side of the windows.

"What grade do you teach?" They turned a corner and started down another hallway.

"We call them forms. I teach seventh form at a school for young ladies in Westmorland." She needed to shift the conversation back to the subject at hand -- Miranda. "When did Miranda leave, exactly?"

He lightly rubbed the tips of his fingers over his nose and studied her. "I told you she left a couple of weeks ago. Late. You don't believe me. Do you?"

"I -- I'm not sure."

He studied her face for a long, tense moment and made her skin heat. "My family has been on this island for centuries. The Morgans are very good at reading people. What are you really thinking?" He stopped in the middle of the wide hallway. His deep voice urged her to tell him the truth.

"I think you know more than you're telling me and I intend to find out what that is."

He leaned in close and brushed a strand of hair from her face with just the tip of his finger, caressing her cheek. His touch left a trail of warmth behind. "You do that, Abigail." His quiet voice surrounded her.

A strong sense of déjà vu settled in the pit of her stomach.

Rubbish. She'd never met the man before today. Why did Devlin saying her name seem as natural and right as if they were old friends meeting again? He mesmerized her even as every cell in her body screamed for her to run.

But she couldn't fly home like a frightened bird seeking the safety and warmth of its nest. She wanted time to puzzle this out without Devlin's penetrating eyes watching her every move. She had to find Miranda, and, like it or not, Devlin was the key.

"I will, Devlin. You can bet on it."

His mouth curved in a slight smile, and they continued walking down the hallway. They passed a couple of elegantly appointed bedrooms and parlors. He stopped in the doorway of a magnificent library. Floor-to-ceiling shelves, crammed full of books, lined the walls. Her gaze darted about the space.

"At least you're honest, Abby. Now I'll be honest with you. Your sister spent a lot of time in here."

Each time he dropped his *r*'s, her attraction for him slid further beneath her skin. *Get a grip.* "Mind if I have a look around?"

He waved a hand through the air. "Be my guest." Devlin flipped a switch, and a wash of light flooded the room.

Sofas, chairs, and reading lamps were scattered throughout. Abby walked over the parquet floor to a large bay window. Dim afternoon light tinted the air with a hint of mauve.

She settled onto the tufted window seat and glanced at Devlin. "Miranda's never been much of a reader unless it involved something paranormal. Why did she spend so much time here?"

"She conducted several vigils in this room after she thought she detected some ghostly activity using some of those gadgets of hers."

Abby remembered those gadgets well. Miranda always came home with the boot of her car packed full with sensors, temperature gauges, and the like. Miranda wanted to teach her how to use them, but she didn't care to learn. "Did she leave in a hurry?"

"I don't know. Maybe. One morning, I woke up and she was gone."

She didn't believe him. A man like Devlin would be aware of all the comings and goings of his guests. Abby rubbed her thumb over the face of her watch and could almost feel the minutes trickling away, one tick-tock at a time.

Miranda, where are you?

"You never gave me an explanation about the chimes I heard when I first arrived at the castle."

He looked at her with a twinkle in his eyes. "You obviously encountered the Chiming Lady."

His voice held an allure, a kind of wicked seduction that urged her to admit she'd experienced a ghost. She refused to give in to it.

Abby rose from the window seat and walked across the room to him. "I don't believe in ghosts."

He looked at her and smiled. "Your sister does. She's absolutely convinced the castle is haunted. When she wasn't running tests, she peppered everyone she met with questions about the chiming ghost."

"And she disappeared in the process. I have to find out what happened to my sister. That's why I need to stay in the castle longer than one night."

"Pointless. She's not here." He gestured with his hand. "Go look for her somewhere else in Maine. Check with Homeland Security -- they're supposed to keep track of foreigners."

She closed her hands into loose fists at her sides. "Very funny. I'm a guest, and guests should have the option of staying a bit longer if they choose."

"Having guests once a month is tolerable. Twice a month would be unbearable."

"Oh, I'm unbearable?" She kept her tone light despite her irritation.

He nodded. "In a manner of speaking."

A lock of shiny black hair dipped onto his forehead. She almost reached up to brush the hair off his face. Sweet Mary, what was the matter with her?

She should ease her way in, try to be more accommodating and pleasant rather than so demanding. "I promise I won't be any trouble." She hoped he didn't see the lie in her eyes.

He smirked. "That's what they all say. Then they make a nuisance of themselves, quizzing me about the castle, the island, and if the castle's really haunted. They take pictures, gawk at everything -- including me -- like they've never seen a castle or its owner before."

"What do you expect? Most of them haven't been in a castle or met anyone remotely connected with one. People are naturally curious and often gullible, especially when it comes to ghostly sightings. If it bothers you so much, why open up the castle at all? Simply close your doors and be done with it."

"I don't want to be done with it."

"Then what *do* you want?"

He looked toward the window at the dwindling light. "I want Wolf Island to survive. The fishing industry here has suffered in the last few years because the fish in the waters surrounding the island have slowly begun to disappear. People were either moving away or going bankrupt." He paused as if gathering his thoughts and exhaled a deep breath. "My

great-great-grandfather founded the village, and since I'm his descendant, it's largely up to me to help support the people living here."

"And?"

"We've managed to turn the village into a kind of resort and created a cottage industry. Fishermen take tourists out for leisure cruises in their renovated boats, and many of the old buildings are now bed-and-breakfasts. Rumors have flown around for years about Morgan's Keep being haunted, so I hyped the concept and started offering ghost tours and haunted weekends."

"Has any of this helped?"

"Yes, the local economy has grown steadily since we started advertising our haunted island and castle." He turned and looked at her. "Maybe you'll see a ghost or two while you're here."

"Doubtful. Besides, I don't care whether the castle is haunted. I'm just here to find my sister."

"One night's all you've got."

"Surely we can work something out."

"No, we can't. There is one possible solution to your hotel dilemma, though. I have a friend in the village who might have a room to rent in her house."

Staying in the castle would be the most advantageous situation for her. It would give her more opportunities to search for clues about Miranda's whereabouts, although she wasn't exactly sure what she was looking for.

He glanced at his watch, then at Abby, with observant eyes. "Let's go. Otis has dinner waiting."

"I'd like to stop by my room on the way downstairs." Quiet surrounded them in the hall, with only the distant echo of a ship's horn filtering through the walls from outside. "It must be lonely here, day after day without anyone to talk to except Otis. How do you stand it?"

Devlin looked at her, his eyes darkening with unreadable emotions while a cold smile spread over his mouth. "You'd be surprised what a man can stand."

What did he mean? Did he spend a great deal of time alone because of his supposed link to Alice Howard's death? She made a mental note to check back-issues of the local newspaper at the library to look for information about that young woman. But first, she needed him to agree to let her stay.

An idea formed in her mind. If he wanted to give the island's economy a much-needed jolt, she'd show him how he and the island could profit from her stay.

Besides, if she left, she might not be able to get back in. He could find innumerable excuses to put her off. Miranda had last been seen here at this castle, and it was the only place Abby knew to look. She couldn't let him outsmart her. She had to move quickly.

"I have a proposition for you."

He stopped and turned his head. His sensual gaze journeyed in a lazy appraisal from her eyes to her mouth, making her limbs feel warm and weak. "A proposition?" An underlying sensuality suffused his husky voice.

Her cheeks heated. What would it be like to slip beneath the sheets with a man like him, to lie warm and protected within his embrace? But would she gain protection, or would getting closer to him physically be a danger instead? Had the same thing happened to Miranda?

Why did she find him so attractive? Abby gave herself a mental shake. "Wrong choice of words. I didn't mean that kind of proposition."

A corner of Devlin's handsome mouth kicked up.

Abby cleared her throat. "I design a lot of graphics for my students to help them with their studies. I've built quite a few websites, and the owners were very pleased with the results." She paused to let her words sink in and gauge his reaction. He raised his brows and motioned for her to continue.

"I could do the same for you and the island." She gestured with her hand. "A well-designed website could bring in a lot of much needed business. In fact, I'm surprised you don't already have one. There would, of course, be plenty of information about the Chiming Lady, the history of the island, and so forth." Tomorrow she would go into the village and get a firsthand look around, snap a few pictures, and talk to the locals. That would make it easy to bring Miranda into the conversation.

"Once I get the site up and running, I'm sure it will encourage more tourists to visit the island, therefore boosting the economy. What do you think?"

His mouth eased into a sudden, arresting smile. "I think you're just trying to come up with an excuse to stay, but you're wasting your breath."

Not just an excuse. She had to stay. "Won't you at least consider the idea?"

The lamps along the hallway flickered out. A chill brushed Abby's skin.

"Help me," a quiet voice sighed.

Her heartbeat picked up rhythm, and she stopped in her tracks. "Did you hear that?" she whispered and lightly touched his arm.

"What?" A frown creased Devlin's brow.

"That weird voice." She turned her head to look up and down the darkened hallway, seeing nothing.

"Must have been the wind." He shrugged in an unconcerned manner and lightly grasped her elbow to lead her toward her room.

"It didn't sound like the wind. And what about the lights?"

“Power outages aren’t unusual in the castle. Much of the wiring is old. Relax. You’re letting your imagination run away with you.”

She didn’t appreciate his patronizing tone, but she let it pass for now. Maybe he was right. When they entered her room, he lifted the screen from the fireplace, knelt down, and struck a match against the hearth. In a moment, flames licked at the kindling and stacked wood. He rose, replaced the screen, and watched her with a sensual glimmer in his eyes.

Through the open door, the lights blinked on in the hallway. “See?” Devlin gestured toward the hallway. “Otis must have checked the fuse box.”

She swallowed and inhaled a calming breath. “So, how about a few more nights’ stay in the castle?” After all, Abby knew she could design a very sophisticated website for the island. “You never told me what you thought of my idea.” She rubbed her hands together and glanced at him, waiting for him to answer. But only the gentle flutter of the flames in the hearth filled the silence in the room. He was watching her the way a man watches a woman he finds attractive.

She had little experience there, although she was no virgin. He walked toward her, slowly. Her pulse quickened. The closer he came, the harder her pulse beat.

As he moved toward her, his gaze never left her face. Unable to meet his eyes a moment longer, she stared directly at the center of his chest. Muscles shifted beneath his blue shirt. A hint of dark chest hair curled through the opening at his throat, inviting her to touch.

Within seconds, he stood barely an inch away. His scent grew more powerful, nearly overwhelming her, the warmth from him a gentle caress of her body. He raised his hand and laid his fingers over the pulse in her neck. Her heart accelerated to a jackhammer beat.

The heat from his hand infused her skin. Hunger and yearning flowed from him into her bones. Inexorably, he lifted her chin until she looked deeply into his eyes.

The moment her eyes met his, she experienced a sensation of spinning down a deep emerald chasm of which there was no end. Clear green eyes with the iris circled in black mesmerized her. His breath, with the faint tinge of coffee, warmed her lips. Her blood heated and raced while her bones slowly melted.

“Staying here more than one night is a lousy idea.” His husky voice did strange things to her insides. Concern flickered in his eyes.

What did a man like Devlin have to be worried about? Did his anxiety have something to do with Miranda’s disappearance?

She wanted -- oh, how she wanted -- more from Devlin. But how could she? He could be connected to Alice Howard’s death somehow.

He rubbed his thumb in a lazy circle against the jumping pulse in her neck. Her breasts ached to be touched in just such a way. How would his mouth feel on hers?

She took a step away to put some much needed distance between them, but he moved closer. Instinctively, Abby laid a hand on his chest. His heart beat steadily beneath her palm, warming her, making her skin tingle. Firm muscles flexed while strength emanated from him, surrounding her in a drugging haze.

Lord help her, she wanted to lean into him, rest her head in the middle of his chest, and let the sensual drumbeat flow into her.

What was she thinking? Her attitude toward him was beginning to soften, and she couldn't allow that to happen. "What worries you so much, Devlin? Why don't you want me here?"

A spark of some indefinable emotion burned briefly in his eyes. "Something that would curdle your blood if you ever came face to face with it."

His chilling words made uneasiness curl through her stomach. "What do you mean?"

He dropped his hand from her neck, breaking the tenuous connection between them. Her palm tingled with the warmth from his body, and cool air brushed over her neck where he'd laid his hand.

"Never mind. You're leaving tomorrow." His offhand manner belied the note of regret in his words.

"But you can't just make a statement like that and then leave me hanging." Exasperation rang in her voice. The man was being deliberately obtuse.

He gazed at her for a moment, and the corners of his mouth turned up in a slight smile. "You're a curious cat, aren't you?"

"I'm a teacher. It's my nature to be curious. Why won't you answer my question?"

A clock on the mantel in her room chimed the hour in light, musical notes. "I've answered all the questions I intend to for one day."

Chapter Three

The scent of food permeated the air in the dining room and made Abby's mouth water. Devlin sat at the head of the table and looked at her. His hands rested on the arms of the big chair, the tips of his fingers moving slowly back and forth, reminding her of how he had caressed her skin earlier.

She tried not to think about what had happened up in her room, but the vivid details of how he had stroked her neck, the bloom of sensual heat that had formed between them, stayed fixed in her mind. A flush warmed her cheeks, and his mouth curved slightly as if he read her thoughts.

She shifted her gaze to Otis, who sat across the table from her. She was no snob, but it seemed a bit unusual for Otis to be sharing dinner with his employer. There must be more to their relationship than just employer and employee. Curiosity overcame her usual decorum. "How did you come to live at the castle, Otis?"

Otis looked at her. "Mr. Dev and me go way back." He reached for a piece of cornbread, dipped one corner of the bread into his bowl, and took a big bite.

"Really. How so?"

He looked at Devlin, then back at her. Dev shifted in his seat and stared at his food with a frown creasing his brow. Why did their conversation make him uncomfortable?

Otis swallowed and rested his spoon on the rim of his bowl. "Trouble be like poison ivy sometimes. If they lucky, people barely brush up against it and hardly get a rash. Me, I broke out good. Top of my head to the soles of my feet. Nobody else would take me in except Mr. Dev."

Interesting. Abby sipped her iced tea and threw a surreptitious glance at Devlin, who glared at Otis out of the corner of his eyes. "Why?"

Otis pursed his lips and rubbed a hand over his chin, contemplating her question. Then he raised his head and looked at her. "Back in N'awlins, when I was a teenager, I was a real bad ass. Always gettin' into trouble. My mama worked two jobs to take care of me when my daddy walked away. I started out shoplifting things so Mama would have something nice to wear. I told her I saved my money and bought the stuff, but she found out I stole it. She told me to stop, but I wanted more for her and for me. Then I found out I could make money selling drugs, until one day a kid in my neighborhood turned up dead from an overdose of drugs I sold him."

Abby set her glass down on the table. "I'm sorry."

"Ain't nothin' for you to be sorry about. I caused it, and I have to live with that for the rest of my life."

Oh, the poor man. She couldn't imagine how Otis must feel, being responsible for the death of a child. She sucked in a ragged breath. But Otis's explanation still didn't answer her question. Why did Devlin allow Otis to live there? How and where did they meet?

What did it matter? She couldn't afford to let him or Otis get to her. Miranda was still missing, but she couldn't help but feel curious.

Abby swallowed a spoonful of gumbo. The flavor was exquisite, a mixture of spices and just a touch of fire. She looked at Otis and smiled. "This is delicious. Where'd you learn to cook like this?"

Otis grabbed another hunk of cornbread from the plate and rested it beside his bowl. "Baton Rouge."

"Did you work in a restaurant?"

"I learned from my mama. She was the best cook in our parish."

"How did you find your way here?"

Had Otis gone to jail for his share of the responsibility in the death of that boy? Was he in league with Devlin? Did they both have something to do with Miranda's disappearance?

"Stop grilling the poor man." Devlin's quiet but firm voice let her know he meant it.

Otis threw him an amused look and pushed back from the table. "I'll get dessert."

When dinner was over, Otis left the dining room, leaving Abby alone with Devlin. At the touch of Devlin's warm hand on her arm, she looked up at him. His eyes appeared a darker green, more compelling and unfathomable.

"Come. I'll take you to your room."

His deep, inviting command brought more heat to her face and tightened the ball of nerves in her stomach. She reached up and played nervously with a button on her blouse.

As they walked up the stairs, Devlin loomed beside her like a gorgeous giant. She inhaled his alluring, spicy scent in spite of herself.

I must stop this fascination I have with him. Miranda is still missing.

The attraction building between them posed a threat to her goal of finding Miranda. She'd always taken care of her sister, and she wasn't going to stop now.

Abby directed her attention to the painting of the woman holding the chimes and away from her sensuous thoughts. She looked up at him. "Who is the woman in this picture?"

Devlin kept his gaze pinned to the portrait. He seemed to drink in the image like a little boy seeing someone he cared about, after a long absence. "My mother."

"You must look like your father."

A muscle worked in his jaw. His eyes, now filled with anger, slid to hers. "I guess so." Control edged his voice as if he were holding back a dam of emotions. "Have you ever been married?"

"No." Not even close. She turned her attention back to the painting and away from her concerned thoughts about Devlin. She couldn't afford to consider his feelings too closely; her focus needed to stay on finding Miranda. "Why is she holding chimes?"

"A young woman made them by hand and sold them from the gift shop in the village."

Why did he continuously evade her questions? Abby looked at the portrait. "She looks so sad. Do you know why?" Abby closed her eyes for a moment and groaned inwardly at her rudeness.

Devlin drew his gaze away from the portrait and looked down at his feet. A frown furrowed his brow. "It doesn't matter now." His tight, clipped voice admonished her further.

"I'm sorry. That was really rude of me. I didn't mean to upset you."

He gave her a small smile. "Forget it." He enclosed her hand in his as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Devlin entwined their fingers and pressed their palms together. Heat raced up Abby's arm and across her chest. Her breasts felt heavy and warm, while sexual tension crackled between them. Just a couple of steps and she could be in his arms. What was she thinking?

She tried to pull her hand free. He held on with a firm but gentle pressure. Why was he holding her hand? Why the change in attitude? Was it his intention to seduce her? Her heart pounded in an erratic dance. The pulse shimmied through her veins. How could she be attracted to a man who might have been involved in her sister's disappearance?

Whatever his motives, she didn't trust his actions. But why not play along? She might uncover some of his secrets and find her sister in the process. Thankfully, they'd reached the top of the stairs. Hoping to go ahead alone to her room, Abby tried once again to remove her hand from Devlin's hold. He tugged lightly on her fingers and kept walking. "You seem anxious to be rid of me." His quiet tone warmed her, even as his thumb caressed the skin of her inner wrist.

She knew he felt her pulse jumping, but there was nothing she could do about it. "No, it's been a long day, that's all."

In a moment, they stood in front of her bedroom door. Slowly, he pulled her toward him until his aura surrounded her in a sensual ambience. He stroked the back of his hand over the hollow at the base of her throat, following the movement with his eyes.

Desire swept through her blood and pooled in her stomach. Desire that she shouldn't feel, considering the circumstances; longing that had nothing to do with reason and everything to do with the man standing in front of her. He lifted his gaze and locked eyes with her. Once again, she felt her senses spin out of control, and a soft, white cloud settled over her brain.

Gradually, he lowered his head, his eyes never leaving hers until his lashes swept down, covering his verdant gaze. He laid a warm kiss with just a hint of tongue at the base of her throat.

When he lifted his head, cool air brushed over the spot he had kissed, making her feel bereft. He watched her for a moment, his gaze resting on her mouth. "Sleep well, Abigail." His velvety words hung in the air as he turned and strode down the hallway.

She couldn't move, at least not until her fluttering heart slid down from her throat into her chest and the strength eased back into her wobbly legs. She heaved a calming breath, wiped her sweaty palms on her thighs, and watched Devlin until he disappeared around the corner.

Instinctively, she raised a hand to her throat and touched the spot that he'd caressed. When his lips had settled on her skin, she'd never wanted to be kissed, really kissed with plenty of lips and tongue, more in her life.

She rubbed her palm between her breasts and sighed. What was he up to? What kind of game was he playing? Should she play along?

She shook her head to clear her mind of the sensual fog Devlin had created, and glanced at her watch. The night was just beginning, and she had work to do.

Hours later, Abby paused in the murky darkness of Devlin's office and shone her flashlight around the room.

His desk, a slab of granite on a large maple pedestal, sat in front of two wide windows flanked on either side by bookcases. A dark brown leather sofa occupied space in front of a white marble fireplace.

Somewhere, a clock chimed the hour. The sound echoed eerily in the silence of midnight. She had decided to start her search in Devlin's office and go from there, even though she wasn't much of a detective. Perhaps there were phone records or guest receipts that might give her a clue as to Miranda's whereabouts.

Miranda had an abundance of wanderlust, so it wasn't unusual for her to go running off at a moment's notice. But even during her adventures, she always managed to keep in touch.

Abby swept the flashlight's beam over the top of the large desk. No drawers in which to hide things. Papers were stacked neatly over the surface, and a fax machine sat on one corner.

Creak. Bump.

A spurt of panic kicked her heartbeat into a rapid tattoo. The breath seized in her lungs. She halted in her tracks, switched off her flashlight, and listened.

Please, God, don't let Devlin catch me snooping.

Rain and wind beat against the windows and the castle walls. Lightning flashed. She whipped her head toward the nearest window and saw a man's dark silhouette through the glass. A scream slid from her gut into her throat, and she covered her mouth with her hand to stifle the sound. Lightning flickered and popped again, but through the window, only rain met her vision.

Abby inhaled and exhaled several calming breaths. After a moment, her heartbeat settled and her pulse slowed to a more normal rhythm. Devlin was right -- being here in this castle affected her imagination. Who would be outside in such a storm? No one in their right mind, that's for sure. There were some trees growing close to the window. She must have seen their shadow, that's all.

She clicked on her flashlight once more and rifled through the papers on the desk. She found nothing to reveal the slightest detail about her sister, only a lot of correspondence between Devlin and a company called Morgan Research and Development.

Was the company a family business, or did Devlin own it outright? What was the real reason he gave Otis a home? They'd grown up in separate parts of the country, with completely different backgrounds. He could hire anyone to cook for him and help with the upkeep of the castle. Why Otis in particular? The man was indeed an enigma.

A picture of Devlin sat on the corner of his desk. He stood next to a man a little younger than he. They appeared to be standing on a butte of some sort.

She shifted the flashlight's beam to the wall on her left. Climbing equipment hung from hooks, along with a series of pictures of Devlin and this other man scaling the side of a rock face. Devlin smiled at her from the picture. He appeared so different with a grin on his face, as though he and his companion had just shared a joke. She tried to imagine Devlin telling a joke and couldn't.

The shadows she'd seen in his eyes were gone. He actually looked ... happy and much more approachable. Her heart turned over in response to seeing a different side of him. Instinctively, she reached out and smoothed her fingertips over his face. *What are you hiding?*

Outside, the wind moaned. Abby shivered against the chill in the air, despite her cotton sweats and matching pullover. She drew her attention away from the picture, turned from the desk, and scanned the spines of books on the shelves of a large oak bookcase.

They were shelved in alphabetical order. Abby smiled. She was a teacher who kept her classroom neat, but even she didn't shelve books alphabetically. Most of the titles consisted of thick, weighty tomes on chemistry, drug development, and drug interactions. On one of the lower shelves, she saw a large black book and pulled it from the shelf. It appeared to be a scrapbook of some sort. She sat down at Devlin's desk, directed her flashlight onto the book, and opened to the first page. A newspaper clipping from the *Wolf Island Gazette* glared back at her in the bright shaft of light.

"Local Girl Attacked." The date on the paper read *January 1993*, a little over twelve years ago.

Intrigued, Abby read on.

Wolf Island village suffered a severe shock when the body of local shopkeeper Alice Howard, 23, was found by a local man Friday night on the side of the road leading to Morgan's Keep. Authorities say it appears she was abducted while walking to the castle. Howard's death reflects similarities to another rape/murder committed on the island many years ago. The Maine State Police are currently investigating, but have made no arrests. In a strange twist, the attack was predicted by Catherine Good Townsend, the victim's aunt and a direct descendant of Sarah Good, one of the accused and convicted witches in the Salem witch trials of 1692.

Trepidation danced through her veins. She recalled Miranda's words once more. *I believe he's connected somehow to the murder of Alice Howard.* Her breath shuddered through her lungs. She'd heard about murderers keeping trophies to remind them of their victims ... She flicked her gaze to the photograph on the wall and illuminated Devlin's smiling face with her flashlight.

Was he involved with Alice Howard's murder? Abby shook her head. She didn't want to let herself believe it. If she did, she would run from this castle as fast and hard as she could ... and Miranda was still missing. She had to find her.

She pushed her suspicions to the back of her mind and focused on the article. Alice Howard had been employed in a shop called The Chiming Lady, owned by Emily Good Howard, the victim's mother. Alice had been strangled with a set of chimes tied around her neck.

There was a picture of the young woman in question. She was beautiful and, according to the paper, Abby's age when she died. How horrible. Gently, Abby touched the photo. What a tragedy to lose someone so young. Ms. Townsend's prediction and Alice's murder had to be a coincidence. She certainly didn't believe in psychic predictions.

Thunder rumbled, and rain pounded harder against the windowpanes. She moved her chair in front of Devlin's computer.

I shouldn't be doing this.

She drilled the importance of telling the truth and always being honest into her students. But what choice did she have? Another creak sounded from the hallway. She

glanced toward the door, but heard nothing more. She exhaled and then touched the mouse. The main menu appeared. As luck would have it, he had not shut down his computer, making it easy for her to access some of his files.

This is wrong. I should find another way. But how?

She shoved her guilt to the pit of her stomach and decided to begin her search with Devlin's personal files. She scanned the list of names in his address book first and found a listing for Jeremiah Dawson Tate. She thought about the new man in Miranda's life -- his initials were J.D. Were they one and the same? Making a mental note to try and get in touch with him tomorrow, she printed a copy of his address and phone number.

Next she checked his calendar, starting with January, and saw monthly listings of guests who were planning to stay at the castle. She found Miranda's name and her length of stay listed under the month of July. According to the original dates, she was supposed to stay a whole week. But Devlin had said he only allowed visitors for one weekend a month -- three days. Why would he agree to let Miranda stay for a week?

She noticed he'd given Miranda a sizeable cut in the normal fee. Why? Abby closed the address book program and clicked on his Internet service provider logo. He had stored his password. She brought up his e-mail and scanned the first few messages before one caught her eye. Subject header: J. No return address. She clicked and began to read.

Devlin pumped his legs and arms faster, harder. His muscles protested the extra effort, but he only grimaced against the pain and kept running on the treadmill. He gloried in the rush of heat through his veins. The breath heaved from his lungs and stung the back of his throat. He drove himself harder. Then harder still.

The shame that incessantly gnawed away at him lessened, and his uneasy spirit settled. At least for now.

He'd survived one more day.

After his workout, he wiped his face with the towel slung casually around his neck and headed toward the downstairs to his office to catch up on some work. He'd reached the bottom of the stairs and turned toward his office when he noticed that the door stood ajar. A blue light flickered through the door's opening. Otis never went in there alone, and if he ever did, he would certainly turn on a light.

A jolt of adrenaline kicked his heart into his throat. He was in the castle! Finally, a chance to stop him.

Devlin padded softly down the hallway, not wanting to alert the person of his approach. Upon reaching the office entrance, he slowly pushed the door open. Abby's head popped up over the top of his computer monitor.

"You little spy! What the hell are you doing?" Devlin ground out the words, not bothering to suppress his anger.

The bright blue light from the computer illuminated the startled expression on her heart-shaped face. Devlin sucked in a deep breath and felt his galloping pulse settle. Relief swamped him at not finding the intruder he expected in the castle, but at the same time, fury at discovering Abby in his office made him see red.

She reached for the mouse and clicked as he flipped the light switch. The sudden glow from the brass desk lamp filled the study with soft, ambient light. He walked to his desk and flicked his gaze to the computer screen, which displayed the main menu, then back to her face. "I asked you a question."

Nervously, she played with the drawstring on her pullover and stood up. "I had some trouble connecting to the Internet from my room, so I thought I'd give your computer a try." She carefully averted her gaze. "I just wanted to check my e-mail. I signed in as a guest, and I'll pay you for the time I spent online."

She tried to step around him, but he simply shifted to the side, blocking her. Her gaze shot to his, and her pretty, violet eyes widened slightly. "If you'll excuse me, I'd like to go to the kitchen and make some tea."

"In a minute." Her enticing scent wafted past his nose. She smelled like something impossibly warm and soft. It soothed him somehow, a comforting deep inside, deep down where his demons hid, ready to pounce on him in a quiet moment. They shrank into the darkness, and something eased inside him.

How was that possible? No woman had ever touched him that way -- in his soul.

He turned and looked at the correspondence he'd left on his desk. Damn it, she'd been rifling through it. All of his business papers, including bills and reservation invoices, were always kept in pristine order.

Now they lay in a disordered pile. Some of them had even fallen on the floor. One of her sneaker-clad feet crunched an invoice beneath its heel. The ease that had soothed him a moment before morphed back into anger at seeing his personal papers treated in such a cavalier way.

With irritation driving him, he leaned over, grabbed her ankle, and lifted her foot from the paper.

"Oh, I'm -- I'm sorry."

Devlin rose and laid the paper on the desktop. "Save your apology."

His gaze swung to a single sheet of paper in the printer's tray. Abby followed his line of sight. Her light pink tongue slicked over her top lip, thinner than her full bottom one. His gut tightened with desire. Obviously too much time had passed without him being with a woman.

She made a grab for the paper, but he managed to snatch it from her fingers. He glanced at the sheet. "You want to explain this? I thought you were checking e-mail." He attempted to control his annoyance, but failed.

She tilted her chin, an action that was becoming all too familiar to him. "I was -- I mean, I did -- but I saw a file marked *Wolf Island Guest Brochure* and thought it might give me a head start on putting together some of the information for the website."

She lifted a hand and brushed the brown pixie bangs out of her eyes. Reddish gold streaked her straight, shoulder-length hair. "I saw the address book and thought I might work up a group e-mail to send to some of the guests who have been here before and had an e-mail address -- to inform them that the new website would be up and running soon." She finished her explanation on a breathless note.

"No website. You won't have time. The first ferry leaves at nine. You'll be on it."

She continued to rub the drawstring between her thumb and forefinger, her gaze pinned to his. How would those feminine fingers feel caressing his skin? Sure and confident, or shy and tentative? Through the opening in her pullover, he saw the edge of a white tank top and admired the hint of shadow between her breasts -- breasts that would fit perfectly in his hands.

"Maybe we could make a deal." She brought his attention back to her face and away from his libidinous thoughts.

"What kind of deal?" He tried to tamp down the attraction he felt for her, but didn't have much success.

"Two days. Just give me two days." She had confidence; he'd give her that. "I'll go into the village, talk to as many locals as I can, and get their opinion on building a website. If the majority of them agree it's a good idea and want to go ahead with it, then you give me a few extra days to take pictures, interview people, and start working on the site. Once the site is built, I can do the maintenance, add any updates, and make changes for free."

"You seem to know what you're doing."

She smiled, and excitement lit her eyes. "You agree, then?"

Danger snapped at his heels. If she stayed, she'd be in danger, too. And he would have put her there. "No, you leave first thing in the morning." He deliberately sharpened his tone in order to make his intentions clear. "Staying a few extra days is out of the question."

"But --"

"No buts." He wadded up the piece of paper with J.D.'s name and address on it and tossed it into the trashcan beside his desk. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have work to do."

Chapter Four

Devlin watched Abby from the darkened stairs to make sure she went back to her room. He didn't like having found her snooping around the castle. *He* had never come inside the castle, but there was always a first time.

Things had been too quiet the last few days, like waiting for the other shoe to drop. No, it wasn't safe. He couldn't let her stay. The click of her bedroom door sounded down the hallway, and he breathed a sigh of relief. The indignation that had dogged him since he'd found her accessing his computer eased a little now that she was safe inside her room and away from his office. But desire still hummed through his blood.

Why couldn't he make these feelings go away? Even as his mind formed the question, he already knew the answer. Thoroughly loving this woman might ease the guilty shame he carried like a hot stone in his heart. He wanted her, but he held himself back. He had to.

The only reason he had come on to her in the first place was to scare her off. He'd figured a British schoolteacher like her would go running back to England if he so much as touched her. Only, his plan to pretend to seduce her had backfired.

What was it about Abby in particular? Why should such a prissy, English woman tie him up in knots? He knew in an instant. He liked her prim manner, the way she held her head and folded her hands in front of her, the set of her mouth when he irritated her.

He admired her quick, intuitive mind. Even though he hadn't liked finding her in his private office, he respected her for going to such lengths to locate Miranda. She made him feel proud of her, for some odd reason. Could she ever feel proud of him? He shook his head. Not a chance. If she knew the truth about his past, she would turn away in disgust.

Lightning flickered through the downstairs windows, briefly illuminating the paintings hanging on the stairs. Devlin couldn't help but look up at the portrait of his mother. He

drank in the sight of her even as he relived the hurt and pain of her rejection. He longed for just one smile from her lips, one gentle touch of her hands.

He wanted that more than he wanted to live, but knew he would go on wanting it for the rest of his life. Even though she lived in Boston, he could never go and see her. She hated him. Nothing he could ever do would change that.

After his birth, she'd thrust him into the waiting arms of his paternal grandparents to raise, unable to bear the sight of him even then.

His own mother loathed him, but he couldn't bring himself to take down her portrait. He needed to see her face, to know that a part of her still lived in him and cast a ray of goodness on the ugliness he held inside.

Devlin skimmed his gaze over her delicate features, the soft, gray of her eyes, the gentle curve of her mouth. Her legs were slim and tucked to the side as she sat on a white velvet chair.

He thought about that chair and knew it occupied a corner of Abby's room. He wanted to see Abby sit in that chair and look at him with gentleness in her eyes.

The last time Devlin had seen his mother, he was barely seven. He'd taken a trip to Boston with his grandmother. He'd begged her to take him by his mother's house. She'd been standing in the garden, clipping roses, when her gaze lifted and she saw him. He would never forget the revulsion he'd seen on her face.

He closed his eyes and let himself remember. His grandmother had put her arm around his shoulders and squeezed. He could still hear the gentle sound of her whispered words: "Don't ever forget that I love you."

Devlin shook away the bittersweet memory and headed back to his office. He walked to his desk. Little castles floated across the screen of the computer that hummed quietly on the desktop. On one corner of the granite top, the fax machine tray brimmed with messages he'd received late in the evening.

He picked up the stack and settled into the chair behind his desk. The first fax was from Dr. Robin Hale, the head scientist in charge of research for Morgan Research and Development.

As he read, a grin spread over his face. The scientists had made a breakthrough in their efforts to find a new drug to help treat the devastating effects of schizophrenia. A tiny chip of the guilt he continuously nursed dissolved.

Researching drugs to heal people, lessening their pain and giving them a better life, helped him draw closer to justifying his existence.

A couple of hours later, he rose from his chair to light the fire in the hearth and realized he was out of wood. Leaving his office, he walked through the kitchen and out the side door to the woodpile.

A strong wind whipped the rain around him, quickly soaking through his clothes. He turned back toward the door and stumbled to a halt. His fingers dug painfully into the coarse wood.

Damn it, not again.

