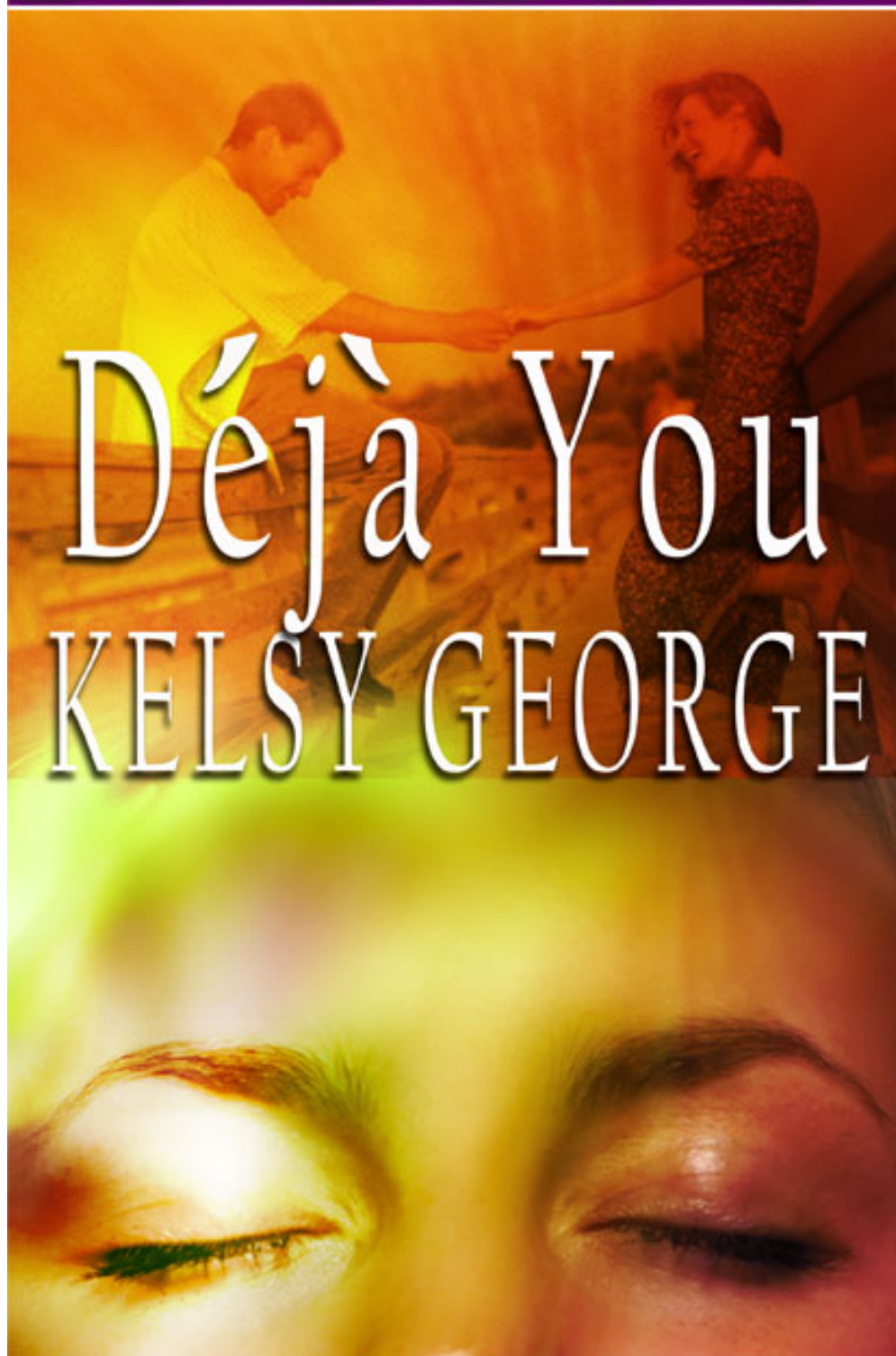


Cerrídwen Press



Déjà You

KELSY GEORGE

A Cerridwen Press Publication



www.cerridwenpress.com

Deja You

ISBN #1-4199-0650-X

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Edited by Ann Leveille.

Cover art by Syneca.

Electronic book Publication: June 2006

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DEJA YOU

Kelsy George

Acknowledgements

Considering no one I know has ever met a *real* ghost, there are very few people to acknowledge in *Déjà You*.

Thanks, of course, goes to my editor, Ann Leveille, for putting up with my strange problem she calls Canadianisms. I forget, every once in a while, and put in something that makes no sense to anyone who doesn't live north of the 49th.

Thanks also to Pat Guthrie, my reader/critter who points out things I sometimes miss.

Thanks and love to my mother—she's waiting impatiently to read this and keeps asking for it.

And thanks again, as always, to my husband—for his patience and his help.

Trademarks Acknowledgment

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Chapter One

November 16, 2005

“Bridge is blocked, northbound traffic is backed up on I-5 all the way to the Puyallup exit and the 405 ain’t much better folks...”

I flip the switch on the tiny radio balanced precariously on the back of the toilet, blank Johnny Hislop’s bad news traffic report from my mind and make a face at myself in the cracked bathroom mirror. Let him worry about snarled traffic.

Chalking it up to just another bad day, the thought niggles it’s more than a bad day. It’s *that* bad day – November 16th.

Nothing’s going right this morning. My last pair of pantyhose sprang a tiny run barely contained by fingernail polish, which shouldn’t show as long as I keep my shoes on. The milk I poured on my cereal turned out to be sour and I can’t get the vile taste out of my mouth. And when I peek out the tiny window behind my kitchen sink, the small slice of sky I can see shows nothing but a dismal overcast gray, rain and the odd snowflake falling from the low-hanging cloud.

November. A month I’d like to forget. Winter in Seattle at its wettest and most depressing.

Today isn’t any different from other November days yet it feels strange. I thought I’d get over this lost, lonely feeling but it hangs around, worse than ever on the anniversary of Michael’s death. My husband would have been thirty-one if he’d lived, instead I’ve been a widow for three of the longest years I can recall.

Every November 16th feels the same. Will it ever get any better? Will I be able, some year, to remember him with fondness and know I’d made something of the rest of my life?

Not if today was any indication.

Deciding I’ll never get my long, wavy hair under control in this dampness, I throw down my comb in disgust and roll the offending strands into a tight French knot behind. A few hairpins and it’s anchored, going nowhere until I decide otherwise. A half-hearted swipe with a rosy pink lipstick and I hit the light switch as I drag my feet toward my front door.

If I don’t hurry, I’ll be late for an important pre-client advertising meeting and my boss, Ethan Harwood, won’t be happy. He warned me yesterday to bring lunch and I made extra last night in case we didn’t finish by suppertime. I can’t afford to eat out.

Picking up the lunch bags and my purse, I take my shabby imitation sheepskin-lined jacket out of the closet and shrug it on at the same time I slide my feet into the

shoes I left by the door last night. Yuck! Still damp from yesterday but the only pair I have.

Glancing around the apartment, more from habit than anything, I pause briefly at the old upright Steinway piano sitting in the corner of the dining room beside my empty china cabinet and shrug. I'll get around to playing the piano one of these days and I'll buy back my fine china and my Nanna's silver tea set from the pawnshop when I can afford them.

Looking out the peephole, I see no one in the dark shadows beyond and turn the deadbolts, remove the bar lock and unfasten the chain. When I finally escape to the dimly lit hall, I have to sit my purse and the lunch bags down so I can use both hands to yank the door shut behind me. The warped frame makes it stick. I'll have to remind Stan Medlar to come up and fix it. It doesn't stick when I open it from inside and I've never figured out why.

It seems darker than usual and, looking up, I notice another burned-out light bulb. Something else to tell Stan.

What can I expect in a near-slum tenement?

"Hey, Charli..."

Pain shot through my head.

Chapter Two

"Hey, Charli, get in here! Where the hell are you?" an aggrieved voice boomed through the open office door.

I'd already put in a twelve hour day, regular hours for an advertising agency slave. There'd be no overtime. You just kept accumulating until you needed a day off then you took it.

Storyboards cluttered my desk. Two easels nearby held flipped pages of discarded ideas. Most had big X's scrawled across. Others offered such encouraging words as "dumb" and "retro loser".

I felt deflated, needed to make myself unavailable. Send incoming calls straight to voice mail. Maybe I'd draw a line across the doorway and post a sign—"do not bug me zone" or I could really be obvious with "I don't get paid so little to worry so much".

My boss, and owner of the agency, Ethan Harwood, was of the opinion if he worked late and didn't get paid for it, none of his support staff should complain when they weren't paid either. Of course it helped he made more than twenty times my yearly salary, was a single man who'd inherited his condo, his weekend place and the building housing his agency and resided on the list of most eligible bachelors invited everywhere and given everything. I had it on good authority the mothers of Seattle loved him. It would be the coup of the decade for the mother who managed to marry her daughter to this man.

"I don't see you coming through my door!" he hollered a second time, making me cringe. The harder everyone worked, the more annoyed we became until the entire team finally hit the wall. The campaign we were working on simply refused to gel. Now, twelve hours from when we started, we were tired and even more irritable than usual. Ethan Harwood had taken to yelling.

"Yes, sir?" I stuck my head around the doorjamb, not sure I wanted to enter his office.

His blue eyes pierced mine across the breadth of his desk and the fine plush carpet, making me back away from the opening. I could still see him when he spoke again.

"Get LeRoy in here for another go at this artwork. See if he's had any more bright ideas. We've got to finish this damned thing tonight. The meeting is set for eight tomorrow morning." He ran long artistic fingers through his dark hair in an uncharacteristic gesture of despair.

"Yes, sir. I'll get him."

I backed away from his office, wondering what it would be like to be part of his world. This man beat all of us to work today, had been at his desk or in meetings all day and still looked fit to be on his way out to dinner at the Georgian.

I, on the other hand, looked as if I'd been run over by a truck or at the very least a bicycle. My blonde hair fell haphazardly from its normally neat roll. My two-piece polyester suit—all I could afford—looked like I'd slept in it and I'd been reduced to wandering around in my pantyhose because my high heels were killing my aching feet. There was a run on the top of my right foot and I didn't know how I'd got it. To top it all off, I had a doozy of a headache not even dented by the ibuprofen I'd taken.

His years in the business made Ethan Harwood good at what he did. Nearly forty, tall and well built, his daily running habits kept him fit. He ran marathons for the hell of it, did weight training to stay in shape. He certainly wasn't muscle-bound, but you could see his strength. He wore his dark hair shorter than most of his artistic staff but still long enough to brush his collar. His eyes were the color of a winter morning, a cool, icy blue. His looks today were mostly frowns but when he smiled he raised the temperature of anyone near him. Well, the women at least.

Tell them to add a dog, Charli. That's what this campaign needs. A dog.

I whirled to see who'd spoken, my heart pounding in my chest. No one there. Anywhere. Unless...

"Did you say something, Mr. Harwood?"

He looked up from the notes he wrote and raised an enquiring eyebrow.

Obviously not. The voice wasn't his. It sounded more like an echo. I decided I'd been working too long and needed a break. Instead of phoning to get LeRoy Helmes back to Ethan's office, I'd walk. A little exercise, outside the four walls I'd been looking at since early morning, might help me wake up.

The atrium on the main floor of our building sailed upward for the first four floors with trees and vines growing in a helter-skelter arrangement that looked natural, not planned. I took a moment to lean over the railing and look down on all the greenery and wished I could be anyplace but this building, doing anything except making my living as a secretary in an advertising agency. But I didn't know anything else.

I came to the unarguable conclusion I was burned out with no way to rekindle the flame.

* * * * *

A new bride, in a new apartment, without a job on that beautiful November morning.

That was me. I moved to Seattle from Bay View to go to college and ended up with a new husband.

If I'd known what the day was to bring, I might not have been so abrupt with Michael Robertson, my husband of only two months.

"Come on, Charli, just one more." Michael grabbed me as I walked past him in the tiny kitchen of the postage-stamp-sized apartment we'd found.

"Stop it, Michael! I'm going to burn your breakfast if you don't let me go." I laughed but I was serious. I pushed away from him and went to rescue the bacon just starting to smoke. The smoke detector shrilled as I lifted the pan from the heat.

"Damn it, look what you made me do." I carried the smoking frying pan toward the tiny window over the sink, trying to get the smoke to go out instead of up. "Wave something at that thing. Make it stop." I opened the window and blew the smoke toward the screened opening. "Come on, Michael. Make it stop."

The alarm went off regularly and I hated the noise it made. Whoever designed our apartment was not thinking when they placed it right above the stove.

Or they were thinking like a man.

No woman would ever put that shrill little box right over the source of smoke and steam. Boiling the kettle was enough to set it off.

Michael dragged a chair over so he could reach it more easily. When the noise finally stopped, I sagged.

It was going to be another of those frustrating days when nothing went right. I was supposed to have an interview at an advertising agency this afternoon and I was trying to decide what to wear, what to do with my hair and how much makeup to use.

I had the misfortune of having what used to be called a voluptuous body. In other words, there was more of me than there needed to be. I tried to dress down my attributes but it was hard hiding a five-foot nine-inch platinum blonde—real, not bottle—with measurements to rival a Playboy centerfold. In an age where people believed what you looked like must be what you were, it was hard to be considered someone with down-to-earth values and a brain looking as I did.

Meeting Michael Robertson had been my good luck. I went to school with him as a teenager and he knew me during my younger, flat-chested, beanpole days. We were friends through high school then drifted apart when he went off to university in Corvallis, Oregon while I attended Seattle City College. In my final year at college he came home. His father had died and his mother needed him so he quit school, found a job and was living two blocks from my apartment. We met by accident at the corner market, stopped for coffee, began dating and six months later we were married.

At the time it seemed a rather impetuous move on our part, but we were in love. Dizzy, happy, crazy in love. We decided waiting was not for us and with his mother's reticence and my family's grave misgivings echoing in our ears, we were married by a justice of the peace with just the three of them looking on. Even at the wedding my family spoke of their disappointment at my choice of a husband and they'd spoken their views out loud. That was the second to last time I'd spoken to them in person.

We were happy. We were on our way to greater things. At least that's what we thought.

Until the fateful morning of November 16th.

Over breakfast we made up for the sniping we did when I burned the bacon. He realized it was as much his fault as mine and we sat, holding hands and cuddling. I sometimes thought that was why we liked fighting. It wasn't the fight we enjoyed, it was the making up afterward.

"How about tonight we go out to dinner? Just the two of us. We've eaten at home for weeks now. The only place we've been is to my mother's house. Let's go out. How about that place you like in the Pike Place Market? Hmmm? Maybe it'll be a celebration. If you get the job."

"I won't know about that job for at least a week, Michael. There are a lot of us being interviewed then they'll shortlist. After that, there's another interview."

"Well, we'll just call it a celebration. We can do it again if you get the job. By then we'll be able to afford it."

"All right. I'll meet you there." I stood up to clear the dirty dishes. "Be there for seven. I'll make reservations."

Michael walked up behind me while I was putting the dishes in the sink. He grabbed me and swung me around.

"Now I get that kiss, babe."

His lips met mine and he'd begun to deepen the kiss when the phone rang. After the third ring I pushed him away.

"I have to answer that. It might be important."

It was Michael's mother, reminding him he was supposed to pick her up for her weekly bridge party the next afternoon. While he talked to her, I went to get dressed. I heard his footsteps when he walked to the kitchen to pick up his coffee cup, and the buzzer ring from the lobby. Michael's ride was here. He was getting a lift with a friend from the office because I needed our car.

"Sweetheart, I'm outta here. I'll see you tonight." His voice shouting down the hall was rushed and sounded like he had his head in a bag. I came out of the bedroom in time to see him shrugging his way into his jacket.

"See you tonight."

He had the door open and was nearly out of the apartment when he suddenly ran back in and down the hall to me.

"Let's do this right." He grabbed me and gave me a kiss that could have become an all day love-in. But he knew he was going to be late and he was holding up someone else.

"To be continued." He ran down the hall and out of the apartment.

I stood, smiling, in the middle of the hall until a sudden feeling of dread washed over me that I blamed on my family's habit of seeing the worst and believing it could only go downhill from there.

I had the strangest premonition this euphoria might not last. Pushing it out of my head, I prayed we'd still be acting like this ten years down the road.

I was nearly ready to leave the apartment later that morning when the buzzer on our intercom rang. I wasn't expecting anyone and I was in a hurry. Whoever this was would be getting a royal brush-off.

"Yes?"

"Mrs. Charleen Robertson?" The unknown voice sounded officious.

"Yes."

"This is Sergeant David Fletcher, Seattle P.D. I need to speak with you please."

"Can't you just talk to me like this? I'm getting ready to go out."

A surge of fear overcame me. I wasn't used to having policemen at my door.

"No, ma'am. I need to see you in person."

His seriousness was even more frightening.

"All right. Come up. But you don't get in until you show me your badge and your ID." In our area of town, you didn't open your door to just anyone. It wasn't safe and it wasn't worth losing your life for such a simple thing as not checking the ID of people who arrived unannounced.

"That's fine. We'll be right up."

I was waiting at the door, looking out the little peephole, wondering why on earth the police needed to talk to me.

The sound of knuckles on the door made my heart leap. I'd looked away just long enough to let this police officer get to the door without my seeing him moving in the hall.

"Let me see your badge," I told him.

He held it up, about a foot back from the door, enabling me to see it completely.

"Now the ID."

He flipped open a card case and showed me his city ID card with his driver's license next to it.

I unlocked the door, removed the chain and pulled it open just as another man joined the uniformed sergeant.

Now I was scared. The second man wore the clerical collar of a chaplain with his police uniform.

I knew before either of them moved.

"Who?" I hung onto the door and folded up inside, knowing what I'd hear. "Not Michael. No." I backed down the hall, not realizing where I was going, and they followed me.

"Mrs. Robertson, I'm Chaplain Richard Dixon." I heard his gentle voice but the words weren't registering. I was against the wall, unable to move. The two men took up places, one on either side of me. Their hands on my arms were meant to reassure but I was beyond feeling.

"Mrs. Robertson, I'm sorry, your husband was in an accident on the I-5 this morning. The car he was in was forced off the road by a tanker truck and it hit a bridge abutment. Your husband and the driver were killed instantly. I'm so sorry. Is there someone we can call for you?"

I stared at these two men who'd just destroyed my world and wondered what on Earth they were talking about. Why would they want to call someone for me? I couldn't think of anyone and then I remembered my appointment at the ad agency.

"Could you let the agency know I won't make it today, please." I walked to the kitchen, picked up the card with the number and handed it to him. He gave me a look I didn't understand.

"Is there anyone in your family you would like us to call?" I looked at him then, realizing what he wanted was to contact my parents. I gave him the numbers and told him he'd better contact Michael's mother too, then I sat down at the table.

It was three days before I remembered anything else.

* * * * *

"Hey, Charli, what's up?" LeRoy Helmes suddenly loomed beside me, frowning at the world in general.

"LeRoy! Where'd you come from?"

"Ethan just called and wondered why I hadn't left yet. Seems you were sent to get me but never arrived. Where've you been?"

I tried to remember how I got here, glanced at my watch and wondered what time it had been when I left the office.

I didn't know. The last thing I remembered was the voice and the laughter.

Forget it, sweetheart. You're not going to remember. Tell him. Tell him now. Tell him about the dog.

That voice again. I glanced around, trying to see if I could spot whoever spoke. "LeRoy, did you hear someone just now?"

"There's nobody here. Just you and me. Everybody else was smart—left when this day should have ended." He laughed as he looked back at me. "You're just tired. You've been cooped up with the boss too many hours today."

"And we're not finished yet. I was coming to get you." I frowned at him, thinking I must be missing something here.

Time. Precious minutes had escaped my grasp.

"You've got me. Let's go."

He put his arm around my shoulders and led me back toward the office I'd left who-knew-how-long-ago. As we walked down the long hall, I had the creepy feeling of being watched. I quickly looked around but saw no one. Maybe whoever it was had

gone back into one of the other offices, but no doors had opened and closed. It was after nine, and the rest of the building should be empty.

It's just me, Charli and I'm not leaving until you give this guy my message. Tell him to put a dog in the ad. It will save you hours of work tonight if you do.

Putting my hands over my ears, I tried to shut out the voice and felt the first stirrings of fear, then warmth flowed through me. The voice sounded vaguely familiar but it wavered. Like a speaker underwater or someone trying to talk while they gargled.

"Charli?" LeRoy stopped and stared at me. "What's the matter? What's wrong?"

LeRoy was the closest thing I had to family in this city. I trusted him like a brother. I needed to tell someone about this, took the plunge and confided, "He's here." I turned around where I stood, trying to find any source for the mysterious voice.

"Who's here?" he asked.

"The voice I thought I heard."

LeRoy shrugged. "I didn't hear anything." The look on his face told me he didn't quite know for sure how to deal with this. "Is the voice talking to you specifically?" he enquired.

"Yes. He says my name every time."

"He? You're sure it's a he?" LeRoy looked around, trying to see something we both knew wasn't there. "You said every time. How many times has this happened?" LeRoy now gazed at me as though I'd taken complete leave of my senses.

"Three so far and it sounds deep enough to be male. I've not heard it before. Just since Mr. Harwood sent me to get you." I glanced at my watch again but it still told me nothing. "Whenever that was," I mumbled.

"Well, I don't hear anything. I suggest we get back to the boss before he comes looking for us. Next thing we know we'll be holding our meeting in the hall." He snickered. "Although it might not be too bad an idea, since we're stuck on the damned campaign. Maybe a change of scenery would help."

Charli, listen to me. Tell him about the dog, then you can all go home.

I grabbed LeRoy's arm and pulled him to a stop. "There, I heard it again." I looked around, prickles of unease racing up my spine. "You didn't?" Desperation crept into my voice.

"Sorry. What's the voice saying?"

I didn't want to say it out loud.

"Come on, Charli, what's it saying?" LeRoy showed a little asperity.

Go on. Tell him.

I spun around, frantically hoping to see someone standing behind us, playing a dirty trick on me.

You can't see me, Charli. Not yet. Don't bother looking.

The voice actually sounded a little sad. I'd have liked to talk back to it but with LeRoy there I wouldn't open my mouth again.

"Come on." LeRoy took my arm and steered me down the hall to the alcove I patrolled in front of Ethan Harwood's office. He always joked I was the last bastion in getting to the boss. If you could get by me, you had it made. "You're looking a little pale. I think we need to find you a chair."

LeRoy led me to my desk and I sat when he shoved my chair behind my knees. I thought I was safe until Ethan Harwood stormed out of his office. He stopped like a deflated balloon. He'd been looking forward to yelling at someone and with both of us there he didn't have a reason.

"Oh." He stopped abruptly. "See you found her." He turned to look at me. "Where the hell have you been, Charli? I've been waiting nearly half an hour for you. We don't have all night."

He turned to go back to his office but LeRoy stopped him.

"Boss, I think Charli needs a little break here. Maybe some food, or something to drink. She heard voices out in the hall and I don't think she's had a break since noon."

"LeRoy!" My forlorn wail was drowned out by Ethan's incredulous voice.

"Voices? She's hearing voices?" He looked skeptically at LeRoy, then turned to me with a questioning look. "You on some kind of drugs, Charli?" His voice dropped an octave when he spoke, sounded threatening. I looked at my hands, clasped tightly in my lap. If he yelled I'd ignore him. He had a right to be annoyed, but to accuse me of doing drugs? After three years he should know me better.

"Charli?" The sudden change to a soft, caring voice threw me completely. "Look at me." I looked up hesitantly in time to see his hand coming down to touch my face. He stood beside my chair, holding my chin in the palm of his hand and gazing at me intently. His words were an even bigger surprise.

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize you hadn't had a break." He turned to LeRoy and brusquely issued orders. "Phone down to the deli on the corner, LeRoy, and see if they'll deliver sandwiches for all of us. Better yet, you go pick 'em up. It'd be faster. You know the kind of thing I like, and I suspect you've had lunch before with Charli. Order something for her. Coffee for all of us." He headed back toward his office, stopped and added, "And something cold to drink."

LeRoy looked from Ethan to me and raised his eyebrows. "Ham and cheese okay?" He hurried away as soon as I started to nod.

"Really, Mr. Harwood. You didn't need to do this," I said.

"Yes, I did. And now it's after hours, how about calling me by my name?" He smiled. "Think you could?"

The heat in my cheeks told me I was blushing.

"Charli," Ethan ambled back to where I sat and knelt on one knee, bringing himself to my eye level. "Will you do it for me?"

"If you want." I barely whispered, yet he heard me. His smile was one I seldom saw in the office. It changed his face completely and made him look at least ten years younger. The creases beside his mouth deepened and the laugh lines at the corners of his eyes suddenly appeared longer.

"Then say it. Say my name."

His hand squeezed my knee gently when I whispered, "Ethan."

Hey, Charli? This guy hitting on you? He's your boss, isn't he? You let him do that?

I spun around, startled, my hands shaking. The feeling of heat which had suffused my face when Ethan touched me must have receded quickly and left me pale because he looked extremely concerned.

"What? What is it? You look like you've seen a ghost." He hurriedly took me by the arm, pulled me out of the chair and led me into his office. "Here, lie down for a minute." He walked me toward the couch against the far wall. "Stay there until LeRoy gets back with the food."

He helped me sit then reached down, took my ankles and swung my feet up onto the couch. I didn't have much choice when he did it. I fell back into the butter-soft leather and stared up at him.

I'd never noticed the black curling hair on his arms before, but tonight, with his shirtsleeves rolled up to the elbow, I saw the tattoo beneath. It looked like crossed rifles, some kind of an insignia. I found it fascinating. Then the voice spoiled it.

Quit looking at him like that, Charli. He doesn't even know you exist outside this office. Remember who he is? The number one bachelor of Seattle. One of the richer men around here if I'm not mistaken.

I whimpered then. I heard the voice and everything it said. It sounded like someone I knew but I couldn't place it. I just knew I shouldn't be hearing it in this office.

"Go away!" I begged in frustration. "Leave me alone."

"What?" Ethan Harwood's startled voice cut through the fog that enveloped me. "What have I done?"

"I'm sorry. I wasn't talking to you," I said.

"You aren't talking to me." He pointedly looked around the office, making his question a statement and making me feel defensive.

"No, I'm not. I just thought I heard someone say something. I know it wasn't you."

"Are you all right?" As he asked the question he sat on the couch beside me and took my hand. At first I didn't know what he was doing then I realized he was taking my pulse.

"Stop." I snatched my hand away.

"If you're still hearing those voices, I'd say it was time we got you checked out. I could call the EMS." I started to sit up in protest but he gently pushed me back. "I thought you might be happier if I just checked you out here, without causing too big a fuss. Just your pulse, your temperature. Like that."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, leave me alone. There's probably a perfectly good explanation for what I'm hearing. And I don't need you trying to play doctor. I'll be fine once I have something to eat."

Tsk, tsk. I mean, really, Charli! The man's only trying to help you.

"Oh, please, leave me alone. Go away!" I shut my eyes tight, hoping all this nonsense would stop.

"Charli..." Ethan began.

I can't, Charli. Not yet.

"What do you mean, not yet?" Without thinking I'd talked back to the voice and when I looked I saw Ethan watching me as though I'd suddenly sprouted two heads.

Exactly what I said. Not yet. I'm here to help you. But first you have to show me you believe, but I don't think it's going to happen tonight, so I'll just go. Remember what I said. Tell them to add a dog.

Bolting upright on the couch, I shocked an already stunned Ethan Harwood into standing.

"Will you stop with the dog bit already!" I muttered angrily through clenched teeth.

"Charli? Are you all right? What about a dog?" Ethan's voice now sounded more concerned than incredulous.

If I'd been him, I'd have been calling the men in white coats who take you places with padded walls. I mean, really! First I heard voices and now I answered them.

I drooped sideways into the big soft cushion on the back of the couch and closed my eyes again.

"Never mind. Please. I think I'd better go home, sir." My voice shook and I didn't know if it was fear, anger or a combination of both.

If I didn't know better, I'd have thought maybe I was going crazy. But I knew the voice was in the room with us, not in my imagination.

"You can't take yourself home. You're in no shape to drive or get on the subway. Wait until LeRoy gets here. We'll figure something out." He got up, walked over to the long mahogany sideboard running beneath his window, opened a recessed door and withdrew a crystal decanter containing something in a nice, warm, golden tone. Probably the expensive brandy he used to toast successful campaigns. He poured an inch into the bottom of one of his matching crystal glasses and brought it back to me. "Here. Drink this. The brandy should help." He sat beside me and held it to my mouth, tilting the glass so I had no choice but to open and swallow. Drink or wear it. I sputtered when it burned going down and he forced the glass against my lips again. "Come on, one more swallow."

As he tipped the glass I felt a sudden chilly breeze move across my skin. My arm suddenly erupted in goose bumps. I shivered and didn't know why. Then, as suddenly as the breeze sprang up, the glass Ethan held flew across the room to crash against the

front of his desk. It shattered into razor-sharp, jagged slivers and rained down all over his nice gray carpet.

"Oh!" My voice was pitched much too high and bordered on hysteria.

Ethan didn't move. He stared at his hand. When he finally looked up at me, his eyes held total bewilderment. He gave me a lopsided, half-hearted smile.

"If you didn't like it, you could have just said so." His effort at a laugh fell pathetically short.

"I didn't..." My voice was a terrified whisper. I couldn't have talked louder if I'd had to.

"I know, love, I know. I felt it, too."

Dammit, Charli, are you just going to sit there and let him feed you booze?

This time the voice came from behind me. I flew off the couch, backed toward the desk and without realizing what I was about to do, stepped into the midst of the broken glass. When the first piece cut into my foot I let out a yelp and backed up even further, stepping on another sharp edge with the other foot. Now in agony, with no way out for the moment, I tried to collect my scattered thoughts. Then I tried to close my mind completely. Think of something inconsequential. Anything to get my mind off the excruciating pain in both feet.

What I thought about was carpet. I'd make a bloody mess all over the lovely dove-gray plush.

"Charli, stand still! Don't move." By the time he finished speaking, Ethan stood next to me, lifting me in his arms. I grabbed for his neck and held on tight, shaking with fright and pain. I heard glass crunching beneath his feet and thought about the disaster this evening had become.

Charli, what the hell do you think you're doing?

I finally admitted defeat and burrowed my face in Ethan's shoulder, letting the tears roll.

"Honey, you're okay. I didn't mean to yell at you. But you were going to step into more glass if you moved."

I hiccupped. "I'm not crying because of the glass."

"Then why?"

I suddenly realized he'd sat down on the lovely leather couch and was holding me on his lap. I tried to pull away.

"Stay put. I've got to check your feet. You're bleeding."

I looked at my feet then the carpet. A path of bloody drops led from the broken glass to the couch.

"Oh, no!" Just as I wailed, LeRoy entered the office carrying deli sacks. His jaw dropped, he stared. His face became menacing.

"What happened?" He advanced on us as though he thought Ethan might be trying to accost me. "Charli, you all right?" he snapped.

"She's fine, LeRoy. She just had a rough spot here and ended up standing on some broken glass in her bare feet. Get the first-aid kit out of the bathroom there, would you?"

LeRoy gazed at me without moving. "Are you all right, Charli?" His voice held a note of steel I wasn't used to hearing. "I want to hear it from you." He stared intently into my eyes and I suddenly knew what bothered him.

LeRoy's wife had been assaulted some years ago by the man she worked for. It took her a long time to get over it and nearly wrecked their marriage in the process. I don't know what he might have done to Ethan if I'd said "no".

"I'm fine. I really did cut my feet and nothing—else—happened." The last three words I said slowly, with as much positive emphasis as I could muster.

LeRoy immediately dropped the deli sacks and sprinted to what we all jokingly referred to as the executive washroom.

He returned in a hurry and before I knew it my feet were set on a towel to try and protect at least some of the carpet. Ethan continued to hold me on his lap. After asking what kind of stockings I wore, LeRoy, the married man with three children, reached up under the hem of my skirt and rolled down my lace-topped stockings, the kind that hold themselves up. His matter-of-fact attitude made me feel like one of his kids.

I glanced sideways in time to witness a fleeting smile cross Ethan's face. I gave him my own small effort in return.

Charli. I'm disappointed in you. Two men? At the same time?

"Go away!" I directed my whisper at the floor. There was no one else in the room to look at.

"What?" LeRoy looked up at me.

"What'd you say, Charli?" Ethan leaned his head closer.

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing." I sighed in defeat. "I thought I heard the voice again."

Both men stared at me. LeRoy with a crooked smile—the one agreeing "you're probably crazy" without actually saying it—and Ethan with a confused look, becoming the kind of soft gaze that made me want to smile gently back. I caught myself just in time.

"Again? This voice is kind of busy tonight, don't you think?" blurted Ethan. "What's it saying?"

Tell him, Charli. Tell him about the dog. You'll see. They'll appreciate it.

"All right, all right. I'll tell them." Now I knew I was crazy. I was conducting a conversation with a voice only I could hear in front of other people.

"Tell who what?" LeRoy smiled at me from where he sat on the floor applying whatever he'd found in the first aid kit to the cut on the bottom of my right foot. "Come on, Charli, let us in on this too."

"You want to know what it's saying? I'll tell you," I said. "And if you laugh, I won't bother coming back to work tomorrow. Or ever again."

"We won't laugh. Promise." LeRoy went through the motion of crossing his heart as he spoke and his grin told me I should expect laughter. When they heard what I had to say it would probably be wild, uncontrollable hysterics.

"All right." I looked down at my hands, unable to look either of them in the eyes. "The voice wants me to tell you to add a big, friendly dog to the ad. Says it will fix your problem."

LeRoy dropped the foot he held and stood.

"A dog. A big dog," he muttered.

Tell him it should be a yellow Lab. My voice now got breed specific.

I told them.

Ethan looked at me intently and LeRoy stared at the ceiling.

"That's it! It's exactly what we need." LeRoy dropped the rest of the bandages and took off down the hall at a lope.

"He's right." Ethan's voice held a note of incredulity. "Your voice is exactly right."

I sat in silent shock, surprised neither man had laughed.

Didn't I tell you, babe? I'm good! I heard a touch of boastfulness in the words but ignored it, settling for being angry at the name he'd called me.

"Don't you dare call me 'babe' !" I pushed up from the couch, scattering gauze pads and adhesive tape and spun around, trying to decide where the voice originated.

"Sit down, Charli, LeRoy isn't finished."

"But the voice just..." I sputtered to a stop.

Only one person, my husband Michael, ever called me "babe" and it had been our private joke, based on something that happened to me. How did this voice know?

"So?" I saw a sparkle in his eyes and a twitch of a smile at his mouth.

"So...well...oh, I don't know. It just shouldn't."

Shock set in and I started to shake. I couldn't seem to help myself, vibrating as though I was enduring an earthquake.

"Come on, honey, sit back down here." Ethan led me again to the soft couch and lowered me gently to the cushions.

The sound of LeRoy rushing through my office turned both our heads. He grinned from ear to ear when he flew through the door.

"Look!" His enthusiasm was evident in the way he presented the drawings to us.

The storyboards he whipped out hadn't changed from the last workup he'd done. But there had been an addition. A large yellow dog now inhabited all the frames. Gamboling around like a puppy while the people around him went about their business.

"The dog is exactly what it needed," he admitted.

Three of us sat, smiling at the storyboards, knowing the meeting tomorrow would now go off without a hitch.

I told you!

Chapter Three

"He's right, Charli."

Ethan's smiling voice made me turn.

"I know," I replied. "He just gave me the 'I told you so' speech."

"He did?" Ethan laughed. "Must have a sense of humor."

"I don't know about a sense of humor, but maybe now I've done what he wanted he'll leave me alone."

I fully expected when I said it the voice would give me a bad time but nothing happened.

"Well, we're done for the night. We don't have to stay any longer." A sense of disappointment overwhelmed me when Ethan spoke. I'd enjoyed being part of this day with these two exceptional men and I didn't want it to end. I was happier than I'd been in a long time, but I guess he'd had enough. He had a life to live outside this building and he would probably be happy to leave us behind.

LeRoy gestured toward the sacks from the deli containing our dinner. "What about the food?"

"Come on, LeRoy, pull up a chair. We'll just sit here, eat, then we can get home for some well-earned rest." Ethan moved books and magazines off the small table in front of him, giving LeRoy room to set the sandwiches and the pickles. Talk about a feast—deli-made bread and meat, with oversize kosher dill pickles and chunks of cheese. I alternated between the flavored coffee and the bottle of spring water LeRoy knew I liked but couldn't afford.

We shared the food like three good friends but I knew when we all showed up tomorrow it would be back to business as usual.

Ethan Harwood was our boss, LeRoy and I his employees.

I became much quieter when I thought about it. When we finished eating, I gathered up the bloody, shredded stockings from the floor by my chair and hobbled painfully, on the sides of my bandaged feet, to my desk. I stood there wondering how I'd get myself home. I couldn't put my shoes on nor could I drive. I was in a predicament. I'd have to ask LeRoy to drive me or find a cab.

A warm, gentle hand on my shoulder made me jump. Ethan stood close behind me.

"Get your stuff together. I'm ready to leave." He disappeared before I could answer him.

Now what?

I didn't want Ethan Harwood to see where I lived. It wasn't much to look at, rundown and shabby and certainly not in the better part of town. In fact, his little sports car would stick out like an expensive Mercedes in a wrecker's lot in my neighborhood. I doubted he'd ever been into my corner of town. At least not intentionally.

He was back much too soon. "Come on, let's get out of here, the day has been long enough as it is." He draped my jacket over his arms, stuck my still-damp shoes in his jacket pockets and my purse under his arm. Walking slowly, he eased me toward the door. "Are you all right to walk?"

"I'm fine, just slow."

We made our measured way down to the elevator, where LeRoy held the door.

"You'd get where you were going faster, boss, if you picked her up and carried her." He reached out, rescued my jacket and purse from Ethan's arm as he spoke.

Before I could protest, Ethan once again swung me effortlessly off my feet. For a moment I forgot why he held me and just reveled in the strength of the arms wrapped around me. My face, against his neck, felt warm. I inhaled his scent and let it blanket my mind. Relaxed, I let out a gentle moan before I remembered where I was and why. I stiffened and hoped he hadn't sensed my reaction. It had been a long time since I'd felt this way with, or reacted to, a man. Any man.

