



# Dark Tides

By

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## Chapter One

Pushing a handful of sodden hair from his eyes, Caleb Hunter scrambled upright. An expanse of sand stretched as far as he could see into a soaking fog, although on the crest of the dune he viewed a slate-roofed, white house rising three stories out of the shimmering haze. Slowly Caleb lowered his hand to his side. He stepped away from the water purling around his feet. He had no idea where he was.

Thinking on it, he wasn't quite sure who he was, either. He knew his name. He thought he was thirty-five or thirty-six years old. Somehow he knew he was six-foot-one, that his eyes were brown, that his nearly black hair was badly in need of trimming. At this point, it was in need of a great deal more than that, plastered with salt and sand and a bit of debris floating in the breeze before his eyes that looked like vegetation. Yanking the piece of seaweed from his brow, he tossed it down.

Turning his hands palm up, he stared at them. They were well-formed, calloused across the pad of the palm just below his fingers. The skin of his fingertips was wrinkled from long emersion, fine sand embedded in the near side of the joints. The hair on his arms was encrusted with salt and sand, the skin chafed. He bore a bruise on his right forearm. When he flexed his hand the injury felt deep, into the muscle.

Bending his head to check the rest of his body for injury, he discovered that he wore not a stitch of clothing. More sand coated his torso, his groin, clumped in the hair on his legs and in places more private where it grated uncomfortably. He planted his feet apart and bent to brush it away, finding this only made the situation worse.

Dismayed by his lack of recall as well as his lack of garments, Caleb glanced around again. He pushed both hands through his hair, clasping his fingers behind his neck on a hard knot of flesh that was very tender, indeed. A frown creased his brow.

Something had struck him there. He remembered that. Something...no, not something. Someone. Someone had tried to kill him.

Shit.

That fragment of recall brought no further revelation, but his skin shifted in reaction to a danger he couldn't fathom, and he looked around again to make certain he was alone. He wasn't.

The fog was shredding, revealing a woman approaching him from a short distance. She walked with her head down, bending every now and then to pick up small items from the water's edge. Not knowing what else to do, Caleb sat down, pulling his knees up close to his chin and wrapping his arms around his legs. After ascertaining that everything was neatly tucked out of view, he waited.

She stopped less than a dozen feet from him, bending to pluck at a polished stone to deposit with the array of minuscule treasures on her palm. The wind fluttered the length of a dark blue shawl from her shoulders, dragging the fringed edge in the sand. Tan trousers were rolled to the knee, exposing the curve of her calf and slender feet washed by the surge of the tide as she crouched. Her hair was the color of honey, dark golden-brown and clasped loosely at her nape. Her white blouse was haphazardly buttoned, exposing a glimpse of fair skin and the fact

that she wore a skimpy undergarment beneath. The flapping hem opened to the second button, revealing the lower curve of a taut, full breast above a firm belly only slightly rounded by position. Sensing that he would increase the precariousness of his situation if he let his gaze linger, Caleb looked again at her face. Even at that distance he could see that her eyes were very green. And they were staring straight into his.

Clutching her treasure trove close to her breast, the woman straightened slowly. Her lips parted, yet if she spoke, her words were carried away on the wind. Caleb cleared his parched throat, uncertain what to say. The woman stared at him for several seconds longer, expression unreadable. Dropping the items from her fingers into a heap on the sand, she placed one bare foot behind the other, backing away. Her gaze never left his face. She shook her head, then turned on her heel and started into an awkward run across the shifting sand, the shawl flying from her shoulders to land on the beach.

Leaping to his feet, Caleb strode quickly over and snatched up the garment, draping it around his waist and tugging the loose knit down to cover himself. Scooping the woman's discarded treasure into his hand, he started after her.

She was making for the white house at a remarkably swift pace, and was a good distance ahead of him. He observed her leap up the long flight of wooden steps from the beach two at a time, crossing a seaside garden to a porch where she yanked open the door and disappeared inside. Caleb paused in uncertainty. He hadn't meant to frighten her, and she did seem frightened, not merely startled. Nevertheless, she was for the moment his only hope of receiving any kind of answer to the burning questions in his head.

Girding his determination as well as his grip on her shawl, he set his own bare feet toward the stairs, climbing to the brick pathway that led through the tiny, tended garden. At the porch steps he paused again, his gaze drifting the length of the covered area, glancing at the blank face of the windows to see if she was peering out at him. All he could see was the milky reflection of the fogged-in sea.

Climbing up the series of shallow steps, he halted a short distance before the closed door. "Hello?"

"Go away!" he heard her cry out, muffled through the solid wood. "Whoever you are, just go away!"

He released his breath through his nose. "I ... can't," he said.

Silence.

"I'm sorry if I startled you."

Nothing.

"I would return your shawl, but I have a specific need of it at the moment."

"I'll say you do. Keep it."

The fact that she had spoken to him again gave him a glimmer of hope.

"I was hoping you could help me," he continued with dogged persistence. "I don't know where I am. I don't know who I am," he added, frowning down at the boards of the porch floor. That statement aloud sounded ludicrous. The brief flare of fear engendered by his own words was not funny at all.

"What do you mean you don't know who you are? What makes you think I can help you?"

Her voice was clearer. Lifting his head, he was able to see past a security chain stretched taut in the darkened space between the frame and the door, where her leaf-green eyes regarded

him intently.

"I don't remember much. I believe I was hit on the head. Maybe I washed up onto the beach from the ocean. I'm not sure. I can give you my name, if that helps. It's about all I do remember. Caleb Hunter. Is that familiar to you?"

"No," she said, "I don't know anyone by that name."

The door shut again. He blinked at the scarred surface, the light blue paint scoured by the salt winds peeling away in places to show the bare, weathered wood beneath. Glancing about, he noted other evidence of neglect. Not years of overbearing neglect, but a general lack of recent regular maintenance.

The door opened enough for her to toss something out at him. He bent and picked up the crumpled fabric of a pair of men's jeans. They looked like they might actually fit.

Turning his back, Caleb dropped the shells and stones and bits of sea glass onto the lacquered surface of a nearby chair, followed by the shawl as he hastened into the jeans. He grimaced as sand abraded his flesh. If she was standing in the doorway watching him struggle into the pants, she gave no indication. He glanced over his shoulder. Through the narrow opening he could not see her.

"What was that in your hand?"

At her question he slowly pivoted to face the door, feeling more naked now than he had in her shawl. It was a strange sensation, talking to her wearing nothing but a pair of borrowed blue jeans. He felt on display, half-dressed. He was tempted to pick up the shawl and drape it across his shoulders. Instead, he seized it from the floor where it had fallen and placed it beside her rescued treasure. The door opened a little more and her face appeared.

"Your things," he said by way of explanation. "I never meant to frighten you, to make you drop what you'd been gathering."

He saw her frown at what he had placed on the chair, then she turned her gaze to meet his. She was slow to speak, her eyes studying him a moment.

"Thank you," she said.

The door closed again.

Not knowing what to expect, Caleb moved to another chair and sat down. He leaned forward, elbows on his thighs, his hands folded together between his knees. Now that he was paying closer attention, he realized that he ached all over. Reaching up, he fingered the back of his head, tracing the contours of the vicious lump. He remembered a flurry of fists, grunting blows and male voices raised in harsh invective, but not the words. Was one of those voices his own? Could have been. And he remembered ... he remembered ... nothing. Nothing else.

Damn it.

Once more the door opened. The honey-haired woman stepped onto the porch holding out a tee shirt. Gratefully he took it, slipping the garment over his head. It smelled a little like it had been left sitting in a drawer. Not that it mattered. He was thankful for any consideration.

"Your husband's?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Is he here?"

"He's dead," she said.

Caleb blinked, running his hand through his salt-encrusted hair. "I'm sorry."

"So am I."

She moved with a lithe stride to the chair where her shawl lay, bending to pick up the

oddments he had deposited there. Brushing them into her hand, she walked to the porch railing and sprinkled them into the garden below, permitting them to flow through a loose fist. Her eyes closed as she did this and it occurred to Caleb that there was something ritualistic in the execution of her action, like perhaps she did it every day in memory of her late husband. He wondered what had happened to him.

"His ship went down in a storm. That's what you were thinking, wasn't it? You were wondering how he died."

Caleb blinked again, feeling the skin between his shoulder blades shift within the confines of a dead man's shirt. "Yes," he admitted, "I was."

She nodded, the long bangs of her honey-blond hair swinging forward. "A year ago today," she told him quietly.

Today. Caleb said nothing.

Moving back across the porch, she lowered herself into the chair opposite. Gathering up the shawl, she held it balled against her stomach. She tucked her feet around the outside of the legs of her seat, her knees angled together. She looked innocent and vulnerable. Caleb felt something churn in his abdomen.

"I dream about him, most nights," she confided in a voice barely above a whisper, her green eyes intent on his own. "But not always. This morning, on the anniversary of his death, I dreamt about someone else. I didn't realize it until I saw you on the beach. I'm fairly certain I dreamt of you."

Stunned by her speech, Caleb sat back hard against the chair frame. His breath exploded from his lungs as the knot at the back of his head came in contact with wood, causing him to jerk forward again, bright pinpoints of light dancing before his eyes.

No matter that he couldn't remember the fundamental particulars about himself and his own life, he knew what dreams were without requiring an explanation. "What do you mean? Do you know me?" he asked again hopefully. Perhaps she did not know his name, but she might recall having seen him somewhere. Something.

She raised her eyes from a fierce contemplation of the air between them back up to his face. After a moment of study she shook her head. He licked his dry, salty lips, then shifted on the seat, frowning at the pain wracking his body. She reached into her pocket as he watched, drawing out a small black object. She opened it. From somewhere in the recesses of murky recognition, he knew it was a cell phone.

"What are you doing?"

"Calling the police," she stated.

*Don't let her. Don't let her. Don't let her.*

He blinked at the force of his own voice in his head, recognizing without understanding that it was instinct for preservation speaking to him.

"Don't," he said, then added more sedately, "Please."

She displayed no overt consternation at his command, but merely cocked her head to the side a little, studying him. However, he could see evidence of the pulse beating beneath her jaw, the momentary suspension of her respiration.

"Why not?" she asked after a moment.

He stared back at her, trying to dredge up a reply that would be suitable. He couldn't.

"God, I don't know," he answered, lowering his head into his hand, shoving his fingers deep into his tangled hair. "I don't. I don't know."

He heard her breathe again, a short, decisive inhalation. She flipped the phone shut. "Don't you want to go to the hospital?"

"Why?" he countered.

"Aren't you hurt?"

The color of her eyes, he decided, was amazing. He did not believe he had ever seen eyes so green, though he couldn't recall for certain. She stood up.

"You had better step inside and let me see to your head."

He held himself very still, eyeing her extended hand as suspicion dawned. "How do you know I have a head wound?"

Her mouth twisted in wry amusement. "I could say that I dreamt it, but I didn't. You told me you thought you had been hit on the head. Even if you hadn't, you wince every time you touch the base of your skull. That, and the fact that you can't remember who you are, are fairly good indicators of some sort of head trauma. Which," she added, "is why you should have a doctor check you out."

Raising his eyes to hers, he held her gaze for a long moment. She did not look away. There was a certain defiance in her stance. Her hand remained steady, waiting to assist him in rising, should he need it. He wondered at her trust in a stranger, or was it merely confidence in herself? That, or total foolishness. He could remember nothing about his past life. For all he knew, he could be a very nasty sort of person, a dangerous man. After all, someone had tried to kill him, hadn't they? Somebody had felt they had good reason for that.

"Not yet," he whispered. He could not say why he possessed such an aversion to the possibility of questions, of a need for answers he could not provide. He did not think he was so dreadfully injured that his life was at risk. He felt no weakness, no disorientation beyond his inability to recall. Whatever was wrong, there was no reason to expect that she was not capable of caring for him. If she saw something that troubled her, he would consider listening to her then. If only—if only what? Swallowing, he slipped his hand into hers and allowed her to pull him up from his seat with a surprising strength.

When he stood up he could smell the sea in her hair, and the fresh air, and a faint suffusion of citrus. She was a good deal shorter, the top of her head about even with his collar bone. The feeling of protectiveness that stole over him belied his recent misgivings about his own character, but couldn't erase them altogether.

Confounded and discomfited, Caleb followed her into the house, the inside of his borrowed pants chafing like sandpaper over thighs and calves and along the tender flesh of his testicles. He trailed her into the kitchen, where she indicated he should sit in a chair she pulled from the table. Gingerly, he did so. She pulled back the curtains to allow more light into the room, then walked behind him across worn linoleum to place her fingers into his hair, gently parting the tangled strands for a better view of what lay underneath. At the delicate touch of her fingertips on his scalp he felt a shiver run the length of his spine. She paused.

"Am I hurting you?"

"No," he said, willing himself to remain still while she examined him, a feat that proved easier to command than to accomplish. He closed his eyes as she bent for a closer look. He now scented more than the fragrance of her hair. He could smell the warmth of her skin, what he knew was the lavender soap with which she had bathed, the light sweat she had worked up while walking through the damp sand. Against his lids he visualized the shape of her arms, her hands, the soft flow of her blouse, the ease with which the buttons would loosen with simple

manipulation, allowing him to take her breasts into the curve of his calloused palms with what seemed a remembered weight and texture and sweet response.

He stood up in a hurry and walked away from her, the chair sliding across the worn floor.

"I did hurt you," she said behind him in genuine remorse. "I'm sorry."

He could not bring himself to reassure her. He stared out the window. The sun had broken through the fog, the golden light dancing on the waves and on the sand, reflecting in a shimmer on the pale blue ceiling of the porch. He felt both mortification and confusion mingle with that strange, unexpected surge of lust.

"You didn't hurt me," he stated quietly. "How bad did it look?"

"The skin's not broken," she said. "It's quite the goose egg, though. I'm no doctor, but it seems to me it's just a nasty bump. I mean, I don't expect there's a fracture or anything. Still, you could have concussion, you know, if your brain gets knocked around hard enough in the pan."

Wordlessly he nodded, staring at the varied reflections of sunlight until his eyes watered. He heard her open the refrigerator and rummage around in the ice container. A few seconds later she was standing behind him. He could feel her there with every pore in his skin.

"Here," she said, handing him a plastic bag of ice wrapped in a tea towel. "This might help the swelling. If I'm not mistaken, you shouldn't sleep with concussion. Would you look at me a moment? I'd like to see your eyes."

Oh, Lord, no, he thought, blinking once. He took the ice pack from her, slapping it against the back of his head with a deliberate intent of distraction before he turned to face her. Pain made him flinch, then he raised his lids in an unblinking stare. Very deliberately she looked first at one of his eyes, then the other, then repeated the process. Her eyes were not just green. The pupils were ringed about with tawny gold, the deeper striations of color in the iris flecked with more of the same. He tried not to notice just how beautiful her eyes were, pressing an edge of a single cube more urgently against his battered flesh.

"Hey," she said, noticing what he was doing to himself, "take it easy. You want the ice on your skin, not embedded in your skull. Sit down. I'll do it."

He obliged, only because he could think of no reason to offer as to why he would not, and dutifully handed the ice pack over to her. She laid the towel-wrapped pack against his nape, standing at his side. From the corner of his eye he could see the gentle rise and fall of her white blouse as she breathed.

"So, you remember nothing at all but your name? I mean, obviously you remember a great deal, otherwise you would be questioning everything I said to you. But those are general things. I suppose it's just your life in particular you don't recall."

"That seems aptly put," he agreed, fixing his gaze on a spot where the seam in the wallpaper had started to curl. He could feel the concentrated focus of her regard as she studied him, could still smell the totally appealing scent of her. He curled his fingers over his thigh, squeezing hard and winced. There was another bruise there, as well.

"You don't know me," he said again at length, as he had before.

"No," she answered. "I told you that."

"Then it stands to reason that I do not know you, right?"

"That only makes sense."

Of course. Sense. When, in point of fact, there was none of it to be made of this day. Regaining consciousness on a beach without memory. Recalling only his name and that

someone had tried to kill him, and nothing of his life. Sitting in the kitchen of a woman he had just met being tended to by her and wearing the clothes of her dead husband. Realizing there was that in him, something elemental, that recognized her, that knew her, that yearned to touch her, hold her, lose himself inside of her, and not for the first time. Yes, it all made *perfect* sense, didn't it?

"Do you often dream of people you do not know?" he managed after a moment. The phrasing of the question, the tone in which he uttered it, sounded harsh. Still, he could not help the manner of his delivery. Something was not right about the implication of his question. Due to his inability to recall, he was not quite sure why that was so, but he knew that dreaming of someone you had never met before, then having them turn up on your doorstep, or at the very least the beach leading to your doorstep, was not a mundane occurrence.

"I dream a lot," she said. There was a note both defensive and apologetic in the statement.

"Of people you don't know," he persisted.

"Of many things."

"And these things you dream of come true? In some way, they come to pass?"

"Sometimes," she said, more quietly.

He let his breath out slowly, accepting. How could he argue the point with her with no ammunition for the battle? Besides, he had no cause to doubt she spoke truly of having dreamt of him, and therefore the proof, so to speak, was in his very presence in her home, in her life now. But why?

"Why?" he asked aloud, before he realized he was doing so.

The ice pack eased away from the back of his skull and lowered to rest against her thigh. He glanced aside at the delicate structure of her fingers grasping the red and white check of the towel, then back to the loosening wallpaper.

"I wish to God I knew," she whispered. "It's hard, when you don't know which of the things you see will happen and which will not. You end up jumping at shadows, trying to foresee everything, then you ignore it all, hoping that it's all meaningless, unable to pick out the one dream you should have paid attention to."

Her voice trailed off and she sucked in a sharp, deep breath, turning to set the ice pack on the counter. Yanking open the refrigerator door again, she drew out a container of orange juice and poured a glass, holding it out to him. Mutely he took it from her, tipping his head back a little to drink.

"What did you dream about me?" he asked, wiping orange pulp from his lip with the back of his hand. "Something in it that might help me, do you think?"

Leaning the small of her back against the counter, she folded her arms under her breast. "I don't remember, exactly," she said. "Usually I do, but I had no recollection of having dreamed at all until I saw you. It was only then that I knew I hadn't dreamt of Matt this morning, of all mornings."

"Matt?" he echoed, feeling a small twinge of something he could not pinpoint. "That is—was your husband's name?"

"It still is his name," she answered. "He didn't suddenly become nameless just because he died."

The pain in her eyes, the bitterness, seared him. "Of course not," he said as she turned away to place his empty glass in the sink. Flicking up the faucet handle, she filled the vessel

with water, then shut off the flow with a fierce motion that made the pipes groan. She curved her hands over the edge of the counter, her arms far to either side of her body, and leaned forward, head bent. He could not see what she was doing. He thought it was an attempt to regain composure, but when she dropped her hands to her side and turned to look at him he saw that he was wrong. She had regained nothing, and it was not grief that shone out brittle and hard from her eyes, but anger.

Wordlessly she shook her head at him, a tiny movement that tossed her bangs into her eyes. She blinked at the intrusion of fine honey-blond hair into her lashes, at the sudden moisture glittering in her gaze. She was holding something back, holding it inside, some severity of emotion that she did not want to let loose.

"I guess I should be on my way," he murmured.

One eyebrow lifted in a gesture like amusement, but she did not laugh or even smile. "And where," she asked quietly, "would you be going?"

He tried very hard to think where, indeed, that might be. The air left his lungs, passing over his lips with a noise like a deflating balloon. "Nowhere," he said. "I have nowhere to go."

A vast emptiness bloomed inside him at his statement, as if his admission had made suddenly visible the void he had entered upon regaining consciousness on the beach. Folding his hands between his thighs, he stared down at his interlaced fingers. What the hell *was* he going to do?

"You should rest for a little while," she said, "and then decide what you should do."

He glanced up sharply, startled once more at how astutely she interpreted his unspoken thoughts. The anger of her expression was gone and in its place was sympathy and concern and the look of a decision made.

"I'll put a towel and some more clean clothes for you in the bathroom, then turn down the spare bed. Your pupils are reacting normally to light, so I suppose lying down won't do you any harm, even if you do doze off. I'll wake you up at regular intervals, if it comes to that, just to make sure you're okay."

"You're not afraid to have me here?"

"Should I be?" she asked.

"I don't know," he answered.

She met his uncertainty with an appraising stare, eyes now green as the sea. She had a lovely face, no longer young but still youthful in expression. Her skin smooth and lightly freckled, the minute lines beside her eyes and more faintly running alongside her nose to her mouth showed that at one time she had laughed often. He was not so sure she did so now.

In response she turned away, heading across the kitchen floor to a narrow flight of stairs. "You can shower and do whatever you need to do while I'm gone."

"Gone?" he echoed, rising from his seat. "Where are you going?"

"After I get you those things I promised, back to the beach. Maybe something else washed up besides you."

## Chapter Two

Sitting in the sand, Meg drew her knees up, hands curved around her ankles. She stared out to sea, to the rocky channel and the lighthouse and the horizon that stretched forever, a boundary almost indistinguishable between the ocean and sky. Thinking of the vastness of the ocean made her feel frightened, made her feel lonely. She couldn't understand how men so loved the sea that they gave up all for her. Well, not men, generally speaking. As a sea-faring sector of the population, she didn't particularly care what their motivations were. It was Matt she meant. Matt who would have been a wanderer, perhaps would have been destined to drive a truck over the road or something similar had he been born and raised somewhere inland rather than within the surging, siren call of the tides.

Right. Even if he had been living in the middle of Kansas, he would have heard that call.

And back when they first were together, if she'd been living in Kansas with him when the call came, she would have followed him. A lot had changed over the years. A lot more hadn't.

And now this. She thought of the stranger she had just left in her house, giving him free rein to go where he pleased, to steal from her, to lie in wait for her return, if such was his intent. He could be lying, for all she knew, shamming memory loss. But she didn't think so. No, she didn't think so.

His injury troubled her, not to the point where she felt a need to rush right in and call an ambulance, though. She would see if a second application of ice reduced the swelling. If so, that would be a good sign. Wouldn't it?

With a sigh, Meg yanked her ankles closer, lifting her head to gaze out over the ocean. Her search of the tide line had revealed nothing of significance. No debris of wreckage, no wallet with identification, nothing but a crab claw, shells and stones and glass and an empty plastic bottle which had escaped her grasp before she could snatch it up for the recycling container, sucked back out to bob upon the waves and make landfall again at some other point. Always capricious, the sea. When she chose to give up her carefully guarded secrets there was no telling where they would come ashore. Ever.

In the town, at its highest point above sea level, there was a single stone cross with a brass plaque beneath. Every year new names were added to that plaque for the sailors who did not return. From a certain point she could see the tip of the cross, if she walked far enough up the beach; that, and the spire of the church at Church and Center streets. Somewhere northeast of the town and many nautical miles out to sea was Matt's body, what was left of it after the creatures of the deep had finished with it and with the others, scattering bones to the ocean floor for degeneration by the salt and the relentless motion of the water. She didn't like to think of it, didn't like to dwell on Matt's fate, his drowning, his possible fear of the toll exacted by his sailor's existence. She hoped for his sake that everything had been over quickly, that one moment he was alive and filled with the hope of survival, and the next he was done, finished, drowned, without ever feeling any fear between.

Yet, he would have understood his chances and faced the inevitable with the harsh philosophy that colored everything he undertook, all of the choices in his life. Fear might not have been a part of it. She attempted to comfort herself with that thought as she had so many times before.

She lowered her lids against the glare of the sun. The constant sea breeze tugged at her hair, loosening strands from the barrette at the back of her head. She breathed in and out, evenly, deeply, trying to banish the sorrow pushing toward the surface. Gulls circled overhead, crying in the wind, waiting for a scrap or two of food she did not possess in offering. The waves crashed against the wet sand of the shore line, curling and foaming. The beach was empty, as it often was at this time of year. Weather-wise October was an unpredictable month. Freak storms came up without warning, and October was as yet too warm for the cold and ice and bitter winds that gave men pause to return to hearth and home and safety.

"Oh, Matt," she whispered. She pressed her forehead onto her knees, squeezing her eyes shut.

She heard him coming through the sand a few minutes later, the drop to his knees beside her causing a deadened thud of reverberation in her hips. Caleb Hunter smelled ridiculously like her lavender soap and her detergent, making him familiar to her when he should not have been at all. She turned her head against the old tee shirt she had left for him in the bathroom. Curling her fingers into the thin material, she wept for all that she had lost, and all that she had bartered away in an attempt to keep a man who had not wanted her after all.

"Shhh," this other man whispered, this man who was no more than a stranger, a stranger without recollection of who he was. He held her close with one arm, not awkwardly at all, the fingers of his other hand smoothing the flying hair from her brow. Beneath her cheek she felt the firmness of his chest, the leap of taut muscle as his arm lifted and fell, felt the beat of his heart and the gentle exhalation of each breath. He rocked her a little in the sand in an oddly comforting motion.

"Meg."

The sound of her name spoken quietly by a male voice caused a trip of chill to course her spine like water. Her blood heated in her veins, pulsing to that place which had responded in the past so readily to Matt's touch. Beneath her blouse her nipples peaked in yearning. Swallowing hard, Meg pulled away. She scrubbed at her eyes with her sleeve, her face averted, hoping he could not read in her expression the sudden longing that betrayed her.

"Meg," he said again, his tone altered by the space between them. "Did you find anything?"

She shook her head, struggling to her feet in the sliding sand. Brushing the clinging grains from her pants, she shoved her trembling hands deep into her pockets.

"I'm sorry, but I found nothing. That doesn't mean something might not wash up tomorrow or the next day or even a month from now."

He rose also, protractedly, not troubling to clear his knees of debris. His gaze was intent, trying, it seemed, by dint of will to get her to look at him. She couldn't, couldn't look at this man whom she remembered vaguely from that place between slumber and waking, couldn't look at this man who was a stranger to her and yet had just comforted her in a brief embrace in a manner she had not permitted any other. She bit her lip, staring out to sea.

"Hopefully a month from now such evidence will be moot. I can only trust that I'll remember everything by then."

"Hopefully," she agreed. She knew she sounded distant. She couldn't help it.

"Meg, I don't want the police involved. Not yet."

"I understand," she answered.

"Do you?"

She nodded. She remembered how their questions made you feel, questions that caused you to seem suspect rather than a willing participant in an investigation. Of course, she hadn't been entirely willing, nor cooperative. It had been Matt they were investigating, a long time ago.

"As far as a doctor," Caleb continued, "I'm not so certain I need one. I've been injured, yes, but I don't believe the wound to my head is making me forget."

She considered a moment. "Other things will bring on amnesia, those things too horrible to face."

"I know. I don't know how I know that, but I know. And it worries me."

He still had not gotten to the heart of what he wished to say. The silent query hung in the air, an unvoiced, curled entreaty. Digging her bare toes into the sand, Meg turned to face him.

He was afraid to go away from this place, to be alone. She understood that fear very well.

"You can have the guest room," she told him quietly.

"How do you do that?" he asked.

"Do what?"

"Anticipate what I'm going to say and answer it before I speak."

"I don't know," she lied, making her voice light. It happened. It happened often. Thoughts, questions, feelings shimmered in the air, sometimes more solidly than others. Matt had been afraid of that extrasensory recognition.

"I made the guest bed up for you earlier for a nap I don't believe you've taken. There's no reason you cannot use it. For a few days, anyway."

He raised his head. His dark hair lifted in the breeze. Black-lashed hazel eyes regarded her solemnly, narrowed against a swirl of sand that he attempted to deflect with his hand. He was an attractive man, lean and solidly built, and with a face that was handsome in its evidence of a life lived, even if he could not remember it. She looked at the furrows beside his eyes that spoke of days squinting in the sun, of concentration and deep passions. She tried not to think of the fact that she had just agreed to let him sleep in a bed two doors down from her own.

"You trust me then," he acknowledged, lowering his hand.

"I do." Even so, she thought of the lock on her bedroom door. It might be wise to use it. She saw him exhale, saw the tension leave his shoulders. His hand dropped with a slap against his thigh.

"Thank you."

Compressing her lips she shook her head, averting an emotion she had no wish to analyze. Crossing her arms over her chest she started back toward the house that had been hers and Matt's and in which she had lived for three years without him, since the day he had walked out with no intention of coming home.

As she climbed the weathered wooden staircase she paused to look back. Caleb had not followed but was standing solitary just above the tide line, watching the sea.

## Chapter Three

She had cooked him dinner. He hadn't expected that, although what he would have eaten had she not troubled to feed him he did not know. Afterward she had gone about her business much as usual, he expected, in a room off the kitchen with paints and canvas, sketches and brushes and pencils, sitting down before an easel where a painting rested not yet completed. The light was failing rapidly, fading from the autumn sky. He had the feeling he had kept her from performing this work at a more opportune time, but she did not say so.

He had watched for a moment, frowning at the dark depiction of the sea. The tide was executed in gradations of purple, midnight blue and blood red, the sky above a mass of storm clouds in varying shades of gray. The picture was disturbing to him.

When he went into the living room seeking distraction he found a variety of children's books she had illustrated. Her name was on the cover of each, although the authors varied. The watercolors were light and airy and wonderfully evocative. Beautiful scenes of wildlife and snowfalls, of children and young animals, of gardens and mountains and ancient, gnarled trees from which swings hung drifting in the breeze. Looking at those pictures he understood that once she had been happy. Remembering the painting in her studio, he knew that she was not now.

Lying in the dark, Caleb stretched in the confines of the narrow bed. He tucked his arms behind the upper part of his head, avoiding the goose egg. His eyes followed the shadowed path of a late moth across the ceiling. He had slept for a little while and then come fully awake, with no idea of what time it was. In his disorientation, he could have been sleeping for hours or just a handful of minutes. Somehow, though, he had the feeling it was the middle of the night.

Across the hall and down one door was her bedroom, by day a light-filled chamber with multiple lace-covered windows facing the ocean. He had noticed it when he had come up to shower and had remained in the doorway for an inordinate amount of time, studying the accouterments, the items of personality scattered about, books and oddments of clothing, the arrangement of furniture, of the painted cast iron bed, the pair of dressers, a small desk in the corner, a worn, overstuffed chair in need of re-upholstering. And then he had turned away, feeling guilty for his curiosity.

He wondered now if her sleep was untroubled or if she lay in her bed awake and uneasy with his presence in her house. He certainly would not blame her. He was a stranger, not only to her but to himself.