A small bundle lay to one side of the kitchen door, half hidden in the shadows. Still as death. Devlin's heart raced, and his breath lodged in his throat. He set down the firewood and approached the bundle while dread built with each step.

Newspaper.

Bending down on one knee, Dev touched the bundle. Warmth seeped into his fingers. He pulled back the top fold of paper and shuddered. Inside were the remains of a dead gull. A set of chimes was tied about its small neck.

Devlin glanced around the grounds for any movement, but the darkness and steadily increasing rain revealed nothing. He did notice some muddy footprints near the kitchen entrance.

Footprints. Larger than his own.

The rain fell harder now, the drops soaking the gull's white feathers. Devlin squeezed his eyes shut and grimaced. He opened his eyes and thought about the little orange kitten he'd left napping in front of his bedroom fireplace. If the bastard ever harmed that tiny animal, he'd -- Quickly, he covered up the carcass with the newspaper and left the wood and the remains of the gull lying on the stoop as he went back inside.

Moments later, he lifted the receiver of the phone on his desk and dialed. The tired, sleepy voice of the sheriff crackled over the line. "Sheriff Dutton."

Devlin explained what he had found. This was the second gruesome calling card he'd discovered on the castle grounds since --

"Dev." Jake interrupted his thoughts. "I got a call this evening from the Maine State Police. Remember I told you that when he escaped from the institution, he beat that guard nearly to death? Well, the guard died today."

The news of the guard's death settled on Devlin's soul like a black pall. He raked a hand through his hair, leaned back in his chair, and huffed out a breath. "How many more people have to die before this nightmare ends?" Weariness nearly overwhelmed him.

"None. We'll catch him." Jake's voice radiated confidence.

Devlin slammed his palm down onto the surface of his desk. "How?" He rose from his chair, and paced to the windows, gripping the cordless phone in his hand. He stared through the glass into the darkness. With each flash of lightning, the silvery drops of rain glowed on the grass. Wind ruffled the leaves of a birch tree growing next to the nearest window.

He finally fixed his gaze on his reflection in the windowpane. Every time he looked into a mirror, he saw his father's face, and it was abhorrent to him. Devlin closed his eyes.

He balled one hand into a fist at his side and squeezed. Hard. "How do you stop a mad man?" Even though he knew his past would once again be the focus of everyone on the island, there was nothing else for it. What choice did he have? He was certain the monster was back on Wolf Island, and the citizens had to know. Their lives depended on it. "Call an emergency town meeting first thing in the morning so we can warn everyone."

"And tell them what?" Jake's calm, clear voice grated on his nerves. "That you found a dead seagull and you think you know who did it? I don't think he'll show up nice and convenient to turn himself in."

"He's been caught before." Devlin had to make him understand. "And he was put away. We can put him away again."

"Ayah, but he wants to finish what he started."

"And the people who live on this island have the right to know that their lives are in danger!" Devlin shouted into the phone. "Why the hell didn't we say something before?"

"Because we have to be smart this time, or he'll slip through our fingers. Besides, what about all the tourists who have been pouring in here this summer, throwing money around?" Jake emphasized his words. "How do you think everybody is going to react when you chase off all the sightseers just because you found a dead gull and you think he's back? This is the biggest year this island has ever had."

Ice surrounded Devlin's heart. "He's here, and he has to be stopped!"

"We'll catch him, Devlin." Jake's placating tone irritated him. "But we need to tread carefully. If we make an announcement, the tourists will leave and he'll disappear ... until the urge to kill has him crawling out of his dark hole."

"Jake, what you're saying makes sense, but the bastard's playing with us. He left a dead gull this time. He'll wait until he's ready to push us over the edge ... then he'll leave a body."

Jake huffed on the other end of the phone line. "No, I have a plan. I called in a couple of favors on the mainland, and the local authorities are sending a policewoman to the island first thing."

"How will one officer help us?"

"I'll explain everything when she gets here. How are things going with Ms. Chapel?"

"Fine. She's leaving in the morning, if the weather lets up."

Jake chuckled dryly. "How did you convince her to do that? She seemed very determined to find her sister."

Devlin pressed his mouth into a firm line. "Yeah, but I'm even more determined to get her off this island."

"Be careful, Dev. This wacko's delusions made him see Miranda as his former wife and J.D. as the man she ran away with. His eye is obviously on you now, and maybe Ms. Chapel, too."

A shudder crawled over Devlin's skin. If something happened to another innocent woman like Abby, he couldn't bear it. "I've got to get her off this island."

* * * * *

As the kitten snoozed contentedly on his bed, Devlin smiled and rubbed the back of his hand over the animal's soft belly. The kitten opened his eyes, looked at Dev, and went right back to sleep.

Devlin rose from the bed and paced to the French doors leading out onto the balcony off his bedroom. The sounds of the storm brewing outside seemed to close the walls in around him.

He needed somebody to talk to in order to soothe his uneasiness.

Otis went to bed early because he rose at the crack of dawn, and Devlin didn't want to wake him.

That left Abby.

But he needed to stay away from her. She churned him up too much inside, made him start dreaming again. Dreaming about having a woman to love him and a child to wrap his or her arms around his neck and say, "I love you, Daddy." Dreams that could never come true. Maybe if he went back to his office, he could get some more work done and shake off this mood.

When he neared Abby's room, he noticed her light beaming from beneath the door and heard the sound of her footsteps moving over the wood floor. He stopped in front of her door, raised his hand to knock, then lowered it again. He clenched his fingers into a tight fist.

I can't.

He raised his hand again and held it a half-inch from the door. Damn it, he knew he shouldn't, but he didn't want to face the rest of the night alone. Always alone.

Devlin inhaled a deep breath and tapped on the door. The footsteps ceased. "Abby?"

He heard her walk to the door. She pulled it open a crack and looked out at him. Her eyes appeared tired, her mouth soft. A long pink nightgown hung loosely about her body. His fingers itched to touch her. "Yes?" Her gentle voice made him want to hold her.

He felt like a fool. "I saw your light. Everything okay?"

She rubbed a hand over her hair. When she raised her arm, the gown stretched over her breasts, revealing the outline of her nipples to his gaze. The breath caught in his lungs. "I'm fine." She sighed. "The storm has me a bit restless."

Abby nervously fingered a button on the front of her nightgown. Briefly, she lowered her gaze to the floor, then back up again to his face. "I'm really sorry about being in your office. I'm just so worried about Miranda. I felt I had to --"

Lightning flashed at the window, followed by the crash of thunder. "It's all right. I understand." His heartbeat pounded in his ears. *Go ahead and ask.* "Want some company?"

She raked her upper teeth over her lower lip, then soothed it with her tongue. Heat bloomed in his belly. "Okay."

Abby opened the door for him to enter. As he stepped through, her feminine scent enveloped him, and he inhaled deeply. Almost instantly, the restlessness inside him eased. To keep from reaching for her, he moved to the hearth and held his hands out in front of the crackling fire.

He listened to her footsteps padding over the floor and turned to look at her. She gave him a little smile and sat in the small white slipper chair. The same one his mother sat on in the portrait. Dreams, wants, and desires he usually kept under lock and key spread outward from his heart, threatening to choke him. He wanted to say something, but the words stuck in his throat. To hide his feelings, he returned his gaze to the fire.

"Is something wrong?"

Yes, damn it. Everything. "Yes -- no --" His voice broke with pent-up emotion, and he cursed inwardly. He heard her rise from the chair and walk toward him.

She can't come over here. She can't.

When she laid her hand on his back, he tried to concentrate on the fire eating greedily at the logs, instead of her warmth melting into his skin. He couldn't look at her. If he did, he would give in and touch her, hold her, kiss her. None of those things could happen. They just couldn't.

"What is it? Talk to me." Her voice coaxed, urging him to respond.

Kindness always smoothed the rough edges of his soul, bringing his needs and yearnings bubbling up to the surface, making him feel helpless. With everything inside him screaming for him not to, he turned and gazed into her violet eyes. Outside, the storm raged, yet before him stood the calm center.

Devlin lifted his hand and touched her cheek. Questions and concern shone in her beautiful eyes. "I wish I could tell you everything, but it's too dangerous." He heard the unspoken plea for her understanding and trust in his voice. But how could he ask her to trust him when he couldn't tell her the truth?

"What do you mean?"

He couldn't tell her that Miranda was safe with his brother, J.D., because she would beat a path to her sister's side for sure, and the evil on this island, a monster with a twisted mind, might follow her. He must keep Miranda and J.D.'s whereabouts a secret. Their lives depended on it. "I can't answer your questions now, but I will soon. Your sister is alive and safe. I promise."

Lightning flashed, followed quickly by a sharp popping sound. The lights in Abby's room flickered once, then blinked out. She glanced toward the window, but Devlin caressed

her soft cheek with his fingers and brought her gaze back to his. Firelight shimmered over her face, illuminating her eyes and hair. She had never looked more beautiful.

“Don’t be afraid. I would never hurt you.” He murmured the words with tenderness, hoping she would believe him. Without thought to the consequences, he lowered his head ever so slowly and kissed her. Soft, sweet lips met his. Craving a deeper taste, he slicked the tip of his tongue over the seam between her lips, asking her to open for him. She parted her lips and he slipped inside.

He lifted Abby into his arms and sat in one of the wing chairs, settling her in his lap. With a soft caress, he explored the warm, silky skin of her neck and teased the tops of her breasts with feather-light brushes of his fingers.

As he sat wrapped in the aura of her warmth and the enticing scent of her skin, the blood careened through his veins while his pulse tumbled. Liquid heat, heavy with desire, slid between his legs, making his groin ache.

As though sampling some juicy, ripe fruit, he nibbled on the sides of her neck and the soft, sensitive patch of skin beneath her ear. When she tilted her head, giving him better access, he skimmed his lips to the smooth hollow of her throat.

He had to touch her. Really touch her. He lightly grazed his hand up her thigh, pushing her nightgown out of his way. She stiffened slightly when his fingers brushed over her panties. Abby reached for his hand and tried to stop its rapid ascent toward her breast, but the drugging scent of her skin pushed him further into the sensual fog.

Devlin lifted his head and stared into her passion-filled eyes. “Let me touch you, Abby.”

The breath shuddered from his lungs. He knew she could probably see the raw need in his eyes, but he didn’t care. If she asked him to take his hands away, he would, even if her request made his heart stop beating. Fear and excitement raced through him -- fear that he might lose control, and excitement that he could go on touching her forever.

“Please.”

Slowly, she relaxed her body. With his eyes on hers, he slid his hand up to the underside of one breast, moved her nightgown to the side, and exposed her breast to his eyes. His arousal pressed against her nearly bare fanny with exquisite pain. He wanted to take her. Now.

She shivered against the cool air, but he chased it away with the stroke of his rough palm over her softer skin. His thumb rubbed insistently over her nipple. Her eyes glazed, and the uneven rhythm of her breath answered his.

The bedroom door squeaked open.

Devlin’s hand stilled on the soft mound of Abby’s breast as he swiveled his head toward the door. A cool draft of air brushed over his body. He heard a metallic sound like a tiny bell

and the audible breath of someone sighing. Abby pulled her nightgown down over her body and slid from his lap. "What was that?"

Devlin turned to Abby and smiled. "The castle is old. Those kinds of noises aren't unusual." He tried to sound unconcerned. But they *were* damned unusual. He'd never heard anything like it.

The wind howled outside the castle walls. Abby's robe rustled softly as she put it on. Something tapped on the floor in the hallway, like a pebble bouncing over the wood. The sound of tinkling chimes drifted into the room, causing the hair on the back of Devlin's neck to stand on end.

Could the sound be the Chiming Lady? Ridiculous. He was the one who had hyped the idea about the island being haunted in the first place. No one had ever played a trick on him. What would be the point? The villagers were behind him all the way.

A scrape and the distinct echo of footsteps.

That was certainly no ghost. Devlin strode to one of the night tables in Abby's room and jerked open the bottom drawer. He withdrew a flashlight stored there for guests in case of an emergency. "Wait here." He clicked the flashlight on and hurried out into the hall. He swept the beam to the right and then to the left, but saw nothing unusual.

Abby walked quickly after him. "I'm coming with you."

Devlin halted in his tracks and glared at her. "No. It isn't safe. Someone could be in the castle. Go back in your room, lock the door, and don't open it until I get back. Understood?"

Abby crossed her arms over her chest and lifted her chin in determination. "I'm not going to just sit here and do nothing."

Devlin laid a hand on her shoulder and felt the fragile bones shift beneath his fingers. A man's strong, unyielding grip could snap those bones like parched twigs. A shiver of terror stabbed his heart. He would die before he allowed anyone to harm her. With a gentle nudge against her shoulder, he pushed her back over the threshold. "You're going to do exactly that. Lock the door when I leave."

He shut the door in her face.

When Devlin reached the end of the hall, he stopped and looked around the corner. He saw nothing but darkness and the occasional flash of lightning blinking in through the hall windows. The sound of tinkling chimes faded into the distance along with a woman's sigh. His heart raced, and a cold sweat broke out on his skin.

He walked swiftly down the hallway until he came to the open door of the library. Out of habit, he reached up and flipped the light switch on the wall by the door, but everything remained washed in darkness. Lightning flared, illuminating the library for only a few seconds, but it was enough time for him to see the gruesome scene waiting for him.

Tension bunched the muscles in his neck and shoulders while nausea swam through his stomach. Slowly, he walked over to examine the macabre package before him.

He knelt down in front of the bookcases and shone the beam of his flashlight on a rabbit's mutilated body. A set of chimes was wrapped around its small neck as it lay on the floor in a small puddle of blood. The chimes were made entirely of burnished copper and were identical to those sold in the village. Thin strands of copper dangled from a star-shaped piece of metal. Tiny crystals of different shapes and colors clung to the metal.

He moved the beam of the flashlight over the trail of blood. It led to the bottom edge of one of the bookcases. Hard, cold panic welled in Devlin's chest and pushed into his throat. *Damn it! He's been inside the castle.*

He pushed to his feet and ran toward the door of the library, the flashlight gripped firmly in his hand.

Abby! I have to get to Abby!

Chapter Five

By the time Devlin reached Abby's room, fear and dread had him breathless. He pounded on the door. "Abby! Abby! Open the door!"

He heard the patter of footsteps, followed by the click of the door's lock. Abby opened the door a crack. He raised the flashlight and shone the beam of light into her face. She stared back at him with anxious eyes. Her skin appeared wan and pale, her mouth creased with fear.

Gently, he moved her back and opened the door wider, then stepped inside and closed the door behind him. "Are you okay?"

She nodded briskly. "I'm fine."

He breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank God. Have a seat." He motioned to a chair in front of the hearth. With the power still out, the fire's glow cast moving shadows about the room.

Abby pulled the edges of her white chenille robe together and sat in one of the chairs. She raised a shaky hand to her brow and pushed the bangs from her worry-filled eyes. "It feels like you've been gone for hours. What happened?"

He knew that when he told her about the dead rabbit, it would frighten her even more, but she had to know. Quickly, he related what he had found in the library.

"Who would do such a thing?" Despite her deceptively calm voice, her nervous fingers twisted one end of the belt on her robe. "Aren't you going to call the sheriff?"

Devlin slid into a chair opposite her. "I will, first thing in the morning. There's no sense getting Jake out of a warm bed on a night like this for a mutilated animal." He rested his head against the back of his chair and watched her. Would she go running back to England once the reality of what he'd found set in?

Abby frowned. "Has this ever happened before?"

Devlin nodded. "A few days before you got here. Then, earlier this evening, I found a mutilated gull outside by the kitchen door." Devlin leaned forward and rested his forearms on his thighs. "Because of these incidents, I need you to leave."

She bit her lower lip. "Are you saying I might be in some kind of danger?"

Not if he could help it. "I'm saying you need to be careful."

"Careful how?"

He stood up from his chair and walked over to one of the windows. He saw nothing beyond the pane of glass but a world washed in darkness and rain. Devlin knew Victor was out there waiting, watching for the right moment to strike again. Would he leave another animal, or something worse? Devlin turned and looked at Abby, who stared at him, waiting for his answer. He didn't want to frighten her further, but he needed her understanding and cooperation. "I want you to stay close to me over the next few hours. Just in case."

Abby tipped her face up to him. "In case of what?"

"In case -- in case you need me." Devlin heard the sound of desperation in his statement and hated himself for it. Wasn't that what he really wanted, for her to need him? No woman ever had. Why should she?

Abby's gaze softened; the firelight sparkled in her eyes, caressed her face. "How close? Are you saying I'm not safe in this room, or even inside the castle?"

Her controlled but weary tone made him want to wrap her in his arms once again. Safety was an illusion on Wolf Island. One day soon, he hoped that everyone living here would be safe. Forever. "You're safe as long as you're with me." He hoped his statement held depth and authority, even though he didn't feel very authoritative at the moment. He'd spent as much time as possible with her since her arrival at Morgan's Keep. He knew his presence wouldn't stop that monster from breaching the castle walls, but at least if Victor confronted them, she would have a better chance of surviving if he were by her side.

She studied her hands briefly before lifting her gaze. "I can't be with you constantly over the next several hours unless we --"

Her mouth fell open, and she stared at him with disbelief blanketing her face.

Devlin couldn't help but smile at her reaction. However, he felt relief as well. Thankfully, the shock over the news of finding the rabbit had begun to wear off. "Don't worry; I'm not suggesting you stay in my bedroom, but in a guest room adjacent to mine. Why don't you pack your things, and I'll move them in there."

She closed her mouth and pursed her lips. He could almost see the gears spinning in her clever brain. "I'd rather stay in this room." Abby gestured toward the nightstand. "There's a telephone, which I won't hesitate to use if I hear any more strange noises."

"I won't take no for an answer on this, Abby."

She paused and tapped the tip of her index finger against her lower lip. "In the morning, I'll make a couple of calls and see if a room has come available in town. I think I

remember seeing a B&B very close to the sheriff's office. I'll be perfectly safe, and it will put me closer to the locals so I can ask questions about Miranda."

"Forget it!" He wasn't letting her out of his sight. There was no telling what kind of trouble she might get into out there on her own. If that monster knew she had moved into town, he might -- No, Devlin couldn't bear the thought of something happening to Abby and him not being there to stop it.

Abby inclined her head. "That sounds suspiciously like an order, and it's not very attractive."

He stepped close to her chair, leaned over, and rested a hand on the arm. With one finger, he brushed a strand of hair from her eyes and then trailed the tip over her cheek. "That sure wasn't the case earlier."

Her skin flushed, and she licked her lips nervously. He lowered his gaze to her mouth and contemplated kissing her. "You caught me by surprise." God, he loved her prim tone. "I was uneasy because of the storm. I'm not sure what my reactions might have been had it been a clear night. Thank you for not trying to force things further."

Frustration at Abby thinking he would ever do such a thing repulsed him down to the marrow in his bones. He yanked his hands away, stood straight, and squared his shoulders. "I've never forced my attentions on a woman." His words grated through clenched teeth. "I don't have a problem with the word 'no.'"

Her face brightened with surprise at his reaction. "I didn't mean it like that. I just --"

Devlin held up a hand, stopping her words. "Forget it." He raised a brow and looked at her. "Would you like some help packing?"

* * * * *

Devlin rubbed a weary hand over his face and glanced at the clock. A quarter 'til two. He needed to get some sleep, but after finding the rabbit ... He'd known as soon as he'd seen it, that bastard put it there. He'd walked right into the castle within a few feet of Abby!

Devlin raked a hand through his hair and closed his eyes. How could he sleep now? What if Victor came back? Devlin's room was next door to Abby's, but still ... Maybe he should leave the doors open so he could hear her plea for help in case she called him. The walls inside the castle were thick, after all. The thought of that monster so much as touching one hair on her head sent fear ripping through his body.

The bastard was getting into the castle somehow. After finding the gull, Devlin had checked all the doors and windows, and all had been locked. There were secret passages throughout the castle, but none led outside. He'd grown up playing in those passages and knew them by heart.

Devlin swung his legs over the side of the bed and reached for his jeans. If he was going to have any hope at all of getting to sleep, he needed to check on Abby and make sure she was all right. Guilt settled in the pit of his stomach over what he was about to do.

He zipped his jeans, put on a pair of sneakers, and grabbed a flashlight. Once dressed, he reached behind the high, carved headboard on his bed and pressed a button fixed to the wall. A door beside the bed swung open, revealing a dark passage. He shone the flashlight into the passageway and grimaced when he saw a large black spider skitter away from the light. Cobwebs hung in tatters from the ceiling and walls. The air smelled musty, and dust motes danced in the flashlight's beam. He hadn't been through the passage since he was a little boy playing hide-and-seek.

He stepped into the darkness with only the flashlight to guide him. In a few moments he came to the end of the passageway, stopped, and listened. The quiet murmur of the storm outside filled the air. Devlin directed the light near the top left side of the door. As quietly as possible, he reached up and lifted a latch. The door swung open.

He waited a bit, then stepped into Abby's room. He shouldn't be doing this, but he had to make sure she was all right. Lightning glimmered, filling the room briefly with light. Abby lay in bed on her stomach, her arms hugging a pillow. He couldn't see her face clearly because she had it shoved into the pillow. She'd kicked off the covers, and her gown bunched around her waist. The sight of her sweet fanny and toned thighs made his groin tighten.

He remembered how it had felt to touch her, hold her, kiss her. With vivid clarity he recalled the feel of her ripe breast in his hand. What was the matter with him? She lay there innocently asleep while he watched her like a voyeur, but seeing her unharmed soothed his worry.

First thing in the morning, he would put her on the ferry and send her back to England, away from the danger stalking this island ... and away from him. Devlin slipped back into the dark passage and closed the door.

Abby awakened with a start. The storm still raged outside her window, but she felt certain the wind and rain had not disturbed her sleep. She switched on the bedside lamp.

Scrape. Creak.

Her gaze darted about the room into every shadowed corner, trying desperately to find the source of the noise. Everything seemed to be in order, but she couldn't shake the feeling that someone had been there, watching her.

A chill raced over her skin at the thought. Instinctively, she pulled her nightgown down over her legs. She listened to the rain for a moment and smiled at her fanciful thoughts. After hearing about the rabbit, her imagination had undoubtedly worked overtime. Snuggling beneath the covers, she decided to leave the light burning.

Just in case.

* * * * *

Devlin stepped out of the shower just as his cell phone rang. He grabbed a towel, wrapped it around his waist, and walked into his bedroom. Snatching the phone from the bedside table, he pushed the answer button. "Hello."

"Hey."

Devlin heard the familiar voice of his brother crackling over the phone line. "It's about damn time you called." He'd been worried and couldn't keep the edge of irritation out of his voice. "How are you feeling?"

"Not bad ... considering my shoulder hurts like a bitch and the nurses won't give me a moment's peace."

Devlin smiled as relief washed over him. If his brother could gripe about having to stay put for more than one day, he was well on the way to recovery. "Quit whining. You're safe. That's the only thing that matters."

"You matter, too, brother."

Devlin rubbed a towel over his dripping hair while the warmth of his brother's words settled like a balm on his soul. "Have you told ... her?" He couldn't bring himself to say the word *mother*.

"No. She and dad are in Europe."

Dev and J.D. hadn't met until after they were grown because their mother wouldn't have let him near J.D. when they were kids. Devlin had initiated the first contact. Later, they'd discovered their mutual love of rock climbing.

One afternoon, a piton had slipped from the cliff face they were climbing, and Devlin had pulled J.D. up to safety. They'd been tight ever since. Having someone he could call brother meant everything to him because he felt so isolated and alone. Knowing J.D. took away a lot of that loneliness.

Devlin plopped down on the edge of his bed and told J.D. about the two grim calling cards he'd found the evening before.

"Sounds like his fixation has switched from me and Miranda to you. Be careful. He almost killed me."

That knowledge scared Devlin down to his soul. Someone else cared what happened to him. J.D.'s caring provided a kind of link with the mother they shared. His friendship eased some of the hurt Devlin had suffered over her rejection of him. If something happened to J.D., he didn't think he would ever get over it.

"Miranda and the doc just walked in. Gotta go."

A dial tone buzzed in Devlin's ear.

“What do you mean, it isn’t running?” Devlin growled into the phone a few minutes later.

“Sorry, Dev.” The ferryboat captain’s voice shouted on the other end of the line. The connection crackled with static from the storm. “The rain’s slacked off, but the tide’s a bitch this morning. We’ve got warnings all over the island. No watercraft. Too risky.”

Devlin huffed out a breath of frustration. That meant Abby couldn’t leave today, so he would have to keep her close. Real close. “Yeah. I understand. What about tomorrow?”

“Updated report says this weather will be moving out later tonight.”

Devlin heard someone yell in the background. “What’s going on? You need some help down there?”

“No. A couple of boats need to be secured.”

“Right. If you need help, let me know.”

“Will do, Dev. Thanks.”

Devlin hung up and slumped back in his chair. He should never have let Abby set one foot inside the castle. He should have put her on his boat that day and taken her back to the mainland himself. If he had, she would be safely on her way to England and away from danger, where she belonged. Instead, he’d given in to that wide-eyed innocent look of hers and been lured into allowing her to stay.

A fire licked at thick pine logs in the fireplace and chased away the chill in the air, but did little for the bitter rush of fear through his blood. After he’d found the macabre package outside the kitchen and then the rabbit in the library, the stakes had risen considerably.

The monster had been inside the castle.

Devlin looked out one of the office windows. Dim, watery light sifted like an ivory mist through the glass pane, but an overhead light cast a golden glow over the room, dispelling the gloom.

His stomach growled, and he checked the time. Half past seven. Jake and the policewoman from the mainland would be here soon to discuss a strategy for capturing the bastard.

Coffee. He needed coffee. Devlin rose from his desk and headed for the kitchen.

Moroccan music, heavy with the click of castanets and the high-pitched lilt of horns, drifted down the hallway and throbbed through the kitchen door. A corner of Devlin’s mouth curled upward. He knew Otis sometimes listened to music while he cooked, but his choice generally ran toward something with a Cajun rhythm.

Devlin shifted closer to the door, laid his hand against the wood, and pushed. He peeked into the kitchen. To his surprise and delight, he saw Abby standing in the middle of

the room, eyes closed, facing the door. She held her hands over her head with her arms slightly curved. Her fingers and thumbs snapped together as if she held small cymbals.

She'd kicked off a pair of brown leather loafers, and her sock-covered feet slid over the gray-tiled floor to the rich beat of the music. She wore a pair of brown corduroy slacks that molded to her sweet hips, and a long-sleeved beige shirt outlined the shape of her breasts.

The feel of those pretty, round breasts floated through his brain, along with the flavor of her mouth and tongue. He remembered every single moment of the time they'd spent together, just a few hours earlier in her bedroom. What a paradox, buttoned up like a nun while her hips undulated like Salome.

Abby had bundled her hair up into a clip on the back of her head, exposing her slim, white neck to him. The texture and flavor of a neck he knew intimately. Devlin opened the door wide enough so he could slip through, closing the door quietly at his back. Enjoying the show, he crossed his arms over his chest and couldn't have stopped the grin of appreciation if he'd tried.

He fantasized for a moment about Abby wearing one of those *I Dream of Jeannie* outfits made of sheer material and sequins, with lots of skin and a generous amount of cleavage showing. Complete with toe ring and ankle bracelet.

A private dance for his pleasure alone.

The cadence of the music pulsed faster and faster; the sound of the horns swelled higher, their tone growing sharper by the second. Abby turned slowly in a circle, her hips gyrating to the swift tempo, her feet shuffling to the flow of the lavish notes. With each rise in the pitch of the music, Abby thrust her pelvis forward then backward, with increasing ripples and rolls. Desire stroked his nerve endings and warmed the pit of his stomach. He wanted to know the heat of her between those sexy legs.

A look of naked joy and intense pleasure covered her face as she let the swirling frenzy of sound sweep her away. The music, blaring from the portable stereo, finally reached a crescendo, then suddenly stopped.

For a moment, Abby remained perfectly still. A light sheen of sweat beaded her forehead, and her chest heaved in rapid breaths. Devlin watched a smile shimmer over her lips before her eyes drifted open.

Their gazes locked, and her violet eyes widened with shock. Her mouth formed a perfect O. She jerked her arms down to her sides as a hot blush burned up her neck and spread red streaks over her face. "How long have you been standing there?"

Devlin raised a brow and smiled. "Long enough. Morning."

She stuffed her feet back into her shoes and cocked her head in his direction. "Why didn't you say something?"

Devlin leaned against the dark granite counter and stuffed his hands into the back pockets of his jeans. "And stop the performance? No way. It's not every day a man gets to see a woman jiggle her fanny in a sexy dance before breakfast."

She raised a nervous hand and smoothed back a stray tendril of hair that had fallen from her hair clip. The blush of color still brightened her pale skin, and he could see the tension in the rigid set of her shoulders.

He watched her lick her lips and swallow, trying desperately to pull herself together. Abby had been together since he met her. About time she loosened up. "How long have you been belly-dancing?"

Murmuring absently over her shoulder, "A couple of years," Abby headed for the coffee pot.

Devlin glided down the edge of the counter until he stood next to her. The aroma of soap and woman slid past his nose but failed to smother the emotional warmth that emanated from her. Her warmth settled the uneasiness that continuously hammered at his soul. "Did you take lessons, or learn from a videotape?"

She straightened her shoulders and cleared her throat. "I took lessons."

"Have you got one of those little harem outfits, or do you always practice in your regular clothes?"

She threw him a sharp look. "No, I don't have a harem outfit." Sarcasm ripened her voice. "No one was around, and I thought --" She bunched her hands into fists. "It was rude not to speak up."

"You're just angry because I've discovered your little secret." Devlin grinned. "I would never have pegged you for a belly-dancer, Abigail."

She sucked her lower lip into her mouth, then let it slide out all wet and dewy. "I belly-dance strictly for the cardiovascular benefits. I saw this belly-dancing class advertised as the next generation of Jazzercise." He liked her precise, matter-of-fact tone.

"Is that so?"

She raised her chin and looked at him. "I'm hoping you'll forget about this and pretend it never happened."

The way those simple words fell from her tongue in that precise British accent of hers burrowed deeper under his skin. "Not a chance. Sleep well?"

Abby reached for one of the large blue mugs Otis had placed on the counter. She turned her head and glanced at him over her shoulder, relief shining in her eyes that he'd changed the subject. "Very well, thank you. You?"

"No, I didn't. I don't think you did, either."

Abby poured herself a cup of coffee, stirred in a spoonful of sugar, and added a dollop of milk before she turned around. She leaned against the counter, took a sip, and eyed him over the rim. "Odd choice of words, considering we didn't sleep in the same room together.

An unexpected image of Abby lying naked in his arms in the center of his bed flashed like a freaking neon sign into his brain. Devlin laughed and shook his head. After witnessing her very sensual dance, he wanted to let go and ease the aching sexual need that rode him every minute they spent together. Only, he was afraid his unwanted need for her went way beyond sex.

Something else about Abby nudged at him, something he didn't want to uncover and look at with his heart. Something he had to fight down to the rough edges of his soul, especially with the delay in her departure due to the storm.

To keep from reaching for her, Devlin paced over to the kitchen table, pulled out a chair, and sat down. "I just got off the phone with the ferryboat captain. They aren't making any runs to the mainland today, so you can't leave. You'll have to wait until tomorrow."

She set her mug down on the counter. "Great, it will give me a chance to talk to the locals about Miranda and see if they're interested in a website."

He slid his gaze to the rounded neck of her shirt, to the sweet, sensitive hollow he'd kissed. She was like a pristine package wrapped up snug and warm, one he wanted to peel open and spoil. Devlin shifted his gaze back to hers.

The kitchen door breezed open, and Otis stepped inside, along with the sheriff and a petite woman with auburn hair, dressed in a police uniform. Otis slipped off his long brown oilcloth coat and hung it by the door.

Devlin rose from the chair to shake the sheriff's hand. "Morning, Jake." He'd be glad when he could meet Jake on a purely social level.

Jake introduced the policewoman as Beth Lowell, and Devlin offered them both coffee. Otis ran his hand over the thatch of gray hair on his head, scattering raindrops. His black eyes fixed on Devlin and Abby. "Guess you waitin' on breakfast." He gestured with his right hand. "Sit down. I'll have some French toast ready directly."

"Thank you, Otis." Abby set her mug of coffee on the counter. "Would you like some help?"

"Sure, you can mix the eggs." Otis looked at Devlin. "What about you, Mr. Dev?"

"I can never pass up your French toast, Otis." His empty stomach rumbled. He looked at Abby. "I need to speak with Jake and Officer Lowell. We'll be right back."

Devlin ushered Jake and the policewoman down the hall to his office. In the hallway, he heard Abby's laughter drift down from the kitchen. He liked hearing her laugh. Seeing her afraid last night, the worry clouding her eyes, made him sick to his stomach. This had to end. Soon.

Jake took a seat in front of Devlin's desk, and Officer Lowell sat in a chair next to him. She was a slip of a woman, probably not an inch above five feet. How could she possibly help capture a big, strong madman?

“Dev.” Jake motioned to the officer. “Officer Lowell and I have come up with a plan to capture him once and for all. We think it has a good chance of success. Go ahead, Beth. I’ll let you explain.”

Devlin looked at Officer Lowell. She regarded him with quiet gray eyes. Her features were delicate, her skin fair. “Mr. Morgan, I obtained some photos of your mother from when she lived on the island. I brought some clothes similar to the ones she wore in the pictures.” She paused for a moment, as if letting her words sink in.

Devlin nodded for her to continue.

“I plan to dress in these clothes, walk through the village, up the castle road, and onto the castle grounds. If he has indeed come back to the island, we’re hoping he’ll see me and think I’m your mother, returned to Wolf Island. And maybe he’ll make a move.”

Devlin shuddered inside. “Officer, I mean no disrespect, but you’re a small woman, even if you are a trained police officer. What kind of defense could you possibly use against him? You could get hurt or possibly killed!”

Jake held up his hand. “I understand your misgivings, Dev, but Officer Lowell will have backup. I’ll have several deputies and officers stationed at various points in the village, along the castle road, and on the grounds. I won’t be far away myself. If he shows himself, we’ll be on the bastard.”

Devlin rose, placed his palms on the desk’s surface, and moved his gaze from Jake to Officer Lowell and back again. “You don’t have a clue who you’re dealing with here. Victor Morgan is a paranoid schizophrenic. He’s not only delusional, but his level of strength is abnormal, especially when the voices scream louder in his head.” He leveled his gaze at Officer Lowell. “He’s fast as hell, Officer. You could be dead before anyone reaches you.”

Jake shook his head. “I promise that won’t happen. Besides, Beth is a trained police officer, Dev. This is her job.”

Devlin straightened and glared at the sheriff. “Dammit, Jake, you don’t get it, do you? If there’s a screw up and she dies --” He pointed a finger at Officer Lowell. “-- guess who gets blamed? Me! Victor’s on this island because of me. In case you’ve forgotten, the bastard wants me dead.”

“Mr. Morgan,” Officer Lowell leaned forward in her chair, “I’ve had a great deal of training in hand-to-hand. In addition, I’ll be carrying one of the most effective self-defense devices used by law enforcement agencies around the country.” She laid a small object on top of his desk. It looked similar to a gun and was slightly larger than a cell phone. The square shape of the barrel did not look like a firearm, though. “This weapon is called a Taser. It might not look like much, but believe me, it *will* bring Victor down. When fired, the Taser releases probes connected by thin, insulated wire. When they make contact with a body or clothing, the perpetrator loses neuromuscular control and collapses.”