When the door opened he turned sideways so my feet wouldn't hit the wall. He stood me upright in the elevator. It was obvious he planned to carry me when we reached the parking level.

"Please. Let me walk. I feel silly like this."

"No. LeRoy is right. We'll get to the car much faster this way then you can sit down again."

LeRoy followed us to Ethan's car, took the keys from him and opened the door. Ethan very carefully stood me up, without letting me put my entire weight on my feet, and gave me a gentle push in the direction of the front seat.

"There you go." Turning to LeRoy, he repossessed my belongings, then tossed them effortlessly onto the shelf behind the seats.

I heard LeRoy calling good night as Ethan closed my door. The two men talked as they walked around the car and I wondered what they were discussing. I was so physically tired and mentally exhausted I didn't try too hard to hear what they were saying.

As Ethan's door opened I heard LeRoy saying "we don't need her". I wondered if they were talking about me then decided Ethan could tell me if he felt so inclined. I leaned back against the headrest and my eyes closed. The car sank slightly as he dropped his weight into the seat on his side. Like his office, his MG convertible boasted all dark leather. In the underground parking light I thought maybe it was green, British racing green.

"Aren't you just a bit young to have a mid-life crisis set of wheels?" I didn't think about what I said, just blurted it out. To say I was embarrassed was another of those understatements, making me look like the dumb blonde everyone expects to find when they first see me.

When the car didn't start I opened my eyes and looked across at him. He sat sideways, staring at me.

"Well! You're obviously feeling better."

I had the presence of mind to look at the floor. I couldn't meet his eyes.

"I'm sorry. I didn't think. This kind of car always makes me think of the stories you hear... Oh, never mind." I waved my hand at him as though to dismiss whatever else was going to be said here tonight. Things were going from bad to worse and I only helped.

"Okaaayyy...so let's start over." He tried to suppress a smile, not completely succeeding. "Charli?"

"Yes, Ethan?"

"Are you feeling better now?" He smiled as though to encourage me to play his game. I tried.

"I guess so. I just wish I hadn't kept hearing the voice. I'm sorry I behaved like such a fool."

"Don't apologize. Stress can sometimes make you hear things that really aren't there and after the hours we've put in on this campaign it might have been nothing more than exhaustion. I'm sorry we worked you so hard."

I decided not to remind him of the glass, which had been knocked clear across the room or the cold breeze we'd both felt. I didn't want to remember it myself.

He turned to face the steering wheel, started the car and began moving toward the parking exit. The overhead lights cast an eerie glow inside the car and made him look dangerous. His normally imposing features became shadowed and harsh. I knew better than to believe it. The Ethan Harwood I knew could be a hard taskmaster when it came to the people who worked for him yet he was always fair.

At the street level exit, he stopped.

"Which way?"

"The old business area. North side."

I saw him frown but he said nothing. Everyone knew the kind of buildings populating the old area. Walk-ups were basically slum tenements in some places and, in the case of the Harmon Court Apartments where I lived, only one step up from the slum level. My building would have been nice if looked after. An absentee landlord, a money-hungry, irresponsible management company and a super who didn't care or do anything more than he had to, all conspired to turn what had been a decent apartment three years ago into a drab, unpleasant and unsafe place to live. If it hadn't been for Michael's debts I'd have moved to a better building long ago. The debt wasn't

insurmountable, but it took every extra penny I had. The brand-new car was now three years old. If I'd sold it, I wouldn't have been able to go places, if I could afford it, when the mood struck. Fortunately, a parking stall had come with the job. I could drive myself to and from work rather than risk public transit in a rundown part of town at all hours of day and evening.

The rent was a monthly chunk I had to pay no matter what. I needed a roof, even a leaky one, over my head. What hurt my level of living, taking most of my paycheck, was paying off the last of the bank loans Michael had taken out to pay for his university courses. He hadn't been eligible for student loans and had foregone the life insurance on the loans because of the additional cost. The small life insurance policy he had taken out on his own had not yet been changed after our marriage. His mother, with her fully paid-for house, her chauffeur-driven car and her fat bank accounts, had been the beneficiary at the time of his death and she took the money as rightfully hers. I found it hard liking someone who could do something so despicable. Occasionally, when the mood was right, I blamed my husband for not changing the policy information before he'd gone and got himself killed.

After Michael's death, I tried hard to save so I could move, but I was still stuck in my disgrace of a building. I'd repainted my own apartment and tried to keep my little corner of the world a place where I could relax and enjoy myself. That's why I had my piano.

Plants grew in every available space. And the few good pieces of furniture were protected, trying to keep them looking as new as possible for the day I could move then invite friends to visit. If I had any friends when the time came.

I realized, frequently, I was flogging a dead horse with this wish, because as the months passed after Michael's death, the people I considered our friends stopped calling. No one invited me to dinner parties. I became the odd man out and no one knew what to do with me. When we married, my friends and his friends became our friends. But it seemed you couldn't go back.

My entire life now centered around work. When I went home at night, I shut out the world and amused myself. I tried what my mother had always referred to as thread work. Cross-stitch, embroidery, petit point and needlepoint. But you can only make so many pictures and chair coverings before you run out of places to put them.

I tried painting. The less said about it the better.

My family lived in California and had been against my marriage in the first place. They took the attitude life was always out to get you. I once told someone they were the kind of people who thought the glass half-empty while I saw it as half-full. We would never see eye to eye on anything. I'd given up trying.

They lived with the attitude that I got what I asked for and they weren't going to interfere. Every time I suggested a visit there'd be a lame excuse instead. I gave up and this year had not once suggested anyone should visit.

I suddenly jolted back to the present and realized I had gone into some dreamlike state and forgotten Ethan's presence entirely.

"I'm sorry, Ethan."

Jeez, Charli, don't be apologizing to him. It was me you were thinking unkind thoughts about!

My head whipped around. The words came from behind me. At least I thought they did. There was no one there, of course. The words themselves reverberated in my ears, not making any sense.

"Don't apologize. You've done nothing wrong."

Obviously he'd missed my reaction. Just as well. I wasn't about to start arguing with something I couldn't see while I rode in his car.

"I just sort of drifted off, my mind someplace else entirely. I'm not usually so rude."

"Don't worry about it. After the day you've had, I'm surprised you're still with me." He looked across at me and smiled. If I'd been interested in finding a man for myself this smile would have made my hormones sing. As things now stood, I was too tired to care. I smiled back, glad to have someone's company for a change.

We continued toward my apartment, neither of us talking, together in a companionable silence. The voice left me alone so I relaxed.

When we got to the point where he needed directions, I glanced at him, gave the street address and told him the easiest way to get there. When I told him the name of my apartment block, I didn't understand why there was a sudden tightening of his face muscles. Or why a scowl replaced his smile.

The smile I'd been wearing disappeared when his did. I was unsure of what I'd said or done, obviously something annoying. I reached behind the seat, grabbed my coat and purse. I left my shoes because I couldn't reach them. When he pulled up in front of my apartment I planned to open the door and run. I didn't want him following me into the building or saying anything about it. As the frown he was wearing became more intense, my fight or flight instinct kicked in. I'd be out of the car and gone before he even realized what I was up to.

At least that was my plan.

Something about what I was doing must have tipped him off because I suddenly heard the thunk of the door lock as it engaged.

He'd put his arm behind me and locked me in.

"Don't. Please. I don't need your help. I just want to get out and go straight in to my apartment when I get home. I don't want you to help me in."

"Not in this area, and not at this hour of the night. I'll see you to your door." His voice was stiff and cold and I didn't know why. "Give me your keys, please."

When he asked in such a severe tone of voice, I knew I had no choice. I held the ring out to him.

I understood why he wanted to make sure I got to the door in one piece. This area was the reason I had no nightlife. I didn't go out after dark or if I did it was only if someone else went with me. In nearly two years, I hadn't gone out at all except during the day on weekends. Once I was locked in at night I stayed there with all the dead bolts and bar locks in place.

"How long have you lived here?" He was pulling to a stop in the loading zone in front of my building.

"Three years."

"Why, for God's sake?" He turned to me, genuinely appearing to want an answer.

"It's all I can afford. This is the place my husband and I lived when we were first married. When he died, I just stayed here. I couldn't find anything cheaper."

"How much am I paying you?" He seemed genuinely puzzled my salary wouldn't get me something better.

"Enough. It's not that. I had to pay off the car we bought and Michael's loans. And I didn't get his insurance —"

"You what? Why on Earth not?"

"Because he never got around to changing the beneficiary. It all went to his mother."

"I see." And I thought maybe he did. "She didn't let you have any of it?" His voice had become deadly quiet. Scary, in fact.

"No. She kept it."

"Did she really need the money?"

"No."

"Then why —"

"Don't go there. Please."

I suddenly shut up, realizing I'd told him way more than he needed to know and more than I should have let out about my present circumstances. Seems I babble when I'm nervous and I was nervous this night. Something had been drastically wrong with my whole day but I hadn't a clue what or why. Then I felt a cold breeze from the back of the car. It seemed to envelop me. I noticed Ethan looking around. Had he felt it too?

"I'd like to go in, please." I had to get out of the car. If the breeze had followed me, was the voice here too? Maybe they'd stay in the car if I got out fast.

"Certainly. I'll come around. You are not going to walk on those bandages." By the time he was around to my door I had it open and was swinging my legs out.

"No you don't, Charli. I'm carrying you in."

"You can't. I live on the top floor. You can't carry me up four flights of steps."

"No, but we could use the elevator." The building codes called for anything over three floors to have an elevator, but ours had long since died. I'd been walking up for nearly a year.

"Actually, you can't. It doesn't work." I hung my head. I didn't want to see the anger I was certain I'd find if I kept my eyes on his face. He seemed to be taking everything about this evening, and what happened to me, personally.

"What?" he snapped. "Why not?"

"Who knows?" I shrugged. We were at the door by then and when he reached to use the key I'd given him, I just laughed. "It doesn't work either. Just pull."

What he did was bend down a little so I could pull the door open and then used his foot to push it back far enough for both of us to fit through. When we got to the inside so-called security door he just looked at me, his eyebrows lifted in a question.

"This one too. It's only been a couple of months, though. There was a rash of break-ins in this area one Saturday night. Someone must have scared them off after they got this far. This was the only lock forced." He shifted me in his arms as though I was heavy. "Look, put me down." I pushed ineffectually at his chest. "I can walk. I'll just do it slowly."

"Are you kidding?" He was looking with distaste at the dirty floor and the steps leading up. It had been at least a month since they'd been washed. Like I said, our building super did as little as he could get away with. "You'd get an infection in those cuts from this filth."

I stopped trying to get him to put me down. He obviously intended to go up all four flights like this.

We paused briefly on each floor while he got his breath back. By the third floor he was beginning to slow.

On the top floor, where my apartment was, he stood me a minute at the top of the steps and shook out the key ring I'd given him in the car.

"Which one?" he asked, slightly breathless but no worse than I normally was. All his running and weight training had come in handy tonight.

"A."

He picked me up again, walked the short hall and stood me against the wall by my door. While he fit the key in the lock I looked around. I had the feeling, again, I was being watched.

"All right, let's get you in here and sitting down."

He picked me up and pushed the door open with his foot.

I screamed.

Chapter Four

Ethan nearly dropped me.

His arms tightened around me while I gazed around in total disbelief.

"What?" He looked at me, then the room. "What's the matter?"

"Someone's been here."

"How can you tell?" He was looking around the apartment. "Seems all right to me."

"When I left for work this morning, my piano was in the dining room, such as it is."

Obviously I didn't have to explain any more. The piano was now sitting in the center of my small living room. As I looked around I started to shake. Something was dreadfully wrong. If someone was playing a joke on me, it was a sick, sick thing to do.

This apartment had been reorganized to exactly the way it had been when Michael was alive.

Except for the Steinway.

Then it hit me. It didn't have a place in this decorating scheme. I hadn't had the piano when Michael and I lived here. A distant cousin I saw about once a year had hauled it here from my parents' home in California after Michael's death.

My body reacted without conscious thought. I shuddered then the tears started.

A cold breeze suddenly enveloped us.

It had followed me. It was in my apartment. Was the voice here too?

"Ethan, put me down please. I've got to check the other rooms."

Instead of setting me down he headed up the hall to the bathroom. I didn't think anything had been moved in here until I noticed the towel rack. My pretty little embroidered hand towel had been replaced by one of the big bath sheets. The ones I usually kept in the linen closet.

"Well?"

"It's been changed."

He turned next to the bedroom door. I held my breath. If things were back to the way they used to be I didn't think I'd be able to stand it. I must have tightened my arms around Ethan's shoulders.

"What, love? What's the matter?"

"Please, put me down. I need to go in there alone."

He hesitated yet he let me slowly slide down his body until my feet were on the floor.

"You're sure about this?" He still had his arm around me as if afraid to let me go.

"Yes. I have to do this on my own."

"I'll wait right here. If you need me, call."

I looked up at him and smiled. "I will." His bodyguard role was unexpected.

I intended to open the door slowly. Again, I felt the cold breeze. The door swung open with the breeze, slamming hard into the wall. I looked around the room, starting at the closet side, and when I got to the bed I felt my knees give.

Ethan must have been watching me from the doorway because he caught me before I hit the floor.

"Come on. We're outta here."

He carried me back down the hall toward the living room, sat me on the big chair in one corner and knelt in front. My hands were clutched in one of his, his other on my knee.

"All right, Charli. What's this all about?"

I looked at him, shaking my head and biting my lip. I didn't want to say it out loud. I wanted this to be a dream, a bad dream, a nightmare, anything but reality.

"Whoever did this?" I paused, took a deep breath. "They've moved everything back to exactly the way it was three years ago, when I lived here with Michael. The towel in the bathroom? It's the bath sheet Michael always used. If you look, you'll find a hole in one corner where he cut it while he trimmed his toenails one night."

I took another long slow breath, trying to figure out how to say what came next. Ethan helped. He stayed where he was and didn't say a word. He let me tell this in my own way.

"In the bedroom... Well, whoever it was put all the photographs back on the dresser. It took me nearly three years to put them away. I had only one photo there this morning—one with both of us. My favorite. It was taken at the Space Needle."

Ethan must have thought I was finished and started to stand up. I grasped his hand gesturing to him to stay.

"There's more." He looked at me as if he couldn't believe what he heard. "The bedspread and the drapes in the room are not the ones there this morning. Those are a set his mother gave us when we got married. I always hated them. Michael did too, but he would never have said anything to her. Anyway, about three months after he died, I put them away. Somewhere in there, in a drawer or the closet, should be the ones I bought for myself."

I had trouble telling this. Since I'd told him this much, I decided I should tell him the rest of it.

"And in the living room?" I looked at the ceiling, blinking furiously, trying to stem the tears, then swung my gaze back to Ethan. "The reason the piano is sitting in the middle of the room, I guess, is because it was never here when Michael and I lived here."

"What do you mean?" Ethan was looking genuinely confused and, I thought, a little frightened.

"The piano was mine before I married. It was never here while Michael was alive. So whoever did this knew it didn't have a place of its own."

"What things do you need, Charli? I'm packing you a suitcase and getting you out of here. Have you got someone you can stay with?"

I shook my head. I couldn't speak.

"Come on, tell me what you need. You are not staying here tonight. Not if someone has been in here."

"No. I have to stay here."

"Why?"

"Because I don't have any place else to go." As I uttered those sad words, I leaned back in the chair and closed my eyes. I couldn't remember ever feeling this alone.

Someone had been in my apartment. Whoever it was must have a key or the building super had let them in. Ethan must have been having the same thoughts because he suddenly straightened and began pacing.

"Who has a key to this place besides you?" He stood, waiting for my answer, and I didn't have one to give.

"Nobody I know of."

"What about your mother-in-law?"

"She never had one. We hadn't lived here long enough to give any out. The only other person who would be able to get in here is Stan, the building superintendent, and he wouldn't do it without my telling him to."

"You're sure?"

"I think so. I've never had a reason to have anyone come here while I was away."

"No delivery men, repairmen?"

"Never. I did all the repairs and painting myself and I've never had anything brought here."

"And you're sure no one else has a key?"

"Nobody I know of." I said with finality.

"Okay. Where do I find this Stan? I need to talk to him."

"He's on the main floor, apartment C. If he isn't there, his wife might be able to help you. But it's so late, they might even be in bed."

"I don't care if he's been in bed for the last two hours, he's going to answer my questions. You stay here, don't move, I'll leave the door open. If anything happens, you hear or see something not right, you scream. At the top of your lungs. And don't stop until I get here. I'll be up those stairs so fast..."

I smiled at him. I think he liked playing the role of protector.

"Yes, Sir Galahad." I tried to smile, to show him I appreciated all he was doing for me.

"You just wait for me. Don't move."

"Yes, boss." His answering grin told me I'd said the right thing. At least it made him feel as though he were in charge.

I sat there and watched him leave and wondered why I'd let him go without me. I didn't want to stay here. I wanted to be as far away from this apartment as I could get. I started to stand and felt the cold breeze again. There was a sudden crash from the kitchen and I let out a yelp. Not loud enough for Ethan to hear, I hoped.

I tried to stand and found if I walked on the outside edges of my feet it didn't hurt as much. I made it to the kitchen door and wished I hadn't. Lying in pieces on the floor in a large puddle of water was a big old ugly yellow pitcher that normally sat on the windowsill. I used it to water my plants and it had been full.

I groaned. Now I had this mess to clean up. Before I could even think about it, there was another crash, this time from the bathroom. I hobbled as fast as I could down the hall and looked in dismay at the mess in there. The mirror that normally sat on the toilet tank was in slivers all over the floor. The metal frame was bent and twisted as if someone exhibiting great anger had attacked it. I stood there, waiting to see what else would happen.

"Charli? Charli, where the hell are you?" Ethan's furious voice, coming from the living room, made me turn. As I turned, he came around the corner and saw the mess behind me.

"How'd it happen?" He stood beside me, looking at the shards of silvered glass.

"I don't know. I heard a crash and came to see what it was."

"I thought I told you to scream if anything happened." He looked very angry and I felt fear encroaching.

"I'm sorry, I know I..." He reached out and put his hand on my arm to stop my apology.

"No, love, *I'm* sorry. I shouldn't have yelled at you." His soft voice took the sting out of his previous question.

"There was a crash from the kitchen, too. My watering jug is in pieces in a puddle out there."

He grabbed my hand, hurried me into the bedroom as fast as I could limp and started opening drawers.

"Get what you need for a couple of days. You're not staying here. What about a suitcase? Have one?"

I shook my head. I had never traveled anywhere. Whenever I'd moved, I used boxes.

"Okay, I'll find a bag or something. Help me here, Charli. What can I use for your things?"

"In the hall closet, there's a box full of grocery bags. Get one of them."

It was easier to do as he said than argue. He was right. I couldn't stay here tonight. Not by myself. In fact, I doubted if I could come back here again, ever. But I wasn't going to tell him. I'd have to find myself another apartment. Something in the same price range. Maybe something in the same area.

I felt the breeze again, except this time I thought it might be slightly warmer. It ruffled my hair where it had escaped from its tight roll. My gasp made Ethan turn and he gaped as the hair around my face moved. He started toward me then stopped, his own hair fluttering in the breeze. His mouth dropped open and he glanced at the closet as if expecting something to happen or something to come flying out at us.

It wasn't the bedroom window. Wherever this breeze was coming from, it wasn't there. My eyes darted from side to side.

"Come on, let's get out of here," he said over his shoulder, taking the clothes I'd held in my hand and striding down the hall. I limped into the bathroom and took the few things I needed—toothbrush, toothpaste and the little plastic case holding my few cosmetics. I followed Ethan down the hall then remembered I needed my hairbrush. When I turned to go back I saw the hairbrush floating through the air toward me.

I screamed, dropped my toiletries, the brush hung suspended in air in front of me. I backed up and Ethan caught me.

"What the—" He never got to finish before I fell into his arms.

"Let's go. Now." I gasped as the hairbrush dropped to the carpet at my feet.

Ethan reached down, touched it as if it might be hot, then gently picked it up and examined it. We both looked at the bag sitting on the floor halfway down the hall, shook our heads and silently agreed "not me".

"We can pick up more on the way, can't we?"

"Sure. There's gotta be an all-night drug store on the way." He swung me off my feet before I could even begin to protest and headed for the door. Four flights of stairs later he stopped. This time he was puffing.

Stan Medlar stood there in a plaid housecoat tied loosely at the waist but not meeting in the front. His boxers showed through the opening. Ethan had obviously hauled him out of bed. His dark greasy hair, streaked with gray, was tousled and his eyes looked sleepy.

"All right, Stan, I want you to go up there and clean up the mess in the kitchen and the bathroom. Then I want the place locked up and no one, absolutely no one, is to go in there until I come back here on Friday. You understand?"

"Sure thing, Mr. Harwood."

"Mrs. Robertson won't be back. I'll let you know where her things are to go. You will ship them to her when I give you the directions. And Stan?"

The man looked up at Ethan and I saw fear in Stan's eyes.

"I don't want to hear anyone else was in her apartment. And I don't want to find anything moved in the apartment when I come back. Understood?"

Stan nodded his head, seemingly unable to speak. He was probably thanking his lucky stars he hadn't had a verbal blast leveled at him.

At that moment the door to Stan's apartment slammed shut, but not before I felt the cold breeze. I clung a little tighter to Ethan's neck and sucked in my breath. Stan glanced toward his door in surprise.

I wasn't superstitious and I didn't believe in ghosts, so there had to be some rational, this-world explanation for what was happening. For now all I wanted was to get out of this building. I think Ethan sensed my desperation because his arms tightened around me and he headed for the door.

"Just remember everything I said, Stan." He stopped to shake hands with Stan, a bit difficult with me in his arms, and I saw the color of money change hands. "You know where to reach me. You'll do fine."

We backed through the security door then the outside door. By the time we were at his car I realized I was in serious trouble.

I was out of my apartment, carrying barely enough to get me through the night. I had clothes for tomorrow, not beyond. I didn't even have one pair of shoes with me. I started to struggle to make Ethan put me down.

"Quit, you're making it hard to hang on to you." We were at the car and he had to set me down. When he did, I backed up, turned and headed as fast as my bandaged feet would move me toward the front door of my apartment building.

"Whoa there, girl. Slow down." He grabbed my arm as he caught up to me. "You're not going back in there, so quit."

"But I don't have any place to go. And you can't make me leave here."

"I just did and you're not going back. If you need anything else, we'll get it for you. I don't want you back in the building. I think it's dangerous."

His words stopped me. What could be dangerous up there?

I slumped where I stood, totally deflated, turned and walked painfully to the open car door. Ethan's outstretched hand helped me in then closed the door behind me.

I didn't look back.

If I was leaving this place for good I wanted no memories from tonight.

"Charli, are you all right?"

Charli, are you all right?

I heard both voices at the same time. I didn't answer either.

"What's the matter?"

"Just get me out of here. Please." He pulled away from the curb and picked up speed. I resisted the impulse to glance behind me. "Where are you taking me?" I had no idea my voice could sound so weak and inconsequential.

"Do you have any friends you can stay with?"

"No. Nobody."

"What about your mother-in-law?"

I didn't even bother to answer.

"All right, if you won't tell me where I can take you, I'll pick a place."

I ignored him. He could drop me off wherever he liked, I'd be back on the street the minute he left. I couldn't afford anyplace he'd pick. I closed my eyes and laid my head against the seat. I didn't intend to but I must have dozed off.

The car slowed down, the motion of the turn waking me, and I looked around in total confusion. I had no idea where I was. It certainly wasn't in any part of the city I knew or could afford. The car zipped up to a set of black, wrought iron gates and hesitated only a moment. As soon as the gates opened Ethan put his foot to the floor and the little sports car shot forward toward a massive Victorian-style brick house.

"Where are we, Ethan?"

"This is my mother's house. When my dad died, my mother refused to move out. So she has a friend living with her and the two of them are rattling around in a house big enough for a family of twelve. I phoned her," he pointed at his cell phone on the dashboard, "and there's a room ready for you now. And you got lucky. My mother's friend Maddie Waltham is a retired nurse. She's got a tray of stuff, whatever she thinks she needs, all ready for you. She'll dress those cuts on your feet. Then you're going to bed. And you will sleep until you want to wake up tomorrow. When I leave in the morning, you're staying here."

"No, I have to go to work tomorrow. The meeting is set for eight a.m."

"You'll miss the meeting, love. You are not going anywhere until those feet of yours are back to normal. When you can put your shoes on and walk again, you can come back."

Hey, Charli, this is a nice guy.

"Oh, no!" My exclamation made Ethan turn my way. He must have seen something in my face.

"The voice?"

"Yes. It's back." I spoke with thinly disguised disgust. "He thinks you're a nice guy." I had hoped I'd seen the end of these weird things when we left the apartment building. "Damn ghost!"

My curse made Ethan laugh. I was deadly serious. If this voice didn't leave me alone soon, I might begin to believe I was haunted. The fact neither Ethan nor LeRoy had thought it surprising made me even more unsure of the situation.

"It's not funny, Ethan. I'm hearing a voice and it isn't inside my head. This time it's in the backseat of your car."

I guess I'd had more than my share of emotional ups and downs for the day and this time I sank even lower. The tears were close. I didn't want to cry in front of this

man. He was my boss. I had to work for him. It didn't matter I was being moved into his mother's house. I couldn't stay here. First thing tomorrow I'd call a cab and leave, if I could figure out just exactly where I was.

A warm sensation on my cheek made me pull back and I turned my head away.

It disappeared.

Ethan parked the car in front of the big house and was already out, coming around to my door. The house was well lit, plus all the outside lights were on, making it seem we were arriving in broad daylight.

Ethan picked me up and the big double door at the top of the steps swung open. Two silhouettes came to meet us.

"Oh, you poor thing," crooned a sympathetic voice. This was the smaller of two women. She had silver hair, a young face and the most impish smile I'd ever seen.

"Hi, Maddie, meet your patient, Charli Robertson. Charli, this is Maddie Waltham. She's going to fix you up. And this is my mother. Charli, I guess you'd better call her Vivien."

"Welcome, Charli. My son told me when he phoned you've had a pretty gruesome night of it. Come in and we'll get you looked after right away. Ethan, don't just stand there, get her inside. Take her through to the library."

"Yes, Mother. And hello to you, too!" His engaging smile was one of a loving son. They obviously got along well. Made me a little envious. I had a mother and father and I hadn't spoken to either of them in nearly three years except to have my invitations rebuffed and my suggestions knocked down. They could have helped me out right now, but I wouldn't ask. They'd told me when I left Bay View for school, and again when I married Michael, I had bought my own troubles, I could pay for them. After the wedding they moved to California and hadn't given me another thought. I'd never seen their new home and they didn't know anything I'd done in the last three years. I wouldn't now ask them for anything. I'd do it on my own, somehow.

"Thank you, Mrs. Harwood." I looked over Ethan's shoulder and realized for the last three or four hours this man had carried me around half of Seattle. All things considered I was glad he was so fit.

Vivien Harwood was tall, at least my height, maybe even five-ten, with dark hair, the bluest eyes I'd seen next to Ethan's and a strong, tanned face. There were very few lines or creases so either she looked after herself or she'd had a facelift. Just looking at the strength emanating from her, I opted for care. This was a woman who wouldn't waste time on the surgical means of looking younger.

"Ethan, you could put me down. I don't think I'm in danger of getting an infection off your mother's floor." I was speaking quietly but she must have heard. The laugh following us down the hall was a feminine version of the laugh I'd occasionally heard from Ethan's office.

"No way. I'll put you down when I get to the chair and not before. And when Maddie's finished with you I'm carrying you upstairs to your bed."

I blushed and tried to hide my face.

"It's all right, dear, you'll get used to him eventually," laughed his mother.

Don't go getting too used to him, babe. He's really out of your league.

My hands flew to cover my ears and Ethan turned so his mother wouldn't see me.

"It's here, too?" he asked quietly. "In this room?"

I nodded, afraid to speak.

"Well, whatever it is, it obviously isn't out to hurt you, so try and relax. Maybe after a good night's sleep you'll be a little more tolerant of whatever it is. Or maybe it'll be gone altogether."

I looked at him in astonishment. My straightforward, play-it-by-the-rules boss was telling me to be nice to a voice in my head, a ghost. Whatever.

You listen to him, Charli. He's right. You'll feel better about all this in the morning. Have a good sleep, babe.

Again the breeze, warmer than any of the others I'd felt all evening. The curtains fluttered and fell still.

Chapter Five

"Did you see the curtain over there?" Ethan whispered in my ear, trying not to let the others hear what he was saying should they come back and catch us talking.

"Yes, I saw it. Just before they moved he told me to have a good night's sleep. And he called me 'babe', again." I looked at him, hoping he'd be able to answer my question. "Ethan, what's going on here?"

"I don't know, honey, but we'll figure it out tomorrow. Tonight we're going to get those cuts fixed up and then you are going up to bed." He turned toward the library door and bellowed, "Mother! Are you and Maddie bringing those bandages tonight or do we have to wait up until tomorrow?"

Vivien Harwood and Maddie Waltham came bustling through the door with the first aid things.

"Hold your horses, young man." Vivien's smile took the bite out of her words. She was carrying a box of bandages while Maddie followed with everything else she needed. Vivien set the box on the table and left almost immediately.

"Sit her down over there, Ethan." He picked me up again as if I weighed no more than a feather and Maddie followed us across the room to a big leather chair. "Sit sideways in there, Charli. Put your feet where I can see to work on them."

She sat the tray on the table beside the chair and swung an antique shaded lamp around. The bandages Ethan and LeRoy had applied earlier in the evening looked pathetic. They were dirty, unraveling and soaked through with blood.

Maddie looked at them with distaste then stood and headed for the door.

"Be right back. I'm going to get a basin of water and we'll soak those off. Otherwise it will hurt too much."

Ethan was hovering behind the chair and I wished he'd go light someplace, but he seemed to have appointed himself my guardian and where I went, he was right beside me.

"You'll be fine. Maddie bandaged a lot of my cuts over the years. She's good."

"I'm sure she is. I just wish people would stop being so nice to me. I have nothing to give in return."

A hand gently covered my mouth from behind, stopping me.

"Don't you ever say anything like that again, Charli, do you hear? Nobody is asking for anything of you except you take what is offered and quit fighting us. If I didn't want to do this, I'd have dumped you at the closest hospital."

The thought stopped me cold. He could have done it if he'd wanted to, but he hadn't. This man had more depths to him than I wanted to know about.

Maddie came back just then and brought the promised water. She had the old bandages off and my feet cleaned and redressed in no time. Tiny butterfly bandages were given the job of holding the cut skin together then she wrapped my whole foot in soft, stretchy gauze. As she finished, Vivien reappeared bearing a tray with large mugs on it, all of them steaming.

"Now the blood is gone, I'll join you." As she sat the tray down I looked at her and realized her face was still a little pale.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Harwood."

"It's Vivien, please. And you've nothing to apologize for. I just don't happen to like the sight of blood. That's why my son's injuries were always looked after by Maddie. I get queasy at the thought. Now, let's forget all about it and enjoy this."

"This" turned out to be steaming cups of hot chocolate, topped with marshmallows.

I sat with my feet propped on the stool. Ethan moved in front of me and was leaning back in the big chair. The first few swallows of the steaming liquid helped to relax me. As I drank my way down the cup I felt myself warming up and becoming sleepy.

"Did someone slip a sleeping pill in here?" My accusatory tone of voice made everyone look.

"Now, why would anyone do that? You've had enough excitement for one night. Now you've had time to relax, you're going to want to sleep. It's only natural." Maddie was answering my questions but three pairs of eyes were watching me. I decided it didn't really matter. If they'd slipped me something in the chocolate I'd probably sleep better than I might otherwise. I sat the cup down and leaned back again, having trouble holding my head up. I saw Ethan start to move forward and just as I lost consciousness I heard his voice.

"Are you sure you didn't give her too much? She went out awfully quick."

I never heard the answer.

* * * * *

I woke up in a strange bed and couldn't remember where I was. As I lay there trying, I felt the pain in my feet. Everything came back in a rush.

I had been wearing a cheap watch, but it was missing from my wrist. I glanced at the table beside the oversized bed I was in and saw it there, showing eleven-thirty.

I'd missed the meeting.

Swinging my feet to the floor, I tried to stand up and nearly fell. Grabbing the post of the footboard saved me from ending up on the carpet. I heard the door open behind me and saw two women standing there. One had a breakfast tray, the other was holding the door.

"Good morning, dear. How're your feet this morning?"

This was Maddie. It was all coming back to me now – the voice I'd heard in Ethan's office resulting in my walking right into the middle of some broken glass. The cuts on my feet. The ride home. The apartment.

The voice.

I remembered the voice most vividly.

Then the memories of what happened in my apartment. I shivered. I didn't want to remember if I could help it.

I looked at the two women who by now were setting the tray on the small table in front of a window.

"They hurt. I forgot for a moment and tried to get myself off the bed. I nearly fell on my face," I replied, feeling a little silly about the whole situation.

"Well, dear, you just wait right there. I'll help you across here and we can all sit down to breakfast. Vivien and I waited for you."

Vivien had obviously gone for another chair, and as Maddie helped me across to the table Vivien returned and slid the chair in beside me. They sat down and the three of us stared at each other. I felt I had to say something.

"Mrs. Harwood..."

"It's Vivien, dear." She was smiling at me so she obviously wasn't too unhappy about having an unexpected guest thrust upon her.

"All right, Vivien, thank you. I'm so sorry to have imposed on you like this. I didn't know your son was bringing me here when he drove away from my...place." I preferred not to refer to the apartment as my house or my home. It hadn't really been either. It was just four walls and a roof over my head that I'd tried to make into the best it could be even with all its shortcomings. It had ceased to be my home the day Michael died.

"Ethan told us about your problems last night. My dear, just relax and enjoy it here. We love having you. And you can stay as long as you like. Ethan told us he'd had the building superintendent lock up your place after he cleaned it up last night. And Charli?"

"Yes?" I looked at the two of them with some trepidation.

"Ethan also told us about the voice and the breeze. About the glass flying across the room. All of it. I'm glad I wasn't there, I'd have probably screamed. But Maddie loves this kind of thing. She thinks what you have might be a poltergeist."

I gazed in stunned silence at the two of them. Both women were in their sixties and here they sat, talking about my voice and the breeze and whatever else it was as though it was some kind of adventure. When I finally got my voice back I could only echo Vivien's words.

"A poltergeist?"

"A poltergeist. A spirit," Maddie broke in. "Something not human. But from what Ethan told us, it wasn't trying to hurt you."

"Well, it did hurt me. It broke things I considered special. It made the glass fly across the room and then because of the voice I ended up cutting myself on the broken pieces. I've been driven out of my apartment. And now I'm missing an important meeting I should be at because of all these things. You think it isn't hurting me?" My voice had risen until I sounded like a shrew even to my own ears. I tried to regain my composure but it was hard. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to yell at you." I looked at the floor. I nearly jumped when the voice announced its presence.

You oughta be ashamed of yourself, Charli, yelling at these nice ladies. What did you want to do that for, babe?

Without thinking I turned in the direction the voice seemed to be coming from and yelled.

"Don't keep calling me babe. I'm not your babe. I'm nobody's babe." I paused for a breath then took another shot. "Get out. Stay out. This isn't your house. It isn't mine, either. You're not wanted here." I was panting from exertion by the time I finished.

"You tell him, Charli!" I heard Ethan's laugh from the bedroom door.

"Oh, no," I spun my head to look at him. "I did it again, didn't I?" I turned back to the two women. "I'm sorry. I had no right."

It was Maddie who made my day.

"Charli, this voice isn't after you. I think he's calling you 'babe' because he likes you. It's an affectionate tone of voice he's using."

I stared at her. It was at least a minute before anyone in the room spoke.

"Did you...hear...him, Maddie?" This from Ethan, who was looking at her as if she'd just told him she knew how to fly. Without a plane. I knew how he felt.

"Maddie, did you hear him, too?" I had to ask. I had to know.

"I did. What's so strange about that? I believe in this kind of thing. So he probably knows I'll be on his side. And I guess I was wrong saying he was a poltergeist. Usually all they do is throw things. They aren't very happy. But this spirit sounded friendly, like he wants to be here to help you. Actually, you might have a poltergeist and a spirit."

I gazed at Ethan and shook my head.

"Well, if Maddie can hear the voice, too, Charli, at least you know you're not going crazy like you said you were last night." I could hear the humor in his voice.

I bent my head, refusing to look at him. If he smiled at me right now I might have to throw something.

"Don't you tease her, Ethan Harwood. Not everyone knows there is nothing to fear. How would you like to be hearing voices no one else could hear?" Maddie's indignation on my behalf made me feel slightly better.

It stopped Ethan. I could see him thinking. When he looked at me I wasn't surprised at his words.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to be unkind. Just make it a little easier to accept. And your voice was right, you know. We got the account this morning." He smiled like a little boy who'd found the Cracker Jack prize. "Because of the big yellow dog. I don't know where LeRoy got him, but he showed up at the meeting with this big yellow Lab in tow. The sponsor fell for him right away. Seems he'd had a dog just like it some years earlier."

"I'm glad. You and LeRoy worked so hard on that campaign."

"So did you. We'd have been at the office all night if you hadn't mentioned the dog." The thought sobered me in a hurry. If I hadn't told them about the dog, would all the other things have happened?

Yeah, they would have happened Charli, just not quite in the way they did. And just so you know, I'm not the one rearranged your furniture.

"Oh," was all I could say.

"What's this about your furniture being rearranged?" Maddie had obviously heard the voice again.

Ethan sat himself on the floor by my chair and leaned against my leg. A feeling of familiarity stole over me and I'm sure my face turned beet red. I could feel it burning, but nobody else seemed to notice.

"When I took Charli into her apartment last night her furniture had been rearranged." Ethan looked up at me from his place on the floor. "You tell it."