Letting his breath out slowly, he closed his eyes, visualizing Meg Donovan against his lids. Small in stature, she was possessed of an artless grace that precluded economy of motion, causing her to move restlessly but wonderfully from location to location, whether she was drawing the blinds or rinsing paint from a brush or rising up onto her toes before the bathroom mirror to comb her hair.

Ah, yes, well, he hadn't meant to walk in on her then. He had turned the corner to go into the bathroom and she had just been ... there. Although wearing thin and ratty sweat pants and an over-sized tee shirt, she may as well have been naked. He knew she was dressed for bed and that she would be walking out of that bathroom and into her bedroom, where she would climb beneath the mounded covers. During her marriage to her husband, they had quite likely engaged

in intimacy in that bed. He didn't want to think about it, and yet he kept doing exactly that, visualizing Meg and a faceless man who occasionally appeared in his mind's eye bearing his own.

Disgusted with himself, he took to watching the moth again, gray-winged in the silver night. Despite the autumnal chill he had lifted the sash an inch or so and could hear the constant rhythm of the surf against the sand. Nearer, hot water ticked through the pipes of the old radiator. Fluttering erratically, the moth moved toward the open door and out between the narrow space between the door and jamb. A shadow passed in the hall.

Sitting bolt upright, Caleb suppressed a groan as his pain-racked body protested the sudden movement. While in the shower he had located additional bruises and they were all making their voices heard. Swinging his feet over the side of the single bed, he tugged on the borrowed blue jeans and stepped out shirtless into the corridor.

The hallway, illuminated by the half moon shining through the narrow window at the far end, was empty. Noiselessly Caleb strode along the worn runner. Someone was descending the stairs, attempting to be as quiet as he. Glancing at Meg's door he saw it was still shut. Not her, then. His body tensed. Taking the back stairs swiftly in his bare feet, he crept into the kitchen. Someone, or something, was moving across the floor. He felt the hair lift along his arms.

And then the light went on. He blinked.

"Caleb, I'm sorry, did I wake you? I tried to be quiet."

"I wasn't asleep," he answered, more gruffly than he intended. "I thought someone had broken in."

She arched an eyebrow at him. Her hair, sleep-tousled, or perhaps from the restless lack of it, was tangled about her shoulders. "And you were coming to do battle with the intruder. That's very gallant of you. I'm glad it was only me."

Conscious of how foolish he must look, half-dressed and unarmed, he sat down in the nearest chair. "You couldn't sleep either, I see," he said.

She gave him a strange look, but nodded an affirmative. "Would you like a glass of warm milk? It really does work, you know. I'm making myself one."

"Sure."

He watched as she set about her preparations, pouring milk into a white enameled pot, placing two mugs on the counter, removing a wooden spoon from the drawer. She turned the jet on beneath the pot, then glanced at him over her shoulder.

"Chilly? There's a jacket behind the door."

He was and hadn't been inclined to say so, but once again she had read him without a need for words. He frowned and rose, moving to the hook she indicated and taking down a faded sweatshirt jacket. Matt's? he wondered. Why did she keep so many of his things?

Shoving his arms into the sleeves, he jerked the zipper up and sat back down. At the stove she stirred the heating milk, one hand in the pocket of her holey sweats. The overhead light glinted in the sun-streaked highlights of her hair. Her shoulders were hunched forward as if she, too, were cold. There had been another jacket on a second hook, a smaller version of the one he was wearing. He went and got it and held it out to her. Wordlessly she put it on.

This time he didn't sit down, but turned his hips against the counter top, crossing his arms over his chest. "May I ask you something?"

She glanced up and away, but she didn't say no.

"Do you miss your husband?"

Her next glance lengthened into a glare, then returned to the task to which she was attending. "Yes," she said.

"Is that why you have his clothes still? To remind you of him?"

"I don't need that sort of reminder," she said, not looking up. Studying the steam rising from the pot, she judged the milk hot enough and poured it into the mugs. She flicked the burner off.

"Then why?"

Carrying both mugs to the table, she paused, turning. "I don't know. I really don't. But I haven't wanted to get rid of anything of his. Call me a fool, if you need, but I'd like to know what makes you so certain that's not a normal course of events."

His mouth twisted at her tone. "I'm not entirely certain, which is why I'm asking. However, I've some inkling that people usually pack up the belongings of the ... of people who aren't around anymore," he finished, crossing the linoleum to take his mug and sit down. She pulled out the chair across from him, lowering herself slowly to the seat.

"Well," she murmured, "so they do." And said no more as she lifted the steaming mug to her mouth and drank. He drank, too, contemplating the curve of her lashes on her lowered lids. After a moment, she placed her mug on the table.

"How are you feeling?"

Green like leaves, like water, like glass, her eyes were ever-changing. Right now, they looked like none of those things, but rather like the horizon on a still, clear evening just as the sun went down and the sky was opening up like a blanket of velvet, the only light that brilliant line of green ... where the hell did that come from?

"Fine. Better, I mean. Not fine. I still can't remember anything."

"Huh," she grunted. She hooked the handle of her mug with her forefinger, moving it back and forth. "Caleb is a fine New Englander's name, but I don't think you're from around here."

"Why's that?" he asked, feeling a spark of something that was not exactly interest. It was more like dread.

"You don't have the accent. Neither do I, so I recognize when it's missing. I'm from Pennsylvania, originally."

"Pennsylvania," he echoed. The name meant nothing to him.

He watched her draw breath, take another sip, set the mug back down. She looked at him again, tucking a handful of hair behind her ear.

"I looked in the phone book. And on-line. I couldn't find anything that would lead to any revelations about who you are."

He nodded, feeling that he ought to know what she was talking about. However, the only thing that was clear to him was that she still had no idea who he was or where he belonged. Lifting his mug, he drained the contents, scalding his tongue on the still-heated core.

"Ouch."

She smiled, a small turn of her lips. "You alright?"

"I'm alright," he said.

He wanted to touch her hand, her face, lean across the table and kiss her mouth, take his time, savor the sweetness of it and the residue of warm milk on her tongue. Instead, he stood up quickly, carrying his empty mug to the sink.

"Matt used to do that," she said from the table.

Oh, God, he thought, remembering how clearly she read him. “Do what?” he asked, not turning around.

“Not wait for the milk to cool. He was always burning himself.”

He let his breath out, running water into the heavy mug. When he spun back toward the table she was holding her own close to her chin, staring off into middle space. Not wanting to intrude on her memories, he thanked her quietly and left the kitchen to return to the guest room and his narrow, empty bed.

\* \* \* \*

Meg listened to the creak of the floorboards in the spare room, then the slow groan of the bed frame. She lowered her mug to the table, staring down into the cooled remnants, the shifting of the film of scalded milk on top.

Yes, she thought, Matt used to do that, before he climbed the stairs to shower or to bed, where he would wait for her to finish in the kitchen and join him. He would lean across the table, kissing her long and deeply in invitation while the flavor of warm milk was still shared in their mouths. Back when he still wanted her, when he leapt up hard in anticipation of heated flesh and slick, private places and the intoxication of abandon.

She let her breath out in a quiet sigh. Odd, that this stranger wanted it, too. Even that small bit, of kissing her. She supposed that he, too, possessed some psychic sensitivity. Since he could bring forth no memories of his own, he was perhaps more receptive to hers, reflecting them as if he and she were two mirrors held face-to-face, silvered surfaces casting back into infinity the image of the other until the origin could no longer be discerned.

After a moment she got up to rinse her mug, drying her fingers on the leg of her sweat pants. Turning out the light she gazed through the window at the softly illuminated sea, impatiently dismissing her theory as she recognized its distinct flaw.

There was nothing reflective in the darkness where she lived.

## Chapter Four

What was it about the night that changed one's perspective? What was it about the closing in of the day, the shadowed places and the absence of sound not hushed, that made a difference? What, in the small hours of the morning, made loneliness more prevalent, made desire seem reasonable, made memory less bearable than the alternative ... well, despite the pain that memory brought, she really wouldn't want to be where Caleb was, without a past to recall.

Lying on her back, Meg watched the pattern of reflected starlight move across the ceiling and listened to the sound of Caleb breathing across the hall. She had peeked in at him earlier, cramped in the narrow iron bed, just to assure herself that he was sleeping normally, then she had left his door slightly ajar as well as her own before climbing back beneath the mounded quilt. She told herself it was so she could hear him, if he became restless or distressed. She told herself that as if it were true. Foolish, foolish, foolish, on so many levels.

Loneliness had become her companion, but was not a pleasant one. Familiar, yes, comfortable, yes, but never comforting. Rolling onto her side, she punched the pillow with her fist several times before lowering her head back onto it.

On the anniversary of Matt's death, and the man she felt this yearning for a stranger. A stranger she had dreamt about, but a stranger nonetheless. She had as little idea of who and what he was as he did. The connection between them, though rarified and acknowledged, was not based on anything practical or proven and it was only a matter of a few hours old.

Sitting across from him as early as dinner, her eyes had strayed to his left hand. Usually, if a man wore a wedding band regularly there was some indication of its existence even if the ring of gold was gone. An absence-of-tan line, a thinning of the flesh there, a certain type of callous, something. But there was nothing she could detect. That didn't preclude marriage, naturally, as he could have been one of those men who didn't wear a ring due to the hazards of his particular occupation. His hands certainly had the appearance of immoderate use.

What did he do for a living? Was anyone yet looking for him to return to his desk, his tractor, his ship? Was there a child or children somewhere, a wife wondering what she had done to make him leave her, waiting in vain for him to walk in the door?

She closed her eyes, blotting out that picture. He wasn't married. Somehow she knew that, or was good at convincing herself she knew. Oh yes, the dark magic of the night was at work. She snorted in derision. *Blame something outside of yourself for your weakness*, she thought, rather than the fact that she was desperately lonely, that this was, indeed, the anniversary of Matt's death, that she wanted comfort and physical closeness and that there was something about Caleb Hunter that made her want *him* to fill that void. Maybe her good buddy loneliness had pushed her off the deep end.

But she knew better.

Dammit.

Settling herself, she listened to the sounds of the house. Wind rattled the glass and ruffled the chimes on the porch into musical annotation. Wood creaked, not from the pressure of a body's weight advancing across the planked floor—even though her mind leaped to that conclusion in a heated rush, quickly dismissed—but the contracting of cooling timbers in the weathered Victorian frame. In the front hall below, the grandfather clock ticked its metronomic

rhythm. Hot water clicked through expanding pipes. The house was far from silent, yet she felt its palpable emptiness like a weight on her chest.

But it wasn't empty. It had never been. She was someone. And now there was another someone within its walls, as well.

Someone with no memory of the specifics of his own life, but what did that matter? His injuries were not life-threatening, there was no continued swelling, no headache, nausea, blurred vision or slurred speech. He just wanted somewhere safe for a time, until he remembered things besides his name and that a person or persons unknown had tried to kill him.

Ah, yes. There was that. He could be wrong about both of those, of course, everything considered. But if he wasn't wrong, then that person or persons might still be looking for him.

She should have considered that sooner.

Immobile beneath the quilt, she listened with renewed interest to the sounds she had identified only a few minutes earlier. Had she locked the doors? She rarely did. It would probably be a good idea to do so now.

Flipping back the covers, she stood up, but she didn't turn on the light. Instead, she went to the window and parted the lightly blowing curtain. The chill draft fingered its way through the worn-thin fabric of her sweat pants. The isolated highway that stretched black in the night behind the house was empty but for the glint of a car window beneath the stand of scrub pine just up the road. A quick stop for teenagers bent on whatever it was teenagers did in the dark in their cars these days. Not much different from when she was young, she was sure. The beach was uninhabited from what she could see, and the garden below shadowed and whispering in the breeze.

Biting her lip, Meg headed out into the hall and down the stairs, moving through the darkness to check the locks on all three doors and on all the lower windows. In the room where she painted she turned on the light, gazing at the illustration on the board, still unfinished. To the right, under an old sheet covering, rested the painting of the sea on its easel. Walking toward it she lifted the edge of paint-smear cloth to peer at the portrayal that seemed almost to breathe with the movement of the ocean. Though usually her own worst critic, she recognized the quality of the work. Even so, from her sudden detached perspective the painting was oppressive and ominous and deeply disturbing.

On a whim, she squeezed paint from several tubes onto her pallet. She had no idea what time it was, and she didn't care. With a few quick strokes she painted an object into the foreground, well off-center so that it would not be the focus of the painting, just an item of interest. She had painted something floating in the water, a bit of debris, of flotsam, then made the water washing over it so the item was nearly concealed. Thrown up there, one might think, in the course of nature. She executed the object without any conscious thought, following a stream of subconscious impulse. When she was finished, however, and had cleaned the brushes and returned to the painting, she stared down at it and felt a chill course her spine.

It wasn't just any bit of debris floating beneath the surface of the dark tide. It was a broken spar bearing the name, nearly illegible, of her husband's ship. *Bonafide Venture*.

Stepping back, she pressed her hand to her mouth. "Oh, God," she whispered.

What had made her do that? The subject matter of the painting was not elevated by that addition, but plunged deeper into the darkness spawning it.

Backing away from the easel, Meg felt blindly for the light switch. Moving swiftly through the shadowed house, she stumbled over the kitchen chair on her way to the stairwell.

Shoving the chair back under the table, she limped up the steps to the guest room.

"Caleb."

He made a noise in his sleep, but did not immediately waken. Meg crossed the floor and lowered herself into the chair beside the bed, taking care that the wood did not creak. She folded her hands between her knees. Turning her head, she stared through the window at the night sky. The bedsprings groaned as he rolled beneath the light cover.

"What's wrong, Meg?"

He showed no surprise that she was there. His tone was sleepy, questioning, concerned. He sounded kind. Was he kind? She didn't even know that for certain.

"I'm afraid, Caleb," she said.

He didn't ask of what. He just reached out and took her hand and held it, then closed his eyes and fell back asleep without letting go.

\* \* \* \*

Lying very still on top of the blanket, Meg listened to the gentle, growling breaths Caleb made above her head. She was careful not to move, not to disturb him. She didn't want him to wake up and find that she had crawled into the bed beside him. In subliminal recognition, he had known she was there anyway, if the fleeting, involuntary erection she had felt rise and then recede against the curve of her posterior was any indication. Eventually his arm had come up as well, flopping across her waist. And then he had not moved, settling back into a deep slumber with his body pressed up against her own.

There was comfort to be had from this closeness, even if it was stolen and premature. She couldn't believe she had the nerve to take advantage of him this way, seeking solace and safety and warmth where she had no right to expect any. But the contours of that single arm around her waist, the weight of it if nothing else, made her feel protected. She who prided herself on her independence, her fortitude, recognized in the small hours of the night lying beside a stranger that it had all been an outward show. Almost of defiance, really, as if somehow word would come to Matt that she had survived his leaving her, continued in her career, made a life for herself without him. Well, she had done all of those things and none of them, and now it didn't matter anyway.

Just let it go, she told herself. Just let it all go.

She had been telling herself that for three years, but it hadn't happened yet.

Suddenly Caleb's arm tightened around her and she felt a thrust of concern into the complacent acceptance of her bold action, laying herself down in a strange man's bed. His hand moved under the rucked hem of her shirt and settled around her breast, cupping the weight of it. He was still asleep, reacting unconsciously as he must have at some point in his life before to the presence of a woman in his bed beside him. She didn't want to think on what that relationship might have been, might still be, if he could only remember who he was. She didn't want to think at all, startled but aroused by the feel of a stranger's hand on her flesh. Holding her breath, she waited for his fingers to relax so that she could pull them away without disturbing him.

They didn't relax. As she lay there his thumb began to move across her stiffened nipple in slow strokes. She bit her lip to silence a verbal reaction to sensation, of heat flooding her limbs and coursing through her blood. Her toes curled, her hips moved, and then she forced herself to lie still. He would stop. He would drift more deeply into slumber and stop. Or she could just get out of his bed and return to her own and hope he had no recollection of what he had done to her in his sleep so that she would be able to face him in the morning.

But he didn't stop and she didn't get up. He took her nipple between his thumb and forefinger and began a gentle and erotically repetitive tug and release. Her heart thudded in her chest. The flesh between her legs grew slick. In a fiery instant of realization she knew he was no longer asleep. And then his arm was turning her onto her back as he rose up from the mattress beside her, both hands pushing her oversized tee shirt up and over her head. She was exposed to the chill air, to the draft seeping in from the raised sash of the window, to the exploration of his hands over the stippled flesh of her breasts, her stomach, everywhere, pushing the ragged sweats down over her hips, fingers slipping between her legs, legs that parted willingly to his exploration as his teeth clamped lightly down on her nipple. She thrust her breasts eagerly toward him with a whispered word, one hand in his hair and the other arm laced through the iron railing of the headboard. Caleb seemed fired by her eagerness, greedily consuming her flesh with his mouth, seeking out and finding every nerve ending to increase her arousal, his fingers doing exquisite things to the flesh between her legs, stroking her clitoris until she was ready to explode. And as his hands firmly grasped her thighs and held her and his mouth closed over her, she did just that, with a cry of release that echoed in her ears long after it was over.

"Oh my," she murmured, breathing hard. The two words were echoed by another pair of his own, not nearly as innocuous, and he sat up, settling back over his heels. She hadn't realized he was sleeping in the nude. His erection stood firm against the line of dark hair trailing up his belly to the silky, curling mass on his chest. The expression in his eyes made her scramble up against the headboard, struggling into her shirt to hide her nakedness.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, ashamed, swinging her legs over the side of the bed as she reached for her discarded sweat pants. He closed his hand around her wrist.

"Don't," he said. "Don't leave."

"I have to," she said.

"Please. Stay. Stay and talk to me."

At his tone she wanted to weep. Instead she stood up, bending to climb into her pants. Peripherally, she saw him watching, and then he moved to sit with his back against the headboard, pulling the blanket up to cover his hips. He was still hard, unfulfilled, but he seemed okay with that. He patted the mattress beside him.

"Sit," he said. "Talk."

Biting her lip she did so, tucking her bare feet under the sheet. Not so much for warmth, but that she didn't want anything of nakedness between them. Of course, there was no getting around the fact that he was fully unclothed beside her, the only thing hiding his erection from her gaze the tented, lightweight blanket. The blood engorging his penis didn't look to be going anywhere else anytime soon. Meg turned her head away, drawing her knees up to her chest.

"I shouldn't have taken advantage of you like that, Caleb, climbing into your bed, looking for comfort, for ... well, I wasn't exactly looking for what just happened."

"I could have stopped," he said. "We both could have stopped."

"I know."

"Don't feel bad about it. It was nice. It was more than nice. You were ... quick," he added delicately.

"Yes, well, three years alone will do that to you."

If he wondered why she had been alone for three years when her husband had only been dead for one, he made no mention. Perhaps he was too distracted to do the math.

"You didn't have any trouble recalling what you needed to do to make that happen," she said.

"I guess some things don't require conscious memory. Some things you don't forget."

"Like riding a bike," she murmured. He gave her a quizzical look from beneath his lashes, but he didn't ask.

Meg let out a long breath. She listened as the wind picked up, causing a sudden, musical clamor on the porch.

"What is that?"

"Wind chimes," she explained. "Metal tubes of varying lengths are hung around a circular plate with fishing line and when they strike each other in the wind, they make that noise. There are eight tubes, so they probably correlate to every note of a tonal octave. I don't know for certain. I'll show them to you tomorrow."

Beside her, he nodded, then he reached over and took her hand. "What's this on your finger?" he asked, rubbing his nail along a bit of dried paint.

"I still couldn't sleep, so I was painting. I think I could sleep now, though," she admitted with a small laugh.

Wordlessly, he slid his hips down, then pulled her close so that her head was on his chest. The folds of the blanket revealed his ebbing erection. She wanted very badly to touch him, to stroke him back to life, to eager hardness, but she kept her hand balled into a fist against the curling hairs of his chest.

"Go to sleep, then, Meg," he whispered above her head. "But tell me one thing first."

"What's that?"

"What are you afraid of?"

She opened her fingers into the soft, black curls on his chest. Beneath the drifting current of her steady respiration, his nipple was erect. She knew what would happen if she touched him there, knew it as surely as if she'd already done so, already explored the places that made him moan. Closing her eyes, she burrowed closer beneath the curve of his arm, breathing in the musky male scent of him.

"It might be easier if I told you what I wasn't afraid of," she said.

"Alright," he agreed affably, even sleepily.

"You," she said. "I'm not afraid of you."

The rumble of a chuckle vibrated beneath her ear.

"And what we just did?"

"Not afraid of that either," she answered. His fingers moved through her hair, stroking it back from her crown, then settled on her shoulder.

"I don't think there's much that really frightens you, Meg Donovan, but there is something that does and it seems to be undermining a great deal of your life. I'm just glad it's not me. I'd like to do this again some time."

She snorted in a distinctly unfeminine manner, wrapping her arm around his waist. "Whatever you say," she murmured, deliberately leaving him to wonder to which of his three statements she was responding, and then she closed her eyes again. Outside, the wind chimes continued their music and she knew she would never hear them again without thinking of this night, this quirky, scary, perfect night. That was one of her problems. She attached meaning, significance, to everything, when sometimes there was none. Sometimes things just happened. Period.

And sometimes, like with Caleb, she knew the trail of significance left scattered in the wake of an occurrence stretched farther than she could ever hope to comprehend.

## Chapter Five

Meg stood before the stone cross, examining the plaque and the names incised into brass. Matt's was, of course, near the bottom, listed with the three others who had gone down with him. Matthew James Donovan. Gary Martin Smith. Donald Sweetwater. James Jay Fitzhugh. She had known all but Donald, who had been newly hired for that fateful trip. She bowed her head out of respect for all of them, but her prayers were brief. Repose. Peace. That was all she could ask for them now.

Lifting her head, she looked beyond the cross and the circle of tarmac that wrapped around it. The little town stretched inland, the main street—which she was viewing now—a series of shops and businesses, while those radiating out from it in less than straight spokes held late nineteenth and early twentieth century homes. Victorian frame houses, some in various stages of refurbishment, some falling into disrepair, dotted these streets with a few newer homes between. North of the 'Point' was the harbor and the fishery, the smell of both drifting down to the town when the wind was right. Today, however, the wind was blowing from the southeast and all she could smell was clean sea air.

Watching the townspeople for a moment going about their business, she recalled the days when she was newly arrived. As insular as New England folk could be, they had accepted her right away. Perhaps because she had been Matt's sweetheart and Matt was, at that time anyway, everyone's darling.

Glancing at the watch on her wrist, Meg noted that it was getting on toward dinner time. Groceries were in her car and she needed to get them home. Still she lingered, thinking of Caleb waiting for her there. She didn't regret her actions of the night before, not the white hot velocity of the sexual act, not the fact that she had fallen asleep in his arms, not even the fears that had driven her there. The shame she had felt upon witnessing that brief expression of accusation in his eyes had been soothed away by his words that followed. Getting out of his bed just before dawn to return to her own had, however, been an error. After the intimacy of the small hours of the night, no matter how premature, waking up in separate beds had set the tone for the day. They moved shyly, almost awkwardly, through the morning's routines. And as the day progressed, so did the distance between them, a distance that should, by rights, have existed all along, but hadn't. It was all backwards.

Even now, remembering the abandon with which she had welcomed his fevered attentions made her skin flush and her knees tremble. What on earth must he think of her?

With a canted, unclear frame of reference—if, indeed, he possessed any—he likely saw nothing extraordinary about a woman who accepted a man she had just met under bizarre circumstances not only into her home, but into her bed. Well, his bed. His loaner bed. Whoever's bed it was, her presence in it would not go unremarked under normal conditions.

And that was it. The conditions existing between them were not normal. They never would be. They had started out in peculiar fashion and that was only bound to escalate once his recollection returned. The elements of their strange and accelerated relationship defied definition, goals, boundaries. The simple act of tending to a fellow human being in need was now complicated by what she had let happen, what she had participated in, what she had precipitated by climbing into the bed beside him.

But would she go back and change it, if she could? No.

Feeling her blush recede, Meg turned her back on the cross, looking past her car at curbside to the headland stretching out into the sea. The promontory was covered with seabirds massed along the rocky crest like snow. The spume from the waves fragmented prismatically in the sun. Despite civilization, it was still a beautifully wild and rugged area. She understood why Matt had loved it so. She did, too.

Yet, upon raising her gaze to the endless appearance of the ocean, she shuddered. She could never share that particular affection. Never. The vastness of the ocean had always frightened her in some elemental fashion she could not explain.

"Meg!"

Drawn back from her reverie, Meg observed the police car pull alongside her own and its driver lean out the window, arm crooked over the doorframe.

"Dan," she said.

The greeting was carefully neutral. Stepping down off the curb, she crossed the empty street to stand at a brief distance from the driver's side door.

"Nice day," said the man who had once grilled her for hours regarding Matt's activities and then later, when it had become known that Matt had moved out, paid her several impromptu visits on one excuse or another. Eventually, he had risked the frank disapproval of his superiors to ask her out. He was sufficiently good-looking to be the topic of frequent discussions in a variety of the female-oriented establishments around town, but she hadn't been interested. He was, she'd heard recently, between girlfriends. His wife had left him some years ago. Maybe that was what he thought they had in common.

"It is," she agreed. "A little chilly, but the sun is delightful."

He nodded, his eyes behind the dark glasses moving in appraisal of her person.

"You look different. Did you just get your hair done?"

She sucked in her breath. Was it that obvious? She felt suddenly like a teenaged girl walking into the house after a date with her sweater on inside out. The blush was back.

"Dan, I can honestly say that I've never gotten anything done to my hair that would make somebody stand up and take notice."

He continued to eye her from behind the dark lenses with a peculiar expression. Perhaps he thought she was blushing because of him.

"Well," he drawled after a moment, "you do look nice."

"Thanks," she answered hesitantly.

He nodded again, a brief inclination of his head. The unit's radio crackled in static intrusion. He lifted the mike to provide a brief response.

"Sorry," he said.

"It's alright. You're working."

"I am," he responded, tapping his finger on the steering wheel. "Slow day."

"That's a good thing, isn't it?"

"Yup," he agreed and continued to idle his car beside her own. Meg started to edge away, moving toward the back of the police unit.

"I'll see you ...."

"Nothing new up by you?" he interrupted, turning to look at her, his eyes shadowed by the dark lenses.

Meg was startled by his question and tried not to show it. After all, it was likely

innocent enough. "Not really," she stated, returning unwillingly to stand beside him again.

"You've been shopping."

Noticing the angle of his head, she realized he could see the bags of groceries on her seat.

"A person gets hungry," she answered.

"Sometimes a person needs a little company, too," he said. "Got enough in there for two?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. I'm expecting someone for dinner."

One sandy eyebrow lifted and then he nodded a third time, knowingly. "Good to hear, Meg. Anyone I might know?"

Was it just force of habit inducing the guy to ask so many pointed questions? Or was he trying to make a point? He couldn't possibly know she wasn't alone. For a moment, she was tempted to ask him what he was driving at, but she stopped herself. If he knew about Caleb, he would have said so straight out. That was his approach. He didn't often beat around the bush, even when he had been trying to trip her up about Matt.

She shook her head in response, saying something about having company from out of town. He lowered his chin so that he was peering at her through pale blue eyes over the rim of his sunglasses.

"Been seeing him a while, have you?"

Her eyebrows shot up. He was being entirely too inquisitive. "No," she said, "I haven't."

He smiled. "Well, then, maybe you'll invite me up one night for dinner, too. I'll bring a bottle of something or other."

"A bottle of something or other?" she echoed, not feeling friendly any longer at all.

"Whatever you like. Wine. Schnapps. A little Scotch. Beer. Give me a call. You still have my cell number?"

"It's on your card," she stated blandly. A card she had promptly thrown away. She hoped he wouldn't have the effrontery to ask her to recite it.

He didn't. Lifting two fingers in farewell, he began to ease the car along the street, then quickly braked, jerking his chin in the direction of the stone cross.

"Heard you were asking questions around town about any downed ships, any distress calls. Anniversary was sometime recent, wasn't it? Bound to get you brooding about that type of thing again. You get spooked out there by yourself, you give me a call. Five minutes. That's all it would take me to get to your place."

He was expecting some kind of response from her. Any sort of gratitude expressed would only provide him an opening she had no desire to give him.

"If I need you, I'll call," she said.

He pale gaze was direct. "Promise?"

Meg sucked in a quick breath through her nose at his tone of challenge. With a nod that was less answer than dismissal, Meg walked around the rear of the patrol unit to her car. She opened the door and slid in behind the wheel, watching Dan Stauffer drive away. There was nothing polite about the single-worded question, *promise?* and the tone. Assertive, almost official rather than friendly, the way he had sounded when he had interrogated her, hoping to bully her into an admission of something she had no way of knowing.

But she had known. Or at least she had suspected Matt was involved in something he shouldn't be. She had not cared for the position into which she had been put, forced to be

evasive when she was uncertain from what she was trying to shield herself. She had not been willing to point fingers at shadows. She had wanted the truth from Matt first. In the end, he had neither admitted nor denied anything to her, and then he was gone.

Realizing she had permitted herself to be placed in a similar position, Meg turned the ignition key in agitation. In this instance, though, there was one major difference. Caleb was not willfully withholding information from her. Whatever reason he possessed for avoiding the law was shut away with his errant memory. She didn't believe he had done anything criminal, but how could she know for certain? The sooner he remembered, the easier she would feel. Isolation could only last so long. Eventually, something from the outside world would intrude and an altogether different sort of danger might arrive in the guise of a uniformed officer.

## Chapter Six

Caleb sat on the low ottoman, his long legs at a sharp angle to his hips as he leaned forward between them, gazing at the instrument in his hand. He possessed a fairly good notion of what it was. After all, he had known what a cell phone was in Meg's hand that first day. But late this afternoon he had recognized with stark identification the instrument's use, just as a series of numbers had popped into his head. For a good hour he carried the phone around, unable to make himself depress the buttons that coordinated to the numbers. He had no idea who he would be dialing. For all he knew, the number might belong to a killer.

Reaching up with his left hand to finger the still-sensitive knot beneath the tangle of his hair, he turned the phone in his right in contemplation. There were any number of possibilities regarding the outcome of making this call besides reaching the man who had tried to kill him, of course. Failure to discover anything of significance, raising more questions than answers, might be one of them. In another scenario, he imagined someone answering the phone, possibly a woman who would tell him that he was married, had a life to which he was expected to return. The only woman that came to mind at this point was Meg. There were echoes of no others in his head. How would he deal with that? What if he never remembered anything or anyone else? Meg's presence was filtering into the blanks of his past, filling the barren niches with the comfort and familiarity of her presence and now, after last night, a passion only briefly explored.