"I still don't like it." Devlin shook his head. "Sounds like you have to get pretty darn close for that thing to work. What if Victor knocks it out of your hand? What if he catches you from behind?"

"There's one other thing that might help ease your mind. Before the probes reach the attacker, an electrical pulse interferes with communication between the brain and the muscles. You've got to trust me about this, Mr. Morgan, and let me do my job."

She was obviously full of confidence now, but how would she feel if and when she faced Victor?

"Dev." Jake drew his attention back to him. "I'm a cautious man. I wouldn't put an officer's life in jeopardy if I didn't believe this plan had a damn good chance of succeeding."

Dev rubbed the back of his neck. "Your plan has disaster written all over it. I can tell by the look on your face that you're determined to go through with it, no matter what I think. But Jake, the stakes are even higher now. The bastard got inside the castle last night. He left me a calling card in the library ... a rabbit with a set of chimes twisted around its neck." Devlin heaved a heavy sigh. "Everything was locked up tighter than a convent around here. I checked every door and window myself after I found the gull."

Jake studied him. "Have the locks ever been changed? Victor is cagey; he's clever." His words were slow and deliberate. "Could he have gotten a key and hidden it somewhere on the island? The guy's so paranoid, he could have hidden one, or more, years ago."

"I don't think so. I could ask my grandparents, but if they get wind of the trouble around here, they'll hot foot it back to the island. No way am I putting them in danger, as well. I'll have Otis call the locksmith and have all the door locks changed ASAP."

Jake nodded. "It can't hurt. If that's how he's getting in, it'll at least slow him down a bit and make it harder for him to gain access. I think we've covered everything we need to, Dev. I'll keep you informed on how it goes."

Devlin let Jake and Officer Lowell out the front door. When he closed the door behind them, he heard a rustle at his back and turned. Abby stood in the foyer, adjusting her purse strap over her shoulder with one hand and gripping an umbrella with the other. "Where do you think you're going?" Devlin listened to the rain hammering against the roof of the castle. She'd be soaked before she made it to her car.

Her back straightened at the censure in his voice. "Into the village." Her tone was excruciatingly polite.

Devlin crossed his arms over his chest and stared at her. "What about breakfast? You finished awfully fast."

"The French toast was delicious, and now I need to pick up a few things."

"You need to stay close, remember?" He mustered his most patronizing tone. "If you want something, Otis will be glad to pick it up for you."

Abby leaned on the handle of the umbrella and crossed one of her feet in front of the other at the ankles. "When you said I needed to stay close, I thought you meant at night." Her expression stilled and grew somber. "I admit that hearing about that poor rabbit last night was frightening, but I figured since the ferry isn't running, there won't be any day-trippers coming to the island today. Maybe some of the shopkeepers will have more time to talk about my sister and the website."

Devlin didn't want her snooping around. The bastard could attack Abby, and there might not be anyone around to help her. He needed to tell her just enough to make her cautious. Besides, one of the locals might accidentally spill some scuttlebutt about him and his family. Devlin hoped to get Abby out of town before either of those things happened.

Thankfully he had the support of the locals, since the Morgan family had founded the village and helped restore the economy. But people were people, and there was nothing as tempting as a nibble of juicy gossip. "I showed the sheriff the rabbit and the gull. He said it could be just a high school prank. However, until he finds out who is responsible, you can't leave the castle alone. Understood?"

Her shoulders squared even as her eyes narrowed. "Yes, I understand. I guess you'll have to come with me. You can make notes on who says what to whom, can't you, Devlin?"

"Wait here a minute." Devlin found Otis and told him to call the locksmith out to the castle today. Afterward he walked back into the foyer, where Abby was waiting for him. "I'll drive. Just let me grab my coat."

Chapter Six

Four down and several more to go, but she'd definitely made a start.

Abby reluctantly left the comforting warmth of the Wolf Island Library. She walked beside Devlin, beneath the large black umbrella he gripped in his hand. Rain pattered around them, creating small rivers of water on the sidewalk's surface, soaking her shoes, but she was too happy to care. Devlin stood close to her like a knight defending his lady.

Under any other circumstances, she might find that particular male characteristic annoying, but today she found it charming.

Abruptly, he stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. Abby halted midstride, and he threw her an irritated look.

"What are you looking so pleased about?" A smile played around his mouth.

"That was the fourth place we've been in. The people I've spoken to so far have been very enthusiastic about me building a website to advertise the island. You should be happy, as well."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. Everyone was willing to give me their opinion. Mrs. Watts, the librarian, even offered to help with research. So far, everyone thinks the site is a great idea. Just think what it will do for the island's economy. There was only one problem."

"What's that?"

"With you hovering over me, everyone avoided my questions about Miranda."

Devlin grinned and curled a hand around the back of her neck. Before she had a chance to react, he leaned forward and kissed her softly on the mouth. "You trying to get rid of me, Abigail?"

Her lips tingled and her knees weakened. So what if one little kiss brought the events of the previous evening back to her in stunning clarity? “Yes.” Her voice wasn’t as steady as she’d like it to be. But how was she supposed to control her reactions when Devlin smelled so wonderful, a mixture of rain, soap, and the distinct spicy aroma that was his alone.

He rubbed his thumb slowly over her cheek. “Too bad. I’m not letting you out of my sight.”

That’s what she was afraid of. What was he hiding? Why didn’t he want her asking questions about her sister? What did Miranda’s disappearance have to do with him? “Could we at least stop for tea? It’s freezing out here.”

Abby and Devlin were just finishing up their lunch when the door to the restaurant and inn called Wolf’s Lair swung open. A lanky, red-faced man, covered from head to toe in a bright yellow slicker, rushed over to their table. Water trickled onto the floor, forming a puddle at his boot-clad feet. “Dev, Otis called and asked me to find you. Your boat broke its moorings.”

“What?” Mild disbelief colored Devlin’s voice. “The storm’s bad, but not ...” His voice trailed away, and Abby watched anger and fear blanket his face. Devlin tossed his napkin on the table, scraped back his chair, and dug some bills from his wallet. He threw them on top of the table -- the cost of their food, along with a generous tip. He laid his hand on the man’s shoulder. “Thanks, Anson. I’m right behind you.”

As the man headed toward the door, Devlin stepped close to Abby and gently grasped her chin. “Wait for me here.”

Without another moment’s hesitation, he walked swiftly toward the door. Right before he opened it, he turned his head and looked at her. Then he was gone.

Abby waited until the door closed behind him, then rose from her chair and walked to the bar. She slid onto a stool and introduced herself again to Corinne, the owner. Corinne nodded in greeting and prepared two bowls of rich blueberry cobbler. Her curly brown hair hung in a thick braid down her back. Loose strands had escaped and wreathed her round face in a tawny halo. “That smells wonderful. Mind if I try some?”

Corinne set a bowl on the counter in front of Abby and topped it with a scoop of vanilla ice cream. “Seems Dev’s deserted you. Hope he gets his boat back in. Doesn’t deserve to lose it.”

Loyalty. It seemed everyone on this island was loyal to Devlin Morgan. Their loyalty bound the village and Devlin together like an invisible net. Abby lifted a spoonful of cobbler to her lips and tasted it. “Delicious.” She licked her lips. “There’s a flavor I can’t identify.” Abby smiled at Corinne. “What is it?”

“Secret ingredient.”

More secrets. “There seems to be a lot of secrets on this island.”

Corinne threw her a casual smile. "You were in here the other day, looking for a room. We had a ghost chaser here recently -- Miranda Chapel. Any relation?"

Abby sat up straighter on her stool. "She's my sister. Did she come in here often?"

A customer called out for a refill, and Corinne went to oblige him. After serving the man another beer, she moved to a small stainless-steel sink and began washing glasses in soapy water. "She came in a couple of times. Nice girl."

Abby ate another spoonful of cobbler and swallowed. She thought about the e-mail she'd found on Devlin's computer from someone named J.D. "Did she come in alone?"

Corinne stopped her washing, looked at Abby, and went back to scrubbing glasses. "I can't remember." She plucked a clean dishtowel from a drawer and wiped her hands.

Abby sipped her tea. "You know more about Miranda than you're telling me."

Corinne smiled. "Like I said, she was in here a few times and seemed like a nice girl." Despite her patient tone, she seemed eager to end the discussion about Miranda.

"I'm worried about her, afraid something might have happened to her. If you know why she left or where she is, please tell me." Abby used an urgent voice, hoping to gain more information from Corinne.

Corinne looked away and wiped the already clean countertop. "I don't know anything."

Abby felt sure she was lying. But why?

Was Miranda still somewhere on the island? Abby spooned more of the cobbler up, but this mouthful seemed to stick halfway down her throat. "I think you do. I've already been to the authorities, but the sheriff hasn't been much help, and Devlin is --"

"Look, Dev's a good man," Corinne interrupted. "He's not responsible for --" Corinne shook her head and got busy washing more glasses.

"Not responsible for what?"

"Never mind." The words weren't much more than a mumble.

Why was everyone on this island so steadfast in their loyalty? It was as if Devlin could do no wrong. No one was above reproach.

Corinne's demeanor changed and she warmed up to Abby a bit more as Abby told her about her plans to build a website promoting the island and offered some ideas Corinne could implement for advertising Wolf's Lair.

Abby remembered the mutilated rabbit Devlin had found and the mysterious sound of ringing chimes. "Do you know if Miranda found anything unusual while she was here on the island?"

"No."

"What about the rape and murder of a young woman years ago?"

Corinne leaned in close. "What are you driving at, Ms. Chapel?" Curiosity suffused her low voice.

"I found the clipping about Alice Howard's death at the castle. I wondered why Devlin would save something like that."

Corinne shrugged. "Lot of people cut stuff out of the newspaper. No law against that. Besides, when Alice was killed, it shook everybody up. Especially Dev. Make no mistake, Dev cares about the people here and what happens on this island. He took Alice's death almost personally. As if he could have prevented it." She paused for a moment. "I suppose if my ancestors dated back two hundred years, I'd feel the same way."

Abby longed for deep roots and a strong sense of family connection. She had none. She'd never had grandparents. Her family had always consisted of her mother and Miranda. How wonderful it must be to know about your ancestors, know something about their livelihood and have a record you could hold in your hand.

"The article mentioned a Ms. Townsend. Does she still live on the island?"

Corinne nodded. "Cathy runs the gift shop at the end of the block. It's called The Amulet. Can't miss it." She nodded toward the table where Abby and Devlin had been sitting. "Dev left the umbrella for you."

Here's your hat; what's your hurry?

Abby rubbed her arms as a sudden chill swept over her body. Why was Corinne protecting Devlin? Was there truly a connection between him and the murder of Alice Howard? Was that the real reason he'd kept the newspaper clipping all these years?

Despite Devlin's air of mystery and danger, he'd intrigued her and made her like him. Deep inside, Abby didn't want to believe that Devlin was connected to Alice Howard's death in any way. It just seemed odd that he would have tucked away the clipping in a scrapbook. Weren't scrapbooks supposed to contain mementos and photographs that evoked happy memories? Brushing aside her internal questions, she pulled some cash from her purse to pay for the cobbler.

Corinne shook her head. "On the house."

"Thank you, Corinne."

* * * * *

Devlin raced past the marina, with rain pelting him every step of the way. His breath sawed in and out of his lungs, and the rubber soles of his boots fought for purchase on the rain-slicked road.

He didn't like leaving Abby alone. Even in the café, surrounded by people he knew. But if she took it into her head to leave ... anything could happen. What if the bastard was lurking about the village? There were a few alleys in between some of the buildings.

What if she went snooping again? The streets were virtually deserted because of the storm, and the visibility was reduced. What if he was there, in one of those alleys, waiting, even in the light of day? With the wind howling, would anyone hear her scream? If Victor harmed Abby, Devlin would never forgive himself. He would have Anson, the harbormaster, call Corinne as soon as he got to the marina, to make sure that Abby stayed put.

When he reached his private dock, hidden by a stand of pine trees, he pounded over the wet planks of the dock and rushed to the slip that normally housed his boat. Waves capped with foam churned long, watery arms upward and swept over the pier. Devlin held his hands up to shield his eyes from the driving rain and looked out into the writhing ocean. His twenty-eight-foot cruiser bobbed over the choppy sea and moved steadily away from the island.

Devlin knelt down and looked closely at the thick rope that had secured his boat. He couldn't believe it. He blinked rapidly and wiped a hand over his eyes, thinking the rain had blurred his vision. When he picked up the rope, he stared at the end.

It had been sawed clean. If the rope had ripped away from the cleat, the end would be frayed.

Someone had cut the line. Deliberately.

He dropped the rope and covered his face with his hands. It was *him*. Damn him. Damn him for this. He was the only one who would have done this. A hand gripped his shoulder, and Devlin jerked. Anson stood behind him.

"You okay?" Anson shouted above the sounds of the storm.

Devlin nodded. "Yeah." He stood up and faced Anson. "Rope's been cut. I need to borrow one of your boats."

"Let the boat go for now, Dev. Water's too rough. Storm's supposed to let up in a couple hours. I'll help you get her back in then."

"No. I'm going now. She might be lost for good."

Anson cursed. "Damn it, your grandpa won't care."

"I will!" It had been a gift from his grandfather, and no way was that bastard going to make him lose it. He wanted to take everything away from Devlin, but he was going to have a fight on his hands.

"You're too stubborn for your own good, boy." Anson shook his head. "Take my inboard. She's a hardy little bitch."

Devlin nodded. "Thanks. Call Corinne at the café and tell her to make sure Abby stays put until I get back. And call Jake, let him know what's happened."

"Will do." Anson laid his hand on Devlin's shoulder. "Be careful."

Devlin ran back to the marina and over the networking dock closer to the harbormaster's office. He saw Anson's boat rocking in the water. With each swell of the ocean, the small boat rose to the top edge of the dock, plunged downward as the ocean

receded, then rose again. He leaped into the boat, and a wave slammed the vessel against a dock piling.

Without wasting anymore time, Dev released the mooring line and grabbed an oar. He cranked the boat, backed her away from the dock, and turned in the direction of the open sea. The front of the boat bounced over the waves, splashing saltwater into his face and eyes, but he continued on toward his boat.

When he reached the cruiser, he pulled the small inboard alongside the larger boat, where it bumped against the side. Rubber buoys hung over the outer rim of the boat and prevented any real damage. A metal ladder attached to the cruiser rose up the port side. Devlin stood up with the mooring line in his hand and grabbed the ladder's side rails. Beneath his feet, the smaller boat bounced with every wave that pushed against her hull.

He lost his balance and fell back into the boat, his ribs slamming against one of the metal seats. A jolt of pain ripped into his side, but he ignored it and reached for the ladder. His hands slipped again. Damn it. The sea rose like a dark beast, lashing at him with strong, watery claws before crashing abruptly with the surging tides.

Fighting against the swirling ocean and hard rain, he struggled to attach the mooring line to the ladder. After a few failed attempts, he was able to secure the line. He leaped for the ladder and, thankfully, his hands finally found purchase. Slowly, he climbed the ladder until he reached the top and stepped over onto the deck of the cruiser. With no time to lose, he headed toward the bridge at the stern. He rushed up the access steps from the cockpit, went inside, and quickly cranked the engine. With feet braced behind the wheel of the boat, he turned her leeward so the bow faced away from the direction of the wind.

Devlin turned the controls to lower the anchor. He planned to leave the cruiser in open water, but anchored so it couldn't drift. He and Anson could come and fetch it after the storm abated.

Abby.

He needed to get back to Abby, but he wanted to check the boat's galley and sleeping quarters to make sure no damage had been done in the storm. As he made his way down the stairs toward the galley, he noticed the faint smell of cigarette smoke lingering in the air.

Devlin stepped onto the lower deck and fisted his hands at his sides. Sweat broke out on his brow. Someone had been on his boat. He checked the galley first and found a stack of dirty dishes in the sink, crumbs scattered over the countertop, and an empty bottle of gin.

His father's favorite drink.

Bile rose into Devlin's throat, but he swallowed it down. Cigarette butts littered the floor, and the cabinet doors hung open. Broken dishes and glasses mixed with the silverware strewn around the shelves and floor.

Coffee. He smelled coffee.

His gaze swung to the coffee maker attached to the underside of the cabinets. He walked over quickly and laid his hand against the carafe. Warm. The coffee was still warm. He must have just left -- or was he on the boat, hoping to get a shot at Devlin?

Devlin moved cautiously from the galley and made his way down the corridor to the boat's two cabins. He stuck his head in one door and found the room untouched. Relief swamped him.

His relief was short-lived. He opened the door to the main cabin and found the bed in disarray. The sheets, dirty and wrinkled, lay wadded into a pile on the floor. The wastebasket was jammed against the side of the bed, with more cigarette butts littering the bottom. Devlin noticed a reflection on the glass covering a picture that hung over the bed. He snapped his head around to a mirror that graced the wall opposite the bed.

He stared in horror at the words scrawled across the glass.

I'm back.

Abby.

He had to get back to Abby. Dev dashed from the cabin and headed up to the main deck.

He shouldn't have left her alone.

A hard, driving wind thrust against the umbrella Abby gripped tightly in her hands. Rain slashed around her as she plodded over the sidewalk, heading toward the gift shop at the end of the block. The wind had grown in intensity since she and Devlin had stopped at Wolf's Lair, and with it, the light had begun to fade. Abby stopped and turned her head in the direction of the marina. She saw nothing but gray, watery images through the transparent sheets of rain.

Was Devlin all right? Had he gotten his boat in? The harbormaster had said the boat broke free from the dock, but she didn't understand the look of fear followed by temper that had crossed Devlin's face. Abby bit her lower lip. She wanted to run and help him, but she needed to find Miranda more.

She turned back around and plodded in the direction of the shop. Another sound mingled with the slosh of her feet and the rain blowing around her.

Footsteps.

Heavy footsteps.

Chimes. The light, metallic sound wafted through the rain-soaked air.

The hair on the back of Abby's neck prickled. Her heart raced. She spun, her eyes wide, her breath shallow.

Nothing.

She saw nothing but the rain-swept sidewalk and street. Devlin was right when he told her she'd let her imagination run away with her. She was perfectly safe. No one was after her. Were they?

She turned around and trudged in the direction of the shop.

The handle of the umbrella slid from her fingers and a gust of wind tumbled it into the street. Before Abby could react, a hand clamped around her arm. Panic surged into her throat and made her gasp. She heard the tinkling of chimes once again as the hand yanked her unceremoniously through a doorway.

The door closed behind Abby with a whoosh of wind and rain. Warmth enveloped her chilled body while the sound of tinkling chimes drifted on the air. For a moment, fear made her giddy, until her gaze settled on the woman standing before her. She jerked her arm from the woman's hold and studied her while she waited for her heart to slip back down her throat.

She was of medium height, with shoulder-length, graying blonde hair, light blue eyes, and a welcoming smile on her lips. There was nothing ghostly or strange about her. She looked perfectly normal. Chimes continued to ring, and suddenly Abby was furious.

"I knew you'd come. I felt it this morning," the stranger said.

She *felt* it?

Abby lifted a hand to her chest, where her heart thundered against her palm. "You scared me to death. Are you in the habit of grabbing people off the street? Who are you, anyway?"

The woman gave her an indulgent smile. "I'm sorry. No, I don't usually grab people, but you were having such trouble walking in the storm. I was only trying to help. Besides, I've been expecting you all morning." She held out a hand for Abby to shake. "I'm Catherine Good Townsend."

Reluctantly, Abby shook her hand briefly. "How could you be expecting me? We've never met."

Ms. Townsend's full lips curved in a mysterious smile. "Not in the traditional sense." She skimmed her gaze over Abby. "You're wet through. I was just about to make tea. Won't you join me? We have a lot to talk about." She waved a hand through the air as she turned and headed toward the back of the shop. "Go ahead and look around. I'll start the tea."

Abby watched Ms. Townsend stroll toward the back of the store. A long skirt in a vibrant print of red and gold swished softly about her legs. Her bulky white sweater gathered loosely at her waist, and little red beads dangled from the hem. A trio of silver bracelets jingled on her left arm, and soft tan boots covered her feet.

Abby glanced about the shop. The ceiling gleamed with midnight-blue paint, and gold half-moons and stars decorated the surface. The glossy white walls provided contrast. Chimes hung everywhere.

She walked over to get a closer look at the chimes. To each, there was a tag attached, with a small picture just like the one of Alice she'd seen in the newspaper clipping. Abby turned a tag over and read. *Fifty percent of the proceeds from the sale of these chimes will be donated to the Alice Howard Foundation, a nonprofit charity dedicated to halting violence against women.*

"They're lovely, aren't they?"

Abby shifted her attention to Ms. Townsend. "Yes." They were lovely when you saw them like this rather than imagining them wrapped gruesomely around a helpless animal's neck. "You're Alice Howard's aunt, aren't you?"

"That's right."

"I'm sorry about what happened to your niece. It must have been awful." Abby couldn't imagine having a loved one die so horribly.

"Yes, it was," Ms. Townsend's voice blended with a sigh.

"Is it true you predicted her death?"

"The tea is almost ready," she said, ignoring Abby's question.

Ms. Townsend led Abby to a cramped room in the back of the shop. A desk and a couple of chairs, along with a small refrigerator, took up one side of the room. A kettle hissed atop a hot plate. "Have a chair." Ms. Townsend prepared the tea and set their cups on top of the desk, along with milk and sugar.

Once settled, Abby thought this the perfect opportunity to ask some questions. "What can you tell me about Devlin? I've tried prying some information out of him, but he's told me very little." She desperately needed answers, but would the truth reveal something she might never be able to forget?

Ms. Townsend fixed her with a penetrating look. "He's very closed, that one. Doesn't like meddlers. Of course, that's understandable, considering the trouble he's had. And his family. Milk and sugar?"

"Milk, thank you." Here was the opening Abby had been waiting for. "What kind of trouble?"

She handed Abby a cup of tea lightly tanned with milk. "Look. Devlin's family founded this island, and most folks that live here appreciate the fact that it's because of them that we have homes and thriving businesses. I don't see any reason to dig up the troubles that family has suffered."

Those troubles could have directly affected Miranda. Maybe they could provide a link to her disappearance. "My sister was here recently. Her name is Miranda Chapel. Did you happen to meet her?"

Ms. Townsend brightened. "Yes, I did. Lovely girl."

"Do you know why she left the island so suddenly?"

She shook her head. "No, I don't. I'm sorry."

This was the first person Abby had met that she truly believed didn't know anything about Miranda.

There was a set of chimes hanging by the small stove. They tinkled lightly on a stir of air. "What was Alice like?"

Ms. Townsend sat in the other chair and smiled wistfully. Her shoulders slumped. Reflections of old sorrows bloomed in her eyes and creased her forehead. "Alice was a ray of sunshine, full of mischief, but always ready to lend a hand or comfort a friend. Her mother, Emily, and Dev's mother were the best of friends. Valerie Morgan and Emily were practically inseparable as young girls."

So, Valerie was Devlin's mother.

"After dear Valerie was --" Ms. Townsend sipped her tea, then set the cup back in the saucer. "Soon after the incident, Valerie left the island and moved to Boston. Devlin stayed behind with his grandparents, who raised him. Valerie sold the shop to Emily. Years later, when Alice was killed, well, let's just say that things have never been the same." Her voice became husky; her eyes filled with unshed tears. "Alice was a wonderful girl. Such a terrible loss. Terrible."

Abby reached over and laid her hand on Ms. Townsend's. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

"That's all right." She blinked back her tears. "Just when I think I've put it behind me, memories crowd my heart and it's all fresh again."

She looked pensively at Abby and cocked her head to the side. "Do you believe that events in the future can be foretold?"

Abby remembered the article about Alice's attack and how Ms. Townsend had predicted the horrible event. Had her prediction been coincidence, or had she truly been able to see what was about to happen? "I'm not sure."

Ms. Townsend was silent for a moment. "Sometimes things have a way of being very real on this island."

Abby waved her hand through the air. "I don't believe there is anything that logic can't explain. We have our senses to guide us."

A frown creased Ms. Townsend's brow. "That's true. Our senses are an important conduit to intuitive thinking. It's sometimes necessary to open our minds and hearts to accept the visions that are sent to us, no matter how good or how bad they might be. Especially if someone's life is at stake."

Abby thought about poor Alice. Her life had been at stake, and no one had believed Ms. Townsend's prediction.

"Not everyone has this ability, but for those of us who do, it can be a blessing and a curse at the same time." Ms. Townsend's expression softened, and she gave Abby a mercurial

smile. "What did your senses tell you regarding the sound of chimes you heard when you first arrived on the island?"

A chill danced over Abby's skin. "How did you know I heard chimes? I haven't mentioned it."

"When trouble is brewing, our resident ghost jingles her chimes in warning."

Abby wanted to roll her eyes, but she kept a straight face. "Does she try and frighten them by leaving mutilated animals with chimes wrapped around their necks, too?"

Ms. Townsend's eyes widened a little, and she leaned forward, laying her hand on Abby's. "Someone left you a dead animal?"

"Not me, specifically. Devlin. He found it last night in the library. And we heard chimes ringing in the hallway, as well. Dev thinks it was someone playing a prank."

Ms. Townsend's fingers tightened around Abby's hand. "Be very careful."

Abby frowned. "Do you know something I don't?"

Ms. Townsend took her hand away and leaned back in her chair. She turned her head, then glanced back at Abby. Her eyes were grim. "You've been given a warning."

Anxiety skimmed Abby's spine. "What do you mean?"

The older woman set her cup on top of the desk, folded her hands in her lap, and sighed deeply. "At the time of her death, Alice was deeply in love with a man who was an artist here on the island. He worked with metal and learned to make the chimes from his father. His father taught Emily how to make them, and she taught Alice."

"One day Alice and her young man quarreled. Storm clouds were beginning to form, but he ignored them and took his boat out for a sail to cool his temper. As you might guess, a gale blew in, and his boat was lost. For weeks after the search for his vessel was called off, Alice stood on the dock with a set of chimes in one hand and a lantern in the other, hoping that they would guide him back to her."

Abby felt tears burning in her eyes. She pushed them back. No time to be sentimental. "That's a lovely story, but what does it have to do with dead animals and the chimes I heard?"

Ms. Townsend gave her a benign smile. "The chimes ... are Alice."

The older woman's whimsical answer dissolved the romantic haze concerning Alice and her lost love. "You don't honestly believe that, do you?" Abby brushed a strand of hair away from her face. "Let's see if I can sort this out. Alice floats around the island, ringing the chimes and leaving dead animals to warn visitors of impending danger. Or is she still trying to find the man she loved?"

Ms. Townsend straightened in her chair and sighed. "Perhaps a little of both." She leaned forward and looked directly into Abby's eyes. "The important thing to remember is that Alice rings those chimes only when treachery looms, and you must take her seriously."

A little knot of pressure grew in Abby's chest. *Get a grip, Abby.*

"There have been numerous signs forewarning that danger is imminent."

Signs. Abby shook her head. "You shouldn't let superstition and old wives' tales color your judgment. After all --"

Ms. Townsend gripped her hand and squeezed. "These are credible sightings. An owl appeared at my window in the light of day three days in a row before your arrival on the island. They are night creatures. The owl's appearance is an omen that shouldn't be ignored."

Abby tried to pull her hand away, but Ms. Townsend held fast. "You and Devlin haunt my dreams. I see poor Dev trapped by a hideous creature that I can't see quite clearly. Forbidden shadows cloak the image. But there is a crimson stain on the creature's fur. I fear it is Devlin's blood."

The older woman's grip tightened. "No one believed me when I predicted that Alice would be murdered. But it's imperative that you believe me about Dev. He needs you. You are the key to his survival and the survival of this island. Without your help, he will perish for sure, and our way of life here with him."

A trickle of hysteria fizzed into Abby's throat. With a strong jerk, she succeeded in pulling her hand away. She popped up from her chair, walked around to the back of it, and gripped the wood to steady her trembling hands. "This is ridiculous. I don't believe in predictions, and I don't like being frightened."

Ms. Townsend rose from her chair and moved closer to Abby. She reached out and laid her hand on Abby's arm. "I'm sorry if I've scared you, but please understand that danger stalks Devlin the same way it stalked dear, sweet Alice. You are the only one who can help him. You have the power to save him. Without you, he will surely die."

Abby's mouth fell open. "Me? What could I possibly do? Dev's a grown man. He can take care of himself."

Ms. Townsend shook her head in a jerky manner. "No, he can't. Not from this. You must believe in my prediction. You must accept your fate. The last time I observed these signs and had such vivid dreams, my only niece was murdered. I can't allow that to happen again."

Abby wanted to laugh off her prediction, but the sudden and unexpected shiver of icy fear that raced over her skin wouldn't allow it. She thought about Alice and Catherine Townsend's prediction of her death.

If the people in the village had believed her -- or if Alice had believed her -- would she still be alive? What about the footsteps Abby had heard behind her as she walked toward the shop, and the scraping noises and chimes she'd heard up at the castle?

Were they real, or the result of an overactive imagination? And now Ms. Townsend was telling her that without her help, Devlin could die. What was she going to do? What should she believe?

Devlin.

She'd almost forgotten. He expected her to be at the café when he arrived. Abby pulled the strap of her purse up over her shoulder. "Thank you for your prediction, Ms. Townsend. I'll think about it. Now, I really have to go. Devlin will be wondering where I am."

Abby turned to leave.

"Listen to me, Ms. Chapel, please. Don't leave this island. Devlin's life depends on it."

Chapter Seven

With Ms. Townsend's dark prediction filling her head, Abby left the shop. The heavy rain had turned to a fine mist that drizzled down from a cloud-laden sky. Thick gray fog hovered in the air, obscuring nearly everything from view.

Her jacket and clothes were still a bit damp, so she rubbed her hands over her arms in an attempt to warm herself. Instinctively, she turned in the direction of the café and began to walk. The fog swept icy fingers over her cheeks and against her neck.

"Whore."

She stopped dead in her tracks and whirled. Her gaze darted this way and that, trying to find the source of the whispered voice. "Who's there?"

Her heart pounded so hard, Abby felt it might burst from her chest. A cold sweat popped out on her skin despite the chill in the air, and her lungs heaved with each breath. Nothing moved except the murky vapor surrounding her.

Not wishing to linger, she turned and headed once again for the café. She heard them again.

Footsteps.

Slower this time. She jerked her head around and peered over her shoulder. No one was behind her. Only the mist and the encroaching darkness. Visions of some large, unknown man raping her flashed in a hideous kaleidoscope through her brain until fear buzzed in her ears.

She quickened her pace, hoping to reach the safety and warmth of the café before she became a tragic headline in the local paper like Alice.

It happened so suddenly that she barely had time to react.

Something slammed into the middle of her back.

Hands.

Yes. Hard, strong hands. They shoved with a bitter, rough slap between her shoulder blades. Abby stumbled forward, her feet fighting for a grip on the sidewalk, slipping greasily over the curb. The toes of her boots rammed into the pavement. Her arms wheeled in the air, her fingers grabbing for something to hold on to, but clutching only handfuls of mist.

The bright glow of headlights streamed through the fog. Abby tumbled to the street. She held out her hands in an attempt to cushion her fall, and her palms scraped harshly over the bumpy surface. She heard the squeal of brakes and a shout before her head banged against the pavement and she rolled onto her back.

Strong arms enveloped her, and a warm hand pushed her hair back from her face. She opened her eyes to find Devlin staring down at her. Someone stepped up beside him, and a pair of dark eyes studied her. The man took off his hat, revealing a thatch of salt-and-pepper hair. He clutched the hat between nervous fingers. "Are you all right, miss?" His eyes brimmed with worry. "You came out of nowhere. I almost didn't have time to stop."

Abby looked at the man, then back at Devlin. Worry shrouded his face. She tried to shove out of his arms, but he held her fast.

"Rest a minute."

She didn't want to rest. "I'm fine. The wet street is soaking through my clothes. Let me up."

This time he relented, and she pushed herself to a sitting position. The world spun. She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment and gingerly touched her temple. She felt a large knot beneath her fingers.

"I told you to sit still a minute." A low growl edged Devlin's voice.

Abby ignored him and forced herself to stand. She swayed slightly on her feet, and Devlin steadied her with his hands on her arms. She looked at his hands and wondered.

His hands were big, hard, and strong. Could he have shoved her into the street? How long had it taken him to secure his boat? Was the harbormaster with him the whole time? Or did Devlin take care of it by himself? He would have had plenty of time to get back up here, but he had no way of knowing that she would visit the gift shop.

"I thought I told you to wait for me at the café. What were you doing out here in the street, anyway?"

"I wasn't in the street on purpose. Someone pushed me."

"What?" Devlin and the man exclaimed at the same time.

Devlin turned to the man standing beside him. "Did you see anyone, Luke?"

"No, sorry, Dev. All of a sudden she was flying in front of my truck. She took ten years off my life. But I didn't see anybody. 'Course, with the fog and all, it would have been easy for them to slip away unnoticed."

“Come on.” Devlin swept her up into his arms. “I’m taking you to the doctor.”

Mortified, Abby shoved against his arms. They were immovable. “Put me down. I’m very capable of walking. I’m not an invalid.”

Devlin ignored her. He nodded to the man. “Thanks, Luke. I can manage from here. You go ahead home.”

* * * * *

While Abby lay resting upstairs in her bed, Devlin sat across the kitchen table from the sheriff, Jake Dutton. “Anson told me he hasn’t seen anyone down by my dock today except for a couple of guys I hired from the marina to check the pilings. With the last couple of storms we’ve had, I wanted to make sure they were secure.”

Jake took a sip of the strong coffee. “I don’t believe for a minute that one of them cut the line to your boat.”

No, Devlin didn’t believe that either. He knew who had done it. He turned and looked out the kitchen window. Maybe *he* was there now ... waiting.

“Two men will be stationed in the pine grove whenever I can spare them.” Jake brought Devlin’s attention back to him.

Devlin waved a hand through the air. “Victor won’t go back to the dock again. He’s too clever for that. He cut the boat loose so I would know for sure that he’s back.”

Jake set down his cup. “You said yourself, he’s delusional. He might forget. Then we could trap him on the boat until backup arrived.”

“I think it’s a waste of manpower, but I suppose it could happen.”

Jake leaned back in his chair. “Did you get the locks changed?”

Dev shook his head. “Not yet. Otis called, but no one can get out here until tomorrow.

Jake finished his coffee. “I could put a man up here tonight, if you want; might make you feel better.

“No, I think the bastard will lie low tonight. Between the boat and pushing Abby into the street, he’s done enough to rattle my cage today.” Dev pursed his lips and looked at Jake. “He wants me dead, for sure, but not without a little cat-and-mouse first.”

Jake rose from his chair. He walked to the back door, shrugged into his jacket, and placed his uniform cap, covered in protective plastic, on his head. “My deputy is going over the boat now. I’ll let you know what we find.”

Devlin stood up and faced Jake. “We both know who’s been camping out on my boat, Jake.”

Jake reached for the doorknob, then turned and looked at Devlin. “I know. We just need to confirm it, that’s all.”

