

# MIDNIGHT HEARTS

By

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ISBN 1-58608-594-8

New Concepts Publishing

Lake Park, GA 31636

[www.newconceptspublishing.com](http://www.newconceptspublishing.com)

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“Now hast thou but one bare hour to live,  
And then thou must be damned perpetually,  
Stand still, you ever-moving spheres of heaven,  
That time may cease, and midnight never come.”

Christopher Marlowe 1564-93

# *Doctor Faustus (1604)*

## Prologue

*Moving toward the fall of water, he stood facing the creek he could not see outside. It was from that direction that she would come to him, wading through water more than waist deep, her hair long and wet and unbound, clinging to her shoulders, her back, the curve of her breasts. Closing his eyes he took a step closer to the falls. Often she left her garments in the woods, safely hidden, so that her clothing would remain dry and questions would be averted. He liked best when she veered from that course of good sense and came to him in her shift with its multitude of tiny buttons, the fabric soaked and diaphanous, guarding from his gaze just barely the places of her body he had explored in intimate detail. One by one, fingers stumbling with cold and lust, he would unfasten those buttons, exposing the flesh he adored, feel her tremble in anticipation, hear the quickening of her breath, the tiny sounds low in her throat...*

*Summoning the return of courage that failed him in these moments, he pushed his way through the tumbling, gilded water onto the ledge beyond. The moon rode high in the sky, round and white, limning the landscape before him with the gentle strokes of spread bristles on stained canvas. He tipped his head on his neck, closing his eyes again. He called her name, sending the pair of syllables out into the woods, into the night, into the days, the months, the years that had lapsed between.*

*And when he opened his eyes, she was there.*

## Chapter 1

Ethan Taylor frowned down at his hands, grabbed a cloth from the bed of the pickup truck and wiped the grime from his palms. Utilizing a relatively clean forearm, he skimmed the tumble of damp, dark hair back from his sweating brow in annoyance. He was nearly an hour late for his appointment, thanks to a flat tire and a spare that needed inflating. Given the opportunity, he would have liked to have gone home to change out of the clothes he had worked in all day and shower, but he didn't have the time. He was coming straight from another job where everything had sprinted behind.

Tossing the rag across the seat, Ethan angled his long frame behind the wheel. With a deep exhalation, he snatched his sunglasses from the dashboard and jammed them onto his tanned face with one hand, allowing his fingers to graze the stubble of a day's growth of beard shadowing his skin. He made a face, then shrugged his shoulders, swiping at his dusty jeans. There was nothing he could do about it at this point. The best laid plans, and all that.

Ethan reached for the directions he'd jotted down, snapping them open across the steering wheel for a quick glance. As he thought, he was only a few minutes away. Even so, it was after six o'clock and his appointment had been for five-thirty.

He'd had the office call to explain the delay. It was a lot easier to leave that type of duty to his secretary than attempt to discuss a flat

tire in detail with a new client while in the middle of trying to change one. There had obviously been no problem, because he hadn't gotten a call back on his cell phone.

From the little he had heard about the woman he was about to meet, she could be a pain in the backside. Still, and contrarily, she had been recommended to him by the same business associate who had spoken of her in descriptors that were not entirely flattering and even less illuminating. Ethan's sole conversation with her nearly three weeks ago had been brief and to the point, with no real opportunity for an evaluation of his own although she had seemed, on the surface, to be friendly enough. She apparently had the money to pay him and a house that intrigued him. For the moment that was all he needed.

With a quick glance in the side mirror, Ethan pulled the truck off the shoulder and back onto the rural roadway. Deftly he folded the directions in half and returned them to the seat by his thigh, noting the smear of black across the white paper from his fingers. He made a mental note to wipe his hands again before greeting Ms. Madison. Perry Madison. Interesting name. Made him think of old black and white television, and Raymond Burr in his commanding portrayal of the literary lawyer. He had been too young to have seen the show at the time it originally aired, but he remembered the occasional rerun many years ago.

"Alright, Ms. Madison," he murmured to himself as he glanced through the trees lining the road and then at the watch on his wrist, "I'll give you the benefit of the doubt regarding your personality if you'll give me another five minutes."

The street sign came up so suddenly he passed it, but as the road was empty he merely pulled to the shoulder and backed up, then made a right onto the unpaved lane and followed it slowly. Somewhere, he had been told, there would be a driveway entrance marked by a white, oblong sign bearing the name of the place, Water on Stone.

He found it, but just barely. The sign had been knocked over, probably in the devastating winds of the latest thunderstorm, and was lying against the base of a tree. Braking, he swung the truck into a driveway of stone and dirt, mostly dirt. It was potholed and overgrown at its boundaries and still bearing a number of sky-reflecting puddles, forcing him to drive at a bumping snail's pace. Tree branches scraped the fenders of the pickup. Branches that would have to be trimmed back if he took the job, he reflected in exasperation as he drove. Bigger trucks than his might have to get up the drive to the house.

Abruptly the woods peeled back from the ragged driveway and he found himself releasing his unconscious stranglehold on the wheel. He straightened his spine, his lips curved into a half-smile as his breath escaped his nostrils in a long, slow release of pent-up agitation.

This is it, he thought. This type of house was why he had started a restoration business— despite a degree in business law and his entrenchment in a family of restaurateurs, cops, and lawyers. He had always been enamored of history. Loved the research of it, the placing of his hands into it, restoring buildings to their original conception, leaving his own mark where once another man had left his.

He remembered explaining that to a woman he had dated for a short time, and she had wondered if there wasn't some correlation to his

relationships as well. He had not found her remark as amusing as she had.

Taking off his sunglasses he set them carefully on the dashboard, wiping his hands again with the rag until they were as clean as he could manage. With a glance in the rear view mirror he pressed his unruly thick hair back from his brow, ascertained he had left behind no telltale smudge of grease, then pushed open the door to step down onto the drive. The sound of his work boots on gravel was barely audible.

Ethan closed the truck door just as quietly, so that it hardly caught. Shoving his hands deep into his pockets, he rocked back onto his heels. His eyes grazed the facade of the plastered fieldstone house with a warm appraisal. Commonly, and certainly not surprisingly, early Americans built from whatever source was close to hand and, in eastern Pennsylvania, it was river or fieldstone. A beautiful and sturdy building material. Hue, shape, the feel of it in one's hand, as familiar as the texture of his own skin after all these years.

He noted with a professional eye where the structure had been added to in a later period. From ground level he could see that the chimneys were in relatively good condition, though far from perfect. The roofs were probably in need of repair. Slate. That would be expensive, although he had a supply stockpiled from dismantled buildings. The porch addition would have to come down, he mused, giving it a quick glance as his hand came up to scratch the stubble at his chin. Stone should be re-pointed; woodwork repaired and repainted; windows glazed; shutters replaced. For the latter, he knew where he could find original era replacements.

Stopping himself, he looked around. There was no use tallying up repairs or restoration possibilities without first speaking to the owner. He would have expected her to come out to talk with him, but perhaps she was involved with something inside and not aware of his arrival. Striding up onto the porch he rapped on the door. When there was no response, he knocked louder.

After a minute longer he discreetly tried the knob and found it locked.

“Well, Ms. Madison,” he said under his breath, “you couldn’t give me the five minutes, I suppose I should rescind the benefit of the doubt.”

He told himself he should just turn around and go home, given the type of day he’d had, but instead he hesitated on the porch, tipping his dark head to listen. From the distant road he had turned off of he could hear the hum of an engine as a well-tuned car sped past. Nearer he was aware of a faint chuckle of water, the breeze in the treetops, a few birds, and little else. Oddly, there wasn’t even the slightest sound of activity from within the house. Granted, the walls were likely a foot and a half thick, but the door was not. Ethan turned on his heel, shoving his hands once more into his pockets.

Taking a deep breath, Ethan began a full circuit of the house. He wrestled a small wire-bound notebook out of the back pocket of his jeans and began jotting down notes. At least he would be prepared when he finally met the dragon lady. No one could fault him for trying.

There were several outbuildings, one of which would be better off torn down. It was a recent addition, anyway, a wooden shed of little import

that had weathered the fifty or so years of its existence poorly. Peering inside with an inbred caution for less than wholesome structures, Ethan noted it had been emptied, perhaps due to the gaping hole in its roof or the good sense of its owner, who might very well be planning its demolition. Finding nothing salvageable there, Ethan moved on.

Alongside the barn, which was in remarkably good condition, he discovered a clear track worn into the earth running close to the wall, then out behind the large building and into the woods. There was no evidence of recent habitation by livestock in the structure, but it made sense that years of animal husbandry by the owners of the home had caused the ground to be worn away as domestic herds passed to and from the barn to some pasturage unseen, or perhaps even overgrown now by the stand of young trees.

Glancing back at the house for some sign of his would-be client, Ethan gave a quick call for courtesy's sake, then willingly permitted curiosity to get the best of him and set his booted feet to the path. Shoving the notebook into his jeans, he tucked the pen in the pocket of his shirt, then ran his fingers through his hair as he headed toward the woods.

The brief expanse of meadow was starred with wild flowers, some tall, feathery variety with tiny, white blooms. For all that he enjoyed working out-of-doors he knew very little about flowers and the like. Still, it was a pleasant sight and Ethan found himself smiling at the pastoral quality of the scene. Unable to hear the road traffic, he could almost imagine what it must have been like when the homestead was first established, free of modern intrusion.



Losing himself in a light drift of fancy, Ethan entered the band of trees. Although most of the trees were young, there was some old growth coverage, trunks hoary with moss and towering toward the blue sky. Picking his way over the twisted roots jutting from the earth, he rolled up the sleeves he had re-buttoned after changing the tire.

A light breeze blew through the woods, stirring the hair on his forearms and at the nape of his neck. With it came the scent of water, a fresh, damp curl of air, redolent with the peculiar fragrance of wet stone and soil. A minute later he heard the sound of it tumbling through a streambed somewhere nearby.

Pausing to get his bearings, Ethan glanced back over his shoulder, certain he had heard a footfall behind him, but the path was empty. He had been considering what excuse to give Ms. Madison should she find him wandering on her property, but there proved, as yet, to be no need.

Shrugging his shoulders, he started walking again. Still, he could sense eyes on him, hear the sound of soft soles on the packed earth of the pathway. Stopping short, he spun about. His greeting died unspoken on his lips. The path, which had opened up in the past dozen yards or so, was devoid of anything but midges and the occasional sparrow.

For a moment longer he stared back in the direction he had walked, scanning the forest to either side. What he had heard was likely a trick of the terrain and no more than branches rubbing together in the breeze or an echo of his own footfalls off the occasional boulder to either side of the path. With a last look around, he started back toward the noise of water, louder now, and nearer, and seeming to have

picked up volume in terms of flow as well as sound.

The path began to climb in an easy but stony ascent. Curiosity now had him firmly in its spell and he bounded up between the rocks, his stride long and renewed perspiration breaking out between his shoulders blades. At the crest he hesitated, a fortuitous pause, because there the trail ended at the edge of a steep drop. On the opposite side of a swiftly running creek a fall of water tumbled out of the rocky face of the hillside into the stream below. The spray was luminous, a colorful mist shimmering in the sun.

The falls were not large, dropping no more than half again his height, perhaps nine feet or so, but the effect in the glade of trees was breathtaking. He stared, mesmerized, for several minutes before looking about for a way to descend. The path was gone, but the rocks themselves provided sufficient handhold and he clambered down to the bank of the stream, his work boots skidding in the mud.

Water on Stone, he thought. The property was aptly named.

Shifting the notepad about in his pocket, he sat down on a boulder jutting out over the water and closed his eyes, permitting his senses to feel the vibration of the plummeting water, smell the scent of it, revel in the cool moisture hanging in the air about his dark head. The noise of the waterfall prevented him hearing any other, drowning out the call of birds, the breeze that still moved in the trees on the crest, any other sound of human habitation nearby. The effect was wonderful. It was what he sometimes imagined heaven might be like, natural and wondrous, and mystifying in its solitude.

After a few moments in which his breathing and his heart rate steadied, Ethan opened his eyes again, a slow lifting of his thick, black lashes. Shifting his feet, he felt his boots brush against something in the moss and bent to see what it was. He stared, and blinked, and stared again, feeling a frown form on his brow.

A pair of women's sandals lay on the mossy soil. One was upside down, the well-worn sole muddied. The other showed the outline of a small, narrow foot in its wear and the leather was lightly discolored by mildew, as if the shoe had been lying for some time in the elements. For how long he could not be sure, but the past few days had been humid indeed and could account for the article's condition.

Hooking the pointer finger of his left hand through the strap, he lifted the sandal and set it beside him on the rock. Who, he wondered, would leave a pair of shoes in the woods, and why? He did not like it. It seemed ominous, somehow, finding such a thing in this place.

He glanced cautiously around and shielded his eyes from the glare of the sun beginning its descent toward the horizon.

“Hello?” he called. There was no response. He glanced over his shoulder, to the ridge, then back toward the creek and the falls.

“Hello?”

Something moved behind the tumbling water with upright locomotion, shielded from full view by the green-gray curtain of liquid. The falls rushed from an opening in the hillside, the exodus of an underground spring, and beneath in the dark cleft someone had appeared, swaying

unsteadily from side to side and barely distinguishable, like a watercolor painting washing away. Slowly, Ethan stood up. The sandal fell unnoticed from his hand, tumbling over the moss-covered bank.

As he watched, an arm sliced through the water, pale and undeniably feminine. A short time later it withdrew and the figure moved to one side of the falls, forcing its way out through the thunderous cascade onto the ledge.

The woman steadied herself in the sun, one slender hand on the rock face. Her head lifted to the light, her hair a tangled mass, her eyes blinking. She seemed disoriented, unaware of her surroundings, definitely unaware of his presence across the creek.

Ethan's breath caught and then rushed from his lungs. A single, meaningless syllable escaped his lips in slow execution, nearly silent in the roar of water. It was a fairly juvenile exclamation, but no other seemed to cover the enormity of his reaction.

Clothed in a sleeveless white shift that ended mid-calf, the garment was soaked and clinging the length of her body, revealing more to his eye than simple nakedness might have done. He could see the curve of her hip, the musculature of her thighs, the gentle mound of the place where they met. Her waist was narrow, her rib cage of a diameter that he could encompass with one arm, the cloth clinging to a roundness of breast above that made his heart squeeze in his chest. Her slender neck arched with the tilt of her head, and her hair, a deep cinnamon in color, wrapped wetly about her arms and throat and clung with greedy intent to her breasts. Her nipples stood taut in the chill of her damp state

against a fabric made transparent by saturation. Ethan shifted where he stood, tugging at the sudden, involuntary restriction of his jeans.

Though he could have sworn he had scarcely moved in his discomfort, her head snapped down and she looked across the expanse of water directly at him, her eyes large and still somewhat unfocused. Her age, at that brief distance, was difficult to discern. She could have been anywhere between twenty-five and thirty-five, her countenance a semblance of startled confusion.

“Hi,” he said loudly, lifting his hand in an embarrassed wave. He lowered the other to shield the evidence of his unanticipated arousal. “I’m sorry,” he added. “I didn’t know anyone was here.”

For an entire ten seconds she said nothing, but stood with her hands out a little from her body at her sides, affording him a frontal view that did nothing to ease his awkward state. He tried to keep his eyes focused on her face, but his gaze kept slipping back to her nipples straining the wet cloth of her summer dress.

Eventually, he strode closer to the water, pausing at the brink of the steep bank. “Are you alright?” he shouted.

She looked alright. She looked more than alright. She actually looked like a woman thoroughly sated, sleepy-eyed and flushed. He could not imagine why. She appeared to be alone.

Recovering, Ethan turned his head away, studiously observing the tree line on the ridge. “My name is Ethan. Ethan Taylor. I--”

“What?”

Abruptly he turned back and was instantly sorry he had. She had the hem of her garment in her hands now, twisting it fiercely and exposing the length of her legs from her toes to a place well above her knees. Bent to her task, the neck of her simple gown hung slack, revealing the pink tinge of her chilled flesh. She lifted her head to look at him, her hair trailing out and over the water, swinging in the breeze.

“Ethan Taylor,” he repeated, shouting, dragging his gaze away from the further revelation of a form that was moving him to imprudent thought. “I came to see a Ms. Madison and I, uh, I...” His voice trailed off at the expression on her face.

She opened her mouth, but if she spoke, her words did not reach him. Her bare foot extended, quite as if she expected to be stepping onto something more substantial than air. Subsequent to her imprudent move she tumbled forward and down into the creek in an ungainly arabesque.

Head jerking in surprise, Ethan leaped from the bank and waded out to where she had gone under, reaching for her shoulder just as she began to surface. Hauling the coughing woman to her feet, he stood with his hands wrapped around her upper arms to keep her from sinking to her knees. Her pallor was alarming.

“Did you hurt yourself?” he asked, his gaze trailing along her soaked gown for signs of injury and finding none.

Her lashes were clumped together in wet spikes that dripped water down her pale cheeks. Feeling the chill of the creek through his soaked

jeans, he scooped the woman into his arms and carried her to the bank, lowering her to the warm stone he had just vacated.

“Are you alright?” he asked again as she bent over her knees, hugging herself for warmth. He noted that a little color was beginning to return to her cheeks and lips when she glanced up at him through the tangle of her hair. She pushed the wet locks from her brow with a trembling hand.

“I—I think so,” she said, her voice hoarse, teeth chattering.

Wordlessly Ethan stripped off his shirt and wrapped it around the woman. She glanced at him again in grateful acknowledgment. He nodded, saying nothing, his eyes narrowed as he waited for her to speak again. The sun was warm on his back, his arms, but his legs were still chilled. He knew she must be freezing.

“Thank you,” she murmured after a moment.

“You’re welcome,” he said, and crouched down beside her, folding his hands together between his damp knees. Dipping his head, he studied her face. “What were you doing in there?”

“In the creek? Not swimming,” she whispered. Her eyes were on the falls.

He followed her gaze. “That can’t be the safest place. It looks rather slick.”

A small shudder took her so that her shoulders jerked beneath his shirt. She looked down, away from the tumbling water. Unwrapping her

arms from her waist she grabbed the fabric of her skirt and twisted it again, fiercely. The tendons stood out along the backs of her hands. Water puddled the mossy soil at her feet. Bending forward, Ethan retrieved the sandals from harm's way, holding them up by the narrow straps.

“Are these yours?”

The woman stared at the shoes for a long moment, then her gaze slid from his hand to his face. Her eyes, he noted for the first time, were the gray of a winter sky, eerily pale but strangely pretty. There was something unnerving in the way they regarded him now.

“Who did you say you were?” she asked.

It was a belated inquiry, though appropriate. Ethan wiped his free hand uselessly on his thigh as the damp was seeping inexorably up the legs of his jeans, and held it out.

“Ethan Taylor,” he said. “And you?”

She grasped his hand tentatively, as if uncertain. “Perry Madison,” she said. “And you’re early.”

“Actually,” he answered, releasing her fingers, “I’m late.”

“What?”

“I had my secretary call you to explain my tardiness. Didn’t you get the message? I had a flat tire.”



She definitely did not look at all as he had expected. His mental image of Perry Madison had been somewhat fuzzy, although since his ruminations in the truck it had been closer to Raymond Burr than to this petite, lightly freckled, shivering, oddly sexy woman sitting on the rock beside him. And although he was waiting for an explanation, less as to what she had been doing—which was none of his business after all--than as to the reason for the disorientation of her state when she had first appeared, she seemed recovered now. Her face had a focused aspect, despite the bewildered frown creasing her brow.

“What day is it?” she asked.

“I—Thursday, the fifth. I’m sorry,” he said in sudden understanding, “I suppose I should have called you this morning to confirm. And to remind you. I—”

“I didn’t forget,” she said, reaching for her sandals. Bending, she studied them for a moment, scraping at the mildew with a flick of her fingernail before putting them on. “I have the appointment marked on the calendar.”

She spoke slowly, almost as if to herself. When she stood, her eyes went again to the falls in mute consideration. Ethan watched as she sucked in her lower lip, sinking her teeth into the soft flesh. He looked away, following the direction of her gaze.

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

He could hear the inhalation of her breath through her nose. Her hands clenched into fists at her sides and then released.

“I don’t know,” she answered and said no more, dropping like a stone.

## Chapter 2

Her lids felt heavy, as if held firmly down by a cold weight. She could hear voices, no, not voices, just one voice, speaking without benefit of reply. Someone, someone male, was on the phone. Yes, there was a man on the phone. She did not know who it was.

Struggling upright, a damp cloth slipped from her eyes and fell into her lap. She grabbed at it with a gasp as her eyes focused on the room around her, witnessing movement. In the shadowed corner at the sofa’s edge someone turned.

“She seems to have come to. What? Wait, I’ll check.”

The stranger moved toward her, a cell phone to his ear, his dark hair disheveled and pushed back from his brow. He crouched on the floor beside her. Staring at him, Perry shoved herself a little closer to the back of the couch.

“Hey, how are you feeling? Do you remember who I am?”

She started to shake her head, then stopped mid-movement. “The contractor,” she murmured. “Ethan Taylor.”

“Yes,” he said. “I’m on the phone with an acquaintance of mine who happens to be a doctor. He wants to know if you’re lucid.” He smiled as he uttered these last words. Perry blinked, disarmed by the easy

way he grinned.

She nodded. “I think so,” she said, bending her head to eye the state of her clothing. She was wet and muddy and disheveled, and wearing a man’s shirt. His shirt. The smell of the creek in her clothes nearly overpowered the masculine scent locked into the fabric. Nearly, but not quite. Without meaning to, Perry inhaled, then she stood up abruptly, turning to assess what was fortunately minimal damage to the sofa. Ethan Taylor shot backward a little and to his feet as well, reaching a hand to her arm in support. Her skin felt severely chilled, his fingers remarkably warm considering the fact that his jeans were soaked and he was shirtless.

“How did I get back here?” she asked.

He dropped his hand from her arm, cradling the phone against his collarbone.

“I carried you,” he stated.

“All that way?” she cried, incredulous and unnerved that she had remained unconscious throughout the process. Her gaze traveled along the muscled length of his arm, marveling at the accomplishment. Although she was not large, it could not have been an easy task.

“I am so sorry you had to do that,” she apologized, warmth creeping slowly into her cheeks. She felt like a fool, fainting dead away and having to be carried back to her house by a man she did not even know. What could have caused her to lose consciousness that way? One minute she had been standing beside the water, speaking to this

man about something, and next thing, she was here...wait. That wasn't right. There was a reason she had fainted. A damned good reason.

Slowly, Perry lifted her head. She felt a chill course along her skin that had nothing to do with the condition of her attire. Her hands began to shake. She tucked them beneath her arms.

Three days, she thought. Her breath rushed from her lungs in realization. Three days.

"What was that?" said Ethan into the phone. "No, she's standing right here, looking at me."

She watched almost without seeing him as he listened for a moment. His expression changed subtly. A muscle in his jaw moved as his eyes slid away from her own. She tried to concentrate on the man's presence, tried hard to forget what it was that she knew, what it was that she had done.

"Yes," Ethan said to the friend who had apparently paused for breath. Ethan Taylor's eyes reflected the light from the window in a brief dance. Perry received the impression that whatever was being said to him from the other end had amused him, and he was trying hard not to show it. "Very."

Something about the manner in which he spoke those two words caused her shoulders to jerk beneath the work shirt still draped about her shoulders. She lifted her chin, collecting what little she had left of her dignity.

"I'm going to put some dry clothes on," she stated quietly.

“Are you going to be alright?”

“Yes,” she said, handing him his damp shirt. He took it, letting it dangle from his fingers, then lowered his hand to his thigh. His wet jeans were clinging closely, leaving little to the imagination. Perry turned away, striding to the base of the staircase. She paused there, glancing back.

“I have nothing dry to offer you. I’m sorry.”

He shrugged, a leisurely movement of his broad shoulders. “Don’t worry about it,” he said, then he spun on his heel, speaking once again into the phone. Perry’s gaze lingered on the lean contours of his back, wondering again at the physical feat of his actions, then she climbed the stairs.

In the hallway above she strode quickly to the bathroom. Once inside, she pushed the door closed with both hands, fumbling with the old latch on the knob. Leaning her head against the wood she sank her teeth deeply into her lower lip, squeezing her eyes shut against useless tears.

What good would it do to cry? Yes, she was embarrassed by the situation that had forced a stranger to take such measures on her behalf. And she was appalled by the knowledge that she had spent three days beneath the falls without a thought to responsibility or reality. And she was frightened by what she had done there, what she had allowed, what she had reveled in, most certainly by the arousal she still felt rippling across her skin despite the interim crisis. Who she

had been with, or what, did not bear thinking about at this juncture. She needed to focus on something else or lose the sanity she was beginning to question. Tears wouldn't help at all.

Turning from the door, she yanked her wet garment over her head, tossing it across the edge of the claw foot tub. Snatching a towel from the rack she hastily dried herself, part of her wanting to jump into a scalding hot shower and scrub herself with the most abrasive soap she could lay her hands on, while another part of her wanted only to return to *him*, to feel again the contrast of cold stone and heated breath, the touch of a mouth, of hands, of skin that was not quite physical but moved her to remarkable heights nonetheless, causing her to yearn for a final fulfillment from which *he* had held back, despite her impassioned encouragement.

“Oh, God,” she whispered, burying her face into the towel in her hands. What on earth had she done? What had she unleashed? What had she called forth? And what was she going to do now?

Perry wrapped the towel around her body, cracking the door open to peer into the hallway. Seeing no one, she darted across the hall to her bedroom.

Pausing at the mirror, Perry dropped the towel, clutching it loosely with the tips of her fingers. She studied her body for evidence of what had taken place, finding nothing overt. She had a couple of bruises, a result of stone meeting flesh, but no more. Her gaze moved to her eyes. It was there she recognized the haunted, heated look that she had witnessed before, when she had been misplacing only an hour at a time, maybe two. She had thought herself daydreaming, losing herself

in vivid flights of fancy that were startlingly sexual and sensual because, perhaps, she was lonely, too long without the company of a man—her husband, in point of fact—in her life and in her bed.

Three days. God. A small sound escaped Perry's throat. She was insane. She had to be.

No. That would be the safer route. The one she had chosen was far more dangerous. She was beginning to understand that now.

With a deep breath, Perry grappled her still damp skin into a pair of panties and jeans, then slipped the baggiest sweatshirt she could find over her head. In her present condition she didn't need Ethan Taylor looking at her the way he had beside the creek. For a moment she had actually thought he knew or that, at the very least, he could sense the fragility and immense arousal of her condition.

Grabbing a clean towel from the hall closet, Perry descended the steps. Self-consciously she crossed the floor to where Ethan was standing, pulling items from his pockets and laying them on the marble top of an antique table. As she watched, he frowned at the wreck of a narrow, spiral-bound notepad.

"I don't suppose this will help at all," she said, offering him the towel. He glanced up, then at the towel, taking it with a nod of thanks.

"Too late for my notes," he said. "I should have used a ballpoint. The ink tends to run less."

He had put his shirt on. The fabric was splotted with damp, the buttons left open so that the garment hung loosely about his naked

chest. He scrubbed at his jeans with the terrycloth, with little benefit.

“Your boots must be soaked,” she said.

“There’s a minor tide taking place inside them every time I move,” he admitted. “I have a pair of sneakers in the truck. I’ll go put them on. That is, if you still want me to have a look around.”

“I—sure,” she agreed. “Would you like a cup of tea?”

“That would be perfect,” he said.

Perfect, she thought, marveling at the nonchalance of his tone. As if he had not just carried a strange woman’s unconscious body the better part of eight hundred feet. As if this first meeting of theirs was not totally off its axis.

Wordlessly she padded on bare feet to the kitchen. He followed, pausing in the center of the floor. Illuminated by the late sun, his hands in his pockets, his eyes scanned in professional assessment the condition of the room. He was a tall man, several inches over six feet, his hair thick and dark and showing a few strands of silver in the revealing glow of sunlight that highlighted the lean athleticism of his form. His eyes, she noted, were an earthy brown, fringed with a length of black lash that was almost unfair. Perry tore her gaze away just as he turned to look at her.

“Are you sure you’re going to be alright? Do you faint often?”

“I never have before,” she said.



“Will you see a doctor about it?”

“Probably,” she answered without commitment.

He stood there a moment longer, as if wanting to say something more. She did not want him to speak at all. Closing her eyes briefly, she stumbled toward the sink, reaching for the cold water tap on the faucet. Turning on the water, Perry flipped open the lid of the kettle to fill it. As she leaned forward she felt the brush of her still taut nipples against the interior of her sweatshirt like a caress. Her hand on the kettle lid shook. Why had she not taken the time to put on an undergarment?

*You know why.*

The kettle dropped into the old enamel sink with a crash. Water splashed over the counter and onto the front of her shirt. With a small cry of alarm she stepped away, backing straight into a masculine form that was not a product of mental imagery but very real. Ethan Taylor grabbed her upper arms to steady her.

“I’m alright,” she said, trying to keep the hysteria from her voice as she eased herself from his concerned grasp. “Really. The pot just slipped.”

Not here, she thought, as Ethan stepped away. He has never been *here*. Not inside the house.

It was only then that she realized she had been fooling herself about the daydreams as well. She had known, somewhere deep, where logical thought was not wont to roam, that the voice she imagined

speaking to her, seducing her, had been coming from somewhere else and not her head.

“Maybe you should sit down,” suggested Ethan. “I could make the tea.”

Perry willed herself to be calm, breathing deeply and deliberately. With care she refilled the kettle and set it on the stove, lighting the gas beneath. She took down two cups from the cabinet and two tea bags from the jar as if nothing was wrong at all. Across the kitchen Ethan had not moved. His head was tipped to one side, watching her, his dark hair across his eyes.

“Would you rather I came back another time?” he asked.

She shook her head. Oddly enough, she wanted him here. Here, but silent. She was afraid, of herself and of the thing she had done. But she didn't want to talk about it. Or about anything at all. That, of course, would be somewhat difficult, she mused, when the man in her kitchen was here to discuss the refurbishment of her late grandmother's house.

“I'll be right back then,” he said. She heard the sound of his retreating footsteps and then the back door opened and closed quietly.

The teapot began a shrill whistle. Hastening to turn off the flame, Perry poured the heated water into the pair of cups, seeking comfort of the familiar in the preparation of tea. Clutching her cup, Perry moved to the window, holding the vessel close beneath her chin. Fragrant steam rose to her nostrils.

He had paused outside in the yard, stretching himself to his full height

to ease an apparent stiffness in his back. His shirt flapped against the length of his muscled torso in the breeze, revealing evidence of daily physical labor. Perry blew a breath out from her cheeks, watching as he crossed the yard toward the front of the house. He had a particularly arresting locomotion, his stride easy and long, almost feral.

*You find him attractive, do you not?*

Perry paused with the mug to her lips. A chill tripped along her spine and she lowered the mug to the counter, clasping her hands together against her abdomen. Her breath came in short bursts through her nose.

“And if I do?” she said. It made her only vaguely uneasy to answer the voice aloud when she had never done so before. She wondered if it was bravado or only a natural progression.

*We may use him.*

The plurality of the reply was not lost on her. She closed her eyes.

“Go away,” she hissed.

And it did.

Perry’s eyes flew wide. Her hand jerked, knocking against the cup. Heated liquid sloshed over the sides of the mug.

She was very much aware that her skin suddenly felt her own again, that her pulse was beating normally, that her breasts were not tingling

with yearning, that the seam in her jeans did not feel so inordinately intimate. Snatching a paper towel, she dabbed at the spilled tea and had her cup, as well as herself, firmly in hand when Ethan returned.

She looked at him from beneath her lashes. He was an extraordinarily good-looking man. And he was a stranger. She recognized both details through the workings of her own perception and within the context of reality. Relief flooded through her.

“Shall we proceed, then?” she asked, handing Ethan his cup as she led the way out of the kitchen. Ethan followed close behind, swinging a long-handled flashlight in his other fist. The fact that he was near enough she could scent the light spice of his cologne—as well as the more robust fragrance of his efforts in carrying her—settled in her mind without undue alarm. She was in control now. She even welcomed his proximity, her consciousness of his height, the breadth of his shoulder, the rumble of his voice as he asked a question while they climbed the attic stair, the hand that reached out to steady her at the top falling gently against her hip.

Perry crossed the attic floor to stand in the center. At either end windows let in light, but here in the middle the enclosure beneath the roof was shadowed. Boxes and crates were pushed under the rafters at intervals, as well as miscellaneous other items, none of which belonged to her.

She had looked through them on occasion when she was very young and had discovered items of great interest, even antiquity, but she had not been inclined to search further since her grandmother’s passing. The house and its contents had been left in their entirety to her, but she

knew there were other family members who might find solace in some memento stored away. One of these days she would have to make a thorough inventory of the attic contents.

She watched Ethan as he shone the flashlight on the roof beams, checking, she supposed, for leaks and signs of damage. Every so often he would grunt and slip the flashlight beneath his arm, jotting notes on another pad, which he did not trouble to place in his damp pocket. He put the pen behind his ear.

“Is it bad?” she questioned.

“Not really,” he answered, glancing at her as if just recalling her presence. He smiled, a charming grin. Perry felt her stomach turn slightly.

“Interesting assortment of oddments here,” he said, sweeping the light across the floor. “Some of this stuff is worth money. Actually,” he added, peering closer at an object hidden from her view, “some of it might be better off in a local museum.”

“Really?” she said, and started across the floor toward him. After two steps she halted, moving to the window instead. It wasn’t that she didn’t quite trust herself, but she needed to be certain she wouldn’t be misread. A residue of pheromones, or whatever it was that a man could scent of a woman when she was aroused, was not something she wished him to misinterpret. It was better to keep her distance, no matter how calm she was feeling now.

“Perhaps when your crew is here I might pay them to help me cart all

of this to the lower floor, ” she said. She kept her tone carefully neutral, amazed at her ability to pretend all was as it should be.

At her words he straightened, ducking his head beneath the rafter just in time to avoid collision. “Are you saying the job is mine? I’ve not even given you an estimate yet.”

“That’s true,” she retorted, laughing self-consciously. “I suppose I should wait for that, shouldn’t I?”

Perry continued to the window, pausing in the sunlight. She raised her hands to the upper frame, hooking her fingers over the edge. Leaning toward the aged glass she stared out at the barn, her view of it distorted by the large rippled pane.

*Take him.*

Damn it.

“Did you say something?”

Glancing over her shoulder at Ethan, Perry shook her head. With a wave of his flashlight the man resumed his inspection. Perry turned back to the window. She pressed her forehead to the glass, feeling its cool surface against her skin and the curve of bone beneath. A thin sheen of perspiration appeared on her brow. She breathed slowly, in and out with a measured repetition. Behind her Ethan grew still.

She felt him there before she heard the tread of his boot on a loosened floorboard. Lowering her lids over her eyes, Perry’s head dropped back, her unbound hair, nearly dry now, catching in the fabric of her

sweatshirt.

*My heart.*

It was not Ethan's voice, it was the other. A sound escaped Perry's mouth, but it was silent after all, wordless, and no protest was made.

*We will use him.*

His hands slipped beneath her shirt where her flesh was bare and heated. Slid beneath and up, cupping her breasts. His fingers toyed with her nipples, already hard, tugging at them gently, teasing them. He pulled her back against his body and she could feel the strength in him, the firmness of muscles in daily, rigorous use. Her own hands remained gripped on the window frame as if to the only point of safety as his fingers tugged on the fastening to her jeans, unzipped them, trailed down the front of her belly into her undergarments, pushing her legs apart with his knee, pushing his fingers in exploration of the soft, wickedly soaked flesh between.

“Please stop,” she whispered.

“Perry, did you say something?”

The effect of his question was as if cold water had been dumped over her head. Spinning on her heel she stared across the attic to the far side, where Ethan Taylor was examining the window ledge opposite. He had not moved, not been near her.

Crossing her arms over her chest, she fought the trembling in her limbs.

“No, nothing,” she ground out, flushing with shame. She bent to lift the mug of now cool tea from the floor where she had placed it. “I—I have a call to make, if you don’t mind. Come on down when you’re done, and we’ll look over the rest of the house.”

Striding quickly toward the stairs she hastened down them without looking at him again, to her bedroom, pushing the door closed behind. Setting her mug on the dresser she leaned against the mahogany edge, opening her palms flat against the wood as she respired heavily. The towel she had earlier used had fallen to the floor and after a moment she bent to pick it up, holding it close to her face. The temperature of her skin slowly cooled in the cocoon of damp terry.

*We will use him. He will be more than willing, I promise you.*

“Shut up!” she cried softly, teeth clenched. “Go away!”

But this time, she knew the truth. There was no making the voice go away. She did not control it. She did not control *him*. She had called him. Called him to her there beneath the falls, selfishly, foolishly, and without true understanding of what it was she had done, but unable to stop once she had begun.

Now, it was too late.

## Chapter 3

Ethan skimmed droplets of water off his body with an edged hand,



then grabbed the towel and hastily finished drying. He combed his fingers through his dark hair with a brief glance in the mirror, then went to dress for his dinner with Perry. After a strange meeting in which he had felt not at all himself but rather like something was needling his skin just beneath the surface, making him behave in uncharacteristic fashion, he had asked her, much to his surprise, to join him for a late meal. More surprising still was her agreement.

They had spent some time outside after he had come down from the attic discussing the roof, the chimneys, whether the fireplaces were actively being used, and then had turned almost as a matter of course to other topics. During the course of their conversation she had proved herself quick and funny, and he found that he liked her. In fact, it had been difficult to just walk away at the end of that hour, which was why he had asked her to dinner. Despite what he had been told about her, she seemed both pleasant and smart and she was definitely appealing. Although a little skittish, which was understandable under the circumstances, she had been genuinely warm. She intrigued him, and that was enough for dinner and conversation, and the offer of friendship. Since he was going to be performing work for her, it would be just as well to start off with an amiable beginning to their relationship. In fact, he would have to remind himself to keep it professional. At least until the work was complete.

Feeling more like himself than he had all day, Ethan paused again before the mirror, giving his appearance a swift, critical glance. He tucked his shirt into his trousers, arching an eyebrow at his reflection. This would have to suffice. There was not much he could do about how he looked. She would have to take him or leave him.

Realizing that his turn of thought reflected more than just a passing interest in Perry Madison, he chuckled derisively at himself. Shrugging his arms into a light jacket, he attempted to dismiss his fancies as the result of a long and tiring day, and the fact that he had been far too busy for female companionship of late.

Perry had chosen to meet him at the restaurant. She had told him it would save time, as it was already past the dinner hour, rather than having him drive all the way back to pick her up. It made sense to him, of course, but he had a feeling she was avoiding his presence at her house again this evening. Possibly she felt awkward about the situation at her home today. But at least he could assure himself firsthand at dinner that she was well. Despite the fact that she had seemed fine when they parted company, and no matter how brief their acquaintance, the fact that she had fallen into a long faint concerned him. He almost felt responsible, somehow, as ridiculous as that sounded.

At the door, Ethan's dark eyes skimmed his modest home with a view to clutter and other factors a woman might find offensive, and determined the place looked clean and neat enough. Just on the chance that she stopped in, he told himself, for a drink before she headed home. Then he shut and locked the door, striding toward his truck with a whistled tune beneath his breath.

\* \* \* \*

Parking her car in the lot, Perry deposited the keys in her purse. She sat for a moment behind the wheel, staring toward the small twinkling lights embedded in the trees and lining the porch of the restaurant. She

had gotten stuck behind a particularly slow-moving truck and so was a few minutes late. Fashionably late, she supposed. There was a saying about keeping a man waiting, but she would have liked to have been the first seated. She felt awkward and unsure of herself and knew that his eyes would be on her as she crossed the floor. She had no doubt that Ethan Taylor was already there waiting for her. She had seen his pickup truck as she pulled in.

Pushing open the door, Perry stepped out onto the pavement, standing beside her car as she smoothed the lines of her dress over her hips. She had dressed carefully, despite her haste, in a fashion that was more demure than he might have expected of her, considering his first sight of her by the falls. A simple dress that did not cling, flat shoes, her thick, chestnut hair plaited in a single braid down her back. She had not bothered with make up, but then, she rarely did. She wanted nothing to call attention to herself. If she had known what color the wallpaper was in the dining room, she would have wished to be wearing the same.

In a fleeting panic, Perry reached back into her purse for her keys, telling herself the smart thing to do would be to go home. She liked Ethan. However, on the heels of what had taken place in the creek and later, in her home, she was not at all certain that liking anyone, allowing herself any type of emotional attachment, was a wise idea. Ethan Taylor seemed to be a good man, an honest and likeable man, a very down-to-earth sort of guy. If she let herself get any closer to him, then she would have to tell him the truth. And that was something she could not do. How would one explain something like this? Hello, yes, I am seeing someone else. Sorry, didn't I tell you? He's no

competition, really, because he's not of this world. He's ... I don't know what he is, but I also don't know if I can break it off with him because the sex is apparently addictive...

Closing her eyes, Perry swore softly beneath her breath. She was being remarkably flippant, all things considered. Quite frankly, had she been a more timid sort, she would likely have locked herself into a small room somewhere and not come out.