Drawing a deep breath, Caleb stretched out his leg and settled the phone onto his knee, staring at the wall lost in thought. He remembered the manner in which she had climaxed in an explosion that left her drained, and then, oddly enough, ashamed. He suspected her emotion had been a direct result of the instant when the thought had flashed into his mind, *how could you do this?* He didn't know where the thought had come from, nor the flare of hurt, almost anger, accompanying it, and just as swiftly he had pushed the thought away. There was no reason for it. But the damage had already been done. She had sensed it, perhaps read it in the air between them in that odd way of hers. She did not deserve his bewildering reaction. He was quite happy that she chose to be with him in that fashion. He needed that closeness and so, it seemed to him, did she. If she hadn't been so withdrawn today, he would have talked with her about what had taken place between them, assured her in some way, if he could.

Lifting the phone again, he tapped it several times on his knee cap, then punched in the ten digits he had recalled. He brought the phone up to his ear. If he was remembering this operation correctly he should hear a ringing of sorts, followed by someone speaking to him.

Instead, he heard a repeated and annoying tone. A busy signal. That was what it was called. Busy signal. Hanging up, he tried again for no less than twenty attempts. Thwarted, he rose and strode out of the living room into the kitchen, setting the phone in its cradle. Picking up a pencil he wrote the number down on a piece of paper and shoved it in his pocket. In a little while he would repeat the process. Finding out anything was better than nothing at all.

In frustration, he climbed the stairs to the second floor and strode down the hall to the bathroom to wash his face. The narrow room was shadowed with the approach of evening. Still, there was enough light to see what he was doing. After all, it was a simple task. Bending over the sink, he turned on the faucet and splashed his forehead and jaw and mouth, then lifted his head in preparation of reaching for the towel. Directly beside his own, an unfamiliar face was

looking back at him.

With a startled exclamation, Caleb spun around, hands raised in instinctive defense. The room was empty, the shadows running long across the papered walls. Shoving aside the shower curtain, he ducked swiftly to peer into the tub, then jerked backward, glancing behind the door before darting out into the hallway, understanding even as he did so that no one could move that quickly. No one was there.

For a long moment he stood in the hall, listening to the sounds of the house, the waning day outside, while his racing heart steadied its pace. Turning around, he strode back into the bathroom and up to the splotched mirror. He half expected to find himself being watched by that other face again, but the only countenance gazing back at him was his own.

"Alright," he said aloud, and then again, "Alright."

Respiring evenly, slowly, deliberately, he examined the bruises that had come to the surface overnight on his jaw and throat. There were several more he had discovered in the shower on his legs and torso. His knuckles were abraded, his hands and wrists and forearms stiff and aching. He had put up quite the fight to prevent his own murder. He was not a small man. The possibility that he had struggled with more than one person was likely.

Oddly enough, that recognition made him feel better. He had been worrying about what he might possibly have done to make someone want to kill him. He had worried that another man had acted in self-defense. But more than one man? No, that had been a deliberate act and would have had nothing whatsoever to do with any flaw of ruthlessness in his own character.

Leaning forward, he tapped on the silvered, damp-blackened glass with his finger. "Who are you?" he muttered.

His reflection wavered as the lighting in the room shimmered and changed. Dizzied, Caleb sat down on the closed toilet seat, one hand pressed to his roiling stomach. Damn it all.

Damn it *all*. He didn't like feeling this way, sick and weak and disoriented. Something in him told him that he had always been strong in the past, a man to take calculated risks, not stupid ones, a man in control. Not now. Oh, God, not now.

Hallucinations or whatever one might call sightings of faces that weren't there couldn't be a good sign either. He had to get better, he had to remember his life and what had happened to him most recently, who had tried to kill him and why. Not remembering was a risk to both him and to Meg, as the danger was likely still there if the perpetrator ever learned he was still alive, where he was. Anyone could walk up to the door without his knowledge of their identity. If he was not alone when that happened, Meg would be in as much danger as he.

"Ah, hell," he said out loud. Meg was not suffering from a knock on the head. Such an idea had probably already occurred to her. Last night, as a matter of fact.

Ah, *hell*.

Closing his eyes, Caleb lowered his brow onto his hand, riding out the wave of nausea. For the sake of Meg's safety, he should leave here, but where would he go? Just since yesterday this house, Meg's company, had become such a refuge from the uncertainty of his position that he could barely stand the thought of going away from her into the unknown. Any danger that might come to him here could conceivably follow him wherever he might wander, stalking him without identity, endangering anyone else who might endeavor to help him. Meg had suggested the police when first he had sought her help, and although he possessed only a rough knowledge of who and what that organization was, he felt an aversion to their interference that even now would not let him agree.

There was so much he didn't know, couldn't understand. He was reacting on a very basic, instinctual level, and even that could be leading him astray.

The panic he felt was ill-defined and short-lived. Rather quickly, something clicked in his head, something very fundamental to his personality. *Trust yourself*, it said.

Rising slowly from his seated position, he returned to the sink and washed his face again, drying himself on the towel he had used that morning when he showered. Striding to the window, he pushed the curtain aside. Meg's car was pulling into the driveway. She didn't get out immediately, but sat behind the wheel studying the facade of the house. When she saw him in the window she waved. He felt his lips curving into a smile.

Trust yourself.

Running his fingers through his damp hair, he went downstairs to help her with the grocery bags.

## Chapter Seven

Meg piled the dishes into the sink, running warm water and a dab of soap into it to let them soak. Watching the bubbles foam, she floated a moment in the intoxication caused by Caleb's nearness throughout dinner. She hadn't once given consideration to the concerns that had plagued her on the ride home. Even now, she dismissed them as soon as they suggested themselves to her again. She felt warm and disconnected and light-as-air, like a balloon with only a slim tether of ribbon to gravity.

"Meg, you okay?"

Caleb was leaning against the counter beside her. He was heat and energy, hard muscle and warm blood, tendon and sinew and flesh. He felt solid, grounded.

"Absolutely," she said.

He grunted in response, nodding toward the sink.

"Why don't you show me how you want those done?"

Meg's brows arched. "The dishes? They can wait."

"Show me," he repeated. "I'll learn fast."

Shrugging, Meg rolled up her sleeves and reached for the sponge. Caleb pivoted on his heel so that he was directly behind her. She pressed a little closer to the sink.

"There's enough soap in here, but I like some extra directly on the sponge."

"Uh-huh," he said, an attentive student. Upending the bottle of dish detergent, Meg squirted lightly-scented liquid onto the center of the sponge, then squeezed the damp cellulose rapidly a few times to work up a lather. His hand closed around her own, imitating the movement of her fingers on the sponge, then he eased it out of her grasp.

"Let me."

She started to relinquish her position to him at the sink, but his other arm came down to her left, hand resting on the counter edge. "Don't go away. Keep teaching."

The whole scene suddenly reminded her of one she had seen in a movie, and she wondered if the same film was lurking somewhere in his subconscious. Dramatic and romantic, she remembered the outcome of that scene very well, and her tongue slipped out to moisten her lips.

Plunging her arm into the water, she brought out a plate, then slid her hand around the back of his, drawing it near to the dish. Foaming bubbles sluiced between her fingers and down her wrist.

"You scrub the dish like this, or I do anyway, in circles."

He leaned his arms alongside hers as he followed her instruction.

"The water's very warm," he commented. Suds, nearly amniotic in temperature, ran in runnels through the dark hair on his forearms and down over the downy blonde hair on hers. His breath moved across her nape, stirring tendrils loosened from the clasp of her ponytail. She thought with fleeting intensity of the night before. Well, technically that morning. Her pulse quickened.

"Can't get them clean without it," she answered his comment about the water's temperature, sounding remarkably matter-of-fact. Turning the plate over, she had him repeat the process on the other side. "Set the dishes over there until we're ready to rinse them all."

He did as he was told, reaching into the water for the next item, performing the mechanics of the task with silent, superficial concentration. She suspected that his mind wasn't totally on the job. Hers certainly wasn't. She turned her head to glance at him. He did likewise, smiling down at her with a closed curve of his mouth. She threw her thoughts at him in a fervent desire for him to kiss her, but it had never worked that way before. She couldn't make anyone do a thing by thought process alone. However, she knew he'd gotten the signal, perhaps by some subtle or not so subtle body language more than any telepathic communiqué, when he smiled again, bending closer.

"This is enjoyable," he whispered near her mouth, then straightened and resumed his undertaking.

Her right knee jerked and struck the cabinet door.

She could sense the firmness of his chest close to her spine, the thudding of his heart beneath the surface of his flesh. She watched the newly familiar shape of his arms from beneath her lashes as he squeezed excess soap from the sponge, the tendons in his wrist standing up, the muscles of his forearm tightening before release. Foam splattered onto her face and the neckline of her tank top beneath her open collar, water running down over the swell of her breast and into her bra in a warm, slow trail.

"Sorry," he apologized softly.

"Not a problem," she assured him.

He continued to wash and she continued to watch, fascinated by the confident action of his hands, the knowledge of his body close to hers, the humming vibration of his energy in the narrow space between them. He confined his activity to dishwashing, but there was a sultry promise in every move he made. It seemed to her that he wasn't just laving a dish, the interior of a glass, the length of a knife, but demonstrating a technique of motion that when transferred at last to her body would cause her to lose all restraint. She had all she could do to keep from squirming where she stood, or slipping out from beneath his arms to stand safely on the other side of the kitchen.

As he neared the end of his task, searching out the last of the items in the water, he began to hum a tune above her head. She listened, recognizing with a start a wordless version of the refrain to an old Morrison tune. Obviously, a bit of memory was seeping through. Leaning forward, Meg drained the sink, humming along with him as a small smile curved her lips. She turned on the water to rinse the dishes and stack them in the drain board. As soon as the last one was in place, Caleb reached past her to turn off the water and pulled her away from the counter, his wet hands on her shoulders, her waist, clutching her fingers as he began to lead her in a slow dance around the kitchen floor to the tune vibrating from his chest.

He held her close, the dampness seeping from his hands through her clothes. It took her a moment to realize the rumbling song from his unclear recollection had ended and he was just holding her, rocking slowly in the middle of the floor, his unshaven jaw turned against the top of her head.

"Are you remembering something?" she whispered.

"No," he answered, but his voice was strained. She pulled away from him to look up at him for the truth behind the word, but then he kissed her.

Startled, she sucked in her breath, sucked in the warm air of his lungs, and then she opened her mouth to meet the gentle exploration of his tongue. Her thoughts spun dizzily, her arms clinging across his back, his neck, to keep herself grounded. His body was heated and lean

and hard, while hers seemed to be losing all solid consistency. He held her tighter, one hand in the small of her back, pushing her close against his hips. She could feel him, erect and straining in the confines of his borrowed jeans. His other hand was open along her throat, fingers pressed to the battering pulse beneath her jaw. Curling her fingers into the fabric of his shirt, she drew him backwards across the floor until they were once more against the cabinets.

He pulled his head away slightly, looking a question into her eyes.

"Don't stop kissing me," she said. "Don't stop anything."

With his mouth on her own, he lifted her onto the counter top. His hands moved beneath her blouse, easing her bra straps down into her sleeves, thumbs sliding along the curve of her collar bone, then down into the soft cup of her undergarment to tease her nipples until they were standing erect against his finger tips. Pressing his forehead against hers, he whispered, "May I take this off?"

"My bra?"

"All of it."

She nodded against him, and he did just that, fumbling with the catch on her bra before basic, unconscious recall kicked in and she found herself quickly naked from the waist up, her clothes in a heap beside her on the counter. He cupped her chilled breasts in his palms. She looked down at the contrast of his tanned fingers against the creamy hue of her skin, her nipples taut in yearning. He bent from the waist to take first one, then the other into his mouth, pulling with the edge of his teeth. The damp residue from his tongue across each rosy tip chilled in the air. Eagerly she thrust her breasts toward him, wanting more. The delicacy of his touch had been exquisite.

With his hands around her rib cage, he repeated his action, not once but many times, until Meg found her breath coming fast and shallow. Heat shimmered across her skin and flooded into her abdomen. If this was all it was going to take, she was in pretty sorry shape, but this *was* all it was going to take ....

At the sound emerging from low in his throat, she knew that Caleb recognized her urgency, felt a similar one of his own, pulling her hips toward his as his head came up, his mouth fastening hard on hers. She wrapped her legs around his waist, the back of her head coming almost painlessly into contact with the cabinet behind as he drove against her, the rumble of her name vibrating around the hollow of her mouth. The pressure of his hips into the curve of her thighs, his denim-encased erection against the seam of her trousers, the soaked cotton of her panties, made her moan and tighten her arms around his neck. They rocked together with the motion of an intimacy thwarted by layers of fabric and she came anyway, hard and long and shuddering and wrapped in his embrace. He whispered words against her face, her throat, the swell of her breasts, then he lifted her from the counter with her legs still around his waist and headed for the stairs.

At the base he paused.

"Don't carry me up, Caleb. I'm too heavy."

"You don't weigh a thing," he whispered, setting his foot on the first step.

She shook her head, struggling free of his arms to stand on the step above, her height on a level with his. He lowered his foot back down beside the other, hazel eyes moving warmly over her flushed breasts. Lifting a hand, he encircled one, rubbing his thumb across her nipple. She felt the heat begin anew, simmering in her flesh. With his other hand he unfastened the button of her pants, slowly pulled down the zipper, then released her breast to push her pants down her

legs. She stepped out of them.

Hooking the edge of her panties, he pulled them aside, sliding the fingers of his other hand along the soaked contours of flesh revealed. He dropped down onto his knees.

"Oh God," she breathed.

He laughed, a low sound less of amusement than pleasure. When he opened his mouth over her, his tongue moved in slow, sultry, sensual demand. Her knees trembled. She clutched the banister for support, finding she had no breath, no voice, no cognizance but that of the place where his tongue circled lazily, urging her in delicious increments toward climax. His hands were on her thighs, pushing her down onto the step, and then his mouth held her there trembling in captivity as he unfastened his jeans.

"Caleb," she whispered.

The utterance of his name seemed to galvanize him, because he stopped everything, the moment hanging suspended in a glittering, crystallized instant before shattering, and then he straightened his spine, taking the pressure of her weight off the wooden step with his hands as he slid the engorged length of his penis inside of her. The sound escaping her throat was not one she recognized.

The hard, rounded edge of the step hurt where it pressed against her spine, but she scarcely noticed. The less recognizable edge to her loneliness hurt, as well, deep-rooted and isolating and she sheered away from it, riding the curl of pure sensation into which she was thrust by the movement of his hips between her thighs, the manner in which he filled her so completely, the feel of his hands protecting her from the full impact of his driving need, the texture of his tongue, the flavor of his mouth on her own. When he groaned and shuddered in completion he was not inside her, some buried retention of precaution causing him to pull out at the end, holding her close against him as he breathed heavily into her hair. He was saying something to her over and over, softly, soothingly. He was telling her not to cry. Only then did she realize that she was.

"Oh, Caleb," she whispered, scrubbing the dampness from her cheek, "I don't know why I'm crying. I'm sorry."

"Shh."

He pulled away, smiling down at her, then made a face at the condition of her underwear.

"I think you need a shower."

"Yep," she agreed.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm fine."

She wasn't, not entirely, but he didn't need to know that. She had just had sex with a stranger, a fact which both appalled and exhilarated her. At the same time, she knew that she had just had sex with a man who was not a stranger at all, because some part of her knew him, recognized him, *remembered* him in a manner she could not explain. For the space of several drawn breaths she studied the hazel eyes gazing back into her own, and then she kissed him gently on the mouth.

"Are you joining me?" she asked as she struggled, rubber-legged, to her feet.

"I'm going to step outside for a bit of air and then I'll be up," he said, reaching for his jeans. Meg bit her lip. He felt the strangeness, too. She knew it, as surely as if he'd said the words aloud.



## Chapter Eight

Dan Stauffer lowered his binoculars against his thigh, digging with his other hand in the pocket of his coat for his cigarettes, remembering after a few fumbled attempts that he had given up that particular vice some months ago. Bad timing, that. He really could have used one about now.

Leaning back in the seat, he stared through the car window at the house, white faded to gray in the night. The lights were on downstairs in the kitchen. For the past three years, his irregular vigils had always shown it to be the same, Meg's nightly routine defined by the light burning in one room or another until the final lamp in her bedroom upstairs, which sometimes stayed lit until the wee hours, and sometimes was shut off within minutes of being turned on. Tonight, however, had been different. Tonight she had not been alone.

Hell, he felt like a friggin' pervert watching that, but once they had begun he hadn't been able to turn away. He'd always known there was something about her. Meg Donovan had a look. She drew men's eyes without knowing it, by the way she walked, her quick laugh, the firm and vigorous female shape of her. Tonight he'd seen a great deal more of that female shape than he had ever hoped to witness. She had breasts that could stop a man's heart in his chest, and that guy she was with had enjoyed every inch of them for a good, long time.

Dan released a shaking breath, shifting his hips in an attempt to relieve the uncomfortable restriction in his trousers. Stretching across to the glove compartment, he flipped it open, not too concerned about the tiny light showing. Meg's place was fairly isolated and he figured neither one of the two occupants were going to be glancing out the window anytime soon. Whatever was taking place in their grand finale had moved out of his viewing area, but he had a healthy imagination and didn't need the binoculars to tell him what they were doing now.

Grabbing an open pack of gum, Dan shut the compartment and slid the paper off the end of a stick, drawing it into his mouth with his teeth, then he leaned back into the seat again, the spice of cinnamon burning pleasantly on his tongue. Pressing the curve of his close-shaven skull against the cloth headrest, he closed his eyes, trying very hard not to let his imagination get the best of him. He had always hoped despite his investigation that he would be the one with which Megan Donovan broke her extended solitude. He had spent more than a few sleepless nights in covetous contemplation of such a coupling. A woman like her, alone for so long, was bound to be hot for a stiff cock. What he had just glimpsed taking place on the counter through the kitchen window had been proof positive of that.

It had been a year since the *Bonafide Venture* had gone down, and three years since Matt Donovan had walked out of his wife's life. She deserved a little fun, even a new relationship, although from what he glimpsed of this guy he didn't look familiar, not like anyone from around here, so Dan couldn't be sure what the heck would come of it. Maybe she'd give up the house and move to wherever this guy was from, but he doubted it. She'd grown up in Pennsylvania and hadn't shown any inclination to move back there yet. He didn't think she wanted to leave. Uncommonly attached to the place, all things considered. Like she was waiting for something.

And just what, he mused, eyes still closed, might that be? He had to stop being so suspicious. It was in his nature to constantly question motives, and considering what he had learned of Matt's activities it had, early on, seemed unlikely to him that Meg was clear of all

knowledge. As time passed he had reconsidered that notion. As to her reasons for staying despite the hurt, the humiliation, well, she did have a life here. She had a few close friends, a looser circle of association, a career, the house. That piece of prime real estate had risen in value over the past couple of years. With a little cosmetic sprucing she could sell it for a bundle and move on. However, during the course of his questioning of her and later, during those few times when he had the opportunity just to converse with her, he had come to realize that Meg liked where she lived, liked the architecture and history of the house, the isolation of its position, the nearness of the beach, the waves, although she wasn't particularly fond of the ocean itself.

If she had any clue how much she'd unintentionally revealed to him of herself she wouldn't be thrilled. She didn't care for him much, he could tell. But occasionally she talked to him, and he was always listening.

Opening his eyes, he saw that the porch light had come on. He couldn't see the back porch directly, but witnessed the glow of the wall sconce along the length of the railing, in the landscaped grasses, a pale nimbus of illumination blooming into the gathering mist. A shadow passed through the light, moving to lean against a corner post. It was him.

That was quick. No afterglow cuddling session? Curious—and a little envious—Dan raised the binoculars again.

The guy was shirtless, clad only in a pair of jeans in the chilly night. Still, he didn't huddle into himself in protection against the chill, but stood leaning forward on his hands curled around the railing, staring out into the darkness. Despite his stance, Dan could see that he was loose-limbed, relaxed, obviously sated. Dan felt a twinge of—what? Was it jealousy? However, when the fellow turned his head into the light his expression revealed an attitude contrary to his appearance. Dan sat up.

The guy's eyes looked cold, hard, calculating. Or at least they seemed to. At that distance it was difficult to tell. A moment later the fellow's expression changed, softened, a smile curving his mouth, then an instant later again became hard. Dan watched as Meg's lover raised a hand to his head as if it hurt, then lowered that same hand back down to the railing. The man tilted his chin up, turning his head, his shoulders, his whole body, until he appeared to be looking directly at Dan across five hundred feet of night-driven darkness.

Swearing aloud, Dan held himself immobile, waiting. There was no way—*no way*—this guy could see him, not even the glint of his binoculars. The car was parked off the road beneath the blowing shadow of a stand of wind-bitten pines. He'd been there countless times before without even a glance from passing motorists. Still the dark-haired man on the porch continued to gaze in his direction, looking for all the world like he was staring straight into his eyes through the circle of the binocular lenses. Dan felt the fine hairs on his neck shift. The dashboard clock flashed from one minute into the next before lover-boy finally looked away. Dan released his breath.

Hell, that had been an odd sensation. Reaching up, he smoothed the follicles down at the back of his neck. After a few minutes, the fellow walked back out of sight and the porch light went out. Dan shifted the binoculars' focus and found him striding through the kitchen. In another minute that light went out also, leaving only a single window illuminated upstairs. The bathroom, he thought.

Dan glanced at the clock again. He'd wait a bit more. There had been something down by the water before darkness fell that had caught his eye. He had no idea what it was, but his vision through the binoculars had been drawn repeatedly in that direction while the light lasted.

Curiosity was burning through him. He couldn't explain why, but he felt an overwhelming desire now that little dance of theirs in the kitchen was done to sneak down to the beach and check it out. After that he would call it quits and go home. His surveillance was unofficial. If he ever got caught at it now that the investigation was closed, he'd be without a job. So he waited a quarter of an hour, until the light in the bathroom went out, then he reached under the seat for his flashlight.

Opening the car door, he stepped out onto sparse vegetation after taking the precaution of turning off the interior overhead. Closing the door until it barely caught, Dan crossed the street at the far side of the weathered fence bordering the property. By daylight the barrier was thinly built, but under cover of night he would be just another shadow.

Stepping out onto the beach below the end of the fence line, he felt the shift of loose sand beneath his sneakers. The foam of the surf was luminous in the black curl of the breakers. Moving with the occasional glance at the house, he headed toward the water's edge. Walking slowly, he hid the beam of the flashlight against his thigh, flicking the switch on and off to illuminate the damp sand. He spotlighted seaweed, debris, shells, pebbles, the occasional bit of trash. And ... that.

"Holy Mother of God," he whispered.

For the second time in a matter of minutes, the short hairs quite literally rose at his nape. What were the chances of this occurring? Squatting, he shone the torch beam along a surface of roughened paint. Christ, last time he had seen this thing it had been hanging in the cabin of Matt Donovan's fishing boat the day before he made that final trip. The condition of deterioration didn't correspond to his idea of what an object should look like after spending a year in salt water. He frowned, bending closer.

Something didn't make sense. Something didn't make sense at all.

Fingerprints weren't going to matter at this point, if he could even gather any. Even so, he slipped the end of his jacket sleeve down to cover his own hand as he grasped a corner of wood. Flicking off the flashlight, he stood up in the darkness. His uneasiness persisted. Feeling as though he was being watched he glanced to his right and to his left, then over his shoulder toward the house. Not far from his feet the dark tide purred against the shore, the sound of driven and receding water rhythmic and pervasive.

The currents had a prevailing pattern. It was what made maritime navigation such a tricky business for the novice seafarer. And the *Bonafide Venture* had gone down to the northeast and fourteen nautical miles out to sea. He would need to check his facts, but he was fairly certain that what he was holding in his hand was a physical impossibility.

Suddenly anxious to be on his way, Dan started back in the direction he had come. It wasn't long before he became aware of footsteps dogging his own. He couldn't tell how far away they were or from where they originated, but they were keeping perfect time with his pace, crunching through the sliding sand. Halting abruptly, Dan spun around, clutching the battered wood against his chest. There was no one there.

With an expulsion of air from his lungs, Dan pivoted back around on his heel. He felt a creeping of dread, unexplainable and unnerving. As he made his way across the sand toward the looming fence line, a shadow formed from the starlit night, blocking his way.

## Chapter Nine

Meg sat on the edge of the mattress, the only illumination in the room the nightlight in the base of the bedside lamp. When she'd come out of the bathroom, all was in darkness downstairs, but Caleb had not joined her in the bathroom, nor was he in his bed. Gazing around her own bedroom, she wondered where he had gone. Would he have set off for a stroll on the beach at night? It didn't seem likely. She only hoped nothing in their recent activity had resulted in renewed physical distress. She couldn't see why it would, but the thought of it caused her to get up off the bed and slip a pair of jeans on beneath her oversized tee shirt. Feeling around beneath the edge of the night stand for her flip-flops, she turned her head at a noise in the doorway.

"Caleb," she breathed.

He looked ... upset. Given the state of his fractured memory, there could have been any number of things troubling him. However, only one came to her mind.

"Are you sorry that we ...?"

Shaking his head, he stepped into the room. When he smiled at her, a curve of his mouth and no more, she was relieved to see the light touch his eyes, as well. Going to him, she stopped an arm's length away, reaching out to slip her finger into the loose curl of his fist against his thigh. Sand salted the carpet by his bare feet.

"I'll never be sorry that we did that," he said, pulling her close to press his mouth to her hair. "Never."

"Not even if you remember that there's someone else waiting for you somewhere?"

"Shh."

A tremor shifted the flesh beneath her hands. She tightened her hold on him. "I don't know what we do now," she whispered. "Making love with you was not wrong, but there's no history between us and no future to be foreseen. Do you lie down beside me or do we sleep alone in separate beds? Do we behave as if this hasn't happened between us, or continue in the path we've chosen tonight? I don't know what we do now," she repeated.

"We take comfort in the moment," he said quietly, "and wait."

"For what?"

He made a noise, an expulsion of air through his nose that was no answer, but was more a dismissal of the topic.

"Come to bed, then," she said, leading him by the hand. He hesitated, then followed. At the foot of her bed he unzipped his jeans and lowered them to the floor, stepping out of them. A mist of fine sand sprayed from the hem.

"Maybe I should shower, first," he suggested, frowning down at his feet.

"Just brush them off. I'll run the vacuum tomorrow."

He did so as she pulled down the quilt and slipped out of her own pants. Once he had climbed into bed, she turned off the light. It occurred to her as she stood blinking for a moment in the sudden blackness that she should be afraid, or at the very least apprehensive of trusting a stranger to such a degree that she was willing to lie beside him and sleep. But she'd done it once already, and had derived a great deal of comfort. She wasn't going to question, just let it be.

Yet his words as she climbed beneath the blankets chilled her.

"I don't know who I am. I don't know what I am. Sometimes it feels like the past is battling in my head, like I can hear it calling to me in a voice I don't recognize, but it doesn't come out of hiding, and I'm afraid that's because it can't. Meg, I wish you could tell me just one thing about me. Just one thing so that I wouldn't have to fear the man I might truly be."

Meg bit her lip. In the darkened room, propped on her elbow, she searched his face, his eyes, for some hint of what he needed from her, to no avail. He was lying on his back breathing steadily and deeply, waiting for her response. There were no shimmering thoughts to be snatched from the air now. She closed her eyes, then slowly opened them again.

"It seems to me," she began, "that you are a kind man, and patient. Soft-spoken, but not timid." She lifted his hand, turning it over. "Your palms are calloused. You've worked hard. You're strong, you appear capable. Whoever did this to you," she went on, reaching up to touch her fingertips to the bruises on his throat and lower jaw, "probably caught you off guard. I don't think you're the type to let that happen a second time."

Briefly she visualized the act, the violent impulse, the flurry of punches, the grasping, curled fingers seeking to choke the breath from his lungs, the desperate struggle, man against man, perhaps more than one man. So strong was the image that she found herself flinching, and she knew then that what she was seeing was truth. She swallowed, trying to calm her racing heart rate. The face of the others involved did not reveal themselves to her.

Beside her, apparently unaware of the image in her brain, Caleb shook his head in a negligible movement. "Except if that person walked up to your door tonight, I wouldn't know who the hell they were," he said, agitation tempered by the action of turning to press his lips against the pulse in her wrist. She stared in a moment of contemplation at the place where his mouth had been, then resumed.

"That's true enough," she said. "But the doors are locked and I know the only visitors I ever get. Besides you, that is. So we'll just figure that if I don't recognize them, they're suspect. How's that?" She wondered how long he had been worrying about this. She had thought to keep that concern from him, but apparently there was no need. He had worked it out, same as she did.

He relaxed as she touched the lines beside his eyes, alongside his mouth, ran a finger lightly along his lower lip. The dark stubble of his jaw rasped beneath the heel of her palm.

"You've laughed a lot. Squinted in the sun. You run your fingers through your hair when you're troubled," she added, realizing how many times she had seen him do that. "Should I go on?"

"Could you?" he asked in a dubious tone.

"Your hair could use a trim," she said, tugging gently on a lock. "I'll do that for you, if you'd like."

His lips twisted in a crooked smile. "I'd like," he said.

"And I'll shave you, too," she said, rubbing a digit across the dark shadow of his jaw.

"Sounds sexy," he said.

"It certainly could be."

Snatching her hand, he turned her palm against his mouth. She closed her eyes as warmth rushed into her veins. What was she doing? She had never been the type to even kiss a man until she knew him fairly well, and had never picked up a stranger in a bar and taken him home for the night, ever, so what had changed in her? What enabled her not just to accept what he was offering, but welcome it, invite it, revel in it, despite the circumstances that had thrown

them together?

“Caleb,” she said, “when you remember ... your life, you might not think much of me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he murmured into the curve of her palm before he yanked her down on top of him. Already he was hard again against her belly. She pushed up from him so that she was looking down into his face. Her hair brushed across his naked chest, mingling with the dark, silky hairs curling out of his skin.

“In certain circles, the fact that I had sex with you when we just met yesterday wouldn’t speak very highly of my moral character. But I promise you it’s not something I’ve done before.”

“What? Had sex? I doubt that.”

His hands were wriggling her shirt up past her waist. One arm settled across the small of her back while the other hand continued to maneuver the cloth over her head. She pulled her head out, allowing him to free both of her arms and toss the garment aside. Her breasts settled against the warmth of his chest.

“That’s not what I meant. I don’t know you ....”