The next day, Abby lay on the bed in the room next to Devlin's. Devlin and Otis had fussed over her and insisted she stay off her feet even though the doctor had told them all she needed was a good night's rest. Rest she'd had. This morning, when she'd tried to come downstairs, Otis had sent her back to her room. Devlin's orders, he'd told her.

A light knock sounded at the door. "Come in."

Otis walked in with a tray cradled in his hands. His black gaze skimmed over her before his mouth curved briefly in a half smile. "Got your color back. That's good."

He walked to the bedside table and laid down the tray. Abby glanced at the pot of tea and plate of cookies. "Thank you for the tea."

Otis nodded. Abby turned her head and gazed out the window at the bright sunlight. All she needed was a walk around the grounds and a breath or two of fresh air.

"I know what you're thinking."

She swiveled her head and looked at Otis. When he said no more, she raised her brows in question, waiting for him to continue.

"You're thinking you want to go outside for a walk and soak up some o' that sunshine."

Abby sighed. "Yes. And that's exactly what I intend to do."

Otis shook his head. "Not today, you won't. Maybe tomorrow. Mr. Dev said to keep you here for a while."

"Do you do everything Mr. Dev tells you?"

Otis glanced at her while he prepared a cup of tea. His face grew serious. After adding a dollop of milk and a spoonful of sugar, he handed the teacup to her. "I have a good life here. It's because of Mr. Dev that I have this life. So when he asks me to do something, I do it. Nothing wrong with that."

After she took the cup, he lowered himself to a chair. "You need to understand something. Mr. Dev is a good, decent man. He's had his share of troubles, but most people do, at one time or another."

Otis leaned forward and rested his elbows on the knees of his worn jeans. "Mr. Dev was real upset about what happened to you yesterday. I could see it on his face when he brought you back here. But I saw something else, too." Otis paused as if gathering his thoughts. He lifted his head and stared directly into her eyes. "He's easing into caring about you. That worries me some, 'cause I don't know you very well and neither does he. Just one thing I want to make clear: Mr. Dev gave me a home when nobody else would, and I ain't gonna stand by and let him get hurt -- by you or anybody else."

Everyone on this island was loyal to Devlin Morgan. Except her. Abby sipped her tea. "I'm just here to find my sister, not to hurt Dev."

Otis rose from the chair and headed for the door. When he reached it and grasped the doorknob, he looked at Abby over his shoulder. "That's good to hear. I'll come by later and

get the tray. The man who almost ran you over last night is here to see you. Should I send him up?"

Abby nodded. "Please do."

In a few moments, she heard a knock at the door. Abby slid from the bed and padded over to the door. When she opened it and peeped out, the man she remembered from the night before stared back at her.

"I'm Luke Carstairs." A guilty expression blanketed his face. He wore khaki slacks, a white shirt, and a worn, leather jacket. Luke stuck out his hand, which clutched a bunch of daisies nestled in a clear glass vase. "I'm really sorry about what happened. My wife and I want to wish you a speedy recovery." The slight lowering of his head emphasized his sincere apology.

Compassion filled her heart. Abby smiled and took the vase from his hand. "Thank you, Mr. Carstairs. But you have nothing to be sorry about. It was an accident and not at all your fault. You just happened to be driving down the road at the time I was pushed into the street." A look of relief washed over his face. He smiled briefly and nodded. Abby opened the door wider. "Please, come in. I'm bored silly and would really love some company." What she would really love was to find out if he knew anything about Miranda.

Luke cleared his throat and stepped gingerly through the doorway. Abby closed the door with her toe. She walked over to the small coffee table that sat before the fireplace and set down the vase of flowers. She sat in one of the chairs and motioned for him to take the other one. "Tell me about yourself. How long have you lived on Wolf Island?" She hoped her casual question would engage him in conversation.

Luke told her a bit about himself, and when Abby was sure he was relaxed, she thought it the perfect time to ask some more probing questions. "I understand there was a ghost hunter here before me. Do you remember seeing her?"

He threw her a furtive glance, then gazed at his hands as he turned his hat around and around. "Ayah, I remember her."

"What do you remember?"

Luke cleared his throat and shrugged. "Not a whole lot. The wife and I only saw her once with --" He threw her an anxious glance, then rose to his feet. "I need to be going, Ms. Chapel. My wife is expecting me."

He knows something. She couldn't just let him walk out. Abby sprang from her chair and laid her hand on his arm as she looked up into his dark eyes. "Please, Mr. Carstairs, if you know something about my sister, you must tell me. I'm terribly worried about her."

Discomfort flitted across his face, and his fingers worried the brim of his hat. He looked toward the door as if he wanted to make his escape. "I saw her with a man."

"Did you know the man?"

Luke frowned and pressed his lips together. He shook his head and wouldn't look at her. "I -- I'm not sure."

Abby felt certain he knew who Miranda had been with. But if she pushed too hard, he might not tell her any more. "All right. Do you know when she left?"

"Well, let's see." He turned and walked toward the door. "I believe she left right before you got here." He slipped on his hat. "That's all I know." He wouldn't meet her gaze.

Abby stopped him with a touch on his arm. "How did she leave? Was she alone? Did she go back to the mainland on the ferry?"

"Look, I gotta go." The words spilled out quickly as he gripped the doorknob in his hand.

"You must tell me what you know." She couldn't let him walk out the door without answering her question.

He stopped, glanced down at his feet and then back up at her. "My wife and I live a ways up the hill from the village. We can see this place better than the rest of the folks."

He paused, and Abby waited, hoping with everything in her that he would give her some news about her sister.

"We were watching television one night when we saw a helicopter land right out there." He gestured toward the window in Abby's room. "We saw a man and your sister board the helicopter ... then it took off."

Helicopter? She couldn't believe it. Devlin had known all along and hadn't told her! "What man? Did you know him? Do you know where they went?" Abby summoned her calmest voice despite the anger she felt at Devlin's deception.

He turned and looked at her with worry clouding his eyes. "I don't know where they went, Ms. Chapel." He opened the door and stepped out into the hall.

Abby rushed out behind him and grabbed his arm. He jerked his head around and stared at her. "Did you know the man? Tell me. Please!"

Luke glanced nervously up and down the hall, and Abby felt sure he was about to tell her, when he abruptly shrugged out of her hold and headed down the hallway. "I really have to go."

"Thank you, Mr. Carstairs, for the flowers. Give my best to your wife."

The moment he left, Abby made a beeline for Devlin's room. Frustrated to find it empty, she headed for the stairs and Devlin's office. He damn well had some explaining to do.

The door of Devlin's office stood slightly ajar when Abby arrived on the threshold with a full head of steam. She saw the deceitful jerk sitting at his desk, leaning comfortably back in his chair, chatting on the phone. His comfort was about to end. She didn't bother to knock, just pushed the door open and barged in.

The lying weasel glanced up at her, ended his phone call, and hung up. "Don't you believe in knocking?"

She marched up to his desk, her hands bunched into fists. "No, I don't. Not when I just found out my sister left this castle in a helicopter!" Abby didn't bother to temper her voice. She'd never been so mad in her life.

Devlin put the tips of his fingers together and rested them under his chin. "Who told you that?" How could he sound so calm?

"Luke Carstairs. Why didn't you tell me?"

He sighed heavily, rose from his chair, and walked around the desk until he stood next to her. He rested his hands on her upper arms. "Look, I know you're upset, but --"

Abby shrugged his hands away and threw her arms out to the side. "You bet I'm bloody upset." She never cursed. Ever. It was all Devlin's fault. "Mr. Carstairs said the chopper landed right outside the window of my room. He saw a man and my sister get on the helicopter. Where did she go? Who was the man?"

Devlin shoved his hands into his jeans pockets and studied her for a moment. "She's with my brother. He got hurt and needed to go to a hospital on the mainland. She went with him."

Abby sighed. Great. Miranda had been searching for that special someone through a series of boyfriends who were needy in some way. She loaned them money they never paid back, gave them a roof over their heads. She wanted to save them all because she couldn't save their mum from her self-destructive behavior. Abby kept her gaze on Devlin. "How did he get hurt?" She'd managed to soften the edge of anger in her voice even though fury still churned through her.

Devlin stepped closer until his scent and body heat surrounded her like an aura. He held her chin in his big, warm hand. "That's not important. I know you're worried about Miranda, but she's okay. I swear it. I need you to trust me about this." He used his soft voice again, the one that urged her to believe him. He was getting to her. Between his touch, scent, and smooth, sexy voice, how could she resist?

Abby lifted her chin from his hand. "Trust you?" No, she refused to let him get to her. "I don't trust you any farther than I could pitch you into the dustbin -- and that isn't very far, considering your size. Why should I?"

Devlin laid his hands on her shoulders and looked deeply into her eyes. The warmth of his fingers seeped into her skin. "Because I'm telling you the truth."

She shrugged out of his hold. "I don't believe you. Why didn't you tell me this sooner?"

"What do I have to lie about?" Nice segue to ignoring her question.

Abby slid her hand inside the pocket of her jeans, pulled out the crumpled copy she'd made of J.D. Tate's address and phone number, and waved it under Devlin's nose. "This, for instance."

He jerked it out of her hand, unfolded the paper, looked at it and then back at her. "So, you dug it out of my trash can."

"Miranda mentioned she was seeing a man named J.D., and I wanted to talk to him to see if he knew anything. But when I dialed that number, there was a recording telling me that the line was no longer in service."

Devlin tossed the paper behind him onto his desk, then turned back to Abby. "J.D. Tate is my brother." He waved a hand toward the pictures on the wall of his office. "The chopper is mine. It was the fastest way to get him to a hospital."

Abby's temper cooled slightly as she walked over to the windows in Dev's office and gazed out at the cloudless blue sky. If Miranda was okay, why hadn't she called her, or at least gotten a message to Abby that she was safe? But deep in Abby's heart, she felt that Dev was telling her the truth. She and Miranda were very close, and she was certain she would know if her sister was dead or hurt.

What about Ms. Townsend's warning?

Don't leave this island. Devlin's life depends on it.

Why would she warn Abby that Devlin's life was in danger, and why would she be worried about him if he had harmed Miranda?

Abby felt Devlin ease up behind her; the warmth of his body and scent of his skin made her senses spin. "Do you believe me, Abby?" His low, seductive voice curled around her.

Through the glass, she watched a hawk riding on the thermals. "I want to. I really do, but why didn't you tell me about the helicopter in the beginning?"

He turned her around until she faced him. "Because it was too dangerous."

Sunlight misted through the window, illuminating his handsome face and bright green eyes, making her breath hitch. "Dangerous? How? Where is Miranda? Why hasn't she contacted me?"

His gaze moved slowly over her face, pausing briefly on each of her features, studying her intently. "Miranda's and J.D.'s safety depends on me keeping their whereabouts a secret. If I tell you where they are, you'll run to your sister's side. I can't risk that happening." Devlin held her head between his hands and caressed her cheeks with his thumbs. "You might be followed."

A frisson of anxiety tiptoed down her spine. "Followed? By whom? Does this have something to do with that rabbit you found?" Her voice was unsteady, instead of calm and matter-of-fact as she would have liked.

Devlin brushed a lock of hair away from her face and tucked it behind her ear. His thumb grazed her ear lobe. A flare of arousal ignited in the pit of her stomach. "Please don't ask me any more questions I can't answer. You just have to trust me when I tell you that Miranda is safe."

Before Abby could respond, he dipped his head and kissed her lightly on the mouth. His warm breath fanned her lips, while the blood rushed hot and heavy through her veins.

He kissed her again, more demanding this time, with a hint of tongue and a firm nip of her bottom lip. Heat plummeted to her stomach and lower. A soft white haze formed over her brain, and she could no longer feel the floor beneath her feet.

Devlin lifted his head and gazed at her. "I would never lie to you or hurt you or your sister. You must believe me."

Her lips tingled from his kisses, and a delicious euphoria swam through her body. Every time Devlin got close to her, he slipped a little further under her skin.

Abby wanted -- no, needed -- to believe that he would not harm her or Miranda. He'd been with her when the chimes tinkled out in the hallway. Could he have put Otis up to it or perhaps planted the rabbit and chimes earlier in the evening to cover his tracks? "I'm not sure about anything anymore."

"Yes, you are. You know I'm telling you the truth, Abby." He touched her chest over her heart. "In here."

Oh, God, what was he doing to her?

Abby eased from Devlin's arms and licked her lips. Her breath heaved raggedly from her lungs, and her skin felt tight. "I'm feeling tired. I'd like to go back to my room."

A worried frown appeared on his brow. "I'm sorry, I almost forgot about the accident." He clasped her elbow and led her toward the door of his office. "Come, I'll walk with you."

Later that evening, Abby paced restlessly around her room. She'd tried burying her nose in a book, but found herself reading the same page over and over. She'd called some charter companies that rented helicopters, and discovered one that Morgan R&D owned, but they didn't tell her very much. At least that part of Devlin's explanation was true. But what kind of danger were J.D. and Miranda in?

She glanced at the clock. Nearly midnight.

What did Ms. Townsend mean about Devlin's blood? How was a British schoolteacher with a normal, uneventful life supposed to save him? When would the creature, whatever it was, strike? The phone jingled on her nightstand, startling her. She picked up the receiver and started to say hello when she heard Devlin's voice and realized the call wasn't for her. She knew she shouldn't eavesdrop, but if she listened in on the conversation, she might discover some new information about Miranda.

"Yeah, I'm okay." She heard Devlin's voice over the phone. "He spent a night or two on the boat, made a big mess, then cut the lines during a storm. It drifted a bit, but I got it back."

Who was on the boat? What was Dev talking about?

Abby heard a heavy sigh on the other end of the line, then another male voice, one she'd never heard before. "He's getting closer. God, I hope this is over soon. I wish you could have come with us. If you were off island --"

"If I were off island, he might follow me, and then the two of you would be in even more danger. How's she doing, by the way?"

"Fine. I'll be in touch."

He rang off. Abby slowly replaced the receiver in the cradle, with a slight shake in her hand. She swallowed and wiped her suddenly damp palms over her black leggings. *He's getting closer.* Could that be the creature Ms. Townsend warned her about?

Chapter Eight

Abby rose from the bed and walked to the window in her room. The moon floated across the night sky, covered with the gray strands of a few ragged clouds. Wind currents moaned outside the castle, and the trees cast long, undulating shadows over the ground. She opened the window and inhaled a breath of pine-scented air. Chimes jingled softly on the night air until the sound gradually faded into the darkness.

Abby closed the window with a snap. She was sick of hearing about predictions and danger and chiming ghosts. She wanted more than anything to just go home where it was safe, where her life could be normal again.

She turned and looked at her half-packed suitcase. She desperately wanted to leave tomorrow. Dev had told her Miranda was with his brother, and the explanation about him owning the helicopter checked out ... but where exactly were they?

Miranda had to know she was worried. Surely she would get in touch with Abby soon. Miranda could just as easily get in touch with her in England. Right?

Wrong. Abby slumped in a chair next to the fireplace and watched the flames dance around the wood. She toyed with a button on her long-sleeved white shirt and stretched her jeans-covered legs out in front of her. How could she run back home where it was safe, until she heard from Miranda? And what about Devlin? His life was in danger, and she had the chance to save him. Didn't she?

She popped up from the chair and stalked over to her suitcase. Her fingers closed around two shirts and tossed them on the bed. Maybe she should tell him what Ms. Townsend had said and let him decide if she should go or stay.

Before she could change her mind, Abby walked out into the hall and up to Devlin's door. With only a brief hesitation, she tapped lightly with her knuckles.

"Come in."

Heaving a deep breath, Abby opened the door.

“Abby. Can’t sleep?”

Her heart pushed into her throat. Dev looked so handsome, she forgot to breathe.

She stepped through the door and smiled. His eyes appeared tired, and his hair was mussed, as if he’d run his fingers through it repeatedly. His ginger-colored sweater molded the muscles of his chest. The sleeves pushed up past his elbows revealed strong arms dusted with dark hair. Jeans covered the lower half of his big body. In one hand he held a snifter of what she assumed was brandy. “I need to talk to you. Ms. Townsend told me something earlier, but I wanted some time to think about what she told me before I approached you.”

He took a sip of his drink, watching her every move. To have something to do, she walked to the French doors in his room and looked outside before turning to face him. Once she started talking, the words spilled out.

When she finished, Dev strolled to the fireplace and set his glass on the mantel. He swiveled his head and looked at her over his shoulder. “You don’t really believe in all that psychic mumbo-jumbo do you?”

“I never have before, but how can I ignore what she said after what happened to Alice? She warned everyone about her niece’s death, and no one took her prediction seriously.”

Dev turned and crossed his arms over his chest. He shifted his weight to his right leg and looked at her. “Have you ever thought that Alice’s death and Catherine’s prediction could have been a coincidence?”

“Yes, maybe, but what if they weren’t? What if everyone had listened to her? Alice would be alive today.” Abby was sure of it. Since when had she started believing in predictions?

Devlin shrugged. “You don’t know that for sure. She might still have been killed. It’s been my experience that when someone wants to do something bad enough, they’ll go to any lengths to achieve it.”

Her heart jolted in her chest. What did he mean by that? Abby walked to his side. “Why is it so dangerous here, Dev? What’s going on? What are you so afraid of? What did Ms. Townsend mean when she said that blood was on the creature’s fur?”

Dev shook his head. “You shouldn’t take everything she says at face value. Okay, I’ll admit that she might have predicted Alice’s death, since it did come true, but she’s predicted other things that never happened.”

Genuine fear and worry crowded her heart. She cared about him. “I don’t want anything to happen to you.” Her voice broke.

“Nothing is going to happen to me.” His voice turned soft. “But something could happen to you if you stay on the island. I want you to get your things together. I’m putting you on that ferry first thing in the morning.”

He couldn't have pushed her in front of that vehicle the day before; if he had, he wouldn't be so concerned about her welfare now. He could let whatever danger lurked around the island get rid of her. Abby held out her hand. Something warm settled over her heart, almost like a sigh of relief as she waited for him to place his hand in hers.

She trusted him.

"I'm not leaving. Not yet. How can I? Catherine said you would die if I left. I admit I've never believed in psychic phenomena before, but I can't blow this off. If something happened to you, I'd never forgive myself, and I'd never know for sure if I had chosen to stay, you might have lived."

Devlin drew her to him. He took her face in his hands and lowered his head. His lips closed over hers in a kiss that was both hungry and laced with fear. His hands trembled slightly as he held her. Devlin lifted his mouth and gazed down into her eyes. They brimmed with yearning, an unfulfilled need. Abby raised a hand and laid it over his. "What's wrong, Dev? What is it you want so badly? Why are you so unhappy?"

His hands slid away from her face. "You don't want to know the answer to that question."

The next morning, Abby sat at the desk in her room and opened one of the drawers, searching for writing paper. She wanted to send a note to the headmistress at the school where she taught to let her know she might be absent a bit longer.

She pulled on the bottom drawer, but it wouldn't open. Abby leaned down to look beneath the desk. She noticed a book wedged between the drawer and the underside of the top of the desk. Abby tried digging her fingers between the edge of the drawer and the desk, but the book wouldn't budge.

She'd just about given up hope of retrieving it when finally the book slipped free. She ran her fingers over the rose print of the small book.

Abby switched on the lamp, opened the book, and began reading. After reading the first couple of lines, she realized she had come upon a woman's private journal.

Not just any journal and not just any woman -- Valerie Morgan, Devlin's mother.

Why would she leave it here? Abby wondered. This was something extremely personal, especially to a woman. She would probably be mortified to know that Abby had found it.

She really shouldn't open it and read her private thoughts. *Devlin obviously doesn't know it's here.* She doubted very seriously that he would want her to read it, but ... she couldn't help herself. Miranda was still missing. Abby looked down at the delicate handwriting on the page and began to read.

The baby was born this morning. I always thought that when I had a child, my heart would swell with so much love I wouldn't be able to hold it in. But I felt none of those

things. I looked upon this child in whose veins my blood flows, and I felt cold. Cold, and sick inside. But also relieved. The pregnancy is over. I no longer have to endure carrying his child. How can a woman suffer rape and love a child that results from such violence?

Abby slapped a hand over her mouth and closed her eyes. Rape. An insidious image cut through her. Cold, callous, brutal. A violent act had made Devlin repulsive and abhorrent in his mother's eyes. Her heart ached for them both. With tears stinging her eyes, she returned her gaze to the page and continued to read.

I wish I could have ended this pregnancy, but my Catholic upbringing would not permit it. So I endured, and now it is over. I wanted to send the child away, to put him up for adoption, but Randall and Olivia insist on raising him. I was hoping to get his father out of my life for good, never see him or think of him again. But when he escaped from the institution for the criminally insane, came back here, and attacked me, I knew he would be a part of my life forever and I could never wash away the horrible memories of him from my mind. Now this child has his father's blood, and that makes Victor Morgan's immoral acts a part of him.

God forgive me, I pray with all my heart that the baby will die. I will leave this castle, this island tomorrow and hope never to return. The only person I will miss is my best friend, Emily. She has been the only comfort to me through the trauma of the last few months.

Abby turned the page and found the rest of the journal blank. She shut the book and choked back a sob. This was the key to Devlin and his past. But how and when would she let Devlin know that she knew the truth?

Was that part of the reason he wanted her to leave the island so badly? Had he inherited the violent triggers of his father? How could she believe that when he had been nothing but gentle with her since they met? He'd never once tried to harm her, and he'd had every opportunity.

She couldn't imagine the horror of rape. Afterward, if she discovered she was pregnant, would she want the child? The child wasn't to blame for the father's actions. Didn't all children, no matter how they were conceived, deserve to be loved and cherished?

Abby was still pondering the words she'd read in the diary when someone knocked on her door. A moment passed before Devlin walked in. He looked incredible, dressed in faded jeans and a white shirt. In his hands, he held a tray with a teapot and cups.

Her heart went out to him. How could his mother not love him? Despite her mother's problems, Abby always knew that she was loved and wanted. Tears welled in her eyes, and a hard lump formed in her throat. Abby turned her face away and tried to compose herself.

"Did I interrupt your reading?"

Abby glanced down at the small, rose-covered diary she still held in her hands, then back up at Devlin. "Yes, I, um ..." She didn't want to discuss this now, with the myriad of feelings churning through her, but how could she ignore the revelation she'd just discovered?

"Then, I did interrupt. If you'd like me to leave --"

"No, I just finished." Her voice wobbled slightly with emotion from reading the diary.

Devlin frowned, set the tray on the small coffee table in front of the hearth, and turned. He looked at her as though he could see into the center of her heart. "What's wrong?"

He moved nearer to her, and her heart rate sped. Devlin lifted his hand and brushed the tips of his fingers over her temple and down her cheek with the softest touch. Abby shifted away from the gentle contact. "Why do you think something's wrong?"

"You wear your emotions in full view of God and everybody. Your skin is flushed, and your eyes are slightly red. Come have some tea, and tell me why you were about to cry when I walked in."

He had noticed. Darn her fair British skin, which reddened easily. She didn't want to talk about the diary now, but she needed to tell him something that would be convincing. Besides, how could she not talk to him when his voice sounded so gentle?

Abby laid the diary on the top of the desk, walked across the room, and settled on the sofa beside him. "The doctor told me that sometimes a traumatic experience or a bump on the head can cause a person to be more emotional at times than they normally would be."

Devlin frowned. "Right, I almost forgot. The doc did mention something about that. I should have come by sooner and not left you alone so much of the morning."

Abby sighed. "It's okay. The bump on my head isn't the reason you found me with tears in my eyes."

"What was the reason?"

"Let's have some tea first."

A minute later, Abby sipped her tea and whisked her gaze over Devlin's dark hair, which had flopped onto his forehead. From there she traced a path to his eyes, then to his lips. Oh, yes, his lips.

She would never forget the way he had kissed and touched her the evening before or the expression in his eyes when she asked him to tell her why he was so unhappy. At least now she knew the truth.

There was no way she was going to leave until she knew for certain that he was safe. He had held her last night as if she were something precious, a treasure that he valued.

Devlin turned on the floor lamp on his end of the loveseat and slumped into the overstuffed cushions on the stripe-patterned sofa. The words *warm and cuddly* sprang to her mind. All he needed was a pipe and slippers. He definitely looked like the lord of the manor. She had an inexplicable urge to wrap her arms around him and cling.

"It's so quiet," she said. "The last time we were here together, we heard chimes ringing and then ..."

Devlin reached over and squeezed her hand. "Try not to think about it. This morning, Otis and I double-checked all of the windows and doors in the castle to make sure they're secure. The only way anyone will get back in is if they can walk through walls."

Walls. Abby thought about the strange scraping noises she'd often heard through her bedroom walls since her arrival at the castle. But when she'd peeked out of her bedroom door or looked behind her in the hallway, no one was there. "Speaking of walls ... I've heard some odd scraping noises from time to time, but when I investigated, I found nothing. Do you have any idea what these noises could be?"

Devlin rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Maybe tree branches brushing against the castle walls, or mice scratching around for food."

She wasn't sure about either explanation, but decided to drop it for the time being. Abby grimaced and gave him a mock shiver. "I hate mice, so don't even mention them."

Devlin smiled. "You seem to be feeling better."

"I am." Abby retrieved the diary from the desk, then sat back down beside Devlin. "I found this wedged in a drawer in the desk."

"What is it?"

Abby looked up at him, reached out her hand, and caressed the side of his face. "Your mother's diary. I'm so sorry, Dev."

He didn't move, just looked at her as though he'd been kicked in the stomach. "You know. Oh, God, you know." He tried to draw away, but she grabbed his hands and held them tight. "Don't pull back, or nothing will ever change. Can't you see that?"

He stared at her with misery on his face and pain shadowing his eyes. "What did it say?"

"Just that she was raped and you were raised by your grandparents."

"That's all?"

"Basically, yes."

"Did she say anything about me? Did she say --"

He turned his face away, but she raised his hands to her lips and kissed his knuckles. "Talk to me, Dev."

"What's left to talk about?" The grief she heard in his voice broke her heart. "You just read it all."

"Tell me how your parents met."

He looked away for a moment, then back at her. "Valerie and her best friend, Emily Good, came here for the summer, right after Victor arrived home from college. They stayed with Emily's older sister, Catherine. They spent most of their time sunning themselves and sketching down on the beach."

He rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. "One day the two of them wandered up here to the castle. Victor was out riding. He came galloping up just as they crested the hill and nearly ran them over. All it took was one look at Valerie and he fell madly in love with her."

Madly in love. How does a man go from madly in love to rape?

"Six weeks later, they were married." His voice trailed away, wistful and sad.

"She didn't mention anything in the diary about how she met Victor or their wedding. I think the diary I found was a continuation of another."

Devlin's head snapped up, his face an expression of surprise. "Do you think there could be another one somewhere in the castle?"

Abby shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe. But does it really matter if there is?"

"No, I guess not. It would probably just be filled with stories about Victor's jealousy."

Jealousy? Abby nodded as if she knew exactly what he was talking about and waited for him to continue.

"They had been married barely six months when Valerie opened a gift shop down in the village. Emily had stayed on the island and helped Val out in the shop a few afternoons a week. Had a lot of tourists, even in those days, who came to the island to rent cottages for the summer."

He paused as if gathering his thoughts. "Victor didn't want her working. He tried to talk her out of it. He couldn't stand for her to be out of his sight. At first, my grandparents were amused at his possessiveness, but then he started showing up at the shop on the spur of the moment and would find her helping a customer. My mother was a beautiful woman. She was friendly and handled the men who came into the shop well. Harmless flirtations. She brushed them off because she only had eyes for Victor. Only, he couldn't see that."

Abby blinked away the tears that nearly rolled down her cheeks. How terrible for a man so obviously in love to allow something like petty jealousy to come between him and the love of his life.

She reached for Devlin's hand and entwined their fingers. "Dev, no matter what you tell me, I'm not going anywhere."

He looked away. "I wouldn't be so sure of that." Hurt, old pain, and guilt laced his words.

Abby couldn't resist giving him some comfort. She touched her hand to his arm. He looked up at her. "Devlin Morgan, you're a fine man, and nothing can ever change that. Tell me what happened with Valerie and Victor." She was anxious for him to finish the story.

"At first Victor would just become angry and storm out of the store. Then he started making nasty remarks to the customers. He became belligerent. One day he broke a man's nose. My mother was horrified and incensed. She tried in vain to convince him there was

nothing going on and there never had been. They had some terrible fights. He started drinking, and the more he drank, the angrier he became.”

In spite of what Victor had done, or perhaps because of it, her heart went out to them both. How could the deep love he’d held for Valerie have become so twisted, so distorted by the intrigues he had unjustly imagined?

“But there was something else going on, too, something no one realized at first. Months went by, and he started hearing things. Voices in his head. He misread every little thing Valerie said or did. He accused her of having an affair with Emily’s boyfriend. He even went down to the village and nearly beat him to death.”

Deep sadness filled Devlin’s eyes. Instinctively, Abby reached over and laid a hand on his arm. He looked at her, smiled briefly, then stared across the room as if observing the memories his grandparents must have shared with him. “His drinking became worse. Every time Valerie left the castle, he quizzed her about where she was going and what she was planning to do. Then he started following her. He would sit in the shop and practically dare her to smile at anyone who came through the door. As you might guess, the situation became unbearable.

“My grandparents tried talking to him, tried to persuade him to see a doctor, to get some help, but he refused. He accused them of encouraging Valerie to pursue other men.” He shook his head. “Can you imagine a father telling his daughter-in-law to cheat on his son? No amount of talking could convince him otherwise.”

Abby squeezed his arm. How awful it must have been for them to just stand back and watch their son become worse and worse and not be able to help him.

“Slowly they watched their son’s mind disintegrate before their eyes.” Devlin looked at her and smiled. “He wasn’t always a bad man, Abby. They weren’t sure what had happened to make him change so drastically, so they consulted a psychiatrist on their own, to try and get some answers as to how and why it could have happened.

“They were told that mental illness usually runs in families and that unless Victor was willing to submit to some testing and agree to therapy, medication, and so forth, there was nothing he could do to help him.

“I’m sorry.” Such pitiful, ineffectual words, but Abby truly didn’t know what else to say.

“My grandparents did some checking on their family backgrounds. They discovered that my great-grandfather suffered from schizophrenia. They’d had no idea. Of course in those days, not much was known about the disease or exactly how to treat it.”

He exhaled heavily. “My great-grandmother told my grandfather that his father had died. He had no memory of him. He was institutionalized shortly after my grandfather was born. Apparently the disease skips a generation -- that’s why my grandfather never suffered from it, but Victor did.”

The distress deepened the color in his eyes. Abby put her arms around him and tried to ease the hurt he felt. She drew back and rested her hand on his cheek. "There's no use contemplating what-ifs. What's done is done. Maybe there's a test, a way to find out if this illness would definitely be passed on or not? Remember the genome project where they identified all of the genes in a human being? You could have yourself checked to see if you're a carrier." She felt hopeful for the first time since Devlin had told her of his father's illness.

"I just read about this woman who had a similar procedure because she was afraid of contracting breast cancer like her mother and her grandmother. It was discovered that she didn't have the gene. Her mother didn't pass it on. Perhaps Victor didn't pass it on to you."

Devlin looked at her, his eyes full of sadness, and a grim expression played over his mouth. "I wouldn't count on it."

"How can you be sure?"

He ignored her question. "I've told you this much -- I suppose I should finish my story." "One day, my grandparents took the ferry over to the mainland to see a lawyer. They were going to try and get some kind of court order to have Victor committed. They were afraid he might harm Valerie. But when they returned, their worst fears were realized."

His brow furrowed in sorrow; his mouth settled into a line etched with misery. Devlin closed his eyes briefly, then opened them again and looked directly at Abby. "My mother left the castle and walked to the village." The weariness in his voice touched her deeply.

"She just needed a few minutes of fresh air and to get away from Victor. He had fallen asleep in the study. As she was coming back to the castle, he met her on the road. Of course, he accused her of running out to meet her lover.

"It was nearly dark, so no one saw him drag her into the trees or heard her scream ... when he beat and raped her." His voice cracked with emotion, then faded.

Abby winced inwardly. Oh, God, how had Devlin and his family managed to endure after everything that had happened to them?

"Victor just left her there, ran off, and hid on the other side of the island. The west side of the island is riddled with caves, the forest is thick, and the cliffs are steep and treacherous. The police searched for him, but they never found anything.

"Then a boat was stolen from the marina, and they assumed he must have taken the boat and escaped to the mainland. The authorities never stopped looking until they found him. He was declared insane and put in an institution."

Devlin leaned back against the sofa and exhaled a deep breath, as if the weight of the world rested on his shoulders. Abby laid her hand over his. "Thank you for telling me." He glanced at her, and one corner of his mouth turned up briefly. Then he closed his eyes. The warmth of his skin made her feel safe and comforted. Now, if she could only comfort Dev, or at least distract him from his brooding thoughts.

She snapped her fingers. "I have an idea." His eyes popped open as she continued. "A picture of you for the website would work wonders for tourism on the island."

Abby retrieved her digital camera and settled back on the sofa next to Devlin. He rubbed a hand through his hair, and Abby couldn't help noticing that the white Henley shirt he wore was open at the throat. A tuft of dark hair curled through the opening. She knew it was soft and springy because she'd had her fingers just there when they'd kissed the night before.

The rolled sleeves revealed muscular arms with a dusting of dark hair. How would it feel to have the freedom to reach out and caress his arms with her fingertips?

Devlin's legs were stretched out before him with his ankles crossed. Bare ankles again. She hadn't a clue why the sight of those ankles should make her feel so hot and bothered. The only thing she knew for certain was that she wanted to wrap her fingers around them and kiss the arch of each foot.

Abby jumped because she was shocked at the direction her thoughts had taken.

"You okay?"

She cast her gaze his way and smiled. "I'm fine. I was just thinking."

"Hmmm." His hum was low. "About what?"

"Just some things I forgot to take care of before I left home." Abby couldn't help studying Devlin out of the corner of her eye. Lately, the thought of having an affair had run through her head more than once.

And if a woman was going to have an affair, it should be with someone good. A gentleman, to be sure, but a gentleman with edges. Edges that weren't so smooth. A man capable of extreme passion. Abby had no doubt that Devlin was just that sort of man. A bit dangerous and secretive, but sexy and alluring.

The passion she'd seen in his eyes last night was real. He wanted her. Could she have an affair with him and walk away? Did the aura of danger that surrounded him matter more or less than the way he made her feel when she was in his arms? How would she feel during and after a hot affair with him?

"Why do you keep staring at me?" A frown wrinkled Devlin's brow. "Are you wondering how much I might look like *him*?"

Abby fixed her gaze on the coffee table and tamped down her anger at Victor Morgan and his wife for bringing so much pain into their son's life. "I'm not staring at you." She lifted the camera and focused on his face. "I'm just thinking about which angle I should take your picture from." She snapped a couple of pictures, put down the camera, and reached for her tea cup.

Something tickled her leg.

She shifted her body on the sofa. She felt it again. Suddenly she had a vision of a large, hairy spider rubbing up against her leg. This was a castle, after all. Just then, something leaped into her lap with a soft meow.

The kitten.

Startled, she jerked, and the tea in her cup flew through the air.

"Damn it, Abby." Devlin growled.