"Whoever was there put everything back the way it had been before my husband died. I rearranged everything after his death and it hasn't changed in three years. Until yesterday. Maddie, if you believe in spirits and ghosts, then tell me why it was throwing things in my apartment. A jug full of water and a mirror—"

I stopped. I had to. I'd just remembered the common denominator of these two items. Michael's mother had given both of them to us. Did that have anything to do with it?

Charli, babe, don't go there. I don't think you want to open that can of worms.

I looked around, trying to see if anything was moving. Maddie was looking too, so she must have heard him.

"What did he mean 'don't go there' and 'can of worms'?"

I lied. I had to. This was getting too close to home.

"I don't know. Sometimes I don't know what he's talking about."

I found it strange Maddie never questioned if the voice belonged to a male ghost or spirit. I hadn't been sure but I was now. And I was beginning to think I knew who it might be.

Most definitely a path I wasn't about to follow.

Ethan must have seen my reluctance to talk about this anymore because he changed the subject.

"Mom, I'm going to take Charli for a ride this afternoon. I may have found an apartment for her. I want her to see it and find out if she can afford it. What time's supper?"

"I'll plan for seven." Vivien Harwood obviously liked the fact her son was going to be in her home for another day.

"We'll be back in plenty of time."

She turned to me then and smiled. "Don't be in a rush to find a new place. You're more than welcome to stay with us as long as you want. You and Maddie can trade stories about the voice. You can't leave anyway until your cuts are healed, and Maddie tells me it might be another four or five days."

Maddie met my surprised gaze. "Four or five? I didn't think they were nearly so bad."

"Charli, I'm serious. Those cuts are deep. One of them should probably have had stitches. And until it heals properly, you'll just keep splitting it open if you walk on it. In fact," she turned toward him, "Ethan, if you're taking her looking at apartments, you carry her, like you did last night."

I gaped at her. Ethan laughed. It appeared the idea pleased him.

At the corner window the lace curtains started to move. Then the book sitting on the table in front of the window dropped to the floor with a crack. We all jumped but Maddie recovered first.

"I think your voice is jealous, Charli!" Her laughter was cut short when her cup rolled off the table.

"And annoyed."

I started to stand, remembered my feet and sat down again. I aimed my words where the last action had been.

"Will you stop it! You're making a fool of yourself. Please, go away."

Can't Charli. You need me here. I can't go until I know you're okay. The rules are set.

Now I had a voice, either a spirit or a ghost, and it had rules. What else could possibly happen?

"Well, hell!" My language would be in the gutter if I had to contend with this voice for much longer. "Just go. I can't deal with you now. Go. Please!"

I'll go, but I'll be back. I can't leave until I'm done.

My curiosity was piqued but I wasn't going to ask questions. If I did, I'd never get him out of here. And I wanted him gone. Dangerous thoughts were buzzing in my mind about the voice. I wanted time to think before I said anything more.

To anybody.

Chapter Six

The voice was with us, in the backseat of the little MG.

I knew it. I could feel the faintly warm breeze on the back of my neck telling me it was there. I still wasn't happy calling it "he" like Maddie did, because if I did I might have to admit I knew whose spirit this was.

While he drove, Ethan told me a little about the apartment building he'd found, one he thought I might like, one I could probably afford.

Then he insulted me.

"If you can't quite make the rent, Charli, let me know. I'll give you a raise to cover it."

I don't know if he said anything more because I wasn't listening. I was too busy going ballistic.

"Ethan Harwood, pull over. Stop this car right now. We're going to talk."

I think he could tell he'd done something wrong by the tone of my voice. If he couldn't, he'd find out as soon as I started talking.

He stopped the car in a no-parking zone, hit the button for the four-way flashers and turned off the motor.

To the accompaniment of the monotonous click of the flasher I did my best to contain my anger and speak in a reasonable tone.

"You are not going to give me a raise to cover any rent I can't afford right now. If I can't afford this apartment on my own, then it wasn't meant for me. Do you understand?"

I looked at him, sitting there with a half-smile on his face, and knew without a doubt it wouldn't matter what I said, he'd make sure I could afford the rent.

Turning to face the front, I set my body as rigidly as I could to try and make him believe I was serious. I watched him when I uttered the next sentence and knew I had finally got through to his stubborn male mind.

"Take me home. Back to my apartment. I don't want to see this place and I'm not returning to your mother's house. I want my own apartment."

"Come on, Charli, be serious. You can't..."

"Can't what, Ethan? Survive on my own in a tenement? I've been doing it for three years. Until last night you didn't have a clue what kind of life I led. You weren't interested. You have never, in the three years I've worked for you, asked about my life outside the office. You didn't know where I lived. You didn't know if I had problems of

any kind – money, people, apartment. But now it's touched your life outside the office, you're going to make everything right? Well, you can't."

"Charli –"

"Take me home." I no longer looked at him but stared straight ahead.

Charli, babe, you gotta take it easy here. I think this is someone you might want on your side. If things get rough, you're going to need someone like him. Be careful you don't burn all your bridges too soon.

Things get rough? Burn my bridges! On top of Ethan's pronouncement this was just too much.

Before he could react I had the door open and was climbing out of the car. It hurt, but I didn't care. I could feel all Maddie's work coming undone but I could fix it later. Right now all I wanted was to get away from the voice and from Ethan.

"Charli, get back in here."

Ethan hadn't moved, probably believing I would do as he told me because he was my boss. Too bad. He was in for a rude awakening. And if he pushed the point, I'd do something stupid and quit. I had experience. I was good. I could probably get a job someplace else.

Charli, babe, come on. Do as he says. This is wrong and you know it.

I'd had enough!

I rounded on the voice and Ethan and if the words applied to both of them, even better.

"Ethan, and you, too, ghost, listen up and listen good. I am *not* getting back in this car. I am *not* moving into some apartment I can't afford. I am not a child. I can take care of myself. Leave. Me. Alone."

And to prove I wasn't a child and could take of myself I promptly turned, stepped on a rock, cried out in pain and fell.

Ethan was out of the car before I even fully hit the ground. He scooped me up, took me back to the car and after fighting to get the door open without letting go of me, dumped me unceremoniously into the passenger seat.

I said nothing. Ethan didn't speak. And I guess the ghost decided now was not the time to interrupt. The silence in the car was broken only by the clicking noise of the flasher.

When Ethan climbed in it was with the jerky motions of an angry man but I didn't care. When I spoke, I hoped it was with finality.

"Take me home. My home." How many times did I have to tell him?

For the next fifteen minutes the only sounds in the little car were the noise of the motor, the traffic on the street and the wheels going around in my head.

I had to come up with a plan and fast.

Maybe I could get LeRoy to come and get me. He and Hazel might let me stay with them for a week or two until I got myself back on my feet, in the truest sense of the words. They'd helped me when Michael died. They'd been the only people to stay in touch outside of office hours. LeRoy and his family had been Michael's friends long before he met me and in the six months I'd known them before his death, they'd adopted me. I'd suddenly had an extended family, with nieces and nephews.

I didn't want to impose on them. They had three small children, only two of whom were in school, and I was sure their household would be a busy one. Maybe I could just stay there, take my car and leave during the day and only go back in time to go to bed. I could look for another job while I was there. As soon as I found one, I would move out.

For a plan formed in a matter of seconds it wasn't bad. But it never had a chance to get off the ground. When I suddenly realized we were not heading anywhere near my apartment it was too late. We were then only a few blocks from Vivien Harwood's mansion.

Approaching in daylight, it wasn't quite as imposing as it had been the night before. It really wasn't a mansion, just a big, expensive Victorian-looking house in a big, expensive and very exclusive neighborhood. When we pulled up to the front steps, Maddie and Vivien came to meet us with a strange man in tow. The three of them stopped by my open door. I had no idea where the stranger came from. He hadn't been there when we left. He was a tall, distinguished-looking gentleman with silver hair, wearing a well-cut navy suit, a white shirt with navy pinstripes and a dark, wine-colored tie.

He reeked of money. He reeked of the social register.

He reeked of anesthetic?

Why would I smell anesthetic on this man, unless...

Ethan was out and around to my door before I could even get the door open. He reached in and scooped me out of the seat, turning to the man who was waiting.

"Where do you want her, Roland?" I started to fight. Want me? Who was Roland?

"Calm down, Charli, this is Roland Driver. Doctor Roland Driver. He's going to put a couple of stitches in your foot, give you some antibiotics and make sure the rest of you is all right." Maddie's voice was matter-of-fact, telling me like it was.

How had this been arranged? I must have zoned out in the car and given Ethan time to phone home as he drove.

"No," I pushed ineffectually at Ethan's shoulder. "I don't want him to touch me. I just want to go home." I must not have been making myself too clear because the little crowd just moved toward the door, up the stairs and back to the room where I'd spent the night. Ethan dropped me unceremoniously into the big leather chair then left the room. From the doorway he looked back once and the look on his face frightened me.

"When you're finished with her, Roland, I need to talk to her. Then I want you to give her something to make her sleep. She's had a bad twenty-four hours and if she doesn't get some rest soon she's going to be in even worse shape."

Behind him I heard a door slam somewhere in the long hall, but a quick headcount showed everyone was in the room with me. Spooky. I had to swallow a smile, even to me it sounded clichéd.

I sat there, didn't say a word while Doctor Driver took off the now filthy bandages Maddie had applied last night, and wished people would just leave me alone.

They can't, Charli. They like you, babe, so they're trying to help. Let them. Don't be so stiff and uncompromising.

With Doctor Driver there I couldn't answer, but it was as if this ghost could now read my thoughts.

Give it up, Charli. You know you can't do this on your own. If you really want to leave at least wait until you can walk out under your own steam.

The voice was right. I couldn't get around on my own and wouldn't be able to for another couple of days. But as soon as I could walk, if I could find a pair of shoes, I'd be gone.

"There you go, Mrs. Robertson. That should fix you up right away. I didn't put in stitches, they wouldn't have held. It'll be a few days before you can walk on the soles of your feet, and at least a week before the bandages can come off and you can start wearing shoes again. Wear something with lots of padding in the heels, it'll take away some of the pain."

He put a small bottle of pills on the table. I could see the name on the label. Amoxicillin. An antibiotic. Then he pulled out a hypodermic needle, a syringe and a bottle of something white and creamy-looking. I cringed and pulled away.

"Relax, Ms. Robertson. This is only a long-lasting antibiotic. It'll work with the pills to make sure you don't get any infection." He took my arm, injected the liquid and put everything back in his little black bag.

I realized then I'd never heard of doctors who made house calls. To me they were a remnant of the long-gone past. Must be another perk to being well-off and having a standing in the community.

"How soon can I leave here, Doctor? I want to go home but everyone seems to think I couldn't look after myself there."

"This is Thursday? I'd give it until at least Wednesday, next Thursday would be better. Then, if you can stand wearing shoes, I guess you could go. Vivien and Maddie want you to stay, and Maddie told me about your apartment. Why would you want to leave?" He looked at me with genuine curiosity.

What was with these people? They were certainly not living up to my expectations. I had thought people in this social class wouldn't want an outsider, which I certainly was, in their midst. But these people were welcoming me, trying to make me feel better about everything happening, and didn't look on this as some sort of intrusion on their well-ordered lives.

I simply couldn't understand it.

"I don't belong here. I don't travel in the same social circles. I'm not a friend of the family, I work for Ethan. I'm in the way here." I felt like wailing "I wanna go home" but restrained myself.

"Well, get used to it, Mrs. Robertson, because for a few days at least, you're stuck here. I'm going to get Ethan now so he can talk to you, then I want you ready for bed and under those sheets. I'll be back to give you a shot of something to make you sleep when he's finished talking to you."

I wondered what he'd do if I argued with him but I was so tired I decided to save my breath and let him help me sleep with his magic potion. He left and I waited for Ethan's return. I was still sitting there half an hour later. About the time I decided I'd waited long enough and was trying to get to my feet and move over to the bed, the door opened. It wasn't just Ethan. Maddie and Vivien were with him. Maddie had elected herself spokesman.

"Charli, Roland told us why you don't want to stay here." Oh, great! Now I'd insulted my hosts. "I respect your feelings. So does Vivien. I can't speak for Ethan but I think he does, too. I know this isn't the kind of life you're used to but for now, let us help. You can't possibly go back to your apartment and look after yourself. And until your feet are better, we want you to stay. Then it will be up to you. If you want to go home you can. But you're welcome to stay here as long as you wish."

Before I could open my mouth to reply, Maddie and Vivien turned and left the room.

Come on, Charli, after all those kind words, don't turn into an ingrate now.

"Go away and shut up," I snarled in the general direction of the voice. Ethan watched and smiled.

"He's still here, I take it." He approached me as if unsure of how I would receive his presence.

"Yes, he's still here. So am I. And, according to your Doctor Driver, I guess I'll be here for a few more days. I couldn't leave if I wanted to." Graciousness eluded me, probably because I was still annoyed at Ethan's high-handedness.

"Charli, calm down. All I want is what's best for you. And if staying here is not what you want, then by all means, as soon as you can, leave. But please, for my sake as well as your own, do not go back to your apartment."

I stared at him. I hadn't realized my apartment had affected him so strongly.

"I have to go there. It's all I have. It's all I can afford." I held up my hand to stop him when he would have spoken. "And I'm not taking money from you to cover rent someplace else. If you can't accept my decision then you'll leave me no choice but to quit the agency. And I enjoy my job. I really don't want to leave."

As I said the words I realized I would eventually have to leave the agency anyway. Ethan had left me no choice. He'd taken us beyond the boundaries of employer-employee and there would be no turning back. But for now I couldn't tell him.

"You don't have to quit. But please, don't go back there. That place scares the bejeezus out of me and I don't scare easily." He stuck his hands in his pockets and started pacing around the room. "I don't think it was just because the furniture was moved, although it was bad enough. Knowing someone who knows you so well has been in there and we don't know who it was? I find *that* frightening. And the other things, taken one at a time, don't add up to anything I couldn't handle. But there is a cold, angry presence in there, not just your apartment but the whole building."

I sat there stunned. He'd felt all this in the short time he'd been there? I had, over the years, sensed the same thing but had become accustomed to it. I didn't like it but I couldn't let it frighten me away. There was no place else for me to go.

I looked at my clasped hands, unable to meet his eyes. I didn't know how to answer him. I wasn't sure there was an answer.

"Ethan, let it be for now. I'm stuck here, according to Doctor Driver, until next Wednesday or Thursday. Whenever I can get shoes on and stand up. So for now the question is immaterial. In the meantime I'll think about what I can do. If you'll bring me the papers every day, I could look for apartments. Maybe I'll find something listed there."

I knew it was a long shot. I'd been watching the classifieds for nearly three years and had yet to find something I could afford or would feel safe in. I didn't expect it would now happen overnight.

"All right. But will you let Roland give you something to help you sleep and get some rest? If you can sleep, I'll have Maddie wake you in time for supper."

He was heading for the door without coming any nearer, and for a strange moment I wanted him to turn and give me the smile I liked. He didn't. He left. In a few minutes there was a discreet knock on the door and Doctor Driver stuck his head in.

"Come on in," I called to him. "I'm decent. I haven't even managed to get out of this chair yet."

He approached me, smiling.

"You know, Ms. Robertson, you're a lucky woman."

"Please, Doctor, call me Charli. And why am I so lucky? I've got cuts on the bottom of both feet and can't walk. I have no clothes here to call my own. And I have three people trying very hard to keep me from going home. You call me lucky?"

"I do. Not everyone has friends who care for them and will do things for them strictly out of kindness. Although, if I read him correctly, I think there's more than kindness on Ethan's part. Are you two an item, as we used to say?"

I laughed. I couldn't help it. Me and one of Seattle's favorite bachelors? Not in a million years.

"I don't think so, Doctor. In case you hadn't noticed, I don't exactly fit into the Harwood social circle. I work for him. That's all." The look he gave me said he didn't believe a word of it. "It's true. I'm his secretary."

"If you say so. Now roll up your sleeve and give me your arm. This will help you sleep soundly for a few hours. And if you don't mind an old man helping you, I'll stay until you're in bed and drifting off."

"Thank you. I do appreciate this. I just wish people would stop making me do things they claim are for 'my own good' without letting me have a choice in the matter."

"Accept it, Charli, it's how these people are. You're very lucky it was Ethan you were with when all this happened. You might have been sitting in some hospital emergency ward and have no one to help you if it hadn't been for him."

I hung my head, felt a wave of shame and heard my ever-present voice. I'd nearly forgotten him, he'd been quiet for so long.

See Charli, didn't I tell you? These people only want to help. So lighten up and let them. When you're ready to leave, you'll do it. And on your own time, babe, not someone else's schedule.

I figured if the ghost could read my mind he could see me. I nodded, slowly. I didn't want to tip Doctor Driver to my other "problem". He might figure the psych ward of the local hospital was where I belonged. After all, he was a medical doctor. Doctors, better than anyone, knew there was no such thing as an afterlife, an "other world" where spirits resided. Maddie was the one who knew about those things.

I tried to stand and move to the bed, and with the doctor's help I made it. I sat on the edge of the bed, beginning to feel the effect of the shot he'd given me. I removed what clothes I could, and still in my bra, panties and the slip I had remembered to bring, I lay back and stuck my feet under the covers. Doctor Driver pulled the blankets up around my shoulders and made sure my pillows were where I liked them. He moved to close the heavy curtains to shut out the daylight then headed for the door. He stopped with his hand on the doorknob and turned back to me.

"Any time you want to talk about your 'voice' Charli, let me know. I would be glad to tell you what I've found out over the years, what I believe. It might help you understand and accept that you have a spirit in this world who is here to help you. Sleep tight, my dear. I'll see you later."

He departed and I lay there trying to close my mouth. If I'd been sitting up, my jaw would have dropped. As it was I was speechless. Maddie must have told him about the voice. From his words, in my muzzy brain, I decided he must be a believer, too. He hadn't sounded cynical. He hadn't pooh-poohed my feelings. He simply told me I could talk to him.

It's okay, babe. There are people out there who do believe. When you do, it will make this easier.

"Michael?"

Chapter Seven

I felt fingers on my face and wondered why I was able to feel a spirit's touch. Before, I'd only felt the warmth of the touch, not the actual sensation of skin to skin.

"Go away, Michael. Leave me be until I'm awake. Go back to your poltergeist and let me sleep."

"Wake up, sweetheart, it's not Michael. Supper's ready."

My eyes flew open and I was instantly fully awake. Ethan was sitting on the side of the big bed, his hand on the pillow beside my head. It was his fingers I'd felt. And he'd called me sweetheart. What was going on here?

"I'm sorry. Did I call you Michael? I apologize, Ethan."

"Don't, love. I think we both know why you said his name."

I looked at him and realized what he was talking about.

He'd called me "love". And it wasn't the first time. In the recesses of my mind I remembered all the other times he'd used an endearment instead of my name over the last twenty-four hours.

"You do?"

I think he knows, Charli. How about you? Willing to admit you know too, babe?

I moaned. "Go away, both of you."

Ethan's roar of laughter was not what I'd expected.

"You mean to tell me you're lying here in bed, in only your silky slip thing, with two men in the room? Really, Charli, I didn't know you were that kind of woman." His smile belied the words and I laughed out loud.

I felt better. The laugh had been spontaneous. And now I'd acknowledged I knew who my ghost was, or as Maddie called him, my spirit, I felt more relaxed. More together. As if things were somehow right in my world.

"Come on, babe, up you get. Supper is ready." Ethan stood, his meaning clear. He moved to help me out of bed, but his words destroyed me before I had a chance to move.

At Ethan's use of "babe", I froze. My mind went blank. I couldn't think or move. I knew he'd used it only in fun but it stopped me cold. Ethan must have seen the effect it had on me.

"I'm sorry, Charli, it just slipped out." He moved back beside me on the bed and reached for me. As he did, I felt the breeze, colder than I'd ever felt it. It moved the curtains. It blew the book off the table for the second time in only a few hours. And it was moving between Ethan and me on the bed. This couldn't be Michael.

What did he do to you, Charli? Are you all right?

When I heard those words I snapped out of whatever limbo I was caught in and looked around.

"Please, don't ever say it again. Don't call me 'babe', either of you."

"Why not?"

"Because." I had to come up with an excuse fast, I couldn't tell him the real reason. "It's just...it was Michael's nickname for me."

It was? Come on Charli, tell him the truth.

"I promise, I won't say it again. I didn't mean to hurt you, love." It amazed me—Ethan tolerated my talking to him and the voice in the same breath without batting an eye, and still called me "love".

The breeze flitted between us once more, slightly warmer than it had been the last time.

"That goes for you too, Michael."

I'll try, Charli, I'll try. But I can't promise.

"You promise, Michael Robertson, or I'll get a bag of garlic and a silver cross and chase you out of here." I smiled as I said it.

Charli? The voice had moved to the other side of the bed, and when I looked its way I gasped. There, hovering above the mattress beside me, was a shimmering light, a fluoresced shape vaguely reminiscent of a human being. It seemed to be in constant motion, the colors of the rainbow flowing together then separating, trying to take shape. When it finally held as still as it seemed it could, I gasped.

Sitting on the side of my bed was the ghost of my husband.

I'd have recognized him anywhere. Not just by his dear, dear face—but the old football jersey I could see had his number on it. The cut-offs he was wearing were his favorites and the disreputable sneakers were ones I had tried any number of times to throw out. He'd always rescued them, until the next time. After his death I moved them to the back of my closet, where they still were as far as I knew.

His sandy-colored hair was longer than he'd worn it in recent years. It looked more the length he'd had in university. And the long, narrow face with the sensitive brown eyes hadn't changed a bit. Why I would have expected it to, I have no idea. Dead men didn't age. They couldn't.

I felt Ethan's hand take mine from the other side of the bed but I didn't turn my head.

"Charli, are you all right?"

I heard the words and nodded. I couldn't speak.

Give the guy a break, babe, talk to him. He can't see me. He doesn't know what's happening. And he is trying to look out for you, so I think he deserves to know. Tell him. If he's half the man I'm beginning to think he is, he'll understand. I listened to the words and wondered if

Michael knew what he talking about. *And Charli? Garlic and silver crosses only work on vampires.*

My eyes remained glued to the image I saw but I began speaking to Ethan. His hand tightened on mine as I said the words. "My voice, Ethan? It's Michael. My husband, Michael. He's my ghost." I paused because I sensed Ethan wanted to say something.

"I kind of figured as much, Charli. He wasn't trying to scare you." I turned and met his eyes. "I think you knew, even before you finally admitted it to yourself."

He'd understood before I had. This was a special man. When I looked back, Michael was smiling at me.

"Ethan, will you please leave me for a few minutes. I have to talk to Michael. It's private." The bed moved as he stood. I never took my eyes off Michael.

"I'll be right outside the door. When you're ready for some help, just holler."

He turned and left the room without looking back.

When the door closed, I scowled at Michael. Now we were alone, I wanted some answers.

"All right, Michael, what is this all about? You're dead. You shouldn't be here."

All I know is I was directed to keep you safe, Charli. Now you believe it's me, you make it easier for me. You can see me. I don't know what I'm supposed to save you from. I don't know who. For all I know it could be the guy out in the hall, but I don't think so.

"Come on, Michael, you know he wouldn't hurt me. If he was going to do something he's had three years to do it in and he hasn't done anything out of line. Ever."

That's why I don't think it's him, babe. He flung his hands up in mock surrender. I know, stop calling you babe. It was my name for you first, Charli. Just remember me when you hear it. Not him. Never him.

As his anger boiled up, the colors shone brighter and moved faster, making it hard to see him. As soon as he calmed down, Michael's presence was back, looking like he had before.

I knew he'd remembered the day he came through the apartment building door and found me on the floor in a dark corner of the lobby, the hulk of a dirty, unwashed assailant standing over me, trying to rip my skirt from me. He'd already torn the buttons on my blouse and I lay there with my bra showing, trying to fight him off. Michael hit him so hard the pervert sank semi-conscious to the floor. Michael had helped me to the elevator and we'd called the police from the safety of our apartment. My attacker had been gone before the police got there, making me afraid to move in the building unless Michael was with me.

"I'm sorry, Michael. I can't seem to get past it. Seems like in three years, nothing's changed. I hear the word, I remember. I try not to let it bother me but..."

Then I think you should tell him. Your friend out in the hall. He has a right to know it isn't because of me you can't stand the word. I'll try to remember, but that's what I called you, ba...Charli and it's a damned hard habit to break.

He was right. When the time seemed right I would tell Ethan. But for now it would remain my secret.

"Michael, why are you here?"

I don't know. I was just told to protect you as best I can. And if your guy out in the hall feels about you like I think he does, I'll have help.

"Michael! How can you say that? You're my husband. I love you, not Ethan. He's my boss, for God's sake. He isn't going to be hanging around waiting to save me from whatever it is you think is going to happen."

Calm down. I was your husband. I'm not anymore. I'm dead. You can't ever have me back. You'll have to make do with your memories after I leave. I'm only around until you don't need me anymore. Then I'm outta here.

"Michael —"

Charli, listen. He cut me off. My very own spirit and he was rude. You have to move on with your life. You're too young not to have another chance at happiness. You're only twenty-six. You...

"Get it right, Michael. I'm twenty-nine. Nearly thirty."

Sorry, I forgot. You were twenty-six when I died. You'll always be twenty-six to me. I don't age. Nobody I knew when I was alive ages in my mind either. So you're twenty-nine. You've still got a life ahead of you. Find a man. Settle down and have those kids we always planned on having.

"Michael, I'm sorry. This is too much for me all at once. Give me some time with this. Please?" I was shaken. How could my husband be saying this?

Sure ba...Charli. I know it's hard to understand. But you will. In time you'll understand all of it. I'll leave now, so you can go have supper. That's one of the things I miss, you know? Food. I always loved my food. And now I don't need to eat.

"Michael, please," I giggled. "I do have to eat. And I haven't had anything since breakfast so I'm hungry. Where will you be later tonight?"

Don't worry about where I am. If you need me, or I feel like visiting, I'll be there.

He was gone. The light grew in intensity for a mere second then it faded. When it went out, he was gone. There'd been something special in the air when he'd been with me, a kind of electricity or a vibration, something I could feel. Now it too was gone.

I lay for a few minutes, trying to collect my scattered thoughts. It only took Michael's spirit a moment to totally upset my world. Now, no matter what I had once believed, I had a new outlook on life after death.

There really was a hereafter.

A soft rap on the door caught me by surprise. When it opened a crack I could see Ethan's face.

"You ready for my help, Charli? They're waiting supper for us."

"Yes, of course. Come in, please. Can you hand me the robe your mother left on the chair for me? It's all I have to wear tonight. My only clean outfit got somewhat dusty when I fell this morning."

I was babbling and we both knew it. He brought the robe to me and held it up for my arm. With the first arm into its sleeve he passed it behind me and aimed it for the other arm. Then, before I could pull away, he leaned forward and planted a gentle, loving kiss on my mouth. He backed away immediately. Smart man. He probably knew after my conversation with Michael's spirit I didn't need him confusing things even more.

"Come on, love, swing your arm around my neck." I did as I was told and he picked me effortlessly off the side of the bed.

"You know, one of these times you are going to wear out and drop me." I was smiling when I said it and I felt his body shake with silent laughter.

"Never, love. Never. You're much too precious to drop." As he said the words the curtains at the window began to move, gently, and the breeze coming our way was warm. It wrapped around both of us. I knew what Michael was up to.

"Quit, Michael. It isn't going to work."

There were no answering words, just the book on the table being thrown up then laid back on the tabletop by an unseen hand. I laughed. And I heard him laugh but at a great distance. He'd left us again.

"Did you get everything sorted out with Michael?" Ethan's question brought me back to the present with a bang.

"I don't know. He won't tell me why he's here. Says he was directed to return and protect me. He doesn't seem to know from what. Or who. He said it might even be you." He looked at me abruptly and I knew my words had hurt him. "It's all right, Ethan. He agrees with me, it isn't you causing me grief. You've had three years and done nothing so it seems unlikely you'd up and go after me now."

I heard him mutter under his breath. I thought he said "that's what you think", but I knew I couldn't be right.

"So what's he planning to do? Hang around indefinitely until something happens?" I could tell he wasn't pleased with the suggestion.

"I have no idea. I don't know where he goes when he disappears, although I don't think he leaves your mother's house. But I can't prove it and he won't tell me."

I wasn't about to tell him the other things Michael said. I was having a hard time accepting he'd want me to find another man. I'd been his wife. We'd loved each other, or so I'd thought. How could he think I would ever replace him? I would never stop loving him.

We reached the bottom of the stairs and I realized I still hadn't seen what the hall looked like. The foyer where the stairs began and ended was a revelation. I'd been

carried through here so many times I should have seen it, but in the state I'd been in each time nothing had registered. I was looking at a truly Victorian entranceway. There were light fixtures reminiscent of gaslights. The coat trees appeared to be solid oak with brass hooks. The walls were painted a shade I thought of as taupe and the trim everywhere was white. The floor was a soft carpet in a deeper shade than the walls. I didn't know enough about good carpet to make a guess. The only name I could think of was Berber.

Against the wall forming one side of the stairway was a chair made of oak, one I thought I'd seen before. When I remembered, I laughed. Right out of "My Fair Lady", it was the oak chair with the wide arms King Henry sat upon. I had Michael to thank for the memory. We'd watched the movie on TV one night and he'd taped it for me. I watched it whenever the mood hit. It was the only video movie I had.

"Ethan, this is beautiful. Is the whole house like this?"

"Yes, although each room is a different color. And believe me, while they might look like antiques, everything here is a replica and works perfectly well."

"I don't care. It looks authentic. It's wonderful!"

He carried me into what I assumed was the formal dining room. Here the walls were a deep rose color. Again, the trim was white and the big mahogany table in the middle of the room filled it nicely. Places for five were set at one end. Obviously we didn't need the whole table. We'd have had to yell to be heard if we had been spaced out along its length.

For whatever reason, the china on the table appeared to be everyday dishes. It wasn't the fine bone china I'm sure was hidden away in one of the cupboards. It looked like the ironstone I had on my own shelves. As if understanding what was in my mind, Maddie piped up, looking through the open doorway from what I guessed was the kitchen.

"Sit down dear. Don't worry. We're using the everyday dishes. We only get out the good stuff when we have company."

So what did that make me? Chopped liver?

I suddenly realized Maddie and Vivien were treating me as one of the family. I felt the blood rush to my face. My fair complexion was going to be the death of me.

"It's all right, Charli. Get used to it. They've decided they like you. You are no longer a guest, you're one of us." Ethan spoke quietly so only I would hear him. Just as he finished I heard steps behind us and, looking over his shoulder, saw Doctor Driver enter the room. He beamed at me.

"I'm glad to see you awake, Charli. Feeling better?"

"Yes, thank you. Whatever you gave me worked like a charm. I slept, didn't dream and when I woke up I actually felt rested."

"That's what it's supposed to do. I'll leave you a small quantity of the tablet form in case you need it again. I'll put them on the table in your room later."

Maddie and Vivien chose that moment to come back with dishes heaping with food. The aromas made my mouth water. I thought there might be enough there to feed ten people but by the time we'd all eaten our fill of the roast beef, Yorkshire pudding and the potatoes and vegetables, there was very little left. Maddie left once and came back with coffee in tall mugs. Good coffee. Something I hadn't had much of in a long, long time.

Listening to the conversation going on around me while I ate, I realized I had nothing very much in common with these people. I didn't know who they were talking about. I didn't know anything about their history. They'd been in this city for years and I knew none of the places they mentioned. It made me realize how truly misplaced I was in this household.

Maddie must have realized what was happening because she suddenly sat up straighter.

"You know, folks, we're boring poor Charli to tears, here. She probably doesn't know anything about the people we've been discussing. It's pretty bad manners on our part, don't you think?"

She looked around the table and I saw embarrassment on Vivien's and Doctor Driver's faces. Ethan just looked at me.

"How's your ghost, Charli?" I nearly choked on the mouthful of potatoes I'd just taken. As a way to change the topic of conversation, he'd picked a good one.

"Uh, he's fine, I guess." As though to prove he was more than fine, my salad fork drifted into the middle of the table. Not blatantly, just a gentle slide. Maddie and Ethan saw it. I don't know about the other two.

"So Maddie's got you believing in her ghosts, has she?" asked Doctor Driver.

Had nobody enlightened this man about what was happening?

Of course they had. I remembered now. He told me I could talk to him about it anytime. But I didn't think this was the time or the place.

"It's not that at all." I looked at Ethan for help but it wasn't forthcoming. It was as if he wanted the subject discussed.

"No, dear, I know it isn't." Doctor Driver smiled at me and I relaxed a little. "And don't worry. I know what's happening. I've talked to too many people who have had near-death experiences not to know there is something of an afterlife. And if you're lucky enough to have someone in the hereafter caring for and watching over you, I'm happy for you. And if what I understood about your ghost is true, the fact it's your husband's spirit makes it even better. You'll be one of the few who'll get an extra chance to talk to someone who has left you suddenly. You can ask questions. If he answers them you'll know more than any scientist about what happens in the afterlife."

I sat there like a lump, gazing at this man, totally unable to comprehend that here was a medical doctor who believed in spirits and ghosts and beings from a different world.

"It's all right, Charli, he's been around me too long. He knows he can say what he wants and will be accepted." Maddie's words made me feel better but I would have liked to have Michael there to tell me I could ask those questions.

You can, Charli. Just not here, not now. Later. When we're alone.

My coffee cup turned a full circle on the table in front of me. It was obvious the others had all seen it move.

"I'm sorry," I snickered, "it appears Michael has a warped sense of humor." Everybody laughed, breaking the tension.

After dinner Ethan carried me into the sitting room across the hall and we enjoyed another cup of coffee. When I started to yawn it was Doctor Driver who called an end to the evening.

"Come on, child, you're fading on us. It's time you went up to bed. I'll come and give you those pills I told you about. You only take them if you need them." As the doctor spoke, Ethan stood and advanced on my chair. He reached down and lifted me again, swinging me around so I could see the others.

"Say goodnight, Charli."

"Good night and thank you," I told Vivien, and Maddie. "Supper was wonderful. I'll see you in the morning."

Their chorus of goodnights again made me feel like I was part of the family. Too bad it would have to end soon. I couldn't let myself get too accustomed to it.

"Oh, Charli," called Vivien, fishing in her sweater pocket for a piece of paper, "there was a phone message for you. Apparently your building super gave her our number. Someone named Ruthie Simpson. Said to tell you she's looking after your plants for you. Your super gave her the key."

Fear made me shiver. "Ethan, didn't you tell Stan not to let anyone into my apartment?"

"I did, but obviously he didn't believe me. As soon as you're safely in bed I'll phone him. Find out what he's up to. And tell him not to broadcast where you're staying. We don't need everyone from your building phoning here."

He carried me back to the bedroom and for the first time I really looked at the décor. It was all heavy mahogany furniture, medium-sized leather chairs were at the table where we'd eaten breakfast this morning and the walls were a deep cherry red, more blue than orange, with the same white trim as abounded in the rest of the house. The room smelled of furniture polish and leather, and from someplace the scent of vanilla. When I gazed around, trying to find the source, I spied a heliotrope plant growing in a large brass pot in the corner. It must have received enough light from the windows during the day because it was thriving.

"You get ready for bed. I'll be back in a minute," Ethan murmured as he deposited me in one of the chairs. He hurried out, anxious, I thought, to contact Stan Medlar.

I dropped the robe and realized I had to make my way to the bathroom. I waited a few minutes, thinking Ethan might come back in time to help, then decided I'd have to get there myself, under my own power. I'd promised Doctor Driver I'd keep my feet off the floor. So how would I get there?

When the answer struck, I dropped to my knees and started crawling. Gleeful laughter came from the direction of the table. Hovering over one of the chairs. as though he belonged, was my spirit.

"If you think this is funny, then why don't you try carrying me, Michael? How else am I supposed to get there?" By this time he'd moved from the chair to the doorway. We'd always shared the bathroom when we were getting ready to go to bed so it didn't seem strange to have him with me now. As I washed my face I heard the bedroom door.

Now what did I do? I was in the bathroom in my slip, my other lingerie removed, in the company of my spirit. Michael looked at Ethan and I knew he was up to something. He had the look he used to get when he was thinking about a way to have a private joke on someone. I might have warned him if I'd seen it coming. But by the time the towel was flying through the air and wrapping around Ethan's face, it was too late. I'd already started to laugh. From beneath the towel I heard Ethan's muffled voice.

"Tell him to can it, Charli. I don't appreciate knowing he's in there with you, laughing at me. This is my home, after all."

My hand flew to my mouth as he yanked the towel off his head. His eyes gave him away. He wasn't really annoyed.

"Tell Ethan you're sorry, Michael. Do something so he'll know you mean it."

The towel was pulled from Ethan's hands, neatly folded and placed on the counter beside the sink. I thought it would do. So, obviously, did Ethan.

"Thanks, man." He reached out and patted the towel. It was as close to a handshake as these two could come.

Tell him he's okay, Charli. I like him.

"He says 'you're okay', Ethan. He likes you."

"Good. Now if you'll allow me, we'll get you back to bed." He came into the bathroom, brushing against, but obviously not feeling, Michael's presence. I'd tried to feel Michael when he was sitting on the bed with me, but aside from the electricity in the air around him and the warmth on my skin, there was nothing of substance.

"What did you find out from Stan Medlar?"

Michael's presence sat up and took notice. *What's he talking about, Charli? What about Stan Medlar?*

"It's all right, Michael. He just called Stan to tell him not to give out the number here. And to tell him nobody is to go into our...my...apartment. He must have given Ruthie the key because she phoned here about my plants."

Before I finished speaking Michael was gone. Nothing moved. No light pattern, no voice. I looked behind me to make sure.

"What's the matter, Charli?" Ethan's voice sounded concerned.

"I don't know. When I told Michael about Ruthie, he got...I don't know...agitated? Then he disappeared. He's gone." It astounded me he'd leave so abruptly. He seemed to think he was here to protect me, but he'd left in a hurry when Ethan mentioned the apartment and Ruthie Simpson.

Ruthie was one of my neighbors on the fourth floor. She was a little wizened lady of about eighty with bright red hair, dyed monthly, who only ever wore caftans or other flowing dresses. She reminded me of a faded vaudeville star. What she had been in her day was a damn fine opera singer, but when her voice went she lost her following and her career. She was at about the same stage of poor I was.