“But you do,” he interrupted. “You just revealed quite a bit about me. Knowledge starts with little things, and then grows.”

“Sort of like this?” she asked, closing her hand around him and laughing.

Before she could draw another breath, he had flipped her over onto her back and was sprawled across her, effectively pinning her to the mattress. Fitting a knee between her thighs he wriggled them apart, then settled himself in between.

“I like that you’re playful,” he said, kissing her chin as he wrestled her wrists into one of his hands. “I always have,” he added, reaching down to touch her between the legs. At his words she stilled, gazing up into his eyes in the darkness. Confusion showed fleetingly on his face as he stared back at her.

“It’s a jumble,” he said. “I think I remember something, and it ends up I couldn’t possibly. You’re all that’s familiar to me right now.” Lowering his weight over her body, he held himself up on his elbows. She could feel him pressing against her, slipping inside with a single thrust. Her vaginal muscles convulsed around him. He sucked in his breath, then looked down at her with a smile in his eyes.

“I need you desperately,” he said, “and I believe you need me. Let’s leave it at that for now, shall we?”

\* \* \* \*

She slept with her back to him, her head heavy in slumber on his outstretched arm, her honey-gold hair soft against his skin. Caleb stared at the ceiling. He would have given anything—well, just about anything—to remember. Not just to remember who he was, where he was from, what his life had been, but to know, really know, why Meg Donovan was in his life now. There was a reason. He knew there was a reason, but he couldn’t fathom what it might be.

He listened to the sounds of the house, identifying each individually as the same he had listened to the night before. Nothing unusual there, nothing suspect. They were safe, or relatively safe. He should sleep. But he was unable.

Since he couldn’t remember, he was trying to work out what had happened in a logical fashion. Someone had tried to kill him. Okay. Where had this taken place? Not here on the beach. There had been no evidence of a struggle around where he had awakened. Besides, he was certain Meg would have been aware of any commotion that would have occurred in the

execution of such an act. Also, if the struggle had taken place on the beach, he would probably still have his clothes, although had he been dropped there he could have been stripped of his clothing to mask his identity in some way. But there had been no sign of his having been dragged across the sand. Therefore, he must have come up on the beach from the water. If he had been thrown from a ship, or fallen overboard, he could have washed up with the tide. That being the case, the chances that anyone would know where he had landed were probably slim, and therefore he and Meg shouldn't have to be quite so worried about the person who had tried to do him in coming after him here in her home. Still, he wasn't willing to relax his vigil altogether based on that vague supposition. He could have wandered nude along the shoreline for a distance before collapsing and the scene of the attempted crime might be just beyond the jetty of jagged black rock.

Gently removing his arm from beneath Meg's head, he stretched the tingling limb while pulling the blanket up over her shoulder with his other hand. She was still naked beneath the covers and her skin shone in the night with a pearly luminescence before he lowered the quilt into place, tucking it close. He fingered the soft strands of her hair, then he eased himself off the mattress, standing in the darkness beside her bed.

She slept on, undisturbed. He watched her for several seconds, then walked around the foot to the window where he slid the curtains aside on the rod, leaning his forearm against the sash and his brow against the cool glass, gazing out into the night. Across the dulled, black ribbon of roadway at a good distance was a stand of trees, their shadows grossly misshapen, weather-beaten. He found his eyes drawn there, fixed on the blackness beneath. His heart rate quickened, thudding suddenly in his chest.

Earlier tonight, when he had stood out on the porch, he had ... sensed? Was that the word? Yes, sensed something there. Or someone. It was all rather vague, like a dream half-remembered, and he knew what dreams were because he had dreamed last night while he slept, waking to find he couldn't bring those fleeting images back for total recall. That's what this felt like, as if there was some loss of time, some disconnection between conscious and subconscious thought and his reaction to those thoughts.

He had imagined himself out on the beach—or had he imagined that? There was sand on his feet when he came inside, although the accumulation on the porch might have accounted for that condition. And as for what he had imagined occurring on the beach, the imagery was disjointed, somewhat abstract, and he couldn't collect enough pieces together to make them fit into a whole.

Frustrated, he sighed, clouding the glass with his breath. Turning away from the window he moved across the room, allowing his galloping heart to calm.

He couldn't tell Meg about what he had experienced because he knew, without understanding, that her suggestion of treatment by a doctor would become insistence. Yet he also knew, again without understanding of how he knew, that treatment would not make a difference. Whatever was taking place inside of him, in his body, in his head, would be unexplained, would be a source of curiosity, of endless questioning, probing, delving, and in the end the result would be the same. There were no answers. He would never again be who he was.

*Be* who he was, not *know* who he was. There was a big difference between the two. Why was he thinking that way? Frowning, he turned again to look at Meg in the bed, listening for a moment to her soft breathing. His hands clenched into fists on his thighs to keep them from

shaking. He was tempted to wake her up, take comfort in her body, in their closeness, but he spun away, disgusted with himself, with his weakness.

Searching the floor for his jeans—for Matt's jeans, he corrected himself—he shinnied into them. In the bed Meg spoke in her sleep, a single unintelligible word, and rolled onto her back but did not waken. The blanket slipped down to reveal the round swell of the tops of her breasts, milky white in the gloom. Caleb left the room and headed into the hallway. Standing on the worn runner he shoved both hands into his pockets. His fingers contacted a folded piece of paper.

It didn't matter that it was the middle of the night. What better time to reach someone, to expect them to be there to answer a ringing phone, than during the hours when one was expected to be asleep? It was worth a shot. If he woke up whoever this number belonged to, fine. He was ready to face whatever he had to. If they chose not to wake up and answer, at least he had tried again.

Walking softly, he made his way down to the kitchen. Turning the light on over the stove, Caleb took the phone from the wall and sat in the chair at the table's head, cradling the instrument in his hand on the tabletop. In the front entryway a tall clock, what Meg had referred to as a grandfather's clock, counted time with a deep, monotonous tone. He didn't bother to turn around and look at the smaller face of the round clock hanging on the kitchen wall. Meg had spent a few minutes going over the mechanics of telling time with him before dinner, but he didn't quite see the necessity in testing himself. He knew that the hour was somewhere between sundown and sunup, and that was enough.

He took several long breaths, readying himself, then held the phone in one hand and the piece of paper in the other, depressing the numbers with the pad of his thumb. Lifting the receiver to his ear, he waited, only to be met by the same repetitive signal he had earlier. What did that mean? Swearing beneath his breath, he repeated the process.

"What are you doing?"

He jumped, just a little, swiveling on the chair to look at Meg in the shadowed stairwell. She blinked at him, sleepy-eyed, her honey hair tousled around her face. She was wearing the tee shirt he had removed, and nothing else that he could discern.

"What are you doing?" she asked again. There was a note of suspicion in her tone. Stepping down into the kitchen, she crossed the floor to stand beside him. She was staring hard at the phone, and then at him, her expression troubled.

"I ... I remembered something earlier today. I remembered what this thing is," he said, waving the phone with the dull tone still repeating itself hollowly in the air, "and I remembered a number. A series of numbers, to be more precise, and I dialed them. All I get is this, though," he finished.

What did she think? That he had been lying to her about his memory loss, secretly making calls in the middle of the night? Actually, if she was thinking that, he couldn't blame her. But he didn't know how to explain himself without sounding like he was trying too hard to convince her he hadn't been lying. Instead, he handed the phone to her. She took it.

"Don't you know—of course you don't. There's a thing known as caller id," she explained, depressing the button to end the call and thus the annoying signal. "That means, if the person you just called has it, they will see my number displayed on their phone together with my name."

She waited, plainly expecting him to understand. It took a moment for revelation to

strike. "Oh, shit," he muttered.

If, as he had worried earlier, the number belonged to the person who had tried to kill him, or someone otherwise connected to that aspect of his life, they now had Meg's name and phone number. "But would that necessarily be something to worry about?" he asked, following his train of thought. "Would someone call back, based on your number appearing on their phone? I don't quite get it. It's not like anyone would know I placed the call, would they?"

Drawing out the chair beside his own, Meg sat down. She set the phone on the table.

"Of course not," she said. "Likely, at this hour especially, they would think it was a wrong number. To be honest, with the busy signal I'm not sure the caller id would even come up on the phone. If they had call waiting, yes, but not everyone does. The person whose number you called probably doesn't, or there wouldn't be a busy signal. I don't have it myself," she added, holding out her hand, palm up.

Caleb looked a question at her.

"The number on that paper," she said. "May I see it? Perhaps it's not even in this area code and you would need to dial a '1' beforehand, although I think you would get a message about that. There are ways to block the number you're calling from, too. We may as well keep trying until we get somewhere, right?"

Encouraged, Caleb spread the bit of paper on which he'd scrawled the number over her palm. She laid it on the table, holding the torn edges of the paper down with her thumb and index finger. Slowly her head lifted. Her gaze, amazingly green even when deprived of sleep, held his.

"What?" he asked, alerted by her stillness.

"This," she stated quietly, "is my phone number."

## Chapter Ten

Her own phone number. What the hell?

As if she needed to be certain, she looked again at the numbers he had written down, then back at Caleb. She could tell by his expression that he was as shocked as she was by this development.

"I don't understand," he said at last.

Didn't he? But no. No, he didn't. She knew he didn't.

Rising from the chair, Meg moved stiffly to set the phone back in its cradle. She stood with her back to Caleb, thinking. She didn't understand either. Why would he 'remember' her phone number? Was it subliminal from something he had seen? Perhaps she'd left her phone bill lying around, although she really didn't believe that was the case. She'd certainly had a momentary doubt as to his truthfulness, but it had occurred to her rather quickly that if he was shamming memory loss and knew her phone number for some reason that eluded her, he assuredly wouldn't be sitting at her table trying to dial it. What would be the point? But if her phone number was, in fact, a memory returned to him, why had he possessed it in the first place?

The other possibility, that he was once again reading her thoughts seemed unlikely. Thinking of her own phone number hadn't been a conscious process of hers, at any rate.

"When did you recall this number?" she asked, turning around.

Elbows on the table, he was shoving his hands through his thick, dark locks. He paused to look up at her, hazel eyes shadowed by his lashes.

"Late in the afternoon. Before you came back."

Hmm. Late in the afternoon she had been in town, at the library, the grocery store and later at the sailor's cross, where she had spoken with Dan Stauffer. Dan had told her to call him, had asked her if she still had his cell phone number. At one point after that conversation she had hoped Dan no longer recalled her number, a number which had come into her mind. Could it be that Caleb had picked up on that? Based on what she had learned over the years regarding telepathy, physical distance between subjects didn't hamper its occurrence. Separation didn't mean a thing.

Stunned, Meg sat down. That had to be it. As unusual a circumstance as this sharing of thoughts was between them, it was the only explanation that fit.

She took one of his hands, drawing it down to the tabletop and interlacing her fingers through his. "All of this will be sorted out in due course."

"Due course? How long is 'due course'?"

She could see that he was frustrated, not angry. She shook her head. "Who knows?" she retorted gently. "I wish I could tell you that, but there's no way of knowing. However, despite the fact that I work from home, I do try to keep a schedule and I need to be up early, so let's go back to bed now, alright?"

He didn't move. Obviously, he wasn't going anywhere without more of an answer than she had given.

"How would I know your phone number? Tell me that."

"You picked it up subconsciously. Maybe it was written somewhere, or you heard me say it for some reason, or ... I don't know."

"Is it possible I knew it? I mean, really knew it?"

"I don't see how. That would be one heck of a coincidence, because we aren't acquainted—well," she corrected, blushing, lifting his hand to kiss it, "we are more than acquainted now, but we weren't before. For you to have my phone number and end up on the beach outside my house without your memory might imply that you were actually headed here, and I can't imagine why that would be. And if you weren't coming to me, to my home, then it would be just too strange that you would end up here and carry with you in your minimal memory a knowledge of my phone number. Besides, I think ...." She stopped, not quite sure she should tell him what she thought, but he insisted.

Meg inhaled. "Remember when I told you I dreamed certain dreams that come true?"

Across from her he nodded, tightening his grip on her hand. "That, and other things, like knowing what a person is thinking, I mean *really* knowing what a person is thinking, are considered to be aspects of a certain psychic ability," she went on. "I don't believe that there's any irrefutable scientific proof of these occurrences, although there has been plenty of study and too many people experience such things to totally discount them as truth. I think that you possess some ability yourself," she finished, waiting for his reaction.

He frowned. "Me? By saying this, you are suggesting this is not the norm, these psychic abilities?"

"Correct."

"And how does this explain the present situation?"

"In your case," she said, "I think you are reading memories and thoughts of mine and, as your own recall is impaired, you are interpreting them as yours."

Releasing her hand, he stood up abruptly, shaking his dark head. She watched him stalk across the floor and back again, his battered body in jeans and nothing else beautiful, lean and hard.

"All of them? All of my thoughts?"

"No. Just a few. Like my phone number," she hedged, hoping he wouldn't delve deeper, wouldn't question those moments she had recognized as belonging to her.

"Someone did try to kill me," he stated quietly. His hazel eyes glittered in the light above the stove.

"Oh yes, I'm quite certain of that," she said. "There's no question that memory is yours."

"Why? Why isn't there any question?"

Pushing back her own chair, Meg stood and moved to stand in front of him. She put her arms around his waist. After a moment he levered an arm across her shoulders, pulling her close to his chest. She turned her cheek against the soft, dark hair arrowing up from the waistband of his pants to fan out across his firm flesh.

"As frightening as it might be, it's your memory, Caleb. No one tried to kill me and the proof of violence done to you is visible." She did not mention what she had sensed when touching him earlier. There was no cause to confound him further.

She felt his mouth against her hair. She had to listen hard to hear the words he was speaking.

"I remember this, as well. Holding you."

"Shhh," she whispered. "I don't have answers. I'm sorry."

He nodded against her. She breathed in the scent of him, pressing her lips to his chest.

"Will you think less of me if I tell you I'm afraid?"

"Never," she said against his skin. "Never."

Quite honestly, their discussion had made her afraid, too.

\* \* \* \*

Standing in the doorway, Caleb made no noise. After the strain following their conversation in the middle of the night, he had been restless, revisiting the strange intercourse over and over again, unable to sleep. He had been able to tell by Meg's breathing that she slept fitfully, but when she was awake she remained silent and physically apart from him. Now, in the light of day, he only wanted to know she was okay, with them, with herself. Instead, he found he was holding himself in absolute stillness, watching the process of her work.

Stifling a yawn against the back of her hand, she turned the bristles of her brush through the paints on the palette, then, with sure strokes, created the line of a picket fence running diagonally along the lower left corner of the picture. Several more strokes and she had the petals of flowers in the extreme foreground. A dab of yellow at the heart of each, and then another brush with two shades of green for the foliage. Just like that. She made it look easy. Caleb's lips curved in a smile, his gaze taking in the illustration as a whole. He didn't know the story, but even he understood that the little brown-haired girl skipping along the dirt lane with a battered doll in tow was headed home.

"Who's that?" he asked, before he could stop himself.

Meg jumped. She glanced at Caleb over her shoulder, looking as tired as he felt. Still, she smiled in that warm, sexy way she had, even when sex wasn't on her mind, and he felt his stomach lurch.

"Hi," she said. The distance of the night had passed. Relieved, he stepped into the room.

"Hi."

Standing at her shoulder, he studied the picture again. The little girl looked familiar. Then he remembered where he had seen her before. Although with small differences, in essence she was the same child he had seen in several of the books Meg had illustrated.

"You've used her face in other books. She's a beautiful child. Is it someone you know? I mean, did you paint her from imagination, or from life?"

Even as he spoke, he frowned. Odd, how the peculiar vagaries of his affliction permitted him to recognize that concept, but not who he was. Contemplating his question, Meg chewed on her lower lip before answering. At her side a breeze ruffled the curtains at the open window, fluttering the hem of her shirt. Beneath the soft fabric her shoulders shifted, altering her stance.

"In this story," she said, "her name is Molly. Her real name, though, is Anne."

"Anne?" Speaking the name, he felt a reverberation thrum through him to settle in his consciousness with unexplained weight.

"Yes. A simple name. A beautiful name, neither old nor young. A name that she could never outgrow. And she never did."

The weight grew heavier. "What do you mean?"

"She's mine," Meg whispered.

"Yours ... and Matt's?" A niggling of confusion surfaced. There was no child in this house, no sign of one.

Meg shook her head. "No. Matt wanted children, but after what happened, I couldn't. I didn't," she amended.

"What happened?"

Setting down the palette and the brushes, Meg moved to the window and sat before it.

Caleb followed, standing with his hand on the top of her head. He could feel the shape of her skull beneath her soft, honey-gold hair, feel the warmth of her scalp. She closed her eyes, tipping her chin up, her face to the sun.

"Before I moved here, before I met Matt, I had Anne. I wasn't married. I didn't care. It happened, and I had the baby. I never would have not had the baby, but once Anne was born I was ... I wasn't the same. I was a mom," she said with a sad smile. "It makes a difference."

Caleb was silent. The weight became an ache, taking his breath away.

"She died ... away from me. Beyond my care. The young man who fathered her one day decided he wanted to share custody. I hadn't looked for anything from him, but he decided to grow up, I guess, to take responsibility, financially and physically. While she was with him, his car was struck by another that had run a red light. They were both killed."

He watched as a fall of tears washed down her cheeks. Lifting her bodily from the chair, he sat in her stead, settling her onto his lap and pulling her head down against his chest. Beneath their combined weight the wood of the chair creaked in protest. The breeze from the window ran across the hair on his arms and through the locks beneath his stroking hand.

"I'm so sorry," he said. He felt her loss so keenly that he wondered if he might have children of his own, children he couldn't remember, children who might be missing their father. He buried his jaw, the curve of his cheek, into her hair, breathing deeply of its recently washed fragrance.

"I'm sometimes certain that's why he left me," she said softly. "Not the sea, not the myriad other small things I recognized and he recognized, but the dark grief I carried around with me and the fact that I wouldn't ... wouldn't give him a child. I didn't mean to hold that back from him. I was just too scared, too afraid of the possibility of that loss again. You can't keep a child protected all the time, I know that you can't, but I don't know what to do with that fear."

He felt her swallow beneath the light grasp of his fingers along her throat, holding her close. "When did he leave?"

"Three years ago," she said. "I came home to a house devoid of all but those few clothes of Matt's that had been waiting to be washed and which you've been wearing," she said with a small, bitter laugh. "All of his personal belongings were gone. The funds in our checking account, too. The cash I kept hidden away for a rainy day was all I had left. There was a hastily scrawled note on the kitchen table with an address to send anything else I might come across, but without explanation."

"None? He never said it had to do with your not wanting children?"

"I had to leave you" was all the note said."

*I had to leave you.*

A small chill crept from the middle of his spine to the nape of his neck. *I had to leave you.* Those words were eerily familiar, haunting, making him cringe.

Meg went on. "Even now, I remember Matt's voice repeating that phrase a long time later as clearly as if he were speaking in my head this minute. It was the last time I spoke to him. The very last time. Why didn't I ask him the reason? Why didn't I make him put it into words? Why didn't I just tell him I was sorry? For that, at least. Only for that."

Caleb held her tighter. He propped his chin on her head, turning to stare out the window. A glint of sun drew his gaze toward the deep shadow beneath the stand of ravaged pines. A car was parked there. He could just make out the sheen of the windshield, the curve of headlights.

Looking at it, he felt a frown form on his lips, felt a surge of unexplained displeasure, and then he pivoted away. Lifting his head, he pressed his mouth to Meg's crown.

"It'll be alright," he said. "You're strong, you've been strong."

She nodded against him. "And you're good for me, Caleb Hunter, no matter who or what the heck you are."

He felt her laugh, a warm, silent burst of amusement. The crisis had passed. She was back in the light again. He could not help thinking briefly of the painting of the sea, of the dark tides in violet-hued depiction. Covered now by a cloth, that painting had nothing to do with her lost child. Nothing. She exorcized those demons regularly with light and lovely portrayals of her daughter in the guise of fictional characters. The threatening sea on canvas was another matter entirely.

"Come on," he said, stroking the lingering dampness from her cheeks, "clean up in here and I'll make us some breakfast."

"You will?"

"Sure. Nothing wrong with my short-term memory. You showed me how, remember? I'll even do the dishes."

She laughed out loud then and he smiled, his heart hurting in his chest. He needed this from her. Needed her laughter, her joy, her trust, her ... forgiveness.

For what? He didn't understand.

## Chapter Eleven

“For the love of God, I’m fine! Get a doctor in here to sign me out, will you?”

The nurse eyed him over the frame of her glasses as she made a notation in his chart. “I think not. Just keep your pants on. The doctor will be back to see you as soon as he’s available.”

“Considering I’m not wearing any pants, that’s a pretty useless suggestion,” Dan Stauffer muttered, throwing himself back on the emergency room bed. Folding his arms across his chest, he glowered at the nurse, but failed to intimidate her. Once she had completed her task she exited around the hanging curtain, and not one second sooner.

Glancing about, he spotted the fellow in the next cubicle grinning at him through the Plexiglas divider, his hand lifted in the ‘thumbs up’ sign. Scowling, Dan laid his head back and closed his eyes.

Truth was, he wasn’t fine, not for the love of God or anyone else. But he wasn’t about to let anyone know it. All the tests run had been negative, proving there wasn’t anything physically wrong. He had known that. Unfortunately, when he’d first managed to call for an ambulance, specifying no sirens and no lights—and he was grateful they’d abided by that, recognized the authority behind the request, because he sure as hell hadn’t wanted Meg to be attracted to the little scene—he’d been pretty sure he was about to die. It had taken a good two hours for him to realize not only that he wasn’t going to die, but that what had happened to him was not something he could ever explain to anyone who might conceivably develop the notion of committing him for a mental health evaluation.

No, he wasn’t fine at all, but there wasn’t a doctor in this hospital capable of assisting him. He could imagine the result once skepticism gave way to a certainty that he’d suffered a breakdown. Couldn’t have that blot on his record. And he hadn’t suffered any breakdown, nor hallucinated, nor fabricated in a moment of stress the whole incident. It had happened. He knew it had happened, and for the first time in his life he gave real credence to the tales one occasionally heard of some poor soul being quite literally scared to death.

He supposed, had he been generally less healthy, he would be dead now. His heart would have exploded or fatally failed him in some fashion as adrenaline erupted into his system. The muscle wall surrounding that organ still ached, but the EKG had shown no change, no indication of heart attack.

Letting his breath out slowly, Dan peered through slitted lids at the bed next door. The curtain had been pulled across and he could see the silhouette of the doctor moving around behind it. Not his doctor though. Too tall. He closed his eyes again.

He didn’t believe in ghosts. Never had. Never would, if asked. But he believed in something else now. He believed in the unexplained. Things happened, things that defied common sense, defied science, defied religion.

Ah, yes, religion. After that ... whatever that had been, he had prayed for the first time since he could remember. Prayed hard. Babbled bits and pieces of structured appeals, then made up his own as he went along, wanting only to be saved from that ... that ... that *darkness* that had come for him.

Feeling his heart begin to race again, and knowing he was still hooked up to a monitor,

Dan breathed deeply, steadying his nerves. Wouldn't do to have his departure delayed. Not now. He had work to do, and plenty of it.

Too bad he wasn't allowed to use his cell phone here. There were calls to be made, first thing when he walked out the door. He needed to arrange for a couple of days off. Certainly the doctor would be kind enough to write up a note for that, considering that what the doc was likely really going to want was for Dan to stay a little longer. It would be a bargain well struck. He would promise to be a good boy, go home and rest, if the doctor insisted he take a couple of days. Then he had to call the lab, get that chunk of wood which should be resting in the back of his car tested. He had to call his ex-wife, just because he knew she would learn he'd been in the hospital and would never let him hear the end of it if she didn't get the news first from him.

And then he had to call Meg Donovan and hope she would listen to him.

## Chapter Twelve

For the third time that morning, Meg ignored the ringing telephone. This time, however, her cell phone rang right after. Frowning, she let it ring. After a moment, the soft chirping noise ceased and was followed shortly thereafter by the signal indicating she had received a voice mail message. Although she was inclined to ignore the message, she listened to it instead, shifting off of the stool before her easel to stand by the window. She heard the creaking of floorboards in the living room as Caleb rose from the chair where he had been reading a children's book.

"Meg, it's Dan Stauffer. I need you to call me. I tried your other line and got no answer. Maybe you're out. However, it's important. I ... it's important." His voice sounded strange, as if he wanted to say something more, but he finished up with a quick, "Call me when you get this message."

She had his number now, and couldn't use that as an excuse not to call him back. Still, if he wasn't going to be any clearer about the urgency of his message, there was no reason to call him. Very likely, she hadn't been firm enough the other day when she'd run into him in town. It certainly couldn't be official business, or he would have been at her door. Besides, there was no longer any reason for that. Matt was dead. The investigation, such as it had been, had ended. Hadn't it?

"Everything alright?"

Caleb stood in the doorway, his head nearly brushing the frame, his dark hair tousled where he had been running his fingers through it. She hadn't trimmed it for him yet, but she rather liked it overgrown and unruly. The dark, silky ends curled along his neck. It was odd how comfortable she felt with him here in her house, how familiar to her he already seemed. Meeting him under normal circumstances, she certainly would have been attracted to him, but if she had actually agreed to date him it might have been months before she ever let him into her life like this.

"Fine," she said.

"Are you sure? You look concerned."

Concerned. Very astute. She smiled at Caleb, attempting to put him at his ease. She *was* concerned, but she wasn't certain why.

"Someone left me a message I wasn't expecting. One of the off—well, someone I know," she finished, not wanting to get into the details about the investigation into Matt's activities. Alleged activities, she reminded herself. Nothing had ever been proven, nor had she had the opportunity to clear the air with Matt before he left her. But it didn't matter. That was over and done.

"Besides, I think he just wants to ask me out to dinner, or something."

Caleb's head cocked to the side. "A ... a date?" he asked, needing a few seconds to search for the right word.

"Yes," Meg said. "A date."

"Will you go?"

He didn't appear to be prying, just asking. Here again, she recognized that the boundaries of their relationship were blurred. Their association, though very real in the physical sense, was less defined emotionally, despite that underlying connection they both felt. Her lips

twisted and she took a step nearer to him, depositing the phone on the table as she passed. Stopping in front of him, she lifted her head to look into his hazel eyes.

“No. Even if I had an interest in doing so, I wouldn’t. Not now.”

A small smile played about his lips. He lifted a hand to toy with the strands of hair loosened from her ponytail, the heel of his palm against her collarbone. “Why is that?” he asked.

Her eyes narrowed. He knew very well what her reasoning was. She could tell by his tone. For all that he couldn’t remember, there were obviously many things he understood without explanation. His eyes had grown heavy, contemplative in a sexual manner. His respiration was deep and slow. Her gaze roved to his mouth, then the stubble of his jaw, then down over his chest and along his jeans, her mouth turning up as she noted that though they fit him extremely well elsewhere, they were a couple of inches too short.

“What?” he asked, tipping his head to follow the direction of her gaze.

“Nothing,” she said. His face was close to her own. She could feel his breath across her skin. She wanted to take his face into her hands and kiss him, long and deeply. Glancing down at his jeans again, it was quite apparent that the same, or similar, thoughts were running through his mind. A slight tremor passed along the backs of her knees.

“I think we need to take a ride into town,” she said.

“We do?”

“We do,” she echoed. “If we’re going to continue to do this,” she said, reaching out to lightly stroke the denim evidence of his erection and feeling a rush of warmth at the breathless, voiceless sound he made, “we need to go to the drug store.”

\* \* \* \*

Meg could feel his eyes on her, and when she glanced back towards the car she saw him watching through the smudged windshield. He said he liked the way she walked, that there was something sexy and carefree about it. His words pleased her more than she had admitted to him. At the doorway, she gave her hips a playful little shake and laughed in his direction, then yanked open the door and stepped inside. Shoeless, Caleb remained in the car wearing a pair of socks to keep his feet warm, having insisted on accompanying her into town, even when she had suggested he wait at home. She planned a stop after at the discount store outside of town, where she would buy him a pair of shoes and some other items before they headed back. He had expressed some dismay at her doing that but, quite frankly, he was in need of more than the few clothes of Matt’s he had been wearing.

Matt’s clothes, Matt’s bed, Matt’s house. Meg shook off the frisson of chill dancing along her spine and strode to the back of the drugstore. They weren’t Matt’s clothes anymore, nor was it his bed, and the house was hers. For the first time in a long while, she was making decisions that took into account an ownership of her own life. She felt good about it. Period.

Having reached the back of the store, she paused at the rack of condoms. Except for the fact that he was barefoot and probably wouldn’t have had a clue how to go about it, she should have sent Caleb in to make this purchase. For one thing, embarrassment was making her cheeks burn like a schoolgirl’s, and for another, once she popped one of these boxes up on the counter, the entirety of the small town was likely to know she had done so within twenty-four hours.

Turning her head, she eyed the woman behind the counter. Not someone she recognized. Good. It was ridiculous to be embarrassed, she knew, but there it was. She couldn’t help it. Being responsible was the smart thing, the right thing, to do, but she hadn’t had any need of birth control or protection since...well, since Matt. She’d been on the pill, then, and condoms were not

in their repertoire. She wasn't even certain what type were the best to use.

"Crap," she muttered to herself.

Picking a box merely because it was the most attractive, she gathered a few more items—deodorant, a new toothbrush, a comb—and set everything as unobtrusively as possible on the counter. As the cashier rang up her purchases, she dug in her purse for her wallet, aware with a flip of her stomach that someone was coming up the aisle behind her. Trying for nonchalance, she sneaked a sidelong glance from beneath her lashes as the customer came to a stop directly to her right.

"Meg."

Pausing in her hunt for cash, Meg lifted her head, drawing her breath in slowly. Dan Stauffer's gaze moved from her face to the counter where nothing had yet been bagged, and back again.

"The guy in the car can't buy his own?" he commented.

Meg didn't bother to answer. Pulling out several bills, she paid the cashier, watching as the woman deposited everything into a plastic sack. Aware of Dan's continued and silent presence beside her, she turned to walk away with a nod both to him and the cashier. He stepped in front of her.

"I called and left you a message."

Meg lifted her head. He had pushed his sunglasses up away from his eyes. Something about them, about his eyes, perhaps the dark circles beneath, the odd, shining intensity, made her pause instead of striding around him.

"I know," she said.

"Is there a reason you didn't call me back?"

"You didn't say what you wanted."