Abby whipped her head around and, with a cursory glance, saw exactly where the tea had landed.

On Devlin's crotch.

A large wet spot spread out over his thighs. Quickly, Abby grabbed a napkin as she set the kitten on the sofa between them. Unfortunately, the kitten promptly climbed into Devlin's lap and began licking the soaked fly of his pants.

Devlin tried to pull the kitten from his lap, but the scalawag dug in his claws, and Devlin yowled. Abby stopped wiping with her napkin and instead started prying the kitten's claws from Devlin's legs and crotch.

When she grasped the second paw, the kitten stuck his nose down between Devlin's legs, lapping up the remains of the spilled tea mixed with lots of milk. Her hand brushed over the rather prominent bulge in his pants. There was a twitch, and the bulge grew larger.

Hastily, Abby withdrew her hand, lifted her chin, and stared at him.

Devlin scowled right back at her. His green eyes were slightly darker. She supposed the color must deepen when he was irritated or ... aroused? His handsome mouth wore a thin-lipped smile. "What did you expect?"

Abby straightened into a sitting position and scooted back to her side of the sofa. Her face burned with a blush she couldn't control. She tossed her napkin on the table and folded her hands in her lap. "I'm sorry. I was only trying to help."

He shrugged. "Don't worry about it. I'll go change and meet you downstairs for lunch."

Later that night, Devlin was in his office answering mail when the sheriff knocked on the door. He looked haggard, and his normally pressed uniform was rumpled. He took off his hat. "Dev," he began. "I've got some bad news."

Please God, don't let him say someone is dead. "What's happened?"

Jake shifted to a chair in front of Devlin's desk and sat down. "Remember the plan I told you about with Officer Lowell?"

Devlin nodded and waited for the bomb to drop.

"He showed himself. She got beat up pretty bad before anyone could get to her."

Devlin sprang from his chair and walked around the front of his desk. "Oh, God, is she all right? Did he -- Did he rape her? What about that Taser thing? Didn't she use it?"

Jake shook his head. "No. He tried, but we got to her in time. There was a scuffle with one of the officers, who sustained some injuries, but Victor ran off. He's one big son of a bitch. And Officer Lowell didn't even have a chance to pull the Taser."

Devlin slumped against the desk, gripping the edge until he felt the granite biting into his fingers. "We failed. Again. What the hell are we going to do?"

Jake shook his head. "We'll try again, that's all. And we'll keep trying until he's caught."

"How, Jake? I never thought that plan had a chance in hell of working. Now another woman has been hurt by that monster!"

"I'm sorry, Dev. We should have listened to your concerns and given them more thought. Officer Lowell is a damn good officer. Victor is bigger, faster, and stronger than we gave him credit for. But one thing's for sure -- we've got to come up with something better. He thought that Officer Lowell was your mother, and when he saw that she wasn't, he got really mad. I think we can use that anger against him."

"How?"

Jake rose from his chair and laid a hand on Devlin's shoulder. "Get some sleep. I'll come by in the morning and we'll talk about it."

Abby swung her legs over the side of the bed and switched on the bedside lamp. She'd been lying there for the past hour, trying to go to sleep and failing. All she could think about was Devlin and her missing sister.

She rose from the bed and slipped on her robe. A restlessness plagued her as though something were about to happen. She shook her head and smiled at her thoughts. This castle, the island, and, most of all, Devlin were responsible for her unusual feelings. These emotions were more like something Miranda might feel, not her.

Abby tied the belt around her robe, then picked up a magazine lying on the coffee table, flipped through it absently, and laid it down again. Then she remembered the rabbit Devlin had found. He'd mentioned something about a trail of blood leading to the bookcase and how it had stopped. Now was the perfect time to check it out; the castle was quiet, and no one was about. Abby retrieved her flashlight and headed out the bedroom door. As soon as she stepped into the hall, she heard the strains of Devlin's violin drifting up from downstairs. The music drew her like a spell. She crept down the stairs and sat on the bottom step.

Had his mother ever heard him play? If she had, how could she listen to the notes he drew from the instrument and believe that he was anything like his father? The music wept with such yearning, such love. Her feet grew cold, and a chill swept over her body. The fire had died down in her room, and she knew that Devlin probably had a blaze going downstairs. But that was only an excuse.

What she really wanted was just to see him, talk to him, touch him. Abby rose from the step and followed the sound of the music. At the end of a darkened hallway, she saw a door standing ajar with light spilling out. The music poured out into the hall.

Abby looked through the opening. She saw Devlin standing with his eyes closed, much like she had seen him on her first day in the castle, holding the violin in his big but gentle hands as if it were a part of him. He stood in front of the fireplace and seemed unaware of his surroundings, only the music.

She slipped inside the room and walked stealthily over to a chair to listen. Listening to him play was almost like listening to his heart. There was such passion, such longing, such happiness and deep sorrow all tangled up together in his performance. She sat in a chair and just watched him. He continued to play without opening his eyes. When he finally stopped, he exhaled a deep breath and opened his eyes. He jerked when he saw her, and his mouth popped open.

"How long have you been sitting there?" he said with a hint of irritation.

She probably should apologize, but she wasn't sure why. His left brow rose as he waited for her reply, and his eyes were dark and compelling. "A while. You play beautifully. I tried taking up the violin once, but I never moved beyond the strangling-the-cat stage, so I switched to the piano instead." She was unable to hold back the trace of laughter in her voice.

He seemed to relax at her statement and laid his instrument almost reverently into its case. "Do you still play?"

She smiled. "Yes, a little."

"I'd like to hear you." Genuine interest rang in his voice.

Abby felt a rush of warmth deep inside at his words. "All right. I'll do that, sometime." When she'd had the chance to practice, she would enjoy playing for him.

He straightened, and amusement glimmered in his eyes. "Now is as good a time as any. It's obvious neither of us is going to get any sleep. Here's the piano." He swung his arm out to the side, gesturing toward the instrument.

"Now?" Surprise vibrated in her voice. Instinctively she fingered the belt on her robe. "I can't possibly. I haven't played in years. I'm -- I'm not prepared."

A grin creased his face and crinkled the outer corners of his beautiful green eyes. "It's like riding a bicycle. It'll all come back once you start playing again." He paused, stepped close to her, and stroked the tip of his index finger over her nose. "I won't take no for an answer. It's the least you can do for sneaking up on me."

Her eyes widened. "If I recall, you caught me belly-dancing in the kitchen and didn't say a word, so it's only fair."

A sensuous light burned in his eyes, and he gave her a slow smile. "How could I forget?"

Abby felt a blush warm her skin. She turned her face away from his penetrating gaze, rose from the chair, and walked to the piano. The room felt cozy, with the fire crackling in the grate. He settled her on the piano bench with a soft throw tucked around her legs. To her surprise, he plopped down beside her. His body heat radiated around her, and awareness expanded in her chest. She looked over at him. "I'm too nervous for you to sit beside me. Would you mind sitting on the sofa or taking a chair?"

Devlin threw her a full-blown grin that sent her senses reeling. "Yes, I would mind. I used to sit beside my grandmother and turn the pages of her music when she played. I'm afraid I don't know any other way to listen to someone tickle the ivories."

Abby imagined him sitting here by his grandmother, someone he obviously loved, and a little piece of her heart fell further under his spell. She couldn't suppress her smile. "Okay." She stretched her fingers and clenched her hands into fists in an effort to limber her fingers. Devlin placed some sheet music in front of her. "It Had to Be You." She arched a brow and looked at him.

"My grandparents' favorite song."

How sweet of him to remember. "I'd like to meet them sometime."

When she said the words, an expression shone in his eyes that she couldn't explain or understand, a mixture of hope shadowed with fear. She wanted to reach out and touch him, comfort him, reassure him that the dark specter of his past wouldn't haunt him forever, but somehow she sensed he wouldn't welcome that kind of comfort from her yet.

Abby turned her attention to the keyboard, looked at the top of the page of music, and put her fingers on the keys. She started to play, and to her surprise, the memory did come back. She stumbled over a few notes, but in all, her performance wasn't too shabby. When she was done, she turned to Devlin and smiled.

He watched her with such a profound expression of affection in his eyes. Could he care for her? Abby's heart leaped at the thought, and warmth flooded her body. She knew in that moment that she cared for him; in fact, she was beginning to fall in love with him. A few more moments like this, another kiss or two, and she would tumble headlong into love with Devlin.

"Very nice." His low, husky words were so sincere, she couldn't help smiling. "We should try a duet sometime."

Playing a duet would make them a duo, a couple, of sorts. If they did play together, the moment he picked up his violin and she touched the piano keys would make them two parts of a whole. Oh, how she longed for that to happen.

The grandfather clock in the hall struck three a.m. Her body ached with fatigue, and her eyes felt gritty. "I think I'll go up to bed and try to get some sleep."

She started to rise from the bench, but Devlin laid a hand on her arm. "Thank you."

"For what?"

“For the song. For being here.”

His quiet answer caused a lump of emotion to slide into her throat. The gratitude she saw in his eyes reached out and squeezed her heart. Had no one else ever played for him?

She left him sitting there alone, though she didn't want to after his softly spoken words of thanks. She wanted to wrap him in her arms and never let go.

Abby walked slowly up the stairs and made her way to her room. She closed the door and sat on the edge of the bed. She waited until she heard his footsteps pass by her door and pad across the floor of his room. Unable to go to sleep without seeing him once more, she walked out into the hall and up to his door. She knocked lightly, opened it just a crack, and looked in. Devlin stood only a few feet away, his shirt off, his jeans unzipped and hanging loose about his hips. His chest looked broad and golden in the soft light of his room.

She gasped at the sight. “I'm -- I'm sorry. I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“Do I look okay?” Amusement laced his sensuous voice.

A blush burned her neck and cheeks. “Yes, of -- of course,” she replied, unable to hide the tremor in her voice. “Um, goodnight.”

Abby quickly closed the door and willed her rapidly beating heart to calm to a more normal rhythm.

“Goodnight, Abigail.” Devlin's voice drifted to her from the other side of the door.

If only a hole would open up so she could fall through.

Cold. The freezing cold sliced into her bones.

Icy water caressed her skin. Exhaustion plagued her; it pulled at her mind and body. Tired. So tired. She moved her head from side to side. “I can't swim anymore. I can't do it.” Abby paddled her arms through the water, gasping for breath, but the cold sapped more of her strength.

“Help me, Abby. Help me.” Devlin called to her, his voice sounding weaker.

Abby struggled valiantly to reach Devlin, but she had nothing to show for her efforts. “I have to keep trying. I can't give up.” The harder she swam, the more the waves impeded her and the farther away Devlin drifted on the current. Oh, God, she had to help him.

She saw the top of his head, with his dark hair now soaked and dripping into his green eyes. Waves lapped his face, making him sputter for breath. His arms struggled against the water in a desperate attempt to stay afloat. Blood from his wounds trickled into the sea.

“It's my fault. All my fault.” Abby moaned the phrase over and over. “Dev, I'm coming. Hang on.” But the rain poured harder from a sky filled with dark clouds, and the wind whistled over the choppy surface of the ocean.

Abby swam harder, trying to draw closer to Devlin. She was almost there. If only she weren't so cold. The cold cramped her muscles; it sucked at her arms and legs, trying to pull her under.

She watched helplessly as Devlin flailed his arms. His big hands reached for something to hold on to; his fingers spread, trying desperately to grasp Abby's hand, but she was too far away.

"I have to save him. I have to. I'm his only hope." The rain pounded harder now, a loud slap into the ocean followed by thunder and the flash of lightning. They had to get out of the water. Too dangerous. Abby saw Devlin's head slip below the cool, gray water. "No," she cried. "Devlin! Devlin!" Her cries were frantic. "Where are you?"

Devlin's head bobbed briefly above the water, his mouth open, sucking in air, his eyes wide with fear. Then he slid into the watery depths once more. Abby beat her arms and hands through the water. She swam harder and faster than she ever had in her life. The wind lifted white-capped waves from the ocean and splashed them into her face and eyes.

Inhaling a deep breath, she plunged beneath the surface and opened her eyes. She saw the faint shadow of Devlin's body as he moved silently toward the bottom. Abby stroked her arms through the turbulent waves and kicked her legs, but the more she swam, the faster Devlin glided through the water away from her. Her lungs burned as though they were about to burst. She had to help Devlin, but she needed air. She watched in horror as Devlin's body disappeared into the murky depths.

Desperate, Abby kicked toward the surface, her lungs hurting, her arms and legs like lead weights attached to her body. She saw the surface. Light shimmered through the water overhead, and the splatter of the rain sounded muffled and distant. Not too far away. Breathe. She had to breathe. Now.

Chapter Nine

Abby opened her mouth and sprang up in bed. The breath wheezed down her throat into her lungs. Her eyes were wide as she stared into the darkness of her room and saw only water. Her heart thrummed in her chest, and the sound of Devlin's cries still rang in her ears. A moment or two passed before her heartbeat settled and her pulse reached a calm rhythm in her veins. She looked toward the window, hoping to see dawn's light, but only darkness lay beyond.

She frowned. Wait a minute. The window was closed, the curtains drawn. She was certain she'd opened it right before she went to bed because she liked to sleep in a cool room. She got out of bed and donned her robe and slippers, then opened the window a crack and walked to the hearth.

The fire had grown cold, and now only ash-covered coals glowed softly in the grate. She threw a couple of logs on top and replaced the fire screen. She rubbed her hands together and listened to the wood crackle as the flames licked greedily at the new fuel. The wind blew in through the window, snapping the curtains in the chilly breeze, helping to clear her mind of the troubling images in her dream.

Starting across the room to crawl back into bed, she noticed a flickering light beneath her closed bedroom door. A bubble of fear crept up into her throat. *Alice looks for her lost love with a lantern.* Ridiculous. There was no such thing as ghosts. Despite her fear, she walked to the door.

She flung the door open, but the light was gone. Her heart grew cold and still inside her chest; her fingers grasped handfuls of her robe and clung.

No, she refused to run. Abby pinched the skin on her outer thighs through the fabric of her robe to make sure she wasn't still dreaming.

There had to be a logical explanation. Darkness filled every nook and cranny. Only a thin wash of moonlight drifted in through the windows lining the hallway. Then she heard it: the soft tinkling of chimes.

The sound surrounded her in a soft, musical cocoon.

“Abby.”

She spun on her heel, her eyes staring down the other length of hallway, trying to find the source of the voice. She saw nothing but darkness. A cry of terror caught in her throat. Finally, the sound of the chimes faded, and Abby heaved a sigh of relief.

She turned and stepped back into her room. When she crossed the threshold, Abby jerked her head up. The window was closed. Again.

But she’d opened it. She was certain of it. She ignored her fear and marched over to the window.

If this was Devlin’s idea of a joke, she intended to give him a piece of her mind. Abby threw back the curtains, opened the window, and turned. She bumped into a solid, male chest and screamed.

The scream skidded up Devlin’s spine and made his blood run cold. He gripped her upper arms. “Abby, what’s wrong?”

She squirmed out of his hold and stepped around him. “I’ll tell you what’s wrong. I’ve just been scared out of my wits!” Her voice was shrill with fear.

“I’m sorry.” He hoped his low tone would help to ease her fear. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

Abby waved a hand through the air and glared at him. “I don’t mean just now. Well, I do -- but I mean before, too.” A ring of control edged back into her voice.

“Before? What do you mean?”

Suddenly, her gaze shifted to the bed. Her eyes widened and her skin grew paler. She walked to the bed and touched the coverlet. Devlin moved quickly to her side and looked over her shoulder. A mangled set of wind chimes lay on her pillow. Icy fear chilled his skin. *Oh, my God. He’s been in her room!*

“How did these get here?” A tinge of hysteria coated Abby’s slightly high-pitched voice.

Devlin laid his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close to him. “I don’t know, but I promise to find out.”

She relaxed against his side a moment before pulling gently away from him. She tipped her face up, looked at him, and pushed a strand of hair away from her face. “What’s going on around here?”

To his relief, a wash of color had come back into her skin. The look she gave him was like the Abby he knew and ... and cared for. Warmth slid through his blood with an ease he had never felt with any other woman but her. The feeling frightened him, made him feel cold and hot all over, at the same time.

Had he ever allowed himself to care for a woman in his life other than his mother or grandmother? He knew the answer. He had not. Too risky. And yet, somehow, a prissy schoolteacher had managed to crawl under his skin and stay there as if she were a part of him.

She propped her fists on her hips and glared at him. "Are you and Otis in cahoots to scare me away?"

"No, of course not."

He grasped her hands. She resisted his touch, but he gently pried her fingers apart and clasped his own around them. Her skin felt icy, and her hands were rigid, as if she were ready for a fight. He rubbed them between his own and lifted them to his mouth to warm them with his breath. Her hands relaxed for a moment. "I can tell by the look on your face that you don't believe me."

Her hands stiffened slightly, and she pulled them gently from his. "No, I don't."

Her reluctance to accept him at his word bothered him greatly. "You've got to trust me," he implored with everything that was in him.

She studied him for a minute. "I'm trying to, Dev. I really am."

He was getting to her; he could tell by that wistful note of longing he heard in her voice. His heart soared. He had to gain her trust. She gestured toward the chimes lying on the bed. "But what about those chimes? They just happened to show up in my room right after I'd been scared down to my toes."

Why was he surprised that Abby couldn't trust him? No woman ever had. Oh, God, how he wanted her to. "I already told you why earlier. But let's not debate that now." He cleared his throat in an effort to hide his churning emotions. "Just tell me exactly what happened."

She frowned and glanced away. "I had a bad dream."

Devlin touched the side of her face and drew her attention back to him. "What was your dream about?"

Abby turned and walked over to the fireplace. The wood popped and hissed in the grate as she held her hands out to warm them. "I can't remember."

He suspected she could remember but didn't want to tell him. He wanted her to tell him -- no, needed her to confide in him. He wanted to hear her relate every detail of her dream to him. Only to him. Did this dream have something to do with him? He didn't want to think about her dreaming of him and being afraid. "Okay, then tell me what you saw or heard."

Devlin sat in a chair by the fireplace and listened to her gentle voice tell him everything that had happened. The more she talked, the more anxious he became. But he was careful to keep his face composed.

“Abby, don’t you think that the incident the other night was the inspiration for the light you saw and the voice you heard? You probably were still half asleep when you woke up from your dream, and what you saw, or think you saw, was no more than a continuation of that dream. Your brain was still foggy, and you were upset.”

Abby scowled at him and tightened the belt on her robe, much to Devlin’s disappointment. It had loosened and given him a fetching view of her dressed in a thin white nightgown. He looked at her, with her chin held high and her eyes sparkling. He wanted badly to smile. Actually, he wanted to grab her and twirl her around in his arms. She looked like herself again. But he knew if he so much as uttered a chuckle, she might slug him. He’d much rather she kissed him.

Abby walked over to him and poked a finger in the middle of his chest. “Do you think I get up in the middle of the night and scream the house down for fun?”

“What I think is that you have a vivid imagination.”

She straightened and walked back to the fire. “I’m a teacher and a very logical and practical person.” She stood there shivering with righteous indignation. What a woman she was. If only he could tell her he believed her, that he knew beyond any doubt what she had seen and heard was real.

Devlin stood up and moved to her side. He propped his foot on the hearth and rested a hand on the mantel. There was a small figurine sitting there, a shepherdess that had belonged to his mother. To have something to do with his hands other than gather Abby into his arms, he looked at the figure and stroked his finger over the woman’s placid face as he talked. “Did you ever think that perhaps you closed the window? And maybe the voice you thought you heard was actually the wind.”

When she started to interrupt him, he laid his fingers lightly against her lips. “Hear me out. Please.”

He stroked a hand over his mouth and cleared his throat. “You’ve been under a great deal of stress the last couple of days, since I told you about finding the rabbit in the library. And then there was your accident in the village.” He shuddered inwardly at the thought of what could have happened. “Having someone push you in front of a moving vehicle would rattle anyone.”

“It wasn’t stress.”

“I’m not finished. You experienced some sort of nightmare that you won’t talk about. With everything that’s happened, I’m sure you just imagined the light and the weird voice.”

Devlin turned his head and looked at her. He wanted to hold her. He needed to hold her.

Suddenly, all the reasons why he shouldn't fled his mind.

What harm could a hug do? He didn't want her to go to bed thinking he'd deliberately set out to frighten her. Would her misconception make her leave Wolf Island ... and him? Did he really want her to? He wanted her to be safe, but she'd brought a light of happiness into his life that he'd never known before.

Devlin slipped his arm from the mantel and moved toward her. She stood her ground, though wariness crept into her eyes. The closer he moved, the warier her expression became. She dropped her arms to her sides.

"What are you doing?"

He smiled. "I'm going to hold you."

"Why?"

"Because you need a hug." *Because I need it.*

"How do you know what I need? You didn't believe a word I just said."

Yes, he did. "Please, let me hold you for just a little while. I want to make sure you're okay."

Before she could argue with him anymore, Devlin stepped closer, wrapped his arms around her, and pulled her against his body. He slid his hand around the back of her neck so that her head rested on his shoulder. In slow, lazy circles, Devlin moved his palm over her back and closed his eyes.

Something nudged him in the dark corners of his heart. A sigh, a spiritual breath that poked at the barriers he'd erected. It shoved and prodded, urging him to open his heart a little bit more. He fought, and fought hard. He knew he should let her go, but he couldn't.

A narrow ray of light shone into a shadowy area of his soul and pushed away some of the sadness, the loneliness, the pain that infused him. It was a small part, but he couldn't help but wish and hope that this new feeling was only a beginning. Could this mean that someday, somehow, he might be able to give his love to a woman who would give him her love in return? And not just any woman. Abby.

Her arms wrapped around his waist, and her hands clutched at his shirt as if her life depended on her holding on to him.

As if he might save her life.

The truth resounded in his brain. Could Abby be saving his?

No, he couldn't believe that it might be true. The small bubble of happiness that Abby had brought into his life since her arrival might burst, and then where would his heart be? Could the woman he wished to become a part of his life be Abby? Hell, he needed to blow off any dream he had of making something solid and lasting between them. He couldn't allow himself to hope.

Devlin pulled back from her, gently grazed her cheek with his fingers, then gathered her close again. When his lips touched hers, desire flooded through him. Her lips were so pliant, so giving. She held nothing back. Oh, how he wanted to make love to her, but tonight wasn't the time. He knew that he would before she left Morgan's Keep. He would lie with the woman who had forced him to care, to begin to hope that he might have a real life.

Her lips parted under his, and he stroked his tongue inside her mouth. She moaned at the intimate intrusion, and his heart tumbled. So sweet, so loving. She would be a wonder in bed, and he intended to have her. Soon, very soon. He kissed her, loosened the belt on her robe, and pushed it aside to give him access to her. He stroked his hand over her collarbone, down to her breast.

Devlin rubbed his thumb over the distended nipple, then used the palm of his hand to repeat the action. He trailed kisses from her mouth, over her jaw and neck, down to her chest. Gently, he lowered the strap of her nightgown and bared one breast to his eyes. He lowered his mouth and licked.

Abby tilted her head back, and her breath grew ragged. He took her fully into his mouth and suckled until a shudder ripped from her throat. He was so hard, it was painful. He wanted to take her, take her now, and he would if he didn't stop. Reluctantly, Devlin removed his mouth from her breast and adjusted the strap of her nightgown, covering her flesh from his view.

"What's the matter? Why did you stop?" Her eyes were hazy with arousal. He drew the edges of her robe together and tied the belt. "If I stay a moment longer, I'll make love to you, and I don't think either of us is ready for that."

He tried to step around her, but she blocked his path. Abby laid her hand against his left cheek. "I'm ready, Dev. I don't think you are."

Dev turned his head and gave her a quick kiss on the soft inner skin of her wrist. "Lock the door and keep it locked." Once he stepped into the hall, he leaned against the panel and closed his eyes. No, he wasn't ready. If truth be told, he was afraid, fearful to let his passions free. Would he lose control? Would the demons that drove Victor awaken while he and Abby made love?

He knew he should force her to go back to England, where she would be safe, but how could he? She made him feel, she made him care, and he liked it.

He was coming to life for the first time.

When he heard the click of the lock on Abby's bedroom door, he opened his eyes and headed toward his room. Wait a minute. He stopped in the middle of the hallway. What about the secret passageway? Protecting Abby for the rest of the night meant everything to him. He remembered an idea from his childhood and the many games of hide-and-seek he'd played in the castle's hidden passages. After a quick trip downstairs to the kitchen, he placed several empty cans at intervals in the dark passageway, then settled into a chair with a

blanket. If Victor tried to get to Abby, the cans would alert him, and he'd fight the bastard until one of them died. He switched off the flashlight and pulled the blanket around himself.

* * * * *

"You're studying me again." Devlin's quiet voice wafted over her like a gently breeze.

Abby watched the waves wash onto the beach where they strolled. The nightmare of last night had faded with the dawn, and now the diffused light of another early evening spread over their heads. They had kicked off their shoes to go for a walk after sharing an intimate dinner, complete with sparkling wine in crystal glasses, on a soft woolen blanket while they watched the sun set. The sky was mostly clear, with only a few stray clouds as dusk deepened into night. "I'm sorry."

He stopped and tugged on her hand. A breeze ruffled his dark hair. "Don't be. But this time I want you to tell me why."

Abby gazed up into his eyes. There were so many questions she wanted to ask, but where should she begin?

"Well?" He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

"How did you and Otis meet?"

He smiled. "Is that really what you were thinking?"

His hair gleamed under the sun's rays. She wanted to touch the strands and see if they felt as soft as they looked. "To be honest, my head is filled with questions."

Devlin continued walking down the beach with Abby at his side. She heard an owl hoot into the encroaching darkness. The sound felt lonely, but for the first time in a long while, Abby didn't feel alone.

"We were in Desert Storm together," Devlin told her. "One night I was injured in battle and Otis saved my life."

That would surely bind a person to another. Saving a person's life wasn't something to be taken lightly. And yet, there was more to their relationship than just gratitude. "Why didn't Otis simply go home after the war? He told me that he paid for the trouble he got into earlier in his life."

Dev twined his fingers through hers and clasped their palms together. A tingle swept over her skin. "He needed a new beginning."

Why couldn't Devlin see the good that was inside him and the many good deeds he had done in his life? Good deeds that had nothing to do with his father. "When you caught me snooping in your office the first night I was on the island, some of the papers had letterhead with a company called Morgan Research and Development on it."

"I own the company."

She nodded. "I assumed as much. What sort of --" Before she could complete her sentence, he placed two fingers over her lips silencing her speech.

"No more questions tonight. Okay?"

They walked farther down the beach with only the sound of their feet swishing through the water, the quiet whisper of a salty breeze. Abby heard the owl again and watched it soar over the tops of the hemlock trees before disappearing into the darkness.

"Who are you, Abby?" Devlin broke the silence and drew her attention away from the woods.

His gentle question brought the words rushing into her throat and onto her tongue like the evening tide beginning to build at their feet. How could any woman refuse to tell him everything when the question held such kindness? "I'm a teacher from England who lives a simple, uncomplicated life. At least until Miranda disappeared and I came here to find her. Now things have been happening so fast I can barely keep up."

She stopped and looked at him. She knew his eyes were green but couldn't really see their brilliant color in the dim light. Instead of seeing with her eyes, she saw with her heart. His were eyes she knew she wanted to look into for the rest of her life. But would Devlin's past continue to keep them apart? Was there nothing she could do to break down the barriers of mistrust that stood between them?

After a moment, a smile creased his sensual lips. "What subjects do you teach at school?"

"Literature and art history."

He rubbed her palm with the pad of his thumb. Yearning quickened her pulse. Devlin stopped and moved closer to her until his body heat swirled over her skin, heating her from the top of her head down to her toes. He lifted her hand and bit into the soft pad of flesh at the base of her thumb. Abby sucked in a startled breath. "I bet you're a wonderful teacher."

"Why do you say that?" For some reason, she just had to know.

Devlin grazed the tips of his fingers over her neck. "Because you're bright and intuitive. I've seen the expression on your face and in your eyes when the wheels are turning in that clever brain of yours."

Her first reaction was to downplay his compliment, but it was time she started speaking up for herself and voicing her opinion, no matter how conceited it may sound. "Thank you, Dev. I always thought I had a gift for teaching."

He leaned over and blew softly into her ear, then tugged on her earlobe with his teeth. Her knees nearly buckled. Should she resist and pull away from the erotic heat that suffused her breasts and between her legs? No, here was her chance to explore her sexuality.

And why not? A beach with a handsome man and a moon on the rise was the perfect setting. Still unsure, but excited at the prospect, Abby wrapped her arm around Devlin's waist and stepped in closer to him so that her breasts, stomach, and thighs touched him. She

lifted her chin and stared into his eyes. To her delight, he trailed kisses over her cheek. She must be doing something right, after all.

“What about your parents?” His voice was a tender whisper.

She gasped when he nibbled the underside of her jaw. “I -- I, that is to say, my parents were -- oh, that feels good.” When he licked her neck, tasting her skin, a soft haze settled over her brain.

That was the first time she’d ever told a man she liked what he was doing to her. She’d always let the man take the lead while she followed. Abby felt a little giddy with her newfound sexual boldness. “My father walked away when we were small. He couldn’t get a job, and the added burden of supporting a family was too much for him, I suppose. At least, that’s what I’ve always thought.”

It was easier than believing he didn’t love us.

“We lost Mum to cancer a few months ago. It’s been Miranda and me against the world for as long as I can remember, even when Mum was alive. She had a drinking problem ... among other things.”

Devlin lifted his head and looked at her, but it was too dark to read his expression. He held her head gently between his big hands, then kissed her lightly, lovingly, on the eyelids. “I’m sorry.”

Those softly murmured words from his lips meant more to her at that moment than all of the flowers, cards, and letters of condolence that she’d received at the time of her mother’s death. His words somehow soothed her grief and loneliness.

“Was she ill a long time?”

She had never talked about it with anyone, not even Miranda. She held all her feelings inside. There were a few friends who wanted to hear how she felt or who lent a shoulder for her to cry on, but she’d always been the one to carry the burden, to shoulder the responsibility.

She never thought that anything could be handled properly by anyone except herself. After all, she had practically raised Miranda because her mother worked all the time, when she wasn’t drinking or running around with a variety of different men. But now, here was a man with big shoulders, a man asking her to tell him her feelings. How could she say no? “Yes. Toward the end, she -- she remembered Miranda, but she didn’t remember me. That was the hardest part of all.”

A burden, a sorrow so deep she thought it would never lessen, lifted at her confession. All it had taken was sharing her hurt with Devlin. A strong man, a fair man. A man who was wise, of that she had no doubt. He had become important to her, and she desperately needed to trust in his ability to comfort her, to soothe her. “Thank you, Dev.”

He kissed her tenderly on the mouth. “For what?”

She smiled, her heart much lighter, her soul freer. "I've never told anyone about what happened with my mother. Her not remembering me, I mean. Not even Miranda."

He started to kiss her again, and as much as she wanted him to, she turned her face away. "Dev, I want to know where my sister is. If I could just talk to her, I --"

Devlin touched the side of her cheek and shifted her face back to his. "Abby, trust me." His soft voice and the way he looked deep into her eyes urged her to believe him. "Miranda is okay. You'll be able to go to her soon ... I promise."

He gathered her close. "I don't know how you've managed to get to me, but you have." His breath felt warm and soft against her hair. "You're such a slight little thing, and I'm so big and tall. I'm always afraid every time I touch you that I might hurt you." He pulled out of her arms and brushed a lock of hair from her eyes. "Abby, there are things about me you don't know, things you can never know."

"But Dev, I've been wanting to --"

"No, no more talk tonight. I need to kiss you, be with you." He gathered her to him again, laid his mouth over hers, and slowly blew her mind with his kisses. A thick white fog rolled onto the beach and surrounded them. The mist felt comforting somehow, as it swirled in the air and blended with the sound of the increasing tide. Or was it the sound of passion and her needs climbing, grasping to the forefront? All she felt was Devlin. All she wanted was Devlin, his mouth, his hands, his arms. She wanted to feel him move inside her.

Amidst the roar of her own desire in her ears, she heard the tinkling of chimes, very faint but there nonetheless. She and Dev broke apart at the same time. They turned and looked around at the undulating fog. Abby gripped Devlin's arms, and he pulled her close to him.

"Don't be afraid," he whispered next to her ear. "I'll protect you."

His words brought a lump to her throat, and happiness swelled in her chest. She closed her eyes to stop the tears of joy from building. For the first time in her life, she felt as though she no longer stood alone against the world -- now someone stood beside her. The plume of silver mist continued to surround them, while the soft tinkle of chimes faded into the night.

Abby touched Devlin's face and gazed up into his eyes. "I'm not afraid. I don't know why, exactly, but I'm not. Corinne told me the story about Alice and her lover. She said that Alice spent weeks after his boat was lost, shining her light and ringing the chimes, trying to find him."

Devlin caressed her cheek and kissed her lightly beneath her eyes. "Yes, she did."

Abby pulled back, not believing what she was about to say. "Do you think it could be possible that the light and the chimes really are Alice still looking for her lost lover?"

Devlin smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not sure."

He pulled Abby into his arms and rested his chin on top of her head. She'd never felt so safe in her life. She settled against Devlin's chest and listened to the steady thud of his heart beneath her ear.

She wanted to stay here forever with his arms around her and feel the warmth of his body. But everything inside her, down to the center of her soul, felt that the laughter she'd heard at the castle and the sound of the chimes connected to Devlin and his past.

Abby pulled out of his arms. "Why did you keep the clipping about Alice's murder?" She already knew the answer but hoped he would open his heart and tell her.

Devlin tried distracting her by nibbling on her neck. "Let's not talk about that now."

She longed to give in to his husky, sensual voice, but she couldn't. She stepped back to put a little distance between them. "I think we need to. Tell me, Dev. Please."

He frowned. "I felt responsible." There was a gentle softness in his voice.

Abby raised her hand and touched his face. "For what?"

Devlin's body stiffened, and his expression grew still and somber. "For Victor coming back to the island and killing Alice."

Abby sighed and tilted her head to the side. "You aren't responsible for Victor's actions."

His face turned ashen, and pain filled his eyes. "He's a monster, and I'm his son. I bear some responsibility for what happened."

She inhaled a quick, calming breath and exhaled. "No, you don't." Unable to bear the anguish in Devlin's eyes a moment longer, Abby glanced around her. The fog grew denser. The vaporous cloud obscured the forest from her view, but Devlin was with her.

No one could harm her as long as he stood at her side. She saw only him. Nothing else. Abby felt the cool ocean waves wash over her feet and listened to the water hiss as it seeped into the sand. The sound soothed her.

Being alone on the beach with Devlin made her feel as if they were the only two people in the world. Abby laid her palms on Devlin's chest and looked up into his eyes. "Make love to me."

Chapter Ten

Devlin gazed into Abby's eyes and saw the reflection of her heart. Should he believe? Dare he believe that she wanted him, cared for him? Helpless with desire, he tunneled his fingers through her hair.

The cover of fog began to dissipate, allowing the rays of the rising moon to shine through. He tilted her head to catch the light. A wave of desperation gripped him. He drank in the beauty of her face, needing to hold her and make her his in the most elemental way.