But she was neither timid nor close-minded and, shoving her keys down to the bottom of her purse, she strode across the parking lot and into the restaurant with determination. At the podium she paused, smiling at the man who raised his brows inquisitively at her.

"Good evening, madam," he responded. "Are you meeting someone?"

"Yes. A Mr. Taylor. I believe he's already arrived."

"He has," said the man. "Follow me."

Wending their way between tables, the man led her to a booth near the back, illuminated by a shaded bulb above and a candle near the wall. Ethan rose as she approached. Not for the first time Perry took note of how tall he was, standing a head above the host. Ethan extended his hand to assist her into her seat. His eyes moved slowly and discreetly over her. Nevertheless, Perry was aware of his scrutiny. She slid into her seat, adjusting her skirt along her thighs.

"I hope you're not troubled by a booth," said Ethan. "I'm not much of a table man myself. I don't care for being out in the middle of things."

Perry's lips curved in a close smile of understanding, for she felt pretty much the same way, even under normal circumstances. Calling attention to herself was not her mode of operation, although she couldn't prove it by the incident earlier at the creek. Steering her mind away, she accepted the menu that was being handed to her, watching as Ethan resumed his seat opposite.

"You look stunning," he said, before she could get a word out in greeting. Drawing a deep breath, she opened the menu.

"Thank you," she smiled. "However, that wasn't exactly the look I was going for."

He made a noise in his throat, whether dissent or disbelief she could not tell. His dark eyes clearly reflected the pinpoint of the candle flame despite the shaded bulb burning so closely overhead. The natural and probably expensive dye of his shirt, a pale yellow linen, accentuated the tanned skin of his face and arms.

"See anything that interests you?"

Uttered artlessly in regard to the menu, his question nonetheless brought a flush to her cheeks. Dipping her head, Perry hastily perused the restaurant's offerings.

"Do you come here often? What do you usually get?" she asked after a couple of minutes. Everything looked so good. She was, she realized, quite famished. After all, she had not eaten in three days.

Dear God.

“Are you alright?” he asked, no doubt alarmed by her sudden pallor.

“Quite,” she assured him. She could feel the intent study of his gaze, and then he leaned back in his seat.

“Do you like fish? The sea bass is excellent. Mild and flaky.”

Perry nodded several times. “Yes, I think I’ll have that. I’d like a baked potato with that as well? I know the menu says it’s served with rice, but I need something a little more substantial. Oh, and I’ll have both the salad and the soup.”

“A woman with an appetite! What a pleasant diversion. You may have whatever you like, Perry. Something to drink? I could recommend the apple martini.”

“I’ve never had one. I don’t usually drink alcoholic beverages.”

Ethan closed his menu. “Don’t feel you must for my sake. Lemonade, then?”

“No, I’ll take the martini. You’ve intrigued me. Hopefully, I won’t get drunk.”

“On one?”

“You never know,” she answered. “I’m a lightweight.”

He laughed, genuinely amused by her candid remarks. She smiled at him, her eyes moving to his left hand. Though tanned, there was no sign of recent removal of a wedding band. She had not asked him his

marital status, naturally, assuming that he would not have invited her to dinner otherwise, but she was pleased and relieved to find no outward sign.

The waitress arrived while Perry was making her mental note. Ethan ordered for the both of them, handing the girl the menus. Once she had departed he sat forward with his hands folded on the tabletop.

“I’m glad you came out,” he said. “You look far more relaxed than you did at the house.”

With good reason, she thought, but refrained from speaking the words. Explanation would have been required, and she was not able to offer it. However, upon Ethan’s departure *he* had ceased to trouble her. She had wondered if this was coincidence or design, or just part and parcel to the nebulous world to which she had traveled willingly. Enmeshed in the stark sensuality of the experience, she realized that she had been willing to yield a little more of herself each time in order to achieve that lofty sense of physical rapture.

Folding her hands in her lap, Perry focused on the man across from her.

“And I’m glad you asked me,” she stated. That, at least, was true. She couldn’t remember the last time she had gone out, enjoyed the company of friends, let alone a male companion. Since the demise of her marriage she had avoided the latter, and since her return from the middle of the country to the East Coast, the former as well. She had told herself she was too busy, there were too many loose ends to be gathered and repaired, and that the time would come again for a

normal routine, a real life. But the truth was, since returning to live in her grandmother's home she had isolated herself, embroiled in her work and in this—this other matter. What was she to call it? There was no name that came to mind.

In recollection, a shiver danced down her spine, and not altogether in revulsion or fear. Across from her Ethan removed his jacket from the back of his chair, handing the garment around the edge of the table.

“It is a little cold in here,” he said.

“Thank you,” Perry murmured, slipping the jacket over her bare shoulders. A good man. Yes, Ethan Taylor was a good man. Thoughtful. Anticipating one's needs merely because he actually took the time to pay attention. Perry let her breath out in a long, discreet sigh.

“You came highly recommended, you know,” she said for the sake of conversation. “I've heard nothing but positive comments about your work.”

Ethan shifted in his seat, a little uncomfortably, she thought, but when he answered her his voice was low and easy. “Thank you. I like what I do.”

“How did you get started in the business? Besides all the back-breaking work, it must be fascinating.”

The martini arrived at that moment, and Ethan's water with lemon. Abstemious. She liked that, too. Lifting her glass, Perry took a small sip.



“Wow,” she said. “That is tasty. Strong. But tasty.”

“Will it make you drunk?” he teased.

“Let’s hope not,” she answered.

At her response he looked a question at her, but she ignored it. “Is it the physical work that you like, or the chance to reproduce history?”

Ethan shifted his hips, a small smile curling his mouth. “Funny you should zero in on both like that. Because it is both. I like physical labor. Call me crazy, but it’s true. And I love history. Always have.”

“Me, too,” she said, turning to find their salads arriving. Conversation halted for a brief interval, then resumed as the server disappeared.

“What is it that you do?” he asked. “I don’t believe we discussed it on the phone when you made the appointment and I, uh, well, I was not told, exactly.”

Perry drizzled creamy Italian dressing over her salad, spearing a bit of lettuce with her fork. “By Rick, you mean.” That surprised her. The man who had been something of a friend had, she discovered, an inordinately loose tongue, whether he was relating facts or exaggerating them.

“Yes.”

“Well,” she said, sliding the translucent dressing over the curve of a grape tomato with the back of the tines of her fork, “I write.”

One eyebrow arched. “Write? What sort of things do you write?”

“Whatever I’m hired to put into words,” she told him, popping the tomato into her mouth. She chewed and swallowed while he waited patiently for her to go on. “Lately, it’s been mostly business manuals. Pretty boring stuff, actually.”

“Someone has to do it, I suppose. Ever try your hand at fiction?”

She glanced up at him. “I have,” she admitted.

“Published?”

“Yes.”

“Anything I might have read?”

“I doubt it,” she said. “Unless you’re a more romantic sort than you look.”

“I beg your pardon?” he countered in mock insult.

She laughed and explained. “I’ve written a couple of historical romance novels. I don’t think you would have read them.”

“You’d be surprised,” he retorted. “Try me. Did you use your own name?”

“In a way,” she said. “I used my last name first and first name last, as a pseudonym. You know, switched the two around. Sort of corny, but that’s what I chose to do.”

On the other side of the cloth-covered table Ethan lowered his fork. A slow grin spread across his face. “Good God,” he said. “Honorable Intentions, wasn’t it?”

Perry sat back, her mouth dropping. “You’ve read it?”

He looked sheepish. “One of the ladies I dated for a time left the book on my sofa. I must admit I was curious, especially when I noted the time period. So, yes, I read it. Pretty hot stuff.”

Perry made a face at him. “That would be all a man would remember,” she commented dryly, but still amused.

Ethan folded his arms on the edge of the table, leaning forward. “Oh, that’s not true. Actually, I remember thinking at the time how detailed the writing was, how well researched and professional. Plus, it was a darned good love story.”

What an unusual perception for a man, she thought, staring hard at him. Not the first part, considering his profession, but the last. For the briefest moment Perry felt as if she had fallen a little bit in love with Ethan Taylor. It was nice to have one’s work appreciated for the reasons one intended. And then she laughed.

“I’m happy you enjoyed it,” she said. “Hot stuff and all.”

He grinned, waving the last remark aside. “Have you another on the way soon?”

Perry shook her head, smiling crookedly. “I’ve been rather busy with the stuff that pays the bills because, as of yet, the fiction is not.

Besides, since moving into my grandmother's house I've been, ah, somewhat distracted," she finished. He seemed to be waiting for further clarification. She remained silent, picking up her fork once more.

Across from her he nodded, accepting her reserve. Glancing up at the light, he wrapped the cloth napkin around his fingers and reached to loosen the bulb, effectively extinguishing the lamp. Only the candlelight remained to illuminate their table.

"Much better," he said.

"Much," she agreed.

"Me, not romantic," he scoffed, picking up his fork.

Perry smiled again, a closed curve of her mouth. Her stomach rolled, much as it had earlier when she had first noted his charming grin. She felt suddenly giddy and wondered if it was the martini, but when she looked at the glass it was still nearly full. Across from her, Ethan resumed his salad. Perry observed him from beneath her lashes, grateful for the subdued lighting that would keep him from noticing her attention. It had, indeed, been a long time since she'd spent any time in the company of a man outside of business, let alone dated. Dinner was a start. A good start. She liked Ethan. He was friendly and confident and not entirely aware of how darn good he looked. He was interesting and interested, to whatever depth the brief period of their relationship would allow. However, she could not help but wonder how quickly that interest would vanish if he learned the truth about what she had done.

Looking up suddenly, he said:

“I offer a history of the house. Prepared and bound, as part of the job. Did you know?”

Perry shook her head. A feathered strand of hair loosened to fall across her cheek and she brushed it back.

“Rick didn’t mention it?”

“He recommended you, Ethan,” she stated, “but he and I have little to say to each other any more. I’m afraid I may have hurt his feelings at one point, although it was entirely unintentional. I—are the two of you good friends?”

“Not really,” said Ethan.

Truthfully, that bit of information pleased her. Since meeting Ethan she had not been able to fully assimilate the idea of Rick and Ethan as friends. They seemed too disparate, the personality of the former aggressive and abrasive where Ethan’s was quite the opposite.

“Then I may as well tell you,” she said. “He asked me out after he and his wife split, and I turned him down. I thought I was nice about it but I bruised his ego a bit, I expect, or something, and he wasn’t happy. I was really surprised that he bothered to give my name to you. I’m glad he did.”

Ethan started to laugh, shaking his head as he wiped at his mouth with the napkin from his lap. “Rick is an arrogant ass,” he told her flatly. “I believe that even more than I did before, now that I’ve actually met

you.”

“So, he was not exactly effusive in my praise, I take it?” she drawled, setting her salad plate aside at the edge of the table.

“Don’t let it trouble you,” Ethan said, still chuckling.

The soup arrived, giving off a delicious aroma. Perry leaned slightly closer to her plate and closed her eyes, inhaling deeply. “Wonderful,” she whispered, then slitted her lids to view Ethan from behind her lashes. He was watching her with a most peculiar expression. For the first time she noted the tiny laugh lines at the corners of his eyes and etched deeply to either side of his mouth. He looked--well, just what she suspected he was. Friendly, approachable, down-to-earth despite his handsome appearance.

“So this report,” she ventured, taking a spoonful of soup from the edge of the bowl, “you prepare it yourself?”

“Yes. I’ve found it very helpful to document the various stages the house and property have gone through so the homeowner can understand what is needed in terms of materials and time in order to bring the house back to its original condition.”

Perry nodded. “Then you have learned a lot of the history of the house. I wonder if there is anything in your report I’ve not uncovered myself. There really is a lot I’d like to know.”

“Hmmm?” he responded, enjoying his own soup, that expression of warm amusement still evident about his mouth. He swallowed. “I’ve

been a trifle short on time lately, so the report's not complete. However, we could go over what I've gathered together, if you'd like."

There was something absurdly personal in his offer, in the manner in which he tendered it. If nothing else, Ethan would be an ally when she needed one. When? If. She had meant if, of course.

Unexpectedly, Ethan extended his hand across the table. "Dance with me?" he asked.

With his eyes he indicated a back room where a live trio had been playing soft music, the type that would not interfere with the conversation nor the digestion of the diners. A small dance floor gleamed in the low light of several recessed overhead fixtures. On the dull reflective surface a lone couple swayed gently to the sound of the three musicians, held closely in each other's arms.

Perry hesitated, opening her mouth to protest that their food would get cold. Her gaze focused on the image of the two dancers, intent on the knowledge of their embrace, the fact that they looked as if they were unaware of anyone else. And she knew she wanted that, too, even if just for the duration of a few slow minutes.

She slipped her hand into his and stood, dropping her napkin onto the table beside her plate. Ethan's free hand moved to rest lightly on her waist as he steered her toward the dance floor with a word to the waitress of their imminent return, and to leave the soup bowls there. Perry felt the touch of his fingers through the light fabric of her dress, the warmth of his skin and the gentle pressure in the small of her back.

For a moment she listened for the voice, telling her the things this man would do at its bidding. When the only voice that greeted her was the sound of Ethan's own, she smiled and stepped into the circle of his arms. He drew her close.

"Your hair smells good," he murmured.

So did he, like freshly laundered clothing. Beneath she scented his own masculinity and closed her eyes, breathing deeply the fragrance of a man who was flesh and blood.

## Chapter 4

*The moon was not yet full. He could see it, though, nearly round, the silver shine reflected in the shimmer of falling water. He watched the sphere move across the sky with anticipation, confused by his inability to clearly decipher time. How long had he been waiting for her here in the liquid dark? It was their place, theirs alone where none came but them, and yet he could not remember how many days had passed since last she was with him, her body warm and willing, belonging only to him despite the fact that she was his brother's wife.*

*He was frustrated now by his longing. Did he dream of her? He thought he had. Touching her, putting his hands, his fingers, his mouth wherever he chose; taking her, tasting her, teasing her, wanting himself inside of her, and yet unable to fully feel her through the gauze of his fancy.*

*He had imagined himself in the house, too, his brother's house where*



*he did not dare any longer to go, and his brother there as well. How odd. In his dream he could sense his brother's lust, that chaste man of God who denied his wife the pleasure of their marriage bed. Could feel it and sought to use it, as if he might step inside his brother's skin, his brother's life, become the man who possessed the one woman that he had wanted. The only woman he had wanted in the entirety of his life.*

*Pausing in his restless pacing he stared down at a vein running through the rock at his feet, a deep earthy red, like her hair. Hair so long and thick and bountiful that she used it to cloak her nakedness from his eyes that first time he had come upon her bathing in the creek. Before, he had thought himself alone in his yearning, but he had seen the reflection of it in her eyes when she had turned around and found him there, watching.*

*The water had been cold, so goddamn cold that it had near shriveled him to nothing--that, and the fear that he would be discovered standing in the stream beside this woman whose damp hair clung to her bare skin more jealously than a lover, the wife of his preacher-brother, the girl he had known since they were both children together grown to beauty beyond imagining. Opening for him without a word of protest or greeting. A subtle movement, the parting of her legs. An invitation that left him breathless and nearly weeping.*

*He could still remember the way she tasted, the soft, intimate flesh chilled and yielding to his tongue, slick from her own body's moisture. He remembered kneeling in the rocky bed of the creek almost reverently, heedless of the pain to his knees, licking and suckling at the patent evidence of her arousal like a babe searching at its*

*mother's breast. He remembered her voice above his head, whispering, pleading, and her fingers in his hair.*

*What he did not recall was how they had come to be here, in the cleft behind the falls, but it did not matter. She was his from that moment on, as he had always been hers.*

*Turning his head as a dog would when questing for a scent, he drew a deep breath, listening. She was here. No, not here, but nearby. The sound of her voice was faint, an echo of long ago memory. Carrying across the pasture and into the woods, a thread of speech, a single word, and then nothing. How he heard her voice through the crashing noise of the falls he could not tell. But she had not come to him, even though she was aware that he was waiting. She had gone into the house instead. How he knew that he could not say either, except he could see her there in his mind's eye, moving like a drift of wind through the darkened rooms. Lonely, longing for him with a passion that made her tremble...*

*Abruptly he threw himself against the stone of the cave wall, moaning, his pain soul-deep. Something had changed.*

*Something had changed.*

## Chapter 5

Perry entered the house holding her breath.

Nothing. She felt nothing. No thought invaded her mind but the

memory of a remarkably pleasant, exciting evening in Ethan's company, a man who was funny and sensitive and compassionate. That one dance had turned into several without stopping, held close in the arms of a man she had not known a few hours earlier. Later, when he had walked her to her car, it was obvious that they were both reluctant to part company. He had asked her to stop by his place for coffee, but she had refused. She could still recall the brush of his lips across her cheek in parting. A gesture that did not take advantage of the moment. If he had wanted more, she possibly would have given it. Perhaps he sensed that. Was he a gentleman as well as all the rest?

Grinning, Perry hung her car keys on the peg beside the door. She reached a slender hand to rub the back of her neck. She needed to sort through the mess she had created before entertaining the ideas that were circling in her head. Needed a solution to it, if there was one. Needed to stop yearning for the touch of a creature of air and water before giving herself to a man who was as solid as the floor beneath her feet.

Yet in this minute of this hour, she was free of that desperate longing, remembering only the touch of Ethan's hand in the small of her back as they danced, his breath across her cheek, his mouth pressed very discreetly against the crown of her head. Continuing to smile to herself, Perry crossed the kitchen floor to go upstairs. She left the light on above the stove. It had been a habit of her grandmother's when Perry had lived there, so that she would not stumble about in the dark if she went in search of a midnight snack when she was young, and to light her way after a late return when she was older and dating or out with her friends.

Touched by the recollection, Perry paused outside her grandmother's old room. Looking into the darkened space, she realized she did not remember her grandfather except vaguely, and she thought most of that was from photographs. She flicked on the light switch, gazing about at a very feminine room that she had not touched since her grandmother had gone into the hospital. It needed to be dusted, even sorted through and packed up, but as yet she was not up to the task. Perry liked it the way it was, as if her grandmother might at any moment return to the space that was so much hers.

Turning off the light Perry moved on to her own room, but halted suddenly in the hall. Swiftly she strode back to her grandmother's bedroom, smacking her hand against the wall in her haste to turn the light back on. What was different? Something was, she sensed it, but her eye could not locate the change.

Stepping into the center of the chamber she looked around. A damp draft blew across her bare legs beneath the hem of her dress. Spinning to the window, she stared at the billowing curtain.

Hadn't that window been closed? Perry rarely opened it, because she was afraid she would forget and rain would get in to ruin the window seat and the handmade quilt folded there.

Breath straining through her nostrils, Perry rushed to the window and yanked down the sash, scrabbling across the top for the latch. The drift of curtain subsided abruptly.

Perhaps, she considered, Ethan had opened it when examining the house. He had been checking the windows, after all. Yes, now that she

thought about it, he did come in here. She had asked him to be careful not to disturb anything, and had apologized for the caveat.

Satisfied by the explanation, she still felt uneasy. In her bedroom she shut the door and turned on the small television set, for companionable noise. Stepping out of her dress she hung it temporarily on a hanger on the peg behind the door, then pulled an oversized tee shirt over her head and climbed into the bed.

For a while she watched the television mindlessly, immersing herself in images that kept her brain occupied though her eyes continually strayed to her own open window, curtain drawn and fluttering slightly from the rush of air at its base. The sound of the distant creek always seemed louder in the night. Now, however, there was a different quality to the noise, neither soothing nor peaceful, nor even erotic, as it had been of late. Rising from her bed, Perry went to stand before the sill, parting the curtain slightly to peer out. The night was lit by a sliver of moon, the shadows beneath the trees and running alongside the barn deep and slightly menacing. Closing the window, Perry dropped the curtain into place, then climbed back into bed.

Twenty-two years ago she had scrambled out of the creek and not returned because of something she had seen without an understanding of how.

Perry knew in retrospect that she had been, at ten years old, a precocious child. Her breasts had budded earlier than her playmates, making her feel self-conscious. She had not wanted to wear a bra, but her mother had insisted on the need for one. And though she had been shy about her maturing body, she had been sexually curious in a

vague, little-girl manner, flirting with young men twice her age without realizing it. Fortunately for her, she had been ignored.

She remembered that it was at that time that she had been wont to sneak down to the creek more often, stripping down to her underwear to float in the water, to feel the chill touch of it on her skin. It had, quite frankly, excited her.

And then one day she had looked up and she had seen someone standing there, on the ledge by the falls. He had seemed less than real, but not surprisingly so. She had noticed the mode of his dress without being puzzled by it, even when she realized she was able to see the rock at his back through the white folds of his shirt. She supposed now that was due to her youth as well as the path her thoughts had been taking just before his appearance. She felt as if she had called him and that he had come in answer to her ill-defined yearning. But when he looked at her he had seemed utterly disappointed.

*You are a child*, he had said. *Go away*.

She had heard the voice in her head, not aloud, but she had known the words were his. Frightened as well as let down by his dismissal, Perry had not returned to the creek after that, and had succeeded in convincing herself that what she had seen and heard was pure fancy, until she had forgotten it altogether.

Years later, returning home after a failed marriage that had moved her halfway across the country, she had discovered differently.

Three days. *Three days*.

Pressing her head back into the propped pillows, Perry closed her eyes. She bunched the sheet into her fists and pulled the finished edge up to her chin. Her heart began to thump in her breast, her pulse to race in her ears.

For three days she had belonged to ... to what? A spirit? How had she not looked for definition, not cared what it was she was lying with, captivated solely by physical gratification? So mindless in her greed for satiation that she had permitted small blocks of time to pass without recollection, and now days without sustenance or care to responsibility. An hour here or there had not worried her, clearing the way, she supposed, for this latest episode.

Lifting her hand, Perry rubbed her brow, troubled by recognition. She had known exactly what *he* was, and she had not objected.

Prior to today, she had never been aware of the entity within the house. She had somehow thought its connection was to the creek and that inside the house she was ... well, at least separate and distinct from what they were together.

She was, of course, more frightened now than she had been during the hours that had passed without counting inside the narrow cave, listening to the hypnotic rhythm of water on stone, the sound of his voice in her head, speaking endearments, words that inflamed her, a constant interplay of desire and demand.

He called her by another name and she answered him readily, even in the beginning. His touch, although ethereal, caused her to climax again and again in heart-stopping violence. Disturbed as she was by the

realization of what was taking place, she trembled with the remembered sensation of his fingers questing, his mouth, his tongue, the pressure of his teeth upon her nipples, her shoulders, her belly and between her legs. There was no physical manifestation of his touch, no mark, no soreness, but she grew wet with the memory of it. And ashamed.

She could not remember if she slept at all while with him. She knew he had not. It did not, after all, seem likely that spirits would sleep in their restless wandering without concept of time.

Utilizing the back of her hand, Perry scrubbed tears from her eyes, staring into the middle of the room. She remembered his fierce yearning as if it were her own, his howling frustration at his inability to complete what he had begun, although his recognition of his condition was not wholly formed. He had been confused, not understanding what he was. She could sense that. And when he had left her abruptly, exhausted but still yearning, she had been afraid for the first time since it had begun. Disoriented, depleted, saddened by a feeling of loss that she thought might have been his more than her own.

She was not certain how long she lay on the cold stone, drifting in that devastating emotion. When she had finally put her dress back on and wandered out into the sunlight she knew she would have drowned when she dropped into the creek, if not for the fortuitous presence of Ethan Taylor nearby. She had not possessed the will, in that moment, to save herself. She would have welcomed death had it come to claim her.



Rolling onto her side, Perry gazed blankly toward the curtained window. Did one call a priest for something like this? She was not Catholic, but she did not think that would matter. Yet, could she bring herself to confess the details of what had taken place? Alarming, she did not want to. A part of her clung to those timeless hours of exquisite arousal with a savage, irrational possessiveness.

Dashing her hand across her eyes, Perry swallowed, hard. She tossed back the sheet, restlessly leaping from the bed to pad barefoot across the hardwood floor. The shut window mocked her. She desperately wanted the fresh night breeze blowing into the room, but she knew she would hear the sound of his voice in the creek's subdued noise, calling her by that other name. A name she could not, when she was away from him, bring into her consciousness.

Nevertheless, the hair stood up on the back of her neck and along her forearms at the thought of him calling to her, claiming her as his own. Her nipples grew hard beneath the tee shirt she wore and her legs parted involuntarily in a repetition of the wanton longing that had been driving her for months. She made a sound in her throat, of desperation and fear, and then the phone rang.

Through the third ring she stared at the nightstand as if the concept of a ringing telephone was totally alien, and then she snatched at the receiver and pressed it to her ear. Her gaze skimmed to the clock and the time.

“Hello?”

“Perry, did I wake you?”

It was Ethan's voice. She reveled in the deep timbre, the slow, easy drawl that some Pennsylvania men, native-born, possessed.

"Perry?"

"Yes, Ethan. Sorry. I heard you. You didn't wake me. I was just lying here with the television on," she hedged. What else could she tell him?

He hesitated before responding.

"Are you feeling okay, then? I was stretched out as well, waiting for the eleven o'clock news. For some reason I started to worry about you."

Perry could nearly see him, spread at his length on a deep cushioned sofa, his feet crossed at the ankles, one arm hooked behind his head, a television on across the room with the volume muted. She smiled into the phone. When she spoke, she thought he could probably hear it in her voice.

"It's very nice of you to worry about me," she said.

From his end a non-committal grunt issued. "We're not quite strangers any more, Perry. I had a great time tonight. And besides," he added, "carrying you unconscious for more than the length of two football fields warrants a little familiarity on my part. Are you sure you're alright? No more fainting?"

"None," she said.

"Are you going to see a doctor?"

He was very persistent about that point. Perry sat down on the edge of the mattress. She dug her bare toes into the small area rug beneath her feet.

“I ... I don’t think I need to,” she whispered.

“Perry, you don’t sound so sure.”

She curled her toes a little deeper into the rug as if clinging to the edge of a particularly hazardous incline.

“Ethan,” she said, not caring what he thought of her question, only seeking confirmation, “do you believe in ghosts?”

He was silent. Perry closed her eyes, uncertain if her prayers were for a positive or a negative response on his part. She was condemned by either.

“As it happens,” he answered at last, “I do. Why? Have you seen one?” he asked, keeping his tone casual. “Today?”

Seen one? Dear Lord, there was a bit more to it than vision.

“Yes,” she told him.

“I suppose that might explain your fainting spell,” he stated.

“It might,” she answered. Shock and an empty stomach were more likely the culprits, she thought, but did not say so.

“Are you frightened of it?”

Was she? Or was she more frightened of herself?

“Yes,” she said again. It was the simplest explanation. Let him take it as he would.

Once more he was silent. Though he did not speak she could hear his breath leaving him in a rough exhalation, followed by what sounded like the chaffing of a stubbled jaw across the mouthpiece and then, unmistakably, the noise of a zipper sliding.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Getting dressed.”

“You weren’t dressed?”

“At nearly eleven at night? No. Did you think my social life was such that I would be going out again?” A quick chuckle followed his question. “However, despite the hour, I was thinking I might come over for a few minutes.”

“Now?”

“Hold on,” he said, and put the phone down. A second later he picked it back up. “Yes, now. Or do you seriously object? I know it could probably wait until tomorrow, but you might want to talk about what happened while it’s still fairly fresh in your mind. Sleeping on it can make a difference to what you actually remember.”

Perry blinked, holding the phone away from her face with a puzzled frown, then she returned it to her ear. There was no way she was

telling Ethan what had happened. Not all of it, anyway.

“Do you know something about this sort of thing?” she inquired archly.

“Beyond a layman’s inquisitive nature? Some, though not all that much. Enough, perhaps, to help in your understanding. To be truthful, however,” he concluded, “I’m curious as hell.”

She smiled. She liked his blunt honesty, the delivery of his words. The package in which the delivery was wrapped held its own appeal.

“I’ll be waiting for you,” she said, and hung up.

## Chapter 6

Ethan pulled up outside the house, parking in nearly the exact place he had before. The yard was dark, the sky overhead heavily clouded, blotting the sickle moon that had been visible earlier in the night. There were no lights at the front of the house but that which showed behind the curtains of a window upstairs. The back light was on and the kitchen itself appeared fully illuminated, the interior glow spreading over the ground outside. Ethan strode across the grass to the bricked walkway, mounting the single step onto the low slab of concrete before the kitchen door. Lifting his hand, he prepared to rap on the doorframe with his knuckles.

Slowly his fingers opened, lowering onto the long muscle of his thigh as he leaned a little forward, peering through a dusty screen and the

large pane of glass beyond. When he had first walked up he thought he had seen Perry moving about the kitchen, but now he realized he was mistaken. The kitchen was unoccupied, a kettle on the stove emitting a forceful rush of steam. He could hear its piercing whistle muted only slightly by the windowpane. Inside the house he knew the summons had to be annoyingly shrill.

Concerned, he knocked loudly, waiting for her to come down the stairs and let him in. A moment later his worry for her, that she'd possibly fainted again, hurt herself, made him dispense with further announcement. He checked the knob and found the door unlocked, then turned it and stepped over the threshold.

The door swung back against him, the edge catching his forearm and almost knocking the manila folder he carried from his hand. Cool, damp precursor to the coming storm, a vigorous gust of air was blowing at him through the house, no doubt from an open window somewhere. It was so strong that it swept the hair back from his brow, then raced in an eddying circle across the lawn at his back, lifting and scattering the hay that had been spread at some point to mulch a newly seeded patch. When he turned on his heel to shut the door he found himself shouldering it against a change in the wind's direction. At this peculiar but frequent phenomenon, Ethan realized the storm was likely to be a nasty one.

Dropping the manila folder onto the table, he strode quickly to turn off the gas beneath the kettle.

“Perry?”

There was no reply. Ethan removed the kettle from the heated burner, where it was still muttering in a staccato chirp. Returning to the door he bent to gather the debris blown inside by the wind and tossed it in the trash.

“Perry?”

Brushing his hands on his jeans, he tipped his dark head to listen.

“Perry?” he called again.

A floorboard creaked above his head, a faint crack and vibration. In that old house he knew the sound could have been generated from any point above. Exiting the kitchen, he announced conversationally that he had turned off the teakettle. No one answered him.

Bounding up the steps two at a time he called Perry’s name again, heading for the room where he had seen the light. Two doors down, however, he abruptly felt the full force of the rising wind tugging at his tee shirt. Halting on the threshold he looked to the open sash. Silhouetted darkly against the night he saw her standing on the window seat, her arms wide, hands pressed, palm flat, to the deep wall on either side. Her oversized garment was billowing in the rush of air, as was her hair, whipping into a tangled mass. Below the tossing hem her legs were bare.

A horizontal flash of lightning embedded deep in the clouds was still enough to reveal her face. She was turned toward the center of the room, not the night outside, a position that startled him to no small degree. He noted that her briefly illuminated features were contorted

in an incomprehensible emotion that did not seem wholly to be fear. And though he had spoken, it was apparent she remained unaware of his presence.

In a rush he crossed the room, grasping her about the waist with both hands. A small cry escaped her and she released her hold on the window frame, toppling toward him. He caught her under the arm before she fell. Through the thin fabric of her tee shirt he could feel the heat of her skin, as warm as if she were fevered.

“Perry, it’s Ethan,” he said at her blank and startled look.

She shuddered. Her eyelids lowered, the thick lashes a smudge of color on her cheekbones. He fully expected her to go limp in another faint, but instead she opened her pale eyes and focused on his own.

“Ethan,” she said, “I didn’t hear you.”

“Nor the teakettle, apparently,” he said.

He studied her face closely for signs of strain. “What were you doing in the window?” he asked, indicating the portal with a jerk of his chin.

Perry turned, pulling away from his grasp. She brought both hands up along her arms above the elbow and hugged herself as if cold, which was entirely possible. The rising wind was ushering in cooler temperatures in front of the storm.

“I was going to put on some clothes before you got here, I swear,” she murmured. “I don’t make a habit of appearing half-naked before men with whom I am barely acquainted.”



“Just this one,” he said.

“It would seem so,” she answered.

He drew a deep breath, concerned by her tone as well as the irrelevance of her conversation. Reaching out, he stroked the tangled hair from her shoulder, then dropped his hand to his side.

“Would you mind very much,” he whispered, “telling me what the hell is going on here?”

In another flash of lightning he saw her bite down on her lip, hard, and then she nodded. Wordlessly she sat down on the window seat. Ethan closed the window, then lowered himself beside her, stretching out his long legs before him.

“You can actually see the creek from this window,” she said. “I never realized that before. Can you imagine? All these years and I never took note of that.”

Ethan turned for a better look. From the vantage point of height one could see through the trees a dull gleam of motion, no more than a spectral glimmering between the boles and shadowed foliage. No doubt in a time of full moon the water would be brighter, but in the gloom of approaching weather it was like a reflection of pewter in glass.

Dipping his head to ask her a question, Ethan immediately forgot what he had been about to say. The heat of her reached him where he sat, though it was subsiding. He wondered what was causing it; if she did,

indeed, have some medical condition of which she was unaware.

“Perry—”

“He’s out there,” she stated in a hoarse whisper.

Ethan started, glancing again to the deep shadow of the woods and the hint of the creek’s deceptively slow-moving surface. He remembered well the force of it against his knees, impeding his progress as if it sought to pull him down with Perry in his arms.

“Who?”

Angling his head he glanced down at her face, the gentle profile, the curve of her mouth in something less than humor despite the quick laugh that exited.

“My ghost,” she said.

Once again he raised his gaze to the murky view outside the window. She sounded very sure. He had not told her, had his reasons for not doing so, but years ago he had volunteered as part of a study of the paranormal, when he was still in college. Although they had not proved the factual existence of spiritual entities in residence, neither had they disproved all events. There was much in the world that remained unexplained and about which he was intensely curious.

Perry, on the other hand, did not seem curious at all, but most definite in her statement. That she was disturbed by her experience was patent, but he could not be certain that she was afraid. In fact, when he looked at her, the gleam in her pale eyes appeared anything but timid.

“Where did you see this ghost? In the outbuilding? And how do you know it’s there now?”

She drew a deep breath, exhaling through her nose. Outside the window the trees began to thrash beneath the wind. In the distance, still too far away to be **anything more than a pulse in the clouds, lightning flashed.**

“It called me,” she said. “*He* called to me, from down by the creek.”

Ethan grew very still. He felt the hair lift on his arms and at his nape.

“Called to you how? By name? And how did you hear him?”

Her chin lifted, her head tipping back on her neck. Her eyes closed. Ethan suddenly wanted very much to take her in his arms. It would have been an easy thing to do. He would not even have had to move, just reach out and draw her against him. He kept his hands at his sides.

“Like that,” she said.

He jerked forward, frowning. “What do you mean?”

“He said, ‘I can make him take you in his arms. It will be a simple task to undertake.’”

Ethan bolted up from the seat. He stalked to the middle of the room, where he stood a moment with his back to her, wrestling with the words she had just spoken.

“I’m sorry,” she said behind him. “I actually didn’t want to tell you,

but I think I must.”

What the devil was she saying? That this spirit, this entity, was seeking in some way to manipulate his actions? Why? He had felt nothing—well, not nothing. He had felt exactly what she told him the spirit had said to her.

Letting his breath out slowly in an attempt to calm his frantically circling thoughts, he paced to the far wall and back. He halted a single stride from Perry, his arms folded across his chest.

“Ghosts, or whatever you wish to call them, cannot hurt you. They cannot control physical objects. Their thoughts, if they have them, would seem to be in the past where once they dwelled, not in the present.”

Perry watched him from shadowed eyes, her countenance a combination of hope and disagreement. “What about those stories where objects float and people have blankets yanked off of them in their sleep?”

“No occurrences have been scientifically proven to date of which I am aware,” he stated firmly, more for his own benefit at the moment than hers.

She shook her head, her hair tumbling about her shoulders.

“Do you need scientific proof? What I just said to you startled you considerably, and I can only imagine why. There’s more, Ethan. A lot more. I don’t think I’m quite ready to talk about it.”

Perry sat with her legs held closely together and her hands folded with unusual primness in her lap. For all her stillness, though, she seemed to vibrate. He could feel her energy like an electrical charge held captive within an insulating sheath.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

She nodded, looking away from him.

“Ghosts can’t hurt you,” he repeated. “They cannot touch you.”

Her gaze shot up to meet his, clearly reflecting her doubt, then returned to the mute study of her interlaced fingers.

“They can’t,” he said. “Your own fears, however, are a different story.”

“Yes,” she said, “I know.”

Lifting his hand, Ethan rubbed the smooth place between his brows. Could what she was intimating be possible? More likely, she had read his intentions in his body language and spoken them aloud. But to what end? It seemed less likely that she would be involved in that sort of game. She impressed him as open and honest and, yes, sane. Though he had possessed a momentary doubt, it had been quickly dispelled.

“Can you sense the spirit still?” he asked.

“No. Not now.”

He nodded, oddly relieved. “Do you ever feel it here in the house?”

Slowly she stood up. The tee shirt shifted about her body, sliding along her thighs. He knew, even without close examination, that she was naked beneath. He deliberately steered his mind clear of that circumstance.

“I did today,” she answered. “For the first time. It was while you were here.”

“And it spoke to you then?”

She nodded.

“What did it say?”

She stared at him for a long moment. His gaze drifted to her mouth and he briefly contemplated what it would be like to kiss her. Her lips looked soft and full and agile. Parted slightly, he could see the exposed and gleaming edge of her teeth.

Abruptly, he returned his attention to her steady stare. He was doubting himself, now, questioning his own natural inclinations. He didn’t like it.

“Is it—”

“No. He’s not here now. I don’t know why, but he isn’t. As to what he said to me earlier today,” she stated quietly, “you really don’t want to know.”

He was silent, unable to comprehend what comfort he could offer. Something was going on in Perry's life, but what exactly that something was he could not fathom. His experience with such matters had been limited. He had never heard of anything like that at which she was hinting.

"Go get dressed," he said with unusual gruffness. "I'll finish preparing the tea you started."

\* \* \* \*

Perry clutched the steaming cup of chamomile between both hands. Across from her, seemingly recovered from the shock of revelation, Ethan had opened a folder he had brought with him and was spreading certain documents over the tabletop. The overhead kitchen fixture, usually less than flattering, treated his handsome countenance with unc customary grace.

"The Historical Society permits me access to a great many documents not allowed to the general public," he said. "I have more research to conduct regarding your home, but what we have here is probably the skeletal history of the last one hundred and fifty years. The house is a good deal older. I'm still working on that."

Perry nodded, sipping her tea with her elbows on the table. It had pleased her to watch Ethan moving about her kitchen, making tea for her and for himself. He had not hesitated to search through the cabinet for cookies, which were now arranged haphazardly on a plate in the center of the table between them.

“Everything in here is a copy of what the Society possesses. There are some letters, death certificates, bills of sale, certain chronologies compiled early in this past century. Some old photographs. People have, naturally, passed away in the house over the years, but from what I can tell they were none of them unexpected nor violent, although they don’t have to be, I suppose. Still, there’s more to be studied. I’ve been a little short on time these past few weeks.”

Extending her hand, Perry drew a copy of a photograph nearer, spinning it so that it was facing in the proper direction for perusal. “When was this taken?” she asked.

Reaching across, he flipped the corner up. “1924,” he said. “No porch yet, although I believe it was probably added on soon after. And there’s a huge oak in the front, see? But I didn’t even see a stump when I was here in the daylight.”

Perry made a face. “There isn’t one. A lot has changed over the years. Look beyond the roofline. There are no trees to be seen at all. I guess it was all field then.”

“Either that,” he said, turning the photo around so he could see where she pointed, “or they were just smaller. Most of those in the back may have been saplings at the time this was taken.”

Picking up a cookie, Perry bit into it. “What else?” she questioned around a mouthful of crumbs.

“Here’s the barn around the same time. It’s actually in better shape now. See? And here, this is an old John Deere tractor in front of that



shed that needs to be taken down. I haven't yet figured out who the fellow sitting on it is, though. And this one is of a young boy fishing at the creek, taken sometime in the early 50's. I—what?"

"Nothing. Even that's changed. The sides are steeper now, unless that was taken somewhere I don't know about."

"No, you've probably been right there. The constant flow of water erodes the banks. I'm sure you've probably noticed changes just from these recent storms we've had. Some of the places I've worked I've found evidence that the bed of a creek has shifted over time to run another course entirely."

Compressing her lips, Perry nodded again. "Are there any of the waterfall?"

"Not that I've found," he said. "Why?"

"I think that's where he, uh, well he doesn't *live* there, of course. But he exists connected to it, somehow."

Ethan sat up, interested.

"How do you know?"

How do I know, Perry thought. A legitimate question, but one she would have difficulty in answering. If she told him that she would have to explain all of it. She felt a crimson blush creep up her throat to her cheeks at the very idea. In addition, she suspected he might very well be appalled at the knowledge of what she had permitted. Permitted? It was not as though she just let it happen to her. She had

wanted it, every moment of that strange, unearthly passion.