"What about Ruthie? What did Stan say?"

"Not much. Says he hasn't seen her all day. He'll get the key back from her tomorrow."

He sat me gently on the side of the bed and reached behind me to plump up my pillow. The blankets had already been folded back so all I had to do was swing my feet to the bed and pull the blankets over my legs.

"There you go, love. Do you want one of Roland's sleeping pills with these?" "These" were the antibiotics he was shaking out of the bottle. The glass of water on the table hadn't been there before so he'd obviously brought it with him.

"No. I'm tired. I should be able to fall asleep easily tonight." I reached out and lay my hand on his arm, trying to get his undivided attention. "Thank you, Ethan. For everything. I'm sorry I made today such a chore for everyone. I promise I'll behave myself tomorrow. When will you be back?"

"Back where?"

"Here. You're going home tonight, aren't you?"

"No, my love, I'm not. Mother made up the bed in the next room for me. I'll be on the other side of this wall. If you need anything during the night, call out. I'll hear you."

"But why? You have your own place. Why are you staying here?"

"Because if Michael is here to protect you from something, then I'm sticking wherever you are, too. I can't help him if I'm in a condo on the other side of the lake. And if anything was to happen, what could he do for you? You need me to back him up."

Much as I didn't want to agree, he was right. Michael wasn't even here right now so how could he help me? And if the best he could do was throw things and cause breezes where there shouldn't have been breezes, I really did need Ethan.

The thought caused my stomach to clench.

I did need Ethan. And I thought maybe I needed him for more than just protection.

He must have decided I'd had enough for one day because he suddenly leaned forward, kissed me on the forehead, stood and backed away from the bed.

"Remember. If you need me, just bang on the wall or yell."

"Goodnight, Ethan." I turned on my side, snuggled under the blanket and closed my eyes. I don't know how long he stood there, I fell asleep almost immediately.

Sometime in the middle of the night I woke with a start, the reality of what Michael told me earlier in the day as clear as if someone had painted the proverbial picture.

Michael was a ghost. When his job of protecting me was done, he'd be gone. I would miss him. The same as I'd missed him before he reappeared. Only now I would have had the chance to talk to him once more. And he was telling me to get on with my life. To go out with other men. To find a new life without him. He would always be in my memories and whomever I met would have to share my love.

Some of my love would stay with Michael forever. But the new person in my life would share a different kind of love. A love based on our being together.

I relaxed against my pillow and said a small thank you to whatever being was responsible for my chance to talk to Michael one last time. And while I had the chance, I would talk. I would ask him all the questions I never got to ask before he died. I'd tell him what my dreams had been for us when he was still alive. I would...

I tried to sit up. The bright light that was Michael was forming at the side of the bed. The energy coming from it was overpowering and I got the feeling that whatever upset him enough to cause him to glow with this intensity was a matter of some urgency.

Finally pushing myself onto my elbows, I looked at him.

"What's the matter, Michael? Is something wrong?"

Where's your other guy? Ethan. I need him.

"He's in his own room, Michael. What, did you think we were sleeping together and trying to hide it from you?" When he tried to interrupt I just steamrolled ahead. "How could you –"

Charli, shut up! I need him. Now. Ruthie is in trouble and I can't do anything about it but he can.

I was pounding on the wall and calling Ethan's name before Michael even finished speaking.

I heard Ethan's door slam and then he was in the room, moving with a speed that showed how concerned he was for me.

"What? What's the matter?"

"It's Michael. He needs your help. Something is wrong with Ruthie."

"Is he here? Can he make me hear him?" For such a levelheaded businessman, Ethan was proving looks could be deceiving. He never questioned why a ghost would need his help. He just tried to cooperate.

Tell him no, I can't make him hear me. It would only happen if it was a matter of life and death and involved you or a couple of other reasons I can't explain. You're the only one I could do it for, for now. Just tell him Ruthie Simpson has been hurt. She's lying in a pool of blood on the floor of our – your apartment. It looks like she's been there for a while.

I relayed the message to Ethan and he was heading for the door before I was finished talking. I tried to get out of bed to follow him. I wanted to be there when he found Ruthie or he might scare her. I was yelling for him to wait when Maddie entered the room.

"What's the matter? Are you all right?"

"Maddie, talk to Michael. He's here, there's a problem. I've got to go with Ethan but he just went back to his room without me. Maybe you'd better go to him first and tell him he has to take me with him. He doesn't know Ruthie. I do."

While I'd been talking I had been pulling on the clothes I'd worn earlier. To get them to me, Michael was throwing them at me. I watched Maddie leave and dressed as fast as I could. When Ethan came back I had on the skirt and blouse I'd worn to work two days ago. He didn't waste time, just picked me up and headed to the door. Maddie was talking to Michael.

Charli, tell him I'll be there when you get there.

He was gone yet I didn't see him leave. Maddie was the last thing I saw before we hit the top of the stairs and she was standing there looking terrified. I don't know what Michael said to her but it certainly got his point across.

Vivien met us at the bottom of the stairs, holding our coats out to me. I took them so Ethan didn't have to stop.

When we got to the car, he left me at my door to put myself in and was around and in with the car started by the time I got my door closed. Something about this should have frightened me but it didn't.

All I could think about was Ruthie.

The car shot down the driveway. Someone in the house must have pushed the button for the gate because it was open when we got there. Ethan didn't even slow down. He was busy calling someone on his cell phone as he drove through the nearly deserted streets. I couldn't hear him well but it sounded like he was calling an ambulance. How he would explain this I didn't want to think.

We beat the ambulance there by about two minutes. He literally ran up the stairs with me, slowing by the time we got to the third floor. When we reached the landing for my floor he stopped, breathing hard. He put me down, held his finger to his lips to tell me not to talk and crept toward my door. He turned the handle and it opened. It hadn't been locked. He disappeared inside and for a minute I heard nothing. When he reappeared he walked up to me and lifted me.

"Michael was right. She's badly hurt, Charli. Don't be shocked by the amount of blood you see. It's a head wound and they bleed profusely. It was done some time ago. The blood on the floor around her is drying and sticky. You just sit there and let me look after this."

He went back to the door and yelled down to the paramedics. I could hear them cursing the elevator as they ran up the steps. Ruthie was not very heavy, which was in their favor, but they would have to carry her down four flights of steps. Behind them,

puffing as he came, was Stan Medlar. When he saw Ethan and me, he slowed. He knew he was in trouble—he just didn't know how much.

I left him to Ethan and went back to watching the EMTs work on Ruthie. They had her on the stretcher in no time, and while one of them gathered up everything they'd been using on her, the other two started for the door. It was obvious the third man was staying with us while they took Ruthie to the hospital.

Ethan had also called the police and they must have passed the stretcher on its way down. Two young, uniformed officers walked into the scene, trying to look as if this was old hat to them. But one look at their faces told me neither of them had seen so much blood before. In fact, one of them was looking around as though he'd be sick.

I pointed. "Down the hall."

I knew how he felt. If Ethan hadn't warned me, I'd probably have been in the bathroom instead of this chair.

I suddenly felt a warmth at my side and when I looked I could make out Michael's presence.

Just nod, Charli. Is she still alive?

I nodded my head slowly, twice.

Thank God.

It seemed a strange thing for a spirit to say, but I wasn't going to start asking questions with all these people here.

Charli, when they ask how you knew she was in trouble, jump in before Ethan can say anything and tell them you had a premonition. You made him drive you here.

Again I nodded. Then we waited. When they asked the question Ethan looked at me, and as if it was the most natural thing in the world I told them what Michael had told me to say. I really didn't think they'd believe me, but they took me at my word. Nobody thought it strange I would have a premonition in the middle of the night when I should have been asleep. Obviously things weren't as normal in the real world as I thought they were.

"Ma'am, do you know if she has any kin we should notify?" This from the young policeman who'd used my bathroom.

"None I know of. There was a son but she never talks about him. Someone in the building said they thought he was dead."

"Okay. Well, if there are any more questions we'll be in touch." Turning to Ethan, he continued, "Thank you, sir, for the numbers. I'll stay in touch with you. And I'll give the hospital your number as a contact."

"No. Ethan, I want to go to the hospital, be there for Ruthie when she wakes up."

"Ma'am, please. You've got to be warned." The EMT who'd remained with us turned my way. "She doesn't have much chance. She probably won't make it."

The tears threatened to overflow. I looked down and watched the fabric on my chair's arm. A pattern was being repeated, over and over, a slight dent was all I could

see—as if a finger was tracing lines over and over. Michael must have been touching it. Whenever he'd been stressed by anything, he'd drawn squares on the closest available surface. I watched the movement and realized how very stressed this spirit was. He was tracing squares on my chair, one after another. I put my hand up to cover the spot his finger touched and felt the chill coming from him. There was no light or glow to indicate he was there. Just the moving pattern.

He was a spirit. Did he know? Until the others left, I couldn't ask.

As soon as the door closed I spun around.

"Michael? What's happening? Do you know if she's going to die?"

No, Charli. I don't have a clue. I'm just sick to think she might die because of this place. Too many bad things have happened here. You've got to get out of here. Find a new place.

"Not you too. Ethan's been after me since last night to move out. He doesn't like it here either. But I can't go Michael. I just can't."

"Tell him why, love." Ethan was standing beside me, watching the pressure pattern Michael was making on the chair. The moving fabric at least told him where Michael was.

Yeah, Charli, tell me why. This is no longer a safe place. You know. You, of all people, should know.

"I, of all people, do know, dammit. But I can't move out of here. I have no place else to go. There's nothing out there I can afford. I'm still paying off the loans you had and I've still got a year to pay on the car."

Why, Charli? There was enough insurance to cover those things. What did you do with the money?

"What do you mean, enough? There was a paltry fifty thousand dollar policy. It wouldn't have covered your loans even if I'd got the money. But I didn't. So I'm paying it off, a bit every month. Another year and I should have everything paid off. But for now I don't have a choice."

There was complete silence. It didn't look as if the spiritual manifestation of my husband believed what I'd just said.

Ethan was looking at me as if he would like to leave the room and let us have this out for ourselves. But I guess he found it hard to walk away when the only person he could see was me. "Okay. Hold it. Sorry I brought it up. I don't think fighting over this now is going to help either of you. Everything happened years ago. You can't change it. Especially you, Michael."

Charli, tell him. I left you provided for. At least, according to the accountant. He changed the insurance to you. He made sure there was life insurance on the loans. The week before we got married I gave him all the instructions.

I told Ethan what he'd said. I sat there, still, not knowing what to say. It was Ethan who came up with the plan.

"Look, Michael. I know you can hear me. So, if I ask questions, will you answer them? By moving something. One move for yes, two for no."

Without hesitation my hair moved. I'd pulled it back in one big fat braid, Michael used it to tap my shoulder. Once. He could now talk, albeit in one and two-tap words to Ethan.

I smiled. My spirit and my...

What did I call Ethan? He was my boss, my friend. Maybe he was more than my friend. Or was he?

"Michael, did you have your own lawyer?"

I felt the braid tap twice. "No? Then who was Miles Laster?" He'd been our lawyer. I was going to interrupt but Ethan asked another question before I could.

"Did you use someone else's lawyer?" The braid tapped once.

Ethan's voice when it asked the next question sounded strained.

"Was it your mother's lawyer?" There was a slight delay before he tapped again, once.

Now I knew why she'd been so cold to me. She'd known she was getting the money the minute they told us Michael was dead. Did she really need it? I sure wouldn't have said so.

Charli? Is this true? You didn't get the money?

"No, Michael, I didn't get it. It went to your mother."

"How much of it? All of it?"

I didn't understand what he was asking.

"Yes, Michael, all of it. When I sent the policy to the insurance company they phoned me back to tell me I had no rights to the money. I wasn't the beneficiary. Needless to say they left me high and dry."

Charli, I can't prove it to you, but believe me, there should have been more and it should all have been yours. There was a second policy for a quarter million dollars. My father bought it for me before he died. The policy was –

I knew the minute he figured it out. The glow he was emanating became bright red then faded to blue-white. Hot to cold. Even the air around him felt cold. When I breathed out, I saw a little cloud of mist.

"The policy was with your mother's lawyer, wasn't it? Did he help her do this Michael?" I shook my head. What on earth was I asking? "Sorry, kind of a stupid question. All I can tell you is I received nothing when you died, Michael. Not one penny. If there was three hundred thousand dollars, it went to someone else."

I wasn't going to name his mother. He could figure it out.

Ethan was shaking his head, almost afraid, I think, of what he'd started. He'd asked the question and now here we sat, knowing my mother-in-law had taken all the money meant for me.

Charli, you've got to believe me. I thought I set it up so if anything happened to me, you'd be taken care of. I am so sorry, babe. I can't believe she did this to you. She knew what I wanted. I told her what I was doing.

The area around my chair was becoming colder by the minute.

That bitch! The air where Michael hovered turned frigid. I could see my breath when I tried to speak. Ethan beat me to it.

"Michael, man, I'm sorry. I think I know what's happened even though I can't hear you. Just give me one sign you want me to go after her. I'll have my lawyer on her lawyer's doorstep when his office opens."

There was an immediate single bounce of my braid. A few seconds later there were two more bounces. Michael was obviously having trouble. This was his mother we were talking about, after all. I decided to jump in.

"Nobody is going after anybody. I've made it this far. I'll make it all the way. I've only got one more year to pay on both the car and the loans. Then I'm free."

The tone of my voice told them I meant business. Nobody argued with me.

When the phone in Ethan's pocket rang we all jumped. Even Michael. So much for the spirit who knew everything. My spirit was a dead loss. No pun intended.

"Yes?" Ethan was mouthing the word "hospital" while he listened. "Yes, thank you. You'll keep us posted?"

I didn't know what they were saying but he was nodding his head. When he disconnected he turned to us, the grave look on his face telling the story without words.

"She's bad. They don't think she's going to make it through the night. They said if you wanted to see her, you should come now."

I was trying to stand before he finished speaking. He never said a word as he picked me up and started toward the door. What was there to say? Neither of us spoke to Michael, either. We both just assumed he knew what we were going to do.

This apartment had probably killed my friend. This apartment or someone in the building.

Once we said our goodbyes to Ruthie, I'd be back to find out who.

And why.

Chapter Eight

Ruthie made it through the night.

While I sat by her bed in ICU I couldn't help but realize how much she'd aged in the last three years. Time was not being kind to her. And there was the added insult of her hair. She'd been proud of her orange-red mass of curls, only now they were gone. Her head had been shaved bald so the surgeons could do the surgery necessary to piece her skull back together.

What they couldn't tell us was whether there'd be brain damage when she regained consciousness. If she regained consciousness.

Ethan took me to the hospital every morning and we sat, waiting for something to happen. Every afternoon he took me back to his mother's house. And every evening I sat in the big chair in my bedroom and made plans.

Michael hung out with Ruthie at night when he knew I was safe with Ethan. During the day he was usually with us.

My plans were taking shape from a seed Michael planted while we were sitting in Ruthie's room. Some idle remark only I heard, but it got me thinking. And the more I thought about it, the more I liked the idea.

It had been a silent few days around the house. We tiptoed around, not saying much. When Michael was with us, his glow was dimmer and he seldom spoke.

On the third day after Ruthie's assault I asked Ethan to come into my room when we got back from the hospital.

"How are you holding up, love?" He came to me, bent over and placed a gentle kiss on my lips. He had taken to kissing me whenever he joined me, no matter where we were. He called me love, sweetheart, honey. When he touched me, his hand lingered. But never once did he make any move to take it any further.

Now, after accepting the kiss I gave in return, he pulled his chair around beside me, craning his neck to look at the papers I had spread out in front of me.

"Ethan, you want to help me get an apartment and I don't want to leave the one I have. You know why. And you know how the situation came about. But you know, I think there is a way you can help."

He leaned toward me, feathered my ear with his lips and smiled at me when he sat back. "I knew you'd come around."

If he didn't feel the chill then, it was only because he was an uncaring insensitive clod. And I knew he was none of those things. So he must be sitting there, waiting for me to lower the boom.

But I wasn't planning to do that. Instead, I'd enlist his help. If he really wanted to help me like he said he did, he'd say yes to my plan.

"I'm not moving out of the apartment. At least not yet. But I do have a plan." I waited for a moment, trying to make the scene more dramatic, but I wasn't doing too well. Too excited about my idea and unwilling to wait long to share it.

"I want to fix up the building. Make it a nice place to live. Without the problems it has now. Fix the elevator, the locks, repair the bad plumbing and replace the light bulbs missing in the halls. I want to make sure the building is secure. I want it safe, where people can't just walk in off the street and destroy what we used to be proud to call our home. But I can't do it by myself. I don't know where to start, for one thing, and I don't know how to find out who is behind the building. Who owns Harmon Court Apartments? Who works for the management company? And who is letting Stan Medlar get away with not doing the job he's supposed to do?"

I saw again the dark look I'd seen when he first took me home less than a week ago. It seemed longer because so many things had happened since then. In reality it had only been five days.

"What?" A flash of intuition told me he knew something. About my building. About the owners. Something. "What do you know about this?"

"I can answer most of your questions, Charli. I'll fill in as many blanks as I can, then I'll find you someone else who can fill in any I miss."

"Harmon is a combination of two names, Simon and Harwood."

I didn't think he could surprise me, but I wasn't prepared for what I'd heard. "Harwood? As in Ethan Harwood? Vivian Harwood? *That* Harwood?"

"Let me explain."

"By all means, please do."

"Simon is the last name of the man who was our family lawyer. Harwood was my father. In the last few days I've been doing some digging, asking my mother innocuous questions to fill in a few more blanks for myself. My father, when he was alive, along with Cuthbert Simon, set up a management company to be responsible for buying older apartment blocks, looking after them and keeping them money-making businesses." He stood and started pacing. I didn't blame him. This couldn't be an easy admission. "When my father died eight years ago we told Cuthbert to sell off our half of the business. My mother didn't want to be involved in the property management business. She had enough money to keep her in the manner she knew for the rest of her life and still leave me well-off whenever she passed on. When Cuthbert paid her for her share of the business he told her he'd sold all the buildings and part of the sale agreement had been the renaming of every building. He told us Harmony, the management company, was closed down. It was the last we heard of it. Then you told me the name of your apartment block. Obviously something wasn't right."

"Ethan, I pay my rent to Harmony."

"I know, love. I've been doing some phoning around and checking on this myself. And I'm disgusted with what I found."

He came back to me, sat in the chair facing mine and took my hands in his.

"Charli, he never sold one of the buildings." He sighed and shook his head. "He gave them to his son to look after and the kid has gone on a tear. And I use the word kid very loosely. He's about my age. He replaced every one of the superintendents from when we were involved and gave the new ones guidelines setting the level of maintenance to be done. He actually pays bonuses to the building supers who keep the maintenance costs below a certain level. He's the walking definition of a slumlord."

I slumped in the chair, my eyes closed.

I felt Michael's presence before he spoke to me. I looked up and cried out. Standing beside him was the just barely discernible image of Ruthie Simpson. I stood, meaning to go to them, then remembered they weren't touchable. Michael, at any rate, was a spirit.

"Oh, my God, is Ruthie..."

It's all right, Charli, she isn't staying. She's going back. It isn't her time to join us yet. She's going to be all right.

I sagged against Ethan, who'd moved to stand beside me. Michael's words rendered me nearly incoherent.

Ruthie must have been in trouble at the hospital if I could see her here. I turned to Ethan. "Please, call the hospital. See what's happened to Ruthie. Please."

He gently pushed me down in the big chair and went to the phone. He knew the number by heart and was soon talking to the nurse's station. When he came back he was smiling.

"She's awake, Charli. She just regained consciousness. She told the nurses God sent her back. And she told them the nice young man who'd accompanied her said to tell you hello and give you a kiss next time she sees you." He took my hands and pulled me up out of the chair once more. As he folded me against his chest, I was smiling. Once more Michael had kept his promise. "She's going to be all right, love, she's going to be all right."

Finally, now that she was safe, I broke down and cried. All the tears I hadn't shed were suddenly flowing freely. All over Ethan's shirt. I didn't care. I had to get them out of my system. My emotions needed the release this would give me. Once I finished crying I'd be able to go back to doing the things I had to do to finish my plan.

Charli, don't cry. She'll be fine. Although if anyone has a reason to cry I guess it would be you. Ask Ethan to repeat the first part of what he told you. I only heard the last bit. And then I need to talk to you.

I told Ethan what Michael said and sat there while he retold the sad details. Michael moved the glass of water I'd been using back and forth, his version of stress relief. Then I noticed him drawing squares again. He was angry. He was stressed. I wondered, inconsequentially, what a spirit did to relieve the stressed feeling. Knowing Michael, it

would be a lot of feeling. He'd felt passionately about everything he'd ever been involved with.

Into the midst of the discussion came the bad news. The poltergeist must have come back with Michael because I suddenly saw my water glass fly across the room and hit the wall on the other side, smashing as it hit. I screamed. Ethan moved to block me from something neither of us could see. I saw Michael's glow intensify, turn blue, then white.

Damn it! Who is this creep?

He was up and across the room in a flash, obviously trying to catch up to something only he could see. When he got to the door, he didn't bother to stop. Just stepped through and kept on going. I started to giggle. The giggle grew and I could hear the hysteria mounting. Ethan must have heard it too, because he suddenly grabbed me and gave me a little shake.

"Charli, quit. Don't go there. You'll be fine." He closed his arms around me and consoled me by swaying where he stood and, as a result, rocking me like a baby.

It reminded me of all the young mothers I'd seen in my apartment building. Standing with their babies in the laundry room, they went into what I called mother mode. The babies didn't need to fuss or cry, it seemed an automatic reaction to holding a baby. But our building was no longer home to anyone with small children. No parent felt it safe enough.

"Shh, sweetheart. It's gone, whatever it was."

"I know." I sniffed and hiccupped. "It was Michael walking through the door that started me laughing. I hadn't seen him do it before. He always just appears." As I spoke, Michael suddenly returned. He was just there. I hadn't seen him come back into the room. "How did you do it, Michael? Walk through the door, I mean."

I don't know. It just happens. Whenever I get mad I find I can't just materialize someplace else, I have to walk to get where I'm going. It's a real pain too, because for hours afterward I don't feel up to par.

"I should guess not. Whatever you are must have been totally rearranged when you passed through the wood. All your cell structure or whatever you have. Does it leave any lasting effects?"

Ethan was looking at me as though I had suddenly taken leave of the few senses I had left. "What are you talking about?" I could see he was totally in the dark.

"Michael lost his temper when the poltergeist threw my glass. And when it left, the only way Michael could follow was to walk. Or hover. Whatever you call it when a ghost moves. Anyway, when Michael got to the door, he just walked right on through it."

"He'd have had a hard time opening it, Charli. Think about it. Walking through would be his only choice."

"Not really. Usually he just shows up wherever he wants to be. Just appears."

"Well, however he gets there is his business. Since I can't see him, I have no idea how he gets around. I just wish he'd stop popping in, though. It's kind of hard to concentrate if you're always waiting for him to appear."

I heard things in Ethan's voice I found strange. He sounded jealous. Of a spirit? Of Michael? I had to be wrong. He wasn't a jealous kind of man. "Well, now you know he's here and the other thing is gone, how about we get back to my plan?"

Ethan sat down, Michael hovered above the third chair and I resumed my story.

"Michael said something at the apartment when Ruthie was hurt. About the sorrow he felt because the building had been let go until it wasn't worth fixing and it wasn't safe to inhabit."

Michael concentrated on my words and Ethan looked at his shoes. Yet I was sure Ethan would be able to give me details of everything I said. Michael would only remember what interested him. My pause made Ethan look up.

"Go on, Charli. What's your idea?"

"I want to get the renters together, have a meeting, find out what all of them think. Then I want to form a condo association and buy the building. We'll fix it up, let people buy their apartments if they want to, without having to qualify for mortgages at the bank, and let the ones who don't want to buy keep renting. Then, as each renter leaves, we'll sell those apartments, but only to pre-approved buyers who meet all the conditions the association sets." The people I was thinking of were those making less money per year than the banks required for mortgage approval. If funded by the association, the banks would never have to be involved except as a repository for the rent and purchase money.

"There's only one problem—"

"I know. We have to be able to buy the building. And right now we can't. That's where you come in."

The moment he understood, Ethan's crooked smile suddenly appeared and I knew he was with me.

"You're right. Except, we'll make sure Simon doesn't know it has anything to do with me. I'll buy the building, but it will be in someone else's name. Then as soon as the sale is finalized, I'll transfer it to you. Will that do?"

I leaned forward and kissed him. I couldn't help it, I was so pleased he'd agreed to help I wanted him to know.

"Charli, is Michael...?"

I gazed around and saw the bluish glow of an irate Michael hovering by the door.

"Yes. He's still here." He pulled back then and looked around, as though he might be able to see him, too.

Sorry, Charli. I didn't mean to get annoyed. I just didn't want to see you kissing him. How do you know when I get annoyed? I can't understand that. What do you see when it happens?

I reached for Ethan's hand and watched Michael glow brighter then begin to turn blue.

"You glow, Michael, it's how I see you. You're a source of moving light. And when you're angry or really annoyed your light turns blue. When you get to the highest level of your anger you turn blue-white. And the air around you is warm when you're pleased or happy and cools off when you get mad. When you were angry about your mother the other night the air around you was so cold I could see my breath as condensation when I talked."

Jeez! I didn't know. The marvel in his voice made me smile. I gave Ethan's hand a squeeze so he didn't feel excluded.

"Charli, when Michael passed through the door, what color was he?" The strange quality of Ethan's voice should have warned me.

"White. I took it to be the highest level of his anger. He went from multi-colored to blue to white. Why?" As soon as I asked the question I knew the answer. "You saw him, didn't you?" My voice was a mere whisper.

While I sat and stared at Ethan, I saw Michael's colors moving faster. This was obviously of interest to him as well.

"Maybe." Ethan obviously wasn't ready to admit he'd seen a ghost.

Charli, ask him –

"What did you see, Ethan?"

I waited for his answer. I didn't want to rush him into denying he'd seen something, if indeed he'd seen Michael.

"I'm not sure, but I thought I saw a flash of light. Like a flashbulb on a camera. It reflected on the surface of the door then it disappeared."

I was smiling at Ethan like a crazy fool. He'd seen Michael. He'd seen exactly what I had.

So? Did he see me?

"Yes, Michael, he did, for just a moment, when you passed through the door." I saw Michael's colors swirl and move faster then they idled back to normal. Ethan, on the other hand, was sitting absolutely still. Probably a little shell-shocked. He'd seen a ghost, after all.

Tell him the reason he saw a little bit of me is because he believes. If he didn't believe in an 'other world', 'life after death', whatever you want to call it, he wouldn't have seen anything.

I told Ethan this, with Michael watching. Michael's colors were switching from his normal rainbow shades to redder hues and back. I took it to mean he wasn't too sure he liked having this other mortal being able to see him, then for a moment he'd be happy about it.

Charli, tell him...

"Charli, tell him to stop talking about me like I'm not here, for God's sake! I can hear him just—" Ethan stopped and looked at me. "I can hear him just as well—" Again he stopped. His mind must have been having a battle with his mouth.

Charli, can he hear me? Is that what he's trying to say?

"I think so, Michael. But he hasn't said so, yet."

Michael and I watched Ethan, waiting for him to finish the sentence. When he didn't say anything more, I finally decided to ask.

"Did you, Ethan? Hear him?"

He nodded his head, unable to say the words. The look on his face would have been funny except this was no laughing matter.

"Does this mean I don't have to *translate* for the two of you now?" I was trying to break the mood and take us back to something on the lighter side. I saw Ethan shaking his head, but it wasn't in answer to my question. It was the last effort he made to deny to himself he'd heard Michael's voice.

Once he said the words there would be no going back. He would have admitted, out loud, he had indeed seen and heard someone from the "other world", a spirit, a ghost. It's a hard admission to make. I knew, because I'd had the same problem admitting it was Michael when I first heard him.

"All right. Let's get back to our discussion. If you think you're missing something Michael says, Ethan, tell me. I'll keep you in the conversation."

Maybe it was my matter-of-fact attitude that made the difference, but Ethan suddenly sat up, put his elbows on the table and directed his next question to Michael.

"So, Michael, got any other ideas?"

Michael swirled and hovered, then began floating back and forth across the room, the ghostly equivalent of pacing, I guess.

"Charli, is he—"

"He's not talking. He's pacing. I think he's trying to think it through from all angles before he says anything. Michael nearly wore holes in our carpet when he got going. This is how he does his best thinking. At least, that's what he always said."

Ethan, I think her plan will work. But there is one thing you need to know. He paused, as though trying to choose the right words. *I'm not the only spirit in the building.*

"What?" I stared at him, unable to believe what he'd said.

"Who else is there, Michael?" Now Ethan had admitted he could hear him, he was bypassing me in this conversation. For the moment I didn't mind. I was too busy trying to comprehend what Michael had said.

Charli, do you remember Tiny Brown, the guy who died on the third floor?

"How could I forget?"

We had arrived home from work the first week we lived in the building to find the police going door-to-door asking questions about the man who had lived one floor

below us. His body had been found, dead in some mysterious manner, and they wanted to know if anyone had heard or seen anything. We hadn't been home so we heard nothing more of the problem.

Well, he's there. I saw him the night we went for Ruthie. He was sitting on the steps. You sort of, well, passed through him on your way up. And do you remember the stories everyone tells about Louise Walters, the old lady who used to live in 2B? Well, she's there too. There's others but I'm not sure yet who all of them are.

Others? There were more?

"How many of them are there, Michael? All together."

Four, maybe more.

"And are they all unhappy?" I had to ask. Maybe that's why Ethan felt the building was frightening.

No, but there is a lot of sorrow there. The only reason they all stayed was because they had unfinished business there. And until they find their peace, they can't move on.

"In other words, and pardon my irreverence, there's no ghost like an angry ghost, for making things happen."

Charli! While he might want to chastise me for my words, he must have agreed with me. He and Ethan were both laughing.

"Michael, if those spirits are all still there, who followed you over here? Do you know him?"

No, and that's what got me riled. This creep keeps showing up, outside of the building, and I don't know him. But he seems to be involved with what I'm doing.

"Well, for the time being let's just ignore him." I wanted to get on with my plan. Ethan leaned toward me and laid his hand over mine on the table.

"All right. I'll have a word with Roland. See if he wants to help us. He can buy the building. I'll give him the money. Then he can transfer it to you. Cuthbert and Harmony won't know I'm involved. He can spin them some song and dance about turning the building into some kind of free clinic for the area. And I'll have a couple of people I know in the building inspectors' office start harassing them. Cuthbert will be happy to sell before those guys get finished." He was busy making notes to himself.

"I'll lay out, on paper, the plans we have for the building. Then, even though I know the inspectors will find all sorts of problems, they'll not act on them. If they know what's going to happen to the building they'll let it be until the renovations are done. Then, you'd better be prepared. They'll inspect the building down to the dust bunnies under people's beds, looking for infractions."

"Let them look. We're going to do this thing to code or better. They won't have any call to find fault when we're done."

Ethan, do you know anyone in the construction industry who could give you a decent discount on the stuff you're going to need?

Ethan listened, looking at a supposedly empty chair. "I do. And you can be sure they'll give us a good break. There's one in particular—he lived in a building just like this for a lot of years. When he finally built his business up to where he could have moved out, he did the same thing Charli's trying to do here. Fixed it up, turned it into a real nice set of apartments. In fact, Charli," he turned to look at me and smiled, "I was taking you there the other morning when you rebelled."

"Oh. Well, then. You can take me there tomorrow. I'll be back in my shoes by then. I want to see what they did." I looked at my ghost and smiled. "Michael, close your eyes."

I gave him a second to comply then leaned over and kissed Ethan. I was getting much better at this. It no longer embarrassed me to find I wanted to touch him or be touched by him.

Aaach! Charli, I'm gone. I can't sit here and watch this.

"I told you to close your eyes. I wanted to say thank you to Ethan. And that's how I wanted to do it."

Michael's colors moved, first red, then blue and back to the rainbow hues. Michael was obviously having trouble with the idea I might like someone in the here and now. He was the one who told me I had to get on with my life, but he wasn't finding it easy to be in my presence while I did what he directed.

"He just left, didn't he." It wasn't a question. Ethan said the words like he already knew the answer.

"Did you see him leave?"

"No, but the air around the chair isn't as warm as it was. I can feel the heat of him. I don't think I saw any light." He said it as if he wasn't sure but I decided now was not the time to push him. He'd had enough shocks for one night. This could wait.

"Ethan, am I biting off more than I can chew here? Taking on someone who would be better off left alone?"

I was worried, needed to be told I was doing the right thing. My reasons for doing it were good. I just needed to have my confidence bolstered.

Ethan stood, walked to the window and looked out. I didn't say anything. He needed the silence to think through the situation. When he turned and came back to me he was smiling. He reached down, drew me from the chair and wrapped his arms around me. His kiss was gentle, a tasting rather than a hungry demand. I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him back. There was nothing desperate about it. It was as though we were greeting each other for the first time. Tentative, gentle, an exploration of the other.

His arms tightened around me and he took the kiss deeper. I would have followed him but the stream of profanity suddenly pouring from the air at the foot of my bed sent me reeling. Ethan must have heard it, too, because he turned and placed himself between me and the noise.

"Who the hell is that?" Ethan's demand went unanswered. I didn't know and this demented voice wasn't telling.

"Ethan," I whispered, "I think this is the poltergeist. I'm getting the same vibes, the same feelings I got earlier when Michael chased him out of the room."

With a suddenness that startled both of us, the voice stopped and at the foot of the bed I saw Michael's presence glowing. But this time, I saw something else. I could see the whitest light, brighter than anything I had seen about Michael, and it was moving in the same way.

"Michael, is this a ghost too?" Ethan asked the question and I gawked at him. I actually wondered if he'd thought about what he was saying before he said it.

With those words Ethan confirmed what he'd told us earlier—he could see Michael and, it seemed, the other presence. One good thing—I wouldn't have to keep telling Ethan what was going on. He was obviously in on the big picture with me.

I guess so. I thought he was a poltergeist, but they don't talk. Just throw things. Make noise. Generally just disturb the peace. But this disturbance is definitely of more dimensions.

The light shimmered and grew, then just as quickly it was gone.

"All right, Michael Robertson, where were you just now?"

Take it easy, Charli, I wasn't in here. I was in the kitchen watching Maddie do the dishes when I felt this guy's presence.

I could tell by the look on his face he knew why I'd asked. I reached out, without thinking, to touch him. "I'm sorry, Michael, I didn't mean to accuse you of anything."

Ethan was standing beside me, his arm around my shoulder, then suddenly he moved behind me and encircled me with both arms. As we watched, Michael's essence, whatever it was made him visible to us, moved faster then started turning blue. Just as quickly it returned to the rainbow hues I normally saw.

"He's jealous of me, Charli." Ethan whispered in my ear but I knew Michael heard. I saw him start to laugh.

Yeah, I am. I'm her husband. But I'm also the one who told her, just a few days ago, to get on with her life. He moved toward us then stopped. I'm here to look after her. To protect her. I don't know from what. And if you're there for her, you can help me. I like you, Ethan. I hope you can take care of her when I'm gone.

With that, he vanished.

"Hell. Now I not only have to convince you I want to be part of your life, I have to satisfy your dead husband, too." Ethan's lips started on the soft hollow beneath my ear and wandered up and down my neck, coming back to the one spot he knew I really liked. Fast learner, this man.

I pulled away. "Ethan, let's just slow down here. Please? I want to get through all this business Michael's here about before I allow myself to get seriously involved with anyone. Can we?"

I knew I was frowning at him, but it was a frown of concern, not anger. He knew it, too. He stepped toward me and used his knuckle under my chin to tip my head back.

"Yes, love, we can. I'll wait. I'd wait forever for you to be mine." He leaned closer, touched my lips with his then turned to go. At the door he stopped and turned back. "Get some sleep, sweetheart, tomorrow is going to be a busy day."

For the first time in five nights I slept well, with no interruptions. I would be awake and energized when I started a new day.

Chapter Nine

My return to Harmon Court was not the inconspicuous arrival I would have wished. Instead, we were met by a welcoming committee of disenchanted tenants. They waited in the inside hall, all of them complaining softly to one another about the problems with the building. I don't know how they knew I was coming back here this morning. Unless...

Stan. He must have opened his big mouth. The man's the worst gossip I know.

If they'd known what my plan was I'd probably have had a hero's welcome. Instead, all they wanted to know about was Ruthie and what happened in my apartment. I gathered Stan Medlar had lived up to his name and meddled, telling everyone about my furniture rearrangement. Morbid curiosity I could deal with. It was the other feeling, something I could only describe as dread, emanating from the building itself that made me uneasy.

I turned to Ethan as we opened the inside so-called security door.

"Michael's right. So are you. There is something here. Now I know it's here I can feel it as soon as I put my hand on the door."

"It's as if there's some black cloud hanging over this place. It's strong." Ethan looked around as though he might see something. Nothing was visible to me, so I doubted he'd find anything.

I hobbled into the middle of this crowd, Ethan tight to my back. I was glad I could walk, once again wear my shoes. I'd have lacked a lot of the clout I'd need to do what we had planned if I'd had to be carried in. My feet still hurt, but at least I was mobile.

Ethan was taking no chances with me, I guess. During the last twenty-four hours he'd been my constant shadow. Wherever I went, he was a step behind. Michael showed up occasionally but seemed to think Ethan was doing a good job and didn't need his constant supervision. I had no idea where Michael disappeared to, but each time he left he seemed to be more accepting of my budding relationship with Ethan. Make it flowering relationship—we were long past the budding stage after just six days.

For one whole day after I revealed my plan to Ethan I had done nothing but sit in a chair and listen to a busy, well-connected man make the necessary arrangements to help me get my plan underway. His first call brought Roland Driver in a hurry. It seemed helping me had also become a mission for the good doctor.