His heart burned with fear that he might lose control and harm her. His skin felt tight and hot and needy. Waves continued to wash over their feet and caress their ankles. A rather large one splashed against their legs, and the ensuing spray wet their clothes, but neither seemed to notice.

"Please, Devlin." Abby's soft plea nearly undid him.

He tried to fight against the current of emotion urging him to take what Abby offered. But how could he say no? He lifted her into his arms. She laid her head on his chest. His heart beat wildly, and a feeling of euphoria swept through him. The fog had receded from shore, and Devlin could see the beach, the forest, the sky scattered with stars.

He headed toward the blanket where they had shared supper. He laid Abby on the blanket and brushed a strand of damp hair from her face. Moonlight filtered down through the tree branches that hung over the beach, and illuminated her skin and eyes.

"Abby, you're beautiful." He watched as tears pooled in her eyes.

"No one has ever said that to me before except my mother." She smiled slightly. "And she doesn't count."

He caressed her face, and watched her shiver as a breeze blew over her wet body. "What's wrong with the men in Great Britain?" He wanted to touch her, really touch her, but should he? "You're cold. Come on, let's get you home and into some dry clothes."

When he tried to help her up, Abby shook her head. “No, Dev. I don’t want any dry clothes. All I want is you, holding me, kissing me, skin to skin.” She pulled her damp dress over her head and tossed it aside.

Devlin touched his finger to the side of her neck and felt the pulse throb beneath her skin. “Are you sure, Abby?”

Slowly, she removed her panties. “I’ve never been more certain of anything in my life.” She was so beautiful, he nearly swallowed his tongue.

Then she began unbuttoning his shirt. As she slipped each button from its hole, her fingers caressed the skin of his chest. She sat up with her legs wrapped around his waist and kissed his neck and chest, licking the water droplets from his skin.

He sucked in a ragged breath at the feel of her incredibly soft mouth and her warm breath blowing over his skin. Desire shot into his gut, then lower into his groin. Devlin reveled in the sultry heat emanating from her body. He’d never wanted a woman more in his life than he wanted Abby at that moment. But if he took her, could he live with himself?

If Abby decided she couldn’t live with the knowledge concerning his past and walked out of his life, a piece of his soul would go with her.

Devlin tried to grab her hands to stop her. She gently brushed them aside and gazed into his eyes. With the fog gone, starlight sprinkled down, making her look like a very sexy angel.

Her hands unsnapped his jeans.

“Are you absolutely sure you want to do this?”

“Yes.”

In a moment, his jeans were gone, and he knelt before her, hard and ready. Water droplets glistened on her skin. One sparkling pearl of water clung to the nipple of her left breast, enticing him. He lowered his head and licked it away with his tongue. She gasped and arched her back, offering him more.

“I want you.” He trailed soft kisses over her face and neck. “I want you so much.” His heart thrummed in his chest, and a tiny voice in his brain rose above the sound of desire rushing through his veins. How could he? And how could she want him, knowing what he was and where he came from?

She was like a perfect gift, but without wrapping or ribbons. Instead, she made him believe he could have a real life, that he could be important to someone and end the loneliness of his days. Devlin wanted to forget that Victor was out there, waiting to strike, like a deadly spider. Making love with Abby would wash away every trace of ugliness from his life, if only for a little while. Should he? Dare he?

She raised a hand and stroked his face. “What are you thinking about? You look so sad all of a sudden.”

Her skin felt soft and innocent beneath his fingertips. Innocent. How could a man like him, with his past, allow himself to take her -- but how could he walk away? He looked into her blue eyes filled with trust. "Abby, you're the best thing that has ever happened in my life, but --"

She laid her hands on his shoulders. "But what, Dev?"

Her eyes gazed deeply into his with a profound truth. He felt hot and cold at the same time. "I almost forgot. You know everything."

Abby nodded. "If you mean about your mother and the rape, then yes."

He closed his eyes and felt shame burn all the way down to his soul.

"Look at me." Her quiet entreaty urged him to open his eyes, but he couldn't ... not yet.

Hearing her tender voice made him feel sad for all the years that he'd lost. But how could he have lost them when he hadn't even known she existed? It was as though she'd always been there just beyond his consciousness, tempting him, wanting him, making him need something he couldn't see or touch or control.

She lifted her head and planted a soft kiss on his lips. His arousal twitched and ached at the contact with her mouth. "Just because Victor Morgan is your father doesn't mean that you're like him. I know you would never hurt me."

Devlin opened his eyes and looked at her. His heart filled with overwhelming need to touch her, hold her, let himself sink into her. "Abby, I --"

She pressed two fingers over his lips, and he kissed them softly. Abby stared deeply into his eyes. "I want to be with you. And it has nothing to do with your past."

When he tried to look away, she nudged his face back around. "Dev, look at me. You need to be with the woman who loves you."

He knew what she was saying, but no one could ever want him like that -- certainly not Abby. Why should she, when she could have any man that she wanted?

A man who came from a good, upstanding family.

Not a man who was spawned from violence.

They were both naked as they day they were born, but Dev felt as though his soul was exposed, too, raw and bleeding.

"You need to find the path to the love that you've denied yourself."

He wanted to say something, but the words caught on a bubble of happiness lodged in his throat.

Abby dropped her chin and gave him a wicked smile, a smile he'd never seen on her prim face before.

"What are you up to? Are you trying to distract me?"

She slid her hand down between his legs and wrapped her cool fingers around his erection. "Yes. Am I succeeding?"

The blood drained from his head and shot to his groin. "Yes." He barely managed to utter the word. His prissy, straitlaced Abby was turning into a vixen. She rubbed her thumb over the head of his penis, and he nearly came in her hand. "Kiss me, Devlin. Kiss me."

He took her mouth and her lips gave. They were soft, wet, and supple, as he knew her body would be when he slipped inside her. He tasted her with his tongue, like a man lapping up the last drops of water to quench his thirst. Oh, how he thirsted for her.

If she hadn't come to Wolf Island, he never would have met her. She wouldn't be here now, in his arms. But here she was.

He'd done something good. He'd helped save his brother and Miranda. Now Abby was saving him. The thought soothed him like a warm caress. Maybe, just maybe, there was goodness in him. Perhaps he had a chance for a happy life, after all.

Devlin forgot all the reasons why he shouldn't touch her, make love to her, or make their bodies one. Her hands roamed over his skin, inciting desire, lust, and licks of fire. He'd never been touched so sweetly and with such tenderness.

Her mouth became rapacious, her lips nipping at his. She played with his tongue, telling him without words what she wanted him to do with his body.

Arousal rose like a flood tide in his blood with each kiss, each eager sweep of her hands over his body, until he felt her in the marrow of his bones.

She pulled her legs up and locked them around his waist. "I want you inside me." Her velvet command felt like a balm on his wounded soul, brightening the shadows that his father's cruelties had caused to haunt his soul for so long.

He wanted nothing more in the world at that moment than to make her his. "I have no protection for you."

"I'm on the pill, if that's what you're worried about. My periods aren't very timely, so I'm using them to regulate my cycle. I don't have any diseases, and I don't sleep around. That is to say -- well, this is quite unusual for me, actually."

A joy he'd never known he could feel poured through him. "I'm glad to hear it."

Her liquid gaze melted into his. "Touch me." Her softly murmured words soothed him.

Him. She wanted him even knowing about his past. His heart felt big and sore inside his chest. Devlin probed his fingers through the damp nest of curls at the apex of her thighs. She was open to him, waiting for him to fill her. He pushed a finger inside her tender body and felt the muscles clench.

The essence of her need for him poured over his hand. He removed his finger from her body, grasped her fanny, and moved his hips forward. The tip of his penis entered her warm, willing body. The muscles in his belly shook with restraint. He wanted to shove deep, but he still feared hurting her. "Are you okay?"

He felt her buttocks flex as she tried to bring him further into her. "Dev, please. I want you. I need you."

“But what if --”

She opened her eyes, glazed with passion, and laid her palm on the side of his face. “You won’t hurt me, Dev. I know that.”

She trusted him.

He felt reborn. It was time he found out if he could truly cherish a woman without fearing his father’s violent curse. Devlin shut his eyes, thrust his hips forward, and drove himself home.

Abby opened her eyes wide and arched her neck. A sigh shuddered from her lips. She started to move, the rhythm of her hips a sensuous pleasure beneath him. Sweat broke out on his brow, and finally, for the first time in his life, Devlin surrendered totally to his need to mate. He thrust in and out, letting the feel of her supple, wet body squeeze him, hold him, love him.

He drove himself into her until a ball of heat plunged to his groin, gripped him tight, and slowly wiped his brain clean.

The world narrowed down to Abby, only Abby. Always Abby. The orgasm pounded through him. He felt Abby’s internal muscles clench, release, clench, and release yet again. A guttural cry issued from her lips.

Devlin slumped on top of her, his face nestled between her neck and shoulder, and just breathed her in. “I promised myself the first time we made love would be in a bed, and here I’ve taken you on the beach.”

She turned her head and kissed him on the cheek. “And I loved every minute of it. We do have a problem, though.”

He damn well couldn’t think of one. “What’s that?”

Abby patted him on the fanny. “No way am I putting those wet clothes back on, so how are we going to get back to the castle?”

He rose up on his elbows and tunneled his fingers through her damp hair. “Good point.” He glanced over at a tree growing close to the edge of the beach, then back at Abby. “I have an idea.”

Devlin found two branches for each of them -- one to hold in front and one for the back. Once they started walking, Abby couldn’t help but laugh. “I can’t believe we’re doing this.”

“It’s a first for me, too.”

In a few minutes, they came up over a rise and saw the castle looming upward. The highest turrets seemed to pierce the sky. Devlin stopped, dropped the branches he was holding, and looked at Abby. “Come here.”

A half hour later, thoroughly sated from making love, Devlin folded Abby in his arms and drew her close. How could he have been so lucky to find such a woman?

A siren blared into the peaceful evening and stabbed Devlin's soul.

The sheriff.

The patrol car's lights flickered along the road as it raced up the mountain toward the castle. "Something's wrong. We've got to go."

Devlin snuck them into the castle through the solarium door. They scooted up the back stairs, dressed quickly, then ran downstairs together. The voices of Otis and the sheriff echoed from the front of the castle, but Devlin couldn't hear the exact words.

"Mr. Dev! Mr. Dev." Otis ran down the hallway toward them. He looked them over. "You all right? When you didn't come back, I got worried. You never stay out past midnight."

Was it that late already? Making love with Abby had made all time stand still.

Devlin grabbed Otis's arm. "I saw the sheriff's car. What's happened? Did Victor leave something else?"

"Yes. Only this time it's worse."

Devlin thought of the little orange kitten. Small, loving, and totally helpless against a monster. "Was it Sam?"

"No." Otis opened the door to the kitchen. Abby followed him through into the kitchen. "He's right over there." Devlin turned his head and saw the kitten nestled on a cushion in front of the fireplace, his eyes closed, his leg secure in the little blue cast. Relief made Dev dizzy.

The sheriff sat at the table, drinking coffee. He nodded in greeting, and Otis laid a hand on Devlin's arm. "There, on the table." Otis motioned with his hand. "I found it hanging outside by the kitchen door."

A set of twisted chimes lay on top of the table. The way the wires twisted around the neck of a crude effigy simulated a hanging. The doll, obviously representing Devlin, sported a knife through the doll's heart, and a spattering of a substance resembling blood covered the chest area.

Abby walked up beside Devlin and put her arm around his waist. "Oh, my God, why would someone do this?" She turned to Devlin and looked at him with worry clouding her eyes. He didn't want her to worry. Not now. Not ever. "Tell me, Dev. What's going on?"

"My father wants me dead."

Chapter Eleven

Abby flung open the refrigerator door and rooted out a leftover slice of fudge cake. If she had to stay there and wait, chocolate was an absolute necessity.

She found a fork and dug in. She'd eaten little at the dinner on the beach. Now she was ravenous.

After the first bite, she glanced at the clock. Two a.m. Dev and the sheriff had been gone only ten minutes. Dev had asked the sheriff to walk the castle's perimeter with him once more before he returned to the village. Even though all of the castle's locks had been changed, Dev wanted to make sure he hadn't overlooked another way Victor might gain entrance to the castle.

She'd tried to convince him everything was okay, but Devlin insisted he had to go. He'd simply given her a quick kiss and headed out the door.

Abby convinced Otis to go up to bed while she waited for Dev, assuring Otis that nothing would happen with Dev and the sheriff right outside.

She padded over to one of the kitchen windows, drew the curtain aside, and peered through the glass. Outside lights illuminated the sheriff's car. Clouds shrouded a pale moon.

Tick. Tick. Tick. Tick. The sound of the kitchen clock marking the seconds boomed in the dreadful silence of the kitchen. Abby pulled a chair out from the table, then shoved it in again just to hear the noise.

She tried turning on the radio, but only static buzzed into the silence, so she switched it off.

Another check of the clock. Two-twelve.

She plopped down at the table and flipped through the *Wolf Island Gazette*. The words ran together. All she could think about was Victor Morgan's presence on the island and Devlin being in danger.

A gust of wind whistled softly against the castle walls. Thunder rolled around overhead and set her teeth on edge, while a hiss at the windows told her rain had started to fall.

Another soggy night. But maybe the rain would bring Dev back inside sooner. Inside their home.

Home. Abby smiled slightly. Since when had she started thinking of the castle as her home?

She'd only been here a few days, and already she'd grown used to the place. It was so different from her airy little cottage by the lake. And yet, here she felt more rooted in her life than she did back in England.

She knew why.

Devlin.

Abby rose from the table and paced over to the fireplace. She rubbed an absent hand over the kitten's belly. He stretched out his legs, opened his eyes to slits for just a second, then closed them again and went contentedly back to sleep.

Had she ever felt such contentment?

Not until she came here. And the feeling had arrived unexpectedly. Abby poked at the fire, sending a dance of sparks up the chimney. She walked back across the kitchen to the stove to set the kettle on to boil for tea.

She had just started searching through the cabinets for the tea when the lights flickered once and then winked out. Her heart did a mad pitch in her chest. Shadows wavered over the walls from the dwindling fire.

Outside, the wind blew harder and the rain picked up. Where was Devlin? What was taking so long? She squinted at the clock to try and make out the time, but couldn't see the dial in the darkness.

Okay. Pull yourself together.

The first thing she needed to do was look for a flashlight or a stash of candles. She pulled open drawers and cabinets and rummaged through them.

Finally, she located the stub of a candle and a box of matches. She lit the wick, and when the flame cast a small circle of light, she felt marginally better. Abby set the candle on the table and prepared to wait. The clock continued to tick, the wind to howl, and the rain to fall. But still no Devlin.

A squeak, followed by a bump.

Abby stiffened her spine and turned her head toward the kitchen door. She'd never been a particularly brave person, but her experiences since she'd arrived on the island had taught her that she was more courageous than she'd ever thought possible.

Thud.

Her heart tripped in her chest before she realized the probable source of the noise. Suddenly she wasn't afraid anymore. Otis. He probably couldn't sleep.

Scrape.

Then she heard them. Chimes tinkled in the hallway outside the kitchen. Abby swallowed hard. The authorities had searched the castle. Devlin had told her all the castle's windows and doors were secure. The effigy had been left outside the kitchen door, so whoever left it had not been inside the castle.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Rustle.

She heard a metallic sound, like metal hitting stone. Her heart slid into her throat. The sound was very similar to the one they'd heard the night Devlin found the rabbit in the library.

Abby slipped off her shoes and crept toward the kitchen door in her stocking feet. Footsteps scraped against the stone floor, the sound echoing off the walls. The steps sounded light as they moved closer and closer. She backed up against the kitchen counter and waited. The footsteps halted right outside the door. A beam of light shone under the door and spread out onto the floor of the kitchen. Abby snuffed out the candle.

The door opened, and Abby saw a figure step into the room but couldn't tell for sure if it was Otis. If she called out his name and it wasn't him ...

She set her shoulders even as fear tapped its way up her spine. Abby reached behind her to the wooden block that held the kitchen knives and withdrew one as quietly as she could. She raised the knife above her head, ready to strike if the person attacked.

The door closed at the person's back. The figure swung the flashlight's beam around the kitchen until it landed on a door beside the fireplace. The person shuffled across the room, opened the door, and went inside, the light from the flashlight casting an eerie glow within. She heard a squeak, then a click.

The lights blazed back on in the kitchen. She had to do something, but she refused to run.

She couldn't run. What about Devlin?

Abby rushed across the kitchen with the knife in her hand. She halted outside the door the figure had disappeared into. Otis stepped through the door. He fixed his black eyes first on the knife she held in her hand and then on her face. "You lookin' for a fight, chère?"

Abby laughed nervously and lowered her hand. "You scared the daylights out of me."

Otis closed the pantry door at his back.

Abby laid the knife on the table. "I might have used that knife, if you hadn't turned on the lights."

He was dressed in a worn robe and slippers. He narrowed his eyes at her. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

Abby smiled while her heart settled back into her chest. "I thought you were trying to frighten me."

Otis laughed. "Now, why would I do something like that? I just came down to check the fuse box. I didn't want Mr. Dev coming inside to a dark house."

Lightning flashed outside, and another crash of thunder boomed.

Where was Devlin?

Otis walked around her and across the kitchen. "Might as well put on a pot of coffee."

After Abby convinced Otis to go back to bed again, she poured herself a cup of tea and waited. In a few minutes, the door flew open and Dev strode in, dripping wet. Abby smiled. He was home. His gaze settled on her. "Abby, you waited up for me." He glanced around the room. "Where's Otis?"

"I sent him up to bed."

Devlin frowned. "He was supposed to stay with you until I got back."

He was worried about her. "If it makes you feel better, he went reluctantly, objecting all the way."

Devlin shrugged out of his coat and hung it by the door. "I'll have to talk to him about who's working for whom. That fresh coffee I smell?"

"Yes. Otis made it."

He winked at her as he walked to the stove and she felt that slow melt down.

Abby swept her gaze over him. He looked tired, and the worry was still in his eyes. She wanted to cuddle him, give him a long kiss, and fall asleep in his arms. But that would have to wait. He poured himself some coffee and flopped into a chair at the table.

"Where's Sheriff Dutton?"

He reached out and took Abby's hand, rubbing his thumb over her knuckles. "Went home to bed."

"Did everything look okay?"

"Yeah. All the doors and windows appeared secure -- at least the ones we could inspect at ground level. Everything looked normal, but Victor's gotten pretty good at covering his tracks and slipping away unnoticed."

Abby fixed her gaze on him. "You said you would explain when you got back. I want you to tell me everything, including the truth about Alice."

Devlin looked at Abby with anguish in his eyes. "She was Emily Good's daughter. Victor Morgan raped and murdered her." He lowered his head and stared at their entwined fingers. "I found her." His voice was so soft, Abby almost didn't hear him.

She felt ice spread through her stomach at Devlin's words. Abby squeezed Devlin's hand, then lifted his chin with her other hand so he had to look her in the eye. Anger and devastation burned in his gaze. But how else should he feel? "Dev, I can't imagine what

you've been through, but you need to tell me the whole story. Only then can you be free from the past."

Devlin let go of her hand, shoved back from the table, and paced over to the fireplace. Sam woke, blinked his eyes at him, and meowed softly. Devlin reached over and stroked the kitten's soft head. Abby wanted him to turn and look at her. She wanted him to see that she didn't care who or what his father was.

She would never regret allowing him to touch her, to make love to her, because she loved him.

Devlin turned his head and gazed at Abby. "I wanted to protect you from all the ugliness, the poison he's spread around. I'll never be free of the past. Can't you see that?" Abby shot up from the table and faced him. "No, I can't! The only person who is keeping you from being free of the past is you. Until you allow yourself to let it go, it will be a noose around your neck."

"Damn it, Abby. He's a part of me!"

Abby pushed back her chair and strode to his side. She laid a hand on his arm. "Biologically, maybe, but that's all."

He jerked his arm away as if he couldn't bear her touch. She felt a stab of hurt slice into her heart, but she pushed it aside. Abby needed him to look at her, really look at her. Only then would she know his true feelings. She touched her fingers to the side of his face and shifted his eyes to hers.

There was shame in his eyes and, dear God, love on his face. "Why did you pull away?"

He lifted a hand and rested his palm on her cheek. "I'm sorry. It's not you, honey. It's me. Come, I want to show you something."

He didn't wait to see if she followed him, just barreled through the door and walked purposefully down the hall.

He continued past a sitting room, then turned left at the end of the hall and switched on a light. Paintings hung on both sides of a long gallery. He walked about halfway down and stopped in front of a portrait. Abby stared at it.

"See some resemblance?"

Devlin's mother sat by her husband with her hand resting on his arm. She saw parts of Devlin in both their faces, but particularly his father.

They made a gorgeous couple. How could two people that much in love journey to such a sad and violent parting? There were other portraits there. As they moved back in time, the paint was a little cracked and the manner of dress more old-fashioned, the expressions on their faces a bit more staid.

There was a portrait of Devlin's mother quite different from the one on the stairs. This was a very young Valerie, holding a bouquet of white flowers, her eyes filled with happiness, a blissful smile on her lips.

She sat on an iron bench in front of an arbor with roses clamoring over it. From a shepherd's hook by the arbor hung a set of chimes. "Was this painted just before or after she and your father were married?"

"Right before." He paused a moment, as if some painful thought floated through his mind. He inhaled a deep breath, then let it out in a shuddering sigh. "My grandparents were thrilled when they became engaged."

It seemed to Abby that Devlin's face aged considerably before her eyes. His shoulders hunched, and the vital, strong man she'd grown to love seemed to have changed into an older man.

"When I was born, my mother left the island. My grandparents tried to see Victor once, but it was a mistake. My father had completely lost his grip on reality. They tried talking to him, but ... they told me he looked at them with such hatred." Devlin's voice broke, and Abby's heart along with it. "He tried to attack them, and one of the guards pulled him off."

Devlin paused and heaved a deep breath before continuing. "He escaped once and murdered Alice. I found her, with the chimes twisted around her neck."

"Oh, Dev, I'm so sorry." Sympathy and compassion for everything he'd endured flowed through her. She looked up at him and held his face between her hands. His gaze softened and warmed as he looked at her. So here was another reason why Devlin was so conflicted about being a good father, about women, about love and marriage. Anyone would be, under the circumstances. But it made her love him all the more.

And she did love him.

Abby touched a hand to her belly and suddenly wished with everything that was in her that she was carrying his child. But would that child end up with mental illness? Would she and Devlin have to watch the son or daughter they had created suffer?

"Remember that whatever Victor did, it has nothing to do with you."

For an instant, an expression of hope swept over his face; then it was gone. "Yes, it does." He gripped her shoulders. "I wanted to take care of this myself. Don't you get it?" he ground out.

"I get it just fine. And you don't need to shout. Why have you insisted on trying to hide it?"

Didn't Devlin understand? Didn't he have a clue at all? How could he not know? She loved him. So what if there had been whispers, gossip, and questions in people's eyes? Couldn't he see that none of that mattered to her?

"Because I'm ashamed." Devlin spat out the words. "I would give my life if I could change the fact that Victor Morgan is my father." Abby wanted to touch him, hold him, soothe away his hurt. "I didn't want anyone else hurt by him. I wanted to rid this island of him once and for all because only then might I be able to justify my being here."

Anger swept through Abby. "Now you've made me mad." She stepped closer to Dev. "Justify your existence? What on earth do you mean?"

Devlin smiled coldly.

Abby felt the tension grind along her spine and tighten the muscles in her neck.

"Don't you get it? The only reason I'm here is because my mother was raped. Why do you think I started the research company? I thought if I could help heal people, it might make up for some of the things *he's* done."

Abby poked her finger in the middle of Devlin's chest. "Let me tell you something, mister. It's insulting to me that you think you have to make up for whatever Victor did. He's responsible for his own actions. Not you. It's high time you got that through your thick skull."

Abby paced to the kitchen door, then turned back around. "I want you to listen, and listen well. I love you. Period. I'm sure your grandparents loved Victor as much as they could love a son. It must have hurt like hell when his mind began to twist and there was nothing anybody could do to stop it. But that has nothing to do with you. What do you suggest they should have done with you? Send you off to a kid's home somewhere -- or just tie your hands and feet together and drop you into the ocean?"

"It has everything to do with me. I'm his son."

Abby shook her head. "So what?" She nearly shouted with frustration. "You aren't responsible for what he became or the crimes he committed, any more than I am. Nobody is, except Victor. Why can't you see that?" Suddenly, the anger drained out of her. "I'm disappointed in you."

Devlin looked as though her words had just kicked his insides out.

"You excelled at school. You went off to college, got your degree, and started a private research lab. You took Otis in and gave him a home. You brought this island's economy back to life and gave people jobs. But most of all, you gave them hope. And you can stand here and tell me that it might have been better if you'd never existed. Who the hell do you think you are saying something like that to me? It breaks my heart."

Devlin looked at her. She loved him so much. She hoped to God that he loved her.

His shoulders slumped, and a faint smile played over his lips. "When I was about eight, Billy Thompson, the village bully, started picking on me. I didn't want to fight him because I didn't want anyone comparing my actions to Victor's. So my grandmother gave me some of those small cans of spinach and told me to be like Popeye."

Devlin laughed and shook his head. "Of course, I had to strut around and show everybody. Stupid, because the kids made fun of me, and then the only thing to do was give Billy Thompson an ass-whooping." He turned toward Abby. "You're right." Abby felt a knot in her stomach ease. "It's time for me to move on. I'm sorry." Devlin wrapped his arms around her and clung. "I do deserve to be here."

“It’s about time you said it.”

Devlin and Abby looked over at Otis. He stood in the doorway, with a smug look on his face. “You’ve been wallowing in self-pity long enough. You done now?”

Devlin chuckled. “Yeah, I’m done.”

“Good. You’re dead on your feet. Get some shut-eye, and we’ll figure out how to trap Victor later. Between the three of us, we ought to be able to come up with something.”

Chapter Twelve

"I think the rain has stopped." Abby pulled open the windows in Devlin's room to let the breeze dance in. She settled on the window seat and gazed up at the moon, white as polished marble.

Devlin walked up behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders. "Let's go to bed." He wanted to hold her, touch her through the rest of the night.

"In a minute. I just want to relax a little first."

He massaged her shoulders, easing the tension from her muscles. Abby's head fell back as she groaned. "That feels incredible. Too bad we can't see the ocean from here."

"We can. Come with me."

When they reached the small balcony at the top of one of the castle's turrets, only a few shredded clouds remained from the storm. The moon's rays watered down onto the ocean, creating pinpoints of light on the waves.

Devlin heard the soft tinkling of chimes drifting up toward the castle on a current of wind from the village.

Abby touched Devlin's arm. "Dev, do you hear that? I don't believe in ghosts, but isn't it romantic to think that it's Alice looking for her lost love?"

The sound of the chimes faded, and Abby sighed. She turned and looked up at him. As he gazed back at her, he felt the most profound sense of peace. He'd truly let go of his past.

"I think it's probably someone playing a trick, but on the website, make sure the legend about Alice takes center stage."

Devlin brushed some hair from her face. *His*. The word resounded through his brain. "Maybe we'll start a moonlit cruise. It'll add to the romance."

"Speaking of romance ..." She laid her hand on his chest. "Are you ready for bed now?"

Devlin gazed at her and saw heat and hunger in her eyes, but also amazing tenderness. He swept her up into his arms and carried her back into the castle and down the spiral staircase. Once back in his room, he brushed his hand over her cheek as he set her on her feet. "If you want romance, Abigail, I'll give it to you."

He left her standing there and gathered some candles. As he touched a match to each wick, he kept glancing at her. He wanted to feel her.

Now.

Skin to skin. She started to remove her clothes, but he stopped her. "Tonight is all for you, baby. I want to undress you. Slowly."

Once the candles glowed softly, he ventured to her room and brought back three roses from the vase Otis had placed on her nightstand.

Devlin stroked her lips with the petals, then handed one of the buds to her, leaned over, and kissed her softly on the mouth, followed by a slow sweep of his tongue over her lips. He turned down the bed, crushed the roses in his hand, and scattered the petals over the sheets.

Slowly, he removed her clothes, kissing the exposed skin as he went. Finally, she stood naked before him. "God, you're beautiful." His voice cracked with emotion.

She unfastened his shirt and stroked her hands over his chest. "So are you." He had never known a woman to desire him this much. But here was Abby, the most wonderful, loving woman he had ever known, standing before him telling him she wanted him -- not just with her words, but with her eyes, her hands, her heart.

He reached out to caress her breasts. Abby sucked in a breath. Warmth gathered on his skin and rushed to his groin, needing her to touch and soothe the ache between his legs. He moved his gaze from her head to her feet, savoring every inch of creamy skin.

Gently, he lifted her up into his arms. He wanted her naked -- not just physically, but emotionally.

"Devlin, I love you." The whispered words caressed his soul. Her eyes filled with sensual promise.

He laid her on the bed. "I love you, too. Don't ever doubt that. Now, bend your knees for me. I want to taste you."

Slowly, she bent her knees. He parted her with his fingers. "Pretty. You're so unbelievably pretty here." He stroked his thumb over her and watched the pleasure radiate over her face and make her eyes glaze.

He spread her legs a little more, opened his mouth, and licked her from bottom to top. Again. And again.

Another swipe of his tongue and the passion tossed her up like a wave cresting. He pressed his tongue to her body and felt her throb all the way to his toes. Devlin didn't lift his mouth until her orgasm had faded and she'd come back to herself again.

He took his mouth away and heard a whimper escape her lips. In seconds, he stripped down to his skin, his penis hard and ready between his legs. He laid over her, fitted his mouth to hers, and kissed her.

Tenderly, he opened her legs even wider, then plunged in one easy glide until he filled her. He moved slowly at first, wanting to draw out the pleasure for them both.

Passion sucked him under. He thought only of her and where their bodies joined. His rhythm grew faster. Sweat glistened on her skin, and all the while he made love to her, he stared into her eyes. He knew the moment she came. "I love you, Abby. With all my heart, I love you." With a moan of pleasure, he spilled his seed inside her.

Abby woke slowly, wrapped in Devlin's arms and draped around his body. Sunlight and birdsong floated in through the window. She didn't want to open her eyes; she wanted to stay there with him forever. Abby felt the tips of his fingers nudge her chin up and then the warm touch of his lips. "Good morning, sleepyhead. Or I should say, afternoon."

"Is it afternoon already?"

"Yeah. Would you like to get up and go scrounge for some food, or would you rather take a long shower with me?"

"Hmmm, shower. Then coffee."

In less than ten minutes, Devlin had her soaring toward another mind-bending orgasm. He pushed her against the wall of the shower and took her fast and hard this time.

When she came, the sensuous pulse punched through her like a hot velvet wave. Devlin followed her over the edge, the muscles in his back tense and straining.

By the time they stepped out of the shower, the water had gone nearly cold. Devlin rubbed a big, soft towel over her, being careful between her legs. She winced just a little when the towel touched her tender areas.

"You're sore, aren't you? It's going to take some time for you to get used to taking me. I intend to take you frequently, so we'll have to go easy on the showers for a while." He stroked his fingers over her face. "I hope I wasn't too rough, but when I got you all naked and wet, it made me crazy."

A delicious burst of female satisfaction filled her. She, Abigail Chapel, drove a man like Devlin wild. "No, you weren't too rough. I loved every minute of it."

Devlin kissed her deeply and was removing the towel from her body, his hands beginning to roam again, when they heard pounding on the bedroom door.

"Mr. Dev! Mr. Dev!" Otis shouted through the door.

Abby slipped into her robe, and Devlin wrapped a towel around his waist. She padded behind him to the door. Otis stood there, his black eyes worried and his face creased with anxiety. "There's something the two of you need to see."

Abby's warm, sensuous thoughts of a moment ago plummeted. "What's happened?"

"Just get dressed and come downstairs."

Abby and Devlin dressed quickly, then headed for the kitchen. When they came to the top of the stairs, they saw Otis standing halfway down the staircase. Devlin put his arm around Abby, and together they walked down the stairs.

Otis pointed to the painting of Devlin's mother hanging on the wall. Abby gasped at the sight before her. Devlin tightened his arm around her waist and hugged her to his side. His mother's portrait hung crooked. The canvas had been slashed, and hanging from the top of the frame was a crude effigy of Abby, with red paint splattered over the doll and some wire from a set of chimes coiled around the neck. Taped to the doll's hand, a piece of paper with *Whore* scrawled across it froze Devlin's blood.

"Oh, my God. He's after Abby."

"Crazy bastard's been busy." Sheriff Dutton examined the ripped painting and the doll dangling from the frame.

He glanced at Abby, then went back to his work. She stood next to Devlin on the stairs, his face a mask of worry.

The sheriff turned and looked at Abby with sharp hazel eyes. Cop's eyes. "You don't have to watch, Ms. Chapel, while we do the preliminary investigation. I'll need to ask you both some questions, but we can do that in the kitchen."

"No, I'm okay."

Devlin put his arm around her. "Go ahead to the kitchen. I'm sure Otis could use some help making sandwiches and coffee."

Abby smiled up at him, and her heart softened. He was always trying to protect her. To keep her from any harm or even from witnessing the horrible threat. "Since when does Otis need help in the kitchen? I'm fine."

If this had happened when she first arrived, she might be tempted to find a cozy corner to hide in, but no way was she leaving now. It frightened her that Victor Morgan had entered the castle while everyone lay sleeping. She shuddered and silently sent up a prayer of thanks that no one had been injured. Or, God forbid, killed.

"Dev." Sheriff Dutton brought her attention back to the ruined painting. "Who found the doll?"

"Otis."

"Did anyone touch the painting or the doll before you called us?"

Devlin slipped his hand under the back of Abby's hair and massaged her neck. She remembered how he had rubbed her shoulders the night before and what his comforting touch had led to later.

She'd like nothing better than to go upstairs, crawl into Devlin's bed, and lose herself in making love. But Victor Morgan was coming closer, and ignoring him was asking for trouble.

"No, Jake, we didn't touch anything" Irritation tinged his voice. "Otis found the doll; then he told Abby and me. Only the three of us have been near the painting. Right after I saw it, I notified your office."

"Good. We'll need every clue we can get to find this creep and lock him up for good this time."

Abby looked at the sheriff. "How long do you think it will take to catch him or even find him?"

The sheriff jotted down a note, then glanced at her. "I thought we would have had him by now, but considering what we just found, I have another idea. After I'm done, we'll talk."

Abby watched Jake Dutton take pictures of the painting, the doll, and the muddy footprints on the carpet, as well as dust for prints. Then he carefully removed the painting from the wall, wrapped it in brown paper, and marked the front for identification. He bagged samples of the mud left on the carpet.

Otis stepped up to them. "There's food and coffee in the kitchen when you're ready for it."

Jake walked over to Devlin, his notepad in hand. "Did you hear anything unusual at all last night, Dev?"

"When I went to bed at three a.m., everything was normal. He must have come in after that."

Jake looked at Otis. "What about you?"

"I went to bed right after you left."

The sheriff looked at Devlin. "I'm trying to get a ballpark on when he gained entrance to the castle. So, figure between three and eight this morning. Water dripped on the carpet, along with the mud. The muddy prints lead from here to a door off the kitchen. I went in there, but it seems to be just a pantry. Is there an entrance we don't know about?"