“I just .... I just do,” she faltered and rose abruptly from her chair. Crossing to the counter she pulled the honey pot close, dropping a dollop into her cooling tea. The thick golden liquid sank to the bottom of the cup in a congealed mass. Behind her Ethan sat in silence. After a moment she heard him shuffling the papers about, returning them to the folder.

“This will keep until a better time,” he said. “Let’s go sit where it’s more comfortable for a few minutes. If you want to talk to me, you can. And if not, we’ll just finish our tea and I’ll explain some of the procedures you can expect in the next few months with the house. Then I’ll go home. Okay?”

Perry closed her eyes. No, it wasn’t okay. Now that he was here she wanted him to stay, despite the peril she knew was present if he did. It wasn’t as if she wanted to share her bed with him. Not right now. She just wanted his companionship, his presence in her home. She wondered if he would sleep on the couch if she asked him. She had a feeling he would, but it would be damned uncomfortable presenting that scenario to him. She wondered as well what would happen if *he* returned in the night. That was something she could not risk.

The kitchen light flickered just as a growl of thunder rumbled overhead. She had not noticed the lightning with the room so glaringly illuminated. At the table, Ethan swore. She spun about in time to see him sliding back his chair.

“I don’t know what I was thinking,” he said. “I left the window open

in the truck. I'll be right back."

She watched him rush out the door with the unnerving perception that he would not be coming back. That Ethan was, in point of fact, already gone from her life, that she was left devastatingly alone. It was a feeling akin to that which she had experienced beneath the falls this very day, when *he* had departed and she knew, with sudden clarity, that this emotion was not her own.

"Go away," she said, squeezing her eyes shut and clutching the handle of her cup so tightly she thought for an instant it might snap. "Leave me be!"

She received no reply.

A scant two minutes later Ethan returned, shaking himself like a dog. The shoulders of his shirt were soaked, as well as his hair. At his back before he shut the door Perry witnessed large raindrops pounding the brick walk.

"Ye gods!" he cried theatrically. "'Tis a night not fit for man nor beast!"

Despite her misgivings, Perry smiled. "I'll grab the plate and your tea," she said. "Your towel is still hanging on the knob of the powder room. I think you need it."

With a grunt of assent he snatched the towel from the door and dried his hair, following her from the room with the terry draped about his shoulders. Switching on a lamp as she passed, Perry sat to one side of the sofa. Ethan hesitated only a moment before seating himself at the

opposite end, stretching out his legs in blue jeans, crossing his feet at the ankle. Lifting his mug to his thigh, he settled his other arm across the back of the couch. He looked, Perry decided, very much at his ease.

“I like this room,” he said. “I like the way it feels.”

“Me, too,” she answered him. “Always have.”

He nodded in appreciation of her sentiment. Outside the window lightning flashed, swiftly followed by a long rumble of thunder that rattled the aging glass. Once again the lights flickered. Wordlessly Ethan switched his cup to his other hand and reached to the side table, picking up the long lighter she kept there and touching its flaming tip to two candles.

“Just on the off chance we might need them,” he murmured, resuming his former position. “It’s not like I’m romantic or anything.”

Chuckling at the jest, Perry settled into her corner of the cushions; at which point the lights promptly went out. She made a small noise, less of consternation than exasperation, and tucked her feet up under her. In between the vivid bursts of electrical charge the candles flickered, the light reflecting off the ceiling almost rosy in hue.

“Does this bother you?” he asked.

“What? Being without electricity? Not really. For one thing, it’s only temporary. For another, I rather think I prefer it. I was born in the wrong age.”

He smiled with his mouth closed, a deep creasing to either side indicating the extent of his humor. His dark eyes reflected the flames. “Me, too,” he said, echoing her earlier response.

Perry felt absurdly contented. She regarded it as a reaction to Ethan’s comfortable self-assurance, but she didn’t care. Taking a small sip of her tea, she set her cup on the coffee table, then tipped her head against the back of the sofa. Wind-flung rain pummeled the windows at the front of the house and fell with a slight hiss down the chimney to the empty hearth. The twin flames of the candles wavered in an errant draft, then held steady.

“What I meant though,” he went on, his voice subdued, “was something else entirely.”

Closing her eyes, Perry did not wait for him to rephrase his question. “If you mean am I bothered by sitting here in the dark in the middle of the night with you, a man I only met a few hours ago, the answer is no.”

“That wasn’t exactly what I meant either,” he said after a moment, “but I’m glad to hear it.”

Perry peered out at him through the lashes of her left eye. Strangely, his smile had vanished. With his hand over the top of the cup on his thigh, he was staring at the fireplace or something in the vicinity. His face had lost all readable expression.

“What did you mean then?”

He sighed, the motion of his exhalation visible in the extended rise and

fall of his chest. “Does it bother you to be pursued by something you don’t understand? Because that is what you are saying is happening, isn’t it? This—this haunting, or whatever we’re going to call it. This spirit is, for some reason, seeking you out.”

Perry closed her left eye again, turning her head toward the ceiling. She wished that he hadn’t brought it back up, that he had, for a time, allowed her to forget. Because she had, for a minute or two.

“Yes,” she said.

“Do you have any idea why that might be so?”

The reason, she mused with irony, is because I am quite willing to give it what it wants.

“Perry?”

“Ultimately, no,” she stated quietly. “I have no idea. I know what he wants of me, but I don’t know why. There must be some reason, wouldn’t you think? Assuming the world is a logical place, that is. I am, however, beginning to doubt the possibility of that being the case.”

He made a noise of agreement in his throat. “Do you think it might be something else?”

“If you’re asking about my mental health,” she murmured without opening her eyes, “I can’t say. I feel sane enough.”

He was silent for a few seconds while thunder boomed, then spoke

again, his voice an echoing rumble. “What happened upstairs? Why were you standing in the window like that? And when you told me what it had said to you, did you know somehow what I was thinking?”

Perry considered all three of his questions carefully. She knew that she had come downstairs and put the kettle on before hurrying back up the stairs to dress. As she had passed her grandmother’s room some turn of thought had drawn her inside to the window. She had opened it. She was not certain why, but she did not think it had been of her own accord. After, she had slipped into a state she did not care to describe to Ethan. It would have been very difficult to do so, even if she were inclined.

As to what Ethan had been thinking, if it was anything near to what *he* had shown her, what *he* had implied, well, that was another dilemma entirely.

“I had no idea what was going on in your mind,” she said, avoiding a direct answer. “I guessed, however, by your reaction, that I was not far off the mark. But it wasn’t me who knew.”

“You’re saying you believe this spirit might direct my actions somehow?”

“I don’t know,” she whispered. “I’m not saying it. He is. Can a spirit do something like that? You seem to be a lot more knowledgeable about such matters. This is new territory to me.”

When he did not respond, Perry sat up. The flames at his elbow bent in a draft, casting his face in shadow. Perry started to lower her feet to

the floor but stopped, drawing them back up under her. It was an old childhood fear, the placing of her feet on the floor in the dark beside the bed. She remembered that she used to cry, so frightened was she that something beneath the frame and mattress would reach out and take hold of her. Recalling that made her wonder why she had not been frightened of her present situation sooner.

Because, she told herself, lust was a very powerful motivation to forget those things of which one should be afraid. In its own way that type of mindless passion really was like insanity, a madly fleeting, but consuming heat. One could burn to ash in it and never flinch away.

“Would you consider professional help?” he asked her. He seemed to realize she could not see him as clearly as she wanted and reached back to the table without looking to slide one of the candles forward.

Disappointed, Perry studied his face, the stark contrast of gilded planes and shadow. “You really don’t believe me then.”

“I’m not suggesting a psychiatrist, Perry. Don’t look so devastated. I’m still occasionally in contact with some of the people from college with whom I was involved doing research. I thought you might speak to one of them—”

“Research?”

“Into the paranormal. This is way beyond my purview. In comparison to a great many of those I worked with I was just a dabbler. But if this is truly a case of a spiritual entity, you need someone who knows what they’re talking about. And even if it’s not, and it’s something else



entirely, at least you'll know."

"Like, me being crazy," she said.

"You're not crazy, Perry. But you are scared. I can see it in your eyes. When did you sleep last?"

Perry sucked in her breath, then realized it was just a lucky guess. The question was innocent, uttered in concern. "A few days, I think," she said.

Ethan nodded, as if it was no less than what he had suspected. "Would it help if I stayed here tonight? I can sleep on the couch—actually, you can sleep on the couch. I'll park my butt over there in that overstuffed chair with the ottoman. And in the morning when I'm at work I'll make a few calls to see what I can find out."

"You don't have to do that," she said, but it was a weak protest and ineffectual. As if he had read her mind, he was doing exactly what she had been afraid to ask him. She watched as he leaned forward, setting his mug beside her own. Then he stood, stretching with a low groan. Perry eyed him from beneath her lashes, waiting for the voice to speak to her, to taunt her, but there was silence.

"Alright," she agreed. "Thank you."

"Blankets?" he asked with an arch of a single brow.

"In the chest over there," she indicated. "They'll smell like cedar though."

“I won’t mind if you don’t,” he said, and walked over to lift the lid. Perry’s gaze followed his lanky stride, then turned away. A second later a lightweight blanket fell over her head, tossed there by Ethan’s quick arm. Shaking it out to cover herself, Perry stretched out along the sofa cushions, pillowing her head on her forearm. Ethan crossed to the aforementioned chair and sank down into it. Unlacing his boots he dropped them to the floor, then snapped the blanket flat over the length of his legs, his feet propped on the ottoman. The sudden gust of air caused the candles to gutter deeply, but they did not go out.

Leaning back into the chair cushion, Ethan interlaced his fingers behind his head. The sleeves of his tee shirt slipped down, each arm flexed by position revealing a lean curve of muscle, a notable evidence of natural strength. Perry dragged her gaze away, lifting her eyes to his to bid him goodnight. He was watching her lazily, his long, dark lashes lowered. His smile was just as languid.

“Go to sleep, Perry,” he said.

A rush of warmth at his tone nearly made her break out into a sweat beneath the light covering of the blanket. Obediently she burrowed her head closer into the flesh of her arm and closed her eyes. Across the room he made a noise, something low and ill-defined. She thought it might be laughter.

## Chapter 7

Lifting the one candle that still had life left in it, Ethan poured the wax pool into the other container. That wick had burned itself out a quarter

of an hour ago. In his other hand he held the folder he had retrieved from the kitchen, all copies and notes returned to it once more. There had been nothing there to suggest a reason for a haunting. He hadn't thought there was, but as he hadn't been able to sleep it did no harm to look through the information again. As the mantel clock chimed the hour delicately, Ethan bent to place the folder on the floor, looking across, and not for the first time, to where Perry lay sleeping.

At some point she had rolled onto her back, the light cover pulled up close to her chin, her cinnamon brown hair flung in a riotous mass over the pale cushions of the sofa. Despite her position her mouth was closed, perhaps from the pressure of the blanket rolled beneath her jaw. He knew that if it were him lying there he would probably be snoring like an old hound. But then again, maybe not. No one had yet complained of him creating any nighttime disturbances to their slumber. It just seemed to him that anyone sleeping on their back would have to go off into a chorus of strange noises at some point.

Come to think of it, Perry was not really making any sound to speak of. The storm had long ago passed on without the return of electrical service. The house was relatively quiet, just the occasional squeak and groan, and the dripping of sodden leaves outside. Ethan stared hard to assure himself that she was breathing, and when he located the evidence he turned away, his gaze drifting around the room.

He had meant what he said to Perry, about liking the room. He felt comfortable in it, at ease, almost as if it welcomed him. He supposed it might be something about the color of the walls, the placement of the furniture, the little mementos of someone's life— not Perry's

though—scattered about among the furnishings. Or, he mused, it might be Perry herself.

Once again he found his eyes drawn back to her. He studied the curve of her lashes, the smudge of rose coloring her cheek. While he had been sitting guard over her during the past hours he had been waiting for the strangeness of the circumstance to hit him. But it hadn't. Despite his reason for staying he experienced no major discomfort in that knowledge. The fact that they were scarcely acquainted didn't register at all. He felt very much as if he had known her for far longer than the half a day fast approaching.

As for Perry, he had a notion she felt similarly. If she didn't, then she was one hell of a lot more trusting than he would have expected any woman to be in this day and age. Even though they had been introduced, on a business level, through a mutual acquaintance, she really did not know him. And yet there she lay, sleeping as carelessly as if long accustomed to his guardianship and his presence.

He didn't quite know what to make of the tale she had told. He didn't doubt her belief in it; he just had never come across anything resembling this type of contact. As for the spirit—if it truly existed—exercising any sort of control over him, he had to admit that he had initially been unnerved by her proclamation, but after time and consideration he was confident that such a thing could not happen. His attraction to Perry was obvious to the both of them. Her words in her grandmother's bedroom had merely been coincidence or some sort of unconscious recognition on her part.

Frowning, Ethan tossed back the loosely knit blanket lying across his

legs and stood up, stretching his arms above his head. Come the morning he was going to be damned tired, he knew, but he really couldn't sleep. He had tried for about forty-five minutes and then given up. It would not, of course, be the first time he arrived at work bleary-eyed, although it didn't happen often. No doubt some of his men would even have a crude remark or two to make, but he had never been one to talk much about his private life and fully intended to ignore any comments that might be passed.

At a noise from Perry, Ethan lowered his arms, turning toward her. She had rolled onto her side again. The blanket was in a heap on the floor. Despite all good intentions Ethan's gaze tracked slowly from her head to her bent knees and back up again in recollection of the various stages of undress in which he had witnessed her since their initial meeting. If it had been intentional on her part it would have been downright laughable. As it happened, though, he felt no desire to laugh at all, but something entirely to the contrary.

Earlier tonight when she had walked into the restaurant wearing that simple cotton dress with her hair pulled back, legs and arms bare and not a skim of makeup on her face, he had felt something inside of himself roll over and spring to life, and he didn't mean that wholly within a sexual context even if his body was, at the moment, betraying him to the contrary. Giving a sharp tug to the sudden restriction in his jeans, Ethan crossed the floor to the window. He hooked his arm over the frame and leaned his forehead against the cool pane, peering out into the sodden wee hours of the morn.

A lone firefly was clinging to the glass, its body pulsating with neon green light. Ethan stared at the tiny creature, trying to recall what he'd

heard about them. Wasn't it the female, he mused, that carried the chemical which caused it to glow, to attract a mate? A firefly's version of seduction. Pretty blatant. With a display like that, though, a guy didn't have to worry about mistaking the signals.

He didn't think, when the time came, that he would have to worry about mistaking any signals with Perry either. There was something about her, some honest, wholesome sensuality. No matter what she was doing it managed to shine through like her own glowing chemical. When she was ready, she would turn to him and let him know straight out. She seemed like a woman who claimed her man in no uncertain terms. He liked the idea of that very much.

Of course, first they had to get her through this mess, and there was that little matter of the work he needed to perform for her on the house. If the guys were going to bust his ass about a noticeable lack of rest, how much more fodder for their speculation would they gain upon witnessing the two of them together? For him, at any rate, the attraction was so pronounced that he knew the symptoms were bound to be recognized by someone in his crew in short order. Hell, if he spent half the day walking around with a hard-on, there wasn't anyone who wouldn't be guessing the reason.

Chuckling quietly at the particulars of his predicament, he redistributed the folds of his jeans again. He had to stop thinking about her for a minute and concentrate on something else instead. As soon as he determined that necessity, however, he pictured her breasts in the soaked white dress, the nipples straining against the wet fabric. And after that, the fabric parting and her breasts rounded in his hands, his mouth moving over her milky skin, his tongue circling the rosy

aureoles, his teeth clamping down ever so lightly on her taut flesh and the cries escaping her, swift and low.

His breath rushed out through his nostrils, clouding the glass. Almost unbidden the images of her were coming to him, making him sweat. It was as if he already knew her intimately, every inch of her open to him. He ached to be inside of her.

Whispering a desperate expletive, he raised his head just in time to catch the reflection of movement in the room behind him, a fleeting alteration of light and shadow traveling from his left to right across the living room toward the darkened staircase. In the gloom he could not tell what it was.

Heart jerking in his chest, Ethan spun about. Light from the lone candle flickered over the walls and ceiling, creating more shadow than illumination. Perry was awake, pressed into the far corner of the couch, the blanket from the floor clutched beneath her chin. It wasn't her he had seen, though, as she had not possessed the time to dart across the living room to the staircase, and then return unseen.

“Perry?”

Her pale eyes were wide, the color in her cheeks high. He crossed the room in two strides and sat down in front of her. Reaching out he took her hands and pulled them away from her throat, down toward her lap. The blanket fell to the floorboards unheeded once more. The heat emanating from her was intense.

“Perry?” he called her again. He saw her tongue slip out to moisten

dry lips. “Perry, look at me. What just happened?”

“He ... he was here,” she whispered.

A chill tripped down Ethan’s spine. He resisted the urge to turn his head and look behind. In a low breath he uttered a quick prayer, the first he could recall speaking out loud in years.

“Was?” he asked. “Or is?”

“I think he’s gone,” she said, her voice still subdued, almost husky. “I’m not sure, though. Can you feel him?”

Ethan looked at her, at the smoldering heat in her gaze lurking beneath the surface of confusion. Once again she seemed overly animate without the slightest motion, as if somewhere inside she was spinning at a dizzying pace. He knew, God, he knew if he reached out and touched her, anywhere, let alone where he could see the pulse beat of her blood at the side of her throat, that whatever tender thread was keeping her glued to her side of the couch would be severed. He could envision her flying up and against him, the vibrating passion, her mouth on his own, the moist warmth of her melting over the shaft of an erection that was growing increasingly more uncomfortable. The image was so strong it was nearly overwhelming. Was this what she meant when she asked if he could feel him, *it*, he corrected; this damned spirit haunting her?

“Christ,” he muttered, not in blasphemy, but in pleading. He stood up quickly, striding over to retrieve his shoes.

“I think we’re going to my place, sweetheart,” he said as he bent to put



them on. “I’m getting you out of here, at least for tonight.”

When she didn’t answer he glanced at her around his arm. She was shaking her head.

“I don’t think I can.”

“I do,” he answered tersely.

“It’s my home,” she said. “I can’t leave it.”

“You can and you will,” he said. “Is there anything you need to bring with you? I’ll make those calls first thing and see if I can get anyone interested in whatever the hell it is that’s going on here.”

He thought she was about to refuse yet again, but instead she relented. “Where are your shoes?” he asked, glancing pointedly at her bare feet as she rose. She looked down also, then shrugged.

“My sandals are by the door,” she said.

“Toothbrush?”

“Upstairs.”

“Never mind. If you get desperate, use mine.” At the face she made, he amended, “There’s probably a new one floating around from my last trip to the dentist.” He wanted as little delay as possible to their departure. He was starting to feel edgy, unnerved, oddly even a little angry. As he finished tying his sneakers he couldn’t think why that might be, except, damn it, if he was going to fuck her it was not going

to be at the bidding of some twisted entity.

With a sharp intake of breath, he swore at the crude and rather chilling turn of his thoughts. Perry deserved more respect, even in the privacy of his own mind, than to be thought of in those terms. As for the latter part, that did not bear dwelling on at all, at least not for the time being. He was feeling far too vulnerable for that type of speculation.

“What’s wrong?”

Straightening, Ethan turned fully around to face her. She was a good-looking woman, sexy, pleasing to him in many aspects. It was only natural that he wanted her. There was nothing else going on here. The strangeness of the night was causing his thoughts to run rampant, that was all.

“Nothing,” he lied. “There’s nothing wrong besides the obvious, Perry. Get your shoes. I’ll grab the candle to light the way.”

She headed toward the kitchen a pace ahead of him. Suddenly, he didn’t even want her that far away. It didn’t feel quite safe.

“I’ll follow you in my car, I guess?” she asked as she moved through the shadows toward the place she had left her sandals lying.

“No,” he said, too quickly. He felt as if he was being watched, like he had in the woods when he had first come to Perry’s house, how long ago? Was it really only a handful of hours? He drew a deep breath to steady himself.

“I’ll drive,” he said, more calmly, “and bring you back when you’re

ready.”

To his relief, she made no protest.

\* \* \* \*

The lights from the dashboard gently illuminated the cab of the truck. Outside, the still-clouded sky made the night even darker than usual beneath the trees overhanging the roadway. After traversing puddles, some of which were fairly deep, and skirting fallen branches and various bits of debris, they sailed out onto the main highway. It seemed to Perry that Ethan was looking a little too intent and driving a little too fast. Something about his posture, close to the wheel, white-knuckled, the occasional deep and heavy respiration, made her wonder what he was thinking. She didn't ask, afraid to distract him from the task at hand.

He said little, glancing her way every now and then. His dark hair was in disarray, the nearest sleeve on his shirt rumpled, turned back on itself. Wordlessly Perry reached out to smooth it down. She could feel the ridge and curve of muscle beneath her fingertips. Not daring to linger long, she lowered her hands into her lap.

“I don't know that it was necessary for me to leave,” she ventured finally, when he had slowed the truck to the speed limit.

“No? I can't imagine why not. I *saw* it tonight, Perry. Or something.”

“But you were the one who said that ghosts can't hurt you,” she reminded him.

“I know what I said,” he replied. His tone was curt.

“I never felt as if I was in danger,” she went on. “Not physically. I don’t think he has any desire to harm me. At least, I didn’t.”

“You’ve changed your mind?”

In the amber glow of the interior lights Perry closed her eyes, leaning her head against the back of the seat. The truck slowed further. She heard the tiny repetitious note of the turn signal.

“I don’t know,” she answered quietly.

“Then why did you leave with me?” he asked.

“Because I knew you wouldn’t leave unless I came.” Perry lifted her lids. The truck bounced into a driveway and began a slow crawl along its length. In the near distance Perry could see a darkened house with a single light burning on the porch. Ethan said nothing until he had pulled up outside the oversized garage and killed the engine.

“This—” he began, and shook his head. “This is crazy. Are you saying you were afraid for me?”

“Yes.”

He drew a long breath in through his nose, then discharged it slowly. His hands dropped from the wheel. Yanking the keys from the ignition he began to tap them thoughtfully on his thigh.

“Why? Why were you afraid for me and not for yourself?”

Releasing her seatbelt Perry pivoted on the seat to face him. His gaze held steady on her own, awaiting an explanation. And she owed him one. She knew she did. Nevertheless, she could not fathom where to begin.

“You said you saw him,” she started.

“Saw *it*,” he corrected. “I didn’t say *him*. What I saw didn’t have any real form. You, however, have referred to it as him from the onset. May I ask how you are so certain what gender this entity might have possessed while animate?”

Perry swallowed, hard, knowing how irrational she would sound. Besides, she could see that Ethan was near to drawing his own conclusions and that he was not caring much for the path down which they were leading him.

“I saw him first when I was ten years old,” she hastened, “but not since then, until I moved back into my grandmother’s house for good. He looked—looks nearly as plain to me as you do now, slightly shadowed, parts a bit brighter than others. Not anywhere near as solid, but not transparent or smoky or whatever one might expect. And often I just hear him, and don’t see him at all.”

He blinked slowly, assimilating her description; possibly envisioning it. The keys stilled in his hand.

“But you feel him,” he stated quietly.

“I ... yes,” she said.

“And you fear that this spirit is seeking to utilize me for fulfillment, for gratification? Because that is what you’re telling me, isn’t it? That when you feel him, you don’t necessarily mean that you sense his presence. You mean that he touches you in some manner that is intimate.”

Perry nodded, not trusting herself to speech. She felt her cheeks flare up and pressed her fingers to them. She bowed her head, staring at the glow of the porch light across the curve of her knee.

“Willingly?”

“What?” Her head jerked up.

“Are you a willing party to this?” he asked. She couldn’t see his eyes, their expression. “I don’t understand. How can you possibly feel anything at all?”

“It’s .... it’s like reading a passage in a book that moves you,” she struggled to explain. “You experience what you have read, even though it’s not real. I’m sorry. I don’t know how to make it any clearer.

“The first time, I didn’t even realize what had happened, I just perceived the changes in me afterward. The episodes became addictive, out of my control, although I didn’t understand that until today. Almost hypnotic, where a word is all that’s needed to put you in a certain state. But this last time I was gone three days, Ethan. When you came upon me at the creek, I had been gone from my home for three days. God,” she whispered, and started to cry. She didn’t mean

to, because it seemed like a play for sympathy, but she couldn't help herself. She felt mortified now that she had confessed aloud, and frightened, and desperately certain that Ethan would turn from her in disgust, rescinding his friendship as well as the promise of something more.

For a long time he didn't say anything, just stared out of the windshield at the blank face of the garage door. Forcing herself to stop crying, Perry wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

"You can't go back there until I have someone check into this," he said.

Perry leaned against the seat. **At least he wasn't making the sign of the cross in her direction. That was some consolation.**

"It's my home," she said.

"Of course. But surely, you must see that you're not safe there? Spirits can't hurt you, but you could hurt yourself in that state."

His voice was flat, emotionless. Perry sat very still.

"Three days," he whispered.

"Yes."

She saw him lick his lips as if his mouth was dry. His head tipped back on his shoulders. He reached up to the visor, pulling out a piece of paper tucked against the roof. After turning it over several times in his hand he put it back. Perry did not think he was even aware of his

actions.

“And you have some reason to suspect that this entity wishes to use me to get to you. That seems to be allotting a sentient personality to something which should just be a shade, as it were, of the past.”

“I’m only aware of what he said to me,” she told him. “I had never heard him in the house, until you were in it as well. Does that mean anything?”

Ethan shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Perry watched him and waited. She wondered if she should just exit the truck and find someplace else to stay. Of course, she had walked out without money or identification or anything but the clothes she was wearing. In fact, she didn’t even have the keys to get back into her own house.

“Ethan?”

“Hmm?”

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“For getting you into the middle of this.”

“I got myself into the middle of this,” he stated. Convincingly, even. Perry bit her lip to keep from crying again. She felt too emotional, too vulnerable, too much like she was falling prematurely for a man she



barely knew. All that, and she was just realizing as well that she had spent the last few months in a brittle nightmare that she had been unable to recognize.

“And no matter what you might believe,” Ethan said suddenly, turning in his seat, “I am not being made to want you through the design of some force outside my command. I’m doing a bang up job of that all on my own.”

“I—what?”

He laughed, a short sound with little humor in it, and then he reached with astonishing swiftness to slip his hand against the back of her neck and pulled her closer. His mouth came down across hers and she heard the keys hit the floor. His other hand settled against her waist. The contact sent a shiver along her skin. She opened her mouth to the pressure of his own.

For their first kiss it was exquisite, long and slow and with just enough control to make her tremble. She could feel the warmth of his breath cross her skin as he exhaled through his nose. His hand on her waist remained stationary, firm, bracing her when she wanted nothing more than to rise up and meet him as his tongue slid over hers in a languid caress. She moored her one hand to the edge of the seat and slid the other hand into his sleeve, curling her fingers around the straining muscles of his arm. A low noise vibrated up from his chest into the hollow of her mouth. Her own breath grew short. Despite his efforts to keep her anchored she tightened her grip on his arm and arched against him. He pulled his head away.

“We’re three dozen yards from my front door,” he said in a husky undertone, “and this seat doesn’t go back any further. Let’s go inside.”

Silently, Perry opened her door and got out, not quite steady on her feet. The world seemed to be spinning at an accelerated pace and she was oscillating in the center of it. The chill of the darkest hours before the dawn of a new day touched her skin, arousing her still further. Her nipples were hard, the flesh between her legs slick in almost instantaneous reaction. Ethan wanted her and she wanted to be with him just as badly. It frightened her a little, considering recent events, to think that in a few minutes she would be surrendering all restraint to him, to a man she barely knew, to a man such as he appeared to be.

He came around the truck and took her hand in a gentle grip, leading her across the graveled drive and up the steps onto the porch. She blinked in the glare of the brightly burning fixture. He opened the screen door. She held it for him, her other hand never leaving his as he inserted the key into the lock and pushed the front door open. In an action that seemed one of habit he reached inside to switch off the overhead light, then stepped over the threshold. She followed.

The darkness inside his home was welcome, relaxing her with its sensation of anonymity. She could smell the scent of something not quite familiar, although pleasant, permeating the air of the foyer where they stood. Wordlessly he pulled her forward, slipping his arms behind her back and cupping her buttocks with his hands, forcing her up against him. He was, quite obviously, as physically ready to do this, as was she.

Perry wrapped her arms around Ethan’s neck. He kissed her again

deeply, holding nothing back. Sliding his hands down her thighs, he lifted her without apparent effort to his waist. She wrapped her legs around him, steadied by his arm beneath her hips and across her back, her mouth locked onto his own. He took a single step to the wall.

She thudded against the barrier without harm, protected from full contact by his arm. Through the thin fabric of her lightweight sweats she could feel him straining against the confinement of his jeans. She rolled her hips, pulling herself closer with her legs. He made a noise in his throat, sliding his hand into her waistband and down over the curve of her buttocks to skim along between her legs. His mouth moved down, hard, to the side of her throat.

“You’re soaked,” he whispered against the pulse beating rapidly there. “God, you’re drenched.”

He pushed his fingers inside of her, catching her as she arched back and away from him. With another word, something unintelligible and intemperate, he turned and carried her through the darkened house to a closed door.

“Get that, will you?” he said. “My hands are somewhat occupied.”

Trembling, Perry reached behind and turned the knob at her back. He flung the door inward with his knee.

The mattress of his bed was firm, giving only a little to the pressure of their two bodies on top of the quilted spread. His movements were certain and easy as he pulled his shirt over his head in a single motion, then took his time with hers, removing it carefully from the tangle of

her hair. He slipped her bra straps down her arms, pressing his mouth to the curve of her shoulder while his fingers trailed over the roundness of her breast not yet exposed. With one hand in his hair Perry kissed the top of his head.

Raising himself up on his elbows, Ethan pulled the fabric of her undergarment down in tantalizingly leisure, his breath moving across her skin, curling over the tight flesh of the nipple nearest his mouth. He touched his tongue to the tip of it, the damp residue of that brief caress chilling in the movement of air in withdrawal. As Perry watched him, dimly visible in the pale illumination of the bedside clock, she witnessed the gleam of his lazy smile, the smile that made her heart turn over, and then he repeated his prior action, this time holding her nipple with the edge of his teeth before licking it in a swift and delicate motion. Perry's breath escaped her in a rush.

"Ethan," she murmured in throaty plea.

"Perry, I know," he answered. "I know what you want. I know what I want. This could all be over in two seconds if we let it, that's what kind of fevered pitch you've brought me to without even trying. But I didn't imagine it to be this way the first time with you."

"You've given it that much thought, have you?" she teased, running her fingers along his arm and down his back. He leaned forward, planting a kiss between her breasts.

"I have," he said. "And as we haven't known each other all that long, you can imagine the torturous evolutions my mind has been going through. I figured if we reached this point we would spend all night at

it. Unfortunately, I haven't got all night any longer. I have to be getting ready for work in little more than an hour."

"I don't mind," she whispered.

"Hmm, I'm certain you don't. I have a feeling you'd climax in a heartbeat."

At his words she arched against him and he slipped an arm behind her back, drawing her up along his body. She could feel the heat of his skin, the muscles of his arm against her rib cage. He stroked the hair from her brow and kissed her there, then trailed his fingers over her shoulder and cupped her breast in his hand, rubbing his thumb back and forth across the stiff peak as he observed the effect his tender attention had on her body. Perry closed her eyes, all sensation drawn to that single point of contact. He was right. In a heartbeat.

When she opened her eyes he was holding himself very still, his hand resting against her.

"Perry?"

"Yes?"

"I'm taking a shower."

"What?"

"A cold one. I don't know if that really works, but I'm hoping it does."

Perry struggled back on her elbows, propping herself against the

headboard.

“I don’t understand,” she said.

Ethan swung his legs off the edge of the bed and sat up facing her, his thigh pressed along hers. She could feel the contours of his flesh through his jeans, and a slight tremor, like a shiver, racing along beneath the skin.

“I want to wait,” he told her quietly, taking her hand. “Do you mind?”

Perry looked down at his fingers interlaced through her own.

“I—no, I guess not. Is something wrong?”

Lifting her hand, he pressed the backs of her fingers to his mouth.

“Not at all,” he said against her bent knuckles. “I just think it would be most fair to you if we waited.”

“Fair to me?” she echoed.

“Yes. And to me as well. Taking into consideration what you’ve told me, I can’t help but wonder if you ... if you are this enthusiastic because of me, of us, or because of what you say has been happening to you.”

“You don’t believe what I’ve told you, then?” she countered, feeling wounded by his statement. Rejection had not yet set in.

“To the contrary, I do indeed believe you. And I feel that I would be taking advantage of you in your present state. Also, I would really like

to know that it is me who makes you come like that. Next time. I think we should wait until we gain a better understanding of what is going on.”

Perry was stunned. Groping around in the dark, she found her shirt and pulled it on over her head.

“You really are quite the gentleman,” she said without sarcasm.

“Disappointed?”

“No. Here I am, a woman of recent acquaintance half naked in your bed and more than willing, and you refrain out of genuine thoughtfulness. Give me a few more minutes to mull over that kind of behavior and I might find myself falling for you in a big way, Ethan Taylor.”

He laughed and stood up, bending from the waist to kiss her on the crown of her head, pushing back the curling tendrils with the flat of his palm. “You just hold that thought, Perry,” he said, and walked out.

A few minutes later she heard the sound of water rushing through pipes in the wall toward the showerhead in the nearby bathroom. Pushing the thought of wet lathered skin out of her mind, Perry yanked the corner of the quilt up around her shoulders and rolled toward the opposite side of Ethan’s bed, closing her eyes as a feeling of bona fide tranquility settled over her.

## Chapter 8

*Rising from his knees, he moved to the curtain of falling water and stepped through it onto the ledge. The moon, which appeared not to have progressed at all across the sky, was pale and luminous, reflecting in the turbulent water at his feet. He stared across the creek to the forest and the cleared pasturage beyond, knowing that there lay the path that would lead him to her. How many years had it been since he wandered that way, since he was welcome in the house where he had grown from infant to child to man? As the eldest of many sons, the house belonged to his brother now. He, himself, had been the last to leave it, and then unwillingly. He would have liked to stay.*

*At what point had the man who had cast him from his home taken Lily to wife? When the congregation had begun to question his brother's lack of a helpmeet, he supposed. When the speculation had been at its worst. The parson's choice of a bride had been deliberate, even with many vying for the position. Lily had been the prize over which he and his brother had long battled. He could still taste the bitter gall that had risen to taint his mouth when he heard tell of the betrothal.*

*He had been long away, he knew. Too long for someone such as Lily to wait. That night before he marched with the others to Philadelphia carrying the banner of political upheaval like a badge of honor, full of fire and determination, he should have asked her then to marry him. He had been afraid though, afraid that she would say no. It had been better to bear a hope in him to that city of strangers and pandemonium than the certain knowledge of her refusal.*

*His mouth twisted in remembered pain. His heart clenched tight. Enough, he told himself. Enough. It was time to claim what should*



*have been his all along. Lily was his by right. His brother did not want her; she had served the purpose for which she had been chosen. The whispers had been silenced. What more did that self-righteous man of the cloth want?*

*Lily wanted to leave. But she was frightened to tell his brother the truth, yet would not walk away without revealing it. He had offered to go with her to speak out, knowing that they would both be condemned for their behavior, that they would have to live their days together sinning in the eyes of God and man, but she had refused. The time would come, she had told him, when she would know what to do.*

*Sometimes he was afraid for her. He remembered the night she had come to him, bleeding. What his brother had exercised had been unnatural and cruel. He had helped her to wash herself, to cleanse her of the residue of the act. It had been hard to do so without wanting to go straight up to the house and lay his brother low. He had been angry enough to kill him.*

*No, Lily had said, let it be. Just promise me you'll never stop loving me.*

*It was an effortless promise to make, one from which he could not be forsworn.*

*Stepping down into the creek he started across, the moon glittering in his eyes. Her name was on his lips as he fought the current, moving without noise, without the slightest splash, toward the far bank. He reached for the outcropping of rock, to drag himself up and out of the water, and felt the slick surface slip repeatedly from his grasp.*

*Frustrated, he pitched himself across the stone. The water dragged him back. He tried again and again, and yet again, flinging himself in desperation, feeling neither bruise nor cut nor the force of his battering. And then, just for a moment, he remembered. It was too fleeting to hold, like a gossamer strand of a spider's skein waving in the silver night. He remembered and he forgot, and when once more he raised his head he was staring through the curtain of falling water. Beyond, the moon continued to shine, fixed like a pearl in filigree in the dark, webbed branches of the trees.*

## Chapter 9

“Hey, boss, you look like you haven’t slept a wink.”

Ethan paused, glancing up. He set the address book in his hand back down on the desk.

“Morning, Tom,” he said.

“It’s eight o’clock and the boys are all set to go. It’s back to the Brady place this morning, right?”

Wordlessly Ethan nodded, turning to grab a purchase order off the filing cabinet. “Pick this up on the way, will you? I’m staying here in the office for a while.”

In the open doorway his foreman reached for the paper he extended. “That good, was she?” he drawled. Ethan made no reply. Tom laughed. “Wait’ll the boys hear this. You’re not even going to be

around to deny it this time.”

Ethan’s eyes narrowed, but he knew Tom would see the smile in his eyes. Then he shrugged. “Get out. You’re going to be late,” he said, stepping forward to hasten his friend’s departure. He could hear Tom chuckling all the way across the parking lot, until he shut the door.

Striding to the desk he lifted the address book again, flipping through the pages. He had gotten to know his cohorts fairly well in college and had managed to keep in touch with a few of them over the years, but he could not recall the last time he had exchanged more than a Christmas card or a congratulations on a marriage, the birth of a child, the graduation of another. Still, he could not imagine any one of them turning down his request for help once they got a whiff of the carrot he was about to dangle before them.

He lowered his tall frame into the chair behind the desk, sliding it on well-oiled wheels across the carpet. Leaning back, he put his feet up on the corner of the desk top, crossing his legs at the ankle. He was looking for one number in particular, the one that promised the most success, a professor whose experience in matters such as this appeared to be was a lengthy resume. Grabbing the phone, he hitched his shoulder to cradle the receiver against his ear. With the page held open in one hand, he reached to punch the number in with the pointer finger of the other.

“Hello, is this Janie? Goodness, you sound all grown up. Has your father left yet? This is Ethan Taylor.”

Janie Gooden was well-brought up and refrained from shrieking until

after the phone had been covered on her end to muffle the noise. A moment later a gruff male voice spoke.

“Ethan? Can you hear her? After all this time I think she still has a crush on you. Ow. She just smacked me in the arm. Daughters! So, how are you? To what do I owe the pleasure of this call? Have you decided to apologize for your numerous refusals to visit us here in peachy Georgia?”

“Yes; yes; fine; I’ll get to that in a moment, and—let’s see—no.”

On the opposite end of the connection John Gooden’s laughter boomed. “Have you no reverence for your mentor?” he demanded.

“Not really,” Ethan retorted, smiling at the mouthpiece of the phone fondly. Tossing the address book onto the desk, he picked up a pen and began to roll it back and forth between his thumb and forefinger, leaning the chair at a precarious angle.

“Well, I’m glad to see that your success hasn’t changed you. Neither has mine, which is a

good thing. Do you want to get to the heart of the matter first, before we go off on a tangent of small talk? Because I do not think I’m wrong in assuming you’ve called for a reason.”

Dropping his booted feet to the floor, Ethan sat up, leaning his arm over the desk blotter. With the point of the pen he began to scribe small, linked circles across the much-abused surface.

“You’re not wrong, John,” he said. “I’ve run into something I think may be of interest to you.”

“Really? Honey, go inside and get Daddy a glass of water. I think I’m going to be out here a while. Oh, and my sunglasses, too. Thanks. It’s quite a bright morning. I’m glad I have the day off. Is it raining where you are?” he asked, addressing Ethan with the last three remarks.

Ethan glanced toward the window. It was still too early to tell, but the day seemed somewhat gray. “Not at the moment,” he advised, scribbling over the circles he had created.

“Well, go ahead. What’s up?”

Now that he was come to it, Ethan was uncertain where to begin. Tossing down the pen, he reached for the cup of coffee that had been cold an hour ago. Nevertheless, he took a swallow, grimacing at the taste.

“Quite recently, I met a woman—”

“Good Lord, you’re not going to tell me you’re getting married again, are you?”

Ethan exhaled abruptly. It was not often that someone brought up his marriage, least of all those who knew exactly how it had ended.

“Not yet,” he said.

Gooden was momentarily silent, probably trying to decipher exactly what he had meant with that reply. Ethan used the time to regain his

equilibrium.

“She’s a client,” he went on and instantly felt regretful, perhaps a little superstitious. “Actually, Perry’s something more than a client at this point, although what, exactly, I’m not able to say. In all honesty, we’ve just met,” he added, with emphasis.

“I see,” said John. “What’s she like?”

Ethan considered a moment, drumming his fingers almost noiselessly on the blotter.

“She’s ... something else,” he murmured at last. “Another sort of woman entirely. You’ll understand what I mean when you meet her.”

“When I meet her? Do you intend to finally grace us with your presence?”