"I said it was important," Dan stated, a certain harshness to his tone despite the flat delivery.

"You did," she admitted. "What's up?"

She heard the breath he took, cut short. His gaze skimmed to the counter and the cashier. Meg glanced back to find the woman observing their exchange unabashedly. Without another word, Dan Stauffer took her arm, steering her toward the front of the store and out onto the sidewalk. In her car, which was parked in one of the angled spaces directly out front, Caleb sat up. With a look she hoped he understood, Meg warned him to stay put.

"Let go of my arm, Dan," she said quietly.

For a moment she didn't think he would, and then his hand released its grip above her elbow and dropped slowly to his side. With a dip of his head, his sunglasses dropped back into place. He turned as if he were staring over the street, but she could see his eyes in profile as they studied Caleb in the passenger seat of her car. A muscle in his jaw twitched.

"Something happened the other night that you need to know about," he said, without looking at her.

Meg moved around him, trying to call his attention away from her car and Caleb. "What do you mean?"

For several seconds he didn't reply. His lips were compressed, brows lowered as he continued to stare at Caleb. Then he turned to face her. "It's difficult to explain. But you need to know about it. Can I meet you later? Alone?"

The last was uttered pointedly as Caleb opened the car door several inches. Dan didn't

look at him, as if dismissing him somehow. Meg shook her head.

"No," she said. "There's no need. I can't imagine what you might have to say to me. I don't think I want to know."

Clutching the bag from the drug store and her purse, she pivoted on her heel and headed for the car, yanking open the door and sliding in behind the wheel. She fumbled the keys into the ignition, turning the motor over. Dan strode quickly to the driver's side door, bending toward it as she put the car into reverse. With her foot on the brake, she opened the window. Beside her Caleb was observing the scene with an unreadable expression. However, his posture of alert caution was patent.

Dan's blue eyes met Caleb's hazel gaze. He nodded briefly.

"I need to talk to your girlfriend. Do you mind giving us a moment?"

Meg spoke before Caleb had the chance to reply. "Dan, don't push it. I don't need to speak with you if I don't want to, do I? This isn't official, I take it. Your behavior is a bit inappropriate for an officer of the law."

"Damn it, Meg ...."

"Dan, get away from my car. I'm leaving. Now."

His fingers curved over the edge of the window as he pressed his face into the small, open space. His expression made Meg's eyes widen.

"I found something out at your place ...."

"What were you doing there?" she demanded, but he didn't pause.

"....that shouldn't have been there. From Matt's boat. The tides never would have brought it there. Never. And after ...."

At his words, Caleb moved, not toward Dan, nor away, just moved where he sat. Meg turned toward him. The sky darkened, the sun moving behind the clouds, dimming the interior of the vehicle. Meg thought of the painting of the dark tides and her addition to it, of the broken board bearing the name of Matt's fishing boat on it. *Jesus, oh sweet Jesus*, she thought and her eyes closed. Whatever else Dan was saying had become a buzzing din in her ears, but she didn't think he was talking at all. The noise was coming from somewhere else, stifling sound and thought. A darkness filled her head, like night to her mind's eye, and she found she couldn't breathe.

\* \* \* \*

"Meg. Meg. It's alright. He's gone."

Opening her eyes, Meg looked to where Caleb's fingers were resting on her wrist. She felt dazed and sick. Turning to the street, she narrowed her eyes against the sun's glare.

"Where did he go?"

"He just ... walked away. I guess he figured you weren't going to listen to him anyway."

Right. She had ignored him and he gave up. Yet, she recalled the darkness and a chill shook her from head to toe. Had she lost consciousness for some reason? That's what it had felt like. As if, for a moment, she was just ... gone.

But no, her foot was still on the brake, the car in reverse, her one hand on the steering wheel. If she'd blacked out, she would have gone limp, the car would have rolled back into the street, Dan wouldn't have walked away ....

"Are you alright to drive?"

Meg bit her lip. "I'll have to be. I would assume that you've driven at some point in your life, but I don't think I want to find out if I'm wrong by putting you behind the wheel."

Caleb made a noise in his throat, not quite one of amusement. Meg eased the car from the parking space and headed out of town, determined to finish the day's shopping. She didn't want to think about what Dan had been trying to say to her. Even so, as soon as she walked in the door she sent Caleb upstairs with his packages and went to uncover the painting of the sea.

Gaze fixed on the lower corner where the board bearing the name of Matt's boat was just visible, Meg felt the bile rising to her throat. What did this mean? Were they mistaken about where the ship had gone down? In the midst of a storm, Matt might have gotten confused, radioed the wrong coordinates, although there was all sorts of technology to prevent that happening. Still, was her painting an indication of some unexplained knowledge of that occurrence? No wonder she had temporarily lost her grip on reality when Dan had spoken. This perception of things beyond normal reckoning could be horribly unnerving.

And just what was Dan Stauffer doing on the beach near her house? Oddly enough, the disturbance of that thought served to steady her. She lowered her hand from her mouth, reaching to pull the covering back over the painting.

"I don't like that painting. I'm sorry, but I don't. It comes from somewhere absent of light and hope. I don't like it at all."

Meg held out her hand and Caleb took it, holding her fingers between his palms.

"It has a name. I don't usually give titles to my works, but this one has a name. It's called 'Dark Tides'."

"Dark Tides," he repeated, without emphasis.

"Yes."

She stared at the painting a moment longer, then flicked the sheet back into place. She couldn't recall exactly when she'd begun the painting, although it hadn't been that long ago. When she'd started it, she had worked at a fever pitch into the small hours of the morning, as if driven. Now, she didn't really even want to look at it. The painting made her think of things she'd rather not.

Like drowning.

Closing her eyes, she took a small step backward into the circle of Caleb's arms. She could feel his thudding heart beneath her head and a slight tremor in his limbs. He was seeing it, too, she knew he was, the deep, deep dark, liquid and singing with silence. The draw of air that wasn't air, the panic, the release of hope, the moment of death.

With a sob, Meg broke Caleb's embrace. She spun around to face him. The look of anguish on his face was unmistakable, and then there was nothing. A blank stare somewhere above her head, his eyes lightless.

"Caleb!"

She threw herself against him, frightened, beating his chest with her hands. He looked like she expected someone would look at the moment when their life was gone from them, except he was standing right there in front of her. But he wasn't breathing. *He wasn't breathing.* She hit him again with the side of her clenched fist. The force staggered him backward. He opened his mouth, gasping a great lungful of air as he clutched the doorjamb for support. Coughing, he dropped to his knees. Meg crouched down beside him.

"Caleb look at me. Look at me!" she cried, and he slowly raised his dark head. Meg felt the dampness on her cheeks and swiped it away with the back of her hand. "What did you see? Tell me. Tell me what you saw just now."

"I remembered ... dying."

“What?” she breathed in shock.

“Dying in the ocean ....” He shuddered. Meg wrapped her arms around him, drawing him against her shoulder.

“You didn’t die in the ocean, Caleb. You’re alive. You’re here. If you weren’t, it would mean I was sleeping with a ghost, and believe me, that’s not the case. Oh, Caleb. I think I did that to you. I think I made you see that. My fear of what happened to Matt, the way I visualize it, just—just ....” Her voice trailed off. God, why couldn’t this affliction of hers be controlled? Would he have died of the vision she had unwittingly forced on him? No, that wasn’t possible. It couldn’t be possible. Because if it was, God, if it was ....

Sheering away from that consideration, Meg struggled to her feet with Caleb. He swayed against her and she tightened her arms around him.

“Let’s get you upstairs,” she said against his shirt. “You should lie down for a bit, okay?”

He didn’t argue, which made her more worried still. Together they climbed the stairs to her room and she drew down the quilt. Caleb lay his long body down on the bed. Meg tucked the blanket up around his shoulders, smoothing the tangled hair back from his forehead.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

Frowning, he shook his head, brushing off her apology.

“Should I call a doctor yet?”

“No.”

Meg nodded without argument. “I’ll sit here with you for a few minutes.” He stretched out his hand, pulling her down onto the bed beside him. Releasing a breath through her nose, she stretched out on top of the quilt, slipping an arm around his waist. She lay her head on his chest, listening carefully to the beat of his heart to assure herself it was steady.

“Just for a few minutes,” he agreed, pressing his lips to the top of her head. His fingers, calloused and strong, stroked tendrils of hair back from her face, her neck, before settling along the curve of her collarbone. Meg swallowed hard, fighting back tears. Beneath her arm she felt the reassuring cadence of his breathing.

“Meg?”

“Hmm?”

“What are those things in that box? I knew what everything else was I was unpacking, but what the heck are they?”

Meg lifted her head a little to follow his gaze. On the night table against the lamp base stood the attractively packaged box of condoms. She sank her teeth into her lip to prevent a laugh. She was afraid there might be a touch of hysteria to it. Instead, she dipped her chin to plant a kiss on his firm, cotton-covered chest.

“I’ll show you later,” she whispered. “I promise.”

## Chapter Thirteen

Meg leaned her forehead into her hand, tangling her fingers through her hair. In the darkened room the computer screen was like a ghostly beacon. She stared at it until her eyes hurt. Behind her, Caleb's breathing was deep and even, his skin pale in the monitor's illumination. Glancing toward the parted curtain, Meg watched fat snowflakes strike the storm window like drifting shreds of gauze, while the shutters rattled against the clapboard. The Atlantic, driven wild by the winds of an early November storm, seemed to vibrate the earth beneath the foundations of the house. None of this appeared to be disturbing Caleb, who was sleeping the slumber of the sated. She smiled at him tenderly.

Returning her attention to the article on the screen, she re-read the words she had read countless times, not only in this article, but in others. Bluntly stated, sometimes an amnesiac's memory never returned to them. It had only been a little over two weeks since Caleb had washed up on the beach, but he was no closer to recalling the lost details of his past life. They had settled into a routine, the two of them, that was comfortable and pleasant, and they rarely mentioned the fact that somewhere out there was a life he'd left behind.

Apparently, no one from that life was looking for him, either. There had been nothing in the local papers, nothing on the news, on the web. No one sinister knocking at the door. Even so, the vision of him fighting for his life remained strong enough that when he refused any advertisement of his whereabouts in the hopes of a response, she understood his refusal. Not yet. Not until he remembered and knew what he was dealing with.

*If he remembered*, she mused, staring at the monitor.

Caleb made a noise in his sleep, rolling his head. Shutting down the computer, Meg went back to bed. Shirking out of her slippers and robe, she climbed beneath the covers and snuggled against his side, sliding her fingers into the curling, silky hair on his chest. Outside the wind continued to blow, snow whispering along glass. Inside, hot water ticked through the pipes, heating the old radiators, and Caleb breathed in and out beneath her hand in a slow, steady rhythm.

She kissed him, kissed the flesh beside his chill-puckered nipple with a flick of her tongue, thinking how much she needed this, needed this closeness. The strange and abrupt circumstance of their relationship had ceased to trouble her overmuch. There was much to be considered in the future, if they continued together, but for now she was content to let those considerations wait until necessity dictated otherwise. She felt bound in a warm interlude that would, in time, change to become something else, but for now there was contentment and languor and peace.

Unexpectedly, she thought of Dan Stauffer. Whatever he had wanted, he had not troubled her further. As far as the fragment of wreckage he had located, if he had anything more to tell her on that subject she had no doubt that he would. But he hadn't. He hadn't called her, or showed up at the house. She wondered if it had been some sort of ruse, to get closer to her.

Biting her lip, she ignored the unrest she felt whenever she thought of the abrupt end to the conversation at her car. For some reason, that fragment of time remained unclear to her. As for what had taken place afterward, with Caleb, well, she had been very careful ever since to keep a rein on certain of her thoughts. So far, that tactic appeared to be working remarkably

well.

Snuggling closer into the heat of Caleb's armpit on her naked shoulder, Meg blew a concentrated breath across his chest, watching a rill of goose bumps stipple his flesh. With the tip of her tongue she tested the texture, then lightly stroked his nipple.

"Meg," he mumbled sleepily, "what are you doing?"

"Nothing," she whispered. "Go back to sleep."

It was a testament to his exhaustion that he did so. Her lips curved as she pressed closer to him, listening to his breathing. Fitting her fingers against the arch of his rib cage, she moved them gently along the lowest rib, careful not to tickle him, then into the ridge of soft hair that ran up from his groin. In the blackness beneath the covers she slid her hand downward to the place from which the majority of his heat emanated. Flaccid flesh curved into her palm and she held him for a moment, keeping her hand very still.

Where had this man come from, this man who was banishing the loneliness from her life, with whom she kept good company, who gave her pleasure? A stranger and yet not a stranger, and even the idea of his strangeness thrilled her as she cupped his heavy, sleeping penis in her hand. If he woke up now, would he be offended by her familiar handling of him while he was unaware? She didn't think so.

Smiling still, she unfurled his penis against his abdomen and began to stroke him leisurely with her curled fingers. A slight alteration of his breathing indicated his awareness, though he slept on as blood began to engorge his flesh. Knowing that what she was going to do next would likely drag him out of his much-needed slumber, she felt a twinge of pleasurable guilt as she slid down beneath the covers.

As she ran her tongue along the length of a growing erection, his hand shot down beneath the covers and into her hair. She shivered as a moan rumbled through him, but he didn't make her stop. Of course not. Why would he?

Smiling against his firm flesh, she continued in her pursuit, every sound that escaped him above her head evoking a responding vibration from her throat. She could feel the heat of him, of his entire body, increasing with his stimulation. The hair of his thighs beneath her palms lifted at her touch.

"Meg."

She laughed against him.

"Meg."

Resting her chin against his hip, she flipped off the covers. "Yes?"

"I have a question."

Her brows arched. "Now?"

"Uh-huh."

"Oooo-kay."

Scrambling onto her knees, Meg straddled his thighs, draping the quilt over them both, holding it against his chest with one hand, while with the other she continued to caress him.

"Go ahead," she said. "Ask."

"Can you stop that a minute?"

Feeling chastised, she did. "Sorry."

"Don't be sorry," he whispered. "I love what you do to me. I just ... I can't think when you're doing that."

She smiled in the darkness. Against the window panes the snow continued to whisper

and the shutters rattled. She felt isolated from the rest of the world here with him.

"Don't you want something more from me?" he asked.

"What do you mean? You don't think I only want you for this, do you?" she asked, tightening her fingers around him again. He made a small sound, like a growl, deep in his chest.

"I should be helping you around here. I feel useless. Give me something to do."

"I am giving you something to do," she murmured, pressing herself against him. Before he could be insulted by her statement, she added, "There's plenty that needs doing, but the weather isn't right for it. In the springtime all the trim will need painting, the gardens reworked, then ...." She sighed, looking at him in the silvery gloom. His hazel eyes, shadowed by his lashes, appeared black.

"Will I be here in the springtime?"

"I don't know. I'd like you to be."

"Me, too," he stated quietly.

Bending forward, she planted her hands on his chest and kissed him. "I don't have any idea where we're going," she whispered against his mouth. "There are too many unknowns, too many variables. You could have someone waiting for you, you know?"

"I hope not," he said back, his breath drifting around the hollow of her mouth. "I think I want only you."

At his words, tears pricked her lids. He drove both hands into her hair, pulling her mouth down hard against his. His tongue moved languidly in contained heat and she recalled all he had been doing with it since they'd met. Her thighs trembled, slick with the moisture of her arousal. Rolling, he positioned his body on top of hers, his thick cock pressed between her legs. She could feel the tip of it against her labia.

"How could we have not known each other?" he asked in an undertone. "I feel like I've always been here, like your body and mine have always conformed to each other, belonged together, just like this," he said, sliding into her.

"Oh ... my," she whispered, feeling the heat of him spread rapidly into her veins. She reached for the box on the bedside table.

"No. Wait. Please, just wait. I want to feel you this way for a moment. It's so much better like this."

"I know, but ...."

"Wait just a bit," he said again and began to move with torturous precision, in so far, then out, nearly free of her, hovering as if in indecision, before gliding back home. Over and over while she lay nearly still, held down by his body, by the weight of sensation, of heat flooding her abdomen, her limbs, as he slowly slipped in and out and in and out with a timing that made her tremble.

"Caleb ...."

"Shhh."

If he had changed his pacing, shifted his weight, she might have been able to come back from that place where she was drifting, but he was quite deliberate in his actions. In, and out, unbearably hot and slow, inexorably timed like the foaming surf of the ocean, relentless and endless and consuming.

"Caleb ...."

"Go ahead, sweetheart," he whispered.

"Caleb ...."

“Shhh.”

Bound to where he held her by the very motion of his entry and retreat, she could see him in the darkness, the sweat-sheen of his skin, his hair grown damp, the pupils of his eyes dilated, the concentration of control. A single drop of perspiration fell from his brow onto her erect nipple, running over the curve of her breast.

“Oh, God.”

When she came, she dragged him to her, wrapping her arms around his neck with her mouth open on his as she cried out again and again into it, hearing his voice echo her release as he drove her down to a place where the silver light of the falling snow shattered and was gone.

\* \* \* \*

When Meg awoke in the morning, she knew she had been dreaming of Matt. He had been lying beside her in this bed of theirs, telling her about the child he had wanted while she slept. Odd, the way dreams worked. Sometimes you saw yourself as if you were standing on the sidelines watching. Closing her eyes, Meg touched her stomach, low, then slit her lids to cast a glance at the box of condoms, retrieved from the place where it had fallen the night before. She thought of the possibility of pregnancy and closed her eyes again.

“Please,” she whispered, not entirely certain what she was asking for.

What a betrayal of memory that would be, to deny her husband the child he had wanted for so long, only to conceive in a coupling of uncontrolled lust with a man she didn’t really even know.

Amazed at the bitterness of her reflections, especially when she had felt so very close to Caleb the night before, Meg tossed back the covers and got out of bed. The other side of the mattress was tousled, but empty. The door to the hallway stood open.

“Caleb?”

She went to the door and put her head out.

“Caleb?”

Hearing noise in the kitchen, she called down the stairs as she was heading into the shower, “Good morning!”

His muffled reply was friendly reassurance. She wouldn’t have wanted her strange mood to be catching. Standing in the bathroom waiting for the water to heat up, Meg looked out the window at the frigid snow sparkling on the roof shingles and scattered across the sparse, sandy lawn. There wasn’t much accumulation. Most of the precipitation appeared to have blown into sheltered areas and gathered there, leaving the road clear. Maybe she would give Caleb another driving lesson today. Re-lessons, surely, considering how fast he was picking it up.

Stepping into the shower as the steam started to roll across the ceiling, she took her time bathing, washing her hair, wondering if last night might have been enough to get her pregnant. It only took once, after all. Not just one time, but just one narrow-tailed, swimming little sperm. In future, she would have to be more careful. Even if she considered herself ready, which she didn’t, to put Caleb in the position of being a father was not fair to him. He might already possess an entire brood, for all they knew. And if he didn’t, it didn’t matter. Until he had some idea who he was, how could he be certain what he really wanted in his life?

Turning off the shower spray with wrinkled fingers, Meg towed dry, then wrapped her hair and went to the mirrored cabinet for her comb. Written with a finger on the steamed glass was a heart with an arrow thrust through it, together with a set of initials, interlinked. Though dripping, they were still clear enough to read.

Neither one of them was Caleb's. In years gone by, she had seen this heart, these matching initials side by side, written in the steam by her husband while he shaved and she showered. Her heated skin stippled with chill.

"No," she whispered, feeling lightheaded. Her legs gave out and she dropped onto the closed lid of the toilet, pressing her head between her knees. "No," she breathed again.

What the *fuck* was going on? Battling a nearly overwhelming desire to vomit, Meg raised her head to stare at the melting heart on the mirror. Had she made it happen again? Was she thinking so hard about Matt and the possibility of a baby and Caleb's position in her life, that she had caused him to do this? She hadn't heard him come in, but he could have entered quietly while the water was running. Could have? Caleb *had* to have come in. It *had* to have been his finger marking the glass in a long-forgotten ritual from her days of being newly wed. After all, she hadn't done it. And it sure as hell wasn't Matt.

Hearing footsteps in the hall, Meg jumped up, applying the edge of her towel to the mirror. Confronting him with the evidence of something he likely wouldn't remember or understand doing would be of no help to him at all. She opened the door just as he knocked. Steam rolled out past his head into the hallway.

"I made us breakfast," he announced with a grin.

"Again? You're quite the homebody," Meg said in an attempt to cover her lingering disquiet. "Thank you."

Leaning into the bathroom, he kissed her forehead. "You're welcome."

Wrapping her arm around his neck, she breathed in the scent of him, pressing her lips to the side of his throat.

"Caleb ...."

"Yes?"

"Nothing," she said. "Never mind. Let me get dressed and we'll eat."

"Alright," he answered, stepping away. "And then would you mind giving me a quick refresher on the computer? I always balk at the same point and can't get the damned thing turned on. I'm good after that, though."

"Sure," she agreed. With any luck, he might find something she'd missed. And the sooner he found out anything about his life, the better off they both would be.

## Chapter Fourteen

Hunt-and-peck, Meg called the way he typed words on the keyboard. Even so, he felt himself growing more adept at the task every day. Somewhere, he had done this before. Even searching the Internet seemed vaguely familiar. The spelling of words came back to him the more he worked. Having grown tired of dead ends regarding his own name, finding people who didn't resemble him in the slightest or who had been dead for many years, he had typed in Meg's name and discovered an abundance of information about her. Articles about her work, places where books she'd illustrated were sold, interviews. She even had her own ... what was it called? Website. The authors of the books she'd illustrated had their own websites as well, chatty and personal, whereas Meg's was all about her work and very little about herself.

Her picture was on it, though, standing on the porch of this very house, looking pretty and extremely feminine in a loose, pale dress. A breeze had blown her bangs into her eyes, and she was laughing. He loved her laugh. Sometimes, he felt like he loved her. Was that possible?

Sitting with his elbows on his knees and his hands interlaced beneath his chin, he stared at the picture of Megan Donovan, Illustrator of Children's Books.

"Oh, you found that, did you?"

He glanced sheepishly over his shoulder as Meg deposited the laundry basket in the middle of the bed, then back at the screen. "You look happy in this picture."

"I was," she said. She sounded perplexed by the admission. He felt a twinge of something at her tone.

"Do you want me to put those clothes away for you?"

"If you want. They're folded, so there's no hurry. I'm going to get to work."

"Okay," he said, listening to her footsteps as she retreated from the room. Once she was gone, he lifted a finger to touch the two-dimensional face on the monitor. She looked very happy, he thought. What had happened?

Gazing at the screen, he decided there might be a way to find out. Going back to the search engine she had showed him, he typed in her husband's name.

"Shit," he muttered. Apparently, Matt and Donovan were commonly paired names. Maybe if he added something else to the parameters, like the name of Donovan's fishing boat. What was it? He could find out, if he checked the painting of the sea, but she would catch him at it. Not only that, but the idea of looking at the painting again wasn't particularly appealing. Had he noticed the name of the town at any point? Not that he could recall, and there wasn't any specific mention of it on Meg's website.

Sitting back on the low stool in front of the coffee table which served as a desk in the bedroom, Caleb let a breath out over his lips. He lowered his arms to his thighs, drumming his fingers on his knees.

"Shit," he said again, and stood up, stretching the length of his body. Sitting on that stool wasn't the most comfortable position.

Frowning in thought, he walked to the bathroom. Flipping up the lid of the seat, he unzipped his pants, turning his head to glance out the window. Two cars were traveling close together along the roadway rather slowly, and slowing further still as they approached Meg's house. In instinctive, unexplainable reaction, Caleb re-zipped his pants and took a sideways step

away from the window, keeping an eye on the cars.

"Hello," he breathed. "Who's this?"

The cars had pulled into the driveway, out of his line of sight unless he exposed himself to view. He waited, then counted the doors opening and closing. Three. Three people got out of those two cars. A short interval later he heard the sound of knocking on the door below. If Meg was in the little room where she painted, it would take her a moment or two to reach the front of the house. Caleb headed toward the top of the front stairs, avoiding even in the swiftness of his stride those places where he knew the floorboards squeaked. Standing with his back to the wall, to hold himself steady so he would make no betraying noise, he waited for Meg to open the door.

Her heavy socks whispered along the hardwood floor and she was talking to herself in a quiet voice. At the door she paused, no doubt looking out before opening it. *Good girl*, he thought. If she called his name, he would be down there in a heartbeat. If not, he would assume it was someone she knew. He was thrown, however, by her hesitation before opening the door. She was reluctant, swearing under her breath. Why?

He heard the sound of the latch, and then the slight squeaking of the hinges as she drew the door inward. Only so far. She wasn't opening the door all the way. Caleb tensed.

"Dan?" she said. "What's going on?"

Dan. The guy from town. Caleb felt an unexpected surge of anger, making the hallway dim around him. Breathe, he told himself. What is your problem?

The man answered her in a voice meant, for some reason, to sound official, but Caleb could hear something underlying his tone, some severe emotion he was attempting to hold in check. Caleb would have thought it was fear, if there had been any reason for it.

"Meg Donovan," he stated. Idiotically, it seemed to Caleb. To Meg, too, apparently.

"Of course. You know me. What's going on?" she repeated.

Risking a quick check, Caleb peered around the wall, then ducked back again. There were three men at the door, not exactly patient in stance. The one, Dan, was not dressed as he had been in town, but was wearing a uniform of some sort. A police uniform. Yes, a police uniform. The other two were in suits.

One of the other men spoke. "Agent Phillips, Mrs. Donovan. May we come inside to speak with you, please?"

"Agent Phillips? With what agency are you affiliated?"

"FBI, Mrs. Donovan. Would you like some I.D.?"

"If you don't mind, yes, I would."

"Of course."

A shuffling of position and then, it seemed, the identification was produced, because Caleb heard Meg step back and the door open wide. "Come into the kitchen, then. I'll put some coffee on. Dan ... I mean, Officer Stauffer, knows where it is."

Caleb listened to the footsteps moving to the back of the house and followed them to the top of the kitchen steps. Unfortunately, the door at the bottom was shut. He could hear the four voices, three masculine and one soft and very feminine, but not what was being said. Frowning at the staircase, he realized there wasn't a single tread on the whole flight that was silent.

For a moment he contemplated going down the front stairs in order to hear the conversation, then he remembered that the door below had been open when he went to the bathroom. Meg must have closed it upon entry into the kitchen. Either she didn't want him to hear what was being said, or she wanted to make certain that they didn't hear him. The latter

seemed the more likely scenario. After a brief debate with himself, Caleb retreated to her bedroom. Silently he returned to the seat before the computer and began typing in a whole new set of inquiries.

\* \* \* \*

At least they're polite, Meg thought as she measured out the grounds into the coffee maker. She was stalling and they probably knew it, but she couldn't begin to imagine what these men wanted from her and she needed a few minutes to collect herself. Quite frankly, she was surprised they were giving it to her.

"Sit down," she said over her shoulder. "I'm almost finished here."

When she looked back, they were still standing, even Dan, who appeared nervous as a hare. His eyes kept darting to the beach outside the window. He was breathing unevenly, the standard bullet proof vest beneath his light blue shirt creaking. There was a telltale dampness seeping out from his armpits. Meg glanced at the thermometer fixed to the outside of the glass. Thirty-six degrees. No reason to be sweating.

If anyone should be sweating, it should be her. Oddly enough, now that the initial shock of having these three men appear at her door was wearing off, she felt an icy calm. Tranquilly, she removed four mugs from the cabinet and set them on the counter. Then she got out the sugar bowl and the half and half from the refrigerator. Behind her the men shifted in silence where they stood, but still they didn't sit.

Water ran down through the filter, the color of cola, slowly filling the Pyrex pot beneath. Meg removed spoons from the drawer, napkins from the closet. She pulled out a box of cookies, preparing to arrange them on a plate.

"That's not necessary, ma'am."

"No? None of you would like any? Dan?" she asked pointedly.

He shook his head. His eyes slid to the counter, and then to her breasts. Meg cleared her throat and he looked away. The one who had introduced and identified himself as Agent Phillips lifted a briefcase and laid it down on the table. Turning, he opened it, removing several photographs. Closing the case, he set the photographs on top, face down.

From across the room, before they were flipped over, none of them had appeared to be a photograph of the board bearing the name of Matt's boat. She had thought that perhaps these men had come about the wreckage being in the wrong spot, or whatever it was Dan had been babbling about that day. Pressing her tongue against the back of her teeth, Meg returned to the preparation of coffee, asking each man how he preferred his.

Handing each his cup in turn, Meg moved to the table with her own and stood beside it.

"Sit, Mrs. Donovan," said Agent Phillips.

"Certainly, if you will."

The third man, who had not yet been identified, frowned a little at her words.

Holding her cup, Meg took a small sip, smiling politely and patiently. Finally, Agent Phillips sat down, followed by the third man, and then Dan. That battle won, Meg pulled out a chair and sat, as well.

I know this game, Meg thought. I played it before, and not well. Let no one say I do not learn from my mistakes.

After several gulps of coffee, dutifully ingested, Agent Phillips lowered his cup with care to the table. Taking the photographs from the top of the case, he shuffled them in his hands before fanning them out between his coffee cup and hers. Meg leaned forward, not looking at

the pictures yet, eyebrows raised.

“Yes?”

“Kindly take a look at these surveillance photographs, if you would, Mrs. Donovan. They were taken in the past several months. Identify anyone you might recognize.”

Meg extended her fingers to the photos, to drag them closer. “May I?”

“Of course.”

Caleb. She had expected that they would be of Caleb, all recent events considered. But they weren’t.

“Oh my God,” she breathed as the air shimmered into unbearable brightness.

\* \* \*

They were gone. At one point there had been a certain amount of commotion, what seemed like chairs sliding across the floor and raised voices, and then all had been calm again. The muffled conversation droned on and on until he heard thudding footsteps exiting the kitchen, the front door open and close, the car’s engines start, the crunching of tires as they left the driveway. Caleb watched from the bathroom window, far enough back to be unobserved, as the two vehicles drove off down the lonely stretch of road. He waited for Meg to come up and tell him what had happened. She didn’t. Instead, a short time later he heard the back door shut and then Meg’s racing steps across the porch. Now, he stood at her bedroom window and watched over her out on the sand by the water’s edge.