Abby took Devlin's hand. "Since I arrived at the castle, I've heard scraping noises quite often, but when I investigated I found nothing."

He brushed the back of his hand over her cheek. "The castle has several secret passages, including one in the back wall of the pantry." He kissed Abby's knuckles. "Come, I'll show you."

The sheriff followed them into the kitchen. Devlin opened the door to the pantry, walked in, and switched on the overhead light. "Right here." He ran his fingers under the end of the middle shelf. Abby heard a soft click, and a hidden door opened with a slight creak. They saw the footprints continue into the passage and disappear in the darkness.

Jake stepped forward to get a closer look. "That's handy. When was this passageway installed?"

"All of the passages were installed when the castle was built. I understand that one of my ancestors had a thing going with the cook's assistant." Devlin turned to Abby and stroked a finger over her nose. "She used this passage to meet him for their little trysts in the guestroom where you stayed originally."

Abby smiled. "There is so much history here, just in the castle. Maybe once everything is settled, you'll show me some of the old records."

"Glad to."

"If you don't mind, leave this open so I can investigate." The sheriff stepped out of the pantry into the kitchen. "I want to see if he left anything behind that might help us find him."

"No problem, Jake." Devlin touched Abby's elbow. "Let's get some food, and you can fill us in on how you plan to do just that."

Abby had no appetite and ignored the huge slab that Otis called a sandwich.

"Eat up. All you've had today is coffee." Otis set a bowl of homemade soup beside the sandwich.

Abby patted his hand. "I don't seem to have much of an appetite."

"At least try and eat the soup."

She spooned in a mouthful and savored the rich flavor, but it hit her stomach like a rock. Abby looked at the sheriff, who hadn't said a word since he'd started eating. Devlin sat across from her and had wolfed down half of his sandwich; his soup was already gone. *Leave it to men. Even when there's trouble, they still have no problem eating.* "Sheriff, you said something about a plan."

He patted his mouth with his napkin and took a big sip of coffee. "Yeah." He cut his glance over to Dev. "But it's risky."

Devlin slumped back in his chair. "What do you mean?"

"Well, you know the Mid-Summer Festival is this weekend."

Abby swallowed another spoonful of soup. "What's that?"

Devlin looked at her. "I forgot to tell you. It's to celebrate the founding of the island. The village green is decorated in fairy lights, and the local merchants set up booths. The Wolf Island quartet plays, and there's dancing and prizes. There's even a masquerade. Everybody dresses up in costumes and tries to ID each other. Otis makes jambalaya. It's a lot of fun." He turned back to Jake. "So, what does the festival have to do with anything?"

The sheriff swallowed another bite of his sandwich. "I think the masquerade is the key. I wouldn't put it past him to make a move on that night. You know how noisy it is, everybody running around in disguise."

Devlin turned to Abby. "In that case, you're not going anywhere near the festival."

Abby straightened in her chair and laid her napkin down on the table as patiently as she could. "Of course I am. You don't think I'm just going to stand by quietly and not do anything? Victor meant those threats for both of us. I won't allow anything to happen to you."

His gaze softened and he smiled. "I'm a big boy. I can take care of myself."

"Yes, I know you can. And so can I."

She turned to the sheriff. "So what's your plan?"

"I think you should definitely go to the festival. We still have extra support from the mainland. We'll have some plainclothes officers and deputies in the mix. I can deputize a few more people here in the village to help on the road leading up to the castle, as well. If you're willing, Ms. Chapel, I'd like to use you as bait." He laid a Taser on the table. "Wear a fanny pack and put this inside. All you have to do is point and shoot."

Chapter Thirteen

“Absolutely not!” Devlin’s words snapped out like bullets.

The sheriff walked out of the room to finish gathering evidence when they started arguing. Devlin paced from one end of the kitchen to the other while Abby sat at the kitchen table and watched him.

Otis had stepped outside with the excuse that he needed some fresh air.

“Dev, there is more happening here than just my safety.”

He looked at her pretty face, her brown hair falling around her shoulders, and the eager expression in her eyes. At this moment, she was completely safe. He could reach out and touch her any damn time he wanted to. No bruises, no cuts marring her skin, and he intended to keep it that way.

“What about you?” She gestured with her hands. “And Otis? Not to mention the people who live on this island. Victor Morgan has got to be stopped, and if I can help make that happen, I’m willing to take the risk.”

“Well, I’m not.” Devlin kept his tone harsh and didn’t try to temper his voice. “You know firsthand what he’s capable of.”

Abby folded her arms over her chest. “Yes, that’s right, I do. All the more reason for me to do this. Don’t you understand?”

“No. All I understand is that I’m not putting you in harm’s way.”

Abby gazed at him and smiled. “Do you know how much I love you?”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “Cut it out. Telling me you love me isn’t going to change my mind. I know you pretty well by now.” A kaleidoscope of pictures of how they had spent the night making love ran through his head. “Inside and out.”

A cute little blush brought bright color to her cheeks. "I'm a big girl, Dev. I'll be okay. Cops will be all over the place, and there will be a mad crush of people on Saturday in costume. I promise I'll stay on the village green and won't go anywhere alone."

He thought for a moment and tried to visualize her dressed up and milling about with the crowd. He wanted to say something to the villagers to alert them to Victor's presence on the island, but the sheriff didn't think that was a good idea. He didn't want to instigate widespread panic.

All of the locals knew the history, and it might make it necessary to cancel the festival. A lot of tourists visited the island on this one weekend. It was kind of like retail sales at Christmas for the big department stores. Wolf Island's economy made more money this one weekend than they did the entire rest of the year.

And there would be his Abby in the middle of it, fair game for a cold-blooded killer. His blood ran like ice in his veins just thinking about Victor putting his hands on her.

Except during war, he had never killed another human being in his life. He despised his father and what he had become, but technically Victor was still his father, and no matter how heinous his crimes, Devlin didn't want him to die at his son's hands.

"That's just it. You won't be able to tell who is who. He could easily slip into the crowd and wait. He's really good at waiting, Abby."

He walked to the table and sat down, taking her left hand and holding it in his own. He stared into those gorgeous, sexy eyes of hers and never wanted them to shine with fear. If she met up with Victor, the cold edge of terror might never leave her.

"I want to tell you something, and I need you to listen. The day my mother went into the village, she was gone for over two hours. Victor huddled in the bushes on the side of the road until she came along. Then he made his move."

Abby laid her other hand over his. "That's a valid point. It proves beyond any doubt that I'm correct in wanting to go ahead with it. I have the Taser to slow him down."

"No, Abby. I want you to stay here in the castle."

She squeezed his hand. "He can get at me here just as easily as he can during the festival. Dev, he was here last night! If he was in the passageway, he may have even come up to your room. He may have watched us sleeping or making love."

The thought of Victor watching him love Abby, of him seeing her sweet body, turned his stomach and angered him deep in his soul. He hoped to God she was wrong and that Victor hadn't attempted to go that far.

"Abby, I know what you're saying is true, but what kind of man would I be if I let the woman I love lure a killer? I couldn't live with myself."

"I couldn't live with myself if he hurt you while I stood by and did nothing." Exasperation filled her voice.

His heart filled with warmth. Devlin wanted to grab her up in his arms, to hold on to her for dear life and never let her go. "You don't need to protect me, Abby."

"Yes, I do, and I intend to do it despite your stubbornness. I'll be dressed up, too." She tapped a finger against her lower lip as a serious expression covered her face. "I'll need to wear a costume that won't conceal my identity from him. We'll make sure the deputies and police officers are close by at all times and that we're familiar with their disguises." Abby touched Devlin's arm and gazed up at him. "Besides, what are the chances that Victor won't recognize you, his only son? Do you really believe he won't be able to tell we're in love? That alone will give us away."

"It's too risky. What if something goes wrong? What if the cops can't protect you?" He poked a finger in the middle of his chest for emphasis. "What if *I* can't protect you?"

"I understand how you feel, I really do, but I'm going to tell Sheriff Dutton that I'll do it." Stubbornness laced Abby's firm voice.

Devlin slid his hands down her arms and clasped her fingers. He brought them up to his mouth and kissed her palms. He looked into her eyes; he studied the delicate curve of the shell of her ears, the sweep of lashes around her eyes. "Abby, listen to me. I couldn't stand it if something happened to you. I never, in my wildest dreams, thought I would ever find someone like you, someone who would actually love me. And there is no damn way I'm going to let you go through with it."

Abby smiled, moved closer to him, and put her arms around his neck. She rested her head on his chest and placed a hand over his heart. "I don't know what I would do if something happened to you."

Her softly spoken words swirled through him like a long, warm ribbon. No woman had ever offered to protect him. He was a big man, and this little British woman intended to slay the dragon for him.

"If I couldn't feel your heart beating, listen to its rhythm, I don't think I could go on." Her husky voice broke with warmth and concern. She brought her head up and looked at him, but kept her hand over his heart. "Dev, in just a few short days you've changed my life. You've given me my life, and no madman is going to take it away from me." Her tone rang with calm assurance. "You haven't thought about yourself. I love you for wanting to protect me, but you've forgotten about how *I* feel."

Her words surprised him. "I haven't forgotten how you feel. I know you're scared and --"

"No, that's not what I mean." She touched her hand to his cheek. "Have you ever thought about me protecting you? I don't want anything to happen to you." Abby gestured toward the kitchen door. "That doll is as much about you as it is about me. He may be after me, but he did that to get to you. And it's working. Don't you think for one minute that he's going to give up. No matter how much protection you or I have, he is going to keep coming until he finds a way to get to us. He won't quit."

"I agree, but that doesn't mean you have to assist directly in bringing him down."

"Yes, it does. This is the perfect opportunity. Just think about it a minute. After this weekend, he could be back in the institution -- for good this time -- and we could get on with our lives."

He knew she loved him, but would she want to stay here on this small island and live with him, be his wife? "Are you going back to England once it's all over?"

"Do you want me to?"

"You know I don't."

She smiled. "Then why not just come out and ask me?"

* * * * *

The sheets felt cool against her back. By the time they reached the bed, he had stripped off her robe until she lay naked in his arms.

Devlin stood over her and shucked out of his jeans. His throbbing erection sprang from his nest of dark curls.

He pulled her to a sitting position so her legs wrapped around his waist. Her breasts rubbed against the hair on his chest. Warm. He felt so warm, his muscles firm.

Her nipples responded in kind to the stimulation. She felt them tighten, and instinctively she massaged them against his skin. Devlin held her face between his hands and started kissing her. Feather-light kisses at first, a press of lip, a nibble, a bit of tongue. Then gradually he deepened the kisses and sucked her lips into his mouth, licking the corners, teasing her with his tongue, but pulling back when she tried to move closer.

"Dev, stop teasing me."

"I like teasing you." He trailed kisses down her neck to her breasts. His hot breath wafted over her nipples, and she desperately needed him to kiss her there, but he rubbed his lips around them.

He kissed the sides of her breasts, the delicate skin underneath, but avoided her nipples. "God, you taste so sweet here." His tongue licked her skin and his lips nipped at her breasts, sending fingers of lust down into her groin.

A soft red haze settled over her brain. She opened her eyes and looked at the ceiling. Shadows flickered, and she felt like she was floating on a cloud with nothing but the sun's warmth touching her body.

Only the sun was Devlin. No matter how much she urged him, he made her wait until she couldn't stand it anymore.

"Dev, please." His tantalizing male scent grew stronger; the whiff of soap, the spicy aroma of his skin tickled her nose and stirred her desire to a fevered pitch.

He lifted his head and peered deeply into her eyes; his sexual magnetism closed around her, over her, inside her. "Soon."

Her fingers sought out his hair, his shoulders, and his neck while he continued his sensual assault on her breasts. Her patience morphed into impatience, then into desperation, until her nipples ached. Badly. The pain was exquisitely sweet.

Finally, blessedly he closed his hot, wet mouth over her.

Firmly.

She arched her back and her neck as a rough gasp scraped from her throat. He sucked first one nipple then the other into his mouth and ravaged them with his tongue. She felt her nipples prod and press against his mouth, wanting more.

Devlin lifted his mouth from her breasts, and she felt the cool air blow over her damp skin. "Better?"

"Yes. Now it's my turn." Abby found the spot beneath his ear and kissed it, laved it with her tongue, then tasted his neck in open-mouthed kisses.

She swirled her tongue inside his ear and pulled the lobe into her mouth. The taste of him infused her like a dense fog and stroked the love she held inside her.

Abby stuck her tongue into the hollow of his throat and smiled in satisfaction when she heard him groan. She worked her way down his warm, muscular chest until her seeking tongue found his nipples. She raked them lightly with her teeth, then drew them into her mouth.

She felt his hand kneading the back of her neck; she heard the thumping of his heart in his chest and tasted the glistening film of sweat that beaded his skin. Her head spun with thickening desire.

Abby swept a hand down his abdomen and felt the strength there. She wrapped her fingers around him and felt his lifeblood pulse into her hand. She looked up at him. "Lie back for me."

His eyes made a quick study of her face. "Abby, are you sure?"

"Yes."

Devlin lay back on the bed with his knees bent and his magnificent arousal rigid between his legs. Abby took her time and drank in the sight of him.

She wanted to memorize every inch of his body, every nuance of emotion. Slowly, she kissed and suckled her way down.

He groaned and his hands clenched the sheets in tight fists. Devlin arched his neck, and she watched him swallow hard.

"Abby. Abby. Oh, God, that feels good."

She felt a rush of female satisfaction, of control over the man she loved. She had never thought she was very good in bed, but with Devlin she put aside her inhibitions and enjoyed her sexuality.

But most of all, she wanted to give him as much pleasure as he had given her.

When she took her mouth away, he pulled her close and feasted on her. "I can taste my body on your tongue." He kissed her again and let his hands roam. Abby ran her hands around his sides and caressed his fanny. She rubbed her mound over him, trying to guide his penis inside her.

He flipped her over onto her back. A devilish grin creased his mouth. "Oh, no. Not yet. It's payback time."

Devlin started at her forehead, planting kisses over her face, her eyes, the underside of her jaw, where there seemed to be a bundle of nerves that he stroked to life with every touch. Sensations jumbled together, raced down her neck, and suffused the lower half of her body.

He spent some time working on her mouth until she thought the desire she felt for him would overwhelm her. His kisses fired her blood, made her want. Oh, how they made her want. More. And more.

Devlin's lips worshipped her breasts, and he suckled her until her nipples were tender and throbbing. He moved his mouth over her stomach, slowly, his breath warming her already hot skin, fanning the passion until little flames ignited all over her body and the heat grew to a heavy ache between her legs.

He explored the inside of her thighs with a sweep of his tongue, a delicate bite. He straightened one leg, then the other, and kissed the backs of her knees. That one gentle, sexy act nearly pushed her over the edge.

Before she could catch up with him, his breath blew over her mound. Probing fingers of desire swirled, gathered, and beat violently in her blood. She grabbed at his shoulders, urging him upward.

"Dev, I need you inside me. Now. Please." She hardly recognized the sound of her own voice. She had never wanted a man so much in her life.

His hands parted her curls, and he rubbed the tip of a callused finger over her. She arched her back and fought against climaxing without him inside her.

"Let it go. Let me feel you come."

"No, not without you."

His mouth ravaged and persuaded until she teetered right on the edge. Light from the fire made his skin look golden, his hair so black it appeared blue, and the glow of the flames played through the strands. His eyes were intensely green, greener than she'd thought possible. The pupils expanded until nearly all of the green in his eyes disappeared.

All the while, he watched her. "Look at me, Abby. Don't turn away. I want to see everything you're feeling. I want to know the exact moment you fall apart."

Then Devlin plunged inside her. She felt the tip of his penis nudge her womb; she felt the strength of him massage every part of her femininity. Every stroke encouraged her to let go; every kiss was an alluring request for her to ride the wave, to allow him to toss her over.

A jolt of pleasure swept through her veins. The rush of heat and the quick, hard rush of orgasm had her lifting her hips to get closer, ever closer.

She felt him go rigid inside her, felt his body tense and listened to the sweet sound of his moan of ecstasy as he yanked her out into the velvet darkness.

Abby snuggled against Devlin's side. He lightly stroked the tips of his fingers up and down her back, his breathing easier now, but sweat still dampened his skin. The covers bunched at the end of the bed. For the moment, all was right with their world.

"I could use a shower." Devlin kissed the top of her head. "Care to join me?"

She smiled and let a strong wave of love roll through her. "Hmmm, yes, as a matter of fact. Will you wash my back?"

"I'll wash more than that." He chuckled and climbed from the bed. "I'll get the water hot. Come on." He gave her a light pat on her fanny.

"I will. I'd just like to lie here a minute."

Abby sprawled in the bed until she heard the rush of water and the opening and closing of the shower door, indicating Dev was inside and waiting for her.

Her body tingled in all sorts of interesting places. The flavor of Devlin's kisses still lingered on her tongue, and the smell of him rested on her skin. She wasn't as sore tonight as she'd been the day before. She grinned and enjoyed the wicked thoughts dancing through her brain. Dev wasn't the only one who could enjoy a body slick with water.

She felt the arousal climb as she thought about having Dev love her in the shower again. She wanted it fast and hard this time. No slow seduction. Just a wet, greedy mating.

Abby rolled out of bed and headed for the shower.

Chapter Fourteen

The following morning, the day of the festival arrived sunny and bright. A gentle breeze blew over the island, ruffled the leaves of the trees, and whisked through the grass.

Abby watched Devlin as he dressed in his Musketeer costume, complete with sword and plumed hat. She sat on the bed, her robe wrapped loosely around her.

He slipped on the white shirt with billowing sleeves and caught her looking at him. "I could use some help over here."

Abby grinned. "That's what you said a few minutes ago, and I ended up helping you right out of your clothes."

Devlin looked down at the shirt, frowned, then cut his gaze over to her. "The buttons are really small."

Abby laughed. She scooted off the bed and walked over to him. His shirt was already buttoned. "You tricked me."

He gathered her into his arms. "Uh-huh. Any objections?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Good." Devlin laid his mouth over hers and kissed her until her brain began to fog and her toes curled into the carpet. When he lifted his head, he grasped her hands, kissed first one palm, then the other. She looked up into his eyes and let the love she saw there pour through her.

"I love you, Abby." She knew without a doubt that she would never tire of hearing him say those words. "I'm going to take care of you tonight and always. I'll meet you on the dance floor, okay? The sun should just be setting by the time you arrive with the sheriff."

"I'll look forward to it."

After Devlin left for the festival, Abby took a quick shower, then laid out her costume. She wrapped her hair around her head as best she could, then put on the tight-fitting harlequin cap. A tassel swung jauntily from the top.

Abby walked back into the bedroom and over to the bed where she'd laid out her costume.

Something cold and metallic dug into her toes when she stepped up to the side of the bed. She lifted her foot and looked down at the floor.

The overhead light glinted on a delicate chain of gold sticking out from under the bed. Abby leaned over and picked it up. She blinked at the object she held in her hand.

Miranda's bracelet.

Was this Miranda's blood? Mr. Carstairs had told her that a chopper had picked her up and whisked her away. Had she been hurt along with J.D.? Had Devlin kept it from her because he didn't want her to worry?

He had protected her since she'd arrived on the island, and he'd taken gentle care of her when she'd been pushed that night into the street. Was he trying to protect her yet again? There was only one way to find out.

She picked up her costume from the bed, put it on along with a pair of black slippers and her fanny pack with the Taser inside, and headed downstairs to meet the sheriff.

Lights had been strung through the beech trees on the village green. A bandstand had been set up, and several musicians were connecting speakers and testing the sound.

The scent of food wafted past Abby's nose. There was a hum of excitement in the air as the villagers finished up the final preparations for the festival. Otis had gone to his booth to check on the jambalaya he'd started cooking early that morning. A couple of boys made a beeline for the sponge-throw booth.

Abby saw Devlin dancing with a tall woman with long gray hair hanging down her back. The woman said something, and Devlin threw his head back and laughed.

She smiled and started toward him.

Devlin saw Abby out of the corner of his eye when she walked onto the dance floor. He held out his hand and smiled at her. She was dressed as a harlequin in a bodysuit with diamond shapes all over it in red, white, and black. The suit molded to every curve of her body -- a body he knew intimately now.

Abby took his hand, but there was an expression of concern in her eyes. Something was wrong, and it was more than just the danger that possibly lay ahead this evening.

He turned to his dance partner. "Lois, this is Abigail Chapel. Abby, this is Lois Greene."

Lois was at least five-foot-ten, mid-sixties, and thin as a rail. She wore a flesh-colored costume, à la Lady Godiva, and had fit her body into a stuffed horse. Her legs stuck out of the bottom of the horse so she could walk around, while a pair of fake legs straddled the horse's back. Her gray eyes sparkled as she held out her hand for a handshake.

Abby took her hand. "Nice to meet you, Lois."

"I'm happy to meet you." She touched Abby on the arm and leaned closer to her. "We're having a little barbecue next weekend. If you'll still be on the island, we'd both love it if you and Devlin would come." Lois laughed. "I'd better go find my husband. I promised him the next dance." She wandered off, the horse's tail swishing this way and that behind her.

Dev turned back to Abby. "Dance with me."

Twinkle lights and Japanese lanterns had been strung from poles around the dance floor. The quartet played "Pennies in a Stream."

The sun, a ball of orange, dipped below the horizon, and the stars were winking into view in a clear sky. A breeze ruffled a few strands of Abby's hair that had escaped her cap.

Around them danced George and Martha Washington, the Riddler, two kings, and couple of butterflies.

"We'll dance later. I need to talk to you about something."

She'd been fine earlier when he'd left her to come down to help finish setting up for the festival. Now, she looked upset. "Abby, what's wrong?"

A little frown creased her brow. "Was Miranda hurt, Dev?"

"Let's find someplace quiet where we can talk."

They were halfway across the village green when two boys scampered up. They were dressed as soldiers, their faces painted up with camouflage. "Hey, surrender your weapon and hit the deck." They each pointed a fake gun at Devlin.

Abby laughed as she walked away. "I'll meet you over by Otis." In a moment, the crowd swallowed her up. His gaze darted over the sea of people until he spotted Otis. In a few seconds, he saw Abby standing in front of Otis's stall and he relaxed.

He returned his gaze to the kids. "You dare threaten a Musketeer?"

One of the boys squared his shoulders. "We're Navy SEALs, mister. Hand over your sword."

He supposed a Musketeer was no match for a SEAL. Dev unhooked his sword and held it out.

The boy took the sword and tried to stick the point end into the earth, but the rubber bent against the pressure. He tossed it on the ground instead and placed his booted foot over the handle. "You are charged with treason. How do you plead?"

"Not guilty."

“Too bad. Off to the firing squad with you.” The other boy pronounced his sentence.

Devlin cut his gaze over to Otis’s booth. “Don’t I get a last meal?”

The boys looked at each other. “Sure, why not. But report back to us at 0700.”

Devlin tipped his hat and bowed. “You have my word as a gentleman.”

Spiderman ran up to the boys and sprayed them with a water pistol. The boys whirled around and gave chase. Dev strode toward Abby, wondering what was on her mind.

When he got to the booth, Abby sat in a chair in front, with a plastic bowl of rice covered in jambalaya. The scent of shrimp, tomatoes, and spices filled the air. When he walked up, Abby looked at him, then spooned in another mouthful of the jambalaya; she didn’t seem to be making much headway.

“Smells great.” Devlin sat in one of the chairs next to her.

“Nice festival this year.” Otis handed him a bowl filled to the brim. “The two of you been dancing yet? Sounds like the guys are playing real good. Got them a new fiddle player, I see.” Otis cut his eyes to Abby and back to Dev. “You two been scrapping?”

Abby looked up at Otis, then back to Devlin. “No. I was starving and wanted to get something to eat first.”

“You sure that’s all?”

Devlin ate another spoonful of food. “This is your best batch yet, Otis.”

Otis stirred the huge pot. “You say that every year.”

A group of tourists strolled up dressed like the Brady Bunch. Otis turned on the charm and thickened his Cajun accent.

Devlin rose from his chair, tossed his bowl in the nearest trashcan, and looked at Abby. “Come on.” He held out his hand to her. “Let’s go talk.”

Abby rose from her chair, dumped her bowl in the trash, and took his hand. They headed toward the cool shadows under a large elm tree. The sounds of the festival faded into the background.

Devlin felt the worry radiating off Abby’s body. She reached up and fingered the tassel hanging from her cap. He recognized that nervous gesture immediately. When nervous or worried, Abby played with a button on her blouse, the belt on her robe, a strand of hair. But the costume gave her no other item to worry with. “What’s wrong, honey?”

She glanced toward the village green, then back at him. “Since I arrived on the island, you know I’ve been worried sick about Miranda. You told me she was okay because she was with J.D. and he would protect her. I believed you.” She paused and looked away.

“Yes, that’s true. So what’s the problem?”

She gazed down at her hands, then back up at him. She held an object up for his inspection.

Miranda’s bracelet dangled from her fingers.

"I found it in your room. It has blood on it. Was Miranda hurt along with J.D.? Did you keep it from me because you were trying to protect me?"

Devlin shook his head. "No, Miranda wasn't hurt. She helped me tend J.D.'s wound while we waited for the helicopter to arrive. Her bracelet must have fallen off at that time.

Abby frowned and stared at him for a moment. "If Miranda was hurt, Dev, just tell me."

Dev raked a hand through his hair. "Miranda wasn't hurt. She didn't find one scrap of evidence that the castle was haunted, but she insisted on reporting her findings." He could tell by the look on Abby's face that she still had her doubts. "I didn't want the information to be made public because I was afraid it might affect the flow of tourists to the island. So I offered Miranda some cash and access to an estate."

"You offered her a bribe?"

"Well, yes."

"Where is the estate?"

"On the mainland. My family owns it, and we've denied access to ghost hunters until now. I thought it would keep her quiet." He paused. "But you have a very stubborn sister, almost as stubborn as you. She refused my offer of cash, but accepted the estate."

The frown smoothed away from her brow. Devlin felt a wave of relief. "That sounds like Miranda. Honest to a fault. Is she at this estate now?"

"Yes, J.D. was released from the hospital this morning."

"What's the number? I want to call and talk to her."

"No one has stayed there in quite some time. The lines were disconnected, the power turned off."

He stepped close to her and drew her into his arms. Her scent infused him. Devlin buried his nose in her hair. "She's okay, Abby, I promise. J.D. should have the power restored by this evening. As soon as the festival is over, we'll go straight home and call her." Home. The castle and Wolf Island were truly his home now that Abby had come into his life and made him complete.

"Welcome to Wolf Island's Twentieth Annual Midsummer Festival!" a voice called over the village green's speaker system. "It's time for our island's most prominent citizen, Devlin Morgan, to say a few words. Devlin, come on up!"

Devlin turned to Abby and laid his hands on her shoulders. He looked directly into her eyes. "That's my cue. The head of the island's village council insists I speak every year, so ... I just spoke to the sheriff. He thinks Victor is here." He smoothed a hand over Abby's cheek. "Dutton's cops are in position, but sweetheart, be careful. If that bastard tries to grab you, zap him with that damn Taser thing." He looked down into her beautiful, innocent face and prayed she would stay safe. "I still don't like the idea of leaving you here on the fringes of the crowd while I go make a speech."

“Don’t worry, Dev. You’ll only be gone for a few minutes. I’ll be in the face-painting booth.” She nodded in that direction. “I promised I’d fill in for a while and give Mrs. Watts a break. You’ll be able to see me clearly from the stage, and the authorities will be waiting if Victor makes a move.” She gave him a smile and squeezed his hand. “Now, go.”

Devlin gave Abby a quick kiss and reluctantly headed toward the stage.

Chapter Fifteen

Abby scanned the crush of clapping, cheering people and tried to locate Devlin in the middle of the swarm, but he was nowhere in sight.

A man walked past her dressed as the Grim Reaper. The hooded black cloak he wore hid his face. In his hand he held a sickle. He turned his head, and she thought for a moment he looked straight at her. A chill crawled over her skin. The man continued walking and disappeared into the crowd.

She hurried over to the face-painting booth and stood to the side. One of the sheriff's men, dressed as Batman, stood a few feet to her right. Daylight had faded, but even with the deputy close by to protect her, she felt alone and vulnerable without Devlin by her side. Everyone crowded together in front of the stage, waiting for Dev to make his speech. Out of the corner of her eye, a movement caught Abby's attention. She jerked her head around and saw the deputy lying on the ground. Black fear swept through her.

Abby grabbed the Taser from her fanny pack and wrapped her hand around the grip of the compact weapon. A sharp blow to the side of her head radiated through her brain, temporarily stunning her. She swayed slightly as the Taser slipped from her fingers. Before she could regain her equilibrium and pick up the weapon, a large hand clamped hard over her mouth.

She slammed against a hard male body. A sob rushed into her throat.

"Look what Daddy's got," a man's gravelly voice breathed into her ear. His putrid breath turned her stomach. "Devlin's little whore." Madness laced his rough whisper.

Victor.

His name roared through her brain like a shrill scream as he dragged her toward the trees and away from the crowd. When they reached the trees, he squeezed her left breast

with his free hand. Hard. Pain lanced across her chest, and her eyes rolled back in her head as terror sucked the air from her lungs.

“I’m going to take my hand away from your mouth for just one second. If you scream, if you utter one little sound, I’ll filet you like a flounder. Got it?” His voice had turned hard, almost angry.

Panic twisted through Abby’s body. Words stuck in her throat. She nodded her head in a short, jerky motion.

“Good.” His tone was patronizing. He took his hand away for a couple of seconds, but only long enough for Abby to inhale a shallow breath and try to calm the horror that gripped her mind. Still groggy from the blow he’d given her, she struggled to pull herself together so she could think clearly. If she didn’t, she might not survive the night.

And she had every intention of surviving.

Victor slapped a piece of tape over her mouth and smoothed out the edges. He bound her hands behind her tightly, then knelt to tie a length of rope around her ankles. Abby saw her chance and tried to run, but he grabbed her around one ankle and yanked. She fell down, like a stone dropping from the sky. The breath whooshed from her lungs, and twigs cut into her face. Dust flew into her eyes and up her nose. She sneezed once before he yanked her onto her back.

He grabbed her by the shoulders and loomed over her, his face barely inches from hers, teeth bared and eyes wild.

The Grim Reaper.

Her mouth went dry. No wonder he’d given her a case of the creeps when she saw him earlier. Victor removed the cloak and tilted his face into a ray of moonlight shining down between the branches of the trees. Her eyes widened, and an icy surge of renewed fear scraped over her spine at what she saw.

The resemblance was there, but insanity had destroyed his mind and his looks. Lines creased his once handsome face; his hair was dirty and matted against his scalp, his clothes ragged. “Don’t ever run from me again, bitch, if you want to see your precious Devlin one more time before I kill you both.” The anger in his voice made Abby’s heart grow cold and still.

He secured her ankles together with rope, then dug his fingers into the front of her costume. For one gut-wrenching moment, she thought he would rip off her clothes and rape her right there, but instead he jerked her to her feet. Her heart slid back down into her chest, and she gasped as a tangled mixture of hope that she could escape and fear that she might not be able to spun through her brain.

Victor wrapped the cloak quickly around her, covered her face with the hood, and tied some rope around her body so she couldn’t move.

As thoughts of murder flashed in hideous Technicolor through her brain, he hoisted her up onto his shoulder and started walking. She bumped against his back, and with each jolt, pain sliced into her ribs, along with the horror that she might never see Devlin again.

Darkness. Suffocating darkness. Panic made her heart flop in her chest and the breath wheeze from her lungs. The hot, itchy cloak caused sweat to trickle down her face and back. Nausea rose from her belly into her throat as she listened to the sounds of the festival fading into the distance, along with hopes of rescue.

She heard nothing now but the echo of his footsteps crunching over brush and the labored sound of his breathing. His arms banded tightly around her legs and held her firmly against his shoulder. She tried to listen for any familiar sounds that might give her a clue as to where he was taking her, but she heard nothing more than the sad call of a mourning dove.

Think, Abby. Think.

She refused to die like poor Alice and be another victim of Victor Morgan's insatiable violence. Somehow she must find a way to escape and return to Devlin. She squeezed her hands together in tight fists and closed her eyes. *I have to get back to Devlin.*

Victor carried her for what seemed like hours before she heard his feet slap against wood and the sound of the ocean lapping onto the shore. He walked for a couple more minutes, then abruptly stopped.

In a few seconds he started moving again, but she felt a sensation as though he were climbing. Before she had a chance to think where he might be taking her, he dropped her unceremoniously onto the ground. Needling jabs of pain darted through her back muscles and into her head.

The surface she lay on swayed beneath her.

A boat. He'd taken her to a boat.

Unsettled, mysterious, and breathing a watery sigh, the ocean splashed against the boat's hull. Abby felt him wrap a hand around one of the ropes he'd secured her with and start dragging her over the boat's deck. Did he plan to take her out to sea, then rape and murder her before dumping her body into the ocean?

Catherine's words from a day or two earlier flashed through Abby's mind.

"He's a good man, Abby. The danger you will face won't come from him. The monster is here on this island, waiting in the shadows ..."

Catherine was right. She'd said that Abby had the power to save Devlin -- but Devlin wasn't here. What about the dream she'd had where she tried to save Devlin from drowning in the ocean? Would that happen before or after Victor raped and tried to kill her?

She heard a creak. Her feet fell a very short distance, hit a flat object, then fell again and hit another flat object. Stairs. He was taking her down some stairs.

Finally, he reached the bottom. He hauled her another few feet, then dropped her like a sack of rocks. She felt his hands pulling at the rope around her, and then, blessedly, he threw back the cloak. Cool air wafted over her sweaty skin.

He stood over her a moment, his mouth curled in an evil grin, before he pulled her up and practically threw her into a chair. She slammed against the back, and her eyes widened while terror made her dizzy. What would he do with her now? Would he torture her first before he killed her?

Victor dug some ice cubes out of a small refrigerator and tossed them into a dirty glass sitting on the counter. Abby's gaze darted around the room, looking for something, anything she might use as a weapon. A phone hung from the bulkhead.

Oh, God, if I could only get to it.

All she needed was a few seconds to call for help.

Victor unscrewed the top of a bottle of gin and poured himself a generous drink. He turned, leaned against the counter, and drank, then wiped the back of his hand over his mouth.

He leered at her and licked his lips. "You're a fine little piece, aren't you?" His voice sounded oily. "No wonder Devlin took up with you."

He gulped some more of his drink and smacked his lips together. "I'm gonna have some of what Devlin's been gettin' before I call that son of a whore and tell him where you are." Victor chuckled and curled his upper lip. "But after he sees what I've done to you, he might not be so interested anymore."

With his gaze pinned to her, he reached behind him, opened a drawer, and withdrew a set of chimes. A tag still hung from them, with Alice's picture on it. Abby felt numb. Had he harmed Catherine to get it?

He walked to her, jingling the chimes as he moved closer. "Yeah, I'm gonna do the same thing to you that I did to those dumb animals I left behind. Not to mention that stupid bitch cop that tried to fool me."

Fear nearly choked Abby, and her hands trembled, but she refused to let Victor see her fright and take pleasure in it.