Laughing, Ethan shook his head. “I’d like to come down. I really need to make a more sincere effort to take the time, I know. I might even get Perry to come with me, if we’ve gotten that far. But what I had in mind was a little trip for you, John. You and some of your equipment and all of your expertise. I don’t know if you’re available right now, but I’ll foot the bill.”

“You’re serious,” he heard John breathe into the phone.

“Absolutely,” he responded.

\* \* \* \*

Chin wedged against the palm of her hand, Perry stared at the face of the monitor. Ethan had told her to make herself at home while he was gone, specifically advising that she use his computer to work if she wanted while she waited for him to return. In that endeavor she'd commanded less than notable success. She needed her files, her notes, everything she had back at her house. So she had opted for Internet research instead, abandoning the obligatory topics rather quickly for those on the supernatural. After spending an hour or so visiting a handful of sites she had typed another subject into the search box.

Ethan Taylor.

She found numerous periodicals from newspapers available, having to do with Ethan's business. She had taken Rick's word for it that Ethan was good at his profession, but she had been unaware of just how good. There were awards and accolades, as well as the casual but specific praise of local businessmen. He had performed work for the county historical society and been presented a plaque for his contribution at a formal ceremony. She spent a few minutes lingering fondly over the black and white newspaper photo in which he stood beside an older woman as he accepted the plaque, his grin a little sheepish, but pleased nonetheless. The woman, on the other hand, looked as if she would like to eat him alive. And why not? Perry thought. Ethan was a charismatic man, ruggedly handsome, tall and strong and definitely in control of himself.

She had viewed many such articles one after the other, pausing only long enough to make herself a cup of tea, and then she had decided to peruse the older references. It was there that she found this picture. A dated photograph given the style of clothing and hair, taken when

Ethan was probably in college or recently graduated, by someone who was not a professional photographer. The picture had been scanned at some point for inclusion on an old reunion site from a university in Atlanta. The photo, possibly a Polaroid, had not been digitally retouched and showed the scarring of age and misuse or poor handling. The caption entered beneath cleared up any doubts Perry might have had regarding the relationship of the two in the photo, however.

Our buddy Ethan and his new bride, Cindy.

Chin in hand, Perry continued to study the image on the screen. She wasn't sure why coming across a fifteen-year-old photograph bothered her so much, why she felt just a little twinge of jealousy. Quite obviously this Cindy was no longer in his life, as the house showed no evidence whatsoever of a woman's possessions, let alone a woman's touch.

Maybe it was the fact that they looked so damned happy simply being together. Had she ever looked at Jack like that? Very likely. It made one wonder just what happened over time to tear a couple apart.

Taking a sip of cool tea, Perry tapped the monitor with her fingernail.

"Where are you now, Cindy?" she asked it. Gone the way of Jack, Perry wondered, or was it something more spectacular and less inevitable? Nastily bitter, or a friendly handshake and a good-bye? Did they talk over the phone on occasion? Did he miss her?

Setting the cup down, Perry decided she had wasted enough time in



dalliance. She really did have work to be completed, and on schedule. She needed to go home.

Pushing back the chair, she stood up, clicking off-line as she did so. She carried her cup into the kitchen, washed it, set it in the drain board to dry. Walking to the phone she lifted it from the wall, then carried it to the French doors and stood staring out into a neatly trimmed yard. Taxis in this area were notoriously expensive, but she was too far from her home to consider walking. Once she got there, she would have to break in to get the cash to pay the driver, and that would take some doing, although it was not impossible. She'd had to do it before, and there was a screwdriver for jimmying the kitchen window hidden beneath a flowerpot. It would have made more sense, of course, to hide a key there.

Rolling her eyes at her own folly, she started to dial information for the number of the taxi service, then hesitated. Ethan would not be happy to find she had returned to a place he felt unsafe for her. She understood his reasoning, which was quite sound, but in the light of day she felt far less vulnerable. She had not been afraid before; there was no reason to allow her behavior to be influenced by fear now. It was her house. She belonged there.

Glancing at the clock on the wall Perry was shocked by the hour. She dialed the phone, pleased at her ability to recall the number. A woman answered.

“Hi. Is Ethan Taylor there?” Perry asked.

“Mr. Taylor is not in the office at the moment. May I take a message

for him?”

“Do you know if he’s headed home?”

“I ... no, I believe he’s at a job site. If this is an emergency I can reach him on his cell.”

Of course you can, thought Perry, but I can’t. Perry had no idea what his cell number was and she couldn’t ask his secretary for it without divulging more information than she cared to.

“When you hear from him will you tell him that Perry Madison phoned?”

“Why, of course, Ms. Madison. I understand you’ve hired him to restore your home. You’ll be very delighted with him, I assure you.”

Perry arched her brows at the woman’s phrasing. “Thank you,” she said. “Just kindly give him that message.”

“Naturally,” responded Ethan’s secretary sweetly, and then hung up.

Perry crossed to set the phone in the wall cradle. She blew a long breath out over her lips. With any luck, Ethan would call soon to check for messages and ring her here at the house. She was surprised he hadn’t done so already. She was curious if he’d had any luck attempting to contact those friends of his whom he said might be helpful. College mates, weren’t they?

Her eyes strayed back to the blank screen of the computer monitor. Not for the first time it occurred to her just how little she knew about

Ethan Taylor and his life. They were, in fact, not much more than strangers. And a short time ago she had fallen into his bed with every intention of having sex with him. If he hadn't come to his senses she would have followed through with enthusiasm. She knew she should be grateful for his conscience. In the wee hours of this very morning, she had been. Now she wondered if there was some other reason, some female reason, why he had pulled away.

God, she needed to get home.

\* \* \* \*

“What time did you say Perry called?”

“I didn't. Ms. Madison phoned at around 11:45. She just asked if I would tell you that when you called in.”

“Thank you. If I don't see you before you leave, just lock the door and have a good night.”

He flipped the phone shut. Eleven forty-five. He had expected Perry to sleep most of the day away, or at least until a great deal past the far side of noon. He hadn't called the house because he had been unwilling to risk disturbing her. It was now a quarter after three and he was still on Route 95, heading up out of the city from the airport.

“Everything alright?”

“I'll let you know in a minute,” said Ethan, opening the phone again and dialing his home. After seven rings voice mail picked up. He tried again for good measure, then swore beneath his breath.

“Ethan?”

“One second,” he said, and dialed Perry’s number. There was no answer there either.

“Damn it,” he muttered. Why the hell hadn’t she called him directly? Only then did he remember that she didn’t have his cell number. He swore again, his hand tightening on the wheel.

Maybe she had gone back to sleep. Unfortunately, he didn’t believe that for a minute. He knew, somehow, that she had left his house and gone home. Yet if that was so, why wasn’t she picking up her own phone?

“Fuck,” he said, resorting to an expletive he had utilized far too frequently over the course of the past twenty-four hours. He repeated the word, slamming his open palm on the curve of the steering wheel.

“Ethan?”

“She’s gone home, John,” he said.

“That probably wasn’t a prudent move,” John Gooden remarked, nodding his head as if in agreement to some unspoken thought of Ethan’s.

“See any cops?”

“Not at the moment.”

“Good,” commented Ethan dryly and pressed his right foot firmly

down on the accelerator.

## Chapter 10

Coming home had done little to alleviate Perry's confusion about Ethan and had certainly not lessened the racing speculation of her more immediate quandary. She found herself looking over her shoulder repeatedly, remembering Ethan's words about "seeing something," but nothing made an appearance. Even the voice was still. Nevertheless, she knew she had expended more energy researching such topics as hauntings and possession in the past two hours or so than she had on her work. Her files lay open at her elbow, but she had not so much as looked at their contents. Some of the information on the supernatural which she had come across seemed ludicrous, while other details made the hair stand up along the back of her arms and at the base of her skull. Was an experience with the paranormal really as commonplace as it appeared to be? Given the vast and varying array of articles her search had revealed on-line, it would seem so. However, the one element lacking in all of them she had read thus far was definitive proof.

Bowing her head into her hands, she pushed her fingers through her hair, surprised to find it damp with perspiration. She shivered suddenly in the oppressive heat of the afternoon. Glancing out the window she saw that another storm was brewing, the air close and humid, barely breathable. Shivering again, she touched her forehead in a futile check for fever. She wouldn't be able to feel an elevation in temperature with her own hands, would she? But she was experiencing

muddled thought, a cloudiness in her head, her throat sore, her back aching, her limbs extraordinarily heavy. Lack of sleep was the culprit, she told herself. Three days without it, and then last night's brief respite. Unless she was coming down with something. That was likely what it was.

Sliding her chair back, Perry rose. Pressing her fingers into her lower back just below her waist, she leaned into the pressure. Her thoughts, gauzy and disjointed, drifted around Ethan and the events of the previous night. She hadn't been looking for a man in gilded armor, but she seemed to have found one.

Perry walked heavily into the living room, pausing at the window to peer out at the sullen sky. Just outside the glass panes the leaves hung limply from their branches while those in the distance had turned, silvered backs soft-edged in the haze. The window was open, but no air moved over the sill. A tiny, shining spider's web in the outer corner of the casement was listless gossamer.

In the three generations of Madison women who had lived here, and who knew how many other women before them, why had the spirit, or whatever it was, chosen her to haunt? If anyone else had ever been made aware of it, they made no mention. As closely knit as they were as a family, Perry, her mother and grandmother, it was not likely to have gone undiscussed. They were basically a unit, the three of them, freely talking over the most uncomfortable of subjects if found necessary. As protective as those two ladies could be, a ghost in residence would not have been something that they would have avoided mentioning.

An abrupt chill tripped along Perry's spine. Slowly she turned to look over her shoulder. Nothing. The air was thick and nearly fetid and, quite suddenly, she felt as if she could not breathe. She needed to walk, get out in the open where the air, though humid, was still vast. Struggling to draw breath, Perry moved through the kitchen and out the back door, pulling it closed behind. Outside was not much better, the atmosphere thick and cloying. Her sleeveless cotton blouse adhered immediately to her damp shoulder blades and close between her breasts, where perspiration had pooled.

It had not been nearly so hot the day before. The sweatshirt she had been wearing after her sojourn in the creek had been quite comfortable. But now, she wanted nothing more than to strip out of her clothes and dive headfirst into the cool, rushing water. Even as the thought occurred to her she tried to banish it, afraid the very passage of that desire through her mind would somehow conjure the connection between herself and *him* and he would call to her. She did not want to be tested. She wanted to believe she had the power to resist.

Breathing heavily, Perry headed toward the barn where it was always cool and shadowed. Once she was feeling a little better she would get in her car and perhaps drive back to Ethan's. She wondered, fleetingly, why he had not yet called her back, and even said as much aloud. Her words were muffled in her ears.

Pausing in her lagging stride she looked around, startled to find herself under the trees. She could hear the creek, but not see it. She did not remember any conscious decision to come this way.

Shaken, Perry turned around on the path, determined to return the way she had come, but she stopped short. She stared along the pathway, unnerved by the color of the visible light. The day seemed to have taken on the hue of the leaves hanging languorously from the boughs overhead. A sluggish mist, like a thickness beneath the trees, hovered at an indeterminate distance between herself and the bend in the trail that would take her home. The hair stood up along her arms at the sight of it as it swirled without apparent cause in the windless air, seeming to take on shape, then spread, then form again.

An overwhelming sense of animosity took hold of her, directed at her, not from within. She felt anger, loathing, desperation like a palpable threat. Without further consideration of the consequences, Perry turned on her heel and ran for the creek and the falls. Whatever was on the path, she knew it was not *him*. *He* would not hurt her. She had always known that. But this, this was something else entirely.

Breath rasping from her throat, Perry clambered down the rocky face to the bank of the creek. Sweat streamed from her brow, plastered her shirt to her back. She leapt into the water, shocked by the chill of it against her heated skin. Stumbling over slippery rock, she swung her arms for momentum, splashing into the churning base of the falls. Water tumbled out of the hillside with unrecognizable force. The creek was deeper than it had been, swollen from the torrential rains the night before. She could scarcely stay upright.

Pushing her sodden hair from her eyes, Perry peered up at the hillside. The mist had congealed on the ridge.

“Help me,” she whispered, not caring to whom she spoke, not even



certain she had physically uttered the words.

The rushing creek sucked at her legs, pulling her off her feet. Perry scrambled at the rock. The nails of one hand bent back as she slipped under the surface. Water ran into her throat. She choked, fighting for the surface and air, spraying liquid from her mouth.

Opening her eyes, she saw him through the glaze of her saturated lashes. She reached out her hand and felt the cold caress of his fingers, but they could not take hold of her own.

“Help me,” she said again, a whisper of sound lost in the crash of the falls. She could see his face clearly, saw the dawning of some vague understanding, and then he was gone. Behind her, the mist came down the hillside, spreading out over the surface of the water. Something hit her leg with brute force, a log rolling in the torrent; yes, that was what it was, the broken branches snagging at the leg of her pants and dragging her down. She went under again and could not resurface. It felt as if a great weight was pressing on her chest, forcing her to release whatever oxygen remained in her lungs. As Perry recognized her own pending death, a black, sweeping shadow appeared over the water to scatter the mist.

\* \* \* \*

Ethan threw himself into the creek and almost went down as he slipped on the rocks. He had seen Perry go under while he was still on the hillside, and he prayed she had not washed downstream beyond his reach. Behind him he could hear John calling encouragement, direction, telling him he could see her clinging to a rock by the falls.

Ethan struggled in that direction, plunging beneath the roiling surface. Feeling sodden fabric, he held on and pulled, dragging her up with him. She came, sputtering and alive, flailing out at him as if she did not know who he was.

“Perry, it’s me! It’s Ethan!” He stumbled in the force of the stream, holding her against his chest with all his might. Perry shook the hair from her eyes, then turned and coughed out several mouthfuls of muddy creek water. Gripping her firmly by the arm, Ethan struggled with her toward the bank, heaving her out of the water to John, who was waiting with his arms outstretched.

“Christ Almighty,” cried Ethan through clenched teeth as he dragged himself out beside the two of them on the bank, “what were you doing in there? Why did you come back? I thought you understood--”

He was silenced by the grip of her hand in his sleeve. “How did you find me?” she asked. Her voice was a rasping croak.

“I—” Ethan began, then stopped.

“He jumped out of the truck and ran straight here,” John explained. “I was hard put to keep up with him. He seemed to know where you would be.”

Perry’s gaze turned toward the sound of John’s voice. She stared without comprehension.

“This is John Gooden, a friend of mine,” Ethan stated by way of introduction. “He flew up here today from Georgia to assist you.”

“To assist the both of you,” said John quietly.

Ethan glanced at his former professor, alerted by the timbre of the man’s voice. Their eyes met and held. He nodded, a barely perceptible motion of his dark head in John’s direction. Then he stood, helping Perry to her feet.

Last time he had carried her most of the way through the creek bed until he had reached a place where he could climb out with her unconscious weight in his arms in relative ease. The flow of the creek was too strong to attempt that sort of gallantry now. She was going to have to climb back up to the path under her own volition. Turning with determination, she began the ascent, stopping every so often to cough or brush the damp hair from her eyes. Ethan stayed close behind, ready to catch her if she should stumble. Gooden brought up the rear.

At the top she halted, looking back toward the water. She was pale and shaken, but essentially unharmed. Ethan thanked God in a silent prayer for that.

“He brought you, didn’t he?”

“No,” Ethan responded curtly, not asking who she meant. He didn’t need to. He knew.

“Are you certain?”

Drawing in a long breath through his nose, he released it slowly. “I followed a hunch,” he said, “nothing more. When you didn’t answer the phone I surmised you were in trouble. And subsequent to our

conversation last night, I knew you might be here.”

Perry hesitated. No doubt she was aware of the anger in his tone, perhaps even the reason for it.

“You didn’t check the house first?”

She was being particularly argumentative for someone he had just rescued from near-drowning. He took her arm and steered her toward the path.

“No,” he said, “and you should be glad I didn’t. Now let’s get going. Dry clothes all around. Oh, except for me once again.”

Perry started to apologize, but Ethan forestalled her. He was being sarcastic in direct reaction to his own emotional distress. If he had been a minute or two longer he suspected she would be, if not dead, at least on her hasty way to the hospital. Perry could no longer stay here nor come back until something had been done. He had been right about that. However, if she was not going to take his word regarding the danger, then she would hopefully take that of an expert in the field.

“What happened here? Would you care to explain it to me?” It was John, questioning her in a soft, non-threatening manner as he took her other arm. Ethan recognized the tactic. He could not help but smile grimly.

Perry turned her head toward John. Her hair was tangled about her shoulders, littered with debris from the water. Her shirt was torn. Ethan did not recall having ripped it when he dragged her out. Her shoulder was bruised, also. Lifting the torn edge with his finger, Ethan

peered in for further wounding. She glanced back for a split second, then returned her attention to Gooden. Ethan dropped his hand.

As Perry spoke, Ethan could hear her strength returning. She was not one, he realized with a touch of dark and proprietary pride, for hysterics. That was good. From what John had been saying on the trip up from the airport, the situation might easily grow worse before changing.

“I was inside working. I came home because I needed my files and things. I know Ethan was worried, but I thought everything would be alright. I really did. I went outside for some air, and then suddenly I found myself here in the woods.”

“You don’t recall how you got here?”

Perry shook her head. “I was confused and couldn’t remember how I had gotten here, or when. Still, I decided it was a wiser course to head back to the house and not the creek.”

Beside her Ethan made a growl of agreement. She glanced at him again, and then away, but not before he witnessed something disturbing in the expression of her pale eyes.

“When I turned around everything looked strange, altered somehow. I felt ill and disoriented. And then...” Her voice trailed off. Ethan saw her shoulders jerk in a protracted shudder.

“Go on,” urged John quietly.

“Did either of you notice a mist on the water?” she asked, seeking

confirmation from one or the other of them. Ethan exchanged a glance with John, then shook his head.

“Why did you go down to the creek, though?” John continued. “I don’t understand.”

Ethan saw her blink in consideration, pace slowing, then she moved on. “To be safe,” she said. “I thought he could protect me.”

To his credit, John did not ask who “he” was either. As Ethan had told him the story, he could only assume his friend was drawing his own conclusions. Ethan, however, felt a sting of rejection. Apparently, Perry had not enough faith in him to keep her safe from harm.

“Protect you from what?” John persisted.

“I don’t know,” she whispered. Ethan saw John lean close to hear better. “I don’t know what it was. It was in the mist, I think. It felt very ... wrong somehow.”

John pursed his lips, choosing silence. Ethan spoke instead.

“And did he?” he asked.

“Did he what?” countered Perry, pivoting her head to look up at him.

“Protect you.”

He could clearly hear the strain in his interrogation, but he seemed unable to control the tone of his delivery. She stared back at him, the aspect of something he could not name still evident in her gaze.

“I suppose he did,” she answered, turning away. “He brought you.”

\* \* \* \*

Ethan watched John stroll slowly around the living room, picking up an object here and there for casual examination before setting it back in the exact place he'd gotten it. Ethan's wet clothes were slightly less so since the vigorous application of the towel unofficially designated as his. Still, whenever he shifted his weight the water in his boots careened around his toes. Upstairs Perry was packing some necessary items for a few days away from home. She had already gathered her laptop and folders of notes and set them on the kitchen table.

“What do you think?” Ethan asked.

“She's an attractive woman,” said John, pausing to glance his way. “Stubborn, too.”

“I didn't mean that, exactly.”

“I like her.”

“So,” said Ethan, “do I. But what about this?” he persisted, indicating their general surroundings with a wave of his hand.

John halted, pulling a book off a shelf. He flipped through the pages, then returned it to the case, tapping the binding with the flat of his fingers. Tipping his pale blond head back he looked up at the ceiling, then into each corner.

“The light in here is nice,” he announced.

Ethan waited.

John lowered his head. "I can give you four or five days," he said. "That's about all the time I have right now, although I can always come back. However, for tonight I suggest dinner, and then the two of you need to get some sleep. Neither of you looks particularly well rested. Tomorrow we'll return and set up the equipment and see if we can get any readings here. If you don't think Perry would be adverse to it, I'd like to try a little hypnosis first, just to get a feel for what's going on when she's in a relaxed state. Does that sound like a proper plan to you?"

"Indeed it does, John," Ethan answered. "Thank you. Did I say that yet? Thank you very much for dropping everything to come up. You're a lifesaver."

"You're more than welcome. Besides, if this case promises to be even half what you say it is, I should be thanking you. As for the lifesaving, that appears to be your job here."

Ethan knew Gooden was referring to the escapade in the creek, but for a full ten seconds, enough time to be noticeable, he could not muster a reply. John's expression altered as he realized what he had said. He ran his fingers through his sparse hair in a gesture of discomfort.

"It's alright," Ethan hastened with a slight shake of his head. "Perhaps it's Karma."

Smiling to soften his statement, Ethan turned and walked to the kitchen. He opened the cabinet, removing two boxes of tea, then set



them beside the computer case. At John's questioning glance from the doorway, he advised:

"She likes tea. The selection at my place is rather limited."

"So Perry has agreed to stay with you."

"As opposed to a hotel? Yes. Besides, I'd like her to be where I can keep an eye on her to ensure there's no repeat of today's little adventure."

Watching from the threshold, it was apparent that John was not convinced. "Do you think that's advisable, Ethan?"

Ethan paused in his search for a bag for the tea and the honey jar. He knew why John was asking that question and he appreciated the consideration.

"It may not be advisable, John, but it's best," he said, and went back to his hunt.

John stayed a moment longer in the doorway, then he, too, turned away. Ethan heard him stride through the living room to the staircase, calling up to Perry to ask if she needed any assistance carrying anything. John was a good friend, and a wise one, and Ethan knew he would not question Ethan's actions without feeling just cause. He also knew that John would likely not bring up the matter again. Once was enough to serve as a reminder. Nothing further was necessary.

A few minutes later Perry appeared, carrying a single sensibly-sized suitcase on her own. John followed empty-handed and bemused. "I

hope you have an iron,” she said to Ethan as she entered. “I rolled up a few things to make them fit and they won’t be wearable if I don’t take the flat of an iron to them.”

She seemed a bit irritated at the inconvenience, but when she smiled he recognized that her annoyance was not directed at him.

“I have an iron,” he assured her.

He watched her cross the floor to grab a set of keys from a peg by the door. She had changed into dry clothes after a record-breaking shower. Even so, fragmented bits of leaves still clung in her damp hair. When it was wet like this it was the color of iron oxide, a rich earthy red. He liked red hair. He had never realized before just how much.

“I’ll follow you in my own car,” she said, spinning on her heel with a toss of the keys in her hand. “This way, if there are any problems with the arrangements, I can find another place to stay for the next few days without troubling you.”

“I don’t anticipate any difficulties,” Ethan rejoined. “You get the couch. I get the bed.”

Behind him, John suppressed a snort of amusement.

\* \* \* \*

Perry sat at an angle on the couch with her knees drawn up and her bare feet tucked up under her. In the kitchen Ethan moved about on some furtive mission. She heard the refrigerator door open and close, then the rattle of dishes in the cabinet quickly subdued. Glancing at the

clock, Perry noted that it was still early enough that she might expect a reasonable amount of sleep. Following dinner and the storage in the locked garage of the pickup truck with its load of sturdy cases filled with expensive equipment, John had retired to the spare room. Apparently there had been some prior agreement. A pillow and a set of sheets now sat on the chair for her use when the time came. Ethan had thus far shown no inclination to duplicate last night's heated episode.

Steering her thoughts from the memory of that ardent quarter of an hour, Perry's contemplation returned to the incident in the creek. She had gone through it several more times with John over their meal, the man's professional yet easy manner helping to allay her lingering fear. After explaining why he wanted her to submit, she had agreed to hypnosis in the morning. Ethan had requested to be present. To her relief, John had advised against it.

He would, John had said, be more of a distraction and a deterrent to her relaxation than an aid. His statement had made Perry wonder just how much Ethan had told him, or how much he was able to discern through his own shrewd observations.

"Here you go. I hope you don't mind, but you seem like a chocolate kind of girl."

Perry turned her head at the sound of Ethan's voice, her eyes alighting on a dish of chocolate ice cream liberally doused with chocolate syrup. Taking the offering into her lap, Perry giggled. She didn't believe she had giggled since she was a young girl in high school.

"Thank you," she said. "Comfort food. Yum. Where's yours?"

“Didn’t need any,” he answered. “My dessert will be watching you eat your own.”

At his words Perry felt a rush of warmth straight to her groin. She actually blushed, ducking her head to keep him from seeing it. She toyed with the spoon, hesitant to eat now that he had presented such a stimulating mental picture. He sat down beside her at a small distance, reaching out to tuck her hair behind her ear before laying his arm along the back of the couch.

“Go ahead,” he said. “I didn’t mean to make you feel self-conscious.”

“You’ve done a good job of it without trying, then,” she murmured.

“Sorry. Just eat it, will you?” As if to add weight to his words, he reached for the remote and turned the television on at low volume. He placed his legs, one at a time, across the coffee table, crossing his ankles as he leaned back into the cushions. Satisfied that he was momentarily occupied Perry lifted a spoonful of ice cream to her mouth. Syrup dripped down her chin.

“Crap,” she said.

His chuckle was warm in her ears. Without turning his head he handed her a napkin that had been tucked into his pocket. Perry scrubbed the chocolate from her chin and resumed eating, her eyes drawn to the flickering image on the television.

“This really is quite tasty and much appreciated. Thank you.”

His responding comment was barely audible. Smiling to herself, Perry

continued to eat, relishing the sweet taste all the more for Ethan's thoughtfulness. His consideration touched her. There were not many men in her life that she allowed such consideration. If any, she realized with a start. She was more inclined to do for herself, to stand at a distance, only allowing a certain amount of personal contact when necessary. What was different about Ethan she didn't know. She would normally have been disinclined to accept any overture of friendship, let alone more. But with Ethan, the interest, the chemistry, the liking, was instantaneous. It was a heady feeling and something she was unused to. The chaotic incidences in the creek were something altogether different. There was no companionship, no interaction except of a certain type, and that in itself was unsettling in the extreme, now that she viewed it from a perspective of normal behavior. But Ethan ... Ethan made her feel comfortable with herself, and that wasn't a bad thing at all.

Eating down to the bottom of the dish, Perry scraped the residue of syrup for good measure, licking the gloss of chocolate from the curved interior of the spoon with the flat of her tongue. The television clicked off.

"Tell me it was me."

Removing the spoon from her tongue, Perry set the utensil into the dish, leaning forward to place both on the table.

"What?"

"Tell me it was me," he repeated very slowly and very quietly. Perry looked at him. His gaze was steady and intent, the dark iris glittering

behind the downward slant of his long lashes. “Last night,” he stated. “Or perhaps I should say this morning. I need to know that it was me you wanted, that it was me who made you that wet, that it was me who made you tremble like the earth had just undergone a major shift in its axis.”

Perry’s skin warmed as her eyes widened. “As opposed to?” she asked.

“You know as opposed to what,” he answered.

Perry brought her knees up again, wrapping her arms around them. She suddenly felt the need to keep herself covered and as small a target as possible. “Are you seeking an honest reply?”

“I am,” he said.

After a brief contemplation of how best to word her response, she said, “The answer is that I don’t know. I would like to say yes, unequivocally, but I can’t. Tonight, however, is a different story. Despite what happened earlier, I felt nothing that would mislead me.”

“No shade between us?”

“Not even the tiniest ghost,” she said.

“This conversation is pretty crazy.”

“I agree.”

“But it’s important to me.”

“Why?”

“Because of the circumstances.”

Perry dropped her chin onto her knees, turning her head to study Ethan. She didn't think she had ever seen a man look so earnest in her life. He was sitting unnaturally still, his respiration barely visible, his gaze so intense it could have burned a hole through glass.

“You have to admit, Perry,” he said, “that we've been thrown together rather abruptly. And last night—”

“This morning,” she corrected.

“This morning,” he said. “This morning was premature. Getting out of that bed and into the shower was one of the hardest things I've had to do in quite a long time, though, I assure you.”

“They why did you?” she asked. He had explained it to her at the time, but she needed to hear his reasons now that his head was clear.

He shifted his hips on the sofa, smoothing his jeans along his thighs.

“Because I like you. I like you more than I would have expected given the duration of our relationship, such as it is. And I was afraid it would seem to you by the light of day as if I had taken advantage of your state of mind.”

“Not to mention the state of my body,” she added with a twist of a smile. His eyes closed as he tipped his head against the back of the sofa. She wondered if he was trying to shut out the image.

“That, too,” he said.

Perry waited.

“I want whatever happens between us to be mutual.”

“Understood.”

“I need some assurance that you’ll be able to recognize the difference.”

Perry blinked. “There’s no reason to be insulting,” she said, not entirely in jest.

“I don’t mean to be, Perry,” he said, sitting up and swinging himself around to face her. “Look, I—never mind. I don’t know why I’m getting into all of this now. John is in the other room and I will be shortly retiring to my own bed. Nothing is going to happen.”

“Hmm, yes, I agree, as I tend to get a little noisy. We wouldn’t want to be disturbing your friend.”

He had been in the process of reaching for the empty ice cream dish, but he stopped short of his goal. “I’m aware of how vocal you can be,” he stated flatly, his eyes on hers. “And we hadn’t even gotten started.”

She had spoken flippantly, but honestly, in an attempt to get under his skin. His response heated hers. Agitated, she shot up from the couch, bringing the bowl to the kitchen herself, where she stood at the sink to wash it. She could hear him in the living room preparing her bed on the couch. A minute later he came into the kitchen as she was drying



the dish. Taking it from her, he returned it to its place in the cabinet above her head. She stood pressed to the sink's edge with every square inch of her aware of his body, of his height and breadth and the warmth he was giving off. If she had moved at all she would have backed right into him. And that would have been trouble.

“Perry.”

The breath she was in the process of drawing caught mid-inhalation at his tone. She could feel his own respiration drift across the nape of her neck, disturbing the tendrils of hair that had loosened from her braid. She shivered as if he had touched her. A second later he did, pressing his mouth lightly just behind the place where her neck curved into the slope of her shoulder. Her captive breath rushed out of her with a low sound. Her eyes closed in the pleasure of sensation.

“Tell me that was me,” he whispered.

“It was,” she said. “I promise.”

He straightened. Placing both of his hands to either side of her jaw he tipped her head back, kissing her in tenderness on the crown.

“Good to know,” he said.

She heard his door close before she even realized he had walked away.

“Bastard,” she murmured as she shut out the kitchen light. “There’s a name for men like you.”

But actually, there wasn’t. She figured she would have at least fifty

sleepless minutes to come up with one, thanks to him.

## Chapter 11

While John conducted what he termed a “therapeutic interview” Ethan began to set up the equipment Gooden had brought with him. Some of it was unfamiliar, but the majority was the same type of thing they had used more than fifteen years ago in their experiments. There were infrared cameras, devices sensitive to sounds not detectable to the human ear, to changes in temperature and in electromagnetic fields. All of it would remain in the house at least through the weekend, in the hope of picking up some determination of activity not explainable through the natural course of events. At some point they would move certain equipment outside to the creek, but not yet. John was still calculating the necessary settings to eliminate the disturbances that would be in evidence from nocturnal creatures, bats in particular.

In a room at the top of the stairs Ethan could hear the drone of question and answer, of John’s gravel tones and Perry’s fragile-seeming responses. What they were saying was unclear, as the door was shut. He had managed to place himself in the area on one excuse or another on several occasions, blatantly eavesdropping, but he could not discern the drift or the content of their conversation.

Frustrated, curious, and worried, he continued to work as the morning wore on. Finally, he heard a heavy tread on the stair and turned to find John descending. He didn’t much care for the expression on his friend’s face.

“What happened? Is Perry alright?”

John nodded. “She’s sleeping. She drifted off at the conclusion. You can wake her shortly, but for the moment let her rest.”

“And? Is she imagining all of this?”

“You of all people, Ethan, should know she’s not. You saw something yourself while you were here. What’s happening to her may not be real in the sense of physically evident interaction, but it’s not something she’s made up in her mind, I assure you.”

Wearily, John lowered himself into the overstuffed chair where Ethan had spent his sleepless hours two nights past. Ethan strode to the window, standing before it with his hands at his sides. Outside the sun was shining brightly, the threatening weather of the day before blown out to sea before it could strike. It was hard to believe that another potentially heavy storm was forecast to hit the area sometime in the next couple of days. Weather prediction was an ambiguous science. Despite all the technological advances it was still guesswork. Mother Nature had the last say in it, after all.

“I know this is going to sound ridiculous, John,” Ethan spoke to the glass pane, not turning his head, “especially considering the early stage of our relationship, Perry’s and mine. But I almost feel like she’s cheating on me. How stupid is that?”

“It’s not an altogether surprising reaction,” John said behind him. “If it makes you feel any better, though, I don’t believe there’s been any contact of that nature since you entered the picture.”

“So she told you everything,” Ethan said.

“She’s a good patient for hypnosis. Most psychically sensitive people are, which leads many of the skeptics to question the authenticity of the incidences they report.”

“Yes,” said Ethan, “I remember.”

“I figured you would. You’re too personally involved in this, which is clouding your judgment just a little. I’m glad you called me.”

Wordlessly Ethan nodded. Contemplating those events of which he was aware, he watched a robin comically engaged in a hunt for food on the lawn.

“Wait a minute,” he said, pivoting on his heel. He strode over to the couch and lowered his tall frame onto the edge of the cushion, dangling his hands between his knees as he leaned forward in earnest. “She told me that this spirit spoke to her, here in this house, the first day we met. She said it hadn’t done that prior, that she was only aware of it at the creek. And then later, when I returned, she told me it was trying to control my actions, that it was here in the house with us. There was contact then. She was obviously being influenced by something at that point. All you needed to do was look at her. And her skin felt like it was on fire.”

Across from him John inclined his head. “I don’t think it’s the same entity. I believe there are two.”

“What?” Ethan stood up quickly, pacing back to the window and

returning. “There are two entities who are ... who are...” He stopped, at a loss for words.

“No,” John clarified. “I think they are seeking entirely different things from her. But I’m fairly certain they are, or were, both male.”

“Does Perry know?”

“She will sometime after she awakens. An idea of it was already in her subconscious and will probably work its way to the fore over the course of the day. She recognized some sort of animosity being directed at her in the woods. That’s why she went to the creek. The one spirit has never shown any inclination to do her harm. Whatever it was she faced in the creek after she went into the water was conversely inclined.”

“You’ve said over and over again that a supernatural entity cannot do harm to a living being,” Ethan argued.

“I stand by that, for now. That doesn’t mean Perry wasn’t sensitive to the ill feelings directed at her, which caused her panic and her inability to save herself when she went under the water. You were right to get her away from the house. She could ultimately be hurt because of these experiences.”

Ethan walked away again, pausing with his hand on the window frame. He leaned his weight into his arm, staring through the glass. His jaw was set, the muscle straining from the pressure of his restraint.

“What do we do?” he asked at length.

“I don’t know yet. It would help if we knew why she was chosen for these hauntings. Or even who these people were in life. Have you made any headway in that area?”

“No. It’s only been a couple of days and it was not something I was looking for in the beginning. I’ve done a rough research back to the middle of the nineteenth century and haven’t located anything that would suggest a cause.”

“Is there anything in the house?” John continued his train of thought. “What’s in the attic? Could there be any journals, diaries, something of that nature?”

Ethan laughed, a short, humorless noise. “That attic is loaded with crap,” he said. “There are objects up there that I couldn’t begin to date without closer examination, some of them probably quite valuable. Perry hasn’t touched any of it since her grandmother died.”

“She probably can’t,” said John. “Whether she recognizes it or not, she’s in all likelihood hypersensitive to any aura that might be given off. But I would take her with you when you go to look around. It might be helpful. I’ll finish setting up here.”

Summarily dismissed, Ethan reminded himself that John was working within a limited time frame. Mounting the stairs, he went to the room where Perry lay sleeping on an old trundle bed. She looked, he thought, quite angelic in sleep, definitely not like she had when she was in his bed. She was wearing a sleeveless summer dress, a lavender cotton with buttons down the entire front, the hem of which was tangled between her knees. Calling her name, he touched her lightly

on the upper arm.

She rolled over, slowly opening her eyes. “Ethan,” she said. He liked the sound of his name spoken in that sleepy manner. One day, he mused, she might greet him in that exact fashion from the pillow next to his.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“I feel like I’ve been sleeping for hours. Have I?”

“No. Just a few minutes.” He sat down on the bed beside her. She scooted over to give him room.

“John wants us to go look around the attic for anything that might give a clue to past denizens of your house, particularly written journals and the like. Are you up for it?”

She struggled to sit up, leaning back on her hands. The fabric of her dress stretched tight across her breasts. Ethan looked away.

“I’m game,” she said. “I really feel quite refreshed. Are you sure I haven’t been sleeping longer?”

“Positive,” he answered. He stood abruptly, extending his hand to help her. She slid toward the edge of the mattress, disentangling the dress as she moved to rise. As she leaned forward the neck of her garment hung slack, revealing a discoloration on her breastbone, above the “v” front of her bra. From where Ethan was standing it looked exactly like the shape of four fingers of a hand.

“Perry, stand up.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Unbutton your top two buttons, would you?”

She hesitated only fractionally, then did as he asked. Taking the two sides of her dress he parted it, then traced the uppermost of the four bruises.

“What’s this?” he asked. “How did this happen?”

Perry looked down, following the movement of his finger. “I must have slammed up against something in the creek. I remember feeling like I had, like there was a weight on my chest.”

She did not seem alarmed. Apparently, from her perspective the bruises didn’t look as ominous as they did from his. Without another word on the matter he re-buttoned her dress. Somehow he needed her to show them to John without frightening her. Hell, they were frightening him.

“Let’s go get this over with,” he said. Perry exited the room ahead of him, heading for the attic stairs. Having no idea that he meant to take her down to John she had misunderstood his intent. Still not wanting to scare her unduly, he followed her up, determined to get John’s opinion of the marks as soon as they had finished.

\* \* \* \*

Perry stood in the center of the attic floor, thinking of the first time she



had brought Ethan up here, to examine the roof and beams. It seemed impossible that it was only two days ago. At that time he had needed a flashlight to inspect for damage. Now he was content to search through the accumulation of stored property utilizing only the sun through the windows set far apart in opposite walls. It was a daunting task just contemplating where to begin, but he had opted for the most direct approach, starting at one end of the attic, suggesting that she commence at the other and that they would meet in the middle.

Perry opened the window at her end to let a breath of fresh air into the vast space beneath the slate roof. Though not exactly stifling, the atmosphere was close and dusty and smelled slightly of age. The latter she did not mind. It had always given her a sense of being in touch with the past.

Yanking up the hem of her dress and tucking it between her knees, Perry crouched low over the floor to look through a pile of books not far from the elongated rectangle of sunlight shining across the random width planks at her feet. They all appeared to be hardback novels of a fairly recent era, the oldest no more than twenty years and none of them the type of thing they were looking for. She moved on.

Next she found an old Singer sewing machine in its cabinet. Lifting the lid off the bench she shuffled through old patterns, packs of needles and bobbins of thread in a variety of colors. At one time the machine had been downstairs, in the little room off the kitchen. She remembered her grandmother sewing a beautiful burgundy velvet dress for a Christmas dance for her while she and her mother looked on. That would have had to have been about two or three years before her mother died. On and off through her life, she and Mom had lived

here with Nana. Perry had never known her father. She didn't feel she had suffered unduly for his absence. They had been a close-knit family, the Madison women, for a long time, until she herself had moved away with Jack.

Biting the corner of her lip, Perry replaced the cushioned lid. Taped boxes were clearly marked with dates and contents and these she bypassed with a glance. She opened an old armoire, rifling through musty clothing, then yanked open the drawers beneath. Old photos in frames stared up at her, remembered faces in dated attire. She wanted to take them out and look at them, but she understood there wasn't time. She pushed the drawers shut.

"Any luck?" Ethan called from his side of the attic.

"Not yet," Perry answered.

A dresser from the turn of the prior century yielded no results. Perry ran her hand over the crazed finish. She needed to get this furniture out of the attic before its value was ruined.

Relocating a stack of chairs, she brushed the dust from her hands, then shoved aside a metal rack of old and moth-eaten coats. Several more marked boxes she pushed across the floor to clear a path. She could hear Ethan exclaiming softly over something he had found, although she thought it less of import than of personal interest to him, because he moved along without saying anything further. Perry continued to peer into cabinets and cases and the occasional open crate, locating items of clothing, blackened silver, frames and books and miscellaneous articles that had been part and parcel of someone's past.

She spent little time in study of these objects, seeming to sense immediately that she would not find what she needed there.

A half an hour or so had passed when she discovered a steamer trunk shoved close up under the eaves. She stopped where she was, staring at it. The words Lincoln-Fairfield were stenciled on the side of it, which meant nothing to her. However, she knew before opening the lid that what was inside held a personal significance. She had a recollection of looking in it when she was too young to have been up in the attic alone, and her mother's voice above her head, reaching past her to lift out a dress folded on top. Dropping to her knees, Perry pulled the trunk toward her and raised the lid.