Bundled in a peacoat and scarf, she was pacing back and forth above the surf line, stopping every so often to stare out toward the gray horizon, her hands shoved deep into her pockets. Rocking on his heels, he kept his gaze glued to her as he thought about what he had learned, confined to silence in her bedroom. FBI stood for Federal Bureau of Investigation. He had read their mission statement, knew their jurisdiction, read about their headquarters, their satellite offices throughout the country. He knew who Dan Stauffer was, too, and his connection to Matt Donovan, and to Meg. An article from a local newspaper told how Office Stauffer had come to the house, together with a representative of the Coast Guard, to tell Meg about her husband’s ship going down with all hands. With all hands. Caleb wasn’t sure what that meant until the point was clarified later on. Matt and all the men on board with him had died. There was a tiny, poorly defined photograph accompanying the article, showing four men standing in front of a boat, their faces indistinct.

As he watched her, he suddenly saw Meg drop to her knees in the sand, her face in her hands. Caleb felt a tightening in his chest. Pulling on his shoes, he grabbed his coat—the one she had bought for him, not Matt’s sweatshirt jacket—and hurried out to her. Running in sand was not the easiest thing to do. He felt like he was slogging through a dream, his mind racing ahead to his destination while his legs kept dragging him backward. And all the while she sat slumped on the ground above the tide line unaware of his approach, unaware that he cared so much about her already that his heart was breaking to see that she was weeping.

“Meg!”

Stumbling toward her, he scooped her up into his arms, holding her tight against his chest. She buried her face against the suede of his jacket, shoulders heaving in his embrace. He smoothed her hair back, his palm dampened by the salt tears streaming along her cheeks.

“Meg,” he said again, softer now, his voice almost lost in the sound of the surf, “what’s wrong? What’s happened?”

She continued to cry, fingers curled into the fabric by his jacket zipper, then up into the

hair at the nape of his neck. He held her and rocked her and watched the gulls circling overhead, the sun a pearlescent disc in the clouded wintry sky beyond.

"It's freezing out here," he said in time. He felt her nod against him, her hair soft beneath his hand. His breath plumed. "Do you want to go inside?"

"In a minute," she mumbled.

He pulled her closer, enveloping her to keep her shivering body warm. He turned his jaw against her head, against the hair at her crown, breathing in the scent of the escaping heat of her scalp.

"What happened?" he asked again.

She drew a deep, shuddering breath in the circle of his arms. Then she stepped back. He let her go. Lifting her head she met his gaze, her green eyes wet and shining and ravaged.

"He hated me."

Caleb didn't ask who she was talking about. He knew.

"I always thought there was a possibility that he didn't, that things just weren't good enough between us to keep us together, but I was wrong. He hated me."

"How do you know that?"

He saw her inhale again, then release the breath in a long sigh that frosted the air in front of her mouth. "No matter what, he should have known I would be devastated when word came to me that he died. And all this time, he let me believe."

Caleb felt a chill under his coat that had little to do with the temperature. "Let you believe what?"

"That he was dead. He's not, Caleb. Matt's alive."

## Chapter Fifteen

Suddenly everything was different, skewed, canted, warped. Nothing made sense. Matt was alive. He had never died. Never gone down in his boat out in the vast, vast ocean. All her obsessions about his drowning, her fears for him, her grief, were pointless. Her daily rituals for the repose of his soul, futile. The happiness she had begun to feel in Caleb's arms was false, because she had thought she was free of Matt, that Caleb had freed her, but he hadn't, she wasn't. Matt was still out there, living a life, an apparently criminal life, not caring that she thought he was dead, not caring that the connection she thought broken between them at last had only been masked. Masked by deceit.

Caleb sat beside her on the sofa holding her fingers in his hand, saying nothing. They both still had their coats on. Desolation seemed to hang solidly in the air between them, and she couldn't understand why.

After a few minutes, Caleb released her hand and put his arm around her shoulder, pulling her snug against his body. He unwound the scarf from her neck, then began to unfasten the buttons of her coat. She caught the heavy zipper tag of his jacket between her thumb and forefinger and tugged it down. Cool air rushed from the weave of his garment, smelling of the sea. With a sound that was half sob, Meg stood up, forcing the sleeves down his arms, then jerked out of her own coat. She stood before him, breathing heavily. The eyes he raised to hers were heavy-lidded and sad, the color of steeping tea in the half-light of the room. Why? Why did any of this have to matter to them at all?

With a swiftness that made her head spin, Meg threw her arms around his neck, straddling him on her knees, pressed deep into the cushion to either side of his thighs. She began to kiss him like a lunatic, saying things to him that were unclear even to her own ears. Crying. Unable to stop the tears from flowing, the salt fluid mingling with the liquid heat of their mouths. Suddenly he shuddered, a long, slow quiver that ran the length of his body, and he encircled her upper arms with his large hands, setting her back onto his knees. She looked at him and saw that he was crying, too.

"Caleb, I'm sorry," she whispered.

He nodded, one side of his lip curving. She reached out to wipe the moisture from his face, then folded her hands in her lap.

"Do you love him?" he asked.

The question caused the air to rush from her lungs. She stared at him, at the beautiful, rugged face of the man without a past, who had washed up onto her beach like a gift, and whom she had accepted into her life. Everything seemed to grow still. She could hear the sound of blood coursing through her veins together with the echoing implication of his question.

That was it, of course. Why the world had shifted, why it had to matter to them. If she still loved the husband who had abandoned her, the husband she had pushed away, who had run from her, from the two of them together, that she had held in her heart as dead for over a year, then it made a difference to what she and Caleb had now. It made all the difference.

Do you love him? Not an easy question to answer. Not an unconditional no, nor a yes. Did she want him back? She had, for a long time, but she didn't now. Yet, if Caleb was not here and she'd received the news today, how would she feel?

Did she recognize the love she had borne Matt Donovan for years, that had been beaten and twisted by the darkness touching their lives? Yes. But did she love him still?

She slid her fingers between Caleb's, squeezing them. He squeezed tighter still.

"Caleb ...."

"Don't," he said. "Don't answer the question I asked you. It's not fair. There's no decision to be made here, no choice between me and a man you thought was dead and have just found out is not. Besides, I'm temporary, right?"

No, she mouthed, but nothing came out. Not temporary, she wanted to say. What about the springtime? You wanted to be here come springtime, and I wanted you here, too.

She started to cry again, and was angry with herself for doing so. Caleb pulled her down against his chest, pinning her with one arm while the other continued to hold her hand.

"Should I leave, do you think?"

"No," she said.

"But it's not the same, now, either, is it?"

"No," she whispered.

Matt's absence or Matt's presence made small difference to the manner in which he colored her life. And things were not the same now. She almost hated him for not being dead, for tipping the balance she had begun to find again.

Almost.

Closing her eyes, she clung to Caleb's warm body while he held her, not wanting to get up from that couch, not wanting to face what might come next.

\* \* \* \*

"It's snowing again."

Unusual weather, this, so early in the season. Unlike the storm the night before, this one was flying in earnest. There would no sleeping nude beside Caleb tonight. The house was freezing.

Meg bit her lip. She wasn't certain there would have been any sleeping nude beside Caleb tonight anyway.

Turning from the window, she studied Caleb's back. As lanky as he was, he looked something like a praying mantis seated on the low stool in front of the computer, his knees drawn up, his arms stretched between them to the keyboard. Searching the Internet had become his fixation, and how could she blame him? If she were in his place, the search for knowledge and discovery of information would have been paramount to her, as well. Right now, he was reading about Interpol, since she had informed him that the third man was from that agency. She walked up to stand behind him. On impulse, she placed her hand on his shoulder. Without hesitation, he turned his head and kissed her thumb.

Her lips curled as she felt a surge of ... of what? Gratitude, maybe. Whatever it was, her heart lifted a little. Dropping to her knees behind him, she put her arms around his waist, leaning her head against the ridges of his spine.

"Find anything interesting?" she asked.

"It's all interesting to me," he answered, fitting the fingers of his left hand into hers while he continued to peck around the keyboard with the right. She smiled against him, breathing in the scent of his deodorant and of his warm flesh.

"You're not cold?"

"Nope." She could hear the answering smile in his voice.

"I am," she said.

"Get in bed. I'll be there soon."

Comfortable, familiar, as if nothing had changed. Maybe if they worked at it hard enough, it wouldn't. But that was foolish. Everything changed. Life was not static. What those changes were and what you did with them were what mattered.

Rising, Meg undressed in haste, slipping into her favorite ratty sweats and a sweatshirt, then pulled a pair of socks on over her feet. She leaped off the cold floor into the bed, burrowing under the covers. When she poked her head back out, she found Caleb watching her. He was smiling, but there was no humor in his eyes.

*Oh, Caleb*, she called silently to him. She stretched her hand out. Mutely he rose from the stool, stretching his cramped limbs, then came to the foot of the bed and crawled across the mattress to her. He stopped with his face above her own. His dark, tangled hair hung forward across his eyes, shadowing them, making them look brown rather than hazel. She couldn't read their expression.

"Too many unknowns, you said. Too many variables. I need to find out who I am, Meg. We'll know what to do then."

Meg swallowed. She touched her finger to the length of his shaven jaw line and nodded. He kissed her, not so much with passion as with promise, then climbed beneath the covers, stretching his long body alongside hers. Folding her in his arms, he pulled her close.

"Shit. I forgot to turn off the computer."

"It's fine," she said. "It'll enter sleep mode on its own in a little while."

Grunting, he reached to the bedside table and switched off the light. The only illumination was the blue-white glow of the monitor. Snow flakes flew with crystalline delicacy against the window panes. He pressed his lips to the side of her head, the breath from his nostrils sweeping single strands of hair in its wake.

"Meg, it'll be alright," he whispered.

"Okay," she said. "Okay."

She felt him snuggle down into the pillow, felt his body relax. Glancing aside at him, she saw that his eyes were closed, his lashes thick and dark against his skin.

Okay, she said again to herself. It's okay. This is where we are.

## Chapter Sixteen

The snow was inches deep, even out on the sand, with the spume from the waves seeping into it. An unusual sight, snow on the beach. Normally the sand retained the sun's warmth better than the green grass and would not let precipitation accumulate, but the days prior to the storm had been cloudy and gray and unseasonably cold. Wrapped in a shawl, Meg stepped out onto the porch with her feet shoved into a pair of unlaced boots. Webs of snow drifted across the cleanly swept boards. Beyond, the garden was transformed by the weather, plants unrecognizable but lovely. Gulls, having abandoned the surf, were out on the ocean bobbing on swells that were warmer than the air above.

Huddled into herself against the cold, Meg found her thoughts recalled to the first winter she and Matt had been married. They had been so young. The first snowfall of their first winter together, and he had wanted to give her flowers, but he couldn't get his hands on any. So he had made them from tissue and set them on the cleared porch for her to find when she stepped outside. 'Snow flowers' he had called them, fabricated of the white facial tissue from the bathroom. He had laughed at his creation, but she had been touched and had saved every one, pressed flat in an old book for years.

Behind her, the door opened. She turned her head slightly and smiled.

"So, this is really snow," Caleb commented. "I think I knew that."

"This is really snow," she agreed, lifting her chin a little to take in the extraordinary beauty of the day. "That stuff the night before last was just a tease. Thank you, by the way, for sweeping the porch."

For several seconds, Caleb was silent. "What do you mean?"

Meg clutched the shawl tighter in front of her throat, her gaze scanning the porch again as a feeling of dread stole over her. Her heart seemed abruptly to thud to a halt, then kick into high gear. On the small table beneath the window stood a round vase and in it, paper flowers made from tissue. Closing her eyes, Meg swayed on her feet.

"No," she said. She put her hands up to her face. Not again.

"Oh God," she cried, pushing past Caleb to get back inside the house. He followed her in, swinging the door shut, then stood watching her, his forehead creased in concern. Meg paced to the counter and back, coming to a halt before him.

"I can't keep doing it. I can't."

"You can't keep doing what, Meg?"

"This," she stated with an expansive gesture of her hands. "To you."

It was like she was infecting him with her memories, forcing him to relive a life that wasn't his own. She didn't mean to do it. Why couldn't she stop it from happening? Why couldn't she stop herself from remembering? Why did the past matter so much?

Caleb shook his head, taking her hands and clasping them together between his own. "Explain it to me," he said softly.

Staring down at the shape of his hands, so much larger than her own, Meg fought against her panic. "We should sit down," she said.

At the table he pulled out a chair for her, then another for himself, sitting facing her, knee to knee. Meg thought of the soft-edged tissue flowers in the snow, the writing on the mirror, the

look like death in Caleb's eyes when he saw himself drowning, the countless other incidents when he had acted, thought, *felt* in a manner controlled by her recollection of events. Even his affection, she realized, could be influenced by her longing for that which she had lost.

Breathing shallowly, Meg took his hand. She could hardly look at him. "I think," she began, "that you are doing things you don't realize you're doing, that you don't remember doing."

He tipped his head a little to the side, regarding her with a quiet speculation. "Like what?"

"Have you come into the bathroom while I've been showering and drawn in the steam on the mirror?"

Startled, he considered for a moment. "No," he said. She could tell by his expression that he firmly believed that was the case, that he was confused by her question. She inhaled, expanding her lungs, then released her breath and tried again.

"Did you sweep the porch clean of snow?"

"No. Are you saying I did it and don't recall?" he asked after a moment.

"Worse. I think what you are doing is acting out memories of mine. Right now there's a vase out there on the porch, on the table by the window, with paper flowers in it."

"Paper flowers?" he echoed.

"Yes. The first year Matt and I were married, he made me flowers out of bathroom tissue to commemorate our first snowfall as a married couple. And the other morning, when I was in the shower, I came out and found that you had drawn something on the steamed-up mirror."

"I had drawn something on the mirror," he repeated, as if for clarification.

"Yes," she said, leaning forward in her urgency. "Yes! It had to be you, don't you see? Even though these are things Matt had done in the past, it's you doing them now."

Caleb's shoulders shifted and then he settled, his elbows on his thighs and her hand in his. He sat very still, thinking, then he looked at her.

"There's no other explanation?"

"It's not his ghost," she said. "I don't believe that sort of physical manifestation is possible."

"It wouldn't be his ghost, anyway," Caleb pointed out in an undertone, his gaze holding hers, "since he isn't dead."

Meg stared into eyes the color of the sea. She felt her chest tighten.

"No," she whispered. "Matt's not in the country. Agent Phillips said ...."

"You told me they lost track of him nearly two months ago," Caleb interrupted her. "He could be anywhere. Even here."

*Even here.*

Meg stood up, dropping Caleb's hands. She could feel herself shaking. It had started in her abdomen and worked its way out to her extremities. Lifting her fingers to her forehead, she could see them quaking, but could do nothing to make them still until she clenched her hand into a fist, pressing it tight against the curve of her brow.

"That would mean he's been in the house," she said, her voice thick in her throat. "While we have been here, you and I, and we didn't know it. How?"

Tucking her hands beneath her arms, she stared at the red and white checked tea towel hanging on the handle to the oven. She looked at the way it was folded, remembering a half dozen times in the past week when she had lifted it up, spread it out across the handle, thinking

irritably that the way it was hanging it would never dry. Not blaming anyone, not really even giving the matter much thought, but remembering now who used to leave the dish towels just like that every time he used one.

She gasped, feeling a sudden lack of oxygen.

Meg spun around, clutching the counter at her back for support. She should immediately call the number on the card Agent Phillips had left. Shouldn't she? And then what? They would find Caleb. Would that be so very bad? To him, it would be. He wasn't ready for questions, she knew he wasn't. And Matt, what of Matt? If he was anywhere near here, knowing he was a hunted man, there had to be a reason he would take that risk. That reason couldn't be her. Not her, after all this time.

"Meg!"

She hadn't realized she'd begun pacing in frantic circles until he stopped her. Taking her by the shoulders, Caleb gave her a sharp shake.

"Look at me, Meg. Look at me."

She did, feeling crazed, frightened, outraged, blind with a number of emotions she couldn't name, and then she didn't feel any of them. His eyes made her steady, held her up, calmed her down, made her breathe again.

"I'm looking," she said.

"Good. Now I want you to think. Is there any possibility that he might be dangerous?"

She blinked. "To you?"

"To you, to me, it doesn't matter. What I'm asking is if we should be worried that he's here. Because he is. You know he is. Somewhere around, able to gain access when he chooses."

Meg felt the panic rising and sought out his eyes, swimming in them, breathing again. She considered what Caleb had asked. Matt, dangerous? Of course not.

And then she had a flash of memory, of her head striking the wooden door of the bedroom and the reeking smell of too much alcohol.

"Maybe," she said.

His respiration caught and something new moved behind his eyes, and she thought, he just saw it, too. My memory. My memory.

Caleb straightened. He put his hand on the side of her neck, his thumb behind her jaw. She felt the warm, calloused ridges against the tiny pulse of her blood.

"Alright. Then there has to be a plan." His face had changed, somehow, hardened, his expression more decisive than she'd ever seen it. "We'll check the property, then the house. Thoroughly. We keep the doors locked at all times. That way, if he wants to come in again, he breaks in, and we know it."

Meg nodded, affected by his attitude. Somewhere in the life he'd known before, Caleb Hunter had been an aggressively capable man. He still was. Nothing in the uncommon situation in which he'd found himself these past two weeks had truly shaken him.

"What about the police, the FBI?" she asked him. "Interpol?"

"Not yet," he said. "If necessary, I will have to deal with them, but not yet. Do you want Matt apprehended?"

Meg hesitated. Did she? "I don't know."

Releasing her neck, he pushed her hair back behind her ear. "Then leave them out of it, for now. We don't know for certain he's still here."

"He was a short time ago, apparently," Meg reminded him, nodding toward the porch.

"Right," he said.

"I think," Meg added, "that what we're doing might be construed as harboring a fugitive or, at the very least, obstruction of justice."

Caleb made a noise in his throat. "We're not harboring. We're not obstructing. We're just securing the sanctity of your home." He seemed as surprised as she was by the tone of his statement. "They might already have some idea he's in the area, which would go a long way in explaining the coincidence of them coming to speak with you just when you started noticing these occurrences. Let me get my coat. We'll lock the house as we leave it and check outside."

He started across the floor, then stopped and turned around. "These things he's done, that you thought I had done, seem very personal, something more than just a way to alert you to his presence. What do you think his point is?"

Cruelty, she wanted to say, because in the end, Matt had displayed quite the cruel streak in his dealings with her. But she couldn't be sure, now, of his motivation.

Looking at the man before her, a man who was still the same but who was also vastly different, transformed in some manner by this call to action, she realized that she couldn't be sure of anything.

## Chapter Seventeen

He had secured all the doors and windows in such a fashion that any entry whatsoever would be known. A simple matter, really, to create this network of security with what was at hand. He startled himself with the knowledge that came to him. He was remembering ... something, but what?

Caleb shrugged it off. If the answer wouldn't come to him easily, there was no point in delving. All he would get for his efforts was a recurrence of the headaches that had plagued him in those first few days after he had woken up on the beach, and he didn't need that distraction.

Standing in the darkness of the bedroom, Caleb listened to the sound of Meg's gentle breathing. She was so trusting that sometimes he was scared for her. She didn't know who or what he was, and yet she had opened her home, her life, herself to him. And he had taken what she offered quite willingly. It didn't seem that he could refuse.

Crossing the floor, he knelt beside the bed, turning his head so that it was aligned with hers. He looked at the color of her hair in the night, the shape of her eyelids, her forehead, the slight bump in the otherwise straight line of her nose, the sweet curve of her mouth. He pressed his lips to the arch of an eyebrow, then sat back over his heels, watching to see if she would awaken. But she didn't.

Too trusting, he thought, and stood up.

It had come to him at some point that he had fallen in love with her. Yet, he wasn't sure if what he felt was for Meg's sake, or was the transference of something he felt for someone else in his life. Sometimes he thought it was the latter, because the love he felt would occasionally startle him by not seeming ridiculously new, but years in its creation.

What did it matter, really? When he regained his memory, everything could change. All these moments that he found himself treasuring could eventually mean quite little to him, when he no longer needed their security. Right?

Wrong. Fucking wrong. That *had* to be wrong.

Moving to the window, he slid aside the curtain and quietly let up the shade, staring out into the night. The moon was nearly half full, its white light shimmering on the sand, on the roadway, on the glint of glass beneath the pine trees. Caleb narrowed his eyes, trying to focus on that tiny pinpoint of light. He had seen something there before. More than once. Could that be Matt Donovan, waiting in a vehicle in the darkness for the right moment to enter the home that once had been his?

As Caleb stared across the moonlit stretch of road, he felt a certain darkness move within him, nearly choke him, and stepped back, letting the curtain fall. Anger wouldn't help him now. Wouldn't help him or Meg.

He could go out there and confront the man, but if it wasn't Donovan, the house, Meg, would be unprotected. Exhaling, he went back to the bed and sat down on the edge of the mattress, in the vacant place between Meg's drawn up knees and her chest. She rolled toward him as the mattress sagged beneath his weight. He caught her by the arm.

"What is it, Caleb?" she mumbled sleepily.

"Nothing," he said.

"Why are you awake?"

I haven't slept in days, he thought. Haven't you noticed?

He needed sleep. His temper was getting short, his body unsteady. He hadn't made love to Meg since the day she'd found out that her dead husband was un-dead. He needed to, now. Wanted to with a sudden, fierce desire. To lose himself in her. To thrust a cock already growing hard into that place of tight, heated flesh. To feel her arms around him and hear the sound of her cries. To hold her locked in his arms as she climaxed again and again and know that it was him, just him, who brought her there. He wanted to make her forget there was another man in her life, another man who hurt her, who made her grieve, who left her and died away from her, only to come back to life and into her heart again, unwanted, unlooked for.

God, he needed to sleep, he just needed to sleep, but he couldn't. Who would watch over her if he slept?

"Caleb, lay down."

*How do you keep doing that, Meg? Get out of my head!*

Groaning, Caleb clutched his forehead. He felt ill, dizzy. Reeling, he stood up, but she had his hand that quick and dragged him back down.

"Caleb, you need to sleep. Lie down."

She sat up, working his shirt over his head. Then she unzipped his jeans, pushed him onto the mattress and pulled them off. With remarkable strength, when he knew he wasn't being any help at all, she shoved him around until she had him under the blankets.

"Close your eyes."

"I can't."

"You have to."

"I can't."

He heard her draw a sharp breath, saw the glitter of her green, green eyes in the darkness.

"Then do something conducive to relaxation, Caleb."

"What? Fucking?"

She narrowed her eyes at him. He was being rude and he knew it, but she didn't say anything. Instead, she got up on her knees and yanked off her sweatshirt. Her breasts were heavy and milky white. Chilled, her nipples stood erect. Inviting. She leaned toward him.

"If that's what you want to call it, fine," she whispered. "You'll sleep afterward, I promise you."

Reaching up he caught a breast in his hand and pulled her closer, working his tongue in slow circles around the rosy aureole, then he lightly clamped his teeth on the tip, licking her nipple with the blunted edge of his tongue until she started to moan. He could feel the blood rush headlong to his groin. Slipping his other hand into her flannel pajama bottoms, he stroked the moist flesh between her legs.

"Take those off."

She was soaked, swollen, ready for him. And all he could think of was that he wanted to drive the image of Matt Donovan right from her head.

"Come here. Right here."

Either she hadn't seen his gesture in the dark, or she was pretending to misunderstand, so he cupped his hands along the inside of her thighs and pulled her to the place where he wanted her. With a silent shudder of anticipation, she leaned her arms against the wall above his head.

"You're going to come as soon as I put my mouth on you," he said.

"You're pretty darn sure of yourself."

"Yeah," he said, "I am."

And with good reason. Nothing could have held her back. Nothing. No sooner had he run his tongue along her slick flesh to circle the swollen bud of her clitoris and she was done. He controlled her with his hands, keeping her where he wanted her even after, bringing her to climax again until she was shaking and her skin sheened with sweat. Yes, and it was his name she called, and again when he mounted her and drove himself deep for forgetfulness, for lust, for comfort, for love, it was his name. His name.

Curled against him beneath the mounded quilt and blankets, she promptly fell asleep in his arms. "You don't love him, do you?" Caleb asked her as he had asked before, now that it was safe to do so, when he knew her dreams were not of a husband who had abandoned her, when he knew that she would not wake to answer either way.

\* \* \* \*

Two hours later, he woke up as if someone had shouted in his ear. He could almost feel the reverberation of noise, the shattering of the quiet night. For a moment he thought that Meg had yelled in her sleep, but she was still slumbering soundly, her head on her arm and the blankets tangled around her waist. With care, he freed the quilt to pull it up over her shoulders, then he got out of bed.

Naked, he shivered in the darkness. He was wide awake, alert to the night around him, straining to hear anything that might indicate they were not alone in the house. Reaching up, he fingered the place on the back of his skull where the knot had been. Though Meg assured him the bruising had long since yellowed and faded away, there was still tenderness there. Tonight, it throbbed.

Snatching his clothes from the bottom of the bed, he thrust his legs into his pants, then pulled the shirt on. Time, he mused without humor, to check the defenses.

Caleb moved through the house in near silence, not bothering to turn on the lights as he went. No need to alert anyone to his actions, to light their way to him or to escape unnecessarily. His eyes were used to the darkness, his body to the places he needed to be where he would not betray his presence. He thought, briefly, of the man or men who had tried to kill him, and the threat he had anticipated from them that had not yet come.

Deal with one threat at a time, Caleb Hunter, he reminded himself.

Matt Donovan's little love notes were not what they appeared to be. They were, as far as Caleb was concerned, menacing in the extreme. Screw what he could and couldn't remember. He knew that a man did not break into the home of the wife he'd walked away from, leaving behind as the sole indicator of his presence reminders of a life they no longer shared. There was something distinctly warped about that. Did he hope for a sweet little reunion? Over Caleb's dead body, if it were true, but he knew that it was not.

He continued through the house, checking the attic door, the basement door, all the exterior doors and windows, the simple but effective devices he had set up to give warning of entry or merely indication of it. All appeared in order.

Relaxing a little, he turned on the light over the stove in the kitchen and filled a pot with water, setting it on the stove to heat. A cup of that tea Meg liked, what was it called? Chamomile. A cup of chamomile tea might settle him down to the point where he could sleep again. She swore by it. That, and warm milk. He remembered that. His first night in the house she had made him a cup of warm milk to help him sleep.

He remembered, too, scalding his mouth, reminding Meg of her husband, who used to do

the same thing.

Shit.

With a flick of his wrist, Caleb turned off the burner. He didn't want anything he did to remind her of Matt. Not anything.

Lifting his eyes from the knob on the stove, he spotted the mug on the counter and reached to put it away. Fingers hovering in the air above the receptacle, he realized that he hadn't taken one out of the cabinet. A spoon lay beside it. Bending closer, he saw what looked like a skim of overheated milk clinging to the concave metal. The mug held its own residue of whitish liquid.

In the two hours he'd been asleep, Meg had not moved from the bed, he would swear to that, and he had been the last one to climb the stairs. The kitchen had been neat and orderly at that time, the way Meg liked to leave it before she went to bed.

Stepping away from the stove, his gaze swept the kitchen. Everything else appeared to be as it had been last time he passed through. Except the towel. The dish towel on the handle of the oven was bunched and folded over on itself. Caleb took another step away, feeling his heart rate increase in thudding increments.

What kind of game was this bastard playing? And how the hell had he gotten in?

There was only one possibility. He'd been here all along, hiding in some location they hadn't discovered. Caleb stared at the cabinets, wondering if they could hold a man undetected. Grabbing the heavy flashlight Meg kept on the shelf, he spun it around in his hand and rushed to the lower doors, yanking them open one by one, half expecting to find Matt Donovan twisted like a contortionist around the pots and pans. Not surprisingly, he found nothing. No use bothering with the upper cabinets. They would never support a man's weight.

The pantry was clear, as was the area behind the door near the porch, where once he had found Donovan's jacket hanging, much as if Meg expected him to walk back in one day in need of it. Moving into the hallway, he began to systematically recheck each room, every piece of furniture that possessed a door, every corner blocked from view.

"Come on," he ground out between his teeth. "Show yourself."

Nothing.

Nothing anywhere.

Fuck.

In the room Meg utilized as a studio, Caleb turned on the overhead light. The room held multiple cabinets where she stored her paints and brushes, cleaners, canvas and various types and sizes of paper. He yanked open the door to each one, without result. Breathing heavily in the middle of the floor, Caleb looked around slowly, just to make certain he wasn't missing anything. Then he saw the painting.

When had she started working on that again? The dark sea looked more menacing than ever, the colors darker, the movement of the waves altered somehow to be more ominous and powerful. He moved closer. The debris she had painted bearing the name of Donovan's vessel was still there, tossed about by the fury of the ocean. The sky above was bruised and embattled. And there, what was that? It looked like ....

Caleb jerked away. For the love of God, it looked like a man's face beneath the surface, wide-eyed in horror as he sank out of sight, the visage barely discernible, to the point where Caleb was certain he was imagining it, until he looked again.

"Oh, God, Meg," he whispered. How could someone who painted those lovely

illustrations filling the books on the living room shelf be capable of this darkness of vision? What haunted her, that she had returned to this painting? Her husband. Matt Donovan haunted her. In life, not in death.

Caleb backed out of the room, not wanting to turn his back on the painting. With the flat of his palm he smacked the light switch down, then pulled the door shut.

Climbing the stairs, Caleb searched the rooms on the upper storey with the same diligence he had given the downstairs rooms, then he paused at the attic door. Determined, he removed the wire he had set up as a trip to let him know if the door had been opened. He didn't know how it could have been done, but if there was any possibility of hiding without detection the attic would be the place.

Turning on the bare bulb that hung at the top of the stairwell, Caleb ascended.

The dust on the floor had been disturbed when he and Meg had searched previously, so there was nothing there to alert him to fresh disruption. Utilizing the flashlight to illuminate the shadows he cast as he passed in front of the hanging fixture, Caleb scanned the large area quickly, then began a more thorough search, pulling boxes aside, checking inside the old armoire, places he'd checked with Meg already, but felt compelled to look again. His nerves stretched and tightened. If Donovan wasn't here, then where the hell was he?

Cobwebs hung, drifting in an unseen current, catching in his hair. He brushed them aside. It was cold in the attic, unheated. If Donovan was hiding there, it couldn't be a comfortable accommodation. Caleb continued in his remorseless search, opening cardboard boxes that might be large enough to contain a man, shining the flashlight under the eaves where a man might lie prone, unseen. Old canvases against the wall shielded an area about eight foot square. Plenty of room, and the canvas would provide some insulation against the cold. Staring at the leaning pile of stretched and prepared canvases, some of them blank, others half cleared of abandoned paintings for future use, Caleb felt a sudden sense of unease. He walked closer, lifting the light in his hand. The hair along his forearms and the nape of his neck stood up. The concentrated beam of the flashlight penetrated deep into the cavern of canvas and passed across a pair of brown eyes.