Victor leaned forward and ran a dirty finger over her cheek. Abby jerked away from his touch. He gripped her chin hard and pulled her face back around. His eyes shone with lunacy. "You know you like it rough." A hint of excitement rang in his voice. "I saw you." His whispered words made her skin crawl.

Oh, God.

Victor had been in the passageway that night. He'd watched them. Her stomach pitched; her head throbbed. He'd seen her naked. She wanted to puke.

"That's right, bitch." He chuckled. "You and Devlin rolling around like a couple of sweaty dogs. You aren't any better than his whore of a mother. She liked it rough, too." Contempt filled his voice.

He tossed back the last of his drink. "I gave it to her just the way she liked it. Down and dirty." He spaced the words out evenly; all the while, his eyes raked over Abby's body.

Bile rose into her throat, but she swallowed it down. She had to gather her wits if she was going to get out of this alive.

He set his empty glass on the table and licked his lips. "Now it's time for us to have some fun." He ran his eyes over her from head to toe, his gaze lingering on her breasts. "That's some outfit, and I'm just dying to see what's under it." His raspy voice made loathing crawl over her skin.

Victor moved closer. Abby jammed her body as hard as she could against the back of the chair in an effort to get away from him, but it did no good. He just came closer. And closer.

Slowly, he reached into his pocket and drew out a knife. Black terror like she'd never felt in her life shot through her blood.

He's going to kill me.

Victor's mouth lifted at the corners in a sneer. "I like it when they're afraid." His voice sounded deceptively quiet. After a moment, he knelt in front of her. The rope binding her ankles snapped in two. Abby rotated her feet. A sensation like needles pricking her skin let her know the blood was flowing once more.

He stepped closer, eyed her crotch, and started to reach out his hand to touch her. Abby brought her knee up and rammed him brutally in the balls. He howled and grabbed his crotch with one hand while he slapped her hard across the face with the other.

Abby's head snapped to the side. Hot, grasping pain ignited in her jaw and exploded inside her head, and little white stars danced in front of her eyes.

Before she could take a breath, he snatched a handful of her hair in his fist and jerked her head back. The tape pulled tighter over her mouth. He drew his lips back from his teeth and snarled at her. "I like a little spirit in a woman," he said between clenched teeth. "It's more fun. But if you try that again, there won't be anything left for Devlin to find."

Victor let go of her hair and fisted a hand in the neckline of her costume. Just as he started to pull, Abby jabbed him again, this time with her foot, as hard as she could in the groin. He slumped to his knees in anguish.

Abby bolted up from the chair and raced through the kitchen door. She glanced at the stairs to her left but figured he would catch her before she reached the top deck. Besides, the rope tying her hands would make the stairs impossible to navigate quickly, never mind getting off the boat. The tape over her mouth prevented her from screaming for help, even if she did make it to the deck.

So she ran in the other direction, down the dark corridor. She heard Victor cursing and scrambling around in the kitchen.

"I'm going to slit your scrawny neck, bitch." The sound of his furious voice echoed down the hallway.

Abby whipped her head around and stared, wide-eyed, over her shoulder while bone-chilling fear swam through her blood. He staggered through the door of the kitchen and headed straight for the stairs. Abby glanced around frantically for a place to hide. There were several doors along the forward hallway, but only one of them stood open. She ran over to it and looked inside. A bathroom.

She struggled against the ropes that bound her hands and tried to loosen them, but all she managed to do was dig the rope deeper into the bruised skin of her wrists. A razor lay on the sink. Maybe she could use the blade to saw through the ropes.

Abby turned and felt around for it with her fingers. Her fingertips grazed the handle, and it spun. She peeked over her shoulder to check the position, then tried again. The razor slipped through her fingers and skidded across the floor.

Clomp. Scrape. A board creaked. Abby heard Victor's slow, steady footsteps as he walked down the hallway. Her pulse accelerated until she heard every beat throb in her ears and the breath saw from her lungs.

"You can't hide from me, whore." His harsh, raw voice grated over her already frayed nerves. "You've got no place to go. If you come out now, I might go easy on you."

Slowly, with her heart trying to climb out of her chest, Abby shifted into the darkest corner of the bathroom, right beside the door. The footsteps moved closer, the sound echoing off the walls. She swallowed hard and tried to control her breathing. The steps moved even closer, then halted right outside the bathroom door. Abby cut her gaze to the left and peered through the crack in the door.

Victor's sweaty face grinned back at her.

As soon as Devlin reached the stage, he looked toward the face-painting booth. Abby was gone. Panic like he'd never experienced before welled up inside him. Where the hell was she?

Frantic, he scanned the crowd, hoping to catch a glimpse of Abby's harlequin cap, expecting to see the sway of her hips, the curve of her fanny in the form-fitting costume. Maybe she'd decided to join the crowd that spread out before him. But surely she would have had one of the cops escort her. He wished with every breath that he was looking into her blue eyes once more. But all he saw was a swirl of color, and all he heard a mixture of sounds.

Oblivious now to the people awaiting his speech, Devlin leaped from the stage and sprinted toward the tree line, desperate for the sight of her. When he reached the face-

painting booth, a surge of icy fear froze the blood in his veins. He stopped and stared at one of Jake's men lying unconscious on the ground. Oh, Jesus, let him be alive. Quickly, Devlin knelt and laid two fingers on the side of the man's neck. Relief rushed through him. The man's pulse thumped against his fingertips. He was still alive. Thank God. But what about Abby?

Devlin rose quickly and bumped into Otis. "Otis, have you seen Abby?"

A worried frown creased Otis's face. "No. I thought she was with you. What's wrong? Why did you run off the stage?"

Devlin laid a hand on Otis's shoulder. "One of Jake's men has been hurt -- I suspect by Victor -- and Abby's missing. Have you seen Jake?"

"Right behind you."

Devlin wheeled around. The sheriff stood behind him, dressed as Superman. "Abby's gone."

A frown creased Jake's brow. "Damn it. I thought something was wrong when one of my deputies didn't check in."

Devlin tried to control the shudder of terror that sliced through him. He hoped to God Abby was okay. "Your deputy's lying on the ground, unconscious, behind the face-painting booth."

Jake snatched the radio hanging from his Superman belt. He spoke rapidly into the radio's mic, relaying the information about the downed man and ordering the other deputies and officers to begin a search for Abby.

Devlin gripped Jake's shoulders as fear for Abby's life made him dizzy. "I've got to find her. I'm scared, Jake."

"Go check the road leading to the castle. We'll find her. I promise."

Jake disappeared into the crowd.

Devlin turned back to Otis. "Come with me."

Devlin and Otis raced toward the parking lot and his truck. Something colorful dangled from the truck's antenna.

Abby's cap.

A scalding breath of panic heaved from Devlin's lungs. He snatched the cap from its perch, climbed into the truck, and switched on the overhead light. The words scrawled in black across the fabric jumped at him. *Your bitch whore is on the boat. Come alone or I'll cut her to pieces.*

A rush of fear buzzed through Devlin's head.

Otis stepped up to the open door and looked at the cap in Devlin's hand. "You'll be walking into a trap. You know Victor's got something real bad planned."

Devlin crushed the cap in his hand.

Sweet Jesus. Victor had Abby.

Chapter Sixteen

Dammit, he should have stayed with her, and to hell with Jake's crazy plan. He should have stuck like a burr to her side whether she wanted him there or not.

He scooted across the seat and pulled a 9mm from the glove box, checked the clip, and shoved it into one of the pockets of his Musketeer coat. Into the other, he stuffed a flashlight.

Devlin climbed from the truck and slammed the door. "Otis, go find the sheriff and tell him that Victor's holding Abby on my boat."

"I'm coming with you. He'll never know I'm there."

Devlin gripped Otis by the shoulders. The older man's thin bones dug into his hand. Otis was his oldest and dearest friend. He had to save Abby without anyone else he cared about getting hurt. "If he sees you, he'll kill her." He had to make him understand. "You know it and I know it. I can't take that chance."

Without another word, Devlin turned and ran toward the road leading to his private dock. A crack of thunder drowned out any further protests from Otis. Clouds shrouded the moon in a ragged veil of gray, but even in the dim light, Devlin saw his boat, the *Sea Ray*, sleek and white, bobbing in its slip.

Lightning popped, penetrating the sky with glowing white fingers. In its wake, a roll of thunder barreled through the air, and the sound vibrated through Devlin's body like a death knell.

Oh, God, please let Abby be alive.

As he approached the dock, all of his senses peaked like finely tuned radar. Sensation and sound magnified -- the slap of wind against his face, the distant cawing of a bird, the hard grip of fear squeezing his chest. Rain streaked down, needling his skin and soaking his hair, but he hardly noticed it.

Abby.

I have to save her. I have to. Then my existence will be justified.

Devlin tucked his hand into the pocket that held the gun. He gripped the pistol in his hand and curved his index finger next to the trigger.

He'd never thought he would have to hunt down his own father.

Darkness gaped from the windows in the boat, like unseeing eyes. Dev flicked his gaze up to the canopy-covered bridge. Too damn dark to see if anyone stood at the controls.

Had Victor hurt or killed her? The thought of finding Abby with so much as one scratch on her body filled him with a current of anger that made him dizzy.

Please, God, don't let me be too late.

Devlin stepped onto the dock, slick with water, and walked slowly toward the boat's stern. He heard nothing but the steady hammer of rain and the shrill whistle of wind.

Water swam over the *Sea Ray's* surface, filling the scuppers and draining the rain overboard into the restless ocean. Gripping the metal railing, Devlin swung a leg over the gunwale and climbed onto the boat.

"Welcome aboard." The raspy male voice echoed strangely through the curtain of rain.

Devlin pulled the flashlight from his pocket and clicked it on. He swept the beam from bow to stern and back again. "Where's Abby?" Fear chilled his blood as he waited for Victor's answer.

Bump. Scrape. A moan.

"Right here." Victor cackled, an eerie sound layered with madness.

He stepped into the cockpit, which filled with a bright puddle of light cast by the flashlight's beam. The light illuminated the slippers covering Abby's feet. Devlin moved the light up her legs to her torso.

Victor clutched Abby like a shield in front of him; his other hand held a knife just under her left breast. The silver blade glinted in the half-light. Rain sluiced over her terror-filled face.

A jagged tear marred the front of her costume. Ice swam through Devlin's blood. He clenched his jaw. *Oh, sweet God, had he raped her?*

I'll kill him.

I'll kill him now.

He very nearly jerked the pistol from his pocket before good sense kicked in. If he fired, he might hit Abby.

Focus. He had to focus, or Abby was dead.

Her eyes held a mixture of fear and hope.

I'm going to help you, Abby, if it's the last thing I ever do. I promise.

A bruise marred her face, and a trickle of blood oozed from the tape over her mouth. Fury spewed inside him. For that alone, Victor would pay dearly. "I'm going to kill you." Devlin growled the words at Victor.

"Not until you watch me have her in front of your eyes."

The truth burst inside him.

No way in hell was he anything like this monster. Randall Morgan was his father. Plain and simple.

His grandfather was the man who had raised him, had loved him, encouraged him, and shown him the difference between right and wrong. Why couldn't he see that before?

Thunder crashed overhead like hammers pounding on metal. He had to get Victor away from Abby. But how? "Let her go. Have it out with me. I'm the one you want," Devlin shouted above the thunder and rain.

"Soon." Victor's calculated sneer unnerved him. With Abby still gripped tightly in his arms, Victor shifted to the side and made a motion with his head. There was a set of molded access steps leading from the cockpit to the bridge and the boat's controls.

"Untie the boat, then go up to the bridge. I'll be right behind you. If you try anything, I'll skewer your little bitch's heart." His voice rang with insanity; his eyes were glazed with madness.

Devlin swallowed and looked from Victor to Abby, weighing his options. Where the hell was Jake?

"Move!" Victor yelled at them both.

Devlin walked past them, his gaze fixed on Abby's face, trying to silently tell her that everything would be okay.

It had to be.

When he reached the bridge, Victor shoved him forward. Hard. He slammed into the boat's steering wheel.

"Crank her up and head out to sea."

Devlin jerked his head around and looked toward the empty dock. If they went to sea, the authorities might not be able to find them in time. Devlin looked back at Victor holding the knife just inches from Abby's heart. What choice did he have?

In a moment, the engine roared smoothly to life under his feet. He shoved the control into reverse, backed the *Sea Ray* from the slip, and pointed the bow toward the open ocean. Swaths of rain lashed the canopy over the bridge. The bow lifted into the air before hitting the crest of waves with a hard slap. With each toss of the churning sea, Devlin's teeth jarred together in his head. He turned and glared at Victor. "You're a disgusting coward," he said loudly.

Victor's lips curled in a snarl. "Shut up, or I'll gut your whore right now."

Devlin moved a little to the left. "Only a coward would take a woman against her will. You said you wanted me. Let's finish this, here and now."

Just a little closer to the left was all he needed. Dev kept his gaze pinned on the knife Victor held to Abby's chest as he stepped slowly toward the outer bulkhead of the bridge. He cut his glance quickly down toward the floor and saw the fire extinguisher hanging in its support. He needed a distraction.

Devlin snapped his hand out and yanked the steering wheel in a sharp turn to port -- opposite the direction in which Victor was pointing his knife. As Devlin had hoped, the sudden movement dislodged Victor's arms from around Abby, and he slammed into the radar panel. Devlin made a dive for the extinguisher. He snatched the red cylinder from the wall, pulled out the safety pin, aimed, and fired. White chemical powder squirted from the nozzle and covered Victor's face.

A scream like a wounded animal's emanated from Victor's throat. With his arms held out in front of him, his fingers curled like thick claws, he stalked toward Devlin. Victor's big hands grabbed the extinguisher and shoved it toward Devlin's head. Devlin's arm and back muscles strained with effort as he worked to hold him off.

Suddenly, Abby rammed her body into Victor's, but it barely fazed him. He shook her off like a minor irritation. Abby fell to the floor with a thud. Devlin looked at Abby sprawled on the floor with a red welt forming on her jaw. "Abby! Are you okay?" With her mouth still taped and her hands tied, all she could do was nod. Victor's fist connected with his jaw. Jagged pain burned through his eyeballs and seared the back of his head.

Devlin plowed his fist into Victor's face. The blow only seemed to anger the madman more. Devlin watched as the hot current of insanity blazed in Victor's eyes.

Abby tried to stand as the boat swayed roughly beneath them. Devlin stumbled toward Victor and grabbed him by the front of his shirt.

Victor barreled into Dev, knocking him into the steering column. Pain radiated through his ribcage. Using the column for support, Dev lifted his legs and rammed his feet against Victor's chest, dead center. Victor flew backward and toppled down the stairs.

In two strides, Devlin rushed over to Abby and held her tightly to his chest for a moment. He yanked the tape from her mouth, and with the knife that Victor had dropped, he cut the ropes binding her wrists. "Get on the radio and call for help. Stay here." He turned and headed for the stairs. Abby was safe for now, and he knew what he had to do. In the background he heard Abby cut the engine and call in a mayday to whoever was listening.

He leaped down the short flight of stairs to find Victor. Devlin held the gun out in front of him with both hands. He jerked the barrel to the left and right, looking for his target.

Behind him, a sound, a scuffle. Before he could whirl around, a rope slipped over his head and looped around his neck.

Victor yanked on the rope. Devlin's feet slid out from under him, and the gun jolted from his hands. He hit the wet, slippery deck, and the noose tightened sharply. He clawed at the rope, trying in vain to loosen it, but his fingers slid helplessly over the rain-soaked hemp.

With every flash of lightning, Devlin saw Victor's contorted face, his glazed eyes. Victor twisted the rope in his hands, tightening it slowly, causing the rope to cut viciously into Devlin's windpipe. Devlin struggled to fill his lungs with air, but the breath barely wheezed down his throat.

Devlin groped frantically around him on the deck, trying to find anything he could use to stop Victor. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a gaffing pole. Stretching his arms and hands as far as he could, he fought to wrap his fingers around the pole. *Oh, God, just a little more.*

The noose grew tighter and tighter. He blinked his eyes as the world slid in and out of focus. He couldn't die. He couldn't. Abby would be at Victor's mercy. With that thought blaring through his head, Devlin's fingers slid around the pole. He gripped it with both hands and swung the gaffing pole upward. It slammed into Victor's upper arm.

Victor screamed in fury as his hands jerked from their hold on the rope. Devlin threw him off, pried the rope from his neck, and heaved in a deep breath. Just as he pulled the rope over his head, Victor came at him again. Devlin struggled to his feet and crunched his fist into Victor's nose. Blood spurted from Victor's face in a grotesque stream.

The boat lurched sharply, and Devlin stumbled headfirst into the stern. As his skull bounced against the gunwale, one lucid thought reverberated through the blinding pain.

Abby.

He sank into darkness.

With her distress call answered, Abby ran down the stairs to find Devlin. Her feet skated over the waterlogged deck, and for a moment, she teetered on the tips of her toes.

Another wave slammed into the boat, rocking the vessel to starboard. Abby slid over the deck toward the edge and the dark, boiling sea. Her stomach hit the gunwale. Her upper body swung down toward the water, her feet lifting into the air behind her. She clung to the railing for dear life, the momentum of the boat nearly pulling her arms from their sockets.

The ocean heaved, tossing the boat back to port. Her fingers slipped from the rail, and she hit the deck on her bottom, skidding into the port side of the boat.

She sucked in a breath and snapped her head around. Her gaze darted over the deck. Her heart seized in her chest when she saw Devlin's still body lying on the deck. Rain splashed around him, over him. A trickle of red oozed from his temple.

Abby raced to him and pressed two fingers against the side of his neck. His weak pulse beat against the tips of her fingers.

Thank God.

Before she could spring up and find a first aid kit, Victor's large hand gripped a handful of her hair. With a brutal yank, he pulled her ruthlessly to her feet. She bumped against his chest, and the breath whooshed from her lungs.

Splinters of pain spread over her scalp until her eyes watered and nausea swam into her throat. Abby fought to loosen his hands from her hair. She had to help Devlin or he would die. No way would she let that happen.

Suddenly, she forgot about the pain ripping into her head. Rage like she'd never felt before suffused her mind and body in a thick, red torrent. Tired of feeling like a helpless doll as Victor grabbed and pushed and threw her around, Abby fought back.

She lowered her chin, then threw her head back sharply, ramming her skull into Victor's jaw. He yowled.

His arms fell away from her body, and with one last look at Devlin, Abby flew down the steps to the lower deck. Just as she'd hoped, Victor followed her. If she didn't stop him, Devlin would die.

Abby made her way to the darkened galley and fumbled for the light switch. Victor's savage curses echoed in the hallway. His footsteps lumbered closer. And closer.

Oh, God, help me. He's coming. He's coming!

She jerked open a drawer. The tines of a cooking fork gleamed in the light. She snatched the utensil from the drawer just as Victor lurched into the galley.

"There you are, whore." His evil voice edged out of control.

He grabbed her by the shoulders and tossed her to the floor. The cooking fork flew from her hand. Her head banged sharply against the tile, causing stars to dance in front of her eyes.

Before she could try to escape, Victor straddled her body and closed one hand around her throat. Desperately, she grabbed at his fingers to pull them away from her neck, but his strength overwhelmed her. With his other hand, he unzipped his pants.

Sweet Jesus. No!

"I'm going to have you now, bitch." His raspy voice made her skin sting with fear. His eyes grew wide, and sweat glistened on his pasty skin. It was as though he'd completely slipped from reality. His mind had twisted into some unrecognizable shape, and any humanity left inside him had been wiped away by the madness.

Abby choked and opened her mouth to try to suck in air. With one hand still clawing at his ever-tightening fingers, she groped around on the floor with her other hand, trying desperately to find the cooking fork.

Her fingertips bumped into the handle. She cut her gaze sharply to the left. The fork lay an inch, maybe two, from her reach. Stretching her arm until her muscles and joints ached, she brushed the pads of her fingers over the handle and moved it slightly closer.

Victor's grip tightened. Her eyes rolled back in her head, and darkness crept in. With one last stretch, Abby closed her fingers around the thick wooden handle.

A shot ran through the small galley. Victor's mouth opened, and his eyes widened in shock before he slumped on top of her. Abby screamed, the high-pitched wail rising deep from within her soul. She pushed against his chest.

"Oh, God, oh, God." She repeated the words over and over in a broken voice.

Suddenly, Victor's limp body lifted off of her.

Abby slid away, her eyes glued to Victor's still form. Blood dripped steadily from the side of his head and pooled on the tile floor.

Otis knelt at her side, gripped her head in his hands, and turned her face toward his. "It's okay. It's over."

His gentle words broke through the stifling grip of fear and revulsion clouding her mind and pressing on her chest. She swallowed and grasped his arm. "Dev. Did you see him? Is he all right?"

"Yeah, Mr. Dev's strong."

Abby pushed to her feet. For a moment, she stared down at Victor's body, at the hole in his temple, his lifeblood dripping onto the floor.

She inhaled a couple of deep breaths to push the bile back down her throat. She had to get to Devlin.

Abby sprinted to the upper deck to Devlin, her love, her life. She knelt beside him in the pouring rain as two paramedics covered him with a blanket and a waterproof poncho. Then they put a neck brace on him to immobilize his head. Abby pushed his sodden hair from his face. "Hang on, Dev. Don't die. Please don't die." She heard the desperate plea in her voice as tears welled in her eyes. She hoped to God Devlin heard her as the paramedics rushed him away.

Later, at the Wolf Island clinic, the nurses stripped his wet clothes from his bruised and battered body, X-rayed him from head to toe, and put him into a room for observation. When he was settled, Abby sat in a chair beside his bed, clasped his hand, and prayed with everything inside her that he would be all right.

After what seemed an eternity, his eyes finally fluttered open, and he looked at her. A bubble of relief and happiness burst inside her and spread throughout her body.

A tiny smile lifted the corners of his mouth. He brought her hand to his lips and kissed her skin. His mouth felt cool and wet, but his breath felt warm as it blew over her skin. "Abby." She'd never heard weakness or strain in Devlin's voice before, and it frightened her. He had to be okay. "Sweetheart, thank God you're okay. Where's Victor? What happened?"

She thought about Victor lying in the galley -- the man Otis had killed to save her and Devlin, the man she loved. "He's dead." She still couldn't quite believe that Victor was dead.

Devlin pulled her gently down to his chest and wrapped his arms around her. She listened to the thud of his heart, closed her eyes, and clung to him.

Epilogue

Devlin slipped out of the car and turned to look at Abby smiling up at him. Sunlight sailed in through the window, casting dappled shadows over her beautiful face. Red-gold highlights glimmered in her hair; a smile curved her lips. He couldn't believe how lucky he was. If she had never come along, would he have ever grown this much? Would he have been able to go do what he'd needed to do since he was a child?

Valerie Tate's house sat on a fashionable street in Boston. Miniature yellow roses lined the walkway leading to the wide white porch overlooking manicured grounds. He remembered how she'd been tending them when his grandmother had brought him here all those years ago.

Devlin opened the iron gate, walked down the path to the porch, and rang the bell. He heard the doorbell ring lightly inside. He waited for only a moment before the door swung wide. His mother stood just on the other side of the threshold. "What are *you* doing here?" Contempt oozed from her voice. This time Devlin didn't feel hurt or anger, only pity.

"I'm here to forgive you."

She tried to slam the door in his face, but he reached out and held it open with his hand. "Please, I have something to say to you. When I'm done, I'll leave, and you'll never have to see me again."

His mother straightened her shoulders. There were a few lines in her face, a smattering of gray in the auburn strands of her hair; otherwise, she looked the same.

Beautiful, cold, distant.

"Very well." Her tone, as sharp as the point of an icicle, jabbed him. But for the first time in his life, he felt no pain.

"I came to tell you that I forgive you. You can't hurt me anymore, and I don't feel angry for what you did," he said firmly, realizing that he believed it.

“How dare you!” Her voice grew bright with scorn. “What do I need your forgiveness for?”

“For rejecting me.”

“You were never meant to be.”

Her harsh, bitter words couldn’t hurt him anymore. “I *was* meant to be. I deserve to be here. For you, I only feel pity.”

Her eyes grew hard; her mouth twisted into a tight-lipped smile. “Is that all?”

“Yes, that’s all.”

She closed the door in his face.

Later that evening, Abby opened the set of French doors and stepped out onto a small balcony off their hotel room in Boston. A warm breeze caressed her skin, fluttering the blue silk nightgown around her body. She rested her hands on the railing and looked out into the moon-washed night.

Traffic flowed past on the street below her, but she barely noticed. She gazed up at the moon cruising big and white through a black sky glittering with stars. In the midst of such beauty, it was hard to believe that anything bad had ever happened on the island.

J.D. and Miranda had arrived the next day, after the events on the boat. Despite J.D.’s own injuries, both he and Miranda had needed to see that their siblings were still in one piece. Then the two of them had proceeded to fuss over and pamper Abby and Dev for a week before they could be convinced that Abby and Dev were okay.

A vase of white roses and irises sat in a corner of the balcony, surrounded by the glow of a dozen white candles. The flowers’ fragrance perfumed the air and made her smile. Devlin had placed them there himself, along with candles in the bedroom and petals sprinkled over the bed.

She felt Devlin’s arms slide around her waist and draw her back against his warm, bare chest. Abby closed her eyes and reveled in the feel of the man she loved. Three weeks had passed since that horrible day, and he had been by her side every minute. Otis had pampered them both to see that they healed.

Devlin lowered his head and nibbled on her neck. She felt the achingly familiar rise of desire swell inside her. All it took was a look, a touch, a gentle kiss from him, and she wanted nothing more than to be in his arms. “How are you feeling?”

“Not bad, but I’d feel a whole lot better if you’d come back to bed.” He spoke the words softly right next to her ear.

Abby turned, lifted her arms, and wrapped them around his neck. She looked up at him; his leaf-green eyes gazed into hers. She could still see the shadows of bruises on his neck where Victor had tried to strangle him. Anger rose briefly inside her, but she pushed it

away. Devlin was okay. He was safe. Their future was secure. "Make love to me," she whispered.

Devlin clasped her hands and tugged her inside. Candlelight flickered around them, making shadows play over his gorgeous face. He laid her on the bed, then leaned over and kissed her. His hand pulled her gown over her head. Cool air brushed her body as Devlin's hands smoothed over her skin, igniting flickers of desire and making her yearn for more.

"Come here, woman." Sensual pleasure glittered in his eyes.

Abby laughed. "You probably should rest. Especially after all the energy you've expended so far this evening." She nearly blushed at the memory. Devlin had taken her with the passion of a man who had only a few hours left to live. She had yet to catch her breath. "The doctor said it would take some time for you to recover from the concussion. Not to mention your cracked ribs."

Devlin shifted on the bed and groaned. "I remember, but I know just the cure."

Abby wanted nothing more at that moment than to curl up in Devlin's arms and stay there until they were both too exhausted from having each other to move. Miranda had gotten herself into another mess. But that was okay. Because over the last few weeks, Devlin had taught her to trust in the abilities and wisdom of the people she cared about. She'd learned that no matter what life threw at her, she had the strength to fight her way out. And so did her sister. Besides, this jam had allowed her to find the love of her life.

Abby snuggled closer to Devlin and laid her head over his heart. He stroked his hand through her hair and kissed the top of her head. She trusted him. Abby closed her eyes and put her concerns about the past behind her. Time to get started on her own happily-ever-after.

"I love you, Abby."

Tears stung the back of her eyes at his words. "I love you, too."

He lifted her chin and gazed into her eyes. "What are we going to do about it?"

"I think we've already done it." Her tone was teasing.

Devlin smiled sensuously. "Uh-huh. But I need to ask you a question."

She sighed. "What, my love?"

"Will you marry me?"

Joy filled her like a giant fizz of champagne. She could only nod yes, because the words she ached to say were stuck in her throat. Devlin drew her close and kissed her thoroughly.

"It will mean giving up your teaching job." He trailed his lips to the underside of her jaw. "Are you sure you want to live on Wolf Island with me in a drafty old castle?"

Abby propped herself on one elbow and laid a hand on his cheek. "There's no place I'd rather be than there with you. I love you more than I've ever loved anyone. My home is wherever you are, Dev."

Devlin rolled her onto her back, slipped off his briefs, and slid into her. Just as she reached climax, a tinkling sound drifted in through the window. Abby and Devlin turned their heads toward the window, then looked at each other.

Abby raised both brows. "Did you hear that?"

Devlin smiled. "I think Alice just gave us her blessing."

 THE END 

Cher Gorman

Okay... here's the thing. I don't live an adventurous life filled with intrigue and excitement. My days are quiet and normal and I love it that way. I'd much rather experience an adventure filled life through my characters. I've been married to my soul mate for sixteen years and we have one daughter. I write while she is in school each day and my writing day ends when she gets home.

I have a B.A in Art and worked a series of clerical jobs for several years mostly in hospitals and doctor's offices. My best subject in school was English composition and of course I always loved to read. However, I didn't actually start writing until 1987 when I pulled up stakes from my home in Augusta, Georgia and headed west to Colorado. You see when I was in high school I saw this John Denver special and fell in love -- not with John Denver -- but with the gorgeous backdrop of snow-covered mountains and spruce trees. I knew in that moment my real home was waiting for me in the Rocky Mountains. Corny, but true. Since I began writing -- 18 years ago -- my dream has been to craft well-written stories that someone besides my mother or my husband would want to read.

Thanks to the wonderful editorial staffs at Loose-Id and Wings ePress, I finally realized my dream. I hope you enjoy reading my stories as much as I enjoyed the journey of creating them for you.

Visit Cher on the Web at <http://www.chergorman.com>.

* * * * *

Read on for a tantalizing glimpse of

Fifty Cents for Your Soul

by Denise Dietz

Available Now from Loose Id

Fifty Cents for Your Soul

"Now I lay me..."

The woman who straddled Victor Madison had hiccups. They inched up her throat, higgledy-piggledy, and emerged between her moans of feigned passion.

Snakelike, she twisted her face, scrutinized the bedside table, and zeroed in on a book. A portion of shiny red cover was missing and the book's title, above a satanic, sharp-fanged face, spelled out FOREVER ASMO...

Between the pages, looking like a fat bookmark, a sheet of paper had been folded twice, lengthwise. Every visible line included one word, written over and over, as if Madison had wanted to duplicate a signature. *Piglet*, he had scribbled. *Piglet, Piglet, Piglet...*

Next to the novel were three empty Tsingtao bottles and an empty bottle of champagne. Next to a kidney-shaped lamp, an ashtray held gold foil from pralines dipped in dark chocolate.

Madison had eaten the candies, every one.

She had gulped down the champagne, every drop.

A pessimist might say she was half drunk while an optimist might say she was half sober. Drunk enough to endure the tireless beast who lay beneath her spread legs. Sober enough to hear raindrops pelting the window. To her ears, the raindrops sounded like acrylic fingernails drumming *do-a-deer-a-fe-male-deer...*

Madison tiddly-winked her nipples, then compressed her ribcage, and the hiccups evaporated. What a relief!

Her relief was short-lived. He began to hoist her up and down like a carousel horse, impaling her each time, and she let out a shriek. "Sorry," he said. "S'okay," she said, even though it wasn't.

But he was her meal ticket, her Bob-Hope-Bing-Crosby "Road to Fame and Fortune," especially the hope part. So she faked another orgasm, then collapsed against his chest. He smelled of sour sweat and Obsession cologne.

"You're the greatest, Madison," she said, trusting her voice sounded seductive rather than weary.

Hadn't Vivian Leigh, as Scarlett O'Hara, said something about toting the weary load?

Maybe not. Maybe it had been that old-man-river man in *Showboat*. The re-make...a happier ending...Magnolia and Gaylord singing about make-believe while Ava Gardner smiled sadly and the movie's invisible orchestra played...

Jump down, turn around, pick a bale of cotton. Jump down, turn around, pick a bale of... Hey! Could a person die from too much fucking? Or too much fucking heat? Although

Madison's hotel suite was expensive, the air conditioner didn't cool good. Cool *well*. Cool *hell*.

Perspiration trickled down her face and thirst clawed at her throat. How could she be so wet on the outside and dry on the inside?

The only other light came from a TV. Disney's *Sleeping Beauty*. But Madison had clicked the remote on MUTE and the Prince searched for Beauty in animated silence.

How could Beauty sleep for a hundred years? Wouldn't the wretched girl have to wake up to eat? Drink? Pee?

Victor Madison wouldn't wake Beauty with a kiss. He'd lick, suck, thrust, prick...

Oh, God, wasn't it the prick of a spindle that had Valium-ed Beauty into her centennial slumber?

Lucky Beauty. Lucky Princess. Now he lays me. Down to sleep. Pray the Lord. My soul to keep.

Madison's first two fingers plunged, and she felt as if a pronged corkscrew had invaded what she, as a teenager, had called her volvo.

Here we go again. Here we go loop-de-loo, here we go loop-de-laid... He stopped. Why? Damn, she hadn't moaned. He liked her to moan. She moaned.

"Shut up," he said. "I hear something."

His fingers twitched nervously and she began to experience her first genuine orgasm of the evening...until she glanced down at his face. It looked skeletal, as if his skin had been knotted at the nape of his neck.

"Elevator," he whispered, removing his fingers. "Elevator. Me."

Elevator me? Was that a sexual innuendo?

The bedroom door dragged against thick carpeting and ruined the visitor's dramatic entrance.

"Come in," Madison said, his voice filled with relief.

"I'm already in, you bastard!"

"Come on *down*," Madison taunted.

With another moan (this one ingenuous), she shifted positions and lay on her back at Madison's side. The intruder's expression revealed a jealous rage, and her brain suggested -- no, *demande*d -- that she scream her head off. But the hotel was old, its walls well-insulated, and anyway her spit had dried up.

Hadn't Madison locked the suite? Yes! She remembered him placing the do-not-disturb placard on the outside of the door, then checking the lock...

Had he, or had he not, slid the chain?

"*L'chayim*," he had said, handing her the champagne bottle and stuffing his mouth with pralines.

While she gulped down champagne, straight from the bottle, he'd eased her clothes off. Then, kneeling at her feet, he had pressed his palms against her butt and aimed his tongue at her volvo.

"Bed," she had said, already unsteady on her feet. Earlier, she'd primed the pump with a couple of margaritas.

Without another word, he had propelled her onto the mattress.

She had lusted after Madison, even conspired with the devil to get him, but she soon discovered that making love to him was like running uphill on a treadmill.

Now, watching him prop his head and shoulders against two pillows, she burrowed closer.

Ignoring her, he stared at the intruder and said, "Care to join us?"

* * * * *

What people are saying about

Fifty Cents for Your Soul

Amazing! I was constantly on the edge of my seat. Ms. Dietz did a fabulous job of bringing all the characters to life... The tension was built expertly and the clues spaced wonderfully, so that you thought you knew what was going on until the next clue was revealed.

-- Kelly Skillman, *Coffee Time Romance*

Fifty Cents for Your Soul is a fun mixture of mystery, humor and the supernatural, and Frannie Rosen is a delight.

-- *Romantic Times Magazine*

The over-the-top, irreverent serving of horror and Hollywood noir in *Fifty Cents for Your Soul* is something of a departure for Dietz, but who can resist a book that opens with: "The woman who straddled Victor Madison had hiccups"?

-- *Publishers Weekly*