The dress was still there. A strapless gown with a high waist and a full taffeta skirt. It was a shade of pink that Perry would never consider wearing, but which her mother had proudly worn to her own senior prom. It was that very night Perry had been conceived. If there was one thing Sheila Madison was, it was honest, and she had not covered up the story of Perry's creation with any glossy tale of romance and tragedy. No, Sheila had gone to the prom with her boyfriend of six months and made a misguided decision later that night. The boy, Frank Harris was his name, had vanished into the service as soon as she had told him she was pregnant. And though she might have had mixed emotions about raising a child on her own, Sheila Madison swore she never regretted the decision to keep the baby that would be her one and only.

Lifting out the dress, Perry sat back on the floor and laid it across her knees. She stroked the outdated, brittle fabric, touched the delicate stitches on the bodice that were Nana's handiwork. Bending her head,

she raised the gown to her cheek and breathed in. The dress smelled musty, it was true, but there was a lingering perfume in it as well. Perhaps it had been stored with some sort of sachet to keep out the insects, but she preferred to think the fragrance was the scent her mother had worn that night.

“Perry?”

Perry looked over her shoulder. Her cheeks were wet from tears she had not realized she was shedding.

“What is that you have there?” His voice was remarkably gentle.

“My mother’s prom dress,” she said, the tears coursing anew at his tone of tender consideration.

“She’s no longer with you, then.”

“No,” said Perry, “she died when I was seventeen.”

Ethan crouched down beside her, setting some large volume tucked under his arm onto the floor by his feet. He touched her shoulder, leaning close to view the dress in her lap.

“Not your color,” he said.

“No,” she smiled damply.

“You miss her.”

“Yes,” she said.

His fingers slipped around the back of her neck and he drew her head close to his own, pressing his closed mouth to her temple. “Do you want to take the dress downstairs with you? Or perhaps the whole trunk?”

She nodded mutely.

“Let’s do that, then. We’ll just drag it out here to the middle of the floor as a reminder.”

He took the dress from her, laying it back in place atop with a careful reverence. Perry rose from her knees, catching sight as she did so of a thick ledger of some sort tucked down against the side of the chest. Before Ethan closed the lid, she reached to take the book out, rising to walk into the light from the window with it while Ethan carried the trunk over near the staircase. Flipping open the pages she recognized her mother’s feathery scrawl.

“It’s her diary,” she breathed.

Ethan, having returned to her side, bent to peer over her shoulder once again. From the corner of her eye she witnessed his slow smile.

“That’s a find of personally inestimable value,” he said.

She nodded agreement.

“I came across a very old Bible,” he added. “I set it by the stairs. There are some slips of parchment held loose inside that someone has written on, as well as what looks to be a recording of birth dates and deaths and the like. It appears to have belonged to a pastor or minister

who once lived here, but I'm not certain. We'll look at it later."

Perry nodded again. Placing the diary carefully on the windowsill, she turned to face him.

"You're a very sweet man," she told him.

"I can't say that I've ever heard that before," he answered her. He smiled again, and took her face in his hands, lowering his mouth onto her own. With a swift intake of breath Perry's lips parted to accept the caress of his tongue across hers in a single stroke. He then withdrew, kissing the tip of her nose.

"And you're a man who leaves a woman wanting more," she stated dryly.

"Am I now?" he drawled, spinning her back toward the window. Taking each of her hands into his own, he crossed her arms before her and drew her back against his chest. Bending, he pressed his mouth to the top of her head, then propped his chin there.

"I thought we were supposed to be searching for information," she said.

"In a minute."

Perry relaxed into his embrace, her gaze on the barn outside the window. It was a little sticky in the attic for such close contact, but the breeze, though warm, felt pleasant across her arms and face, fluttering her hem below her knees. She could feel his breath, the subtle movement of it in the loosened tendrils of her hair as well as in the rise

and fall of his chest along her spine.

“My wife died,” he said.

Perry’s head jerked. She would have turned around again but he held her fast.

“About seven years ago,” he added.

So much, she thought with self-deprecation, for my jealous reaction to Cindy. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “What happened?”

He was silent for so long that she thought he had not heard her, and then he shook his head. “Not now. Some other time.”

Perry nodded, her hair catching on the curve of his chin. Inhaling deeply, she loosened one hand from his own and reached back to touch the side of his throat. She could feel the drum beat of his pulse beneath his jaw. He turned and kissed the inside of her wrist. With his free hand about her waist he pulled her closer still.

“Thank you,” he said.

She nodded again, a little less forcefully, nestling closer against the contours of his chest. After a moment he bent his head to the back of her neck. His breath passed over her skin. She shivered in his arms.

“I like that,” he said.

“What? What is it that you like?”

“This,” he said, and kissed her where his breath had been. She closed

her eyes as the pleasant chill tripped along her spine, turning to heat where he had positioned his mouth.

“Uh-huh,” she breathed. “I like that, too.”

“I can tell,” he answered, and she felt his smile stretch into a grin against her skin. Then he kissed her again, harder, and her breath rushed from her lungs.

“Don’t start what you’re not going to finish,” she warned in a low voice.

“I’m not.”

He kissed her again on her nape, opening his mouth so his teeth grazed lightly over her skin. She arched her neck into the caress and he increased the pressure, just enough. The sound she made inflamed them both. She could tell by the way his arms tightened around her, almost convulsively, possessively, and he buried his face into the place where her shoulder curved upward, scrubbing his jaw back and forth gruffly over the tendon there. His heated breath rushed across her skin.

“Ethan.”

It was neither the time nor the place, all things considered, but she was very close to being unwilling to refuse him. And hadn’t she told him not to start if he had no intention of seeing them through to completion? She turned her head slightly, toward the stairs, thinking of John below, and then of the voice which had not come to haunt her.



She closed her eyes again as Ethan's mouth opened once more upon her nape in a manner that made her knees nearly buckle. Sensing her unbalance, he tightened his grip.

"Ethan."

"Shhh." The whispered syllable was a caress in itself, the air of its passage rippling over her ear and along her jaw. Releasing one hand, he moved it to the buttons of her dress, deftly unbuttoning them all to her waist one by one. She felt the damp breeze through the window along her stomach, where the fabric parted. Wordlessly, he slid the dress down her arms to her elbows, then ran his hands along her shoulders and up the sides of her throat, pressing his teeth again to that place that made her quiver. Her nipples tightened within the confines of her bra. His hands were suddenly there also, as if sensing her need, sliding without pressure over the fabric of her undergarment, then pulling it down slowly to expose the taut flesh to his fingers.

"Oh, God," she breathed, "don't stop this time."

"Sweetheart," he whispered against the side of her throat, "I don't think that I could."

Something in his words chilled her, just for an instant, and then she responded again to his manipulation of her nipples with his fingertips. She knew she was wet already, could feel her body's moisture between her legs. He unbuttoned the remainder of her dress, sliding his right hand along the subtle swell of her belly to linger just within the low band of her panties.

“You’re trembling so hard I can’t hold you still,” he said.

“I know.”

“And if I put my hand between your legs, it’ll be over for you.”

“No,” she contradicted, “it’ll be just beginning.”

He groaned, possibly the only articulation he could make, and followed through with his threat. All he did was cup his hand over her, but it was enough. With a cry she pushed herself against his curved palm and arched her back. His arm tightened across her ribcage to keep her from rocketing away from him. A string of words escaped him, mostly unintelligible and some of them doubtlessly profane, and then he stepped nearer to the wall beside the window, lifting her along with him. She put her hands up against the cool stone surface.

Breathing heavily, her head against the stone, the perspiration streamed between her shoulder blades. Behind her she heard the zipper of his pants and then he took her dress off as she lowered first one arm and raised it back up, then the other. Her underwear dropped to the floor. He ran his hands along her buttocks to her thighs as he stepped forward, parting her legs with his knees. She rocked her hips toward him, her head dropping back on her shoulders. As she moaned a subtle syllable he slid into her from behind, his hands on her hips to steady her precarious balance.

“Oh my God,” she whispered.

*This is what we wanted.*

Perry gasped in cold shock. “No.”

If Ethan heard her, he made no sign. With his knees slightly bent he was sliding in and out with a leisure that was maddening, almost making her forget that *he* had spoken. Her heart raced as her breathing grew shallow and rapid. Ethan’s hands were on her hips, then up her spine, curving around her shoulders. Her breasts yearned for his attention, but she knew if he reached forward she would topple off balance. She had to hold herself still, despite her inclination to move with him. The enforced immobility was agonizingly sweet to her senses.

“Perry,” he whispered, “Perry, I’m going to pull out now. I have no protection. I don’t think it would be wise to continue.”

*This is what you wanted.*

“No,” Perry said again, as a cat’s paw of chill crept along her heated flesh. There was a vicious note to *his* declaration, a frightening intonation. She perceived a touch across the nipple of her right breast and knew it was not Ethan’s. Even so, for a moment she reacted to the sensation with the mindless eagerness that had consumed her in the days that she had lost, feeling her muscles contract spasmodically as Ethan drove forward again inside of her. And then she pulled away. The phantom caress followed, without tenderness, without warmth. It was not the same as it had been. No, not the same at all.

“Perry,” Ethan, questioning her sudden movement, seeking a response to what he had said.

*You filthy harlot.*

Abruptly, Perry found herself shoved to the wall. She thudded up against it, her breasts pressed flat against the cold stone, the curve of her cheekbone bearing the brunt of the impact so that she cried out.

“You fucking whore.”

“Ethan!”

It was his voice, and yet not his voice, the tonal qualities recognizable but the manifested animosity entirely alien.

“You don’t deserve to be treated like a woman.”

The menace of the statement was evident. He grabbed her roughly between the legs.

“Ethan, stop it,” she said, trying to sound calm though her mind was cartwheeling. She attempted to turn around, to look him in the eye, to recall him from wherever he had gone, but he planted his forearm between her shoulder blades, his hand locked around the back of her neck, her battered cheekbone lodged still against the cold, unyielding stone.

With his next move his intent was clear to her. The pressure of his fingertips on her buttocks was brutally implicit.

“Ethan, don’t do that. Ethan!”

She cried out again in shock and pain as he thrust himself into resistant

tissue, and with the impetus of both she managed to push off the wall and jerk away from the hand restraining her. He reached to grab her again.

“Damn your soul to hell, Lily, you shall take what I choose to give you. You deserve no respect from me. My brother? You are worse than a whore!”

Perry swung around, striking Ethan across the face with the back of her hand. He staggered backward from the blow, then lunged at her again, but when his fingers made contact with her arm he stopped. Mouth agape and breathing heavily, he dropped forward, one hand on his naked thigh, the other clutching her upper arm.

“Perry, my God. Perry, I’ve hurt you, haven’t I?”

“Oh, you were aware of that, were you?” she spat, yanking herself free. Bending, she grabbed her dress from the floor where he had trampled it. Dazed, he pulled his pants up over his slim hips, fumbling with the zipper. His countenance was blanched, white with shock in the unrelenting sun. Whatever ardor might have been present in his gaze when their lovemaking had begun had been stripped away by the intended savagery of an act uncompleted.

“Perry, I don’t—I don’t understand what happened. I swear to you.” He reached out to her and she stumbled away from him, spinning with her dress clutched close to her body. His hand dropped to his side. “Part of me was aware of what I was doing, and it seemed to make perfect sense in some warped manner. But I didn’t want to do it. Hell, I would never hurt you. Never. You must know that.”

Feeling sick, Perry struggled back into her clothing. She brushed the boot prints from her dress with the edge of her hand. Raising her fingers to her bruised cheekbone she started to cry. When Ethan reached for her again she did not fight him, but allowed him to envelop her in his arms. She buried her face in the folds of his shirt.

“I’m sorry,” he said in a voice like heartbreak. She shook her head against his chest, wanting him to be silent. She wanted no apologies. Whatever had just happened, it was not of his choosing, she knew. She had heard the change in his voice, felt the malevolent impulse of another presence. Nevertheless, her body cringed from the remembered assault when he lifted his hand to stroke her hair over her head and down her back. She could feel his fingers trembling.

“This is not good, Perry,” he said.

“I know.”

A rapid, heavy tread sounded on the stairs and then the steamer trunk Ethan had set at its head was pushed back. John appeared, breathless and excited.

“I had an extraordinary reading. I don’t know if it was an anomaly, because not all the equipment was interfaced. But I—good Lord, what happened here?”

John was staring at her battered, tear-streaked face, the manner in which she was clinging to Ethan. If John noted Ethan’s haggard expression, he gave no sign as he slowly took in the condition of her clothing. Swallowing hard, Perry could only stare back at him.

“I’m not certain what happened, John,” Ethan said above her head. “But we need to find out who the hell Lily is.”

## Chapter 12

The spigot in Ethan’s tub dripped. Perry was surprised to see it. She decided there must be some truth to the adage regarding the shoemaker’s children never having any shoes. Ethan’s house certainly was not suffering from neglect, but the small irony of a leaky faucet made her smile, although without much humor. She lifted her foot out of the water, waiting for gravity to do its work. After several seconds a tiny drop slid down her toe. She lowered her foot back into the tepid liquid.

She had permitted John a cursory examination of the bruise to her cheek. Ethan had wanted him to see the blue-black ridges across her breastbone as well, but she had not been disposed to open her dress for anyone at that juncture. Whatever concerns Ethan had regarding that particular injury could wait until a better time. The discomfort she felt in other regions was more pertinent, though she had no intention of being seen by a doctor for that either, even one at the hospital, which Ethan had suggested. What had occurred was not life threatening or even particularly painful, as she had managed to prevent further damage when she pulled away from him. What it was, though, was humiliating, because she had not asked for it, as well as disturbing.

Ethan had driven her back to his house after a minor disagreement with John. Apparently, Ethan was not happy about leaving his friend

alone in the house. John had successfully argued that any entity making itself known had no interest in him. Ethan had conceded and left him there with a promise to return in a few hours' time.

Solicitous and unnecessarily guilt-ridden, Ethan had immediately filled the tub with hot water for her upon their arrival, then left her in privacy to soak her sore body. Now, the water was nearing room temperature as the heat dissipated, but Perry felt no inclination to get out of the tub. She eyed the clean, folded towel on the edge of the sink, then returned her scrutiny to the next drip forming at the edge of the spout.

Perry held no doubt that Lily was someone, or had been someone, very real. Lily was the name by which *he* called her, and to which she had responded so readily. Until she heard the name from Ethan's mouth, memory of it had eluded her. In the silence of the ride back to Ethan's house she had made no mention. She had a feeling he suspected the truth already. Through some ghastly logic it only made sense, after all.

A light knock sounded on the door and then it opened, just enough for Ethan to speak through, asking if she was alright. The defeated tone of his voice saddened her. She fought back tears.

"I'm fine," she said.

"That water has to be getting cold."

"It is cold," she answered.

There was a momentary silence. "I made you a cup of chamomile tea.



You should drink it while it's still hot.”

“Thanks.”

The door started to close.

“Ethan?”

The door swung open again. His dark head appeared around the edge. God, he was a handsome, vigorous, competent man, even with that expression of uncertainty moving through his eyes.

“Come in and sit down a minute, will you?”

He did, perching on the lowered toilet lid. He forewent his usual stance, legs stretched before him, for one not quite as confident, knees and feet planted slightly apart at right angles, his arms folded across his thighs and his hands clasped together loosely between. A frown marred his brow. Perry had a strong, oddly maternal urge to reach out and smooth that mark of worry, but it would have meant getting out of the tub. For the time being she was not willing to do that. The draft of the open door rippled across her arms. With his innate sense of what she needed, Ethan extended his hand to push the door shut.

“Ethan, we must find out who Lily was,” she told him, amazed at how calm she sounded. “We have to find out who it was who might have wanted to ... to do that to her. It seems to me,” she said and paused, drawing a steadying breath. “It seems to me,” she went on, “based on what you said at the time, that the act was not consensual but meant to punish in some fashion.” She saw him flinch, but he stoically nodded his head. “I am assuming that you spoke through no context within

your own past life, so I think we can safely say that Lily slept with somebody's brother."

"I agree," he said quietly.

"Lily is the name he called me by, the name I couldn't recall before. The spirit in the creek, I mean. I don't know who this was in the house. It wasn't him. And Ethan, it wasn't you either. You didn't intend to hurt me."

He lifted his hand, dropping his head into it, running his fingers through his hair. "But I did hurt you, Perry," he said, "and it could have been worse. What happened was fairly close to rape."

Perry closed her mouth, felt the muscle in her jaw tighten as her teeth ground together in acknowledgment of his statement. She slid her hips along the bottom of the tub, dropping down into the water until her chin dipped below the surface. Once there, she held herself very still.

"It's tearing me up," he said, pivoting his head to look at her. "To realize that I'm not man enough to fight something like that. To abandon my own instinct to protect you, to keep you safe. I hurt you, Perry. Damn it, I hurt you. It makes me wonder just what kind of man I am inside, that I could give in to that urge without so much as a struggle."

Perry sank her teeth into her lower lip, almost hard enough to raise a welt. Her eyes were riveted to the drop still quivering on the metal edge of the tap. Come on, she urged it silently, come on. When you fall, I'll get up. I'll get out of this tub and decide what next to do with

my life. With mine and with his.

“Perry,” Ethan went on, his voice resonating in the tiled enclosure, “you mean a great deal to me. I’m not going to go on about love at first sight or any of that garbage. But I don’t want to lose you, I really don’t.”

Plop.

Perry was out of the tub so fast she nearly fell, flying across the hazardously slick tile to throw herself into his lap, soaking wet. He grunted from the force of her landing, and then his arms went around her, pulling her close. He stroked her hair and kissed her brow tenderly, and then he reached over to the sink for the towel, wrapping it around her naked, shivering body.

They sat there like that for a very long time, the only sound the steady drip of water from her skin and hair onto the floor at his feet. Eventually, even that stopped.

\* \* \* \*

“Where’s Perry?”

Ethan closed the kitchen door, crossing to where John stood on the threshold to Perry’s living room holding a printout from one of the machines in his hand.

“At my place curled up in bed with the television on. She took a couple of those over-the-counter sleep aids I’ve had in the medicine cabinet for God knows how long. I don’t know what kind of shelf life

they have. They may not do her any good.”

John nodded. “And you? How are you doing?”

Ethan shrugged. “Better,” he said.

John nodded again, then wordlessly handed the lengthy strip of paper to Ethan. Ethan slid the printout through his fingers, tipping it to the light.

“I don’t see any signs of activity here,” he said.

“There hasn’t been any since the two of you left,” John told him. “But this,” he said, handing him another register, “is what appeared when you were in the attic.”

Ethan let out a low whistle. “Crap,” he said, unconsciously using one of Perry’s favorite expletives. At mention of the attic, Ethan felt a slow roll of remembered lust tinged with a residue of lingering rage, and then shame. He was not that man who would use a woman so wrongly, yet he could feel the emotion as if it were some echo of his own. Swearing a bit more potently, he handed the paper back to John.

“He calls her Lily.”

At John’s questioning glance, Ethan explained further.

“The entity at the creek. He calls her Lily. She hears him in her head, where I cannot go to drive him out.”

John arched his shaggy blond brows.

“And you called her Lily,” he said.

“Yes,” Ethan admitted, lifting his gaze to stare across the living room to the window and beyond. The sunlight was golden on the grass. In the deep shadow surrounding the casement the silhouette of leaves shivered in a short-lived breeze. “But it wasn’t him in the attic. She said it was someone—I mean something different.”

“As I suspected.”

“Yes.”

John sighed, folding his arms across his chest. “You are in definite pain, my friend. This is a very dangerous situation for you as well as for her.”

“I realize that,” said Ethan. In the thin veil of yellow sky beyond the treetops he could see a bird circling. In a moment another joined it, and then another, circling higher until they were out of his sight.

“Well, what do you want to do about it?”

Ethan turned away from the window, blinking. “Whatever we can.”

Lifting his hand, John scratched his nose. “This is a start,” he said, indicating the monitoring equipment. “None of this needs our babysitting, however. I suggest we leave the equipment undisturbed overnight, then return in the morning to check any results.”

Slowly, Ethan nodded agreement. “And if nothing shows up? You know that’s a likely scenario. What you showed me there is a rare

detection.”

John grunted. “Yes, of that I am only too acutely aware. I wish I had more time to spend, but I don’t. I hate to make this suggestion, Ethan, but we might need Perry to return at some point. I don’t want to put either one of you at risk, but Perry is apparently the catalyst for what’s been taking place at the creek, and you appear to be in some way responsible for the contact of this second entity. Or perhaps it is you and Perry together that produce the necessary conduit. After all, there have been no tales of haunting associated with this house before. Have there?”

“Not that I know of,” said Ethan. “Who knows, though? There aren’t any published eyewitness accounts, to be sure. We couldn’t be that lucky. But I don’t like the idea of putting Perry in harm’s way.”

“Between the two of us we’ll guarantee she doesn’t do herself any harm,” John assured him. Ethan eyed him sidelong.

“That guarantee carries no weight with me,” he stated in a tight voice. “She didn’t hurt herself due to some confused or entranced state. I hurt her, John. For Perry’s sake I wasn’t too specific about what took place in the attic, but you have to know something of it.” His hand shook against his thigh and he curled his fingers into a fist to stop the spasmodic movement.

“I hurt her, John. For a moment it was as if my thoughts were in perfect sync with that of someone else, and that someone else did not have Perry’s, or I should say Lily’s, best interests at heart, believe me. She didn’t fall against the wall. I shoved her there, and ... and worse.

And those bruises on her chest that she didn't want to show you? They look to me very much like a handprint. I didn't cause those. She said they appeared after something struck her in the chest while she was under the water yesterday. To be exact, she said she felt as if a weight was on her. I don't like this, John, not at all. This goes beyond anything I've ever experienced while working with you. To be honest, it's scaring the hell out of me."

For a full minute John was silent, staring at the floor. He reached up, pulling at his chin between his thumb and forefinger. Ethan recognized the old habit and chose not to hasten his friend's thought processes. Give the man time, they all had been wont to say, and he'll come up with something new to try.

This time, however, he didn't. He blew his breath out through his nose and shook his head. "Hypnosis would probably aid in deciphering your actions."

Ethan felt a flicker of annoyance. "You want to put me under? Haven't we tried this before?"

John looked him in the eye. "For an altogether different reason, as you will recall. I would like to make certain at this time that what occurred was not the result of some repressed anger in you. The fact that you used the name Lily, and so did the entity by the creek, which I believe had not previously been revealed to you, bodes well. At least for your behavior. Not, though, for Perry's chances of living a normal life in this house of hers. What I want to know is what sparked this? Until we have some answers out of the past, there's no telling what we're dealing with."

Ethan nodded, rubbing his hand wearily along his jaw. He could feel the heavy stubble of a day's growth of beard, which was not surprising, as he hadn't shaved that morning. He could barely remember what day it was, he felt that tired.

"In the morning, before we return?" he suggested.

"Whenever you'd like."

Yawning, Ethan turned away into the kitchen. "Let's lock up then. I just want to make one stop on the way home."

John didn't question him, merely giving the machinery nearest to hand a cursory check before following him out the door. In the truck, Ethan remembered the equipment John had wanted to set by the creek, but his former professor waved away his concerns.

"Tomorrow," he said.

Complacent in his exhaustion Ethan backed the truck in a half circle, nosing it toward the road along the deteriorated driveway as he suppressed another yawn. The late afternoon sun slanted through the trees, barring the dirty windshield in shadow and glare. Reaching for his sunglasses Ethan slid them on single-handed, glancing in the rear view mirror as he did so. When he slammed on the brakes John hit the dashboard hard with the flat of his left palm, the seatbelt he had not yet finished fastening, falling out of his right hand to clatter against the door.

"Look on the porch."



“What?” John asked, fumbling for the fallen belt.

“Look on the porch, *now*.”

Beside him John spun in his seat, narrowing his eyes against the sun’s brilliance.

“Take these,” said Ethan, handing him his polarized sunglasses. John slipped them up his nose, tilting his head to look through them.

“I don’t see—”

“Third upright from the left, your left,” Ethan explained rapidly as he rummaged in the narrow space behind the seat for the 35 mm camera he used to photograph houses before he began work on them. With any luck, the polarizing filter was in place. He had used the camera last to take pictures on a day such as this.

“Son of an f’ing bitch,” John murmured, focusing on the place where Ethan had directed him. “What is that, do you think?”

“I know what I think it is,” Ethan said through his teeth, excitement surging through him despite his efforts to stay calm. “Your opinion is what I want right now.”

Opening the driver’s door Ethan stepped out of the cab, camera in hand. He made a quick f-stop adjustment and raised the viewfinder to his eye, hoping for the best.

In the truck, John leaned across the seat. “Want these back?” he asked, preparing to remove the sunglasses.

“No time,” Ethan said brusquely. “Just tell me if it’s still there.”

“I—no. Yes! A little more to the left of where you said it was. Can you see it at all?”

“I can’t see it,” Ethan answered, “but I sure as hell can feel it.”

A rill of hair was standing up along the front of each arm, as well as every follicle on the back of his neck. As he repeatedly shot and wound the film forward, varying the point of focus only slightly each time, he could hear John talking rapid-fire from inside the cab.

“I’m half tempted to go back in the house and check those read-outs now. Left, left, again! It’s half-formed. I can’t make out the shape. It’s definitely not a trick of the light. There, again! Left again, toward the far corner. Yee-hah!”

A grin broke out across Ethan’s face at the well-remembered display of John’s enthusiasm. John Gooden had grafted well in his southern home, combining New York cynicism with rebel exuberance into a kind of heartfelt, endearing symmetry of character. Still smiling, Ethan moved along the truck bed, nearer the house. As he did, he stepped out of the sun and into the shadow of the trees.

Whatever it was on the porch turned, drifting like a mist and coalescing again, quite as if it had seen him, detected him, made him the focus of its attention. Ethan stopped shooting. What was it Perry had asked? Did either of you see a mist on the water?

Setting one foot behind the other, Ethan began backing away.

“John?”

“I see it.”

Ethan nodded. He shot two more exposures as he walked backwards, then lowered the camera to his side. The mist had drifted off the porch into the ragged grass at the structure’s edge.

“What are you feeling, Ethan?”

John was out of the truck. Ethan could tell by the way John’s voice traveled to him, but he didn’t turn his head to check.

“A little alarmed. Curious. Angry.”

“Angry?”

“Yes. Like there’s this rage beating against me, wanting in. I’m not going to let it. I know better now. I didn’t expect it before and was caught off guard.”

“Get in the truck, Ethan.”

“I’m coming.”

“A little faster, please.”

There was a unique note to John’s voice, one that Ethan could not remember detecting in the years he had known him. Backing up more swiftly, he found himself in the sun and unable to clearly see any longer. Fighting down a vicious compound of panic and fury, Ethan

made his way quickly to the truck, tossing the camera to John as he slid behind the wheel. Gravel spurted from the tires as he shot along the driveway, jolting John from his seat yet again in the ruts.

“I’ve never known you to be afraid, John,” Ethan said, when they were out on the roadway and he had looked back too many times to be of comfort to him.

“I was afraid for you,” countered John, calmly belting himself in. “How are you feeling now?”

Ethan tested his emotions before replying. “Unnerved, but myself.”

“Good man.”

Laughing in grim humor, Ethan leaned closer over the wheel. His shirt was drenched with reeking sweat. The first thing he was going to do when he got home was take a shower. The second, well, the second depended on Perry. If she was sleeping, so be it, but if she was not, then, God help him, he needed her to make him feel normal again. To show him he was not this raging creature the residuum of which seemed to be clinging to his clothes, his skin, his very soul.

Rolling down the window, he turned his head and spat. Even his mouth tasted foul.

“You alright?”

“I will be,” Ethan said.

Abruptly realizing where he was, he veered off the road without

utilizing his signal.

“What’s wrong?”

“I passed the church. We’ve got to stop there.”

“Feeling a sudden need for redemption?” drawled John. “Not that I would blame you in the slightest,” he added.

“No,” said Ethan, glancing up and down the road for traffic before swinging the truck back in the direction they had come. “I want a quick look at the graveyard.”

“Ah,” said John, and refrained from further comment even after they had pulled into the narrow, graveled lane and parked in the lot. Ethan sat behind the wheel a moment longer, studying the church’s facade. It was a small building, more the size of a one-room schoolhouse than anything else, with the marked exception of its height and steeply pitched roof. Nearly two hundred years earlier the building had been constructed of stone, then plastered for insulation, and would have accommodated a minimal congregation. No longer in religious use, fifteen years ago the church had been closed due to some damage to the floor that was yet to be corrected, and it was now under the jurisdiction of the historical society. Ethan knew that some very old records were housed there in proprietorial insistence and regularly maintained, though not available to the general public. Beside the structure, shaded by the canopy of gnarled branches of an ancient white oak in heavy leaf, stood the graveyard. Its moss-covered markers leaned with age over the unevenly humped earth. Beyond, corn in a farmer’s field stood in tall, green contrast, rustling in the

breeze fingering through the stalks.

Ethan shoved open the door and got out, advancing toward the narrow gravestones. He heard the other door close as John followed. Striding across the roughly shorn grass, Ethan's dark eyes scanned engraved names and dates discolored by pale, gray-green lichen.

"Here's a Lily," John announced. Ethan moved to his side, gazing at the inscription.

"1902? I don't know. If you've got a pen and paper, would you write that one down? Thanks." Ethan continued on, finding another Lily a short distance away. This grave was some thirty years older than the first, which had, by its date, appeared to be one of the last dug. The cemetery had not been used since the beginning of the twentieth century.

"Popular name," commented John dryly, jotting down the information. "There can't be more than sixty stones here, and at least two of them bear the name Lily. This isn't going to be easy, if she's even buried here."

"I know," said Ethan. "It's just a hunch, a hope, given the proximity of the church to the property. Besides, I think there's some connection between the house and the church building. The Bible I found in the attic belonged to a Reverend Edward Nicholson. If I thought someone was inside on a Saturday, I'd go and ask to see the old records."

"How do you know there's not?"

"Do you see a car?" Ethan asked, looking around.

“Behind the building,” answered John, indicating the back end of a late model Dodge with a jerk of his chin. The strengthening breeze tugged the frizzed ends of his thinning blond hair. “Let’s give the door a try.”

Ethan heard the last about two seconds too late as he was already in motion and the door in question already opening at his approach. A pretty, middle-aged woman stepped out onto the shallow flight of marble steps.

“Ethan?” she said.

Ethan faltered, then continued forward, leaping the stairs to stand at the woman’s side. After a minute hesitation he bent and kissed her on the cheek. She made little, flustered noises as she smiled up at him.

“John,” he called over his shoulder, “this is Maggie Barnes, an old friend of mine. She’s on the Board of Directors for County Historical Preservation. Maggie, this is John Gooden.”

John mounted the stairs to shake Maggie’s hand. She seemed startled by the gesture, quickly snatching her fingers back to her side.

“What brings you and your friend here?” she asked. “I didn’t hear you pull up, but I heard voices.”

Ethan exchanged a quick glance with John over Maggie’s head. “I’m doing some research,” he said. “Before I start work on the Madison property. Water on Stone? Perhaps you’re familiar with it.”

“Goodness, yes,” she said with a tittering laugh, her green eyes looking him up and down in quick appraisal, hesitating at the sweat stains causing his shirt to cling across his chest and abdomen. “How not,” she went on, her cadence measured, “considering my work here? A great many of the inhabitants of this graveyard made their home there at some point. Our most infamous is the Reverend, however. But you must know that.”

“Must I?” Ethan responded, exchanging a second glance with John. “I’m not familiar with his history at all.”

“No? Then come in. I’m sure you have a few minutes to catch up on old times and then I’ll show you what we have.” She tucked her hand into Ethan’s elbow, leaning around him to smile sweetly at John. “You’re welcome to come in, as well,” she advised.

The third glance exchanged was prompted by John and embodied an entirely different message than the first two. Out of sight of Maggie’s direct gaze, Ethan rolled his eyes and shook his head. Don’t ask, he mouthed.

Ethan was grateful for his friend’s restraint, despite the man’s expression of suppressed mirth, as he allowed himself to be lead into the former church by the woman he had, on more than one occasion, been forced to physically fend off. He was careful not to hurt her feelings, but he had certainly gained a better understanding of what women went through when confronted by unwanted attention.

The interior of the building still contained what appeared to be its earliest seating, dark wood glistening beneath a silt-like layer of dust.



The center of the floor was blocked by a pair of sawhorses. As they traversed the floor a finer dust rose into the air, shimmering in the sun.

“Careful,” said Maggie. “One of these years we’ll get that fixed. There’s a small problem with the allocation of money. I don’t suppose you’d be interested in performing the job for, say, some other type of compensation?”

Behind them John coughed, cleared his throat, then apologized, attributing the outburst to the floating dust.

“I’m very busy at the moment, Maggie,” said Ethan. “I haven’t time for much of anything these days.”

She made an extremely unfeminine sound of doubt, but dropped the subject, tossing her head. “Through this door,” she directed. “What fortunate timing. I stopped by to gather some paperwork and in another couple of minutes would have been gone.”

“Yes, quite fortunate.” This from John, who was bringing up the rear. Ethan saw Maggie cut her eyes in John’s direction as if just recalling some annoyance.

“Sit down,” she said, indicating a single chair. Which one of them was supposed to remain standing was anybody’s guess. “Tell me how you’ve been.”

“I’ve been well,” Ethan said, remaining on his feet. “Busy, as I’ve said. In fact, I’m pressed for time, so if you could just share that information with me?”

She pivoted on her heel, patently disappointed. Then she shrugged. “As you will,” she murmured, crossing the floor with an exaggerated swing to her stride. A good-sized floor safe was against the wall; too heavy to be moved by someone intent on mischief. Ethan watched discreetly as she spun through the combination, then yanked open the door. She pulled an old registry from the interior. Other documents were visible within.

“Why aren’t those things kept someplace better suited?” John ventured to ask from his post by the doorway.

Maggie lowered the register onto the table at Ethan’s elbow. “Part of the stipulation,” she said, all sign of sweetness and patience gone.

“Stipulation?”

“Neither the building nor the land on which it stands were ever donated to the cause of religion. They have been privately owned through the years by the original founders and the heirs of the estate you’re going to be working on,” she said to Ethan, rather than John. “Both remained in the family for generations until the early 1920’s. At that time, when the last Nicholson died--although by that time, marriage had changed the name to something else, Smith, I think,” she added in a flippant aside, “there was some legal clause in his will that this portion of the property, albeit part of the estate in its entirety, would go to use by the State in preservation with each successor. Nothing inside could be removed. There was, of course, no money willed to that end, but the State has continued its guardianship. I can’t imagine what sort of contract could legally bind any new owner to continue the agreement. I suppose it might have been a condition of

sale. I believe the Madisons bought the place in the 1950's, didn't they?" Once again, she directed her remarks to Ethan, ignoring the fact that it was John who had asked the initial question.

"They did," Ethan answered. He was surprised by the other information, because he had not yet come across any of it in the course of his own research. Neither had Perry made mention of owning this property, nor the stipulation that it remain in preservation. Of course, questions of ownership had not come up in the natural course of conversation. Without knowledge of the connection to her own home which he had stumbled across in the Reverend's Bible, he could see no reason why she would have gone out of her way to tell him.

"I hear the new owner is, let's see, a little standoffish, shall we say?" Maggie volunteered. "An old-fashioned term, but I've heard it's an accurate description."

At Maggie's tone, Ethan's hackles rose. This feeling of protectiveness in regard to Perry was a bit unsettling.

"Funny," declared Ethan, "but I didn't receive that impression at all. In fact, I'm getting on quite well with her."

Maggie faltered fractionally as she opened the leather-bound register; the only sign of her vexation besides the rapid blink of her lashes three times in succession.

"Here," she said, pointing with her blood-red fingernail. "All the births and deaths in the Nicholson family from the time the church first opened its doors for worship. And this, this is the family of Edward

Nicholson, the Reverend I spoke of. The eldest of eight sons he was, not a female among the brood. Prolific family in their own right as well, as you will note by the number of births, christenings, and infant deaths. No lack of libido there.”

Ethan ignored the jibe, tilting his head to look where she was pointing. If Maggie wanted to believe that was the reason he was not interested in her, he would leave her to it, and gladly.

“Except for our friend Edward, perhaps. He married late in life, and not until he had been goaded into it by members of the community. There are numerous letters, which have survived the passage of years attesting to that fact. For some reason, he was disinclined to take a wife.”

“Homosexual?” asked John. Maggie glanced at him briefly, and away.

“Possibly. Or just not interested. At any rate,” Maggie went on, unconsciously warming to her subject, “he married when he was forty-three, a venerable age for that period. Married a girl some twenty years his junior, a spinster who had been waiting, apparently, for his youngest brother to ask for her hand in marriage. There’s some vague communication about that, too, between the Reverend and one of the other brothers.”

Ethan felt as if his heart faltered a beat. John abandoned his support of the doorframe to step closer.

“What was the wife’s name?” John queried, staring hard at Ethan.

Maggie leaned over the page, moving her fingernail to another point

and tapping, once.

“Lily,” she said. “Lily Madson. Now there’s a coincidence for you. One letter short of Madison. I’ve wondered if it might be the same family, generations later. You know how sometimes the spelling of a surname is changed over the years, due to the miscopying of official documents. Wouldn’t that be a strange happenstance?”

A chill settled into the pit of Ethan’s stomach. Lily Madson, waiting for the younger brother to claim her, settling instead for the eldest. Had the youngest indeed one day come home?

“When did Lily die?”

At his tone, Maggie stared at him, then turned back to the tome beneath her hand.

“There is no reference to a date in the registry. That’s where the infamy comes in. Apparently it was quite the scandal. Lily disappeared with her husband’s brother Daniel sometime in 1824. The relationship between a brother-in-law and sister-in-law was viewed, in the morals of the day, to be nigh on incestuous. You know, accepting the family of your spouse as your own and all of that. Edward personally survived that embarrassment, I suppose, but his reputation suffered tremendously. His congregation began to seriously doubt his ability to lead them. There were some episodes of bizarre behavior recorded. Edward retired from the ministry in 1829 and became a recluse. He died in 1831 and is buried at the upper end of the graveyard behind the wrought iron fence, where once he had been expected to lie beside his bride.”

Ethan closed his eyes, willing himself to breath normally. But the words that had exited his mouth when he was in the attic came back to him with thudding force.

*Damn your soul to hell, Lily, you shall take what I choose to give you. You deserve no respect from me. My brother? You are worse than a whore...*

Commanding his lids to lift, he turned to John with a stifled word and headed for the door. John extended a hasty thank you for the two of them, then followed him outside. Ethan did not lessen his stride until he had returned to the driver's seat of his pickup truck. He leaned his forehead against the wheel. John climbed into the passenger's side, hastily donning his seatbelt before Ethan had a chance to put the vehicle in gear. Respiring heavily, Ethan turned his head on his knuckles to look at John.

"I believe we may safely assume the entity in the house is the shade of the dearly departed Reverend Nicholson," he said.

"And the other by the creek? Daniel?"

"I would think so," agreed Ethan, raising his head and putting the truck into reverse. "The question is, why?"

## Chapter 13

*The sound of water falling onto stone was hollow and echoing and limitless, seeming to repeat the same expanded pattern, like music, like*

*a symphony with the hand of God in it somehow. He was uplifted by it and at the same time cast down and made humble, sad, hopeless. If he thought he would come to the end of the symphony he might have felt differently, but it seemed to him he had been listening to it forever and would go on listening to it forevermore without the promise of completion. Alone.*

*Prone on the water-smoothed surface he turned his cheek against the stone, remembering the smoothness of her skin, the tiny droplets of liquid spray from the falls glistening across her breasts, and how he had taken the time to lick them off, one by one, only to find they had been replaced by others in due course. He had spent more time than they had available committed to that service, bidding her be patient as she arched against him pleading for more, her flesh taut and heated beneath the cooling sheath of water, and then he had slipped his hand between her legs. The cries she had made echoed in his head. He moaned with the memory of them.*

*Lily, Lily, the child in your womb is ours. Do not let my brother lay claim to it. You promised me. You swore on the blood in your veins.*

*But it was too late. He knew that now.*

## Chapter 14

Standing in the open doorway, Ethan watched John pull out of the end of the driveway in his truck, headed for a hotel. Ethan had given him directions, a less than complex process as there were only three turns

to make, and the Bible. John had promised to look through the aged volume overnight. As for processing the film, that would have to wait. It needed to be done by hand, not run through a machine. Tomorrow they would have to take the film into town, to a camera shop where Ethan knew they performed their own developing.

The last of the sunlight reflected in the side view mirror, flashing like a beacon, as John swung left onto the main roadway. He waved his hand in a brief salute. Ethan waved back, then closed the door.

Turning, Ethan stripped off his sweat-soaked shirt, rolling it into a ball in his hand. He clicked off the foyer light. His diaphragm collapsed, rushing air from his lungs as he recalled that first night he had brought Perry into his home; how he had lifted her in the darkness and she had wrapped her legs about his waist as he carried her to the wall. He would give one hell of a lot to believe that lust alone had been the impetus to that moment, but with each passing minute he was growing more fearful of another influence.