After he outlined our idea to Roland, Ethan made the necessary bank transfers, by phone, to put the money in place for Roland to make the purchase of the building. Ethan's friends from the inspectors' office had been busy. By ten o'clock they'd given Simon, Jr.—I never heard anyone refer to him by his other name—a list of infractions

that would have choked a horse. And no time to fix any of them. By noon the lawyers were drawing up the necessary paperwork for the sale. A man with some background in this city could obviously move mountains.

For this slime of a slumlord the easiest way out was to sell the building to the first chump who looked interested.

Enter Roland Driver, playing the role of chump to perfection.

I turned to Ethan for his support. He rubbed his hand up and down my back. Just once. But I knew he was solidly with me. "Thanks. I can handle most of this, I think, but anytime you think I need help? Feel free to jump right in."

His answering smile told me I was covered.

Bobby Turner, who occupied 1D, across the hall from Stan Medlar, spoke first.

"So, Miz Robertson, whazzup? What's happenin' in yo' apartment, huh?" This young black man had a beautiful young wife and a baby on the way. He was maybe twenty-five or six, his wife Serena a couple of years younger. This building was all they could afford. I wanted to make a difference for them. Their baby was due in about five months. Maybe this was the date we would aim for. At least for the major changes.

Bobby was currently unemployed, laid off by an aircraft giant near Seattle that had left a lot of people jobless over the past few years. His wife was a teacher's aide in one of the schools nearby. I knew Bobby was looking for work but there just didn't seem to be a lot of jobs out there for high-priced airplane mechanics.

"Don't know, Bobby, the police haven't found anything helpful. We'll probably never know." I lied my way through the explanation, waiting to see if it got any reaction. Nobody around us seemed surprised to hear my news. But on the stairs behind the small crowd I saw a movement. I tried not to let on where I was looking, but the outline of a large man had become just barely visible. His presence color was tinged blue, a sure sign, at least it had been with Michael, that something he'd heard was making him angry. I gently elbowed Ethan and looked up, hoping he'd follow my gaze.

He'd already seen it.

I tore my eyes away and turned back to the little group standing around me.

"Since we may never find out anything, I'd like to just forget it." Yeah, sure. "Instead, I want to make a suggestion."

"Tell us about Ruthie first. Please." I turned to look at the tiny man who had moved forward as he spoke. His name was Barnaby Barnaby, a very big name for someone as small as he was.

Over the years some of the tenants cruelly called him BB, a nickname I was sure he disliked intensely. I'd decided his mother must have hated him from the day she conceived him to saddle him with the name. He cringed every time he heard it. But it didn't stop him from once a day walking down to the mailboxes to see if he had received anything, saying his shy hellos to whomever he passed. To my knowledge he never got a letter, but at least he got a little exercise. He barely cleared five feet and he

might have weighed one-twenty soaking wet. He told everyone he'd been an insurance adjuster until his body started to give out on him. He had to be nearly sixty. And his health problems, some of which I'm sure were only in his head, made him a virtual shut-in in 2D.

"Yeah, how is she?" This came from Jimmy Rodriguez, the Hispanic singer-wannabe who regularly tortured us with his off-key renditions of somebody's hit songs. For his apartment I'd recommend soundproofing. And since 3A was right below me, I'd make sure the ceiling had a double layer. Jimmy's day job was driving a bus for the city. His shift hours meant he was gone from about four in the morning until noon. Anytime after one we'd hear the music crank up and we'd all issue a collective, dejected sigh.

He was a good-looking man in his early thirties, with Latin charm and an attitude. He told everyone that he knew he'd never make it in the world of entertainment but he'd have fun trying. I wasn't sure why he lived here, or why he didn't appear to have a full-time girlfriend. He could afford a better apartment than this and the girls should have been following him down the streets, panting.

"Ruthie's much better. She woke up yesterday. Told everyone she'd been sent back by God. So be prepared for some stories of what life looks like on the other side. You know Ruthie." I smiled to let them know I liked her, even while I understood her strange convictions. If Ruthie thought something needed to be told, she told it. And if she was telling me about it in her first waking breath, no doubt the rest of them would hear it the day she came home.

There was a ripple of uneasy laughter through the group. I knew why they felt this way. I lived here. I knew Ruthie's accident was not the first. My apartment was not the first, if I kept to the pretense it was a break-in. And I knew the rest of these people were just as scared as I was.

"Before you all go back to your places, I want to say something." Those who'd begun drifting away turned back. "This morning I'm here to announce I now own this building—"

The buzz of surprise stopped me. I waited until they settled down.

"Why the hell would you want it?" Stan Medlar stood there looking confused and a little frightened. I think he saw his job disappearing down the drain. His question quieted the rest.

"I wanted it because I plan to turn this building back into the kind of building it used to be. Where it was safe at night. Where the light bulbs all worked. Where the security locks kept us secure. In other words, I want to turn this building back into a place we can be proud of and where we'll be happy to live." There were mutterings from the crowd. Most of them probably thought I'd taken leave of my senses. So maybe I'd better hurry and introduce them to Ethan before they started leaving.

"This," I dragged Ethan up beside me, "is Ethan Harwood, the man I work for. He's going to help us get started. He arranged yesterday for me to buy this building. And he

is the one who had the inspectors out here. We are going to gut this building, one floor at a time, and rebuild. Make it safe. Make it look nice. Make it insurable. Make it ours."

They stood looking at me in total disbelief. I could understand. If someone else had told me these things I'd be wondering how many bricks short of a full load this person was working with. Because the way it was right now, only a fool would want this place.

I was no fool.

I could see the problems but I could also see the outcome.

"And when you're finished fixing this place up, who's going to live here? We'll all have moved on to someplace we can afford. You'll have to start all over again finding new tenants."

"No, Bobby. That's the whole point. None of you will have to move. None of you will have to pay more. None of you will have to worry. The plan is to sell your apartments to you..." I waited while the murmurs and mutterings dropped back to a manageable level. "The plan is to sell your apartments to you at prices you can afford, probably the same thing you pay for rent now. Or you can continue to rent them. No one will have to qualify to buy. It will all be done through an owners' association."

I waited while the news sank in, keeping an eye cocked to the glow on the stairs. One minute it was a normal rainbow hue, the next it was a warmer red. I gathered at least one spirit liked my plan.

How many more of these spirits were there and which ones would put up a fight? That was the next hurdle.

"So, you're going to be our landlord. Coming up in the world pretty quick, don't you think?" I looked at the woman speaking and realized Stan Medlar's wife had joined us.

"Eunice, I'm not coming up in the world, I'm just taking back what is rightfully mine. All I want is the right to live safely, in peace, not have to worry about someone breaking in or the building coming down around my ears." I turned to Ethan and mouthed "now"? At his nod, I turned back.

"The first thing we are going to do is settle the matter of who is looking after this building. Stan." I looked at him, hiding the dislike I felt for someone who could have done what he'd done to us. "The first things you're going to do are fix the elevator, replace all the light bulbs and fix locks on both of those doors. Today." I was pointing at the front door. As I turned back I caught sight of Michael, sitting on the stairs next to the other spirit. He must know who it was. He didn't look unhappy about the presence so I'd take my cue from him.

"Michael's here," I whispered to Ethan.

"I know. I saw him arrive." His nonchalance surprised me. We were standing in this public place discussing the spirit of my dead husband. "Who's the guy with him?"

Now *that* shocked me. "I don't know."

We'd been whispering and not paying attention and I suddenly realized the rest of the tenants were standing there waiting for me to say something.

"All right. I'm going to talk to everyone in the building then we'll lay out some ground rules. But before any of you leave now, I want one thing. Sometime today, sit down, write out everything that's wrong with your apartments. Anything needs fixing. Rank those things. Most important at the top of the list. We'll do some fixing up of anything major or dangerous then we're going to all sit down and figure out how we're going to make this work."

Looking around to see how this was going over, I saw a lot of disbelief. But I saw one tenant about to try us on for size and see if we meant what we said.

Joseph Linden was a retired schoolteacher whose wife had disappeared more than ten years earlier, taking with her all of their savings and their bonds. By the time he realized what was happening, she'd cashed everything and disappeared. Now he did odd jobs around the area and worked four hours a day at the gas station around the corner. He barely made enough to pay his rent, let alone buy groceries.

When I'd first heard his story I found it hard to believe. How could she have done it without him being suspicious? Then I looked back on the few months I lived with Michael and realized I'd have trusted him to do just about anything he wanted to do.

Yet I'd believed the worst of him after his death, when I found out his mother had taken all the money. I'd just assumed he'd neglected his duties to me.

"Mrs. Robertson—" I interrupted him before he even got rolling.

"Joseph," I raised my head and my voice, "and this goes for the rest of you—I'm Charli. Not Mrs. Robertson. In fact, anyone who insists on calling me that, I'll ignore." I was smiling at them, and realized, from the smiles aimed at me, those words had probably done more for my cause than anything else I could have said.

"Okay, Charli. I have a complaint. Can you do something about the disgusting smell coming out of the apartment next to me? Whoever lives there must be keeping an animal or something. The smell is really foul. And with the air-conditioning not working, these hot days are making it worse."

I looked at Ethan and he nodded. He was up the stairs and gone before anyone else realized he'd moved. I had labeled a floor plan for him so he knew where everyone lived.

"Done, Joseph. As for the air-conditioning... Stan, get whoever needs to come and do something about this out here today. I want an estimate by this afternoon. I'm going to use my apartment as my office for now. Bring me the numbers as soon as you've got them. And Stan?" I tried, but probably failed, to look my most intimidating. "There's no excuse for anything in this building not working. Anything. And if any supplier questions who's going to pay the bill, tell them to phone me. I'll straighten them out."

Air-conditioning had been added to the building by one of its many owners somewhere along the line, but as far as I knew it hadn't worked more than a week out of any year so far without breaking down. For the last two years it hadn't worked at all.

Stan shot looks of undisguised ill will my way. I guess he'd got so used to not working for his salary that having someone give him orders didn't sit well.

"How about you prove to me you got the right to tell me to do anythin'." His belligerence was touched with just a hint of uncertainty.

"She's got the right because I say so." I spun around at the sound of Roland's voice. I hadn't known he was coming here today.

"I'm Doctor Roland Driver. If you want to look at the documents, here." He threw an envelope on the floor at Stan's feet. "This legal agreement says I own this building, with an interim agreement showing the transfer to Mrs. Robertson."

If I hadn't seen the look on his face, I wouldn't have believed it. This kind man, a gentle doctor, looked like he could eat two of Stan for breakfast and come back for snacks. He almost frightened me.

"Thanks, Roland." I turned when I heard Ethan's steps on the staircase, just in time to see him walk through Michael and the other spirit. I nearly laughed out loud before I saw his face.

"Charli, go into one of these apartments and call the police. The rest of you, please go back to your apartments. We'll come and see you as soon as the police get here. And please, don't anyone leave. They'll want to talk to all of you." He was beside me by the time he finished speaking. The tenants were reluctantly heading back to the apartments, looking at Ethan and speaking to each other in muted whispers. Ethan's tone made his words an order.

"Tell them it's a murder." His whisper shook me to my toes.

"Who?"

"Tell me what Mrs. Joseph looks like. It was a woman."

"I don't know. I've never seen her. She disappeared nearly ten years ago. What makes you think it was her?"

"I thought she'd disappeared just recently. Forget it. I'd say this woman's been dead about a week. Not much longer. No wonder poor Joseph thought the smell was bad. You could hear the flies humming the minute I opened the door."

"Yech!" I headed for the closest door, which just happened to be Stan's apartment. As I knocked, I heard raised voices. A man and a woman. Obviously I was interrupting a fight. Just when I thought I should probably try another door, the one in front of me jerked open.

"What?" Stan's unpleasant attitude hadn't changed any.

"I need to use your phone, Stan. To call the police."

He seriously thought about not letting me in. For a moment the door wavered and the sneer on his face changed to a gloat until a discreet cough from Roland, in the hall behind me, changed his mind. He threw the door open, bashing it into the wall, and walked away.

I found the phone just inside the door and while I was waiting for the 911 operator to pick up I noticed the fresh dent in the drywall. It was on top of an already patched spot. Stan's temper obviously took a lot out of the walls around here. I wondered what else about this building had been neglected like this.

"This is the 911 operator. What is your emergency?"

"Uh, I'd like to report a body." I wasn't sure what to tell her so I decided to wait and let her ask questions.

"One moment, I'll connect you to the police department." I'd just reported a dead person and been put on hold. Something about that didn't quite compute.

"Seattle Police Department, where may I direct your call?"

"I...I want to report a body."

"Hold, please."

Again? This was too much. I leaned out the door and looked for Roland Driver. I just had to tell someone. He was still standing just outside the door, looking at the front lobby. I knew what he was thinking when I saw him look up.

"You're right, Roland, it would make a wonderful atrium." All four floors would get the benefit of anything growing in what was now wasted space. The front doors opened into a space the size of a one-bedroom apartment. The elevator was tucked in one corner, the stairs suspended from each floor into the open space. I could see the vines clinging to the stairs as I stood there. "And, did you know, if you report a murder they put you on hold? I guess they figure if the victim is already dead there really isn't much need to hurry." I leaned back against the wall and crossed my feet, trying to look nonchalant but wishing someone would answer the phone.

It was at least three minutes before anyone came back on the line, got the information and promised immediate action. While I'd been on hold, I'd surreptitiously cased Stan and Eunice's apartment. There were marks on the walls indicating someone had been throwing things regularly. There were stains soaked into the peeling paint. The linoleum on the floors was cut and curling and when I looked closer at a bare spot on the floor in the kitchen I almost threw up.

It was crawling with bugs.

That did it! I got out of there as fast as I could and hobbled back to Ethan and Roland. Ethan knew instantly I was upset, probably because my hand was shaking, so when I spoke he knew I was serious.

"Ethan, would you please go in there and get the keys to everything from Stan. While you're there, look at the place on the kitchen floor where the linoleum is missing, right by the door, and tell me I'm wrong. If there are no bugs there just come back out with the keys and pretend I didn't say anything." I turned then, a decision just made. "If those are bugs, you will fire the man. Tell him he has one week to vacate the premises. I can't stand the thought of him having anything to do with what we're planning. And tell him he won't be getting any reference letter, either."

Ethan was only gone a few moments but it seemed an eternity. Just before he opened the door and came back to us I heard something hit the wall, or maybe the door itself. Ethan was ducked over when he opened the door. He handed me the keys and smiled at me.

"Stan and Eunice will be gone by tomorrow night. He accepted one month's wages in lieu of notice. It was either take the offer or I was going to have him arrested for destruction of private property."

Thank God! "Okay, now we just have to wait for the boys in blue." Hearing a siren, I turned to look out the front door. "And, if I'm not mistaken, that's them."

Ethan walked to meet them, two uniformed officers and man in plain clothes who'd arrived right behind them in the ME's station wagon, and stood, explaining, I guess, what he'd found. He led them upstairs.

Roland and I decided to wait in my apartment and he followed me up the stairs. By the time we got to the top we were both puffing. Him because of his age, I guessed, and me because it was hard walking on my still-sore feet.

I let us in, taking in a deep breath before I pushed the door open. I needn't have bothered. Everything was back the way it should have been. I turned to Roland, mystified.

"Who..." I knew even before he had a chance to answer. "Ethan did this, didn't he?" Roland's nod only confirmed what I already knew.

"He did it one afternoon after you insisted you were coming back here. He said he had a deuce..." I raised my eyebrows at the word. "Okay, he said he had a hell of a time figuring out where everything went but he used the dents in the linoleum, the flat spots on the carpet and the marks on the walls where the paint was lighter. He just hoped he got it right."

I looked around. It was almost the way it had been, close enough it didn't bother me.

"Did he fix the other rooms, too?" I didn't want to look if he hadn't.

"I think so. You'd have to look to be sure but don't if you think it would upset you. You can ask him when he gets back here."

I sat down, weary without having done very much, and took a small notebook out of my pocket.

"Well, now we've fired Stan Medlar, we're going to have to find someone to run this place." For an instant, brilliance sparked. "Roland, will you phone Bobby Turner and ask him to come up here, please. I don't think I could walk down again right now and I think I've just come up with a plan to solve at least two of our problems."

For the time being, all of the money required to fix this building and hire the people to do the fixing was coming out of Ethan's deep pockets. He'd agreed we could pay him back at the end of the fixing period with the money coming in from people who bought their units. The rent money would continue to maintain the building, the purchase

payments would be put into some kind of trust, there for any major repairs which might be required. Since I planned to buy my place under the deal, I knew at least one apartment was sold. And there were others who would jump at the chance.

For now, the cost of a manager would also come out of Ethan's pocket. He didn't know it yet, but I knew Roland had read my mind and he'd have stopped me if he thought Ethan wouldn't want to pay for a new manager while we were still paying off Stan.

Roland went to find the phone and I sat, wondering if I was out of my head. This was a huge undertaking and I'd never done anything like it before. As long as Ethan stayed involved I knew we'd do just fine. It was what would happen if he left me to it that concerned me.

Roland was smiling when he came back.

"That is the quaintest phone I have ever seen. An absolute relic. Where did you get it?"

"It was here when we moved in. I know rotary dials are almost a thing of the past but it still works and it was kinda cute."

"Well if you're going to use this apartment as the nerve center of this operation, the phone has to go. In fact, I'll talk to Ethan. I think you need to have a phone and a fax line in here. And maybe a cell phone so you can be reached if you're not in the office."

"Roland, we can't afford it. There's no money yet."

"Fiddlesticks! I'll pay for it if I have to. But those two things are essential. And Bobby is on his way up, by the way."

He sat across from me, crossed his suited legs and looked at me. When he didn't say anything I began to fidget. I finally gave up.

"What?"

"I'm just thinking. In six days you've gone from being Miss Dependent to Miss Bold. Have you always been this way, and just hidden your backbone from view?"

I knew what he meant. I'd always been the follower. Now I was suddenly leading with a vengeance. There was something empowering about being able to take control of one's future. I think this was what made me brasher than I'd ever been before.

I tried to explain it to Roland and he just laughed.

"You're just finding out you can do things on your own, Charli. That's good."

We were interrupted by the knock on the slightly open door.

"Come in, Bobby." I didn't bother getting up. Neither did Roland. Bobby sauntered toward us, his loose-limbed body moving as though he heard music.

"Pull up a chair, please. We've got something we need to discuss."

I saw the uncertainty in his eyes and hastened to allay his fears. "It's okay, Bobby. Nothing serious. Just a job offer."

I watched as the words sank in. I liked the feeling it gave me when I saw a gleam of hope in his eyes. He pulled up one of the kitchen chairs and, after turning it backward, straddled the seat, laying his arms across the top. "A job? Doing what?"

"How would you like to be the new building supervisor, manager, whatever it is they're called? Stan will be leaving us, in fact he's gone now as far as the building is concerned, and we need someone who's good with his hands. Someone who can fix the minor problems and figure out who to call for the big ones."

"Man, Miz Rob...Charli. You're kiddin', right?"

I shook my head, didn't say anything and watched as hope changed to joy.

"Miz...Charli. I'd be honored to work for you. You can't know how it will help us."

"I think I can. And Bobby, this job comes with a whole lot of perks. The first is you can move into 1B or 1C, whichever you want, as soon as we get them fixed up. You'll have to make do with what you've got until it's done. And there's no rent. It's one of the bonuses that goes with being on-call nearly all the time. I have to find out what Stan was paid before I know where to start discussing salary. For now, just keep collecting your unemployment if you still qualify. We won't date your contract until the place is ready for you. Unofficially, you're in charge and will be paid," I looked at Roland and he nodded, "cash, under the table so to speak. You answer to me or to Ethan, or Roland Driver. No one else."

"Man..." He sat there, smiling like a fool and looking intensely grateful. Another good feeling washed over me.

"Bobby, first thing you have to do is get someone on the air-conditioning. It's going to be brutally hot in here again this summer if it isn't fixed."

"Charli, I have an idea. Can I tell you?"

"Certainly, but you don't have to ask. This is your job. You tell me what has to be done."

"Okay, then, I think you'd be better off replacing the old air-conditioning unit. Only replace it with individual units in each apartment. You can choose the size by the amount of space needs cooling. That way, if someone doesn't like it as cold, they can just run their unit less or at a different setting."

It was a brilliant suggestion. Why hadn't one of us thought about it? Probably because Ethan and Roland didn't live here and I was only home during the hottest part of the day on weekends.

"Do it. Do you know who to phone?"

"Yes, ma'am, I sure do. And I know where to go for better prices than what some would offer. I'll use the suppliers we used at work."

"All right. Get going on it. Also get someone onto the elevator, get some of those light bulbs replaced and please, please, replace the locks on both those doors. Get as many keys cut as we'll need for everyone and make sure they get delivered to each suite as soon as you get the locks installed."

"I'll distribute the keys before I change the locks. Nobody has to worry about getting locked out."

I smiled at him. This man had a good head on his shoulders. He'd do just fine. He was my first successful executive decision.

"Bobby," Roland interrupted us before I could go on, "we're going to get cell phones for the people who are involved in fixing up this place. You'll have one. We'll get them all programmed with speed dial numbers for everyone who gets frequent calls."

"Thanks, Mr. Driver." Bobby stood.

"Actually, it's "Doctor", Bobby, but in this building I'm just plain Roland."

The two men shook hands and Bobby left, a spring in his step that hadn't been there when he entered. I was happy with the way things were going so far.

"What's keeping Ethan? Shouldn't he be done with the police by now?"

As I asked, the door opened and the subject of my question appeared, trailed by two plainclothes policemen. At least, that's who I supposed they were.

"Charli, they need to use the phone up here. His cell phone just died." Ethan cocked his head at the larger of the two men while his look said only a fool would go any place with a cell phone not fully charged. If we were going to start carrying them, I'd have to make sure mine was always working.

"Fine. Who is it, Ethan, did they say?" I was keeping my voice low. Why, I didn't know. Maybe I thought I was showing respect for a deceased person even though I had no idea who it was.

"The identification says it's Margaret Moorhead, but Joseph Linden was asked by the ME to do an identification and he says it's not her. The face is so badly messed up he's not sure who it is. So they won't know for a day or two. In the meantime, they've got to get the forensic team out here, so no one is to go near the apartment. In fact, they'll seal it before they leave."

The warmth I'd felt from helping Bobby and solving our managerial problem faded fast at this news.

As the two detectives came back from the kitchen where the phone was, I saw the glow heralding Michael's arrival suddenly brighten and fade again. He obviously wanted to make sure I knew he was there.

It's Lillian Yarman, Charli. But I don't know how you can tell them.

I frowned at him. I couldn't talk to him with those two here. Then I remembered he seemed able to read my thoughts.

How do you know, Michael? Were you down there?

No. Her ghost is still in the building. I was with her on the stairs this morning. She's trying not to leave because she wants to make sure the guys who did this to her are caught. Only, she didn't see who stabbed her. They had her blindfolded while they ransacked her place then they dragged her down to the second floor and put her in there. She was lying on the floor face down

when they started beating on her. She says the first few stab wounds weren't fatal, but then they hit an artery and she knew she was dying, she could see the blood spurting. She bled out on the floor in there, Charli. Not a pretty sight.

She said "they"? Two of them?

That's what she said. But she also said she could have been wrong. She was too busy trying not to die to really notice.

I sat there wondering how I could tell these two policemen what I'd just heard. When Ethan spoke, he startled me.

"Charli, who else in this building fits this rough description?" He then described Lillian as best he could by what he'd seen.

I suddenly remembered what Lillian had jokingly referred to as her "hopeless diamond". It would give them something positive to identify. "Was she wearing a big, phony diamond necklace?"

"There was a chain of some kind wrapped around her neck. I think they tried to choke her with it, but she died from the stab wounds. It was hard to tell what color the stone was for all the bl..." He tried to stop but he might as well have finished the word.

"Well, if it's a big, ugly piece of clear glass, that would make it Lillian Yarman. She lives with her husband in 3C. I know he's been away for the last three weeks. He had to go home to Nebraska, Iowa, wherever he came from, to help bury his mother and settle her business there."

The two police-types had been listening to all this and making notes.

"Mrs. Robertson, do you know how to contact him?" This one must have thought he looked like Joe Friday. Dark hair cut Fifties-style, baggy gray suit and a fedora. Just like the one Jack Webb used to wear on *Dragnet*. Michael and I had watched the old shows whenever we could. They were so dated it was like watching comedies.

"No. I'm not even sure which state he went to. But if it's her, then maybe there'd be something in her apartment that would tell you."

Ethan took out the keys he'd recovered from Stan and led the two out of the apartment. When the door was closed, Roland spoke. "You did rather well, the two of you. Michael's here, isn't he?"

"Yes. I guess Ethan must have heard him, too. I forget he can hear him full-time now." I looked to where Michael had been hovering only to find him gone. "I think Michael is trying to play detective. He probably beat them downstairs."

"Well, this isn't the way I would have liked to see you start your plan for this building, Charli. I figured this would be one of those normal takeovers, but it seems nothing around you is ever very normal."

I gave him a look and he laughed. It was like having a nice older uncle to talk to when Roland was around.

Suddenly, for just a brief moment, I could hear my father. Yelling about something, refusing to let someone have his way. It was an unsettling feeling, like I was intruding

on someone's dream. But his voice was carrying through my brain with no trouble at all. He was busy telling someone he wouldn't pay for something. His words were scathing and cold. As clear as though he was standing beside me I heard him yell "she's not worth saving". There was a loud crash, then the feeling stopped. I shivered. I felt cold. But I no longer felt threatened.

I sat back to wait for Ethan.

Just when I was feeling better about everything, it happened again.

Bitch. Whore. Useless crappy damn woman – "Attitude" was back.

Chapter Ten

“Michael!”

I was wailing his name when he suddenly appeared, hovering just to the right of Roland’s chair.

I heard him, Charli. I’d sure like to know who this is. I’d give him a chewing out if I knew what to say. But as long as all he does is scream obscenities and throw things I can’t do anything. Sorry, babe.

Roland was watching me, wondering why I’d yelled. He didn’t look around, just watched me.

“Sorry Roland. ‘Attitude’ is back. All he does is curse and scream and swear about women. I really don’t like it. I wanted Michael to do something about him. But it appears he can’t.”

Just as I said this, there was a crash from the kitchen. I didn’t know what he’d broken this time, but I hoped it was nothing I valued.

It’s okay, Charli, just an old dented pot.

Roland looked at me with a half smile.

“Don’t worry about him,” I muttered, “unless you hear glass breaking.”

The next crash wasn’t glass—it was definitely metal. And I knew what he’d thrown. My baking sheets. There had been three of them on the counter. That must have taken care of his anger because as suddenly as it started, the noise stopped.

We sat in silence for a few minutes, waiting.

Ethan walked into this silence looking even grimmer than he had before.

“There’s absolutely nothing in the apartment to tell us where Frank Yarman is, but there is such a mess we might have missed it. Those creeps trashed it so bad I don’t think there’s anything useful left. I hope he has insurance. Now there will be two apartments tied up by the cops.” His frustration was showing in the way he spoke. This was not the normal Ethan manner.

“Well, don’t worry about it. They’ll be done soon. In the meantime, there are a lot of other apartments we can be working on.”

Charli, my love, you are something else. This is the “glass half full” attitude of yours again.

“Sit down, Ethan, right there. We have to have a sort of emergency meeting to decide a few things. Then, if you can find me a cup of coffee, I will be forever indebted to you.”

Ethan bounded out of the chair he'd just sat in and disappeared out the door. He was gone only a few minutes and when he returned he was carrying a tray with three cups of coffee.

"Where did you find that?" I was amazed at what this man could do whenever I said I wanted something. Look what happened when I suggested I wanted to help the people here fix up this dump.

"Joseph offered me coffee when I was downstairs before. I turned it down and he was moaning about having made a 'big pot'. I won't vouch for its flavor but it smells good."

He handed me a cup and I inhaled the aroma of recently made coffee, probably made with freshly ground beans. I'd always wanted my own grinder but I couldn't justify the thirty dollars just for myself, so my coffee came home already ground. As a special treat I occasionally bought beans and had them ground just before leaving the store.

As I raised the cup for my first swallow I saw what was painted on the outside. I was having coffee with Bullwinkle. I looked across and saw Ethan partnered with Rocky and Roland sharing with Boris Badanov. This cast a whole new light on Joseph Linden, Jay Ward fan.

"Okay, so why do we need a meeting?" Ethan pulled a notebook out of his pocket, one he'd already written in.

"I just hired Bobby Turner to be the building super, manager, whatever you want to call him. What we need to find out is how much is paid to one of these guys. They get the apartment for nothing because they're on-call all hours, but I don't know how much to tell him he'll make in wages."

I drank slowly from Donald Duck and waited. If anyone knew these things, it would be Ethan.

"I noticed a check stub on the kitchen counter at Stan's. It was for two thousand dollars. It included his claim for truck expenses, so they must pay expenses as well."

"Well, I know Bobby doesn't have a truck. They've only got one little car they share."

"How about you offer him fifteen hundred and the use of the condo association's vehicle. The association can get a better deal on a truck than he could on his own. And because they'll own it, the association will also pay the truck expenses. Everything, including the gas."

I thought about it for a few seconds then wrote it down in my little book. I'd find out later if Bobby thought this sounded like a good deal. I figured he would.

"Do you want me to phone him and ask him to come up here again?" Roland seemed to be anxious to be included in our discussion, and as the temporary owner of the place I felt he had the right. Ethan answered him before I could.

"He's not here. He just left. I saw him in the lobby. Said he was off to buy locks for the front doors, and light bulbs."

"I'd say he was taking his responsibilities seriously. I told him to do it, but I didn't tell him it had to be done this morning."

"Hey, if he wants to do this and is so, what, gung-ho? Let him do it."

The sound of something moving beside me made me turn. Just in time to see Michael's fingers tracing squares in the dust. What did he have to be worried about?

"What, Michael? What's the matter now?"

What are you going to do about the spirits, ghosts and poltergeists staying in this building, Charli? They're going to suddenly be displaced from whatever spaces they're living in if you start tearing this place apart.

"I can't do anything about it, Michael. And I'm not about to stop just because someone from the 'other world' is unhappy enough to want to stay here. They'll just have to move as we do." I turned to Ethan and Roland. "Michael's worried about the spirits, and the like, staying here. And I just thought of a way to do this makeover so we don't displace too many people all at once. If we start at the top and work down, we'd only have to move a couple of people on each floor. Since Ruthie is going to be in the hospital for a while yet and then she's going to the convalescent home you booked for her, Roland, and I'm already staying at your mother's home, Ethan, the top floor is already empty. We'll just move the furniture out and start up here."

I sat back and waited for them to find fault with my plan, but neither of them said anything. Michael didn't react either and I turned to find he'd left.

Finally, Ethan sat forward and looked at me. "It could work, Charli, it could."

I beamed at him. Two executive decisions made.

"And like you said, it would keep the number of moves down to just a few at a time. We need to get the meeting arranged with the tenants and form the association. Then you'll be ready to order the materials to do the work. So long as they all realize they'll have to do their share, according to what they're able, we'll have this place finished in no time."

Always assuming none of these ghosts and poltergeists makes trouble for you, Charli.

"Dammit, Michael, don't do that!" I whirled in my seat to where he'd reappeared, behind me. I hadn't known he was there until he spoke.

I saw Ethan laughing and knew he'd seen him.

"You don't need to laugh, Ethan Harwood. One of these times he'll get you. Darn near gave me a heart attack!"

"Darn, Charli, only 'darn'?" Even Roland was enjoying my discomfort.

"You know what I mean, Roland." I said it crossly, but I really didn't mean it.

So what are you going to do, Charli, if they give you a bad time?

"Tell them to get lost? What can I do, Michael? They probably don't believe I can see them anyway."

Well, babe, I wish you luck. You've got yourself a lot of work here.

"I'll make it Michael. I've changed since you knew me. I can do these things now. I had to learn how after you..." I stopped when I realized I was baring my heart to a ghost, my boss and a friendly doctor. Not the thing to do, I didn't think.

Roland cleared his throat and changed the subject. "When do you want to have this meeting, Charli?"

"I was thinking it would be best to get whoever's in the building right now down to the lobby. Tell them to bring chairs, if they can. We can round up some ourselves if we have to. Then we can sit down there and discuss this. Then we'll have a second meeting with the other lot, the ones who aren't here today."

"Good idea! How would it be if Ethan and I round them up right now, then one of us will come and get you and your chair? Give you some time to compose yourself." I knew he was trying to give me some time alone with Michael, but I didn't know if it would help anyone.

"Thank you, Roland."

Ethan never said a word, just stood and left the room.

"Oh, dear. Did I just insult him?" I asked, hoping Roland would tell me Ethan just knew it was a good time to disappear.

"I'm not sure, Charli. He has never acted like this before. I think he may be jealous, if he stops and thinks about it. He's trying to compete with a ghost for your attention."

"No. Oh no, Roland. He's got to know it isn't true. Even Michael said so. He told me the other day I had to get on with my life. That's what I hope I'm doing. He has no reason to be jealous."

"I don't know, my dear, I just think it's the likeliest explanation."

"Well." I leaned back in my chair and tried to figure out why Ethan would think he had cause to be jealous. I wasn't carrying on about my lost love. I hadn't mentioned loving or missing him. I had done both those things for months after Michael's death, but I had finally accepted it had happened and there was nothing I could do but go on with my life.

Life, living in this tenement, had been no picnic, but at least I'd tried.

"Stay here and relax for a bit, Charli, while we get the other people down to the lobby. We'll come for you." This time it was Roland who moved to the door.

Behind me, I felt the warm air that was Michael. Turning around, I looked at the glow I could see and saw a rainbow of color. Obviously Michael was happy at the moment. Not deliriously happy, but satisfied. There was no excess red or blue in his aura.

I looked at him and wondered if I dared ask. Only one way to find out.

"Okay, Michael. If I ask for your help here, will you give it?"

You know you don't have to ask. I'll do whatever I can to help you. I just hope it's enough.

"Thank you. I appreciate it." I hesitated. I wanted to ask him other things, things I would never have a chance to ask again. Things I hadn't thought I'd get a chance to discuss.

Go ahead. Ask. I know you have questions.

"Oh. All right. And if they sound like stupid questions, just remember, I haven't died. I don't know what you're experiencing."

Just ask, babe. I'll tell you anything I can.

I sat, tears gathering in my eyes, wondering. "Michael, when the car you were in crashed – did you have time to think about me? Or did you just...just die? Did you just cease to exist?"

Charli, we might have had about three seconds from the time we knew we were in trouble until we hit the bridge. But in those three seconds I thought of nothing but you. They were nice thoughts. They were worried thoughts. He hovered between the chair where Roland had been sitting and the door. Once again he was a ghost who paced. I wondered how you'd cope. I wondered how you'd hold up when someone gave you the news. I wondered if you'd miss me. I even had time to wonder how long you'd wait before you found another guy.

"Oh, Michael. That's sad. I'm sorry. I wish you'd had more pleasant thoughts."

No, Charli, those were just exactly the right thoughts. I know now you held up, you coped. I know you missed me, but you didn't carry on about it like some kind of demented, crazy woman. And it's kinda nice to know after three years you still haven't replaced me with anyone.

"Michael, I could never replace you. I might find someone new eventually, but they'll just have to live with the knowledge you were my first love. They can be my last. And if they can't accept it, then they aren't the right person for me."

Charli, Charli, you do know how to make a spirit feel good. I assumed the movement I saw was laughter. But Charli? It's time. Get on with your life. Find someone else and do the one thing I regret we didn't get to do. Find yourself someone to love and have the family we wanted. Remember? We were going to have two. A boy for you and a girl for me. Do it, Charli. Please. I'd like to know you had a family to love and care for, but I won't be here that long. Just promise me you'll do it.

"I'll try. I promise, I'll try."

Another thing, Charli. If you want to get serious about this guy, Ethan, you go right ahead. I like him. In fact, if I were going to pick someone for you it would be someone just like him. He's kind, considerate and he treats you like a lady. And you know what? I think he's already in love with you.

"You're right, Michael. I am."

I gasped and turned in time to see Ethan sit down on the edge of the coffee table, right next to me and just a few feet from Michael's presence.

"It's all right, Charli. We'll take it nice and slow. But be forewarned. I am in love with you and I don't plan to let you get away."

As I watched, Michael shimmered to a bright red.

Happy.

He was happy for me.

I started to cry and Ethan reached out to me.

"Don't, Charli. There's no need for tears."

"I'm just happy. You love me now. Michael loved me when he was alive. I've been very lucky."

"Hey, Michael, did she always get weepy on you if she was happy?" His question, directly aimed at a spirit, seemed a little incongruous, but no worse than my asking the same spirit what he had been thinking about when he was dying.

Yeah. That's just her way. Right, babe?

"Michael, quit. Do not call me babe again." I scowled at him, hoping he'd stop calling me "babe". I didn't have any happy memories associated with the name.

"Come on, sweetheart, the people who are home are all down in the lobby waiting for you." Ethan held out his hands and pulled me up from the depths of the soft old armchair I had been sitting in.

He held me for a moment within the circle of his arms. Not a demanding lover's embrace but the hug of a friend giving comfort. I liked it, but had it become a demanding lover's hug I don't think I'd have stopped him.

"Thank you. Both of you."

I had to stop doing this. Talking to Michael in public could get me into some serious trouble. People wouldn't believe me if they thought I was nuts. Talking to myself, talking to someone who wasn't there—all the same any way you looked at it.

Ethan led me to the door and as I walked out I heard a voice behind me.

Good luck, babe.

Chapter Eleven

“Good luck, Charli,” Ethan whispered to me as we came down the last flight of stairs. “You’ll do fine. And I’ll be right there if you need me.”

He led me to the front of the assembled tenants, where someone found a chair for me. We’d forgotten to bring one from my apartment. It was a poor excuse for seating and I wouldn’t have wanted to spend too much time sitting on it. The back was a skinny board between two posts and the seat was made up of slats, with the kind of spaces between them that pinch. I was very careful when I sat down.

The meeting, such as it was, turned out to be a tremendous success. Serena Turner offered to take minutes and keep everything the way it had to be to satisfy whatever government agency would license us as a condo association. We had to be registered somewhere to make everything we did legal.

Joseph Linden decided to make use of his pot of coffee and brought down a tray loaded with other cartoon character mugs, cream and sugar and spoons. His second trip brought a Thermos of coffee and a fresh pot. We were set.