Swearing, Caleb rushed forward with the flashlight raised as a weapon, flinging aside the framed canvases. And then he stopped, sweat popping out on his forehead, his arms, the indentation above his upper lip. He dropped to his knees, seeing himself against the wall.

Breathing heavily, Caleb reached out to pull his portrait forward. It was signed by Meg and dated more than eight months prior.

He wanted to vomit, right there on the attic floor. His stomach clenched and he swallowed, hard, to prevent the spillage of bile and whatever might remain of his evening meal.

Meg had lied. She knew him.

## Chapter Eighteen

Dan wadded up the oily paper from the sandwich he'd been eating, tossing it into the bag on the car floor between Dutch Phillips' legs. Andre, the guy from Interpol, grunted and tossed his own trash toward the bag and missed. Dan watched as the paper bounced and landed on the mat.

Unscrewing the cap from his soda, Dan took a long pull. Beside him, Phillips had a pair of binoculars trained on the house. Just a few minutes earlier the FBI agent had called him dedicated, said he never would have expected a local to be donating his free time to an investigation. Obviously, Phillips didn't know how long he'd been doing just that without any sanctioning from the powers that be. Frankly, Dan was grateful for the company. After the last time, he wasn't too keen on sitting anywhere near Meg's house alone. Even though he had decided that what he'd been certain he'd seen had been a result of stress and too little sleep, he still got an uneasy feeling whenever he thought about it. A heart attack from stress was more likely than a death by fright. Right? Right. Anyway, he hadn't had a heart attack. The tests had proved it. Still, he didn't care to look too long at that stretch of beach behind her place.

In the back seat Andre sighed. Dan heard him shifting on the seat, stretching out his legs.

"Can you tell me again why you expect our guy might show up here? Didn't he walk out on his wife years ago?"

"Why wouldn't he?" Phillips tossed back. "Last word we had, from your associate I might remind you, was that he was heading back to the States. Figure this is as good a place to start checking as any. Not only that, but did you see how she shut the door to the stairs when we went in the kitchen the other day? I don't think she was hiding a pile of dirty laundry sitting on the steps."

"We should have just asked to have a look around," Andre grumbled.

"On what grounds? We were there only to have her identify the subjects in the photographs."

Dan screwed the cap back on his soda, pegging the bottle into the cup holder. "I think you're wrong about Donovan being there. If he's smart, he'll stay away. Wouldn't this be the first place you'd look? Besides, the guy who's been camped out with her for the past couple of weeks doesn't look like the type to take the return of her ex lying down."

Phillips lowered the binoculars, then raised them to his eyes again. "What did you say his name was?"

"I didn't, and I don't know. I only met him once, with her in town, and we weren't introduced."

He remembered that day he had tried to talk to Meg. He had seen her go into the drug store and had held back a minute or so before following her in, glancing at her boyfriend in the car as he passed. Dan had been jealous as hell when he'd gotten inside and saw what she was buying. That unexpected emotion had made him sarcastic, when he really needed her to speak with him. Not only so he could discuss what he'd found on the beach, but what came after. He didn't think she'd experienced anything similar—God, he hoped not—but he felt compelled to talk to someone about it, and she seemed, somehow, the most likely ear. Well, fat chance of that with lover boy sitting in the car waiting for her.

He remembered, too, the way Meg had closed her eyes when he tried to get her to listen to him, as if she could shut him out. And then her boyfriend had turned his head. Nothing could have prepared Dan for the expression on the guy's face. Dan didn't consider himself a timid individual, but he had actually shivered when greeted by the aspect of those eyes. He hoped Meg wasn't getting in over her head, mixing up with more trouble. He'd seen that same look on Matt Donovan's face on more than one occasion. Flat. Hard. Cold. Most of the time, chance met on the street, that fisherman was as cordial as any other resident in this town, but when crossed he was something else entirely.

"You sound like that might be bothering you a bit."

"What's that?" Dan asked, feeling a slight heat worm into his skin. He knew what Phillips meant, but he wasn't rising to the bait.

"You have a thing for Ms. Donovan?"

In the back seat, Andre leaned forward again, interested.

"What?" countered Dan, trying to sound casual. "Don't tell me you didn't notice she's a good-looking woman?"

"Very pretty," Andre agreed, but Phillips remained mute.

"Well then," said Dan, hoping to dismiss the subject.

Dutch Phillips lowered the binoculars again, setting them on his thigh. "Nice breasts," he said.

Dan's stomach muscles clenched. He knew the agent had passed that comment deliberately, to see how he would react. Did Phillips think he might be biased? Was he testing him? Fine.

"Very nice breasts," Dan said, and laughed as if the whole conversation was only a joke. Then he remembered the last time he had been sitting in this exact spot, his own glasses trained on the kitchen window, watching Meg's new boyfriend putting his mouth all over those breasts. The muscle in his jaw tightened. He could feel the pressure, feel his teeth grinding together.

"What's up there?" Andre asked suddenly. "Attic?"

A narrow rectangle of light had appeared at the top of the house. "Probably," said Phillips. "Dan, do you know?"

"I've never been up there, but I would suppose it's an attic, yes," he stated flatly. Reaching for his field glasses, he fitted them against his eyes, focusing on the window. "What time is it?"

From the corner of his eye, he saw a brief flash of green as Andre pressed the watch on his wrist to illuminate it.

"3:17."

"Odd time to be rooting through your attic," Phillips commented.

Dan said nothing. He hadn't been able to put his finger on what had been bothering him since they'd begun the surveillance, but he suddenly realized what it was. Normally, Meg was fairly careless about her windows—hence the little peep show the evening he'd found the spar—but tonight every shade, every blind had been drawn down tight. Did she and her boyfriend know they were out there?

The attic window was bare, though, showing what appeared to be the illumination perhaps of a naked bulb, but he could see brighter flashes now and then, flicking back and forth.

"Flashlight," said Phillips after a couple of more minutes, giving voice to the conclusion he'd already drawn.

"Could it be our man?"

"We didn't see anyone go in," Dan reminded Andre.

"He wouldn't be likely to use the front door. But it could be like I said, she's been hiding him here the whole time."

"No," said Dan. "No way."

"What makes you so certain?"

Because he remembered how she'd reacted when he'd brought word to her that her husband was dead. Heartbroken, yes, and grief stricken, but relieved. The guilt of her relief had crushed her. He knew it had. It was her guilt, more than her mourning, which had kept her solitary for so long.

"What the hell is that?"

A flurry of shadowed motion reflected on the glass and then, as he and Phillips watched, and Andre scrambled to find what they were looking at with his naked eye, something bloomed in the yellow illumination inside the attic. Remembered dread, fear, crawled over Dan's skin, making his breath come short. Beside him, the FBI agent seemed merely interested. Damn it, Dan thought, didn't he *see* that?

Whatever that darkness was, it continued to grow until there was no light left in the space beneath the steeply pitched roof. Dan felt like he was choking, recalling again those long minutes in the car as he waited for the ambulance to arrive, fearing that whatever it was he'd seen on the beach would hunt him down. He hadn't imagined it. It hadn't been stress and lack of sleep. It had been real. But what the fuck was it?

And then it was gone, and Dan could breathe again, and the two men occupying the car with him were exchanging theories about what the fellow in the attic had been tossing around. Paintings, they thought.

Paintings. No freaking way. Hadn't they *seen*?

## Chapter Nineteen

“Meg, explain this to me. Please.”

At the desperate tone of Caleb’s voice in the darkness, Meg came awake, tossing back the blanket and sitting up against the wall. Stretching for the light, she clicked it on. She blinked, staring at him and what he held.

“Where’d you get that? Were you up in the attic?” she asked, disoriented. She hadn’t heard a thing, but now she could hear the slamming of her heart in her chest. “What’s going on?”

“Explain this to me,” he said again.

Rubbing her eyes, she reached for the clothes she’d discarded earlier and put them on, then she climbed out of bed. Placing her fingers on the edge of the stretched canvas frame, she lifted the painting away from Caleb and leaned it against the wall.

“I painted that shortly after I heard that Matt’s ship had gone down,” she said, spinning on her bare heel to face him. The look on his face made her step back.

“Go on,” he said.

“Then I didn’t want it around, so I put it in the attic.” Simplistically stated, but essentially the truth.

“How did you paint that? Another one of your dreams?”

If he had uttered the words differently, she would have thought them sarcastic, but instead they seemed merely resigned. She didn’t understand what he was asking.

“No,” she said. “I had photographs.”

“Of me.”

“Of you?”

He moved quickly, darting past her to point at her signature and the date at the bottom of the portrait. “Yes, of me! Is that how you’re going to explain it? That you painted this picture of me before we’d met from a photograph. What were you doing with a photograph of me? You know me. You lied and you know me. Tell me who I am, Meg! Tell me.”

Grabbing her arm, he pulled her closer to the painting. Yet even in his agitation, his fingers circling her upper arm were not harsh. She felt her racing heart begin to slow its pace.

Tilting her head to the side, Meg studied the portrait. She hadn’t looked at it for more than half a year. Freeing her arm of his grasp, she crouched down beside it.

“That’s not you,” she said, frowning as she tried to ascertain the resemblance that might have confused him. “That’s Matt.”

He didn’t even pause to consider her words. “You lied when you said you didn’t know me,” he stated with a quiet desolation, “and you’re lying still.”

Glancing up at him from her position near the floor, she shook her head. “No, Caleb, I’m not. Look. Look at the painting.” She reached out to touch him in reassurance, but he drew away.

“I thought you were the one who is too trusting. I’m a fool,” he whispered.

His words struck her in the heart. She actually flinched in pain.

Standing up, she crossed her arms to hug herself. Poor Caleb. What did he see when he looked at Matt’s portrait? Obviously, not what she saw. His emotional state, the fact that he

hadn't been sleeping well for the past several days, on guard, on edge, feeling this need to protect her, could account for his sudden distrust, his confusion. The portrait had never been meant to be a true-to-life rendition, but was developed more from what she had been feeling at the time. It was not abstract, by any means, but was more of a caricatured interpretation. Features exaggerated, emphasized, while others were a mere wash of color, a hint. Granted, Matt and Caleb had similarly dark hair. As he had never known Matt, known what he looked like, she could see why Caleb might be bewildered.

"I can show you the photographs I used," she suggested. "Would that help?"

After a moment he relented. "Yes," he said.

Crossing the floor, Meg yanked open a drawer in the low dresser beneath the window, reaching in for the photo album. Shoving aside paperwork, articles from magazines, odds and ends of items that should have been discarded, she found that the thick album of photographs was gone. Her extended fingers clenched into a fist.

"They're gone," she said.

"You're certain?"

Meg pivoted. "Yes," she said, then frowned at Caleb's back. He was standing by the painting, head bent in study. Angrily, Meg took the canvas and marched it across the hall into the spare room where Caleb had spent the first couple of days. She tossed it on the bed, face down, then returned to her own room.

"Yes," she said again. "You haven't moved them, have you?"

"Of course not. I haven't looked at your things, and wouldn't presume to take them, even if I had."

Of course not. Of course not, Meg kept repeating to herself over and over.

"Matt, then."

"Probably," Caleb agreed with an irksome calm.

Meg tried to remember the last time she had seen the album. She hadn't looked at it in months. "Damn it," she said beneath her breath. "When would he have taken it?"

"He was here tonight, Meg. I found evidence of him in the kitchen. That's why I went to the attic, looking for him. I don't know how he's getting in and out. I thought I had devised a system that would work, to let us know if he came in, but I failed. I'm failing. I can't keep you safe, Meg."

She shivered at his words. "Why do you feel you need to keep me safe?"

"He hurt you. I know that he did."

Meg closed her eyes. Oh, yes, he had hurt her. She hadn't wanted to think about that, to remember those times when her husband had seemed like another sort of creature entirely, violent and cold and without reason. At those times, he had been another man, one she didn't know.

"It's not your responsibility to keep me safe," she said softly. "And you're not failing. You're very diligent. Too diligent. You're going to kill yourself from exhaustion. Maybe it's time we called the authorities. I know you don't want to. I understand your reasons. But something has to be done."

She saw his shoulders slump. He looked tired to the point of being gray.

"I don't know," he breathed wearily.

Stalking to the door, Meg crossed the hall one more time, removing the chair from the guest room. Returning with it, she closed the bedroom door and locked it, then shoved the back

of the chair beneath the door handle. At Caleb's quizzical look, she said, "It works in the movies," then she yanked down the covers of the bed and pointed at the rumpled sheets. "Lie down," she ordered. "It's my turn to keep watch."

"No ...."

"Yes."

With a deep breath, he relented. He lay down, fully clothed. Meg pulled up the blankets and tucked them around his body. She touched his face, his jaw, smoothed the hair back from his brow. The hazel gaze he turned her way softened, lost its look of desperation and suspicion.

"I would never lie to you, Caleb. I ...." *love you*, she wanted to say, but stopped herself. For one thing, love didn't preclude lying. It often precipitated it. For another, she was just plain afraid to say the words aloud, afraid it was too soon, that she would wake up and they wouldn't be true, that Caleb wouldn't believe her, or wouldn't want to hear those words from her. Or that the day would come when those words would stand between them, when he remembered who he was and found he had to leave her.

Bending, Meg placed her lips on his forehead. "Goodnight," she whispered against his skin.

Then she turned off the light and crossed to the other side of the bed, sitting down with her back against the wall and her knees drawn up. Vigilant. He must be aware of her vigilance so that he could relax. His hand snaked across the mattress, fingers slipping around her own.

"Goodnight, Meg. I'm sorry if I frightened you, about that portrait. I believe you. I know you wouldn't lie to me. I know that. I just ... I'm tired."

She squeezed his fingers. "Go to sleep, then," she said.

He pressed his forehead against her thigh and she felt him nod. Letting go of his hand, she placed her fingers in his hair, stroking the thick, silky locks back across his crown several times in a soothing gesture, then let her hand rest atop the curve of his skull. In a few minutes, he was asleep. Meg leaned her own head against the wall at her back.

The truth was, he had unnerved her in his insistence about the portrait. She was afraid that his visual perception had suffered from the blow to his head. She should have insisted he go to a doctor. God, he had been so upset, so despairing when he thought she had lied to him. Trust was a two way street, and so was honesty. Perhaps she should have told him more than she had about her life before, about Matt, about the things that had happened, that had come between them.

Matt. Damn him. What did he think he was doing, coming back here? He had walked out on her, walked out with absolutely no intention of returning. And then he had let her believe he was dead. It wasn't like he didn't know she'd been told. What would he have expected, when he had created an entire scenario designed to lead everyone to believe the fishing boat was somewhere at the bottom of the ocean? Dealing in stolen goods, high-priced stolen goods, according to Agent Phillips, was apparently lucrative enough to make him turn his back on everyone and everything he had known.

Meg's gaze drifted to the shut door, the chair wedged beneath the knob. She only hoped that trick really worked. The fact that Matt was apparently coming and going at will, and undetected, not making contact, just leaving those sadistic hints of a past that no longer existed, made the hair stand up on the back of her neck. What did she and Caleb hope to accomplish, riding this out on their own? Did they hope he would move on when he tired of his wicked games, or that they would catch him in the act and call the authorities then, when the commotion

of his capture would enable Caleb to avoid too many questions? At first, she had wished Matt would just leave her alone, that she wouldn't have to deal with the responsibility of his arrest, but the more she thought about it, the more she just wanted it to end.

It had, once.

Remembering her vacillating emotions over the years was enough to make her angry, at herself more than anyone else. Protecting him, making excuses for him, trying to blame the break up of her marriage on outside circumstances rather than the truth.

The truth. There were so many truths, and not one of them came close to uncovering the final grimness of it all. Grief and relief had mingled as one, when she'd been told he was dead.

And now he wasn't.

Looking around the room, Meg thought of the past two weeks with Caleb. She had allowed herself to lapse into a fantasy existence with this man who had washed up out of the dark tides of the sea. She had felt cocooned in the life she had fashioned with him, separate from the harsh realities of the world in a place that was safe and special and tender.

Her eyes strayed once more to the chair jammed under the doorknob. She had known all along it couldn't last, but she'd never expected that the house would come under attack, that this room would become a prison, where she would have to lock herself away to avoid the one man she'd thought never to see again.

And yet something inside of her wanted to see him, wanted one final chance to make it right.

Oh, stop it! she cried silently. Stop it.

"You're really sick, you know that?" she muttered to herself.

To make it right. Not another chance at love with the man who had been her husband, but the chance for her to make it right, as if it were all within her control, as if it would make her feel better about the demise of their relationship. How self-centered was that? How stupid and egocentric and self-righteous and delusional and ... and any number of things. What had happened between them had not been entirely her fault, so it was not her place to correct. Indeed, Matt's final slide into the dark life he'd chosen to lead had nothing to do with her at all.

Did it?

Meg closed her eyes, wanting nothing so badly than to go back to in time, just four or five days, to the last night she and Caleb had spent together before the news of Matt's survival, his life of crime, had been delivered. Curled in the darkness, everything between them both new and old and strangely, wonderfully perfect.

But that wasn't going to happen. In the morning, there were some decisions to be made.

## Chapter Twenty

Meg shut the door, inserting the key into the lock. Caleb watched her do it, not believing for a moment that it would do any good. They were both missing something, something that would be obvious when it was revealed, something that would explain just how Donovan was getting into and out of the house without detection. As to the why of the man's actions, Meg had said that only Donovan himself could explain that, and she meant to ask him when he was caught. The morning had found her determined, sharp-edged and fixed on a goal. They were going into town, Meg to speak with the officer, Stauffer, and whoever else was available and open for discussion, and Caleb, apparently, to lay his story out for a private investigator.

"Just be honest with the guy," she'd said to him. "I don't know why I didn't think of it sooner, but this is what private investigators do. He's not going to make a report to the law, only to you."

Mulling over the particulars of how he would explain himself and his story, Caleb followed Meg to the car and got in to the passenger's side. He smoothed the legs of his jeans down over his thighs, then snapped the seatbelt into place. For the first time in days, the sun was shining brightly. He lowered his lashes over his eyes, glancing sidelong at Meg as she started the engine.

Her honey-colored hair was pulled back in a loose ponytail at her nape, long bangs falling over her forehead and catching in her lashes when she blinked. She looked pale, tired, and incredibly beautiful to him. Delicate and lovely but with a deep-seated strength. The scarf she wore hung loose around the collar of her coat. It was the same green as her eyes.

Suddenly, she reached into her purse, pulling out some paper bills. He frowned at their denomination, calculating in his head as she handed them to him. "What's this for?"

"To pay the investigator. He'll probably want a retainer, but this will have to do for now. Tell him you'll pay him to listen to you for an hour or so, and you'll determine afterward whether or not you want to hire him. That will buy me some time to get the funds together if he thinks he can help you."

Once she had revealed her plan to him, he had told her wanted to go it alone. He didn't want her presence in the room to prevent him from saying all that he needed to. He hadn't thought about the payment, though.

"I'll pay you back, somehow," he said.

"You could do some work around the house," she told him, then raised her eyes to his. "In the springtime."

In the springtime. He smiled, feeling a bit of the tension leave his neck and shoulders. Maybe. Maybe not. But at least she was thinking it.

The ride into town was brief and silent. They both had a lot on their minds. She poked her fingers into his hand at one point, and he held on, not releasing her until she needed to turn the wheel to pull into a parking space.

"It'll be alright, Meg," he told her.

"So you keep saying," she retorted with a rueful smile.

"So I do," he agreed.

The investigator's office was about a block away and they walked side by side in the cold

sunshine. He could smell the fragrance of her hair, freshly washed that morning in the shower while he stood guard outside the bathroom door. Just in case.

"Tell him everything, Caleb," she reiterated her earlier statement to him. "Everything you can think of."

He nodded, hooking an arm around her shoulder. She barely came up to his armpit. Her hair caught in the nap of his coat, winking like gold in the sun. From the moment he'd met her, he'd felt this need to protect her. From what? Maybe it was just her size in comparison to his own instilling that need to shield her, keep her safe. Cherish her.

"Meg," he said quietly, "I don't want to leave you."

He saw her suck her lips in and press them together tightly. Then she drew a long breath through her nose and let it out.

"Maybe you won't have to. We don't know anything yet. You haven't remembered who you are, and even if this investigator helps you find out the details of your life, there might be nothing compelling you to go back to it. But if there is, and you have to, if you want to go, then you must. I won't—I won't ...." Her voice tapered off. Understanding, Caleb stopped walking and drew her close against his chest.

"If I must, then I'll miss you. I don't want to miss you."

She didn't say anything, but he heard the sound of her sniffing and knew that she was crying. He pressed his mouth against her hair and held her until the sniffing stopped. Her hand moved back and forth across her face, beneath her nose, bumping against the front of his coat.

"Okay," she said, stepping back. "That's it. We're good. Whatever happens, we'll handle it. But right now we're where we need to be. This is Craig Miner's office. You go on in and I'll drive over to the police station and come back to get you in a bit."

Suddenly reluctant, he hesitated to turn up the short walkway to the glass door. Meg gave him a little push in the small of his back.

"Go," she said.

So he did.

He turned with a grip on the door handle to find her walking backwards away from him. When she saw him turn she raised her hand, then she spun on her heel to hurry in the direction of her car, the scarf as green as her eyes drifting across the wool of her coat. She didn't look back. Maybe she was afraid to. He went inside.

Blinking in the interior dimness, Caleb moved slowly toward the desk where a pleasant-looking woman was seated. She looked at him expectantly.

"Yes?"

"Caleb Hunter," he said. "I'm here to see Craig Miner."

"Yes. A young lady made that appointment, didn't she?"

Caleb nodded, not really seeing why it mattered. Perhaps she wondered why the young lady in question wasn't with him.

"Have a seat. Mr. Miner is with a client at the moment, but should be finishing up shortly. Oh, and please fill out as much information on this sheet as is applicable."

She handed him a flat board with a clip on top that held a form of some sort and a pen. Taking the items to the nearest chair, he sat down.

Name. He knew that. Address? Nope. Phone number? Meg's. Birth date? Social Security number? No idea. Reason for consult? Could he write that down? He wouldn't know where to begin. Talking about it would be more direct. Returning the pen to the clip, he set the

board across his knee and waited.

Trying to make himself relax, he watched the traffic in the street outside. It seemed to him it was minimal, but he wasn't certain to what he was trying to compare it. In the shadowed corner of the window glass he kept catching the edge of his reflection.

Meg was wrong. No matter what she thought, that portrait looked like him. He didn't believe any more that she had lied to him, but perhaps that the psychic ability she kept talking about had somehow conveyed him to her long before she had even dreamed him. Not that the portrait was anywhere near an exact likeness, but there had been enough of a resemblance, as far as he was concerned, to give him pause and make him doubt.

Spotting a small mirror on the wall across the waiting area, he stood up and walked over to it, frowning at his reflection. He needed a hair cut. Meg hadn't yet given him the trim she'd offered. He studied his face, the shape of his brow, his jaw, the earthy color of his eyes. Yes, enough of a resemblance, and yet far from accurate. He could see the woman at the desk reflected in the mirror, also. She was watching him in curiosity, her brow furrowed.

Caleb turned around. "Will Mr. Miner be a lot longer?" he asked.

"About fifteen minutes or so. I'd offer you a cup of coffee, but our maker broke. There's a shop across the street if you want to run and grab yourself a cup."

Depositing the form with its scanty information on the desk, Caleb decided that a cup of coffee might be a good way to kill the time. Crossing the street, Caleb glanced up and down the length of it. Meg's car was already gone. There were children playing on the sidewalk not far away and people walking, driving by, getting in or out of their parked cars. Though foreign, there was something about the town that struck a chord of familiarity in his mind. Perhaps he was from some place similar, homey and slow-paced.

Yanking open the door to the Caffeine Café, Caleb went inside. The aroma of coffee was strong, the scents varying, however, and not entirely pleasant. Studying the board behind the counter, he saw that the establishment offered a vast variety of coffee flavors, none of which sounded appealing to him.

"Plain coffee?" he asked.

"Okay, black coffee. What kind?"

"Just regular coffee," he said. "You have that?"

The boy shrugged, turning to pour him a cup of dark brew. "That'll be \$2.00," he said. Caleb handed him one of the bills out of his pocket from Meg, watching carefully as the boy counted back the change. It seemed correct.

Sitting down at a table by the window, he figured the woman in the investigator's office would see him and be able to get his attention if he wasn't back by the time Miner was ready to meet with him. The Caffeine Café offered other inducements besides coffee, with a section of the store filled with racks of magazines and books. A big, boxy contrivance in the corner had a curtained door with the words "digital photos" printed above it.

"What's that?" he asked the kid at the counter.

"What's what, man?"

"That in the corner."

"A photo booth. You go in, put in five bucks, and it takes your picture. Five of them. Gives 'em to you right away out that little slot at the side there."

Photographs. Those would probably be a good thing to give the private investigator. He would be able to match them up to other pictures he might locate, perhaps in some sort of listing

of persons missing, if such a thing existed. Leaving his coffee on the table, Caleb went into the booth, yanking the curtain shut across the door as instructed by the written placard in the device. Pulling the change he'd just received out of his pocket, he plucked a five dollar bill from it and inserted it, face up, into the slot intended, it seemed, for receipt of funds. Then he pushed the red button.

An immediate flash blinded him. As he brought his hands up in front of his eyes, another flash followed. Then a third, a fourth and a fifth, all as he was trying to figure out what he was supposed to be doing.

"Crap, I've never felt so friggin' incapable in my life," he muttered, and paused, holding his breath. That felt like memory, an association between what was presently occurring and who he was in the past. But he couldn't quite grasp the feeling as it slipped away.

Outside the machine a whirring noise was taking place. He stuck his head out.

"Your pictures," said the boy at the counter. Seeing a strip of paper sticking out of the outside slot, Caleb grabbed it.

"Huh," he said. Couldn't see much of him in any one of these, as he was bent forward in the first one, holding his hands up in the second and third, had bent forward again to look at the directions during the fourth and was just straightening back up when the fifth was taken. At least now, however, he had some idea how the machine worked. Fishing another five from his pocket, he decided to give it another try.

This time he was prepared when the flashes came, and kept his face directed toward the aperture in the wall. When the photographs popped out, he held them up to the light inside the booth. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out the last five from his change and slid it into the machine, drawing the curtain closed again. A short time later the prints were ready. He held these up to the light, as well.

Sweat broke out across his forehead, cold as ice water.

"No," he said.

\* \* \* \*

Climbing out of the car, Meg stood in front of the police station, reliving the anxiety she'd felt the times she'd been here before, called in for question and answer sessions. She relived the trepidation, the fear of letting something slip that would condemn Matt, even though she didn't know what she was shielding him from, what the police were looking to gain from their conversations with her. Now she was here to turn him in.

For several moments longer she remained motionless on the sidewalk, the crushed shell in the tended beds to either side of the walkway white in the sun, ornamental grasses brown and blowing in the light breeze. So many times she would have been justified in calling the police for Matt's behavior, but she'd thought she could make it alright, that she could shelter them both from consequences until they merely blew away, like thistledown. In a way, she had been doing the same thing with Caleb. It was time, and more than time, that she learned from her mistakes.

Taking a deep breath, Meg marched up and through the doorway into the tiny lobby, halting in front of the window of bullet proof glass. "Yes?" asked the police clerk who had risen from behind her desk. Meg leaned forward, projecting her voice closer to the concave aperture below the bottom of the window.

"I'm Meg Donovan. I've come to speak with Dan Stauffer. Is he here?" she added in afterthought.

"Hold on. Have a seat."

Too nervous to sit, she paced the small area. A minute or two later the clerk returned, pushing open the door. Meg followed the young woman inside and down a side corridor off the main office. She knew exactly where they were going.

The interview room was claustrophobic by design, she was sure. Only large enough to hold a small table and a pair of chairs, the walls were of the same dark brick as the outside of the building. An overhead light was at just the right angle when one was seated to be annoying. Nevertheless, Meg sat down. She pushed her chair against the wall so that she was facing the door when Dan came in.

"Meg," he said.

"Dan," she answered. She pushed the other chair out with the side of her foot. He pulled it away from the table and sat down very close to the closed door. Loosening her scarf and unbuttoning her coat, Meg stalled for time, searching for a way to begin the conversation. For all that she'd been thinking about it on the drive, she still didn't know where to start.

Folding her scarf on the table, she glanced at Dan. He looked not to have slept well.

"Are you alright?" she asked him.

"Do you care?"

She was startled by the abrasive inappropriateness of his retort. "You look tired," was all she said.

He shrugged his shoulders. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to make a report," she said. "Should I be talking to you, or to those other two men who were at the house?"

Reaching into the pocket of his shirt, he pulled out a pad and pen. "You can start with me. I'll put in a call when we're through and see if they want to question you, as well."

She cringed at the phrase 'question you'. Once again, it made her seem suspect. "When the three of you came to show me those pictures, was there any other reason besides identification? Did you have reason to believe Matt was heading back here?"

"Why? Have you heard from him? *Is* he here?"

Though he was trying to act only vaguely occupied with what she was saying, looking down at the pen he was toying with between his fingers and deliberately avoiding eye contact, she could tell by the shift of his shoulders that she had caught his attention.

"I-yes."

There. Laid out on the table with hardly a breath for air. Across from her, Dan clicked the tab at the top of his pen and looked up.

"He's contacted you? You've seen him around? What?"

Meg leaned forward, twirling the fringe on the edge of her scarf. She bit her lip. "He's been in the house ...."

"And your boyfriend didn't beat the crap out of him?"

Startled, Meg blinked. "What?"

"You know. The guy who couldn't buy his own rubbers."

He pronounced the last word like 'rubbahs' in true New Englander fashion, but drawn out and deliberate in a manner she'd never heard him use before. She frowned at him.

"What?" she asked again.

Dan shook his head irritably. "Never mind," he said. "Go on."

"No. What is your problem? I've come to you on official business and you're acting like the jilted suitor. I never even went out with you. You know that."

"Yeah, I know that," he said, tossing the pen on the table. Sitting back, he folded his arms across his chest. "Just go on. You've talked to Donovan, then?"

"I haven't talked to him," Meg continued, defensive. "I haven't even seen him. Neither one of us has. But somehow he's gotten into the house and left indications that he's been there, like a taunt."

Dan drew a deep breath, expanding the vest beneath his shirt. "How long has this been going on?"

"A few days," Meg said.