Still, he should have needed only to remind himself of the feelings he had for her to stave off uncertainty. Edward, if the entity was indeed Edward Nicholson, had no such tender sentiment in reserve. That emotion was Ethan's and Ethan's alone. Yes, he only needed to remind himself of that difference. Unfortunately, the necessity was coming with increasing frequency.

Wiping his forearm across his brow he went to the bedroom door, listening as he had a short time earlier when he arrived home. Hearing nothing within he carefully rotated the knob, easing the door open to peer inside.



A break in the drawn curtain permitted enough light into the room for him to see Perry. She was as usual sleeping on her back, one arm thrown up on the pillow above her angled head. Beneath her other hand on her abdomen was the bound diary of her mother's, one finger in between the pages as if to mark the place where she had left off when she decided to close her eyes, the other fingers curled in relaxation. Requiring clean clothing, Ethan entered the room quietly, tossing his soiled shirt into the hamper in the corner. Carefully and quietly pulling open the various drawers in the dresser, he took what he needed and turned to depart. On the bed Perry rolled in her sleep, the diary slipping from her grasp.

Ethan reacted nimbly, darting to grab the diary before the volume fell to the floor. His clothing tumbled across the comforter, the clean shirt coming to rest on Perry's outstretched leg. Her hand moved to brush it aside, closing around the fabric. Her eyes opened.

"Hi," said Ethan.

"Hi," she greeted him sleepily. "What time is it?"

Retrieving his clothes, Ethan sat down on the edge of the bed. "A little after seven-thirty. Hungry?"

"Not really," she said, her eyes trailing over his naked chest in a manner that made him shift his hips on the mattress, before she continued on to the clothing lying rumpled across his thigh. "Did you eat yet?"

"I'm not all that hungry, either. I think I might just grab a bowl of

cereal.”

“I’ll get it for you,” she offered, starting to rise.

“Not necessary,” he said, forestalling her movement. “I’m taking a quick shower first.”

She subsided onto the pillow, her head cradled on her arm. “Where’s John?”

“Gone to a hotel for the night.”

To that, she said nothing. Lifting his hand, Ethan held out the diary.

“You were reading this when you fell asleep.”

She took the book, cradling it against her stomach. “Thanks. I just started to read when I dozed off. It’s amazing. She was very young when she began the journal. There are thoughts of hers in here that I would never have recognized as hers, if not for the fact that she wrote them down. By the time I was old enough for her to share her life with me, she probably didn’t recall any of this with the clarity revealed on these pages.”

Ethan smiled, a slow turn of his lips, feeling a pull of sadness and regret. It was too bad that not everyone took the time to document personal experiences and emotions in such a manner. There were circumstances during one’s life wherein that type of revelation could be of immeasurable value. He knew it would have helped in his.

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m jumping in the shower.”

Perry nodded as she sat up, pushing her hair off her brow. “Do you mind if I scrounge around for something for dinner?”

“I thought you weren’t hungry.”

“I’m not. I just want to do it for you. You’ve been very kind, Ethan.”

Have I? he thought, but left his doubts unspoken. Standing, he shifted his clothes into his other arm, extending his hand to help her up. Not that she needed assistance. She hopped out of the bed, apparently refreshed from her long nap. He, on the other hand, felt too tired for speech. Wordlessly he made his way to the bathroom, leaving Perry to rustle around the kitchen in search of something to feed him.

Stripping down, Ethan turned on the shower, waited a moment for the water temperature to level out, then stepped into the wide stall. He lifted his face to the spray and closed his eyes as the warmth streamed over his body, soothed by the gentle bombardment and the darkness behind his lids. Life had, once again, taken quite a strange turn for him. He just needed to slow down and breathe and set for himself a plan of action.

He had been keeping his existence consciously and deliberately manageable. Sailing into storms with all canvas blowing had not been his style for some time now. In fact, he had only developed that mode of behavior out of necessity. He had always been the kind of person to step in and help when needed, but in the end his life and his marriage with Cindy had called for more crisis intervention than prevention.

Opening his mouth, Ethan let the steaming water fill the cavity around his tongue, then he turned his head to spit out the last residue of foulness from the episode at Perry's earlier. The shower streamed over his hair and down his face. He bent his head, letting the pulsating flow work its way into the taut muscles of his neck.

Ghost hunting in his youth had been one thing; this roaring need to protect Perry from whatever it was that appeared to be haunting her was another. The constant flux of adrenaline was beginning to wear him down. As for Perry herself, well, she had certainly upset the balance he had created for himself, with or without her ghosts. She had taken him quite by surprise. To be honest, he hadn't anticipated feeling so close to someone again. He was sure that the swiftness with which his emotions had grown should be scaring him a little and yet fear, despite all that wanting Perry seemed to entail, was non-existent. When he thought of her, every time he thought of her, something in him seemed to settle, to drift into place, gently filling a void he had forgotten existed.

Hearing a noise, Ethan opened the stall door, listening. He thought he could hear Perry's voice and wondered if she was talking to him or to herself.

"I'm in the shower," he called. "I can't hear you."

A second later there was a knock on the door. Perry stuck her head in.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to answer your phone. Force of habit, I guess."

“Who is it?” he asked her, closing the shower door to keep the water from running onto the floor. “John?”

“No, it’s a Maggie Barnes asking for you.”

Groaning in irritation, Ethan grabbed the soap from the dish and began to lather it between his hands. “Would you do me a favor, Perry?” he called, lifting his head so she would hear him clearly over the noise of running water. “Tell her who you are and that I’m in the shower, and that you and I both thank her very much for the information she provided.”

After a brief hesitation, Perry agreed and shut the door. Less than a minute later she was back.

“May I come in?”

He smiled into the water. “Of course.” It seemed to him that she was laughing.

“Your friend was a little put out by your message,” she advised dryly. “I take it that’s the pretty lady from the historical society whose picture was in the paper with you?”

Ethan grimaced. “Yes.”

“Hmm,” she murmured. He could hear her near the sink and wiped the condensation from the door to peer out. Although blurred, he could make her out by the mirror studying the bruise on her cheekbone. Biting the flesh inside his own cheek, he turned away.

“So basically what I just told her, in not so many words,” she went on conversationally, “was to get lost, that we are friendly enough that you take a shower in my presence, and you are otherwise involved and not interested. Correct? Oh, and you were thanking her for something. That, at least, was straightforward enough.”

Ethan chuckled, soaping his body with vigorous strokes. “Yes,” he said. “To all of that.”

For a moment she was silent, then he heard a distinctive and rather unfeminine snort. “Had there been anything going on there?” he heard her ask.

“Not on my part,” he answered.

“Good,” she said. His lips curved in response.

When she did not speak again right away Ethan peeked out of the shower door, wondering if she had left. But she was standing in the middle of the floor, her head tipped to one side, the bruise on her cheekbone glaringly evident, her gaze meeting his as he blinked water from his lashes.

“Are you going to tell me what this information is for which I just thanked Ms. Barnes?”

“Of course. When I’m finished here,” he advised, and shut the door again. “I’ll just be another couple of minutes.”

“I think,” he heard her say from just outside the shower stall, “that you may be longer than that.”

Once more the door opened, splattering another half pint of water across the floor. Perry stepped in minus the men's boxers and tee shirt she had been wearing while sleeping. He took a step back, keeping his eyes on her face.

"Perry, I don't—"

"Yes," she interrupted, "you do."

She took the soap from his hand. "I have never seen a man looking more mentally and physically exhausted than you do now. Turn around."

"I—no. Wait a minute."

With a grip on his arm, she urged him to face the wall. "Do it," she said in a tone that made him smile and comply, turning his back to her. As she began to run her hands along his back, kneading tired, tense muscles, he put his arms on the tiled enclosure, leaning his weight into them. Although he was very well aware that she was nude and glistening wet from the water spray behind him, the quality of the massage soon drew his mind away from that image.

"This is wonderful. Thank you."

"Shush," she chastised. "No talking."

"Okay," he said with a grin.

She took her time completing a circuit of his back and shoulders,

loosening knots created by the stress of the past couple of days as well as those resulting from the daily labor to which he had become accustomed. His breathing evened out and he wished, in a vaguely retained thought, that they were lying in bed so he could just drift off to sleep.

“That’s nice,” he murmured. “And so are you.”

“Hush,” she said.

Her hands dipped to his buttocks, kneading the flesh and muscle there. He groaned, reveling in the remarkable sensation. When she moved to his thighs and calves he thought he had died and gone to heaven, and said as much. Once again she told him to stop talking.

“As you wish,” he acquiesced and closed his eyes.

He sucked in a mouthful of water as her hand slipped between his thighs to cup his balls. Coughing, he turned his head aside from the shower fixture, but he knew better than to speak. She slid her soapy fingers along the hardening shaft of his penis and he was instantly and fully erect in her hand.

“Dear God,” he moaned. She did not chastise him for his speech now, but laughed instead, a pleasantly joyous sound. “Are you sure you want this?” he managed.

“Yes.”

He could feel her warm breath racing over the skin of his thigh. Unable to bear any more of her stroking, he grabbed her hand and



turned around, precariously balanced as he swung his leg over her head. Closing his fingers about her upper arms, he lifted her to her feet, forcing her to release him.

“If you want all of it, you’re going to have to stop doing that,” he advised quietly. She looked up at him from beneath her wet lashes and said nothing. The shower splashed over his shoulders and onto her face and breasts in glistening droplets, clinging to her hair, the tip of her nose, her mouth, poised to fall from her hard nipples. Holding her still with his hands, he bent and extended his tongue to capture first one drop, then the other, before they slid free. Despite his gentle restraint of her, she thrust her breasts forward toward his mouth, wanting more.

Delighted by her reaction, he slid his tongue along the roundness of each breast, collecting water droplets as he went and avoiding the ridge of blue-black bruises, returning to her nipples again and again when the water accumulated there, licking one and then the other, divesting them of the trembling beads of fluid. He could hear her breathing, quick and shallow above his head, and knew she was watching him through slitted lids. Impossible as it seemed, his arousal increased tenfold. Whatever happened, he could not let her touch him again. He felt like a skyrocket ready to burst into a thousand shimmering sparks.

Cupping a breast in his open palm, he lifted it, holding that part of her body for a long moment as he toyed with her nipple with the ball of his thumb, glancing up to view the flow of ecstatic response across her features. He bit her then, ever so carefully, tugging on the nipple with his teeth as he slid the tip of his tongue over the tightened flesh. Her

fingers pushed into his hair and she made a noise that was nearly his undoing.

Releasing his hold on her arm, he grabbed her hip, pulling her near, then dropped to his knees before her. She became still, her whole body one thrumming, vibrating string of an instrument waiting to be plucked. He was almost regretful of his next move, wanting to keep her for as long as possible at that perfect, fevered pitch, poised on the edge of climax. The evidence and extent of her arousal were plain to view as she waited breathlessly for him to take her into his mouth.

When he did, her knees gave out, and he lowered her to the shower floor trembling and crying out in ways that made him nearly insane, but he would not release her. She was his in this most intimate of ways, powerless and powerful, making him want to never come back from this place where he had brought her and to which she had conveyed him, soaring virtually out of control. He could not begin to imagine how many times she climaxed or if it was only once without end, and then she struggled upright and away from him, reaching to take him into her hand again.

Tipping his head back he drank water from the shower, then he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her down on top of him. He slid into her without a word and her mouth came down onto his own, open and demanding, and the noise that welled up from somewhere deep inside of her vibrated into him, into his head and his heart and every bone of his body. An answering call escaped him as he drove himself deep, feeling her muscles contract around him as she came again, and then he was lost. He was not certain when the last time was that he had made such a cry of transport in ejaculation, or if he ever

had. It did not matter. He came as hard as she did, breathless, heart pounding, all thought of any other kind driven from his mind.

\* \* \* \*

Perry rose slowly from the shower floor, fully sated and moved, oddly, to tears. Ethan looked at her questioningly and she smiled at him, stepping into the lukewarm flow from the showerhead to bathe. From a seated position on the opposite side of the double-wide stall he watched her, one arm across his raised knee, feeling content.

“I’ll bet your hungry now,” he said.

“I am, at that,” she answered.

“I’ll cook, then,” he told her as he stood. “How do you like your omelettes?”

“What are my choices?” she asked, turning off the water once he had completed his ablutions. He brushed the beaded water from his skin with an angled hand. Perry slipped her fingers into the hair on his chest, where the water still stood like diamonds against the short, dark strands. He raised her hand to his lips, kissing the backs of her fingers softly.

“Cheese or no cheese, I guess,” he said against her knuckles. “I haven’t much else to offer. I really do need to get to the store.”

“Ah yes,” she agreed. “I don’t suppose you were anticipating a house guest, were you?”

“Not one like you, at any rate,” he said. She warmed beneath his fond and somewhat libidinous gaze.

Reaching out of the stall Ethan grabbed a towel from the rack and proceeded to dry her, despite her protests. She ceased her objections, accepting his affectionate attention. When he was finished, he kissed her lightly on the tip of the nose.

“We really shouldn’t do that again,” he whispered.

Disconcerted, Perry frowned at him.

“Without a condom,” he explained.

“Oh.” Feeling somewhat chastened, Perry picked up her discarded clothing from the floor and got dressed. She was aware of his eyes on her.

“I’ve always been careful about that,” he went on in a gentle, even tone. “In fact, I can safely say that I’ve not had sex without one since I’ve been widowed. I know you don’t want to hear this, and I’m not going to start talking about any other women in my life—there really haven’t been that many, by the way,” he added. “But it’s a precaution that should be taken in this day and age.”

“I understand.” This was a reasonable conversation to be having, she knew, and she was grateful for the sensitive way in which he was approaching the subject, but she felt slightly—well, cheapened by it. She wondered why he could not have waited until the afterglow had faded.

“If it makes you feel better at all,” she stated, “despite the fact that Jack and I drifted apart long before we actually admitted it and divorced, he was not the type to cheat. What I mean is, he was the last man I was with and likely safe.” She turned to look at him. “That was nearly three years ago. I don’t think you have to worry about me.”

He paused with his shirt over his head, then slowly pulled it down, tucking the hem into his pants. Hooking his hand around the back of her neck he drew her closer, pressing his lips to the arch of her eyebrow.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. And, to be honest, I wasn’t really thinking about the transmission of anything unsavory or deadly. Not with you. I was thinking more of the possibility of getting you pregnant. After all, I have no idea if you’re on the pill. It’s not something we’ve discussed.”

Perry paused in the act of scrubbing her forehead back and forth against the side of his throat. “Crap,” she murmured. “I’m not.”

She felt a minute tensing of the muscles in his arm, swiftly flown. “We’ll just have to be careful, then, won’t we?” he said in dismissal, then took her hand and dragged her off to the kitchen for the promised omelette.

Splitting a microwave-baked potato, several pieces of toast slathered with strawberry preserves and a pair of omelettes with cheese, Perry ate across from Ethan at the kitchen island beneath the glare of the overhead light, barely subdued by the frosted glass of the fixture. Nevertheless, to her at least the meal felt absurdly romantic and if it

tasted like anything less than the best gastronomic feast, Perry was not inclined to notice. Every so often, she would find herself overcome with a rush of warm heady memory followed quickly by a sort of humbling stillness in which she would look across at Ethan and think, thank you.

Whom or what she was thanking she wasn't sure, but she was beginning to recognize the staggering options of chance and the designations of fate. For example, if Ethan had opted to return to his office when she was not available for her appointment, who knows what might have happened to her there in the creek. For that alone she would ever be grateful, never mind all that he was doing for her now to help her. And what if circumstances had otherwise spun them into different circles so that they did not meet? He seemed so much a part of her life even now, as if they had never really not known each other, that such an alternative was hard to fathom.

“Are you alright?”

Wordlessly Perry nodded. She was feeling a little wistful, oddly a little sad, and more than a little bit in love. She didn't say so.

“Dessert?” Ethan asked, clearing the dishes.

“What did you have in mind?”

At her tone, he glanced back over his shoulder. He grinned and her stomach rolled. His smile had done that to her from the very first time she had witnessed it. She had a feeling it always would.

“Up to you,” he drawled.

Perry pressed her lips together, but was unable to keep the smile from forming. She arched her eyebrows at him.

“Now?” he asked.

“Up to you,” she said.

He laughed, a rich and earthy sound, and slipped the plates and utensils into the sink without haste, running water over them briefly. Then he turned and walked back across the floor. Once again she was struck by the way he moved, confidently and with unconscious grace like an animal in the wild, a wolf or a feral cat. She lifted her head. He placed his hand, palm open, on her throat, his thumb pressed lightly beneath her jaw. His mouth was warm, kissing her so deeply that she felt herself disintegrate into a puddle of liquid flesh and bones.

The phone rang. They both turned to look at the instrument of disruption in dismay. Ethan dipped to press his lips to her forehead.

“I really should answer this,” he said.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to do it,” Perry queried sweetly, her voice only a little unsteady, “to deter another of your lady friends?”

He made a face at her. Striding over to the phone, he lifted it from the wall.

“Ethan Taylor,” he said.

Watching him, his lean, muscled height, the magnetism of his stance,

Perry made a conscious effort to draw her body back into solid form. After listening for several seconds he glanced back at her, then away. Perry sat up straighter. She lifted her hands and placed them side-by-side on the countertop.

“What do you think that means, John?”

Ethan continued to listen and Perry continued to watch him, attempting to read his response to whatever was being said on the other end of the line in the way he was holding himself. But she couldn't. She realized he was a man very much in command of himself and used to giving little of himself away. The fact that he had repeatedly let down his guard over the past two days to consciously supply her with small portions of who he was, was suddenly very dear.

“We were just going to discuss that, yes,” he said. “I agree. It's very important. No. No. Good night then. We'll see you first thing in the morning.”

Pushing the button to disconnect the call, Ethan stared for several seconds at the phone in his hand, then slowly placed it in the cradle. He returned to the island, taking up the seat he had vacated.

“We need to talk about what John and I found out this evening,” he stated in a manner that set off a small alarm inside of her.

“From the lascivious Ms. Barnes?” she asked, teasing.

“I wouldn't call her that,” he said.

“Oh no? You must not have taken a good look at the photo of the two



of you in the newspaper,” she taunted without rancor.

Ethan’s brows lowered over his dark eyes. He made a face of wry amusement. “Just when did you see this photo?”

“On-line, yesterday,” she confessed. “I was trying to find out a bit more about you. Sorry.”

He waved that aside as insignificant. “If you must know, she made certain assumptions about me that I did not encourage. May I go on?”

“Please,” said Perry with the hint of a smile despite her growing unease.

“You remember the Bible I took from the attic?”

Perry nodded. She released her breath as quietly as possible.

“John has it now,” Ethan said, “looking through it. The name in it was Edward Nicholson. Sound familiar to you at all?”

Thinking hard, Perry had to admit that it did, although she was not certain why.

Across from her Ethan looked at her oddly. “He was the minister at the local church.”

“When?” she responded. “And which one?”

“Apparently from 1809 to 1829. As to where, in that little church you own.”

“The little church *I* own?” she echoed. “What are you talking about?”

Ethan rose from his seat and went to take two small bowls from the cabinet. Opening the freezer, he removed a half-gallon of ice cream. He glanced over at her.

“Chocolate syrup again tonight?” he asked.

Apparently his idea of dessert had altered since the call. Perry nodded, thanking him.

“Well,” he said, leaning forward to scoop ice cream into each bowl, “that tiny stuccoed church the State is supposed to maintain in preservation. Where your property crosses over to the other side of the narrow highway.”

Perry was, quite frankly, baffled and said as much. “Crosses over to the other side of the highway? I was unaware of that. You’re talking about that abandoned church that’s about the size of your living room? With the overgrown graveyard.”

“That would be the one,” he said, carrying both bowls to the granite island and setting one before her. “You had no idea?”

“None. How is that possible?” she asked, lifting a spoonful of chocolate ice cream into her mouth and talking around it. “Aren’t churches owned by, well, the church entity?”

As she ate, Ethan recounted for her his conversation with Maggie Barnes regarding some type of stipulation. Perry frowned.

“The estate lawyer has been hounding me to come to his office to discuss some further details of my inheritance. Maybe this is one of them.”

“Very likely,” Ethan concurred. “Perhaps you should meet with him sooner rather than later. I could go with you, if you’d like.”

Perry gave his offer a momentary consideration. “I would like,” she said.

He rolled ice cream around inside his closed mouth, letting it melt. Perry could see the smile in his eyes at her response. He seemed pleased to have his offer of assistance accepted so readily.

“No one mentioned any clause to you regarding that portion of the property, maybe when you were younger and your grandparents were still alive?” he asked, after swallowing.

“No.”

He studied her a moment, a frown between his brows. “You really have been distracted by this whole situation, haven’t you?”

Knowing precisely to what situation he was referring, she blushed. “I suppose I have,” she said.

“You’ve let a lot go by since moving back into your grandmother’s house that needed taking care of. I can’t even begin to imagine where your head has been due to all of this. Honestly, I’m not sure I would still be sane at this point.”

“Maybe I’m not,” she retorted, arching her brows.

“Oh, you’re sane, sweetheart,” he declared. “Because if you aren’t, then neither am I.”

“Two crazies together?” she said.

His lips curved in a close smile. “I don’t know. Are we?”

“What? Crazy?”

“No. Together.”

Perry brought her hand up to her face, curving her fingers against her mouth as she gazed back at him. Maybe it was just the aftermath of sex that was making her want to cry; or maybe it was something else altogether.

“I think so,” she said, her voice muffled by the position of her hand. “I really do think so.”

He smiled again, an out-and-out grin, and shook his head, pushing her dish of neglected dessert closer to her. “Finish this,” he said. “I hate to see good ice cream go to waste.”

Blinking away the small amount of moisture that had managed to evade the power of her will, Perry picked up her spoon. She sniffed, once and very discreetly she thought, but apparently he noticed. His hand came across the island and squeezed hers, lingering a moment before he pushed back his chair and stood. Taking his nearly empty dish to the sink, he ran the water to make it hot and prepared to wash.

Perry joined him there, leaning her lower back against the counter as she finished the contents of her bowl. At her left a dishwasher was in evidence, its front matching the cherry cabinets to either side. She wondered if he ever used it.

“So,” she said, “what about this minister?”

“Edward Nicholson?” said Ethan, glancing aside at her. “Lily was Edward’s wife.”

Perry felt a shock of impact at his words. “Lily? Our Lily?” she faltered, staggered by the news and how quickly it had been uncovered. She had held minimal hope of any breakthrough whatsoever.

“Yes, our Lily,” Ethan said, both his expression and his tone altering slightly. “And Edward’s Lily. And apparently the Lily of his younger brother, as well.”

Closing her eyes, Perry inhaled deeply. She actually felt ill, sick to her stomach. Lily and Edward. The unfaithful wife, the cuckolded husband. And the younger brother, the spirit who had chosen her, Perry, to replace his long lost lover? Was that what Ethan was saying? Remembering the captivating hours of lust and longing felt like a betrayal now. She didn’t want to think about how *he* had made her feel.

She really did feel quite sick.

Setting her dish on the counter, Perry went into the living room. She sat on the couch, bending her head over her knees with her arms

clutched tight across her abdomen. She saw the shadow of Ethan's passing on the rug and then he sat down beside her. His hand lowered across the back of her neck, still heated and moist from his round at the sink.

"Is this a classic scenario?" she murmured without lifting her head. "Is there something about a triangle that ghost hunters, or whatever you call yourselves, have come to expect?"

She heard his breath escape him, through his nose. "There is nothing expected when it comes to the supernatural," he said above her. "The only 'classic scenario' as you say is that of untimely death and unfinished business."

Perry nodded, or she tried to. The awkwardness of her position precluded completion of the gesture. She sat up. In the darkness of his eyes she witnessed an emotion he was struggling to master.

"And in this case?" she asked.

A muscle snaked in his jaw. "I don't know. It would seem that Lily and Daniel departed the area, leaving Edward to face his congregation and his own phantoms."

"Daniel? That's his name?"

"Yes."

There it was again, a dilation of the pupil, an alteration of focus, and then he returned his attention to her. His hand on her nape continued to move comfortingly, but she was not certain he was even aware of

what his appendage was doing.

“Why is he there? Why does he haunt the creek? What would cause a spirit to return to such a place? And is it Edward in the house, then? Edward who once hurt and shamed his wife as punishment for her transgression, and bids you do the same to me. How is that possible? I don’t understand.”

She could hear the edge of frenzy in her voice. Ethan’s hand stilled, then slowly his fingers curled to tighten about the back of her neck. A shudder coursed her spine, a remembered fear, recalling his attempt to overpower her, to restrain her while he thrust himself into a place she had given him no permission to go; his voice mingling with that of another, damning her, calling her a whore...

Abruptly he pulled her to him, up against his shoulder, and his other arm went around her waist. He crushed his mouth to the crown of her head and held it there. His voice, when he spoke, was harsh with regret.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “God, I’m so sorry that happened. I wish I could erase it, from my memory as well as yours. Whatever else Edward Nicholson was, he was a cruel man. If he ever truly loved his wife he would not have done such a thing to her, no matter her actions. Whether he viewed her behavior as mortal sin or hurtful or just a deadly wound to his ego, such a vindictive act was not justified.”

At his words the tension in her body relaxed, her unconscious preparation to fight or flee vanishing. She pressed her forehead against the side of his throat. Her hand strayed to his hip, the ends of her

fingers slipping into the pocket of his jeans.

“Am I ever going to be able to go home?” she asked.

“For my part, you could stay here until the moon turns blue, but I know you want to be back there. It is your home after all, and we’re working on it, John and I. You’ll go home again, I promise you.”

Perry smiled against his neck and kissed him where his pulse beat steady and strong. Two days. She had only known this man two days, and she already recognized just how powerful his promises could be.

## Chapter 15

With the volume muted, Ethan sat with his back against the headboard watching the eleven o’clock news, observing the silent gesticulation of the reporter and trying to decipher the gist of what she was saying. He only wanted to see the weather at this point, but that wouldn’t come until nearly the end of the program. In the meantime, he was engaged in a little lip-reading and his own interpretation of the video being presented.

The storm moving up the coast was worrying him. Although he normally kept works in progress tarped and secure against the elements, extra precautions had been taken against the promised onslaught of high wind and torrential rains. What he needed right now was the most accurate timetable available in order to get his crew out before the weather turned bad to finish the work begun. Mentally he was calculating man-hours and which of his men would be available



when he heard a sound beside him and glanced down.

Perry had offered to sleep on the couch. Ethan had a feeling she was a little uncertain about what was happening between them. He had, however, refused her offer and she was lying curled up against him in his bed, her head on his arm heavy in slumber. The sheet was pulled up over her bare shoulders, her hair a tangled mass down her back.

Carefully easing his arm from beneath her, Ethan pulled her closer. She murmured in her sleep but did not wake. He studied the curve of her lashes over her cheekbone. The bruise was a dark, mottled blue, like the blush on a concord grape. Although she made no complaint he knew it had to be hurting her. Clenching his teeth in memory of its cause, he let his breath out slowly. She slept on, undisturbed by his scrutiny.

Tomorrow, he reflected, John would delve into his subconscious in search of any possible reason Ethan would have had to turn on Perry in that manner. Both of them knew there was none, but the more he'd thought about it the more Ethan wanted to be absolutely certain. For his own sake as well as Perry's.

Closing his eyes, Ethan leaned his head back against the headboard. Initially, after Cindy's death, he'd had a problem with repressed anger. It had affected everything he did, including his ability to grieve. But he had worked through that. There was no reason to expect he would be acting on such anger now. Not in that way. The occasional outburst, maybe, but not such a deliberate and cruel act designed to humiliate and inflict pain. Mutual consent was one thing, force quite another. The abusive berating that had spewed from his mouth still shocked

him in recall as well, but he was also thankful for it. If not for the words that were so alien to him, his doubts regarding the impetus behind his actions would have taken a firmer hold.

Lily. Lily Madson. He could only speculate at what dark emotion the woman had felt, married to one man and wanting another, and that man her husband's young brother. And yet, there had to have been something of joy in the mix, hadn't there? Why would she have risked her husband's wrath, being ostracized by her community, condemnation, if there had been no happiness for her? Still, it baffled him. It must have been an extremely difficult situation for all of them.

Lifting his lids, he glanced down again at Perry's sleeping form. He knew, of course, how he felt, the snaking of unnecessary jealousy through his blood, when he thought about the interaction between Perry and the entity in the creek. How much worse would it have been to be Edward Nicholson, a man of God, respected in his community, cuckolded by his wife and learning that the man with whom she was sleeping outside of their marriage was his own brother. Maybe it was the unconscious empathy that had made Edward, if indeed it was Edward, choose him as a conduit for anger, which should, by rights, have died along with the man himself nearly one hundred and seventy years earlier.

Releasing another pent-up breath, Ethan shifted his hips on the mattress to ease the stiffness of too long spent in one position. As if sensing his discomfort Perry moved too, resting her head and one hand on his thigh without waking. Ethan stared at her profile in repose. Her lips were parted slightly as she breathed, slightly irregularly as if she might be waking or dreaming. The pearly edge of her teeth reflected

the flickering illumination of the television screen. Extending a single digit he lightly traced the curve of her mouth, then he pulled the sheet back up around her naked shoulders, settling his hand into the bountiful red-brown curls tumbling along her back.

She could, he mused in reverie, lips twisting in recall, do some sweetly entertaining things to him with her mouth. Not the least of which was the way she kissed him. Remembering the gentle insistence of her mouth stirred him to an immediate erection, lifting the sheet not far from her head. Willing himself to think of something else, he returned his focus to the screen where there appeared to be some discussion regarding shady dealings by certain members of the mayor's office in the city. He had heard enough about the investigation over the past several days to have a fairly good idea what was being said, but he stared at the television nevertheless, in the hope of distraction.

When she touched him, he leapt against her hand and she giggled like a sleepy child.

“Down boy. That was an accident,” she murmured.

“You’re awake,” he said, unnecessarily.

“I am now,” she answered, sweeping the hair back from her brow as she sat up with the sheet tucked under her arms. She scooted back to sit next to him, her spine against the headboard. Mutely he handed her a pillow, which she tucked between her back and the wood.

“What are we watching?” she asked, blinking at a fast-moving commercial.

He smiled at the ‘we.’ “The news,” he said.

“Huh.”

She sounded slightly disoriented. He watched her tip her head to one side. “What time is it?”

“About 11:15, I think.”

She nodded and blinked, sinking down a little onto the bed. With a stifled yawn, she slanted a glance at him.

“Can’t sleep?”

“Waiting for the weather.”

Nodding again, she stretched beneath the sheet. He observed the arch of her body from beneath his lashes, suppressing a grin at the noise of pleasure she made, loosening her muscles. Then she reached for his tee shirt, which he had tossed at some point earlier onto the bottom of the bed. She sat up and slipped the garment over her head, smoothing it down over her naked body.

“I need to use the bathroom,” she explained simply.

As she got out of the bed she tugged his shirt to cover her bottom. The hem fell to mid-thigh when she stood up. He liked the way she looked with his black tee shirt hanging loosely around her. Still, it was odd—yet endearing—to find her so shy that she felt the need to cover up before heading into the hallway, when her inhibitions were limited to nil in the pursuit of passion.

He watched her exit the room, then turned up the volume slightly to hear the rest of the broadcast. The weather was coming next.

“Damn it,” he said, when the report was completed.

“What’s wrong?”

Perry crossed beyond the foot of the bed to climb back in beside him. She did not remove his shirt. Instead, she raised the neckline to her face and breathed, then looked at him with a smile.

“They’re moving up the start time for that storm they’ve been tracking. Sometime after midday tomorrow, rather than Monday morning. Looks like some areas might get four inches of rain or more. I was hoping for a little more time. I need to take further precautions to keep water out of a couple of jobs we’re in the middle of. The rest are already prepped. I guess I’ll have to get a jump on it first thing in the morning.”

Out of the corner of his eye he saw her bite her lip. “The creek will rise,” she said. “I’ll need to be home.”

He was startled. “Surely it won’t flood all the way to the house?”

“No, of course not. I’ve never seen the water come to the house, but it has run into the barn. And the basement does get wet, just from ground seepage. I’ll need to make sure the sump pumps are operating.”

“Perry, I’m thinking,” he suggested mildly, “I could send one of the men over to take care of that, with a generator in case you lose the

electric again.”

“I could meet him there, I guess.”

“Perry, I’d rather you didn’t go there at all.”

“I know.”

Ethan was silent. Perry pulled her legs up and shoved them under the sheet.

“I have to go home sometime,” she said.

The weather report concluded, Ethan turned off the television, setting the remote down on the bedside table. He switched the lamp on low.

“I’m worried about your safety,” he said, turning to her. “It seems to me that the situation has gotten progressively worse and there’s no guarantee that you won’t come to harm in some fashion.”

“I realize that. Yet, Ethan, it is my home, the only one I’ve got. I have a responsibility that I can’t ignore.”

“I’m not asking you to ignore any kind of responsibility, but it seems to me you’d be better off staying away until—”

“Until what?” she interrupted, touching the back of his hand with her fingertips. “I have to admit that I’m a little frightened by the progression of events at my house.”

“A little frightened?”

“Alright, a lot frightened, although it doesn’t feel nearly as hair-raising

when I'm here with you, I assure you. However, there's no guarantee, is there, that you will find anything that might help me. Eventually, I will need to learn to deal with the situation on whatever terms are necessary, or ... well, I don't want to think that far ahead. That's not what I'm suggesting for tomorrow, at any rate. I only need to go home to take care of a few things. And I don't plan to do it alone, if you really will send someone to give me a hand."

Ethan relaxed. "Someone, or me, depending on how the morning goes."

"Fair enough," agreed Perry, "but I'll pay the fellow you send out."

"No," he said. "You won't."

He saw her brows arch, briefly taken aback by his retort.

"What I mean is, it's not necessary," he explained. "Someone's got to be out and about anyway, and it'll only take a few extra minutes to stop by your place. I'll already be paying for their time."

"Alright," she said, after a moment.

He sat up, twisting to look her in the eye.

"Look, Perry, if I'm overstepping some boundary, I'm sorry. I'm not intending insult or implying that you owe me anything in return. If I want to help you, and if it means taking advantage of the good graces of one of my men—who, by the way, will be making double-time from me due to working on a Sunday anyway—then let me do it, would you? Please. We're not strangers. You're not my client, I'm not

your contractor, or at least, that's not all I am. I hope." He smiled. "I care about you and what is going on between us means a lot to me. I tend to take care of the people who are important to me."

Her auburn lashes lifted as her pale eyes locked onto his in the dimly lit room. Raising his hand he pushed the hair back from her brow, smoothing it over the crown of her head.

"I care about you, too," she said. "What's begun here between us is absolutely wonderful ... but we don't really know where we're headed, do we?"

"Does anyone ever really know, in the beginning?"

"I suppose not," she conceded. "Even so, I can't hang out in a place that's been yours, unfettered by the intrusion of the likes of me, without some fixed time limit. Don't you think it might start to cause some sort of friction between us?"

No, he wanted to say, I don't. But he remained silent.

"We don't know each other that well," she added.

"Not yet," he agreed.

"Heck, the sex alone could wear us both out."

He chuckled despite the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. "What's wrong with that?"

Her lips curved, but she did not smile. "Nothing's wrong with that."



And I know you're afraid for me. I'm afraid for me, too, but I can't let whatever is happening run me out of my own house indefinitely. I—I feel lost, to be honest. I don't know why. Maybe because I can't go back and I can't really go forward. Situations have developed that I didn't expect a handful of days ago, a week ago, a few months ago. Some of them are pretty bizarre, as you must admit," she said, looking at him intently again. "And one of them is probably the best thing to happen to me in a good long time."

The discomfort in his gut dissipated at her statement. "I feel the same way," he said.

Her pale irises seemed darker, the gray more like storm clouds and shielded partially from his view by the thick curl of her lashes. He took her hand in his own and kissed the ridge of her knuckles.

"You're not going to cry, are you?" he said. "Because you'll get me started, too."

"You are a romantic."

"I've never denied it."

"Well, don't worry, I won't spill a single tear," she declared. "God only knows," she said with a wave of her hand and a small, humorless laugh, "I'm not going to be responsible for that, as well."

He frowned. "As well as what?"

"Since you've met me," she stated, "you can't tell me that you haven't been troubled by the things occurring between us. Not this," she

elaborated, indicating the bed, “but what takes place at the house. I see something in your eyes that was not there when we first met.”

“Don’t assume that’s a bad thing,” he countered softly.

“You know what I mean.”

Ethan shook his head emphatically. “You’re not responsible for any of that, Perry. And whatever is, we will hopefully soon uncover.”

She sighed deeply, lifting the soft fabric of his shirt with her inhalation. “Thank you for that, as well,” she said.

“And John. We mustn’t forget his assistance.”

“Of course not.”

He pulled her forward, kissing the top of her head, breathing in the scent of her hair. Where his fingers lay, against her neck, he could feel the steady beat of her pulse.

“Will you tell me something?” she asked against his shirt.

“What’s that?”

For the space of several seconds she said nothing. Ethan waited.

“How,” she asked at last, “did she die?”

“We don’t know how Lily died. Hopefully of a ripe and happy old age, but as she took off with her lover there’s no local record of the date of her death or anything else.”

“Not Lily,” said Perry quietly, pulling away to look up at him. “Your wife.”

He couldn't have been more startled if she had reached out and struck him squarely in the chest. He ran his fingers through his hair, hooking his hand behind his neck. Only then did he note the shift of her glance across the room. Turning his head he followed the path of her gaze.

“Oh.”

He remembered clearly the evening that picture had been taken. It had been one of her good days, one of the best, he supposed, that she had known in many. Her mood had been even, her smile not bright, but calm, contented. They had been at the Jersey shore that week and he had just won a stuffed dog for her, throwing balls at stacked bottles on a shelf. He would have wagered the game was fixed, until he actually took them down with one of his pitches. The prize she had chosen had been the most God-awful shade of pink, like the stuff you put on horses to keep away the flies. But she had loved it, and he had taken her picture with the animal in her arms. After the photographs from their vacation had been developed she had pulled that one out and had it framed for him.

*I'll always remember this day*, she had said to him each time she looked at it, more often than he could number. Obsessively, he realized now. He sighed.

“She killed herself, Perry. Took her own life while I was at work one day.”

\* \* \* \*

For an entire minute and a half Perry said nothing. Her instinct to express sympathy seemed shallow and unnecessary. Compassion went without saying. No one received news like that and said, so what? What she knew he didn't need was her pity or her curiosity. She was sorry she had asked, for with receipt of the answer her question appeared entirely inappropriate. Even so, she raised her gaze to the photo on the top of the chest of drawers, the one to which her attention had been drawn on and off all day. She knew it was not the same as having the picture of a former spouse as a reminder of better times. That would have been enough to send her racing for a motel or some other place to stay. But the fact that he kept his departed wife's photograph, not in a place of prominence but in the intimate setting of his bedroom, had made her curious and a little uneasy. It had made her think that she could never hope to live up to the memories he possessed. Now that she knew the manner of Cindy's death that somewhat natural uncertainty had exploded into tiny fragments, leaving her baffled and at a loss.

As for Ethan, she could only guess what thoughts were running through his head, what roosting emotions she had just shaken from their place of repose. Something in the way he had answered her led her to understand that this was a subject of which he seldom spoke. Given half a chance and an instrument sufficient to the task, she would have sewn her lips shut rather than dredge up past pain for him.

"I shouldn't have asked. It's not my place nor any of my business."

"It is your business," Ethan stated in a firm undertone. "It is very

much your business. I brought the matter up, after all, in the attic. I wanted you to know. You have every right to follow through.”

Perry slipped her hand into his. After an abbreviated hesitation his fingers closed tightly around her own. He turned his head to gaze at the photograph, his dark hair in disarray. His long lashes were lowered so that she couldn't see his eyes. There was no mistaking, however, the tautness in his jaw. After a moment she saw him swallow and then he turned back to her. His expression was guarded.

“Cindy and I were married shortly after graduation from college,” he said. She nodded, having assumed as much from the photo she had viewed on-line. Young, they had been terribly young, the two of them, and had looked to be very much in love.

“She told me straight out, shortly after we started dating, that she suffered from bi-polar disorder. It didn't seem reason enough to discontinue seeing her. Not as far as I was concerned. She was on medication and doing well. Even had she not been, in time I cared enough about her that I would never have turned my back on her.”

“Of course not,” said Perry. “You loved her.”

To Perry, it was a simple statement of fact. Yet the sudden leap of the muscle in his jaw told its own story. His grip on her hand tightened fractionally, then relaxed.

“This is difficult,” he whispered.

Perry knew that. She said nothing.

“We—we had decided not to have children. There’s a genetic predisposition to the disorder. I suppose I should have taken the responsibility of reducing the risk, but I didn’t. She got pregnant. And when she did, knowing what the medication might do to the fetus, she stopped taking it.”

Lowering her mouth to his shoulder, Perry lightly touched her lips to the place where bone curved into the muscle of his upper arm. He pulled her against him, talking softly above her head.

“She miscarried. It was nothing she had done or not done, but she blamed herself. The lack of medication didn’t help her frame of mind. When we finally got her back on the medication the routine that had been so helpful to her was canted and she never really recovered. When she was feeling good she would stop taking the meds without telling me, although it would not be long before I realized she was off. It was a constant battle. More than once she became suicidal, but we always managed to head her off and get her back on track.”