Barnaby Barnaby offered the use of his apartment for future meetings. Seemed he had a stash of folding chairs that would do for all of us. Joseph, who volunteered for permanent coffee duty, had only to carry his cups and the coffee down the hall.

Maxie and Flo Sharmer were new to me. I’d met them on the stairs and known their names but never talked to them. As a couple, they reminded me of Sonny and Cher. He was shorter than her by at least eight or nine inches, had sandy hair just a little on the long side and a handlebar mustache waxed to attention. She, like Cher, had straight, long, long hair in a peculiar shade of burgundy. I didn’t know if it was supposed to be black or red but it satisfied neither. She was built like a model, thin to the point of fainting, and her makeup was impeccable.

The only problem?

He was at least seventy, she wasn’t far behind, and time hadn’t been kind. Both had the wrinkles and sagging skin of their age group. To say they were a parody would be kind. A joke was probably closer to the truth. But.

And there’s always a “but” with people like the Sharmers.

He was a retired contractor. She was a retired paralegal. He could guide us, she could help keep us out of trouble. Better yet, she professed to know how to wield a hammer.

We were picking up talented people every time we turned around!

The only people missing from our little meeting, when we finally did a roll call, were Frank Yarman, currently out of town and now a widower, although he might not

yet know, Tony Battola and Gus Farnswood, names on the mailboxes none of us could put faces to and Gary and Denise Lawless, missing from the third floor. But I knew, from talking to them occasionally in the halls, they both worked. And they were busy house hunting. They might not want to be involved in any of this.

We were going to have to look for a few new tenants once we got this place fixed up. But for now, the empty suites allowed us to move from one floor to the next while we worked on the other floors. Most of us saw the temporary inconvenience as being well worth the trouble. One or two might grumble, but they'd all go along with it.

"We're done, people. As soon as we get the paperwork finished, we'll start. And, while we're at it, I would like everyone to describe, on paper, what they'd like done to their apartments. If you're going to buy them, you might as well get what you want."

Ethan and Roland were nodding their heads, and I took it to mean they agreed with my suggestion. I hadn't had time to pass it by them—it just popped into my head while I was talking. I did think I could possibly thank someone else, if he showed himself. Because I think Michael was the one who put the idea into my thoughts.

"Before you go, folks," Ethan stood and moved up beside me, "I've had another idea. The rent for next month is due tomorrow. Instead of making it out to Harmony, hang on to your checks until we know what the account name will be on the bank account the condo association will have. Then you can pay your rent to the condo name and we'll have the money to start the repairs. We should be able to start ordering things the day after tomorrow and start work by the end of the week."

"And what happens if we run out of money in the account, Mr. Harwood? Then do we have to wait a month before we continue?" This was our paralegal, asking good questions. I, too, waited for the answer, because it would be a problem if we ran out of money in the middle of one floor and had to wait for three weeks to finish. We could be six months just doing one level.

"No, Flo, you won't have to wait. I'm going to put a slush fund in place, a sort of oversized petty cash. Charli can draw on it anytime she needs to. And Flo?" He waited for her to look up at him. "I'm going to be like Charli. I'll only answer to Ethan. Call me anything else and I'll ignore you." There was a ripple of laughter through the small crowd.

"Same goes for me." Roland was making his way up beside us, smiling at the rest of them. "It's Roland, or I don't answer either."

"Okay, people let's get working on this. Anyone around tomorrow, same time, we'll have an informal meeting and tell you what's happened." Ethan was smiling at Barnaby Barnaby as he spoke. "Always assuming it's okay with you, Barnaby?"

"It's fine, it's fine. Joseph and I'll have everything ready for eleven."

They made their way back upstairs, talking among themselves, and we stood and watched them go. These were the people I'd staked my life on. If they failed me, I'd be out on the street, looking for a buyer for the tenement I'd tried to rescue.

Don't think such negative thoughts, Charli. If you think it, it will happen. And I'm glad to hear you got the message. I was listening to Serena Turner earlier and she was saying to Bobby if they had two bedrooms, they'd be able to make one into a nursery. That's what made me think about it.

"Thanks, Michael." I whispered in case anyone was watching or listening.

It was five days before we were ready to place our first order, and when Bobby Turner called the lumberyard and told them what we wanted we were all standing around him, like so many little kids at a candy counter.

"Right. Deliver it here, tomorrow, and be prepared to lift it four floors. However you do it. You promised delivery to the site and that's where the site is. The fourth floor."

We sat and watched the faces he was making. Either the guy on the other end was complaining or Bobby had food poisoning.

"You heard me. Either come prepared to get it to the fourth floor or cancel the order."

Not every lumberyard can afford to turn down quite a few thousand dollars for one order. Apparently this was one of them. After several minutes of bitching and complaining, the guy on the other end must have agreed. Bobby's face was suddenly all smiles. We took it to be good news. As he hung up he turned to us.

"I knew he'd do it. But you know, this guy was really obnoxious. Anyone want to help make his day even worse tomorrow?"

"What do you mean by worse?" I was cautious about getting involved in this, just in case it was something illegal.

"Well, I was just thinking, since he says he'll have to do this himself, his other staff wouldn't do it, if he had to make a trip or two with the same stuff, over and over, and over and maybe over, he'd find out if he works with us instead of arguing, it would be easier. So while he's bringing something up the front stairs, we could be taking it out the back and adding it back to his pile."

The absolutely devilish look in his eyes told me it wasn't the first time he'd done this kind of thing, but for now I was going to put a stop to his fun before it really got going.

"No, Bobby. We won't do it. We're going to keep giving this company our business and when we get to the next floor, he'll be delivering again. Then I'm going to ask for a discount. In fact, I'm going to go after a discount for every other floor. Five percent off for the third, ten percent for the second and when we get to the main, which will be the biggest order, I'm going for twenty percent. So let's not make him mad the first time."

"You're no fun, Miz Rob...Charli. No fun at all." There were some shy smiles and a few laughs from the people milling around. Joseph and Barnaby, standing together, had become best buddies and were now taking turns cooking for each other.

Barnaby was my conduit to what was happening with the other tenants. He heard or saw everything that happened and he just had to tell someone. I made sure he knew I was interested. Barnaby told me in private Joseph had a shrine in his second bedroom to the woman who'd cleaned him out. "He still loves her, Charli, after everything she did. Strange, don't you think?"

They were both there, as were Maxie and Flo. Maxie had helped put the list together, based on the design we'd roughly sketched of the changes for the fourth floor.

"Okay, so tomorrow the stuff will be delivered and then we can start. I'm going to be in my apartment tomorrow bright and early—about six, Bobby, but you don't have to be there until nine, maybe nine-thirty."

I had to remind Ethan tonight I needed to be there sometime before dawn. He could drop me off and come back later when the order was delivered.

"Tomorrow, everyone. Tomorrow we start."

There were some high-fives and some waving fists as these people I was beginning to think of as friends left the lobby to return to their own apartments. I rode the newly repaired elevator to my floor and went to my door. As I let myself in I felt a cool breeze. I knew none of my windows were open so I looked around.

Sure enough. He—make that *it*—was hovering in the space beside my sofa. Until Michael found out who this was, I didn't even know if it was man or woman. Actually, the closer I got, the more unsure I was if this was even one of the ghosts I'd already met.

"Hello?" I took a tentative step in the general direction and watched as the presence changed color. It started to change to blue then abruptly flashed to the red I saw Michael take when he was happy.

Can you see me, dear?

I backed up. Sat down.

Gulped for air. Looked again.

She, it was a woman's voice I heard, was still there.

"Ah, yes? I can." Why was I acting afraid of this spirit when Michael's appearance hadn't startled or scared me? "Yes, I definitely can. Who are you?"

Well, I was Margaret Moorhead. But somebody attacked me. Killed me. Only no one has found my body yet. And until they do, I'm stuck here. If ghosts could cry, this one sounded like she just might.

"Didn't you live in 2A, Margaret?"

I did. Until they murdered me. Now I don't know where I am. I only know it's in this building, it's dark and wet and it smells bad. A horrible, rotten stench.

I was suddenly aware of another presence, this one standing beside me, and I turned to find Michael had joined us.

Charli, you gotta help her. I've been searching the building but I can't find her body. She hasn't been able to lead me to it and her description is really not much help. I thought I knew this building inside and out but there must still be one room I haven't found yet.

"Michael, hold on here. We've got Lillian Yarman dying in Margaret's apartment, now Margaret's ghost is saying she's dead someplace in the building and we've got another, very untalkative spirit who keeps sitting in on our meetings and I don't know who he is. What's going on here? Everybody's dying."

I saw Margaret's presence swirl faster and could only assume that, like Michael, she was interested in what I was saying and not liking what she heard.

Nobody's dying, Charli, they're being murdered, protested Michael.

"Any ideas who is killing all of you, Margaret?"

I saw her colors slow and slump. Obviously she didn't have the answer.

Charli, get Ethan to find out if there are any older sets of blueprints for this building, maybe hanging around some city planning office. Maybe there's a room or a space in this building we don't know about.

"All right. But I'm going to have to tell him why, don't you think? I can hardly ask him to go and find these plans and then say, 'oh, look, this must be where Margaret's body is hidden'. He'll think I'm nuts. Not that I don't already think maybe I am! I mean, I'm the one can hear voices, can see spirits and ghosts." I plopped myself back in my chair and stuck my feet out.

Nobody was going to believe this, ever.

"All right, maybe it had better be me talks to Ethan. When's he expected back here?"

"About eight. He and Roland had the lawyers and the bank to go to this afternoon and then Roland wanted to stop at the hospital and see one of his patients. Ethan decided to call a quick meeting with some of the fundraisers there and was going to come back for me about eight. I was just coming up here to make supper and take a nap."

Well then, we'll wait with you. You can have your supper and we'll just sit quietly over there.

I saw Michael join Margaret's spirit in the corner. I didn't know if they were having a conversation or if they were just waiting. I, in the meantime, was getting hungry. I'd brought a casserole-for-one Vivien had made for me and was going to reheat it while I waited. I left them hovering and went to the kitchen. I made coffee while I waited for the oven to warm up then stuck the dish in to reheat. About twenty minutes would do it.

I set my little chicken kitchen timer for twenty minutes, took it with me and stretched out on the couch. I sat the timer on the floor beside me. That way if I fell asleep, I at least wouldn't burn my supper.

I was just nodding off when Michael moved up beside me. He looked agitated. His colors were swirling so fast he looked more the color of mud than the colors of the rainbow.

"What, Michael?" I was short with him because I was tired and hungry and I immediately regretted it.

Charli, what did you put in the oven? This place is filling up with smoke. It's burning.

I bolted to my still-tender feet and skidded around the corner into the kitchen. The apartment was full of smoke but it wasn't coming from my oven. In fact, my oven was stone cold. I flipped the light switch only to discover my power was off. Heading back into the living room, I noticed the smoke was thickest by the door. I headed down the hall, realized I'd walked past the main source of the smoke and turned back. The paint on the entry door was blistering as I watched. I put my hand on the doorknob and felt the heat.

"My God, Michael, something's on fire. The smoke's coming in under the door." As I said this I turned and ran down the hall to the bathroom. I grabbed as many towels as I could, threw them in the tub and ran water on them. I didn't care if they dripped all over me, I had to get them to the door.

I dragged the sodden mass down the hall and stuffed them along the crack under the door. It stopped the smoke. For now. But I knew it wouldn't last.

"Michael..." I turned, realizing for the last few minutes I hadn't seen his presence anywhere near me. He had followed me to the kitchen and back out when I first went in there but he wasn't here now.

It's all right, dear, he went for help. Margaret's breathy voice was coming from the corner. She didn't sound frightened, but maybe that was because she was already dead. She had nothing to fear.

I got my brain back in gear and decided I'd better phone for the fire department. I didn't hear any alarm bells going off in the building, but if the fire was only on the fourth floor, I might be the only one who knew there was a problem.

I picked up the receiver and heard nothing. The phone was dead.

Great! Now what?

I jiggled the button up and down just in case but it didn't produce any noise worth mentioning.

I stood there trying to think, not having much luck. I was trapped on the top floor of this building, and, as we'd discovered three years earlier, there was no way to get to the fire escape. The window in the bathroom was painted shut. Stan Medlar was supposed to open it, but never got around to it. Even if it could have been opened, the bars on the landing for our apartment were missing. They'd been torn off somehow, the welds showing where they had been. It was a drop of about twelve feet to the next level. I'd reported the problem so many times I'd finally given up. Now it was going to cost me.

I looked around for something I could use to break the window then realized Michael was back.

"Thanks a lot, Michael. You could have stuck around and given me some help. Well, some encouragement at least."

By now my towels had given up on their job and were smoldering. The smoke got thicker and I coughed. My eyes burned and I found it hard to keep them open. Hell, I was finding it hard to breathe. The smoke suddenly became much thicker and smelled. I didn't recognize the smell, but I knew I should know it.

It's okay, babe, help is on the way. I found Ethan and told him to call the fire department.

"You did?" Of course he did. Michael would never desert me. I was coughing again, trying not to inhale the stinking smoke. I shut the bathroom door, soaked another towel and pushed it under the door. It might last for a few minutes.

"Michael, the smoke smells funny. Like it has something in it..." Another coughing fit stopped me and I was bent double by the time I finished.

Smells funny how, Charli?

"Like the stuff we used in our camping lantern." Before we were married, Michael and I had gone camping with friends to see if we wanted to buy the gear for ourselves. We hadn't had time buy our own gear or go anywhere before Michael died. Now, however, our one experience was telling me something I didn't want to know—I'd remembered the name of the stuff in our lanterns.

This fire was being fed by kerosene. And if that was true, the other truth was someone outside this apartment set it.

Michael suddenly disappeared again, this time through the wall into Ruthie's apartment. I waited, crouched on the floor in the bathroom, trying to hear sirens to indicate I was about to be saved. As suddenly as he disappeared, Michael was back.

You're right, Charli. Somebody set this fire. In fact, someone set this fire to get you. There's a stack of torn boards, old chairs and a bunch of boxes piled in front of your door and there's a red plastic can sitting a little bit to one side. Someone put the stuff there, poured kerosene over it then lit it. Somebody out there doesn't like you, babe.

By the time he finished speaking, Michael's presence was blue-white. He was angry again. I hadn't seen him do anything while he was angry, but I thought if he decided to get revenge for me, he might be an awesome force to deal with.

"Michael, when you were out there, did you see anybody?"

No, but I wasn't looking either. Hang on, be right back.

He was gone again. Fear swept through me like an insidious disease, inexorable in its intent. If all he wanted was to see me sweat, whoever set this fire should be on my side of the smoking door. The smoke was now black and seeping quickly under the bathroom door. The fire had to be burning inside my apartment.

I heard the faraway wail of the siren and the alarm bell in the hall at the same moment. Someone must have finally noticed something wrong.

I could hear nothing but the sound of crackling as the fire evidently ate its way up my hall. The peeling wallpaper and the little rubber-backed rugs I'd had there were feeding the flames.

I decided I was going to have to go out the bathroom window whether I wanted to or not. Looking around for something to break the glass, the only thing I could find was the toilet plunger. I started hitting the window with the rubber end, realized it wasn't going to work and began again with the wooden handle. Just as the glass broke I heard an enormous crash.

Behind me, where I stood in the tub, the blade of an axe was embedded in the wall.

A big axe.

Obviously help had arrived. I couldn't hear anything for the roar of the fire on the other side of the door. A second axe suddenly came crashing through the wall, this one disappearing back to the other side. Another few jarring crashes and there was a hole big enough to see through. I could just see the yellow coats the firefighters wore.

It took them a few more minutes of smashing their way into my apartment before they could reach through and hand me a face mask. It was evidently attached to a tank on the other side of the wall, and as I gulped the smoke-free air hissing through the mask I said a little prayer of thanks. Someone up there, some friend of Michael's perhaps, had been watching out for me, with Michael's help.

"Ma'am, can you hear me? Ma'am? Charli?"

Somebody out there knew my name.

My throat was so sore from all the smoke I only managed a croak. I tried again and this time he heard me. "Yes, I can."

"Good. Just keep the mask on, and stay where you are. We're in your hall now and the fire will be out in a few minutes. Then we'll get you out. Okay?"

I removed the mask just long enough to answer him. Those had been the best words I'd heard all day.

I'm proud of you, Charli, babe, really proud of you. You didn't panic, you waited long enough you didn't have to fall out the window and get hurt. And Ethan moved so fast the fire department was on its way before he was. I cued him about where you were and he told them the only way out of here was through the bathroom window. He also mentioned it was painted shut.

"Who started the fire bell in the building, Michael? It's ringing, too."

I think it was Jimmy Rodriguez. He's out in the hall talking to one of the firemen.

"Do you think he might have started it?" I had to ask. Someone had done this. I wanted to know who.

Don't think so, babe. He was busy trying to pull things off the pile in front of the door, and he's gone and burned his hands a bit doing it. I don't think he'd set the fire then do that, do you?

"No, I guess not. But if he didn't, then who did?"

He didn't answer me, just glimmered and shimmered, hovering, as if in thought. When he suddenly disappeared I wasn't surprised.

I thought he was going sleuthing. And what better sleuth than one nobody could see?

It was another fifteen minutes before there was a crash at the bathroom door and there, filling the space where the door had been, was a large man in a breathing mask and yellow fire gear, carrying the biggest axe I'd ever seen. What was with me and these big axes? I almost told him I'd have let him in if he'd just knocked. Then I thought better of it. Besides, the door was one of the things being replaced in the renovation.

He pulled his hat and mask off and came toward me, smiling.

"You Charli?"

I nodded and removed my mask, handing it back through the hole in the wall to whoever had the tank on the other side.

"You'd better get out into the hall and calm down the guy out there who's driving us nuts. He wanted to come in here too, but we can't let him. He's chewing out our division chief, now, for not letting him in."

Had to be Ethan. Only Ethan would expect the fire department to let him into a burning building. Such a fool. Such a crazy fool.

But he was my crazy fool and I loved him.

Wow, had I really thought that? Of course I had and I did and—oh, my—what a glorious heat spread through me. Seemed it had taken almost dying to make me realize what was important.

The fireman took my arm and led me around the still-smoldering patches of my hall floor, what was left of my lovely little scatter mats lying in smoking ruin along the way. When we got to the front door it was obvious the fire hadn't got going inside the suite except in the hall. The damage would be mostly smoke and the mess the fire department made.

As he helped me over what was left of my door and the pile of junk in the hall I heard another voice.

"Charli, love. Oh my God, sweetheart. You had me terrified. When Michael..."

To shut him up, I kissed him. I guessed I had a job for as long as he wanted me.

He kissed me back and didn't let go. It was obvious he was pleased to see me. Then, while I was still kissing him, I heard a voice.

"Let go! Get your friggin' hands off me. I didn't do nothing wrong."

I turned to see who was causing the commotion and saw Bobby Turner, Barnaby Barnaby and Jimmy Romano coming up the stairs with Stan Medlar in their grasp.

"Here he is, guys. The crud who started the fire. And if you want proof, check out his truck in the alley. There's more of the stuff he used up here and a big can of kerosene." Jimmy Romano had a tight hold on Stan's arms but the hands doing the holding were blistered red and peeling. He was probably in shock if he wasn't feeling the pain. All I saw was his anger.

I tightened my hold on Ethan as I felt his anger mount. He looked like he might take Stan apart with his bare hands.

"No, Ethan. Please. Don't. Let them look after it."

When he saw the fire department had brought the police department and two cops were about to take over from Bobby and Jimmy, Stan turned on me.

"Bitch! Slut!"

He was twisting in the grasping hands of the two officers holding him, trying to get away. If he got loose, I knew he'd come after me.

"Too bad, bitch, you ain't worth saving. They should have left you to roast. Let you die. Would have served you right. You think I'm paying for any of this? Forget it. You really ain't worth saving."

I heard them again. The same heartless words I'd dreamt my father said.

I wasn't worth saving.

Chapter Twelve

The words chilled me to my core. I felt warm hands holding me but didn't heed what was being said. All I wanted was to turn and leave. Go someplace where no one could find me. Where no one could call me names and tell me I was worthless.

It seemed to be a repeated theme in my life. Nobody thought I was worth much. The only person who ever saw me as I truly was had up and died on me, leaving me alone in a world that saw me as having no value.

Hands grasped my arms tighter and I felt my body shake. I wasn't shaking, someone was shaking me, gently, and murmuring words I didn't hear.

"Charli! Listen to me." I was given another shake, slightly harder this time. "Don't you ever believe that! You are worth saving. You are very worthy. Don't you ever believe otherwise."

Ethan, holding me by both my arms, bent over slightly to look me in the eye and was giving me little shakes to emphasize his point. I blinked back the tears the words had brought and saw Roland move up beside Ethan.

"He's right, Charli. So right. Don't ever believe you aren't worthy. Just look around. If you weren't worth something, all these people wouldn't be standing here waiting to make sure you were all right."

I looked past him to the faces gathered around, all serious, most looking very concerned. One face was past concerned, however. Bobby Turner stood there, tears streaming down his face, muttering to himself.

"What's he saying?" I asked Roland, who was standing closest to him.

"He's been muttering it was his fault you nearly got incinerated."

"But why? It was Stan, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was, love, but Bobby figures if he'd got the locks changed so Stan couldn't get back into the building this wouldn't have happened." Ethan's reply did more than anything else to return me to some sense of normal.

I slid away from Ethan's grasp on my arms and walked to Bobby.

"You listen to me, Bobby Turner, and listen good." He looked at me, his eyes swimming in tears. When he tried to speak I cut him off. "No. Listen. It wouldn't have mattered if the locks had been changed. When we were still upstairs, one of the firemen told me Stan pried the lock with a crowbar. He didn't use his keys. Ethan took those away from him the first day we were here. So it wouldn't have mattered at all. Look at it this way—at least he didn't wreck a brand-new lockset." My pathetic attempt at humor stopped his tears and Bobby tried to smile. It was a pretty feeble effort, but he

tried. "Now, you can go and get a new lock and install it tonight. Then, tomorrow sometime, you might think about putting some kind of alarm on the door. Hmm?"

"You got it, Charli. First thing tomorrow the door will be alarmed. And I'll post signs so everyone in here knows."

"Actually, I think they all just heard you. But post the sign for the few who aren't here right now."

"Okay."

Ethan and Roland moved up behind me then. Ethan's arm went around my shoulders and he pulled me closer.

"Come on, Sparky, let's get you home. I think you've had enough excitement for one day." He turned and waved. "Goodnight everyone. We'll be back in the morning to clean up the mess and get started."

I heard the chorus of goodnights and goodbyes and allowed the two men to lead me to Ethan's car at the front door. He'd obviously decided Roland and I could not both ride in the little MG. It had been replaced by a Lincoln Navigator. Talk about the sublime to the ridiculous. Only in this case I'm not sure which was which.

Roland held the front door for me while Ethan went around to his side. Once I was in, Roland climbed into the back. We all smelled a little like a wood fire and I knew I had black smudges on my face. I'd tried to wipe them off and only made them worse.

"Come on, little one, let's get you home. You can get cleaned up and climb into bed. Roland and I can talk business to you in there."

"Could I eat first?"

"Didn't you have your supper, Charli? I thought you took it with you." Roland's tone of surprise made me chuckle.

"I did. In fact, that's what we thought was burning at first. But then I discovered the power was off and the phone didn't work. So it's still sitting in the oven back there, stone cold."

"Well, I'm sure my mother or Maddie can find you something. In fact, Roland can phone ahead and let them know we're on our way, then you can eat as soon as we get there. As soon as you've washed your dirty face." Ethan used his thumb to try and remove another smudge then he laughed. "I just made it worse." He reached for my hand and held it the rest of the way home.

"Ethan, how on Earth did Michael manage to get the message to you? I mean, I know you can see him, but how did he do it? Just walk into the boardroom and start chatting?"

"He showed up in our meeting room and I knew by the colors I could see he was upset—going from red to blue and back—so I walked out into the hall where I could talk to him. He started talking before I got out of the room and I nearly blew it. As soon as he said you were in trouble I turned and started talking. If it hadn't been for Roland moving to stand between me and the rest of the people in the room, I'd have made a

fool of myself, but I didn't care." Ethan gave me one of those smiles guaranteed to make my knees weak. Good thing I wasn't standing up.

"All I knew was something was wrong and you needed me. When he told me about the fire, I dialed 911 and reported it. Told them I'd been talking to you and you'd said there was a fire and the phone line had gone dead."

"Poor Ethan. You've had to tell a lot of lies this past little while on my account. I'm sorry."

"Don't you be sorry. I'm not. God, Charli, if anything happened to you..." His hand tightened to the point where my hand hurt but I didn't move. I couldn't. To think he'd been upset because of me made me feel very special.

"Charli, dear, you can stop feeling sorry for him. It was me who was trying to dance around the room to keep the others from seeing what he was up to. I'm the one who looked foolish."

I felt Roland's hand as he grasped my shoulder and squeezed and when I turned he aimed a beaming smile my way.

"I'm just glad you both got the message. It was beginning to feel a little dicey there for a few minutes. And I wasn't looking forward to leaping out of a little window with a twelve-foot drop to the next piece of floor."

"Just put it out of your mind, Charli, try and forget about it. You're fine now. It's over." Roland's advice was good but I didn't think it would be easy to take. It still made me shiver when I thought about how much spite and hatred there'd been in Stan's words.

Maybe it was because they were the same words I thought I'd heard my father speak.

Ethan and Maddie fed me. If anyone had asked what I ate, I couldn't have told them. Almost before the last bite was in my mouth, Ethan was leading me upstairs and insisting I go to bed. I didn't argue. I was too tired. All I wanted was to lay my head on the pillow and let my cares disappear.

I know he stayed in the room after I got into bed, long enough to lean over and give me a nice, brotherly kiss.

Darn.

If I hadn't been so sleepy maybe I would have tried to take it further, but my eyes were already closing. His hand stroked my hair and I drifted off.

The sound of the door crashing open and footsteps rushing toward the bed woke me. By the time I'd fought my way clear of the sheet, somehow tangled around my head, I was almost coherent. Fuzzy-brained but coming out of whatever had turned my peaceful sleep into a voyage into terror.

"Sweetheart, are you all right?" Ethan had hold of me again, his arms around me feeling like a safe haven after the terror of my nightmare.

Still shaking, I looked up at him and saw he was pale in the dim light.

"I, Ethan,..." I was doing it again. Trying to say things, nothing coming out. It made me feel slightly stupid not to be able to put my feelings into words, but how did one describe indescribable terror? What words could paint the blackness swallowing me? The cold, damp fingers touching me? The feeling of dread wrapping itself insidiously around me and pulling me under?

"What happened? You were screaming. Something about..."

"A body. I know. It was so real, Ethan, I could smell it. I could see it. It was a body, a woman's body. It was lying beside a machine of some sort. Something like a big oven." I couldn't go on. The rest of the nightmare was probably what made me wake up screaming.

"And, Charli? There's more, isn't there?" How had he known? "What was it? Talk about it, then you won't feel so bad."

He sat on the side of the bed and I leaned against his shoulder, fighting the tears trying to escape.

"Oh, Ethan...it...I think..." How could I say this?

I thought I'd seen myself dead.

I heard other movement in the room and realized Roland, Maddie and Vivien had all entered the room while I was talking. Roland turned and left in a hurry, as though he'd forgotten something.

"Tell me. You'll feel better if you tell someone."

"Ethan, it was me. It looked like me. The body." I shuddered and felt his arms tighten around me.

"Shhhh, sweetheart. It wasn't you. You're here, you're safe."

I burrowed closer, taking comfort from his solid warmth. I heard the door again and turned to see Roland coming toward me. He had something in his hand.

"Give me your arm, Charli. I'm giving you something to help you relax. It won't make you sleep, unless you want to. It's just a very small dose of Valium."

I was about to protest when I saw the look in Ethan's eyes. He was almost as scared as I was. If this little shot helped me, maybe, by extension, it would help Ethan. I uncomplainingly held out my arm.

Maddie and Vivien pulled chairs beside the bed and sat quietly, waiting to see what happened.

I tried to smile at them but it didn't feel like a very successful smile. It felt instead as though I was making a face.

A distorted grimace of fear.

I tried to pull away from Ethan only to feel his arms tighten. He didn't want to let go, I didn't want him to leave. But we couldn't sit like this for the rest of the night.

"Maddie, how about something hot? Chocolate, maybe?"

Roland stopped her before she was even off her chair.

"No hot chocolate, tea or coffee, they all contain caffeine, which is a stimulant. I've just given her a relaxant. No point in one undoing the good of the other. Hot milk, maybe? How about it, Charli, a cup of hot milk sound good about now?"

Never having had hot milk, I had no idea whether it would work or not, but it sounded good. Comfort food. I nodded without speaking, still held tight against Ethan's chest.

By the time the hot milk did its work and the others had all gone back to their beds, only Ethan remained to ward off the sleep I was in fear of finding. If I went back to sleep, I might have the dream again. And I didn't want that to happen. The next time, I might not wake up. I knew it had been me I'd seen on the floor. Next to something that might have been a furnace.

I could think of only one place with a furnace so big.

Harmon Court.

I was leaning against Ethan's chest, my ear just over his heart, hearing it beat in a slow, steady, peaceful rhythm. Content to stay there for the rest of the night if he'd stay with me. Then I felt his muscles tighten as he started to move. I couldn't believe myself when I moaned and tightened my grip.

"It's all right, sweetheart, I'm not going anywhere. I'm just going to turn out the light. I'll be right back." He reached across me while speaking and turned on the small bedside lamp to cast a very pale glow over the other side of the bed. When he stood, I felt cold and alone. I watched him cross to the door and flip the switch, willing him to hurry. I wanted his arms around me to protect me. To hold me. To care for me.

To love me.

When he sat beside me again I stayed back against the pillows and watched as he reached for my hand. His other hand rose to push the hair back from the side of my face. I had taken the bands and pins out before going to bed and my long hair fell in waves around my shoulders.

"God, you're so lovely, my love. Your hair...your eyes. Your lips." I knew then he was going to kiss me. This time it wouldn't be me kissing him to make him stop talking. This would be a kiss that might tell me whether he felt for me as I felt for him. As I gazed at him, he leaned toward me, his eyes holding mine, both of us searching. I knew what I wanted to see and I found it. His feelings for me were there for all to see if they but looked.

I don't know if he saw in my eyes what he was looking for. I can only assume he did if his moan meant anything. I saw him close his eyes as his lips met mine. My eyes closed and I reveled in his warmth. His kiss was soft and cool. Exquisitely gentle. I returned the same tenderness, not wanting to rush and spoil things. Then I felt him deepen the kiss and I opened my lips to his tongue.

I was lost—in his kiss, in him.

When he suddenly pulled back, I felt abandoned.

"What..."

"Shhhh, sweetheart, shhhh. This isn't the time. You need sleep. You've been through so much today, I'm amazed you're still with me."

"Ethan, I..." I didn't know what to say. I wanted to ask him not to go, he thought he should to do the right thing for me. "Please, don't go. I don't want to be alone. If the nightmare comes back..."

His mouth on mine silenced me. It was not a lover's languid caress but a hard, greedy kiss that told of more to come. Then, as though to tell me it was all a lie, he sat back.

"Move over. Slide over. We're not going to do anything in this bed tonight, love, we'll save it for another time. But I will stay with you. I'll stretch out beside you. You can go to sleep and know you're safe."

Once more Ethan had shown his caring nature. He'd like to be doing something else in this bed, and so, in all honesty, would I. But he'd stay with me, without touching me or loving me, to keep me safe. His actions said more than any of his words.

"Ethan, thank you." My voice was a whisper, my hand curled against his chest.

"Charli, love, I'd do anything for you, and I think you know it. So if you want something, just ask." He took my hand from his chest, kissed each finger, then tucked it back in place. As he did so, he pulled me closer to his side, holding me with his arm. He used his hand to guide my head to his shoulder.

"Go to sleep, love. I'm here."

I relaxed against him and sighed. How could anything be better than this?

Sometime during the night I woke up, alone.

Ethan wasn't beside me on the bed. I opened my eyes and glanced around to see him sitting at the table by the window. He was whispering to someone, but there was no one there. Then I realized he was talking to Michael. Maybe it was the hour, or maybe it was because he was just talking, but tonight I had a hard time seeing Michael's aura. He was nothing more than a patch of light against the back of the chair.

"Ethan, Michael..." I called softly, not meaning to intrude but wanting them to know I was awake. Ethan stood and walked back to the bed.

"Sorry, Charli, I hope I didn't scare you. Michael woke me. Said we had to talk. About Margaret."

Ethan sat beside me on the bed and Michael hovered nearby. Obviously it wasn't bothering Michael finding Ethan and me in the same bed.

"Has he told you all of it?"

"Yes, my love. He has. Tomorrow morning I'll go down to the city planning office and see what I can find." He turned to the glow that was Michael. "Do you know if there was ever a pool in the building? Some of the older buildings just closed in and built over the pools and there might be a pool room under the main floor on one side."

I don't know. Never heard about there being one. Wouldn't there have to be a door someplace to get to it?

"Not if they put it under an apartment. Might be no more than a trapdoor to the basement area. See any trapdoors when you were living there? Or on your recent travels?"

I could tell the two men had been having a good talk earlier. The easy camaraderie spoke to it. And Michael had remained his usual rainbow hue when Ethan sat beside me on the bed. I wondered if Michael found us together. If he had, he was dealing with my feelings for Ethan and dealing with them well.

Thank God! What would I have done if he hadn't? Thoughts of an irate spirit throwing things and jumping up in down in anger flashed through my brain just long enough to make me giggle.

Man and spirit looked at me, questioning looks I wouldn't answer. I couldn't tell them what I was thinking. They'd think I was nuts!

Ethan figured it out though, because he looked at me and deadpanned, "Michael woke me up. Had to tell me about Margaret and this seemed the best time. He said it didn't bother him."

By this time, Michael had caught up. He laughed and glowed a nice warm pink. Obviously not a hundred percent behind the idea, but not displeased.

"Thanks, Michael." He'd know what I meant.

Don't worry, babe, I like the guy. When Ethan realized Michael was going to talk about him, he stood and moved over to the table again. Gave us a little privacy. *And I'm the one told you to find yourself a new guy. You could have done worse!*

I took the backhanded compliment as he'd intended and blew him a kiss. He glowed a little redder then dimmed to normal.

"Michael, is there a trapdoor anywhere in the building? I don't remember ever seeing one. Unless it's in one of the apartments."

Ethan heard my mundane question and came back to the bed and sat beside me again. Michael hovered near the foot of the bed.

Not one I remember.

"Tomorrow we'll use Stan's keys and check out all the rooms on the main floor. If there's something there, we'll find it."

"Thank you. Margaret sounded so upset to think she hadn't been found yet."

How'd you feel if you were dead but you couldn't leave? Because nobody knew you were dead or where your mortal remains were hidden?

"I guess I'd be upset, too, Michael. If we're going to do this, and we have to be there early for the delivery anyway, I've got to get some sleep." I yawned. I'd been trying to hide them for the past few minutes. Now I'd given up.

See you in the morning, Charli, Ethan. Don't forget those plans.

With that, Michael was gone. He obviously wasn't going to stick around to see if Ethan planned to tuck me in again. He was being awfully considerate for the spirit of a dead husband, watching his living wife with what was, hopefully, the new man in her life.

"Go to sleep, Charli. I'm sorry we woke you." He pulled me back into the curve of his shoulder and tucked my head under his chin. For comfort, it was sublime. For erotic, it was next to nowhere.

For right now?

It was enough.

Chapter Thirteen

"Yech!"

I was busy pulling spider web out of my hair and off my face when I actually saw the spider whose hard work I was destroying. Coming face-to-face with the poor, hardworking little bug while I tore her home to shreds made me feel a little bit sad. Then I remembered why I was here in the first place and went back to gritting my teeth.

"What?" Ethan's voice came from behind a pile of old couches and chairs, possibly the original home of some of the stuff piled in front of my door the day before and set on fire.

"Spider web. Nothing serious."

"Good. We don't have time for serious. Those guys will be here with the lumber order soon and we still haven't found anything down here." We were working our way through an apartment at the rear of the building that had been turned into storage areas for the tenants. The apartment was in such pathetic shape it wasn't habitable, so this was the next best thing.

I stood up, looked around and wonder why we were here this early in the morning looking for a trapdoor. Then I remembered poor Margaret's state when she'd been with me yesterday and my decision to help.

"Is it possible we're in the wrong part of the building, Ethan? There's definitely no trapdoor here and this looks like the original hardwood flooring. Nothing has been built over top of it." I was standing there, staring at the door in the dining room wall and wondering if we'd ever find this room Margaret had told us about.

I turned to Ethan and started toward him when something tweaked my brain.

Door. Dining room.

I turned where I stood and looked again. There really was a door in the dining room.

"Ethan, look. In here." I waited until he joined me then remarked, as casually as I could, "This door isn't in any of the other apartments. And I'm not sure, but I don't think this room is as big either."

By this time I'd crossed to the door, skirting the stacks of old furniture. I was afraid to open it. I heard Ethan coming up behind me and decided I'd let him open the door. I didn't want to be the one who found something. Like a body. The deceased and probably well-deteriorated body of a woman.

Fascinated, I watched him reach for the doorknob, cringed slightly as he bent his fingers to grasp the knob and then turned to open the door. When the knob didn't move, I breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe we could do this another day.

I still watched when he pulled Stan's keys from his pants pocket and looked through them. There were nearly two dozen of them. Maybe none of them would fit and we'd be spared any further search.

Yeah, sure.

I don't know if it was beginner's luck or if he'd found the only key for that kind of lock by its name, but the first key in the hole worked.

The door obviously hadn't been opened for some years. The doorknob turned but the door stuck. I looked to see if it had been painted over, but it seemed it was simply the building's settling that made it stick. A couple of quick tugs and Ethan had it open. He turned to me and I jumped.

"You coming?"

As if he was going any place without me!

I clutched his arm as he started down the stairs. I didn't want to let go—just in case we found anything, although I really didn't think there would be anything to find.

I realized why we hadn't found a trapdoor or any indication of a pool when we reached the bottom of the stairs. By the time we were in the basement we would have been under the next apartment. We'd started looking in the wrong apartment.