"A few days? What the hell have you been waiting for?"

Tilting her chin, Meg stared at the brown, finished brick of the wall above his head. "I don't know."

She felt his gaze on her and lowered her own to meet it dead on. "I don't know," she repeated. "But I need your help, the help of someone in authority, because it's not a good situation."

He watched her a few seconds longer, and then he stood up. Without speaking, he shoved his chair out of the way in order to open the door. Picking up her scarf from the table, Meg held it in her lap, burying her chilled fingers into the soft lamb's wool. When the door opened five minutes later, it was the clerk from the front desk, who set a styrofoam cup down on the table in front of her and then left. Meg glanced at the contents. Black coffee. She didn't like her coffee black, but she put a hand around it, thinking it might warm her. The insulating qualities of the container made short work of that. Meg shoved her hand back inside the scarf.

While she waited for Dan's return, she wondered how Caleb was faring with the private investigator. She knew he was having increasing difficulty dealing with his lack of identity. Hopefully, Craig Miner could assist him. With any luck, he might convince Caleb of the one thing she had wanted him to do all along: see a doctor. Someone, somewhere, would help him recall. Maybe even just having a few facts could prompt recollection.

Hand in hand with recollection, of course, was the probability that what they shared would be lost. He had a life, another life, whole and entire, awaiting his return. They both knew that.

Meg closed her eyes.

There were other factors to consider. Caleb needed to remember who had tried to kill him, for his own safety. In all that had occurred over the past few days, she had nearly forgotten what had brought him to her. It had seemed like he had always been there.

Should she mention any of this to Dan? Not unless she talked it over with Caleb, first. That decision was ultimately his to make.

Glancing at the clock on the wall, she saw that another ten minutes had passed. Steam no longer rose from the coffee. Standing up, Meg walked to the door and turned the knob. It was locked. Yes, she remembered that, too, reacting with the same claustrophobic intake of breath she had when first she'd discovered during her series of interviews that she was locked in.

"Come on, Dan," she said to herself, returning to her seat. "Where are you?"

When next the door opened, three men filed in, filling the room to capacity. Dan and the fellow from Interpol stood against the wall, while Agent Phillips took the seat Dan had abandoned. He folded his hands on the table. Meg did not like the look on his face.

"Tell me what's been happening at your house," he said.

She did, trying to not to leave anything out, but she had to, for Caleb's sake. When she

was finished, he stared at her for a long time.

"You shouldn't have waited so long to tell us this," he said quietly.

"I know you're looking for him, which is why I'm here now. At least I am here now. And he didn't try to hurt ... me," she finished, still attempting to steer clear of any further reference to Caleb, although she had no doubt that Dan had mentioned his presence to these men. Agent Phillips shifted his hips on the hard seat. He looked directly into her eyes.

"He could have," he said. "We have come to suspect that he is responsible for the deaths of two of those men whose names are on that cross on the point. They weren't willing to work with him, you see."

A chill coursed throughout her body in the space of a heartbeat, as if with the next contraction of her heart ice-cold blood had been pumped into her veins. "No," she said.

"I'm afraid so. Certain agencies are still working on that. So, you understand, he could have hurt you. And there's something else, Mrs. Donovan."

She didn't want to know. But she didn't think there was any way to stop hearing, and Agent Phillips showed no inclination to close his mouth and walk back out the door.

"Go ahead," she whispered.

"I've said that he could have hurt you, because there would have been that very real possibility had he been at your home. That was where he was headed, our sources say."

Meg frowned. "What do you mean?"

Agent Phillips reached into the inside pocket of his suit coat and deposited an envelope on the table. "Whoever has been in your house," he said, opening the flap to spill the envelope's contents onto the laminate surface between them, "it hasn't been Matt Donovan. He's dead. Your husband is dead. His body was identified by his fingerprints. We received word of the identification this morning. This time it's definite. Three weeks ago he was killed. I'm sorry, Mrs. Donovan. I suppose I should say I'm sorry, shouldn't I? But you've thought for a long time now that he was gone and I really don't think you were hoping he'd come back."

Dead. Dead again.

"H-how?" she stammered, barely able to speak. Not Matt at the house. Blindly, she reached for the photographs the agent had dumped on the table and pulled them toward her. Some of them were too gruesome to bear.

But there were others. Oh, God, there were others ....

"That answer is still part of an ongoing investigation, Mrs. Donovan. I can't give you the details now." He dropped his hand over the photos, sliding them away from her, choosing several from the pack to push back in her direction.

Yes, that was Matt. Matt, obviously dead. She had never had that closure, the first time. She almost wished she didn't have it the second time around. Her stomach turned. She shuffled the photograph of Matt pale and battered and lifeless back into the pile Agent Phillips held secured beneath his hand and looked at the other three. Her heart started to pound in her chest, nearly choking her. Pushing the photos away, she stood up, shoving her hand deep into the warmth of her scarf and grabbing her coat with the other.

"I want to go home," she said.

"Do you have anything else to say about what was taking place in your house these past several days?"

No, she thought, she did not. She could tell by the expressions exchanged between the three men that they either thought she had fabricated the whole story, perhaps for attention, or

that she was lunatic. Except Dan. He alone appeared to be reserving judgment. She couldn't imagine why.

In the final analysis, Meg didn't care what they thought. What they thought of her didn't count worth a damn. What mattered to her now was the truth. And in order to uncover that, she had to retrieve Caleb and go home.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Two and a half hours later, Meg pulled into her driveway. Alone.

Upon her return to Craig Miner's office, she had been informed in bewildered tones by the receptionist that Caleb had gone across the street for a cup of coffee and then never come back. She'd called the number he'd written down, the woman went on to explain, but there had been no answer.

Glancing at the paper the woman extended toward her, Meg nodded. There wouldn't be. She wasn't home and she had no answering machine.

At the coffee shop the young man behind the counter wasn't very helpful. After all, was he expected to remember every customer who came in? Meg had reminded him, with a pointed look around at the clean and empty tables, that he couldn't have been all that busy. Only one table held a single cup, but no patron. Noting the direction of her study, the young man had then volunteered the information that whoever that belonged to might be coming back.

"Dark-haired man? Tan coat? About six-foot-three?" The height alone should have jogged the boy's memory, but he shrugged. Meg had walked over to peer into the lidless cup. An oily slick filmed the top of the dark liquid, which was apparently quite cold. No one was hastening back for that cup of coffee.

She'd begun her search on foot, checking the store fronts, alleys, asking people on the street if they'd seen a man who fit Caleb's description, possibly disoriented. Then she'd gotten in her car and started driving around, frantically numb, staring down side streets, into the faces of people she passed, backtracking repeatedly to circle the area near the private investigator's office. Finally, she had headed home. If he had any concept at all of where he was, he would find a way to get back there on his own. And if he wasn't there? She didn't want to consider that, to consider what steps might be necessary to take next.

With her hands around the steering wheel, Meg stared at her house, only noticing after a few moments that one of the lower panes of glass on the front door was broken. Her heart skipped a beat, then steadied as she remembered it couldn't be Matt. But if it hadn't been Caleb damaging, then utilizing the broken pane to enter the house, she could be walking in on a burglary in progress.

Deciding after brief deliberation not to rely on that much coincidence, she climbed out of her car and walked to the front door. A few shards of glass sparkled on the door stone. The rest, she knew, would be lying on the hardwood floor. Turning the knob, she went inside.

Tossing her keys on the table beside the door, she called Caleb's name. The floor beneath her feet was free of glass, indicating that he had taken the time to clean it up. He appeared from the kitchen as she was removing her coat.

"I'll fix that, if you show me how," he said quietly.

"How long have you been back?"

"An hour or so."

"What happened with the private investigator?"

"I didn't see him."

"I know that," Meg said, with forbearance. "Why not?"

She was willing to listen to him, to wait for all that he had to say before she gave him her

news. In the wake of her controlled panic, she felt tired. Consequent to what she had learned at the police department, she felt bewildered and battered and sad. But not afraid. Why not?

When she said the words aloud, asked the questions she needed to ask, showed him the photograph she had pilfered from Agent Phillips' collection, then she would be afraid. But by then, there would be no turning back.

Caleb came to her, wrapping his arms around her back and pulling her up against his chest. For a few seconds she stood stiffly, then she raised her own arms to encircle his waist, scrubbing her cheek back and forth across the soft fabric of his shirt. His heart beat beneath her ear, steady and strong and seemingly unaffected by the currents of strangeness swirling between them.

"You're like ice," she whispered.

"It was a long walk," he said above her head.

"Why didn't you just wait for me?"

"I couldn't." She felt his lips against her hair, the tightening of the muscles of his arms before he released her.

"Come into the kitchen."

She followed him down the dim hallway, still with that odd lack of physical sensation. She supposed it was hysteria.

"Matt's dead," she said as they entered the kitchen. "He's been dead for three weeks."

The words sounded flat to her ears. If Caleb was surprised by the news, he gave no indication. She wasn't certain he'd heard her.

"Sit down," he directed, pointing to a chair he'd pulled out from the table.

She did so, slowly, perched on the edge of the seat. Caleb sat across from her. His eyes held hers with a look of haunted determination.

"I had my photograph taken in a booth in the coffee shop across from the investigator's office," he said, reaching to pull two strips of photographs out from beneath the napkin holder. He slid them across the table to her.

"At first I thought, 'why didn't she tell me?', but then I realized that you couldn't. You couldn't tell me anything. There was no way you could know what I saw when I looked out of my eyes."

Meg separated the two strips, side by side, her fingers splayed along the edges. The first set was almost comical, his expression purposeful as he tried to focus on the task of having his picture taken in a manner that was, no doubt, totally foreign to him. In the second set, however, his dismay, even horror, was evident as he stared at the lens.

"That's me," he stated quietly. "Isn't it?"

Meg nodded, wondering what he had thought he looked like, what he had seen in the mirror every morning, what he had seen reflected in her eyes. Swallowing, she reached into her pants pocket for the crumpled photograph she had hidden in her scarf at the police station and placed it on the table with the others, spinning them around so they faced him. Caleb grimaced, bending closer to stare down at the larger one. He rubbed his forefinger across the likeness of himself, then slowly pointed to the other man in the photograph. His voice, when he spoke, was harsh, as if he found the inquiry difficult to articulate.

"Who is that?" he asked.

He didn't remember. What would happen when he did?

"That's Matt," she whispered.

She told him to keep the money that had been designated for the private investigator, and gave him more. She'd packed the clothes she'd bought him in a bag, as well as all of Matt's that she'd never thrown away. He might need them.

Agent Phillips had given her a minimum of information about the other man in the photograph with Matt when he walked her to the door of the police station. His name was, indeed, Caleb Hunter, but it was an alias. He couldn't tell her the man's true identity. The whole incident was still under investigation. All she understood was that Caleb and Matt had been closely acquainted for more than a year.

"Did this man kill Matt?" she'd asked.

But Agent Phillips couldn't, or wouldn't, tell her. And so she had left him, and spent hours searching for a man who might, or might not have, killed the man who had once been her husband. When she found him returned to her home, she had given that same man her money, only realizing later how incriminating that might look, and a kiss goodbye. In that contact, her mouth on his own, the breath of his lungs filling hers, she had relived again that vision of his fight for his life. If Caleb had taken Matt's life in defense of his own, then so be it. But he needed his past returned to him, no matter what it held.

"I have to know who I am, Meg. What I am," he'd said. "I can't do it here with you, I can't ask questions of the authorities. I can't do it at all except on my own. I don't know why, but I know that's true."

Meg nodded at him, touching his face one last time. He turned his face against her palm, pressing his lips to the pulse in her wrist.

"Get as far away from here as you can, Caleb. They're looking for you now."

He held her for a long time and she had cried in his arms, and then he was gone. She didn't expect to ever see him again.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Meg reached up to pull the chain on the kitchen light fixture, then hesitated with her hand in the air, frowning at the calendar on the wall. She'd forgotten to flip to the new month. Removing the clip, she re-affixed it to reveal a snowy December scene. Caleb had been gone for a little over three weeks, without any word from him. Shortly after his departure she'd been questioned again by Agent Phillips and the other one, from Interpol. Andre. Yes, that was it, Stefan Andre. And then they, too, had exited her life. She had returned to the routine of her days, altered now by Caleb's absence. Sometimes more, it seemed, than when Matt had gone away.

There had been another funeral, quiet and unpublicized, to inter Matthew Donovan's remains. Meg had attended together with Matt's aged aunt and her daughter, the only relatives who remained of his small family. They hadn't asked any questions, no doubt having already received all of the information they needed from other sources. Meg was grateful for their silence in that area, and for their presence at the brief memorial for her husband. This time, she didn't cry.

Frowning at the calendar, Meg flipped it back to November, then back to October, touching with the tip of her finger the small check mark that she made habitually every month. She thought for a moment, hard, scanning the days of November for a similar mark. There wasn't one. Of course there wasn't one.

She'd missed her period.

Closing her eyes, Meg swore softly under her breath, letting the calendar pages flutter from her fingers. She clutched her abdomen, remembering with a heated flush that night with Caleb when they hadn't used protection. She turned on her heel and walked out into the living room, sitting on the couch with her face in her hands.

"Don't panic," she whispered against the heels of her palms. "Don't panic."

After a few minutes, she lifted her head, staring across the room at the shelf of books she'd illustrated. She stood up and crossed the rug, taking one down and letting it fall open in her hands. Caleb had been more astute than most, recognizing the similarities in all the illustrations. Anne. Sweet Anne.

A bubble of grief and fear and sadness welled up into her throat, choking off air. Tears slid down her cheeks. With the flat of her fingers, she stroked the paper, the golden hair of the child depicted in the story. This one, more than any other, resembled her daughter.

"Will you forgive me if I have another?" she asked the silent, smiling picture. Naturally, she received no answer. Closing the book, she returned the volume to the shelf, went back to turn off the kitchen light, then went upstairs to bed.

\* \* \* \*

In her loneliness she dreamed of Caleb. Dreamed of his long, heated body, the feel of his mouth on her, the touch of his hands, the searing, slow intensity with which he made love. When she woke up she was flushed and damp with sweat and acutely aroused, and there was a weight in the bed beside her.

A hand closed gently across her mouth before she could cry out.

"Meg."

Struggling out from under his fingers, Meg threw her arms around him, whispering his name over and over against his ear. *Caleb*. Did he know yet that this was not his name? It didn't matter. She would always think of him that way.

"Oh, Caleb, I missed you." She kissed his face, his mouth, his eyes.

"I missed you, too. And didn't I say I didn't want to do that?"

He sounded different in a manner she couldn't quite place. No doubt he was altered by the journey he had taken in search of himself. She wondered if he had come any closer to finding out who he was, but hesitated to ask him.

Rising up onto her knees, she unzipped his jacket, the suede one she'd bought him, still smelling like the cold night. She pushed it off his shoulders, yanked it free of his arms. He lay with his dark head on her pillow, watching her, his eyes following her movements as she removed his shoes, his pants.

"You're freezing cold. Get under the blankets."

Silently, he obeyed. She crawled under the covers beside him, trying to warm him.

"Oh, Caleb," she said again.

"Shh."

Several times she opened her mouth to ask him what news he had, but as he wasn't jumping to tell her, she could only assume it wasn't good. She stroked his chest, slipping her hand beneath his shirt to trace her fingers through the silky hair running up from his flat belly.

"You haven't been eating well. You've lost weight. Do you want me to make you something to eat?"

"No," he said, taking her hand and placing it lower on his body. As she stroked him through the soft material of his boxers, his eyes closed and a small sigh slipped past his lips. His penis grew hard under her attention and the sounds he made, deeper.

"Take your clothes off, Meg, will you? I don't have the strength."

"Are you alright?"

"I'm just tired. I feel like the life is being sapped out of me. You'll give it back to me, though. I know you will."

Stripping out of her long-sleeved shirt and flannel pants, Meg pressed her naked body against him. He turned toward her, then, the entire length of his body thrumming as if with electricity. She could feel the charge in her blood. He touched her between the legs.

"Were you dreaming about me?"

"Yes," she said.

"Good."

Pulling her on top of him, he parted her legs with his knees. Meg slid his boxers off, reaching with her other hand to the drawer of the night stand. He grabbed her wrist, then slipped the fingers of his other hand inside of her. She gasped at the remember sensation, a shudder coursing over her skin.

"Leave the box in the drawer, Meg," he said.

"I shouldn't," she breathed.

"Does it matter now?" he asked. "You're pregnant."

"I—what?"

"You're carrying his child, when you wouldn't carry mine."

Meg froze. "What?" she asked again, quietly.

All the while his fingers continued their exploration, but it didn't feel good anymore.

The hand gripping her wrist held on with painful tightness.

"You fucked him here in our bed, Meg. Hid him from Stauffer and those other two. Gave him money and wished him well, even when you thought he'd killed me."

Twisting furiously, Meg pulled free, leaping from the bed. She grabbed her clothes and put them on, standing wide-eyed at the foot of the mattress. He lay on his back, watching her, the curve of his mouth sinister.

"Caleb," she began.

"Stop calling me that. That's not my name."

"Yes, it is! It's the only name I've known for you. Who is it that you think you are?"

The smile grew broader, stretching into a grin. It was not a grin she'd ever remembered seeing on Caleb's face. Moving quickly, she turned on the light. The darkness was frightening her. Caleb was frightening her.

"It's me, sweetheart," Caleb said from the bed, drawing out the last part of the last word with an upward turn of the 'a' and 'r'. He lifted himself up on his elbows. "Your husband."

*Oh, Jesus.* Meg stumbled backwards against the computer stool and sat down.

He'd lost his mind. He hadn't found anything, he'd lost it all. Or perhaps he'd discovered entirely too much, and guilt about killing Matt had unhinged him. And what? Made Caleb think he *was* Matt?

"I don't think I'm Matt," Caleb announced from the bed. "I am Matt."

"No. You're not."

In this state, he could very well be dangerous. She needed to get out of this room and to the phone.

"Won't work."

"What won't work?" she demanded, voice rising.

"The phone. I yanked the line outside."

"Caleb, please."

"Don't call me that!"

He was out of the bed in a flash, standing before her in nothing but his shirt and socks, his erection still raging. It was Caleb's body. She remembered it very well. But the stance was not his, not his at all.

"I was on my way back to you, did you know that? I knew you'd be overjoyed to find out I was still alive, not drowned in the cold, black sea, the end you always feared for me. Me and Caleb, we go back a-ways. Told that bastard everything about my life before, every detail."

That explained it. If this part of what Caleb was saying was true, he would have knowledge of certain aspects of Matt's life.

"No," said Caleb, with slow enunciation, "that doesn't explain it."

*Oh, dear God,* she prayed. Their thoughts had often entered into each other's minds, hers and Caleb's, but not like this.

"How sweet," Caleb drawled, coming to stand before her. Roughly grabbing the back of her neck, he yanked her forward, pressing her turned cheek against his stiff penis. "You know what I want," he said.

She punched him hard in the thigh and shoved him backward, catching him in the testicle with the edge of her hand. He bent forward with a groan, then straightened as she stood up.

"Get out of my house," she stated through clenched teeth.

In response, he arched a single eyebrow at her. She recognized that gesture. Her hand

came up to her mouth, holding back a scream.

"It can't be you," she whispered through her fingers.

Reaching down, Caleb pulled up his shorts, then reached back for his pants and stepped into them. "It can," he said, walking around the bed. "It is. You're so willing to believe all that other crap about your dreams, and your thoughts, why not this?"

Meg shook her head. Caleb extended his hand to the lamp, pulling off the shade. "Come here," he said.

"I don't think so," Meg answered, her gaze sliding to the door.

"You're not leaving, Meg. I said come here."

She lunged for the door, fingers arching for the knob, blood pumping. And then she felt fire in the back of her skull as he grabbed a fistful of her hair and stopped her short. Still clutching her hair, he dragged her back to the bed.

"Look at me," he growled.

He had lifted the lamp in his hand. She could feel the heat of the bare bulb against her cheek. Then he moved it away, up to his own face. She raised her eyes.

"No!"

In that instant, unguarded, not knowing what to expect, with the light bright and white against his skin, she had seen. But she had seen more than he'd thought to show her. Yes, it seemed that Matt was in that body she'd come to care so much about, hazel eyes looking more like the color of the earth than of the sea, but Caleb was still there, too.

"Not for long," Matt said. "He's a dying soul."

"I don't understand," she whispered.

"There's nothing to understand," commented Matt conversationally, maintaining the killer grip against her scalp. "He pretended he was my friend. I took him in, let him share the riches, so to speak, and then I found out it was all a game. A lie. Subterfuge," he said, with exaggerated slowness. "He was an agent, for Interpol. Gary and I, we decided to take care of that, out on the ocean. Figured it was easy, after Jimmy and Donald, but it wasn't. Bastard knew something was coming and fought like the fucking devil. Gary got dumped in the sea. Don't think he made it. Then your buddy Caleb, he killed me."

Meg closed her eyes, a long shudder snaking through skin tissue and muscle.

"But I didn't die right away. There was this moment, this one infinitesimal moment of ... of gleaming darkness, it was, when I saw my chance and I took it. But he sensed something had happened, and even though he didn't know what it was, the fucker ran the boat aground before we got here. *My boat.*"

She recalled the piece of Matt's boat that had washed up on the beach. It was like him to be so arrogant that he wouldn't have changed the name. How had Caleb gotten to this particular stretch of beach, when there had been no sign of wreckage?

"He was sick and beat up rather badly, and afraid. I could read it in him. Not of me, never of me, even that whole time. Afraid of what I'd do to you when I got here. Christ, he didn't even know you. What the fuck should he care?"

*Oh, Caleb.*

"Oh, Caleb," he mimicked, jerking her head back so she was facing him again. "That is his name, you know. Caleb, but not Hunter. Caleb Russell. Want to know how I know that?"

She shook her head, feeling the tug of her hair between his fingers.

"Too bad. I'm telling you anyway. It's because I've been holding onto his memories for

him, took them all away and kept them from him. I know all about him. I've been sharing this body of his for, what, six weeks? Unfortunately, he kept picking up on a few of mine. I watched him fuck you, too. I wasn't liking that too much at all."

Reaching up behind her head, Meg dug her fingers into his. "Matt, let me go."

"No," he stated simply, and swung her up with unnatural strength onto the bed, pinning her with his arms and legs. "My turn, now," he whispered.

Meg bucked and fought, biting and pushing and scratching, aware that it was Caleb's body receiving the damage, and feeling that pain as if it were her own. Matt laughed, fighting back harder still, pressing his mouth to her throat, her breast through her shirt, then lifted his head up to look her in the eye.

"After," he whispered, "we'll talk about how you're going to die, too."

Bringing her head forward with all her strength, Meg crashed her skull against his cheekbone, missing the more disabling strike against his nose. Nevertheless, he reeled back, momentarily releasing her. Meg rolled away, landing on the floor with a force that nearly knocked the breath from her lungs. She leapt up as Matt rose to stand on the sagging mattress. His eyes met hers. Hazel eyes. Caleb's eyes. The struggle contorting his face was obvious.

"Run, Meg," came the strangled command.

She did, without looking back. Down the back stairs and out of the house into the frigid night. Without a phone, without her keys, without anything but her fear. Heart pounding, she raced down the rickety steps to the beach. The road was too open, too obvious. It wasn't until too late that she realized her error. The beach was desolate. There was no one to chance by and help her there.

And Matt was coming.

Breath steaming, she pounded through the cold sand in her bare feet, her blood singing in her ears, the sound of her pulse and the surf drowning out the noise of Matt's pursuit. She didn't dare turn her head to look back for fear of losing her footing. Her side hurt, her breath bloomed in huge clouds, freezing in her nostrils. And then it happened. She turned her ankle, heard it snap, and flew to the ground. He was on her before she could regain her breath.

"Matt! No!"

He was dragging her by the arm and the back of her pants. She heard them rip and almost got away, but the grip on her wrist was too strong. Bumping over the uneven terrain, her broken ankle jarring across the sand, he hauled her down to the water's edge.

"You were always afraid of the sea, weren't you, Meg?" Matt taunted, pulling her out into the water. The surf broke over her, salt water running into her nose, her mouth. She turned her head, gasping for air. He pushed her back down, under the surging water, then lifted her up again.

"Afraid of drowning. Afraid of me drowning. You made your fear my own. And guess what? That's how I died. Sinking into the blackness, with Caleb in my boat, watching."

Meg tossed the sodden hair from her eyes. A sickle moon shone in the sky above his head. "I saw your body," she cried. "A photo of it. You weren't in the water when you finally died. You were on the land! If you had waited before you fled the darkness, you might have lived."

He howled then, with an inner rage that she knew had always been his, and shoved both of her shoulders under the dark, debris-laden tide. The sound of the water in her ears was a deadening silence, despite its movement, deep and singing. She struggled against his weight,

against the force of the water, against the urge to open her mouth and let the ocean in, to let it take her away from the nightmare of knowing what Matt had done and that Caleb would soon be no more. With a final effort, before her lungs burst, she dug her hands down in an effort to push upward, and found beneath her fingers the shape of something long and solid slowly being released from its bed in the sand by the pull of the receding tide.

*Caleb, forgive me.*

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Carefully, Meg fitted the pair of crutches beneath her arms, curling her fingers around the crosspieces. Although on them for more than a week, she was still not used to walking encumbered by extensions to her limbs.

"All set?" asked the doctor, arching his eyebrows over the rim of his glasses.

"Yes, Dr. Stevens. Thank you for your help with these," she added, indicating the crutches by swinging the right one away from her body several inches.

"Lucky it was your left foot. At least you can still drive. Sometime today or tomorrow, I want you to get over to the drugstore and get this prescription filled. Natal vitamins are very important."

Meg thanked him again and left the office, hobbling down the short flight of stairs, then across the parking lot to her car. Easing behind the steering wheel, she set the crutches in the passenger seat, then sat for a moment staring down the street to the place where the sailors' cross stood stark against the sky.

She had horrifying nightmares that she didn't expect to go away anytime soon. Sleeping pills might have helped that, but pregnant women couldn't take sleeping pills.

Pregnant. She was *pregnant*.

Despite all her years of dread and dismissal, she smiled. She was pregnant.

Backing from the parking space, Meg headed out of town in the direction of the hospital. The hospital where she would one day, God willing, give birth to her child. Today, however, she had another reason for going there.

The nurses on the third floor hurried to help her, but she waved them away. Maybe she really was getting the hang of the crutches thing, after all, because she was managing them as well as her purse and a bouquet of flowers. Slowly, she made her way down the hallway to Room 316, but as she neared she heard the sound of a familiar voice and stopped.

"Don't tell me about strange. I've seen strange. This isn't anything we're going to talk about outside this room, either, understand?"

Hobbling forward again, Meg stood in the doorway. Dan Stauffer turned at the sound of her shuffling halt.

"Meg."

"Dan," she said. She realized that this was the way they always greeted each other. She smiled, then glared meaningfully at him. He had told her about the apparition he thought he had seen, not once, but twice, at her house. It seemed he had been wanting to confess it to her that day in town, and she hadn't let him. A manifestation of darkness, he had called it. And he had been right.

However, the patient in the bed didn't need to be hearing any of that. He was nearly recovered from his head wound, his memory fully restored with the exception of roughly two weeks before his 'accident'. She prayed that those two weeks never returned to him.

Dan came forward to take the flowers and her purse, then in an unusual show of decency, went to seek out a nurse for a vase. Meg crutched her way into the room, hoisting herself up onto the patient's bed.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi," said Caleb.

"How's your ankle ...."

"How's your head ...." they both said at the same time, and laughed. Meg let him answer first.

"Better. I'll be getting out of here tomorrow or the next day, I'm told. I still can't believe the way this whole thing happened. I'm sorry we argued," he said.

Ah, yes, argued. That was the story and she was sticking to it. They had argued over something she was claiming not to recall, she had gone out on the beach in a huff, falling and breaking her ankle. When he came out looking for her, he had tripped over her prone body and struck his head on a jagged rock in the surf. A weak prevarication, but so far no one had questioned it. Except Dan, whom she had called to help her save Caleb. It had been a risky thing, his body being that close to death, but only Caleb had returned to the living.

"I wish I could remember my homecoming," he said with a rueful grin. "But at least the rest of my life has come back to me."

"And I'm still in it," she said, feeling a bout of hormonal tears coming on.

"Always, I hope," he answered, tucking his fingers around her own. He reached up to wipe away the moisture from under her eyes. "Why are you crying? This is a good thing, isn't it? No wife, no kids, no other commitments. Looks like I will be there in the springtime."

She started to cry in earnest, half laughing, half weeping, wiping futilely at the tears spilling down her cheeks.

"Hey, hey, now, enough. Come here."

He pulled her right down onto the hospital bed with him. She curled both of her legs on the mattress, propping the casted ankle up on the good one. Beneath her cheek, his heart was beating a little too rapidly.

"Are you alright?" she asked him, laying her hand on his chest.

"I'm afraid you have something bad to tell me," he said.

"Well," she said, "that depends on your point of view, I guess."

He stroked her hair back across her crown, dipping forward to place a kiss there. "Go ahead," he said. "Unless you're going to tell me they called off spring, this year. That I don't want to hear. I have big plans for the springtime."

She smiled against him, feeling the dampness of her tears soaking into his hospital gown. Above her he grew still.

"Go ahead," he said again.

She drew a breath, and then another, then bit her lip. "I'm pregnant," she blurted.

He was silent a moment. "Is that all? The way you acted, you could have been about to tell me I'd been possessed by the spirit of your dead husband, or something, because I have been having the hell of a time in my dreams. The doc says it's the blow to my head, the bleeding into my brain and all."

At his words, Meg jumped up, planting a heavy kiss on his mouth to shut him up. "No. I'm pregnant. I'm just pregnant, okay?"

"Just pregnant?" he echoed. "Pregnant is big. Pregnant is wonderful. It is, isn't it? As I remember, you were afraid of having another child."

"I'm not afraid any more," she whispered.

"Well," he said, and then a few seconds later, "well," again.

Meg loosened his dark hair from around his bandage, smoothing it back. His gaze was

steady on hers, almost daring her to look away. She didn't.

"Will you marry me?" he asked.

She wished she could stop crying just long enough to answer him, but she couldn't, so she nodded instead. From the doorway, Dan Stauffer asked:

"When's the wedding?"

Apparently he had forgiven her for being the only woman in town not stirred by his charms. Still holding her eyes steady on Caleb's, she asked, "In the springtime?"

"Yeah," said Caleb with a grin. "In the springtime."

The End