“We?”

“Me,” he clarified. “Her family. Mine. Understand that not everyone who is bi-polar suffers to such a degree, but those who do are at constant risk. In the end, the depressive stage of the disorder was so deep that she succumbed to it. And somehow, that time I hadn’t seen it coming.”

He lapsed into silence with a negligible shake of his head. As to how Cindy had taken her life, what pain and guilt and anger his discovery of her death, perhaps even of her body, might have caused him, he

said nothing. Listening to the staggered cadence of his respiration, Perry imagined he had endured all those emotions and more, living constantly haunted by the memory of her passing, the existence they had shared before, his own since. Like the effect of water constantly dripping onto stone she suspected that part of him had worn hollow because of it, a permanent indentation in which memory pooled in waiting for the next drop to stir the calm surface to animation.

“Ethan,” she said, “no matter what happens between us I want you to remember that you can always come to me if you need to. If nothing else, you’ve shown me true friendship and I won’t forget that.”

He shifted on the mattress, setting her a little away from him. His dark eyes held hers.

“You sound as if you’ve made a decision. Have I scared you off?”

“Not even close,” she told him.

He smiled, a mere curve of his mouth that was both sad and hopeful, and then he kissed her lips with gentle pressure. “Tomorrow promises to be a long day. I think we should get some sleep.”

Perry agreed, drawing him down into her arms after he turned off the light. He lay with his head on her breast, one arm draped across her waist. She ran her fingers through his hair several times, smoothing the dark locks back from his brow, then she nestled her hand against the side of his neck and closed her eyes, her other arm behind her head on the pillow.

She had awakened an old and deeply rooted pain for him, and she

regretted it. Had it been at all possible to go back and withdraw her question, she would have, for his sake. Yet for her own she was relieved to have an answer. To be happy about the answer was not a requirement.

As she lay there, his breathing evened out, his head heavy on her breast. Perry's fingers unconsciously stroked the short, curling hairs at the nape of his neck. His skin was warm, the tips of her fingers fitting perfectly into the hollow at the base of his skull, moving in the same direction again and again in gentle, abbreviated strokes. She wanted to tell him that she was sorry, even though she had told herself a short time ago that it was unnecessary, that her empathy went without saying. She opened her eyes to look at him, her lips parting to speak, even if he did not hear her.

In the darkness of the room she saw the upturned shadow of his lashes, the minute reflection in the peat-colored iris of his eyes. She jumped a little at finding him awake and watchful.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"You didn't wake me," he said, a breath of sound, no more.

Her tone had not been one of apology but sympathy. If he chose to misinterpret her words, so be it. He understood her sentiment, despite his response. She could tell by the way his hand had tightened momentarily on her waist.

"May I ask you something now?"

She looked at him in the darkness, at the black, unruly mass of his hair



curling into the black fabric on her breast, at the furrow of his brow as he lifted his eyes to her face, the fine high arch of his cheekbones, the faint hollow curving into his shaded jaw.

“Sure,” she said, hoping he had not noted her hesitation. She was, unaccountably, fearful of his unworded question.

“You asked me not so very long ago if I believed in ghosts,” he said. “You made that query on blind faith and trust, of a man you barely knew. You could have asked that question of anyone, anywhere, and received a totally different response than that which you received from me. And there’s a reason for that. A reason you asked it of a man who would not turn away from you for asking.”

“Perhaps I sensed you would understand.”

“Perhaps,” he said. “But you trusted me, Perry, as if you already knew me. Does it seem strange to you that our relationship has advanced so quickly?”

“No,” she said after an interval of thought. “Not at all.”

She saw the gleam of his teeth in the flash of a grin, quickly flown. “If you hadn’t moved back into your grandmother’s house, hadn’t called me for refurbishment, if I had turned and walked away from the house when you did not answer the door instead of letting my curiosity get the better of me, what do you think would be happening right now? To you, and to me?”

He had asked several questions, all skirting the heart of the matter, she

felt, but spiraling nearer. She wondered if she could steer him clear. “Well,” she drawled, “you would probably be doing just what you did tonight. Watched the news, turned off the television, gone to sleep. Well, not to sleep, obviously. Perhaps there would have been someone else in your bed.”

“Not likely.”

“No?”

“No. I haven’t been inclined toward female company of late. Maybe I was waiting.”

“For me?”

“Maybe.”

“Fate?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

She held her breath.

“But what about you?” he asked.

“What do you mean?” She knew exactly what he meant.

“What would you have been doing?”

She shook her head, turning away.

“Part of the reason I don’t want you going home is your safety,” he

said. “My concerns for your well-being are sound. But another part of me is, well, to be honest, jealous as hell. And I’m not a jealous type of guy. Never have been before, anyway. Yet I can’t help but wonder, when I think about what you told me, if you can fully turn away from ... from what it, he, offered.”

“That’s not fair,” Perry whispered.

“I know it’s not,” he said.

Perry bit her upper lip, then ran her tongue over her front teeth. She exhaled. “What is your question, then, Ethan? Ask it. Do you want to know if I would run to a creature of air and God only knows what else for gratification instead of you? Is that it?”

“Not exactly,” he said.

“What, then?”

“I know that you trust me,” he said, rising up onto his elbow. “What I want to know is if you trust *us*. If you trust and believe in us, in what has begun here, enough to allow me to see you through anything that might arise out of this investigation, this haunting of your life?”

“Oh, Ethan,” Perry breathed, her voice catching, “the responsibility is not yours.”

“I’m aware of that,” he said. “I’m asking it to be, nonetheless.”

Perry’s mouth twisted, her lips drawing in as she fought back tears. She thought of Cindy, of Ethan’s loss and his self-blame. “Ethan, you

have nothing to make up for.”

“Maybe not,” he said. “Maybe yes. It doesn’t matter. This request has nothing to do with my past, Perry, but it has everything to do with our future.”

*Our future.* She liked the sound of that. She said as much.

“Me, too,” he told her.

“Even so, you might not be able to make this right for me,” she said.

“I’m damned well going to try, though,” he answered.

She stared at him through the gloom. “Then I guess I have to let you.”

He smiled, rolling on top of her, holding himself balanced above her on his elbows. He kissed her on the tip of her nose. She lifted her arms, sliding them behind his bare back. He was lean and strongly built and she could feel the tension in his muscles as he held himself aloft. She pulled him close.

“Oh,” she taunted, wriggling her hips, “I see the thought of rescuing me excites you.”

“No,” he corrected her, “just the thought of you, nothing more.”

“I thought you wanted to go to sleep.”

“Soon,” he murmured. He was still smiling. “I want something first.”

“And what would that be?” Feeling him erect against her inner thigh,

she pushed against him suggestively.

“I want you to kiss me.”

“Kiss you where?”

“On the mouth, for starters,” he said.

Taking his face in her hands, she opened her mouth over his, kissing him slowly, allowing her tongue to slide leisurely against his own. Kissing him was a great pleasure and she reveled in it, taking her time, ignoring the fact that one of his hands had left his side and was performing a delicate task all its own. After a moment, she pulled away, breathing hard.

“I think you should stop that,” she said.

“Uh-huh,” he grunted and went right on. “Kiss me here,” he said, managing to lift his other hand to point to the edge of his jaw. She did. “And here,” touching the side of his throat. She felt his pulse beating rapidly beneath her tongue. A low moan, barely audible, escaped him. His skin was warm and tasted slightly salty. All the while, he stroked her with tender restraint between her legs, knowing full well he was driving her crazy.

“Stop that.”

“No,” he said.

“I’ll bite you,” she warned.

“Please do,” he answered.

She did, right where her mouth had been, on the taut length of his throat. She felt him tremble, a small shiver, and the temperature of her skin went up another degree. She wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him close and kissing him deeply.

“Come on inside,” she whispered into the cavity of his mouth.

“Not yet.”

“Then stop *doing* that,” she cried.

“Not yet,” he said, his tone unaltered. But she could feel the change in his respiration, the quickening of it, the rapid inhalation and expulsion, as if he was barely under control. She ran her hands over his chest, caressing the tiny bud of each nipple beneath her palms. Leaning toward him, she bent her head and slid her tongue over the right one. This time when he moaned it would have been audible to his neighbors, if he had any nearby. Laughing, Perry did it again, then slowly closed her teeth around his flesh. He swore, not in pain by any means, and pulled away, grabbing both of her hands and holding them on the pillow above her head. She could feel the heat of his skin through his shirt she wore. The places where flesh met flesh were fully charged.

“I made you stop, now, didn’t I?”

“Yes,” he agreed, almost conversationally, “you did.”

He had a wicked gleam in his eye, visible even in the dark. Perry

grinned at him.

“Would you like me to do it again?”

“I would love you to do it again, but let’s not just now, alright?”

Perry pushed against him. “Have you something else in mind then? Somewhere else you’d like me to kiss you, perhaps?”

Groaning, he pushed both of her hands into one of his own, then reached down to disentangle his legs from the sheet. “You don’t play fair,” he whispered against her neck. Perry turned her face against his, against the warmth of his breath, of his skin. She pressed her mouth to his temple. He rose up on his knees, pulling the shirt she wore to her waist. Perry attempted to lower her arms, to pull the shirt over her head, but he would not relinquish his grasp on her hands.

“Don’t you want it off?” she asked.

“Nope.”

Once again his hand slipped between her legs, stroking her slowly. Her mouth opened, her breath captured in her lungs.

“I thought you wanted to sleep,” she managed to say again.

“I do,” he said quietly. “In a minute. Lie still.”

Lie still. Not likely. Not while he was displaying such skillful handling of her body. She tipped her hips to meet his fingers and he paused. With a small sound of protest, she subsided. Beneath his shirt

her nipples were taut. He bent his head to her until she could feel his moist breath through the fabric but he made no move to take them into his mouth. He seemed totally fascinated with what he was doing to her, his attention dedicated to the moist place between her legs.

“Ethan—”

“Shh.”

Slowly, slowly, each stroke light and exquisitely perfect as he brought her closer and closer to climax, and then he would pause, his hand hovering near enough above her that she could feel its heat. Otherwise he did not move, never letting go of her hands. It was the most wonderful torture and he knew it. She could tell by his expression, sleepy-eyed but aroused, self-satisfied, that he knew it. Each time she neared orgasm she could hear his own respiration quicken. Oh yes, he knew exactly what he was doing, prolonging pleasure for the both of them.

“Ethan, let me go,” she whispered, dragging her arms down. His restraint of her wrists was gentle but unrelenting.

“We’ll see.”

She wondered if he was trying to forget the past, root himself in the present by this simple, remarkably sensual act before he finally gave into sleep. She didn’t know for certain, and she didn’t really care. She spread her legs further for him and he made a low noise in his throat.

“Your responsiveness stuns me. I don’t think I’ll ever get enough.”



“Let’s hope not,” she whispered, arching toward him and feeling the weight of his hand on her thigh pushing her back toward the mattress. Then he began again.

“I don’t know how much more of this I can take,” she said.

“Shh. When you’re ready, don’t let me stop you.”

“Liar,” she ground out as he slipped his fingers inside of her and she shot up off the bed. He quickly removed himself from the heated interior of her body, pushing her down again.

“Not yet,” he said.

“Well, suppose I just roll over and go to sleep then? We’ll call it quits for the night.”

He chuckled. “I think not,” he stated.

Turning his head he nuzzled her nipple through the shirt, keeping his hand for the moment to himself. She felt the moist tip of his tongue over taut flesh in repetitive, titillating strokes. The muscles of her abdomen tightened in response.

“Ethan—”

“Shh.”

“Ethan—”

“Shh.”

“God, Ethan...”

His teeth closed around her as his hand moved with unerring aim to the soaked and swollen bud of flesh between her legs. He knew better than to stop, releasing her hands and pushing his other arm behind her hips to hold her as he fondled her through climax, his erection firm against the curve of her calf. Perry cried out, reaching to take him in her hand. He apparently needed no other incentive, permitting Perry her own brand of torture as he groaned and called her name.

After, Perry collapsed against the pillow, tugging the shirt free of her hair. Ethan lay down beside her. He pulled her into his arms, yanking the sheet up over both of them.

“Now,” he said, “we sleep.”

And they did, dropping into a deep and sated slumber. When Perry awoke the sun was up and Ethan was gone, a hastily scrawled note on the nightstand where she would find it as soon as she opened her eyes. Reading the playful, gentle words Ethan had written, Perry couldn't help but smile.

## Chapter 16

*How many pieces of fine linen paper had he covered in his carefully practiced script only to crumple them and toss them away before the words came right? He could not recall. He could not even recall the words now. But it had only taken the one sheet of fancy paper to damn them both. Just the one.*

*Why had she been so neglectful with it? So careless as to leave the note that was his heart made plain where his brother might find it? Where Edward went daily as was his wont and preference, to prepare his sermon for the Sunday to come? She knew. It seemed to him her negligence had been a deliberate act, so that Edward would learn the truth without the need for telling it. But there was a difference between words flown from the lips and those that were wrought in ink, like Scripture. You couldn't take them back, couldn't say they were misunderstood.*

*Rising from his knees he moved toward the fall of water. As always he could see the moon, nearly round, pristine and pale. He stretched out his hand toward the steady, unmoving orb, opening his palm, curving his fingers, remembering the feel of her breasts, the weight of them, the scent of her skin, the texture of it. He recalled the curl of his tongue around her nipples, reminding himself that sometime before the spring to come her milk would flow, giving sustenance to the child that was yet such a tiny being in her womb.*

*Until he had found the note, Edward had believed the child to be his own.*

*Or so Lily had said. He wondered, sometimes, at the sequence of events. Clarity oftentimes eluded him and he could not distinguish the events of one day from those of the last, nor the turn of his thoughts from his actions. Lily was the only true memory he had, steadfast and constant. She belonged to him. Her body was his from which to partake, like a feast to which he returned again and again.*

*Remembering the taste of her, he closed his eyes. How exacting a price he paid for his pleasure. How dear and precise a price. He wondered if Lily knew. She must, of course, for a woman could sense even if she had no true knowledge. Yet she said nothing of it. Ever.*

*Lily wept each time in passion. That alone was enough. He made her happy, where Edward did not, where Edward failed again and again. He could not remember what it was that had made him question her, doubt her, accuse her of faithlessness. It was nothing, nothing. Just a momentary lapse.*

*Yet, where was she? Where was his Lily? How long did she expect him to wait for her here?*

*Forever. She wanted forever. That was what she had told him.*

*Yet when he had offered her forever, she had refused him.*

## Chapter 17

As a normal precaution, Ethan tarped all jobs in process, but with the weather that was coming further steps were necessary to prevent water damage in open areas of construction. He had been of two minds about leaving Perry without waking her to tell her exactly where he was going, but as she wasn't inclined to stir when he climbed out of bed, he wasn't disposed to disturb her unnecessarily. He had left a note for her by the bed, then phoned John to ask him to come by earlier than anticipated with the truck so he could take care of business. John was seated in the cab of the truck now, making phone calls. Glancing over

his shoulder, Ethan concluded by the animation his friend was displaying that John was talking either to his wife or eldest daughter.

Smiling, Ethan turned back to his work. John Gooden was a dedicated family man and whenever he was away from them he missed them terribly. Ethan wondered in a fleeting ‘what if’ just what sort of a parent he might have been, had the opportunity presented itself. With a mental shrug he dismissed the thought. He was not likely to find out anytime soon, if ever at this stage in his life.

Ethan waved his hand to the man on the rooftop. Tom, usually his foreman, was also the employee most willing to put in time on a Sunday and had arrived at the shop a few minutes after he and John had, looking a little rough around the edges. Ethan knew he had woken him up when he called and, as a single man with a propensity for spending one or two Saturdays a month with his buddies at the local bar, he was probably not feeling on top of the world. Still, he was the best climber Ethan had, agile and with uncanny balance. At Ethan’s signal he let loose the blue expanse of tarp, covering the one already in place with an overage of several feet to either side. Ethan scaled the ladder to secure the ends in place. Tom made his way down the roof, distributing sandbags along the edges. He paused after setting the last in place, eyeing Ethan critically. Ethan squinted up at him against the swiftly vanishing midmorning sun.

“Same one?” Tom asked.

“What?”

“Same woman who kept you up the other night?”

Ethan's brows arched. "You know, you're pretty damn nosy for a man who's expecting me to pay his salary come Friday." Still, memory made his skin warm.

His friend laughed, taking the threat in stride. "Anyone I know?"

Ethan opened his mouth to make a hasty and discouraging reply, but instead he shook his head. "Not yet," he said amiably. Although not the closest friend, Ethan had known Tom for nearly five years. They did not socialize outside of work except on specific occasion. Nevertheless, the fellow deserved the consideration of the relationship they had forged. "One day soon I'll introduce you, I expect."

The full evidence of how uncharacteristic his reply was could be read in the expression on Tom's face. To Tom's credit, he quickly masked his surprise with a smile.

"Thank you," he replied. "I'd like that."

Tom's artless response affected Ethan more than he cared to admit. He realized in that moment just how much he had been distancing himself from those to which he was or should have been closest. Tugging on the edge of the tarp, he reflected on all the invitations refused, the lapsing exchanges of communication, and was suddenly and intensely grateful to John in the truck below, who had not turned away despite Ethan's neglect. As for Tom, who could be so pleased by the promise of an introduction to a part of Ethan's existence that was not work-related, the man had stood by him through a great deal more than the ups and downs of his profession. If he had given it any thought at all, he would have recognized that the man's past remarks were not those

of someone seeking a blow-by-blow description of any sexual escapade, just an offer in friendship that was more than superficially bounded.

Ethan looked up again, raising a hand to shield his eyes. “Maybe this week sometime we might all go out to dinner. You did mention you were dating someone, didn’t you?”

Tom looked even more shocked than he had a minute ago. “It’s pretty casual at this point, but sure. That would be great.”

Ethan nodded. “We’ll figure out where tomorrow or the next day. Once we see what this weather brings.”

“Sure,” Tom answered above him. “There’s an Italian place just opened up. Supposed to have good food.”

“That could be it, then,” Ethan said. It occurred to him as he spoke that he had no idea if Perry ate Italian. Most people did, though, making it a pretty safe bet.

“Hey, Taylor,” Tom called as he was making his way back up the roof, “your buddy in the truck is trying to get your attention.”

Turning his head, Ethan saw John hastening toward him from the pickup. He was holding Ethan’s phone in his hand, waving it back and forth.

“It’s Perry,” John shouted up. “She got your note when she woke up.”

“Perry?” This from Tom. Ethan glanced up at him to find the man’s

face creasing into a grin that didn't want to stop.

“Yes,” Ethan said.

“Not the woman whose house you went to look over just a couple of days ago?”

“Yes,” Ethan repeated. “The same.”

Tom was silent for a full three seconds, and then he whistled, a low, single tone.

“Quick work, boss.”

“Shut up and get off the roof,” Ethan growled, suppressing a laugh, then clambered down the ladder to take the phone from John.

“Perry, hi.” Although he would have liked to temper the fondness in his voice he realized how futile the attempt would be, and unnecessary. “How are you this morning?”

Smiling, John moved away.

“Fine,” she answered, “and you?” If she had been a cat, she would have been purring. He could see her face against his closed lids. When he opened his eyes he found that John was watching him with a peculiar expression, very nearly smug. Then his friend turned and continued on his way to the truck.

“More than fine,” he answered. “I’m finishing up here and then John and I are heading to your house to check the instruments.”



“I’ll meet you there. If you don’t mind, would you bring that generator? I just watched another report on the weather. They act like we’re in for the storm of the century before this day is over. Could be hype, but I’d rather be safe than sorry.”

Ethan hesitated. He really didn’t want her there. To him, his expectation was reasonable, but it was Perry’s home and he knew how strongly she felt about not being run out of it. Still, he could not quite banish the images of the past several days in that house from his mind: not of the episode in the creek, nor in the attic, nor of the mist creeping off the porch toward him. He hadn’t even told Perry about that last. John had advised him not to, just yet. With his penchant for understatement, he had warned that Perry might become alarmed. Still, Ethan would use the information if he had to, to convince her of her risk.

“Ethan?” she interrupted his contemplation. “How about in an hour? Does that give you enough time to finish what you’re doing?”

Blowing out his breath with a puff of his cheeks, he said, “Give me an hour and a half. Don’t go over any earlier than that, alright? I don’t want you to be alone.”

In an hour’s time he and John would have finished their discussion of the findings in Edward Nicholson’s Bible and also would have had the opportunity to arrive at the house well ahead of Perry to check things over. If he perceived any danger he would have her out of there so fast her adorable little head would be spinning.

“Alright,” she said.

“Promise me.”

“Alright,” she said once more. “I promise. I’ll give you an hour or so and then start driving over. Fair enough?”

“Fair enough,” he said and she hung up.

Ethan cast a quick eye around the property to make certain they’d left nothing lying out of place, then he called to Tom.

“That’s it, Tom! Time to get your hung-over ass back home and tucked into bed!”

Collapsing the ladder, he went to the truck and secured it in place. As Tom had not yet come around from behind the barn with the second one, Ethan went to help him. Rounding the corner he stopped short, skidding in the loose dirt, then darted forward. He had his phone out in preparation of dialing for emergency help before he reached Tom’s body lying on the ground. Fingers probing for the pulse beneath the man’s jaw, Ethan felt an unutterable surge of relief when he saw Tom’s eyelids flutter open.

“Ouch,” he said, moving his head.

Shoving the phone back into its holder, Ethan slipped his arm behind Tom’s shoulder, but he hesitated to move him until the man had given a more informative accounting of his pain. “What happened? Does anything feel broken?”

“Mmm. My ankle, maybe,” Tom answered, lifting his leg from the

ground. He seemed to be concentrating on moving his foot, but it remained immobile as he grimaced in pain.

Ethan eyed the man's head through his tumbled brown hair. His cap was lying at a short distance, dirty and crushed. He saw no blood, but that didn't mean anything. "Did you hit your head?"

Reaching up, Tom touched his scalp just above the hairline. "Yeah, I think so. I'm not sure though. It hurts like a son of a bitch." His eyes closed again, then opened slowly.

"Your head or your ankle?"

"Both."

Ethan swore beneath his breath. Tom swore aloud.

"What happened?" Ethan repeated his question, glancing up the ladder for any sign of malfunction.

"You told me to get off the damn roof," Tom muttered, trying to roll over to sit up. Ethan helped him, frowning at his words.

"I told you—"

"I'm joking. I stepped wrong on the ladder, about half way down. I've never done that before." He laughed, then groaned as he clutched his side. "Shit. I think I broke a rib, too."

"Oh, hell," said Ethan.

Tom was struggling to rise, using the ladder as support. Ethan hoisted

him upright. The man's body slumped against him, avoiding the placement of weight on his injured ankle.

"We're off to the hospital," said Ethan, half-carrying him toward the front of the building. "I'll come back for the ladder later. Just take it slow."

Tom eyed him sidelong, pain making his skin pallid. "This puts a damper on your plans with the little lady," he commented through clenched teeth.

Ethan smiled grimly. "I wouldn't be calling her 'the little lady' to her face if I were you. She's liable to throw you off a roof herself."

Tom laughed, then groaned again, finishing up for good measure with a string of barely intelligible profanity. Seeing them, John hastened back to assist, taking Tom's other side. Once they were in the truck and on their way to the nearest emergency facility, Ethan asked John to give Perry a call to explain the situation.

"Tell her I'll ring her when we're ready to leave the hospital."

A minute later Ethan heard John leaving a message. John glanced at him around Tom's head with a puzzled expression.

"Don't worry about it," said Ethan. "She's probably in the shower or just not answering the phone. My pal Maggie phoned last night. Perry might be avoiding picking up another call."

John chuckled in appreciation. Ethan turned his attention back to the road. A few minutes later he asked John to call again. In wordless

understanding of his concern, John complied. There was no answer. Ethan chewed the inside of his cheek. He would give it a little while longer in case she was actually showering, and then try again himself from the hospital, just to make certain he spoke to her before she made plans to leave.

\* \* \* \*

Wrapped in a towel and leaving a trail of watery footprints across the floor, Perry hurried to the ringing phone, pausing to check the number on caller id. Not recognizing the digits as belonging to Ethan she hesitated to pick it up, expecting it might be a repeat of the type of call received from Maggie Barnes. As she faltered the phone ceased ringing. A few seconds later the light on the base began to blink, indicating a message on voice mail. Well, she mused, turning away, hopefully it wasn't for her, because she hadn't a clue of the password to access the telephone system.

Unconcerned, she went to get dressed and dry her hair. More than once her gaze drifted across the room to the picture of Ethan's wife on the chest of drawers. She went closer, tilting her head to study the image, extending a finger to slide the frame back and to the side a little for a view unobstructed by the reflection of the window.

She remembered the picture on the Web site, and how plainly happy they both had seemed. The woman in this photo was different, somehow, haunted perhaps by the loss of her child and the decision to have no more, as well as the depression inherent to the particular extreme of her condition. Knowing Cindy Taylor's story made Perry feel almost guilty about her own place in Ethan's life these past few

days.

Tapping the glass with her fingernail, Perry returned the photo carefully to the exact space it had been, aligning the edge along the mark in a barely discernible layer of dust. She recognized that the peculiar circumstances that had thrown them together—for more hours straight than most people just met would spend in each other's company over the course of several weeks—had something to do with the forward momentum of their relationship, hers and Ethan's. She wondered if they would burn themselves out too quickly, like a fire to which an accelerant has been added, or if a return to normalcy would toll the bell to end a premature and frantic rush of shared communication and, well, lust.

She hoped not. No matter how guilty she was feeling standing before the photograph of Ethan's deceased wife, she really wanted what they had to last.

Glancing at the clock on the bedside table, Perry picked up her mother's diary from the place where Ethan had placed it the night before. Even though she'd brought all her files with the intention of meeting her deadline, she found that the situation was seriously impairing her ability to concentrate on the tedium of this particular job. She had called and arranged for an extension the prior afternoon when Ethan had left her to return to her house. As it had been granted, she found herself with ample opportunity to peruse the journal.

Grabbing a glass of orange juice, Perry carried both out onto the back deck, sitting in one of the Adirondack chairs. A weak sun shone like a white disc through the thickening cloud cover. The wind blew fitfully,

tugging at her hair and her clothes and intermittently chill, harbinger of the approaching storm. She could smell the rain in the air.

She felt an urgency to be home, almost into her bones, to be home and to be taking care of those things for which she was responsible instead of lounging in Ethan's house as if she hadn't a care in the world. But she had promised Ethan and therefore she would wait.

For some time now she had been taking care of herself, of her own needs, her own obligations. To have someone else looking after her was an unfamiliar experience, although not unpleasant. Her skin warmed at the thought of Ethan's safeguarding her, his tender care, his amorous attentions. She smiled, leaning her head against the back of the chair.

He had hinted at fate, at destiny, and sometimes it seemed that their relationship was, indeed, influenced by something outside of themselves. Their paths could have just as easily never crossed, instead of becoming intertwined on numerous levels and just, it might seem, when they needed each other most. Her mind skittered nervously around the connection with the ghostly residents of her home and their direct link to her past and to her present, and then she veered away. She did not want to consider the possibility that shades of past deeds could in some way influence what she and Ethan had now.

Still, as she let her eyes rove over Ethan's pretty landscaping, she found herself returning again and again to that possibility. Deliberately she steered her mind clear, turning instead to the book beneath her hands.

“Hi, Mom,” she said as she opened the diary. Goodness, how long had it been since she had said those words? Not since her mother was alive, naturally. Yet her utterance in that moment seemed intimate and familiar and as if no time had passed at all.

Biting her lip, Perry flicked through the pages, trying to locate the place where she had left off before dozing. She knew she had only read a dozen or so pages when those darned sleep-aids had kicked in. Their effect had certainly not been lasting. She had woken up without any problem once Ethan had come home.

Flipping back and forth, Perry noted that the pages were crammed to capacity with her mother’s schoolgirl script, sometime even warranting notations in the margins. Tipping her head to glance at a few of the comments inserted there, Perry found herself laughing out loud at a humor exhibited that was not so very different from what her own had been as she entered her teenage years. God, she wished she’d had the opportunity to know her mother better, as an adult, woman-to-woman. Given what she was reading here, Perry knew they had a lot more in common than she’d had the ability to recognize growing up.

Saddened by that realization, Perry picked a page about a third of the way through the volume to start again where a phrase had caught her eye. There was no date at the top, but by the tone she was certain this entry had been made a couple of years after the last she had read. It appeared that her mother had plans to attend a party and had, instead, been blessed by menstruation, her very first experience with it. A little older, it seemed, than Perry had been when she started hers, but she remembered the chaos it had created for a time in her own life. Perry



smiled in sympathy at the statements agonizing over the cancellation of her plans, the mess she hadn't expected, the cramps, the realization that she was now "a woman" and what that might mean. Despite her youth, Sheila Madison displayed an insightfulness and a gentle humor about it all that amazed Perry in retrospect. She had known this side of her mother, yes, but she had never appreciated it as much as she did in this moment, knowing that she could not recapture what was lost.

Leafing ahead, Perry read about a date and a party, a new teacher at school and the fresh cut of her mother's hair. Then, impulsively, she turned to the back, flipping in reverse to the last entry.

Reading for a few minutes about a date and a party, a new teacher at school and the fresh cut of her mother's hair, Perry leafed a few pages further.

*I've missed my second period, it read. I know I'm pregnant. I don't know what to do.*

And that was it. The remainder of the diary was blank. Perry stared at the yellowed pages with their faded blue lines and felt a hole open up in her, a gaping void. She wanted to weep. Tears welled up in her eyes, but did not fall. Those three simple sentences seemed to tear at her soul, embodying all the fear and uncertainty her mother must have felt at the realization that her life was forever changed by the poor choice she had made. There was nothing further to indicate how she might have vacillated between options, or if she ever had. Or even if she had, from the very beginning, determined to have the child and raise it alone. Well, she hadn't been alone. Nana had been very good about that. And her mother had always told Perry she had wanted her,

that there had never been any doubt in her mind. Somehow, as an adult Perry had come to believe that a teenage girl in her mother's position could not be that strong. What she had just read gave no real indication of anything different.

Just a scared young girl who had chosen to write no further, as if the sharing of her thoughts within the privacy of her journal was the pastime of a child, and at the realization of the passing away of childhood she had turned away from that comfort. Or, Perry told herself firmly, she might be viewing the whole thing through her own insecurities. Sheila Madison might, indeed, have decided from the exact moment she set her pen to this page to make that entry that she would never look back in regret, that she would accept responsibility and get on with her life.

In that, mother and daughter were very different. There had been a time during Perry's marriage to Jack when he had expressed a desire to start a family. Although his expression in that direction had been short-lived it had, for a time, been earnest. It was Perry who had held back, Perry who had been afraid. Of what, she did not know. Perhaps that Jack would leave her, as her mother had been left. Or merely of the responsibility of caring for another living being when she was not so very certain about the caring for herself. Other women, new mothers themselves, told her they had possessed the same doubts and worries, but once their children were in their lives adjustments came naturally, although not always easily.

In the end, she supposed it was just as well. Jack was God-knew-where with his new wife and Perry was not so very certain he would have given the time a child would need, even of a long-distance

parent, for stability. But suddenly, and perhaps unreasonably, she wished she had possessed her mother's courage. She wanted a child of her own, to know that joy and that heartache, to share moments like the ones she had shared with her own parent, to form that bond that was so very special.

Well, she thought, dashing away the few tears that had broken free of her lashes to roll down her cheeks, that was rather selfish of her, wasn't it? A child was not a pet. You didn't want one just for the experience, the companionship, the love ... did you? Or was that part of it, and so much more besides?

Picking up the glass of juice, she drank it down in several great gulps. Wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, she decided to page back in the diary to before that final entry. If there was nothing after that revelation, at least she might determine where her mother's head had been beforehand.

Randomly picking a page she started to read, trailing her finger for a few seconds along the curling, slanting script. And then she froze.

Tearing her gaze from the page, she looked up and around the well-tended lawn of Ethan's backyard, then down again at the words marked by the tip of her finger. A chill crept up her spine.

*I've never seen the ghost of the minister's wife. I don't believe she exists. It's just a story the girls tell, to scare each other at slumber parties. But I've seen him. I've seen him, right by the waterfall down at the creek. None of the other girls can say the same. They don't know who he might be. I don't think they believe me anymore than I*

*believe them. But it's true. I saw him just the other day again. He moves like a bit of sunlight and you can't really see him until he's in the shadows behind the rocks. But then he looks very sad, looks right through me actually, and disappears. The last time I thought I saw his hand lift. I got a real funny feeling when I saw that, way down low, like I was going to be sick. It made me feel like I should run away, more than just seeing him did. I don't think I'm going back there again.*

Keeping her finger in that page, Perry flicked ahead in cautious haste, careful of the brittle paper, anxiously searching for another mention. The entry immediately following had been several days later, the one after that seemed to have been written after the passage of several weeks. The next three were consecutive days, with no mention of a ghost by the creek. Could her mother have so easily dismissed him? How old was she when she wrote this?

And then she found another reference at a point that seemed to be several months after her mother had philosophized over the advent of her first menstrual cycle.

*I have decided that I am very brave. I saw him again today and called to him, daring him to speak to me. He will not. I don't know why. I suppose ghosts can't talk, but I had hoped he would. He must be very lonely. I thought I could help him, maybe send him back where he belongs.*

There was more along that vein, childish romantic theories about unrequited love and a lost soul wandering in search of the woman who had scorned him. There was even a passage where her mother had

wondered about the possibility of kissing the “spirit of the waterfall.” Reading this, Perry felt a vicious, irrational surge of possessiveness, of jealousy, and then cold realization rushed in to cool her veins.

Perry was not the only one *he* had contacted. Although from what she could see there had been no physical intimacy between her mother and the entity to whom she, herself, had submitted so willingly. Perhaps the difference was age or sexual experience, or maybe it was something more subtle, maybe even more sinister, which enabled him to manufacture the bond between himself and Perry. After all, the spirit of Daniel Nicholson—if indeed it was he—had actually spoken to Perry even when she was still quite young.

Leaning closer over the journal Perry read on. The next ten pages were filled with the recounting of Sheila Madison’s excursions to the creek bank, to the falls themselves, sometimes viewing the spirit, sometimes not. It was quite apparent that her mother’s fascination with the creature was growing, despite a lack of any form of reciprocation. It was as if, so the diary spoke, the spirit took no notice of her at all.

What, then, was the difference between Perry and her mother that had enabled the boundary to be transcended? In the turning of the next page, Perry understood. Shock numbed her hands and made her skin feel more readily the wind’s shifting chill.

*Mama says I am not to go back there. It is forbidden. She said that she should have told me sooner to stay away, and would have, had she known that was where I wandered. I asked her why the spirit haunted that place. I asked her what it wanted. And she said, very matter-of-fact, as if she had only been waiting for me to ask, “He does not want*

*you, child. He waits for another. You must be grateful for that and never go there to seek him again."*

Perry slumped against the back of the chair, closing the volume slowly.

Nana had known. God, Nana had known. How?

She recalled again her mother and grandmother's warnings about the creek, intimating that she was in danger of drowning. Why had they not informed her straight out? Because, she told herself, they knew she would not have believed them and would have been more determined than ever to go the place that had drawn her irresistibly from her earliest memories, and even more so as she neared puberty. When she had been frightened off, when *he* had told her to leave him, that she was just a child, she had begun to spend her time close to the house and had ceased her wandering. They must have been watching her without her knowing, realizing without words from her that they could relax their vigil. Yes, it seemed to her in retrospect that the stern admonishments had ceased at that point in time, or shortly thereafter.

Why had they not all just moved away? And what? Perry argued with herself. Left it for the next resident to do battle? No, no, that wasn't it at all.

Perry opened the diary again. This time it fell without restriction to the last page she had been reading.

*He does not want you, child. He waits for another.*

He waits for another.

And he had found her.

Discovering that her hands were shaking, Perry stuffed them under her arms and tipped her head against the chair back, closing her eyes.

If Nana had known the danger, why had she left the house to her, ensuring her return? Or had Nana in her elder years pushed the knowledge aside in the same manner Perry once had, until the episode had ceased for her to be anything more than a figment of a vibrant imagination? And even that, in time, forgotten.

Breathing as if she had been running, Perry leaped up from her seat on the deck, snatching up the diary in one hand and her empty glass in the other. Hurrying into the house, she deposited the glass in the sink, then went straight for her shoes. According to the clock she had been a good deal longer than she had meant to be, lost in the reading of words that were unnerving her far more than any of her encounters with young Daniel's restless shade. She needed to show the diary to John Gooden and Ethan and let them tell her what she should think of it. She was too disturbed by the disclosure of this particular family secret to know what to think on her own.

Grabbing her keys and her purse, she tucked the diary into the latter, then headed out the door, locking it behind her. As she started across the gravel drive she heard the phone ring. There was nothing she could do about that, even had she been of a mind to answer. She had no key to get back inside.

## Chapter 18

A discordant note, like an alarm bell, went off in Perry's head when she pulled into her driveway and did not see Ethan's truck. She actually felt a sheen of sweat break out beneath her palms on the steering wheel. Rechecking the time on the dashboard clock, she silently berated herself for having hastened out of his house without calling him first. It occurred to her as well that the last call might have been him, to tell her of a delay.

"One of these days I need to get a cell phone," she said aloud, as if hearing her own voice might steel her nerves to get out of the car.

No such luck. The act only served to make her feel more alone.

How could the two people she loved most in the world keep such a secret from her? At the very least it was uncharacteristic, and at the worst, dangerous. Perhaps they had not wanted to frighten her or confuse her or burden her unduly with the image of a ghost that haunted the women in the house. And why only the women? Well, that was obvious, she decided. But he had sought fulfillment only with her.

He waits for another...

The knowledge that she had apparently filled that niche was not comforting.

Perry leaned her chin on her fingers clutched tightly around the ridge of the wheel. She stared at the porch, the walls, the windows with their familiar curtains behind the glass. With the marked decrease of the sun



each pane looked like pewter. The facade should have been dear to her, but it suddenly seemed like the house of a stranger. Her feelings for it were canted by the revelation of the diary as well as the growing menace of the situation within the aged walls. She stared for a long time, then she forced the fingers of her left hand to release the wheel and move to the door.

“It’s my house,” she said, hooking two fingers around the car door handle.

“It is *my* house,” she said again, and pushed the car door open with her knee.

Standing in the graveled drive, Perry took several deep long breaths. Her eyes lifted toward the roofline and the attic concealed beneath row after staggered row of hand-hewn slate. In the pages of the diary recently read there had been no mention of anything unusual in the house itself. Perhaps Edward Nicholson had been disinclined to make his presence known until the entity that seemed likely to be his younger brother had become more active, until Perry had begun her strange descent to meet him in that nebulous place of altered reality.

No, corrected Perry, that was not accurate. To be perfectly candid Edward had not made an appearance until Ethan had made his.

Shaken by the realization, she told herself she should also be reassured by it. Perhaps it meant that with Ethan away from the house she could enter without worry. Determined, she marched toward the side yard and the kitchen door, then paused halfway across the lawn.

If that was true, then she would not have experienced the episode in the woods, awakening as if she had been walking in her sleep to find herself on the trail and something, the mist, the sensation of animosity, blocking the path leading back.

Remembering the struggle under the water and Ethan's timely rescue, Perry eyed the kitchen window askance. She moved a few steps away, further into the grass. A wooden swing, at least as old as she was, hung from a pair of thick ropes tied to a branch overhead in the tree at her back and she sat down on it, feeling an unnerving trembling in her knees. Frowning at the house, she bent her arms around the ropes, clasping her hands together in front of her. Pushing back once with her heels, Perry set the swing into tenuous motion, the soles of her shoes dragging over the earth. She stared at the plastered stone of the wall as if she could bore a hole through to uncover the secret life of the occupants within.

She couldn't help but wonder if there was some purpose here that was beyond her ability to fathom. Recent events seemed too interconnected to be coincidental. And that was no comfort either.

Perry continued to stare at the house where she had intermittently spent so much of her life, the house her grandmother had left solely in her possession, ghosts and all. The swing creaked to a halt. Perry stood.

"This *is* my house," she said, for the third time. Maybe that was the point, after all. Maybe someone with the connection to the spirit and the will to reclaim what was hers by right was all that was needed to end this conflict.

Striding once more across the lawn, Perry went to the kitchen door, extending her hand with the key at the ready. Slowly her hand lowered to her side.

The door was open.

Although only parted a few inches, she could see the floor littered with natural debris, curled browned leaves and brittle grass, as if a blast of wind had blown the detritus of her untended lawn inside. Yet, if that was the case, would not the door still be standing wide? Frowning, Perry shoved the edge of wood with a single digit, effortlessly pushing the door inward on its hinges. At a rush of sound she jumped, an involuntary cry parting her lips, and then a bird flew past her head, taking wing to the sky and freedom. Recovering, Perry glanced at the jamb. She could see no sign of forced entry. She would have felt better if she had.