The smell assaulting us at the bottom of the stairs wasn't very pleasant, but it didn't really concern me. It was the smell of stale air and dust with some animal odor, probably mice and rats. Nothing you could describe as "a real bad stench".

We stopped and surveyed the space. It looked like it had been a furnace room, or maybe the old boiler room. There were five large tanks standing along one wall, rusty, covered in dust and spider webs. There was just enough fresh air coming from someplace to make it bearable.

I saw the other door first and touched Ethan's shoulder. "Over there."

He turned and headed toward it with me still clinging to his arm. His hand came up and covered mine and the warmth made me feel slightly more secure. "You'll be fine. Even if we find her, it's not like it will be a surprise or anything."

I followed him blindly, knowing he was right. If we found her, we were actually doing Margaret a favor. Her spirit would be free to leave.

The thought made me braver and I stepped around Ethan and headed for the other door. Now I wanted to find her.

As I reached for the handle, I felt Ethan's hands on my shoulders.

"You sure about this?" he asked.

"I'm sure. I've met Margaret's spirit. I want to help her."

He reached around me and covered my hand with his and we both pulled the door open.

The stench of decay nearly knocked us over.

And it wasn't just the smell of a dead, decomposing body. It was something worse. Ethan yanked me back and when we cleared the doorway, he spun and slammed the door shut.

We were both taking deep breaths of what now smelled like fresh air, trying to rid our minds and noses of the awful smell. Ethan recovered enough to talk.

"What was that? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. And I don't know what it was. How come we never smelled it until the door was open? The smell is so bad it should have been carrying throughout this building."

While I'd been talking, Ethan was on the phone. We'd had so many visits from the police lately they'd given him a direct line to someone who would help if we called. And I figured this was one time when we really needed them.

My eyes were still burning from the odor we'd unleashed. The stink reminded me of the smell of the neglected kennel runs on the next property over from where my family lived in Bay View – fecal matter and the overpowering ammonia smell of urine.

That's what this room smelled like.

I knew I wasn't going back in there. I couldn't. The smell was too strong for someone without an oxygen mask. I guessed we'd have the fire department as well as the police, again. They might want to consider setting up a substation in this building the way we were going.

"Let's go. We'll wait for them upstairs." Ethan took my arm and led me toward the stairs.

"Did you see anything? Was Margaret's body in there?"

"I think so. There was a mound on the floor beside some kind of pump. I suspect it was her."

Michael's rainbow hues suddenly appeared at the base of the stairs.

Did you find her? Was she in there?

"We think so, Michael. But we can't go in there. We've had to call the fire department and police again. The smell in there is not all from Margaret."

That bad, huh?

"Worse." Ethan's one-word reply silenced Michael. Michael's presence suddenly disappeared and I knew where he'd gone. Obviously spirits and ghosts don't have a problem with bad smells. I put my hand on Ethan's arm, intending to slow him down.

"We'll wait for him upstairs, Charli. We have to wait for the cops, too." From the look on his face I knew it would do me no good to argue with him. We trailed upstairs and I could hear both of us inhaling huge amounts of the fresher air.

"Let's go wait for them on the front step. It'll smell even better out there." I took his hand and he didn't put up any fight.

We sat on the steps, waiting for something to happen. Neither of us spoke. How could we? We'd just discovered another body. The second one in a week. It certainly made one think. How many more could there be? This building seemed to have more than its share of bad news and dead people. Maybe we were trying to save a sinking ship.

I leaned toward Ethan and moved to put my head on his shoulder. He abruptly pulled away and stood up.

Obviously what was allowed in the bedroom wasn't for public consumption. I hadn't realized his feelings for me were like that. I pulled back from those thoughts, trying to shut them right out of my head, but I didn't succeed.

I'd been under the impression from his obvious public displays of affection in the past week that Ethan felt something for me. Now he was treating me like a stranger. Well, if he thought I was the kind of woman who'd let him do what he wanted in the bedroom then deny it outside of those four walls, he had another think coming. If I wasn't good enough for the public Ethan Harwood, I wasn't good enough for him, period. Anywhere.

As those thoughts circled through my head, I stood. I went back inside without speaking to Ethan and took the elevator to my apartment. The mess there and the smell of smoke took my mind off the problems downstairs. As I climbed over the last of the pile of burned rubbish, I heard the phone ringing. It hadn't been working yesterday so obviously someone had fixed it. When I picked it up, all I heard was the distant static and echo of an open line.

"Hello?" Silence. The empty sound of a line supposedly in use. "Who's there? Hello?"

I heard the soft click of someone hanging up and decided somebody must have dialed a wrong number. I just made it to the bedroom when the phone rang again. Once more, when I answered there was nothing but the sound of that annoying open line.

"Come on, whoever you are, have the guts to talk to me!" I was getting a little panicked by these calls, even though there'd only been two. They seemed deliberate. Not like a true wrong number. The line remained open much too long. I decided I'd had enough and hung up. The phone rang again before I had even made it five steps away.

"Will you stop this!" I yelled into the phone, hoping someone would pay attention.

"Stop what? Charli, is that you?" It was Roland Driver.

"Roland, did you call here, twice, and just not say anything?" Before he could reply, I realized how stupid the question was. "Never mind, forget it. Where are you?"

"I'm at the city planning office. Let Ethan know there is a door in the—"

"We found it Roland. We're, that is, Ethan is downstairs waiting for the police and probably the fire department. The smell in the room is so bad we can't even go in."

"Is Margaret there?" We had filled him in on the latest developments at breakfast that morning.

"Ethan thinks so. He saw something near one of pumps. He thinks it's her body."

"Poor thing. I hope it is. Then she can be treated with the respect she deserves instead of being left in a cold, dank, smelly basement." He made a sound I took to be a shudder and fully understood why.

The silence that followed was almost like a memorial.

"Uh, Charli, I have to ask, what were you yelling about when you first answered?"

I'd hoped he forgotten about it, but I should have known better. It wasn't Roland's way.

"Somebody was phoning here and just letting the line stay open, without saying anything. I thought that's who you were."

"Let me know if it happens again. I'm picking up cell phones for you and Bobby this afternoon, then you can have them disconnect the line. When they put it back in after the construction, ask for a different number and get them to keep it unlisted."

"Roland, the one I have now is unlisted. So I'd guess it was someone with a wrong number."

"Unhuh." That was his total comment on the subject.

"Roland, it's all right. I was just a little spooked after being in the basement so it bothered me. It was really nothing."

"And you said Ethan is still downstairs?"

"Yes, he was being a little strange about everything and sort of shut me out. So I came upstairs to see what this mess looked like in the morning light."

"Charli, I have to tell you something, then I need you to go back down and stick to Ethan like glue. This is going to be really hard on him."

"Why?"

"Because Ethan is the one who found his father's body. Everybody thought he was out of town on a business trip while his body was really in the garden shed out back. Vivien and Ethan were away, visiting some relative. Ethan's father went out there to the shed to get something and had a massive heart attack. No one was worried about him because he was supposed to be in Dallas. It was purely by accident Ethan found him, and by then, it was not pleasant. The smell was horrible, the decomposition well advanced. Then they had to leave the body there until the police were finished checking everything out. He told me once it was the smell and the sound of the flies buzzing that upset him most."

Oh, God, and I'd just left him downstairs with those thoughts in his head. And this was the second time he'd found a body in such a frightening state. How had he stood it when he found Lillian? Maybe I just missed his reaction in all the excitement.

"Roland, thank you. I'm going back down right now. He's supposed to lead them downstairs and I can't let him do that now. I'll see you when you get here."

I slammed the phone and ran to the door. As I shut it behind me I heard it ring again but I didn't stop to answer it.

When I went out the door to the front steps there was a crowd gathered around Ethan. Two policemen, three firemen and two EMTs. I wasn't sure why they were there. This was a very dead body, not one that could be resuscitated. Then I remembered. There was some rule I vaguely remembered that said if you called in a body, it had to be pronounced dead by someone before it could be moved and only an EMT or the ME could do it. The firemen were busy fitting one of the EMTs with a mask and air tank. One of the cops was already outfitted and I saw Ethan reaching to take a mask. I ran down the steps and stood in front of him so fast no one had time to react. Before he could get a good grip on it, I took the mask out of his hands.

"I'll go down, Ethan. The lumber is due any minute—I need you to deal with that. I'll show them what they need to see."

I was pulling the mask over my face, ignoring the emotions I knew would come from him, glad there was someone else there to help me. The fireman never batted an eye at the abrupt change, just helped me tighten the strap.

"Are you sure, Charli? It's not very pleasant." Ethan's jaw was clenched, which told me just how bad I was going to find it in the basement.

"I'm sure. I'll go, you stay up here." My voice sounded muffled behind the mask but he heard me. I started to move away but he reached out and stopped me by taking my arm. He leaned close, put his mouth to my ear. I felt the kiss first, then heard the words.

"Thank you, my love, I'm not sure I could have gone down there again. I'll wait for you in the lobby." Another gentle kiss and he released me. He'd obviously been terribly upset by what we'd found and I hadn't even realized it.

I started off again, this time with the other men in tow. The EMT was walking next to me, his mask sitting on top of his head. He must have done this before. His nonchalance was a bit unnerving. I figured he should be as jumpy as I was, but then I realized the two men behind me were just as blasé about the whole thing. I'd just have to suck it up and try not to fall apart.

By the time we were back in the building, I wished I'd left the mask off until we were in the basement. My face was hot and sweaty behind the clear front and I could feel the sweat trickling down my cheeks where the edges sat.

As we descended the steps, I waved my arms to dislodge more of the spider web. It seemed to have been replaced since we were down here earlier. Busy little insects.

I stopped outside the door and waited while the men with me pulled on their masks and the policeman and one of the firemen turned on powerful flashlights. I pulled the door open and let them enter first. I brought up the rear and I can honestly say I was a reluctant bystander at this scene.

I looked around the room and when I saw what sat in the corner behind the pump I realized what had caused the smell.

There was an old mattress there, with garbage strewn all around it. One of the things I noticed was a banana peel. It wasn't more than a day old. It hadn't dried up or

even turned black. That meant someone had been down here recently. How could they stand the smell? I wondered, too, how they'd got the sticking door open. Was there another entrance we hadn't found? Mind you, we hadn't stuck around to look, either, once we smelled –

The sickening odor came from the pail in the corner. Whoever had eaten the banana must be *living* down here. Eeeuuww! The bucket was his bathroom. I'd picked out the cause of the smell without knowing it. Fecal matter and the ammonia smell rising from a couple of gallons of urine.

I realized I was taking deeper breaths through the mask although I couldn't smell anything. As I looked around I saw the mound Ethan thought to be Margaret now being looked at by the EMT. One of the cops waved everyone away from the body just as I started to move toward him but a hand restrained me. It was a fireman. He was shaking his head and pointing upwards. I heard his muffled voice.

"Upstairs, Mrs. Robertson. We don't need you down here now. Just wait outside on the steps for us."

I headed toward the stairs then stopped and looked back.

Two spirits supervised the proceedings from the corner. I noticed the one I thought of as Margaret was glowing a little redder than she had in my apartment and for some reason, Michael's football jersey stood out as plain as day. Margaret's brightening glow told me she must be awfully glad her body had finally been found.

The EMTs followed me up the stairs. Obviously they weren't needed for this crime scene. I overheard one of them talking about the state of the body then he remarked, "Sure am glad I don't have to do anything about *that*! Geez, you can't even tell if was a woman or a man." *Poor Margaret*. My stomach heaved once and I swallowed hard, several times, trying to stop myself being sick.

I didn't take off the mask until I was back outside, then I let one of the firemen help me. I hadn't noticed who was standing around when I came out, but once out from behind the mask I glanced around and was surprised to see LeRoy Helmes had come calling. His tall, lanky shape was standing in the group, partially hidden by a fireman. It was his hair I recognized first. His usual shoulder-length flying wedge cut couldn't be missed. I often wondered what his long, narrow face would look like if his sandy hair was styled differently. From this distance I realized what he had suited him. That's probably why he never changed it. It went with the striped, long-sleeve T-shirt and the baggy chinos.

"Hey, LeRoy? If you're here, who's minding the store?" I smiled as I walked toward him. What I didn't see, because there were too many people in the way, was the big yellow Lab standing on the other side of him.

When I finally saw the dog, I fell in love.

The dog could only be described as beautiful. His tongue lolled out the side of his mouth and made him look like he was smiling. His eyes gazed upward and flashed back and forth to whomever was talking, as if he could easily follow this conversation. I

almost expected him to start talking, he looked so intelligent. His tail was gently fanning the air around him and the goofy grin just got bigger while he waited.

"Hiya, Charli. Glad to see you've got shoes on again." LeRoy leaned over to give me a kiss on the cheek and as he backed away the dog took a leap. Straight at me. Fast thinking by a couple of the rescue team standing behind me kept me from being bowled over, but the yellow dog was still trying to get my attention.

"LeRoy, for crying out loud, control him!" I heard the anger in Ethan's voice and tried to head him off.

"Ethan, it's okay. The dog just wants to say hello. He saw LeRoy give my cheek a peck and I think he thought he'd try the same thing." I held my hand out to the dog. He licked my fingers in a hurried manner that looked like some kind of feeding frenzy. He was the happiest dog I'd ever seen.

"Just hang on to him. He nearly knocked Charli over." I think it was then Ethan began to wonder why LeRoy was here. "What's up, LeRoy? You should be at work."

LeRoy was the guy in charge while Ethan helped me. Ethan had decided he was overdue for some time off, told me he'd not had a holiday in nearly three years. When I thought about it, I realized he hadn't been away since I started working for him. That was the only reason I didn't argue when he told me he was staying away from work for most of the next few months while we sorted out the renovations.

"I know boss, but we have a little problem. Meet Mikey." I looked up with a start, wondering if he was joking. LeRoy was looking at me. "No joke, Charli. That really is his name."

"So, what about him?" Ethan was being rather short with LeRoy but I didn't think it had anything to do with LeRoy being here. I think he was still feeling the effects of his earlier find.

"So, well...Mikey has a problem. He needs a home." I looked again at the dog and I didn't think the thoughts going through my mind would make me very popular with either Ethan or his mother.

"Where did you get him, LeRoy? He's gorgeous." By now I was kneeling in front of the dog and we were busy having a love-in. I patted and hugged him, he washed my face. And the faster his tongue lapped, the harder his tail beat LeRoy's leg beside me.

"He's the dog I took to the meeting with the client last week. The one that clinched the account for us." LeRoy looked down at me. "Would you please stand up, Charli? I'm going to have bruises where his tail is hitting. That tail should be classified as a dangerous weapon." LeRoy reached down to help me but Ethan got there first. He helped me up, giving me a look that said he knew what I was thinking and the answer was no. I looked back and smiled anyway.

"Yes? Please, Ethan. Say yes." I was holding his hand and I felt his grip tighten.

"LeRoy, why doesn't he have a home? Where did you get him?" Ethan made it sound like an inquisition.

"Weeeelllll, I just sort of picked him up at the pound. But I didn't realize that if they took him back, he'd be euthanized. Apparently they figure a dog is unmanageable, out of control and can't be adopted again if it comes back too fast. I thought I'd explained myself to the woman there that I only needed him for a couple of days and would be returning him, but now they're saying she was wrong. Anyway, I couldn't let them do it. I took him home. Everything was fine until we found out Bennie is allergic." Bennie was Benjamin, his youngest son and a really angelic little boy. I could see LeRoy's problem and hoped I could convince Ethan to give my solution a try.

All the years I'd lived at home I wanted a dog but my parents refused. Said it was too much money and they didn't want the fuss. In the city we couldn't have one because we lived in an apartment. But I would be living in a condo as soon as it was renovated, so all I had to do was convince Ethan to let me keep the dog at his house until my apartment was done.

"So now you have to find a home for him and you thought of us? Not your best thinking, LeRoy." Ethan frowned and I didn't have to wonder what he was thinking, I knew. He wanted to say no. While we stood in a silent circle, Mikey sat in the middle, watching us and probably trying to decide how to ingratiate himself further. He suddenly flopped down and rolled on his back, his tail lashing wildly and his grin back in place.

How could anyone say no to him?

Ethan couldn't.

"Oh, all right. I guess we could keep him at my mother's until your apartment is done. I'll have to phone and ask her, though, Charli. I can't just spring him on her."

I threw my arms around his neck, gave him the biggest, sloppiest kiss and a hug then turned and did the same to the dog.

Mikey must have realized he'd just arrived in doggy heaven. He suddenly started to bark, an excited, shrieking noise sure to attract attention. I knelt beside him, shushing him as I did.

"Mikey, shut up or you're going to spoil it. No one is going to want you if you make that kind of racket."

As though he understood every word I'd just said, the dog quit barking. He looked from me to Ethan then back to me. As though saying thank you, he reached out and gave a quick lick to Ethan's fingers. Then he lay down, curled up with his head on Ethan's feet and closed his eyes. All was right with his world.

"Thanks, you two. I was getting a little frantic." It wasn't until LeRoy handed me the leash the reality sank in. I had just acquired a full-grown dog named Mikey. I knew next to nothing about dogs so I was going to have to do some fast learning.

Roland walked into this little scene and caused a minor commotion. When he reached us he leaned forward to give me a peck on the cheek, and Mikey took exception to his close proximity. The dog heaved himself to his feet and put himself between

Roland and me. His hackles stood on end and a low growl rumbled in his deep chest. Roland backed away quickly, looking down to see what had warned him off.

"Who's this?" He held his hand out, fingers closed, to allow the dog to get his scent. "Lovely dog."

"This's Mikey. He's going home with us today. I just got my very first dog, Roland!" I'd been getting more and more excited as I spoke and Mikey must have taken my attitude as a signal that Roland was allowed to be close.

I saw Roland look at Ethan then turn back to me. He was laughing.

"What?" I demanded. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing, Charli, absolutely nothing." Roland strolled toward the front of the building, leaving me wondering what he'd found so amusing.

"Ethan?"

"Nothing, Charli. Forget it." He, too, was smiling and seemed more relaxed.

I realized Margaret's body had been loaded into the coroner's wagon while we'd been admiring Mikey. The van was just pulling away from the curb. Obviously Ethan felt better.

LeRoy was standing alone, looking toward the building and the rescue team gathered on the front step. The firemen were now in their regular clothes, the heavy coats and rubber pants removed. Masks and air tanks had all been stowed in the rescue truck standing at the front door. I hadn't realized until then they'd just driven up on the grass and right to the steps.

"What happened? You have a fire?" LeRoy had been told what we were doing with the old building but he hadn't heard about the bodies we kept finding. He would hear about it later, on the local TV news, so I figured he could be told now.

While I enlightened him, I watched Roland and Ethan, once more exchanging information with uniformed policeman. I did see, briefly, one of the plainclothes detectives who'd been there the day before, but he was heading for his car without talking to us.

"You sure have been having some excitement around here, Charli. Maybe it's a good thing you'll have Mikey now. He can protect you."

"He's a Lab, LeRoy," I scoffed. "What I know about the breed, he'll probably open the door to the guy trying to break in and show him where the silver is. If I had any, of course." This brought laughs from a few of the others who heard me. Mikey was doing his best to make sure he was accepted. He was moving from one to the other of the rescue crew, licking hands and wagging his tail.

Having Mikey there gave me another idea. I turned to find Ethan. He was standing back now, watching the crowd and looking unsettled. I gave Mikey's leash back to LeRoy and told him to hold the dog while I went and talked to our boss.

As I walked toward him, Ethan swung his gaze back to me. He didn't smile. He just looked at me.

"You're something else, lady." His comment made me blink in surprise.

"What? What do you mean?" I wasn't sure if he'd been complimenting me or if he was being sarcastic. His voice was dead flat and his eyes were hooded.

He stepped toward me then and pulled me into the circle of his arms.

"You, you minx, are very good at getting what you want. I just agreed you could have a dog and it only took you about ten seconds." He leaned closer and kissed me gently. "Thank you, Charli." Now he was whispering in my ear. Anyone watching wouldn't have known he was speaking.

"You're welcome." I knew what he was talking about, I didn't need a picture. "Roland told me about your father, on the phone. I'm sorry if I got a little annoyed at you. When he told me, it explained your reaction. I'm just sorry you had to go through it again."

He hugged me hard then. And when he eventually let go he took my hand and laced his fingers through mine.

"Let's go introduce your new dog to everyone. I suppose you'd like me to agree we should tell the others if they want a pet they can have one."

I smiled at him and nodded. This man could read my mind.

"Okay. I'll even tell them. But let's get in there and get to work. The lumber's going to be here any minute and we need a place to stack it. We'll discuss everything else upstairs, later this afternoon. And we'll keep LeRoy here. He can make a food run for us. There are at least four of us who will have to be fed."

"Make sure he finds some dog food while he's at it. It's the least he can do since I agreed to save his sorry hide."

We were both relaxing and felt better about this morning. We could discuss the whole thing later, out of earshot of the rest of the tenants.

For now, we had a building to renovate.

I'd managed to put the strange calls out of my mind while I'd been downstairs. Walking into my apartment and hearing the phone ring again brought everything back in a rush. I raced to answer it, hoping I was wrong.

I wasn't.

There was no one there.

Chapter Fourteen

For the next three weeks absolutely nothing happened.

No, that's not quite true. Lots happened with the building. The renovations on the fourth floor were coming along like gangbusters. The number of people working each day fluctuated according to who was available. By the time we finished tearing out the walls and started over, it became apparent it wouldn't take long to finish my apartment, Ruthie's place and 4D.

Ethan nudged me in the direction of expanding my apartment and in the back of my mind I wanted to believe it had something to do with the feelings growing between us. He never said anything. Just helped me decide what I wanted where and helped me pick out the colors for the paint. He never interfered.

I spent the first week waiting for the phone to ring again and have an empty, open line, but it didn't happen.

The second week I only thought about it when the phone actually rang.

The third week I forgot about it completely.

During the busy three weeks, the police kept us informed on the advances they made in the case of Margaret's murder. She had been bludgeoned and stabbed, exactly the same as Lillian Yarman. They didn't come right out and say so but I took it to mean we had a serial killer on the loose in Harmon Court.

Unfortunately, they had no clues as to whom, why or with what. It left all of us feeling strangely unsettled. The women took to going about outside their apartments only with their husbands present except during the meetings. I never went anywhere without Mikey.

The renovations on the fourth floor were nearly complete in the first four weeks. We knew it would take longer on the third and second floors because there were more things that needed fixing. Bad linoleum had left the sub-floor in most of the apartments in such a state of disrepair the entire sub-floor was to be replaced before new carpet or linoleum went down.

As I returned from the last meeting before we started the third floor I saw the glow of a presence I assumed was Michael hovering around my apartment door. I didn't pay any attention to him as he'd been around, commenting on and watching everything we'd done for the last month. So when things started flying through the air in the general direction of my head I was stunned.

I barely had time to duck before the first piece of wood flew past. Obviously not Michael. This spirit was moving the scrap lumber pile outside my apartment door by

heaving it all at me, one piece at a time. It fell over the staircase railing into the center of the building and clattered all the way to the first floor.

Mikey was no help. He cowered on the floor, his hackles up, and emitted his bass grumble. "Not much of a guard dog, are you pal?" He appeared more frightened than I. "Stop it!" My voice was angry and I expected it to at least slow this ghost down. It didn't. He just flung things faster then started shouting.

Bitch. Whore. You're just as bad as your mother!

"I beg your pardon?" It suddenly dawned on me I might be the recipient of some misdirected hatred. "I'm just as bad as who?" This had to be a case of mistaken identity. "Who is my mother, if you think I'm so bad?" I was having trouble talking and ducking at the same time, but my question seemed to slow the flow of invective and missiles.

Don't try tricking me, you bitch. You're your mother's daughter. You look just like her. I couldn't make a mistake. Louise Walters was a whore. You're a whore. A slut. Bitch!

I realized then I was definitely not the person this ghost thought I was. I ducked again as another, larger piece of wood hurtled my way.

"Hold it, bub," I yelled just before ducking again. "My mother's name is not Louise Walters. My mother is Celeste Martin. She lives in California. And she is none of those things you keep calling me. In fact, she's so damned straight-laced she wouldn't even know what some of those names meant."

I knew I was exaggerating when I made the claim, but I was mad. In fact, I was furious. This thing was hurling lumber at me and I wasn't even who it thought I was. My words must have got through to his muddled brain because there was suddenly another drop in the numbers and speed of the projectiles flying at me.

You're not Louise's daughter? The faltering words gave me hope.

"No, I'm not. I never met Louise Walters. She died a long time ago, way before my time." I knew who Louise Walters was—rising young vaudeville star nearly a hundred years ago. I stood upright and started moving toward my door. "Think about it. Do the math, buddy. I'm not quite thirty and she died more than fifty years ago. My name, before I got married, was Charleen Martin. There are no Walters in my family tree at all."

The presence slowed from a whirling dervish of rainbow colors to a more sedate, spinning glow.

Well, hell. Damnation, woman, if you're not her daughter then you're no help to me.

"What kind of help did you expect to get with that attitude? If you think I'd do anything for you after all this, you are sadly mistaken."

Oh, come on, you know you'll help me. You're helping Margaret and Michael. So you gotta help me.

"Over my dead body!"

Oops. Considering the number of ghosts and spirits this building seemed to be home to, that was probably not the smartest thing to say.

I saw the rainbow hues suddenly vibrate and realized this ghost was laughing. At least his version of a laugh. The sounds I heard were a gasping breath followed by a squeak. Not a pleasant laugh – for real or in a ghostly setting.

“Like I said, I won’t be helping you after this attack.”

Ah, please, you gotta help. If you don’t, I’ll be stuck here for the rest of eternity. I need someone to release me so I can pass over.

Release him. Pass over. Was this another of those ghosts stuck in the wrong place? I’d have to ask Michael about this.

“What kind of help do you need?” I hoped he didn’t take my words the wrong way and think I was backing down.

The ghostly glow settled at the top of the steps, and it struck me he was probably sitting on the stairs, leaving a place for me beside him.

Come on, sit down. I won’t hurt you. I know you can see me, you saw Margaret. And thanks, by the way, for helping her. That’s why I thought you might help me.

“Well, you certainly have a strange way of showing your thanks.”

If I’d known you weren’t related to Louise, I wouldn’t have done anything. I won’t hurt you. But when it comes to that woman I can’t seem to do anything without losing my temper.

Now there was a picture I didn’t want to imagine. A ghost throwing a temper tantrum. I decided this ghost must be the one I’d been calling “Attitude”. He certainly had one, and not one I liked so far.

While Attitude talked, I watched Mikey. The dog lay quietly, cocking his head from one side to the other as though he could see or hear something. He’d stopped growling and his hackles no longer made him look like a Rhodesian Ridgeback. He was creeping slowly on his belly, coming closer. He didn’t appear to be upset by Attitude’s presence.

“What kind of help do you need?” I was now sitting beside him and wondering why. I was *not* going to help this ghost. I refused to give in and change my mind.

I need someone to fix a story for me. In the paper. It has to be one of those revelation stories everyone reads because of the titillation value. You know...scarlet woman had secret lover. Something along those lines.

“Scarlet woman? Titillation? How old are you? Nobody ever uses those words nowadays.”

Well, I was fifty-six when I died. That was in 1920.” I must have looked shocked, or something, because he continued, “*Yeah, I know, I’ve been hanging around here for a long, long time. And it’s all Louise’s fault.*

“Why? What did she do to you?”

It’s what she didn’t do. Somebody leaked a story to the paper about the affair she was supposed to be having with me. Instead of denying it she played coy and refused to answer, so everyone thought the worst. Including my dear, sweet wife.

Aha! The truth was beginning to poke through and I was getting the picture. But how he thought I could help him I had no idea.

Before you ask, I want you to get her diary and release it to someone at the paper. Let them read it. And get them to publish a story saying I never had an affair with her. Tell them she was having fun with them. Tell them there's no substance to these rumors. Maybe if I can show my wife, she'll let me talk to her again. I've been trying for years but she just shuns me. His aura sagged, dejection written in the slump.

"If I did, who'd care? If there's a diary to be found, why do you think anyone would be interested in what it said?"

Because of who I am.

Obviously Attitude thought he was someone important. I looked at his rainbow hues and wondered who he was. Did I dare ask? If I did, he'd think I was going to help him.

As I was thinking all this, Attitude leaned toward me and whispered, *Lester McGinley.*

Another ghost reading my mind!

It wasn't that he could read my mind which blew me away, though, it was his name. "*The Lester McGinley?*" I looked at him in surprise, making no effort to hide the effect of hearing his name.

The same. Now you see why I need help?

Lester McGinley, nearly one hundred years earlier, had been the president of his own bank and one of the largest land-titleholders in the area. His biggest claim to fame was the brewery still operating in the heart of downtown Seattle. At the time he'd only been in his mid-thirties. There were numerous things named after him—a stadium, a park, an old office building downtown and a street. He had been considered the bright and shining star of Seattle's rich and famous.

Then he'd decided to back Louise Walters, a dancer-singer on the vaudeville stage. His family had been certain he'd taken leave of his senses and tried to have him committed to an asylum but it hadn't worked. He'd been one step ahead of them all the way. When he finally proved to everyone he knew what he was doing and turned a tidy profit on the shows he bankrolled, it was too late. By then he was considered the nefarious Mr. McGinley, the person every mother of the day used as an example of what they *didn't* want their sons to become.

Idle gossip and jealousy reared their ugly heads and it was soon spread all over Seattle that Lester and Louise were an item. A pair. A couple.

In other words, they were having an affair.

Lester McGinley was said to have denied the affair until his death in a suspicious fall from one of his office buildings' top floor windows. It had been ruled a suicide, but there had been quite a few at the time who'd thought it might have been a murder.

"Yeah, I'd say you needed help. But I don't think there's anything anyone can do for you. At least not here."

The proof I wasn't having an affair with the woman, that I was murdered, is in a book hidden in this building.

I looked in his direction and wanted nothing more than to get up and walk away. But I knew I wouldn't.

I was going to help him.

Why?

Because the story of Lester McGinley and Louise Walters had been made into a film for a local film festival and I'd been one of many who'd paid good money to see what all the fuss was about. It was said to be based on her diary, but the film's writer and producer had never proved to anyone's satisfaction they did indeed have the infamous volume.

"What makes you think it's here?" I frowned at him, wondering. Louise Walters was supposed to have lived the last two years of her life here, but there had never been any rumors about things such as her diary.

Because she would have had it with her to the end. And her end came here.

It wasn't much of an argument, but then it didn't seem to take much effort on the part of these ghosts and spirits to get me to agree with whatever they wanted me to do. It was almost as if they thought of me as one of them.

"Lester, I don't know. How am I supposed to find this book? Do you know which apartment she lived in? Do you know where it was hidden?"

I waited for his reply and could see by his slowing motion and the blue tinge of his color he couldn't answer my question.

No. I don't. I guess I don't have much hope of clearing my name, do I? I couldn't even begin to tell you where to look.

You couldn't, but I could.

The woman's voice coming from above and behind me was cultured, melodic yet sultry. I turned and nearly fell down the stairs from where I sat.

There was another one of these damned ghosts right behind me.

Only this one had such a strong character I could see her—her face, her clothes, the way she held herself.

Louise? Obviously I wasn't the only one surprised by her appearance.

Hello, Lester. How've you been? The voice must have seduced hundreds in her day. The grand dame of vaudeville stars hadn't changed much from the photographs I'd seen of her. She wore her long auburn hair up in fat curls, with ringlets falling over her shoulder. Her gown seemed to be covered in some kind of beadwork, reflecting rainbows of her own ghostly hues back at the viewer. It was an off-the-shoulder, low-cut number with a deep v-shape to the bodice, showing off the body that had made her famous.

The only problem was the face belonging to this goddess appeared to be about a hundred years old and the breasts which should have been swelling above the top of

her tight-fitting gown were wrinkled and flat. The affect was garish, gaudy and tasteless.

I had never heard anyone describe Louise Walters as any of those things, so I thought maybe there was some mistake here. I turned to ask Lester what this was all about but he was already above me, standing next to Louise. I looked across at Mikey and noticed he no longer seemed to be worried about the ghosts who kept popping into his life. For a dog I'd only had for three weeks, he was doing pretty well.

Louise, what are you doing here? I thought you'd passed over.

I did, but I had to return. I had such a guilty conscience I wasn't happy in the other world so they told me to come back and make things right. But I didn't know how. I've been listening to you and the solid, and I think you have a very good idea. I want to help, Lester, since it was my fault you ended up in so much trouble.

Well, wasn't that just peachy keen!

I was a "solid". And at the moment I was the odd man out, the minority in this little crowd.

"Okay, Louise, so how do you plan to help?" I thought it a fair question. I might have to help them with some of the plan, but if it was their own, and they could do most of it, I was in total agreement.

I'm going to tell you where to find the book. As long as no one has ripped up the floor in my old place, it should still be there.

"Which apartment was yours, Louise? I know you lived here, but I don't think I ever heard anyone say."

I had 304.

Great. She had been in 3D, now the apartment of Denise and Gary Lawless. They were the couple who worked all day. I didn't know them very well, so how would I explain I was going to go and pull up their floor? I certainly couldn't tell them why!

"Louise, Lester. This is not going to be easy. There are people living in the apartment. I can't just go in and rip up their floorboards. Are you willing to wait until we start the renovations down there next week? I'll make sure it's the first apartment we work on. Make it happen as fast as I can."

"Make what happen fast?"

Ethan's voice from below me on the stairs startled me so badly I slid down the steps on my backside, coming to rest at his feet. He was grinning down on me and holding out his hands.

"That's quite the welcome, my love, but didn't it sort of hurt?" He pulled me to my feet as he spoke, turned me around then wrapped his arm about my waist and started walking upward. I looked up and could see Louise and Lester as clearly as if they'd been real human beings. Was it possible Ethan couldn't see them? He'd been able to see Michael and Margaret.

He soon put the notion to rest. "Introduce me, sweetheart, I haven't had the pleasure."

We were standing two steps down from the top, and he was looking at the two old friends waiting there.

"Ethan, this is Lester McGinley and Lou —"

"*The* Lester McGinley?" His jaw had dropped and he seemed to be having trouble closing his mouth. I knew just how he felt. We all seemed to be talking in italics these days.

"Yes, and this is Louise Walters." I watched Louise as she simpered her way to the edge of the steps and spoke to Ethan.

Charmed, I'm sure, Mister... She stopped and I realized I'd forgotten to tell them who he was.

"Ethan Harwood. I'm sorry." Now I knew I was in trouble. I'd apologized to a ghost.

Mister Harwood. As I watched, Ethan inclined the top of his body toward her and I realized he'd just bowed. To a ghost.

Lovely!

"It's a pleasure meeting you, Miss Walters. I've heard a lot about you."

I'm sure you have! Her seductive laughter was contagious and we were all smiling and chuckling away when the new cell phone in my pocket started ringing. I moved away from Ethan and answered the call. It showed as "restricted number" so I had no idea who it was.

The sound of the open line froze me where I stood. My bloodless hand dropped the phone and it clattered down to the landing.

Ethan was beside me before I could move.

"What is it, Charli? What's wrong?" I looked at him but I couldn't speak. I just pointed at the phone.

Ethan left me there long enough to pick the phone up and check the line. By this time the caller had hung up.

"Who was it Charli?"

"I don't know. They never speak. Just keep the phone line open without saying a word."

"What do you mean, never? How often has this happened?"

He was moving me up the stairs, his arm around my waist, and back toward my apartment. Louise and Lester had moved aside and were in the living room waiting for us when Ethan finally led me there.

"It hasn't happened for over a week now. But before, it happened over a period of about three weeks. Not often. Just enough to keep me unsettled. I didn't want to tell

you about it, because I really thought, at first anyway, it was just a wrong number. Roland and I thought it would stop when I got the cell phone."

"Roland knew about this and neither of you told me?" I was beginning to understand it hadn't been the thing to do when Lester suddenly spoke up.

I was here when the calls started. I was hiding out up here so whoever the other spirit is who's in this building wouldn't recognize me. I heard the first couple of calls. When I saw how frightened those calls made the young lady, I tried to hear anything on the line that would be a clue but I heard nothing. It was as Charli, he suddenly turned to me, is it alright for me to call you Charli? I nodded and he continued without waiting for me to speak. It was as Charli said. Just this open line she told you about. No noises to give anyone any idea of where the caller was or who it was.

I was looking at Lester's presence and wondering how long he'd been following me and where he'd learned so much about phones. It must be that if they don't want you to see them, you can't. It's only when they need help they announce themselves.

Except for Michael. He said he was there to protect me. Now here was Lester trying to help me, too. Maybe there was some chivalry alive and well in our dearly departed.

When I realized what I'd just thought I was aghast. How could I think of Michael that way?

Yeah, how could you, Charli? I spun around. He was standing beside Louise and appeared to be holding her hand. As I watched, he took her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers. A greeting way out of date to Michael and I but right in style in Louise's day.

"You quit sneaking up on me, Michael Robertson!" I was trying to look outraged and failing miserably. I was having too much trouble not laughing out loud.

I didn't sneak. You were just too busy entertaining all your friends to notice me. I've been here since your unceremonious slide down the stairs. You never did thank Ethan for helping you up.

Now a ghost was teaching me manners. And even if it was Michael, I thought it might be taking things just a little too far. I was about to lecture him when Ethan interrupted.

"Charli, I want you to call the cell phone company and have them change this number. Right now." Ethan handed me the cell phone so I could make the call. "Tell them you want a number that has never been used before. If they get difficult about it, tell them why. And make sure they install the feature you can use to find out the number of the last caller."

"It keeps a record of the last ten calls, but that won't help. It showed as 'restricted number' on the little screen. Otherwise I usually see the number when they call."

Ethan was right about the number though. I had to have it changed. I couldn't take many more of these calls. They were fraying my nerves!

And get her name off the sign in the front lobby. It could be anyone in this building doing this. Her number is there in plain sight. Michael's voice sounded slightly accusing.

"God, yes, I forgot about that. I'll take down the sign this morning. Serena can make us another one to show my name instead. In fact, Charli, don't call about this phone. I'll have Roland get another one tomorrow for you and I'll carry this." He took the phone from me and was looking at it with distaste, as though it was the phone's fault I was getting these calls.