Stepping over the threshold, Perry planted both feet side by side just inside the doorway. Silently she looked around the kitchen. More than just the debris strewn across the floor, the place had an air of abandonment. Despite the fact that all her possessions were still in place, she had an overwhelming sense that if she spoke her voice would echo as if off barren walls.

Spying a tendril of Virginia creeper wrapped around the base of the doorframe she thought of the story of Sleeping Beauty and how the castle was entranced in sleep for a hundred years, barricaded from the world by the rapid and expansive growth of green and living things. Yet with the exception of the vine at the door, nothing littering the

room was green or living, but as brown and dead as the remnants of summer's departure or the early arrival of an autumn still to come.

Reluctantly Perry crossed the floor, realizing at some point that she was treading as quietly as possible. She paused, listening, then moved on. Through the open access to the living room she could see John Gooden's equipment. It stood eerily silent. If it was in the process of recording anything she could not tell. Not all of the devices produced noise when in operation.

There were more leaves caught in the weave of the area rug and scattered across the sofa cushions. On the shelves, the tables, the mantel of the fireplace, everything that had been there when she left was still in place. Nothing had been touched. If someone had come to rob the place they had left everything behind, including the expensive infrared camera set to be triggered by the advent of the unusual. She had expected nothing less. She knew it was no burglar had entered here.

Without turning her head Perry reached for the phone on the wall. Holding it before her, where she could see it peripherally while not removing her gaze from the equipment in the living room, she depressed the buttons with the tip of her finger, dialing Ethan's cell phone. Each tone was astonishingly loud. She held the phone to her ear.

"Hello?" Briefly she closed her eyes at the sound of his voice, rich in timbre. Then she opened them wide in a swift reversal, staring into the living room. Dust motes disturbed by an unfelt current of air danced like silver flecks in the dim illumination of deepening gloom.

“Ethan, where are you?”

“At the hospital,” he said.

“The hospital?” She checked, startled. “Are you alright?”

“Yes, I tried to call you. Tom fell off the ladder. Where on earth are you?”

Perry drew a steadying breath. “Home,” she said. “I thought you would be here.”

There was a momentary silence, then “Shit,” he said, followed by a hasty apology to someone possibly standing near enough to have been offended. “What’s going on? I really don’t want you to be there alone.”

“I know you don’t. I’m sorry. I found something in my mother’s diary that I want to talk to you and John about. It’s important. But Ethan, the house is ... the house is a mess. There are dead leaves and dirt everywhere.” She scuffed a leaf with her foot, glancing down at it, then back up to the room before her.

“What do you mean?” Ethan sounded uneasy. As for Perry, her own voice channeled strangely into her ears, not echoing at all, but slightly muffled as if she were speaking through the heavy vapor of a cloud.

“Just that there’s all manner of debris obviously blown in from outside. The door was open, but nothing is really disturbed. Still, it doesn’t feel the same—”

“Get out.”

“What?”

“Get out of the house, Perry. Please.”

It took her a couple of seconds to realize she was nodding her accord in short, rapid movements. She felt incapable of speech. In the living room one of the monitors had jerked into life, a band of sharp movement evident on the paper spewing out the side like the register of an EEG machine or a lie detector.

“What is that?” Ethan’s voice cut in. “What is that noise? Is that the equipment?”

“There’s a paper readout showing some sort of activity,” Perry managed after a failed attempt. “Is it because I’m standing here?”

“No. God, no, Perry, it’s not!”

“I didn’t think so,” Perry breathed.

She didn’t hear what he said next as her attention was pulled away by the joists creaking in the attic far above. It was a steady, progressive sound, as if something heavy was rolling across the floor. Clutching the phone tightly in her hand, Perry unconsciously lowered the implement against her thigh and began to back away from the entrance to the living room. Inside her head she was visualizing someone or thing on the attic staircase making its way to the second floor. The hair on her arms stood up from her skin.

In the living room the dubious light dimmed further beneath what appeared to be a shroud of coalescing fog. At her feet the leaves began to tremble, flying in an abrupt onslaught of wind against her back. She wanted to turn, to view this wind coming to her through the open kitchen doorway, but her eyes were riveted to the place where she knew the staircase existed beyond her sight, the other side of the wall. Where the wind struck the gathering mist she could see fragments of the latter swirling, taking shape and breaking apart, then attempting vague shape again, all the while spinning not toward her, but toward the stairwell, as if the elements were being called to some focal point.

“Get out of my house,” she growled through clenched teeth. “Get out of my house!”

She was aware of Ethan calling to her through the phone, muffled against her pant leg. She had no time to spare for him, no energy to divert.

“Get out,” she said again, louder but breathless, as she was unable to fill her lungs with much needed air. “Get out of my—”

*Lily.*

The voice boomed through her skull, robbing her of the last of her oxygen and causing her to stumble to her knees. The phone clattered across the floor.

She couldn't understand how she had ever mistaken these tones for those of Daniel's, when this voice had been telling her the things it could make Ethan do at its bidding. The difference now was glaringly

and frighteningly clear. Perry struggled upright, clutching the counter for support. Her hair, loosened from the barrette at her nape, whipped into her eyes, causing them to tear. She pushed the hair away frantically with both hands, trying to clear her vision as she continued to back toward the doorway. Her heart was drumming so hard she could feel her shirt vibrating, feel the strangling pain of blood pumping at too swift a rate through her veins.

“Go away,” she ground out. “Get out. You don’t belong here.”

*Lily.*

“Shut up!” Spinning on her heel, Perry ran for the back door, thudding up against the wooden barrier as it closed painfully on her arm. She jerked free, scrabbling for the knob to yank the door wide.

*You’ll not leave me again.*

“The hell I won’t,” she spat, digging her nails into the edge of wood. The noise inside her head was deafening, a barrage of manifested rage and the fury of a wind that now had no source and a storm raging against the glass and stone walls all around as if it’s origin was not the caprice of nature, but the hatred and fear that was making her knees quake and her skin crawl. She fought to open the door, resisting the urge to turn and view whatever it was she could sense nearing her.

And then she felt the hand on her arm.

\* \* \* \*

Windshield wipers slapped hard, trying to clear the glass of the wind-



driven torrent. By the feel of the truck's handling, Ethan was fairly positive the truck's tires had not actually touched road surface for the past fifteen minutes, but he had no intention of slowing down. As long as the vehicle remained in his command the gas pedal would get no relief. And neither would John. On the opposite side of the cab he sat mutely, his expression grim, one hand clutching the edge of the seat for support, the other hooked through the handle on the doorframe.

Ethan's conversation with Perry had been cut off by what sounded like the phone hitting the floor. He had tried dialing back as he rushed John from the hospital after a hasty word to Tom, but to no avail. After his fifth attempt to get through, Ethan had phoned the police. Unable to give them a concrete reason for his concern, they had still offered to stop by the house at their earliest opportunity. With the state of the weather Ethan did not expect that opportunity to present itself anytime soon.

Even before they had reached the hospital's parking lot the rain had begun falling heavily, drenching them both to the skin. Now midday was as dark as a sunless evening, the sky split by flashes of vivid lightning, the resultant rumble of thunder vibrating along the truck body. Ethan had not bothered to speak since he began to drive and John made no attempts at discourse. Ethan's mood was obvious, his worry even more so. For the moment no further explanation was needed. John knew where they were headed.

"Tell me again that spirits cannot hurt the living," Ethan demanded abruptly, not taking his eyes from the roadway. Beside him John made no comment.

“There was some sort of read-out while we were speaking,” Ethan continued, although he knew he had spouted out that bit of information in their race across the lot. From the corner of his eye Ethan saw John nod. “The phone went dead after.”

“You said it sounded like she dropped it, didn’t you?” John reminded him.

“Yes.”

“Perhaps that’s all it was, then. Maybe she broke the phone. You won’t help her, Ethan, if you don’t ever make it there. I would suggest you slow down just a bit.”

With a powerful effort Ethan backed off the gas. Broken branches laden with slick green leaves littered the highway, waving madly in the wind. Given the saturation of the ground from all the recent storms, the runoff from the fields and the road itself was quickly filling the shallow drainage to either side, covering low lying areas clear across. John was right. He had to take care not to run them off the shoulder, because it was not likely they would regain the road without assistance.

He wished he possessed John’s conviction that nothing was taking place at the house to cause concern. Perhaps, had he been standing in a different pair of shoes, he would have been able to call to mind all of the case studies for reassurance. Instead he remembered the attic and how he had very nearly hurt Perry quite badly. He remembered dragging her from the creek and the bruises on her chest. He remembered her describing to him the things the spirit had told her,

reflections of the thoughts in his own mind, making them seem malevolent somehow.

“Try the number again, would you?”

“Of course,” answered John, dialing the number Ethan supplied. After a moment he shook his head. Ethan’s teeth came together, hard.

“We’re nearly there anyway,” he said, expecting to feel better hearing the words aloud.

He didn’t.

\* \* \* \*

Maneuvering along the driveway was nearly as laborious and treacherous as the road had been, years of wear having reduced the level of the unpaved surface so that it now lay completely under several inches of muddied water. The trees hung lower than when dry, scraping the cab of the truck. A sapling had fallen over, uprooted by the wash of soil away from its roots. After hesitating fractionally, Ethan drove right over it. Pulling up before the house he spotted Perry’s car through the rain. His stomach rolled. He had been hoping to find the graveled parking area empty and Perry gone from the house.

Jamming the truck in park, Ethan jumped out without troubling to turn off the engine. To him it was a prudent, maybe expeditious, move. If he had his way they would be leaving immediately.

He heard John exit behind him, then the splashing of the man’s feet as

he hastened to catch up, head ducked low against the pounding rain. Ethan made straight for the kitchen door. Remembering what Perry had said, he gave the lock and jamb a cursory visual inspection before grabbing the knob and turning it, then stepped over the threshold. He stopped short. John sidestepped him to avoid collision, pausing to look around with a frown as he pushed his thin and sodden blond hair back from his brow.

“What the devil happened here?”

Ethan didn't answer, taking in the disorder of the kitchen through narrowed, dark eyes. He turned away, heading for the living room.

“Perry! Perry!”

He left John to inspect the equipment, bounding up the steps to the second floor two at a time and calling Perry's name again. Throwing open closed doors he peered into every room in rapid succession, finding nothing. When he reached the base of the narrow attic stairs that door was already standing wide. He hesitated at the bottom, jaw tightening. His breath whistled through his nose. Then he raced up the staircase and into the dimly lit space beneath the roof. The sound of the rain was a deafening roar.

“Perry? Are you here?”

Hurrying across the attic, he glanced amidst the clutter of years of collection for any sign of her, then made his way slowly back again. He could not imagine she would come up here alone after the other day, but he had to be certain. As he searched he fought to regain his

composure, knowing he would do neither of them any good in his agitated state. Satisfied she was not in the attic, he headed to the stair head. He set his foot to the first step, his hand on the narrow rail. Below him, the door slammed shut.

The noise of it caused him to jerk back, away from the darkened well. Somewhere near his left hand he knew there was a light switch to the bare bulb that hung from the ceiling below. Without turning his head he felt along the roof joist for it, flicking the tab up.

The stairs were empty. Frowning, Ethan descended. Halfway down he looked at the ancient doorknob and saw it turn. Bracing himself, he hastened to the bottom of the stairs and pushed the door open, feeling the barrier strike something solid. On the other side John swore.

“Sorry,” Ethan apologized, stepping down into the hall. “You spooked me a little when you slammed that door.”

“I didn’t slam it,” John told him, rubbing his elbow. “A draft caught it when I was coming along the corridor. The kitchen door is open. The police are here.”

“Perfect timing,” drawled Ethan.

He met two officers in the kitchen, one of whom had been eyeing the equipment in the living room with patent speculation. The other was kicking at the debris on the floor as accumulated rainwater sluiced from his raincoat onto the linoleum. When Ethan entered he held out his hand.

“Officer Clark,” he said by way of introduction. “Are you the guy that

called?”

Ethan stepped forward. “I am,” he answered, giving the officer’s hand a brief shake. “Thanks for coming out. I’m sure you’ve got your hands full in this weather.”

“Not a problem,” responded the officer. “What happened here?” he asked, indicating the state of the room with a tilt of his chin. As he spoke, he pulled a slim notebook out of his pocket.

“I don’t know. It was like this when we got here. However, I think my friend—the woman who owns the place, Perry Madison,” he expounded, seeing that the officer was making notes, “found it in this condition as well. Nothing appears to be missing at first glance, but I wouldn’t be the one to know that for sure. I was speaking with Perry on the phone and she said that the place was littered with debris from outside. Shortly after, the phone went dead. It sounded like she dropped it first.”

The police officer nodded. “Is that the phone?” he asked, pointing with his pen.

Ethan turned, locating the kitchen phone in its cradle. He walked over to it, tilting his head to study the scuff on the shiny plastic. He could not tell if the damage was new.

“When she phoned me she said she had found the door open,” said Ethan, feeling suddenly defensive.

“And what did you tell her?”

“I told her to get out of the house.”

“Maybe she took your advice,” suggested the officer.

“Her car is still here,” stated Ethan flatly. “If someone had actually broken into the house, they might have been inside when I was talking to her. I’ve searched the house with no sign of anyone. Except the basement. I haven’t checked in the basement.”

“We’ll go look,” Officer Clark informed him in no uncertain terms. “You stay here, sir. Where is the basement?”

“The only access is outside through the double metal doors,” Ethan said. “Watch your heads, it’s not as deep as you might expect.”

He could see the recognition that they would have to go back into the rain register in both men’s eyes, then they donned their hats once more and departed, pulling the door closed behind them. Ethan grabbed a handful of paper towels to blot the water from the floor just inside the door and where the officers had been standing. Cupping his hand to catch the overflow, he tossed the soiled toweling in the trash. He gave the lid of the can a spin, frowning angrily.

“Damn it, John, where can she be?”

“Well,” said John from the living room, “if these officers really thought there was a possibility Perry had interrupted a burglary in progress, they’d be treating the place like a crime scene. Before I came upstairs for you, I saw them checking the front door and the windows on the porch on their way around to the back of the house. I don’t believe there’s any sign of forced entry. All of this might have blown

inside when the wind picked up prior to the storm,” he said, indicating the floor. “Or not,” he added, pointing to the equipment. “I don’t know. I think other things would have been disturbed as well if the wind had blown through with that type of force. But I don’t think any burglar or mischief maker would trash the house with leaves and twigs and grass, do you?”

Ethan shook his head. No, he did not. Which was precisely the point.

“She didn’t leave, unless she went on foot, and why would she do that? Wherever she went, though, she pulled the door shut behind her. It was closed when we got here, right? Hell, maybe she’s just out in the barn. That’s why she came here today, to make sure the pumps would be working if the creek came that high.”

John threw up his hand in that direction. “Let’s go, then,” he said.

Ethan started across the floor, but was interrupted from his goal by the return of both officers. Shoving a small mat toward the door, Ethan opened it. The men stepped inside.

“Nothing,” said the one who had not introduced himself. “Some water down there, though. Might want to keep an eye on that.”

Officer Clark spoke. “Do you want us to treat this like a missing person? Unofficially, at any rate. Could she have left with someone? A boyfriend maybe?”

Ethan stared levelly at the man. “That would be me,” he said.

“Husband?”



“She’s divorced.”

“I’m sorry, but there doesn’t seem to be any evidence of a crime here, Mr.— Taylor, was it?”

“Yes, Ethan Taylor.”

Apparently, the radio dispatcher had not given the officers his first name, because Clark jotted that down, too. “May I have your home phone number and address?”

Growing impatient, but understanding there was some protocol to be followed, Ethan provided both. “Look,” he said, “I’m going to check the barn. I’m sorry to have bothered you. Shall I call to let you know everything’s alright?”

“Sure, that would be helpful. Maybe she went to a neighbor’s to borrow something and is waiting for a lull in the storm?”

“Maybe,” agreed Ethan, starting to edge toward the door. He wanted to check the outbuildings and then the creek. He did not think she would have gone there, either, but she had before, seeking safety. And as it had turned out, she hadn’t been safe at all.

“What is all that stuff?” This from the other officer, who seemed unable to contain his curiosity any longer. “You guys making a movie or something? Looks like a lot of sound equipment and the like.”

“It is sound equipment,” Ethan heard John answer as he made his move to exit. “These instruments are for recording sounds beyond the

normal range of human hearing. These others are for detection of atmospheric changes, electromagnetic fields, and various other indicators.”

“Indicators of what?” the officer asked.

Although he would have loved to hear John’s explanation and the reaction of the two men, Ethan had no time for it. He headed outside and across the waterlogged grass, head bowed against the onslaught of rain.

## Chapter 19

*The moon had been unchanging for so very long that the darkness seemed deeper still because of it, like velvet draping the bed of an unlit chamber. He understood now what had happened, remembered it and wept in pain. But it did not matter. Time had come full circle. She was here with him again in the darkness that was theirs alone. She would not leave him. She had accepted forever and would rejoice in it. This final battle was not Edward’s to win or lose.*

*Outside the creek was rising, just as it had, just as it was meant to again. He could hear the change more than see the mounting water, for the sound of the falls had altered as the drop lessened. Still musical, still voluminous, but the tones were deeper, like the reverberations of a church bell after it has rung.*

*Slowly he turned away from the tumbling water, making his way to the back of the narrow cleft in the stone. Soon the water would enter in,*

*but there was still time before that happened.*

## Chapter 20

Perry rolled her head and opened her eyes onto blackness. No, not blackness in its entirety. Somewhere beyond her feet was movement, like intertwined shadow in the middle of the darkest night. It seemed very far away. Slowly, Perry dragged her hand along damp stone to her hair, fingering the strands that were absorbing water from beneath her like the wick of a lamp. She pressed the tips of her fingers to the ache in her skull, alarmed by the size of the lump and its tenderness.

When she lifted her head nausea rolled in her stomach, making her gasp. Beneath her skull, the length of her spine, she could feel a ceaseless vibration. The sound of water was overwhelmingly loud.

Oh God, she breathed, knowing where she was.

*Have no fear, Lily. You are safe.*

Perry closed her eyes. His voice evoked a response in her that was uncanny. But now she hated it.

“How did I get here?”

*You came willingly, Lily. Edward knows. This time he knows your choice.*

“I made no choice.”

*You did. My love, you chose me.*

She did not remember being presented with any options from which she had to choose. All she remembered was—

*Yes, Daniel said, Edward wanted to hurt you. You had to come with me to prevent it. The baby in your womb belongs to me. He must accept that now.*

“What baby?”

She felt confused, disoriented, ill. For the first time she realized just how cold she was. Only partially clothed, those she was wearing were soaked and gritty with sediment from the creek.

*The babe we have made. Inside of you. In here.*

Without preamble, he shoved her underwear aside and slipped his fingers inside of her. It was an intimate gesture that once she had welcomed. She moved and made a small noise, but whether it was one of protest or welcome she was uncertain. Her body and her mind were on two different planes altogether. Ethan, she thought, where are you?

The phantom caress stilled. *For whom do you call?*

There was a strength to the spirit she had not previously noted and she wondered if she had crossed over a boundary that made him somehow more real, and she less so. She felt almost as if she were not wholly within her body, so little control did she have over its functioning.

*Not Edward, he said. You have never wanted Edward. It has always*

*been me.*

Shaking her head, Perry closed her eyes again, fighting another wave of nausea. Her soaked blouse moved, lifted, was pushed aside. In the past he had not possessed the ability. She had been the one to remove her clothes.

His mouth closed on her breast in the familiar pattern of manipulation, one he knew would arouse her instantly. Lifting her arms, she shoved against him, expecting no resistance. Instead, she found them nearly solid.

A shudder of fear coursed the length of her body. “Am I dying?” It seemed a reasonable question.

*Soon.*

“What?”

*Soon, he said again. Soon the oblivion of forever will claim us both. This time will be different. This time we are together.*

The air rushed from Perry’s lungs. “No,” she said.

*You have chosen.*

“No,” she said again. “I have made no such choice. You are mistaken. I am not Lily.”

For a moment there was silence in the midst of deafening noise. In that silence Perry realized two things: one, that she had somehow become

separate and apart from the physical world and two, that she wanted very much to live.

*You are she. I know you in the fabric of my soul. I will always know you. I have waited long for you to return to me, Lily.*

Struggling up onto her elbows, Perry faced the spirit. He cupped her breasts in his hands, bending to tease her nipples. She pushed him away.

“You are wrong, Daniel. I am not who you seek.”

*You gave yourself to me. How could I not know who you are?*

Despite the darkness surrounding them she realized she could see his face very clearly, as if some fey light emanated from within, could see the high planes of his cheekbones, the curve of his mouth, his close-cropped hair curled above his ears. The pain in his brown eyes went straight to her heart.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “It’s over. You need to move on. You don’t belong here any longer.”

Bewilderment altered his expression, and then he smiled, slowly, sadly.

*I know that I do not belong in this place. Soon, we will be gone. Can I not have you once more?*

“No.”

*Before the end. Before the water fills the hillside and takes us both. Do you not remember, Lily?*

Remember? Oh, God, the creek was rising! Yes, yes, she had nearly drowned crossing over the swollen watercourse. But how had she gotten inside? How had she struck her head?

“I don’t remember anything!” she cried.

She needed to get out. It might already be too late to make the attempt. When the creek was in flood the torrent raging down the narrow watercourse had the strength to move trees. She could never hope to swim against it. She would be dashed against the rocks. Envisioning the water filling her lungs, Perry gasped and struck out. To her surprise, the ghost staggered back.

But the movement had its price. Perry leaned over and vomited, her head spinning in sickening circles.

*You see? It is the babe that makes you ill.*

Perry pushed the hair from her eyes. “There is no baby. It is concussion making me ill.”

*You told me you were with child.*

“I did not.”

*Lily, you did. You were so happy you wept with joy.*

Perry closed her eyes again. Tears seeped out between her lashes.

Whatever had taken place between the ghost of Daniel Nicholson and the long departed Lily must have broken his heart.

“I am not Lily,” she whispered. “I am Perry Madison.”

*Yes, he said, Lily Madson was your name before you took my brother's.*

Turning her head slowly, she asked, “What did you say?” But he ignored her question, his hands taking hold of her as if to force her once more to lie down. She pushed him away. He grabbed her again, one hand reaching down to stroke her between her legs. She blocked his movements.

“Leave me alone,” she said. “I am not Lily. There is no child. What passed between us could not have manufactured one, I assure you.”

A sudden silence echoed in her head. He released her immediately, pulling away.

*How dare you? Do you think to tell me again that you carry Edward's child in your belly?*

Perry blinked. In an instant she saw the situation with clarity. On impulse she reached out to him, closing her hand over his groin.

“You are barely erect,” she said. “It has always been this way. You have used other means for pleasure with me, every time. You cannot make a child like that, Daniel. Your seed was never expended. Not in me. Nor, I suspect, in Lily.”



In an angered gesture, he flung her hand aside. The force of his action caused her to rock back onto her elbows again. Smaller stones ground into the narrow expanse of flesh over bone, causing her to stumble further until she lay prone and gasping in pain. A shimmer of waning consciousness passed before her eyes. She fought to regain her grip on awareness.

From beneath lowered lids she watched him. He seemed to have gained solidity, mass, strength. But he was still a ghost of a man who had lived nearly one hundred and eighty years earlier. She would do well to hold onto that fact.

“I thought you had forgiven me, Lily. When you came back, I thought you had forgiven me.”

Perry shuddered in a spasm of fear at the sound of his voice no longer in her head, but echoing through the cavern. The noise of the falls was hushed, no more than a rushing of water. She rolled onto her side, retching, and attempted to slide away from him. Her feet touched chill liquid several inches deep. The creek was inside. She might only have moments, now, to gain access to the cleft in the hillside before the cave behind filled with churning brown water.

Seeming to realize what she was attempting to do, the spirit took hold of her again, dragging her back. He threw himself down on top of her, his face close to hers. Her arms were pinned beneath his chest. As hard as she tried to push up on him, she couldn't make him budge.

“Tell me you forgive me, Lily. You must, or all will be lost.”

His mouth was on hers, hungry, all gentleness gone, and she turned away from it, the pressure of his lips urgent on her throat.

“Forgive you? For what?” she asked as she struggled, feeling the gain of water licking along her calves. “What did you do that has damned you to haunt this place?”

Abruptly, he rolled off of her, on his knees above her with his hands at his sides. The grim light that had begun to emanate from him seeped away to a pale, spectral glimmer. He bowed his head, reaching out to touch her throat, curving his hand around the slender column.

*I killed you, Lily. I did not mean to. You were going back to him and I could not let you.*

Perry lay still, sensing his hand on her throat without pressure. The water was nearly to her waist, tugging at the hem of her shirt. Her legs were numb.

“I am not Lily,” she stated softly. “But it appears you may have killed me, too.”

With a howling cry, the spirit lunged toward her. She braced herself for the inevitable, but he shoved his hands beneath her arms, ineffectually, as if he were weakening. It appeared that he was trying to move her.

*There is a place at the back that is higher than the rest. Perhaps you will survive if you go there.*

Obediently Perry summoned the strength to drag herself in the

direction indicated, jamming her body into a crevice at the top of an upward slope. The lapping, swirling water echoed as it filled the cave. Daniel's ghost crawled up beside her, laying his head against her thigh. She stroked the feather-light hair back from his brow.

"I forgive you," she whispered. If she was going to die, it was the least she could do.

\* \* \* \*

Ethan stared at the creek. Brown and frothing, it rushed by below him at a horrifying rate, tumbling logs and unrecognizable debris as the spume sprayed high into the air. For the moment the rain had stopped, but not before the storm had dumped several inches in an hour's time.

The barn had been empty, the smaller outbuildings as well. After assuring for Perry's sake that the pumps were operable, he had gone back to the house. The policemen had already left, exiting along a driveway completely underwater, having been called away by an emergency. An emergency. This was an emergency. They just didn't realize it.

Now John stood at his side, shaking his head.

"She wouldn't have gone in there."

"Why not?" Ethan argued.

"She wouldn't have made it across."

"Not if she went in right after the rain began. She could be in the

hillside now.”

“Let’s hope not, Ethan,” John reminded him in a low voice that carried nonetheless, due to the enormity of its content. “She won’t survive it.”

Ethan’s fists clenched at his side. For a moment he found it hard to breathe.

“Call the fire department, John. Go back to the house and call them. If I’m wrong, then I’m wrong, but they might possess the equipment to gain access. I can’t just let her die, if she’s there. I can’t do that again. I can’t.”

John’s hand fell on his soaked arm. “You didn’t let Cindy die, Ethan. She made that choice on her own.”

Ethan’s jaw tightened. He dashed a hand across his eyes, ostensibly to wipe away the moisture dripping from his hair, but he needed a moment to compose himself. Three days. Three days and three nights, and he loved her. It was ridiculously premature. Nevertheless, it was true.

And even had it not been so, he couldn’t live with himself if he didn’t do his best to save Perry. If she wasn’t in the cave, all well and good. He would look elsewhere after he had ascertained that fact for himself. But if she was—God if she was...

“Please, John, go back to the house and call someone. I don’t care who.”

“And what are you going to do?”

“I’m not going to walk away from here, not knowing. That won’t happen. Just do as I ask, John. Please.” His voice was harsh with emotion. John hesitated a fraction of a second longer, then took off at a careful trot toward the house. Neither of their cell phones had a signal in the woods, whether due to the storm or the topography Ethan could only guess. Once his friend was out of sight, Ethan turned his gaze back to the creek.

Calm now, he assessed the situation, eyeing the embankment on the other side. To add to the influx, water was running out of the fields to converge with the massive flow below. Still, if he had a sturdy rope he could tie it to one of the larger trees and lower himself hard by the falls on the upper side. That way, if he lost his footing he would be washed closer to his goal rather than away from it, as long as he maintained a grip on the line. If not, he was done. Six inches of racing water could move a two-thousand pound motor vehicle. Something like this would break him and rush on without notice.

Stepping closer to the edge of the steep drop, he looked first upstream and then down, hoping to locate a sturdy branch or a fallen tree not in danger of washing away that would aid him in getting to the other side. Finding nothing, he decided to waste no more time looking. There was rope in the barn, and a pair of sturdy gloves, as well as a waterproof flashlight in his truck. He should have thought ahead, but he hadn’t expected to encounter something so nearly insurmountable.

Loathe to leave the creek side, he still understood that he must. He would gather what he needed, then cut through the woods to the road and the low bridge that crossed the water there. Very likely the road

would be underwater as well, but he didn't anticipate he would have too much trouble getting across. Then he would have to make his way back again to this same point on the opposite bank. Precious time would be expended, but he had no choice.

It had been a long time since he had had a serious talk with God. Since Cindy had died, in fact. But as he turned, lifting his knees to run as fast as the conditions would allow, he spoke in earnest to whoever was listening. It couldn't hurt. If Perry was behind that waterfall, there was little else on his side or on hers.

\* \* \* \*

Coughing out a mouthful of water, Perry pushed herself up again to the pocket of air beneath the ceiling of the cave. Her body had been too long in the water and she was afraid that hypothermia was going to set in. Even though it was late summer, the swift, spring fed creek was seldom more than sixty-five degrees. Too cold to maintain one's body temperature. She could barely feel her limbs.

"Daniel?" she called, sparing as little effort as possible. She needed to conserve her strength and the limited oxygen. There was no response. She had not expected any. He was gone. What was likely her final act on this earth had granted him the peace he sought and he had left her. She was going to die alone.

To keep from being sucked out by the surging water, Perry had anchored her arm between two firmly wedged stones, using the angle of her extended limb more than any act of strength. Fortunately, the water's swirling flow had not intensified, as she had a feeling the bone

of her arm would have broken under the pressure.

If she lived to see Ethan again, she would have quite a story to tell him. Lily had not left the preacher; she had been murdered in a passionate rage by her impotent lover when she had informed him that she was going to stay with her husband, the man who had fathered the child in her womb. Edward's anger that had been so flagrantly displayed in the attic was not only cruel, but unnecessary. Lily had chosen her husband in the end. She just had apparently not lived long enough to tell him so.

And neither would she. Not long enough to tell the tale to Ethan and to John, nor just to tell Ethan how she felt about him. She didn't like the idea of unfinished business. Wasn't that the sort of thing that made the essence of a departed soul cleave to a place once known? Years from now, would Ethan or one of his offspring wander down to the falls and see her restless shade trying to get the words out? She nearly laughed at the very idea, choking and spitting water.

She was lightheaded with exhaustion and the aftereffect of the blow to the back of her head, as well as the lowering temperature of her blood. She remembered now that she had fallen upon entering the cave, striking her skull on the harsh, unyielding stone. She remembered also those few moments in the kitchen when Edward's ghost had laid hold of her, attempting to drag her from the door. But without Ethan to perform his dirty work he had been unable to do more than frighten her.

Daniel had been right about that. She had chosen, in that instant, the younger brother, knowing that Ethan would not be safe when he

arrived at the house if she remained within, and Edward's shade in active fury. She remembered how calm she had been, despite her fear, hanging up the phone as if she were in the midst of an everyday occurrence, pulling the door closed, walking slowly through the woods and the driving rain to the creek side, where she swam across and was nearly washed away in the process. Whatever was meant to happen, the time had come. At least Ethan would be free of the specter of the Reverend seeking to relive his pain and righteous anger through a man of flesh and blood. Ethan would be out of danger.

The oddest sensation stole over Perry as she reflected on those words. Of peace and drowsiness and a lifting of her spirit, not figuratively, but literally, as she looked down upon her floating body in the darkness as if from a distance, tethered to it still by a skein of gossamer material she could not name. Perhaps if she allowed herself to sleep for a moment, to regain some of her lost energy, her thoughts would become clearer.

She watched as a murky glow moved under the surface of the water toward her, causing her to forego the sleep that called her. She would have screamed, had she the will to do so, and if she wasn't so fascinated by the possibilities. Whose ghost was coming to greet her now? she mused with a crooked laugh. There was no one left, was there? Perhaps it was Lily herself.

She felt a tug in the general vicinity of her abdomen and resurfaced on the water, choking. She shot to the ceiling of the cave yet again, gasping for air. Desperate to keep herself from drowning, she pushed her arm further into its anchored position, her numb hand closing around the nearest object.



There. Something had touched her again. It was the awareness of something beneath the water that had recalled her. She could feel a large body moving alongside of her, and then it broke free of the surface, a sleek dark head like a seal's revealed in a beam of light.

No, not a seal. It was dark hair, plastered wetly to a very human head. She watched it turn, blowing water from its lips in a thin spray.

"Ethan! Oh, God, Ethan!" She tried to move, to put her arms around him, but she couldn't.

"I'm getting you out of here, Perry," he said, his voice moving in a hollow echo along the stone above their heads. "It'll take some doing, but we'll manage it, I swear to you."

"T-thank you," she chattered, pleased to be shivering once again. "First you'll have to get my arm out. I can't really f-feel my fingers anymore, but I think they're stuck in s-something."

His free hand followed the contour of her arm through the stones to her hand. For a moment he stiffened beside her, plainly holding his breath in concentration as he moved his fingers in a search of the thing to which she clung. Then he loosened her grasp gently, drawing out her arm.

"Come on," he said. "I'll tie the rope around the both of us. We'll either swim out together or die together. How's that for romantic?"

Perry smiled, struggling to keep her head up. "I love you, Ethan Taylor. Can I say that n-now that you've risked your life to s-save

mine?”

“You can say whatever you like, dear heart, because I love you, too. However, I would suggest you keep that speech for a more appropriate time. You’re going to need your breath and whatever strength you’ve left in you to aid us both. Are you ready?”

Wordlessly she nodded, shaking her head free of the water again. He looked her in the eyes, holding her gaze for a long moment. Trust, his eyes said to her. What is between us is all about trust.

“Now,” he commanded, and she sucked in a great lungful of air, willingly placing her life in his hands as he dragged them both down into the raging water of the creek.

## Chapter 21

### *Seven Months Later*

Slowly, Perry rose from a deep crouch, gazing for a moment longer at the flowers she had placed on the ground. They were daffodils come early in the unexpected warmth of winter’s end. She had cut a handful and tied them in a white ribbon to lay on the grave. As she stepped back, moving toward the opening in the wrought iron fence, she raised her eyes to the headstone and the two names, side by side, of the occupants of the earth beneath.

Lily, and Edward. The year of Lily’s death had been inscribed into the stone beside the date of her birth, and that was all. Perry had not

known what else to say. But her remains were now interred beside her husband's, silencing Edward's shade once and for all. In another grave among those of his brothers and their families, Daniel's remains had been buried as well.

Closing her eyes, Perry uttered a brief prayer for their repose. It had taken some doing to get this final act completed, but now that it was accomplished she felt a certain peace of her own.

The skeletal remains of the two had been located in the cave, not far from where Perry had been lying awaiting her last breath. Ethan had realized, when he worked to free her arm, that they were there. Her fingers had been locked inside the eye cavities of one of the skulls. Later he had brought the police back and the remains had been conveyed to the surface. The investigation had been brief, once the age of the bones was determined. As there were no family members remaining to protest, Edward's body had been exhumed and a DNA test conducted, which had determined satisfactorily the familial connection between the male skeleton found in the cave and the reverend's. The determination was that the skeleton was Daniel's, once the story of his disappearance with Lily in 1824 had been brought to the attention of the police. As for the female, a young woman of no more than twenty-five years of age, given the revelation of the known history of the family as well as the personal notes that Edward had kept safeguarded in his Bible, conclusion was made as to her identity. Although speculative at best, backed by a few corroborating facts, Perry had never doubted that the woman was Lily Nicholson nee Madson. It would have been more than a little complicated trying to explain how she had come by that knowledge to

anyone else and so she had said nothing, waiting patiently for the outcome of the investigation to prove her right. John understood, and so did Ethan. She didn't need anyone else in whom to confide her story.

Turning, Perry passed through the gate, closing it quietly, and strode across the rough-tended grass toward the parking lot. The door to the former church was open. A woman stood there, watching her. Perry lifted her hand in greeting, unable to suppress a certain satisfaction as she crossed the paved lot to the man waiting for her.

Ethan was leaning against the fender of his truck, arms folded across his muscled chest. He was wearing a suit, a nice gray that fit his lean form well. As Perry approached he pushed away from the fender with his hip and came forward, bending to kiss her on the tip of her nose. A temperate wind blew his dark hair across his brow, tickling her forehead. Then he, too, waved to Maggie Barnes with a brief word of thanks.

Opening the passenger door, he held his arm out to assist Perry into the seat. Perry climbed in, pulling the seat belt to an extraordinary extent before latching it. Ethan settled behind the wheel. He smiled at her, leaning forward to plant another kiss on her mouth. Putting the truck in gear he headed south, turning into the driveway that bore two signs. One, the name Water on Stone, the other that of a local realtor. Following the path of her gaze, Ethan asked, not for the first time:

“Will you miss the place?”

Perry shook her head. “Only a little. I think I'm going to like our new

old house a whole lot better.”

Laughing, Ethan drove the level, graveled drive to the front of the house and parked. The refurbishing was nearly complete. Perry knew that his men would be finished in the next day or so. She watched as he nodded at the sight of the house, pleased with the results. Already a dozen calls for work had been generated by the project. He had even been written up again in the paper.

Jumping out of the truck he opened Perry’s door for her, holding out his hand. Perry slipped her fingers into his, grateful for the help. From the porch Tom let out a whoop of greeting and leaped down the two steps in a single stride, hurrying over to meet them. Pausing before Perry, he bent a little from the waist.

“May I?” he asked. “You know it’s supposed to be good luck.”

Perry laughed. Beside her, Ethan feigned a frown of disapproval.

“Just keep your hands where I can see them,” he warned.

Chuckling, Tom extended his open palm to Perry’s abdomen, holding his fingers splayed across her swollen belly. His eyes lit when he felt the baby kick.

“So,” he said, indicating Ethan with a nod of his head, “when are you going to make an honest man out of this fellow?”

Reaching into her purse, Perry pulled out a handful of cream-colored envelopes.

“Today,” she said.

“Today?”

“Yes,” Perry grinned, “today. We’re on our way to the District Justice to be married. There’s a party in three weeks time. We would love for you to be there.” She handed Ethan’s foreman his invitation, as well as those for the others among his crew. Tom wiped his hands self-consciously on his work pants before taking the envelopes from her. He looked genuinely touched. In fact, Perry was certain she saw a gleam of moisture in his eyes.

Abruptly, he bent and put an arm around her shoulders, pulling her as close as he could manage in a fierce hug.

“I’ve never seen this guy happier,” he whispered in her ear, then he smacked Ethan once on the arm and walked away, calling the workers together in order to distribute the invitations.

Perry watched him with her teeth in her lip. Ethan’s hand lifted to the back of her neck beneath her hair, his fingers curving in a brief, affectionate squeeze.

“Feel up to a walk?” he asked.

“Sure.”

It had become a ritual of theirs, whenever they were here, to walk to the falls and back again. At seven months pregnant Perry was feeling a little ungainly. They took the path at a leisurely pace, her hand tucked securely in Ethan’s elbow. He helped her up the rise to the ridge, then

stood beside her with his arm around her shoulders. Below them the falls tumbled to the creek, water on stone, a mist of rainbows rising into the air.

“You know,” said Ethan in that familiar soft drawl which thrilled Perry’s ear every time she heard it manifested in him, “I was a bit jealous of that guy, I must admit.”

“Not Tom?” questioned Perry.

“Not Tom,” Ethan answered, staring hard at the falls.

Perry nodded, remembering her own unnecessary insecurities regarding Ethan’s first wife. “You’re not anymore.”

“Of course not.”

“Good. There was no reason to be.”

“I know,” he said, and stepped behind her, pressing his mouth onto the nape of her neck. Perry closed her eyes as a thrill of sensation danced over her skin. She leaned into him, taking his arms and wrapping them around her distended abdomen.

“And that is why I’m not,” he said above her head.

“Because you know it’s you?”

“Because I know it’s me. And I know it’s you. It’s us, together.”

“It is indeed,” she answered.

He lowered his chin to the crown of her head, settling the curved edge gently.

“They why did you wait so long to agree to marry me?”

He moved his hand over her belly. She wanted very much for his fingers to drift lower, but they were due to be married in an hour’s time and she knew where such caresses would lead. It wouldn’t do at all to show up at the magistrate’s office for their wedding flagrantly pregnant and disheveled to boot. The first alone was enough.

“I didn’t take so long,” she said. “I agreed, in my heart, the instant you asked me. I just wanted to give you time to come to your senses, I guess. It took my head a little while to catch up with what my heart was telling me. I knew it would, eventually. I was just a little overwhelmed by all that had happened, and afraid.”

“Hmm,” he murmured, kissing her crown and turning his jaw against the curling tendrils of hair. “What made you decide not to be afraid?”

“You,” she said.

“Me?”

“Yes.”

“Anything in particular that I did? Just in case I have to repeat it to keep you from running away,” he added.

She could hear the smile in his voice, the utter happiness. And that was it. He wasn’t with her out of obligation, or conscience, or even the



staggering sex. She made him happy, deep down in some part of him that needed precisely that very thing. And that was exactly what she wanted.

“Just you,” she said and lifted her face to the wind, smiling because he made her happy, too.

The End