"Then how will anyone reach me?"

"They won't. The only one who will have your number, other than Roland and I, will be Bobby. And I'll make sure he knows not to give it out." The grim determination on Ethan's face let me know Bobby would give my number out under the threat of dire consequences.

"I'll call Verizon this afternoon then."

"No, you call them now. But use a different phone. I don't want there to be any chance someone could be listening in and know the new number. In fact, use Roland's phone. He's down in the lobby talking to Bobby. He should be up here in a few minutes. Tell them we'll pick the phone up first thing tomorrow, to have it programmed and ready to go."

"I—"

"On second thought, tell them not to give you the new number over the phone but hold it until we pick it up. Just in case."

I wasn't going to ask just in case of what. I think I knew. Ethan was worried someone had some kind of scanning device going and was listening to our calls. If they didn't know about the other phone, they wouldn't be looking for it. I didn't have the heart to tell him that if someone scanning this building they'd pick up any call I made the first time I used the phone.

"Okay, now we've got this all arranged, what are all these...ah...your guests doing here?" Ethan had the same problem I did. Who knew what to call a spirit?

I was just about to answer him when the fire alarm went off.

"Not again!" Ethan grabbed my hand and began pulling me toward the door. "Come on, we have to walk down. The elevator now locks down the minute the alarm goes."

I turned to look at the apartment, wondering if there was anything I should take with me. Ethan's not-so-gentle tug made me decide it was time to follow. Mikey was glued to my heels, afraid to be left alone. Poor dog, this was not his day. Two ghosts and a fire alarm. I'm sure he was about ready for a nervous breakdown.

I know I was.

By the time we were down in the main lobby, it had become apparent there was no fire. Everyone was milling around, looking at one another to see if anyone would admit to pulling the alarm. Ethan and Bobby started checking to see which alarm had been pulled and found the glass in the alarm between the front doors was broken. So it was probably none of the tenants who had done the deed. During daytime hours the outside

door was unlocked. Bobby had installed a time lock to automatically lock the door at ten at night and unlock it at six in the morning.

"Whoever did this was just playing a prank, I guess." Bobby announced this to all who stood waiting inside. He'd phoned the alarm company and they'd turned off the noise. Now all he had to do was replace the broken glass rod.

Ethan walked toward me, looking as though he'd like to murder someone. Who, I didn't know, but I was glad it wasn't me. He didn't look like he would show much mercy. Even Mikey, at my side, hugged closer to me. He was reading Ethan's ire the same way I was.

"What?" was all I said, but he knew what I meant.

"It was deliberate. Right after you get a phone call. I'm starting to worry, Charli. All these things are happening to try and make us stop work on this building. And that makes me wonder about Stan." We were standing in the lobby, watching the other tenants make their way slowly back to their apartments.

As the last of the tenants disappeared, we stood in front of the elevator, waiting to go back to the fourth floor. As the door opened I heard a crash, followed by a bloodcurdling scream.

Ethan and I backed out of the car and looked upward, trying to see where the noise came from. A second scream followed the first and we knew. It was Flo Sharmer making all the noise, which put the problem on the third floor.

We got there as fast as the elevator would take us and walked out of the car just in time to see a chair come flying out the door of 3B, the Sharmer apartment. A terrified Flo was glued to the hall wall beside her door. Once everything stopped flying around the hall and inside the door of her apartment, we ventured in. Ethan held me behind him and indicated to Flo she should fall in behind me. Mikey brought up the rear, literally crawling on his belly, whining and whimpering in case anyone cared.

The sight that met our eyes was horrendous.

Anything movable had been flung from one end of the apartment to the other. Everything breakable was in pieces on the floor. The only things untouched were the paintings and framed pictures on the walls. They were untouched but every last one of them hung crooked.

It had taken massive force to do this. The only problem was, even with three of us watching and knowing no one had left the apartment, there was nobody in the apartment to have caused all this mess.

I looked at Ethan to find him looking at me and nodding.

If Lester had been our poltergeist, who the heck was this?

Chapter Fifteen

"Where's Maxie?" Flo's tremulous voice brought us all back to reality.

"What do you mean, where is he? Was he in here?" Ethan's voice sounded slightly bewildered.

"He came back to get his wallet. We decided to go out for a while and I was waiting in the hall when everything started to happen." She was returning to normal in a hurry. She was too levelheaded to let a little thing like flying furniture upset her.

Ethan hurried down the hall, sticking his head into the two bedrooms and then the bathroom. I saw him return to one of the bedrooms and disappear inside.

"Flo, Charli," he called, his voice muffled, "bring me a wet towel, please."

We hurried down the hall, Flo going to the bathroom for the towel while I went to join Ethan. Maxie was lying on the floor, his face totally bloodless, a big bump on his forehead already turning purple. Obviously one of the flying projectiles had beaned him on the way by.

"He should be okay, I think he was just knocked out." Ethan looked at the door and then back to me. Flo hadn't joined us yet. In a whisper only I could hear, he continued, "You know what did this, Charli. You've got to get Michael to find out what, or who, it is. Before it really hurts someone."

"I'll ask him as soon as we go back upstairs. I think he stayed there with Louise and Lester." As I spoke I saw the glow I now had no trouble recognizing as Michael's presence materialize beside Ethan.

"I guess you could ask him yourself." I used my eyes to let Ethan know Michael was there.

"Didn't see you arrive, Michael. Sorry. Who did this, do you know?"

No, but if I ever get my hands on the creep he'll be wishing he'd stayed wherever he came from. Michael's presence glowed blue, a sure sign he was angry. And Michael mad, while he'd been human, had been a spectacular show of fury. It hadn't happened very often, but when it did... Then his temper would be gone. As a ghost I wasn't sure how he'd react when he was mad.

I decided I didn't want to be around to find out.

"Maxie, oh, my precious..." Flo joined us, falling on her knees beside her husband. She placed the wet towel into Ethan's outstretched hand. She took hold of Maxie's hand and hugged it to her breast as though she could will him back to consciousness.

When Maxie's eyes fluttered, Flo broke down and cried. I tried to lead her away but she put up such a fight I gave in.

"Maxie, who did this to you, baby?" Flo's question was the one we all wanted the answer to so no one interrupted her. Ethan had placed the towel over Maxie's forehead and the coolness of the wet cotton must have been helping because with every passing second the unfocused look in his eyes dissipated. When he finally moaned and tried to sit up, Ethan's hand held him down.

"Stay where you are until you feel a little better. You've got quite an egg on your head, man." Ethan sat on his heels, looked at Maxie, and I could tell he was wondering what the man had seen.

"Maxie, did you see anyone? Was there someone in here?" Ethan knew the answer as well as I did, but it would be interesting to see what Maxie would say.

"Nah, there was nobody here. At least not that I saw. Just something whizzed by my head and the next thing I know I'm waking up here." He was still looking a little disoriented but he tried to get up on his own. With Flo on one side and Ethan on the other, he slowly stood upright. He was clinging tight to Ethan and holding the towel to his head. Then he jostled and moved the towel.

"Ow! What the heck hit me?" He angled across the room to the mirror over his dresser and removed the towel from his face. His purple egg was now the size of half a tennis ball and had to hurt.

"You're sure you're okay, Maxie? It's an awful big bump." I asked, knowing if he was the typical male he'd brush it off as nothing. Obviously Maxie wasn't the typical male. He looked at me when he spoke next.

"Do you think I should go to the hospital? Maybe call an ambulance?"

"I think maybe Flo should take you to the closest hospital or walk-in clinic and let them check you out, but I don't think you need an ambulance. Besides, they cost a lot of money."

That slowed him down. He had money. I knew he did, but because he was frugal, he had to justify every expense to himself. And I guess his sore head just didn't measure up to the cost of the ambulance.

"Okay, Flo can take me. I'll get my wallet, babe, and we can go." Hearing Maxie call Flo "babe" nearly made me choke. Here it was again. Another reminder of the pair as Sonny and Cher. Now I was certain it was something they did on purpose.

"Drive carefully, Flo. Come up and let us know what they have to say when you get back. Better yet, phone the cell phone. I think we'll probably be gone by then." Ethan had his hand at my back and was guiding me toward the door as he spoke. I knew he wanted out of here and I knew why.

He wanted to talk to Michael.

Upstairs in my apartment, we sat on the boxes doing duty as chairs and waited for Michael to make his appearance. I mentally told him we were waiting for him and within minutes he was there, hovering on the floor beside Ethan.

"Okay, Michael, what the hell is going on here?" Ethan wasn't mad at Michael and Michael knew it, but I knew both of them were extremely angry at whatever was causing all the trouble.

I wish I knew. I wish I had one single clue! This damn poltergeist hasn't uttered a peep. I haven't been able to get a real good look at him to find out if it's someone I know. All I do know is if he does one more thing in this building I am going to gather a few of my other friends and we're going to go hunting.

To my mind it sounded dangerous. Spirits hunting a poltergeist. One mad and the others mad at him. It could end up a worse mess than Flo and Maxie's apartment. It could be the spirit equivalent of the shoot-out at the OK Corral.

"Be careful, Michael. We don't need any more disasters like this afternoon."

I will. Besides, there's not much a bunch of ghosts can do except move things around. We can't bleed or kill each other. So it'll be a pretty tame fight, if it gets to one.

It must have struck me as funny because I started to giggle. But, as often happens when too many things have gone wrong in too short a time, my giggles turned into tears and I was suddenly up and running down the hall. I heard Michael's voice as I left the room.

You'd better look after her, Harwood. Things are getting to be too much for her.

Ethan's reply went unheard. I was in the bedroom at the back of the apartment. I stood at the big window, looking out on the slowly darkening sky. The pink glow along the horizon told me the sun was setting in the west on the other side of the building. Mikey's nose prodded my hand. When I felt Ethan's arms around me, turning me to him, I leaned forward and put my head on his shoulder and let the tears flow.

"Let it out, sweetheart. You've been holding it all in and you've reached your limit. And that ghost out there gave me strict instructions. I'm to look after you. He's going to hold me responsible if you get hurt."

"Oh, Ethan, and this isn't even your fight." My muffled wail sounded awful.

"Oh yes it is. Anything involving you, my love, is my fight. And don't you ever forget it. When this is all over we'll sit down and figure out where we go from here, but you are definitely my responsibility."

He placed his hands on either side of my head and tipped it back. He looked into my eyes for a long moment, then his gaze lowered to my mouth. I knew he was going to kiss me and I let my lips part slightly. I gave him my mouth to do with as he liked.

His lips on mine were gentle. He deepened the kiss, his mouth demanding now, not asking. And the more he demanded, the more I gave. I wanted him to make love to me. Now. Right here in this room. But it would have had to be on the floor because the furniture was being stored downstairs.

The mundane thought snapped me back to reality and I pulled away. I looked into his eyes again and saw such love I thought I might just let myself get lost there. But reality is hard to fight. I pulled back, wiping the last of the tears from my cheeks.

"Come on, sweetheart, it's time to take you home." He put his arm around my shoulders and led me to the living room where he picked up the cell phone and my carryall.

"Anything else?"

I looked around, shook my head and started for the door. Ethan was right behind me, taking my hand to slow me down. He stopped long enough to key the deadbolt lock then led me to the elevator. Mikey was glued to my other side, not wanting to let either of us out of his sight.

"You know, this dog is something else. Once he decided he was yours, he hasn't let you get more than a few feet away from him, except occasionally when I'm with you. Then he seems to relax. It's like he thinks he's protecting you from something. It's enough to make a guy jealous." He smiled down at me as he spoke, his smile telling me he really didn't mind Mikey protecting me.

"Well, I guess I could always take him back to LeRoy, if you don't want him around." I said it in a teasing voice and he leaned over to kiss me again.

"No way, sweetheart. I want the dog next to you like glue so if I'm not around, you've got someone protecting you. There's just too many strange things going on in this building."

We were silent for the ride down and the walk toward the car. He held my hand tightly, his fingers laced deeply through mine. I felt very safe with Ethan so close and Mikey right beside us. So when trouble struck, I was in no way prepared for it.

Just as we reached the main sidewalk a truck careened around the corner and drove straight for us. By the time we realized what was happening there was no place to go. We were in the open with the big truck bearing down on us faster than we could move. I pushed Ethan away from me, hoping to save him, and tried to move in the other direction, but I tripped over Mikey and went sprawling.

The dog realized something was wrong and immediately moved to stand over me. His body protected me from most of the stinking mess thrown from the truck. What little made it to me on the ground was enough to make me want to throw up. Mikey was the one who took the brunt of the foul goo. It was a thick soup of the most awful smelling garbage imaginable. In fact, when I got the second good wave of the odorous mass I realized it was exactly that. A mixture of garbage and some kind of manure. I thought maybe chicken from the stinging sensation the fumes were causing. It reminded me of the chicken coops in our old Bay View neighborhood. A few of those had been allowed to steep, the waves of their stench an eye, nose and throat-burning atrocity.

I hadn't meant to push Ethan so hard but I'd actually knocked him off his feet so in the time it took him to stand and get to me, the truck was long gone down the street.

"Charli! Are you all right?" His anxious voice told me he was worried. My concern was even greater. How on earth was I going to get anywhere, home or back to the apartment, smelling like this? And what about Mikey?"

"I'm fine. Just very, very angry. This stuff stinks!"

I was wiping it off my pants and not doing a very good job of it. The more I wiped, the worse it looked. And there stood Mikey, dripping with the same odiferous ooze. There was no way either of us could climb into anyone's car.

"Come on, let's go find a hose. There was one at the side of the building yesterday. If we're lucky the water is turned on inside." Ethan took hold of my hand but I noticed he was keeping his distance. I couldn't blame him. I was the one covered in the mess and I didn't want to be near me. Poor Mikey was drooping along behind us, trying to keep up while we wished he was anywhere but close by.

I gave up trying to talk. Every time I opened my mouth I swear I tasted the foul odor, and Ethan must have been having the same problem.

Well, all I can say is I'm glad I don't have a sense of smell. If that stuff stinks as bad as it looks you must be pretty gross, Charli.

"Shut up, Michael. This isn't funny."

I know, sweetie, but if you could see how bad it looks –

"Michael, if I were you, I think I'd stop talking about now. Otherwise, when she loses her temper, I'm the one who's going to be on the receiving end." Ethan's tone was serious. He was angry, but I'm not sure with whom.

Can I make everything better if I tell you who was driving the truck?

"You saw them? Come on, Michael, spill it. I was on the ground, I don't know where Ethan ended up, but I don't think either of us saw the driver."

"I didn't." Ethan now had the hose unfurled and turned on the tap. I watched as a small trickle built to a steady stream. He began spraying me down, starting high and working his way down.

Let's just say you must have really ticked off Stan Medlar. It was him and his wife. She was driving, he threw the stuff.

"Why am I surprised?" Ethan's growl made me look at him. He was furious but still managing to hold his temper in check. I gave him credit for that, then I turned around and blew up.

"Well, damn!" I felt like stamping my foot. "All we did was fire him. With a month's salary. We could have had him charged for all the damage in his suite and the lack of work he did on this building. He's lucky he's not in jail."

"I think he may just end up there, if I can get the police moving on this. I've had it with the man. He went just a bit too far tonight, with this mess. He could have hurt you."

"No, Ethan. Don't. Get them to warn him off. I'm afraid if they charge him, as soon as he's out he'll come looking for us."

Ethan stared at me and I could see the conflict in his eyes. He wanted to get even with Stan but he knew I was right. If he called the police, Stan *would* come after us. Me, in particular.

“Leave it, please, Ethan. Maybe he won’t be back.”

I seemed to be ineffectually brushing at the water streaming down my clothes, trying to get rid of the ooze, yet it appeared I was finally winning. While I was being hosed down, I reached down to Mikey and grabbed his collar. He was next. He couldn’t go into anybody’s house or car smelling the way he did.

I have to admit I have never seen a more bedraggled-looking pair than Mikey and I when Ethan finished with us. We were wet from head to toe. My hair hung in wet strands around my shoulders, dripping down my neck, and Mikey’s hair had the spiked look of a wet Lab. While he shook, trying to get some of the water off, I was busy wringing out my hair. I noticed Ethan walking around us, sniffing.

“Well, I think it’s safe to take you two home now. But I’m going to go back and get some towels from Serena Turner. You can’t drip all over the leather seats in the car. You’d ruin them.”

It was nice to know he was now more worried about the car than he was about me. I took it to mean he’d calmed down.

He left Mikey and me standing on the sidewalk just outside the building door and was back in no time with a half dozen big towels—enough to protect the seats and wrap around both of us, which is just what he proceeded to do. Once we were in the car, Mikey on the floor in back and me sitting on three towels on the leather seat in front, he started the SUV and cranked the heater to high. It didn’t take long to start warming us, but the amount of water on Mikey and me was soon fogging up the inside windows. Ethan turned off the heat and I hoped the towels could keep us warm while he drove home as fast as he could. Turning off the heat also lessened the smell, which was a definite improvement.

It was a silent ride through the deepening twilight. Michael had disappeared. Ethan didn’t talk and I didn’t feel like saying much. The only noise was the occasional whine Mikey made from the backseat. When we pulled up in front of Vivien Harwood’s home, Ethan left me in the car while he went in for a robe for me to wear. I wasn’t taking these clothes into the house. As far as I was concerned, the outfit was going in the garbage. Even the underwear was headed to the trash. The thought of wearing any of it ever again made me shudder.

I took off the pants and blouse in the shelter of the passenger door and took the robe from Ethan. I threw modesty and my inhibitions to the wind and removed the bra I was wearing. Once out of that I put the robe on, tied the belt, and slid my panties out from under. I dumped each piece into the big black garbage bag Ethan held and he tied the top. We both took deep breaths of the fresh air to try and dispel the lingering odor. It hadn’t been bad in the car as long as the heat hadn’t been on, but there was still a trace. He would have to have his car looked after professionally to get rid of the mess Mikey and I left behind.

As I walked beside him up the steps, Ethan's mother and Maddie appeared at the door. Ethan headed around the side of the house with Mikey in tow and I knew he was about to get another bath.

"Ethan told us what happened, dear. Are you all right?" Maddie's concern probably stemmed from her nursing background but it was nice having someone worry about me.

"Yes, I am. It was just the smell was so bad."

"You don't smell too bad now, Charli." Vivien wrinkled her nose and sniffed while she led me down the hall to the little sitting room she favored. "Can we get you a cup of anything to drink?"

She ushered me to the big leather chair in front of the fireplace, where someone had started a roaring blaze. The warmth took the last of the dampness and the chill away, leaving me warm and bundled in a blanket in the big chair. Maddie brought me a cup of hot, sweet tea and sat it on the table beside me.

"Ethan didn't say how this happened, dear. Did you fall into something?" I almost said I had, fallen into a nightmare, that is, but stopped myself. These two gentle women didn't need to know about all the ugly things happening to us. I told them only about Stan getting even by throwing the foul-smelling liquid at us. Maddie laughed then tried to cover her smile.

"Don't worry, Maddie, it is kind of funny. Now. And I think Ethan might even laugh about it later. But at the time it was awful, because of the smell."

By the time we finished discussing all aspects of our latest adventure, Ethan had rejoined us, a damp but sweet-smelling Mikey beside him. Ethan threw a big blanket on the floor beside his chair and the dog dropped gratefully into a heap, apparently tired out by the day he'd had. I knew exactly how he felt.

I yawned so wide it cracked my jaw. I couldn't help it and didn't try to hide it. It was still early, but exhaustion had finally caught up to me. I finished my tea and stood.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to run out on you, but I need to take a bath and then I'm going to see if I can get to sleep. I must have overdone the excitement today. I think I could sleep for a week."

Ethan was on his feet before I moved a step. He took hold of Mikey's collar and led him to the door, carrying the damp blanket with him.

"Come on, I'll help you get him settled in your room. And I think after all the proximity I've had to bad odors tonight, I'm going to have a nice, long, hot shower myself. I keep thinking I can still smell the mess. I know I smell like wet dog, thanks to our pal here." He looked down at a tired Mikey, sitting patiently beside him, the dog's head against his knee.

"You probably can smell it." Maddie was grinning at him as she spoke. "Make sure you wash out the inside of your nose. Once you get the odor in there, you have to wash it to get rid of it. That's why people who get skunked keep smelling the odor even after they've been cleaned up."

I looked at her and burst out laughing. "Thank you, Maddie. I needed that."

Ethan was grinning at all of us. Seemed like it helped him, too.

"Good night, dear. We'll see you in the morning." Vivien stood and followed us to the door.

By the time I'd showered and gone through my nighttime ritual, Ethan had finished and was knocking on my door, wearing only the bottom half of a pair of silk pajamas. I couldn't take my eyes off the sculpted muscles of his chest.

I let him in, wondering what he was up to. I knew what I hoped for, but I didn't think it would happen this night.

"I just wanted to say goodnight, sweetheart, and tuck you in." He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me to his chest. His hands felt wonderful in my hair. My cheek pressed against a mat of dark curly hair on his chest and I fought the urge to rub my face against him and purr.

"God, Charli, you're so beautiful," he breathed in my ear. His mouth found mine and he was kissing me as though he might never get to hold me again. He broke the kiss long enough to murmur against my mouth. "Please, whatever you do, don't leave me. Don't you ever leave me. I think I'd die if I lost you."

There was no hesitation. I kissed him back with passion then broke the kiss long enough to whisper back, "I won't, love. Ever. I love you, Ethan Harwood. I didn't mean to fall in love with you, but I did."

I no sooner spoke the words than there was a loud crash behind us. I spun in Ethan's arms to see the dresser in the corner lying face down on the floor. Before I even registered what had happened, a book was sailing our direction, thrown with the force of hate.

We had another poltergeist.

Ethan pulled me behind him so fast I nearly fell. Mikey was cowering at the foot of the bed, the dresser having just missed him. I was shaking in fright, wanting to cry yet becoming angrier by the minute.

Michael suddenly appeared in the room with us, glowing bright blue, which I took to mean he could see whatever was causing all this havoc.

Man, you idiot, are you trying to kill these people? As though in answer to his question, another book sailed in our direction. *Will you stop!*

If ghosts can bounce up and down, I think that's what Michael was doing. He sounded furious. His presence couldn't stay still.

"Michael, for God's sake, what's doing this?" Ethan's angry voice sounded strained and harsh, partly due to the seriousness of what was happening and, I think, partly because we had been interrupted.

I crept out from behind Ethan's broad back, watching in case our poltergeist decided to throw something else. Mikey moved closer and stuck to my leg as if he couldn't get close enough. "Do you know who this is yet?"

No, I haven't been able to find out. But let me tell you, when I do... His voice trailed off, letting me know he was one unhappy ghost and if he had any say in the matter, he was going to fix this poltergeist good.

You can't touch me. The deep voice rooted all of us to the spot and I watched Mikey cower even closer to the floor.

"Who are you? Why are you trying to hurt us?" I couldn't see anything, but there was obviously another ghost with us. Now he'd opened his mouth, he could no longer be called a poltergeist. I had done a little reading since Michael's appearance and found out poltergeists never talk. They just throw things, drag furniture around, rattle chains and generally disturb the peace and make noise to express their displeasure.

You don't need to know who I am. Just stay out of my way. Leave the building alone and don't mess with anything more in there. You're going to ruin everything.

With no idea what "everything" was, I had no intention of backing down on the repairs to our building and told him so. The reaction was predictable. This time a hand mirror sailed my way. Ethan's fast reflexes caught it before it had a chance to hit the floor and break.

Now I was mad. I moved closer to the source of all this anger and shook my finger at him while I bawled him out.

"You quit. You're going to hurt somebody if you keep throwing things. Especially furniture. You have no right to destroy other people's property." Ethan's hand was on my arm and he pulled me back toward him.

"She's right, you know. You shouldn't be doing any of this. What are you trying to stop? And why?" I knew by Ethan's voice he'd calmed down a bit, but it still sounded tight and strained to me.

You don't need to know who I am or what I'm doing. Just stop!

"No. I won't stop." I stepped closer yet. "I'm taking back the building for the people who live in it. You can't stop me. When we're done it will be safe to live there. It will be a nice place to call home." My anger built as I talked.

Whew! Are you hot, Charli! Michael was glowing redder than normal, which I took as a sign he was happy with my stand. He obviously didn't think I'd get hurt doing this.

If you don't stop, you'll destroy everything.

This was a totally different tone of voice than I'd heard before. It was still the same ghost but he had obviously decided fighting wasn't getting him anywhere, so now he was about to try something else. Well, I was ready for him and I wasn't backing down.

"You're going to have to explain. I don't know what you're talking about." I spoke to this ghost as though it was a child.

Well, if I must. But I don't know how to tell you this.

"Just start at the beginning and tell me what you did."

I'm the one who killed Gus Farmer.

Ethan and I looked at each other, eyebrows raised. Neither of us knew what it was talking about.

"Who is Gus Farmer?" I asked the question since Ethan seemed content to let me do the talking. Maybe he thought the ghost would talk to me but not to him.

He used to be my roommate. Years ago. When the building was first built.

"What year are you talking about?"

"Nineteen-nineteen. The year after the war ended."

I looked at Ethan and wondered where to lead with my questions. It was Michael who came to my rescue.

Charli, ask him what he did to this Gus and why you're going to ruin it if you go ahead with the building plans.

At the sound of Michael's voice, the ghost suddenly let us know where he was. His presence started to glow the same way Michael's did. But his colors were muddy, not brilliant like Michael's.

"Okay, so you killed Gus Farmer. How? Why? And what did you do with his body? I'm assuming something about his body started all this."

That's the problem. When you start the work on the third floor, you'll find him. Or what's left of him. I put his body under the floor in 304.

Great. Just great! Now we had a diary and a body under the floor in the same apartment. "You know, this makes no sense at all. If there were a body under the floor, somebody would have smelled it after the murder. Bodies don't just shrivel up. They rot! They smell!"

The ghost interrupted before I could ask another question. *Not if you wrap them in oilcloth with lots of lye around them. Keeps the smell down and speeds up the decomposition.*

Wasn't this just wonderful? Now we had a ghost with some knowledge of forensic science.

Ethan interrupted at this point and cut off the conversation quite effectively.

"Look here, for tonight we can't do anything. The building renovations will go ahead as planned and nothing you can do is going to stop us. If we find Gus Farmer's bones under the floor, we'll turn them over to the police. Since you are obviously already dead, you don't have anything to worry about."

I'd never heard a ghost cry and I don't ever want to again. The wail rising from this manifestation was enough to give my goose bumps goose bumps. It was the kind of sound one would imagine a ghost would make, but actually hearing it was dreadful. I backed up into Ethan and he pulled me behind him. Mikey was up and growling again and Michael's glow turned instantly blue-white. Obviously none of us liked what was happening.

"Come on, Charli. You're not staying in this room by yourself. You're coming with me."

Ethan led me from the room with Mikey close on our heels. Ethan led me to a door just down the hall from my room and opened it. We entered a masculine room, obviously lived in, and even though it wasn't his full-time home, the room was all Ethan. There were two ANDY Awards sitting on the massive chest of drawers. I knew what they were and was surprised he didn't have them in his office to show them off. Winning an ANDY was like winning an Oscar. It was a big accomplishment in the advertising world. He must have known what I was thinking when I turned because he laid a finger over my lips and smiled. He reached behind to close the door. I wondered if he'd lock us in.

"Don't ask. I'll tell you why sometime but you'll have to take a vow first. You can never divulge to anyone what I'm doing with them."

I smiled, happy to share his secret. "When?"

"Not tonight, that's for sure. You're ready for bed, young lady, and I want you tucked in and asleep right now. You need some rest after the day you've had. You're going to make yourself sick if you keep this up."

While he spoke, Ethan steered me, walking me backward toward the massive four-poster bed on the other side of the room. His hands were warm on my arms, his fingers gentle. He kept me close to him, my body just touching his chest. His leg slid between mine through the opening in the front of my robe and I felt his warmth through the thin layer of pajama leg. He stepped into me as he pushed me toward the bed. The touch of his leg churned my insides and I overcame the strong desire to pull him to me, touch his bare chest, stroke my fingers over his bare skin. I wanted to bury my hands in the mat of black hair on his chest, touch him where I knew I could elicit an erotic response. He smiled when he saw my desire and stepped around me.

"Not tonight, sweetheart."

I pursed my lips in a tiny sulk.

He turned down the dark green quilted blanket and plumped the huge down-filled pillows. He obviously liked green. First his car, now his bedding. When he reached for the tie belt on my robe, I waited, wondering if he would continue what he'd started by the door. But it seemed he'd decided I needed sleep more than loving. I plopped down on the side of the bed when he pointed and before I could move he picked up my ankles and swung my legs up and under the covers. He tucked the big quilt up around my chin. Then he surprised me.

He knelt beside the bed, put his hand on my cheek and moved his lips toward mine. Again, my lips parted before he reached me, wanting this kiss, wanting him. When all I got was a chaste touch of his gentle lips on my forehead I was ready to throw my own tantrum but thought better of it. This was not the time or place to be pushing Ethan Harwood.

"Sleep well, Charli, I'll be right here."

He moved to the big chair in the corner and sat, turning the lights to the lowest level, leaving my side of the room in near darkness. I gazed at him as he watched me and felt my eyes grow heavy. Ethan had been right. I needed sleep.

I don't know when I finally fell asleep but when I awoke it was because the bed moved. Without opening my eyes I lay still and waited. I felt the quilt lift and the weight of a body on the mattress next to me and realized Ethan had joined me in his bed.

I wondered what he'd do if I turned over and touched him? But before I had the chance to find out I heard him speak.

"Go wherever you go at night, Michael. I'll protect her. She's safe with me." I didn't open my eyes, afraid I'd see Michael watching me while I slept in another man's bed. But I needn't have worried.

I know you'll take care of her. You're her only hope, you know, Ethan. The others will make sure she dies if they have their way.

Make sure she dies? The others? What was he talking about?

"I won't let it happen. She's mine now and I'll protect her. Not even her parents can harm her here."

What on earth was he talking about? What did my parents have to do with any of this?

And why would anyone want to hurt me?

Who would want me dead?

Weariness overcame me before I figured it out and I fell asleep wondering what they'd been talking about.

Chapter Sixteen

Morning came too soon. I could hear the sounds of rain against the window and knew today would be one of those sodden Seattle days that made up most of our spring, fall and winter. My mind made the raindrops sound like a spattering of applause. Only I didn't know why anyone would be clapping.

I was snugly tucked under the quilt, warm and coddled by the downy filling, and I'd forgotten whose bed I was sleeping in. I saw Mikey on the floor beside me and smiled. I let my arm fall over the edge and reached to touch the soft hair on his head. His tongue gave a quick lick then his eyes flew to someone behind me.

That's when I remembered.

I was sleeping in Ethan's bed. With Ethan.

I felt the give of the mattress and realized Ethan was leaning up behind me, close but not touching. He wasn't getting out of bed. His hand came out to touch my cheek.

"Good morning, Sleeping Beauty. Feel better?"

I rolled onto my back and looked up into slumberous eyes that would tell me secrets if I just cared to listen. I listened and smiled. These secrets made me feel loved and wanted.

Then I remembered his conversation with Michael from last night.

"Ethan, what were you and Michael talking about? Who wants to see me dead?"

"What? I don't know what you mean."

He hastened to cover his tracks. Obviously I was not supposed to have heard the discussion.

"Oh. I must have heard you wrong then. I thought you said something about even my parents not being able to get to me here."

His frown slowed me even more. Maybe I *had* heard it wrong.

"Oh, well. Whatever it was, I guess it wasn't important." I rolled onto my side again, using Mikey as an excuse to pull away from him.

I didn't understand any of this.

"What's on your schedule for today, little one?" His finger was tracing the length of my arm from my wrist, up and across my shoulder then along the back of my neck. If he wasn't careful, I might just turn over and throw myself at him. That's what I felt like doing. I wanted this man to take me in his arms, hold me. Make love to me.

I felt the warmth of the flush as it swept over me and hoped Ethan couldn't see it.

"Well, we have to get Maxie and Flo set up in one of the other apartments while theirs is being renovated. And I guess we'll have to move Frank Yarman's belongings

out of 3C. I was planning on putting him into 4C. And Jimmy Romano has to move up to 4D. We're definitely going to have to help him. He still doesn't have the bandages off from when he burned himself trying to help me. We're ready to start on his floor today. The lumber will be delivered just before noon."

"Glad to see you have it all planned. Got the manpower arranged too?"

"I think so. There's Jimmy and Maxie along with Joseph and Barnaby. Jimmy can direct while the rest of us work. It shouldn't take any time at all. The only heavy work will be unloading the lumber, and I think Gerry knows not to come without help this time."

After warning the lumber dealer he had to haul his first delivery to the fourth floor, he had shown up by himself and had taken hours to do the work. Some of the men had tried to help, but no one had a lot of time to commit that day. Today there would be even fewer bodies around to help when the time came. Today's load was only going to the third floor.

"I'm sure after last time he'll come prepared." Ethan's chuckle fanned warm breath on the back of my neck. I suddenly found he'd moved closer. Without realizing what I was doing I leaned back until my body was propped against his.

"You know, Charli, I could get used to this." His hand was resting on my arm, the tips of his fingers resting on the side of my breast. The electricity shooting through me made me shiver in anticipation. My senses were so heightened I could hear a clock beeping softly somewhere in the room, counting every second. I could swear my heart was beating right along with it.

I turned my head to look into his eyes and nearly drowned in the feelings I saw there. This was love, I was sure of it.

"Ethan, I—" I never got to finish the sentence. There was a knocking sound at the door.

"Come in," he called. I was all for diving under the covers, but Ethan's hand held me still and the grip of his fingers told me there was no use fighting. The door opened to his command. "Just relax. I asked Maddie to bring breakfast up for us this morning. It's not too often I get to have breakfast in bed with a beautiful woman."

By this time I had to be beet red. I blush easily and Maddie's knowing smile made it even worse.

"Ethan, how could you?" I muttered, but Maddie heard me.

"Sweetie, if he wants to have breakfast with you, in bed, enjoy it. It won't happen very often." She laughed as she set the tray on the table at Ethan's side of the bed. She sat the cups upright on the tray, poured two cups of coffee then left. Just like that. As if her friend's son had breakfast every day with someone in his bed.

Maybe he did.

"Ethan, how many others have you done this with?" I smiled at him as he handed me my coffee, wondering if he'd answer.

"You're the first, sweetheart, but it's no secret to Maddie and my mother how I feel about you. And they're both very open-minded about this kind of thing. Don't fret it!"

He passed me toast, in fact he fed me toast, so I couldn't answer him.

By the time he'd finished feeding me my breakfast, one bite, one kiss, one bite, one more kiss, I had come to realize not very much would stand in this man's way if he wanted something.

And it seemed he wanted me.

When he took my empty coffee cup and sat it on the tray, I fully expected he'd bound out of bed and start planning our day. Instead, he rolled back toward me, crowded behind me and draped his arm down the length of my body. His lips touched the back of my neck and sent more of those pleasurable shivers down my spine.

Through the thin cotton of the nightgown I wore I could feel the heat from his hand as it rested lightly on my belly. The feeling of being wanted grew in direct proportion to the ridge of the arousal I could feel burgeoning at my back. If I'd needed further proof of his feelings for me, this was certainly a good start. I leaned my shoulders against his chest and his hand moved slowly up, then down my stomach. The lower he went the more I wanted to just turn over and throw myself on him. Bury him deep inside me and let him make passionate love to me. When his fingers moved lower and found the apex of my thighs I felt the warmth and dampness build. I was ready.

All he had to do was start something.

His lips continued to nibble their way up and down the back of my neck until finally he found my ear. His teeth bit lightly along the edge of my lobe until I was ready to scream from the tension building in me. When the tip of his tongue found the inside of my ear I nearly doubled over from the exquisite sensation racing through me.

I couldn't help myself.

I turned over and crushed my body against the front of him, his arousal between us giving silent testimony to his desire. His hand was slowly drawing the cotton up the length of my legs and when it reached my hip, he drew the fabric up between us then reached down to touch me. When his fingers found the heart of me, I moaned, cried out. His mouth sought mine and his lips covered my mouth to swallow the sounds I might make when he took this further. And further he did go. His hand on my stomach was moving in slow circles, the tips of his fingers brushing low enough to bring me a little nearer to the edge each time. He was taking me closer to where I wanted to go and I pushed against him.

He stopped.

He pulled back, giving me a little kiss on the mouth as he rolled onto his back.

"I'm sorry, Charli. I shouldn't have done this. I had an overpowering desire to touch you, to take you. But I don't have the right. Not now, not yet."

He rolled off his side of the bed and grabbed the robe hanging on the bedpost.

Desertion. Betrayal. Those were the emotions uppermost in my mind. He had given me what I wanted then taken it away.

"Why, Ethan? I wouldn't have stopped you." I couldn't bring myself to look him in the eye. I didn't know if it was something I'd done or just something he couldn't get past. The minute the words left my mouth I regretted them, but they brought him back to me so fast I backed up on my side of the bed. He was sitting on the bed, leaning over me and touching my lips with his.

"It's all right, Charli. We'll have a lifetime together. It just won't start quite yet."

I saw Michael's presence materialize at the foot of the bed and suddenly understood what the problem was.

"Go away, Michael. Get out. Before you ruin everything for me."

I can't, Charli. I have to stay until I know you're safe. Ethan understands. If it wasn't important, I wouldn't be here now.

Ethan brought me my robe and helped me into it when I rolled myself off my side of his bed. I tied the belt then turned on Michael.

"All right. What is so important it couldn't have waited?"

It was hard holding back tears. For the first time in three years someone wanted me. To love me.

And now this.

I know who our ghost is. Ethan and I both turned to him.

"Who?" I nearly yelled I was so upset.

His name is Tiny Brown. Somewhat of a stretch, that is. When he was alive he was about six feet tall and weighed well over three hundred pounds. Seems he thinks he murdered Gus Farmer. Only problem is, whoever is under the floor up there isn't Gus. According to another spirit who seems to come and go whenever the mood strikes, Gus died of old age about twenty years ago. I have a hunch about this, but he refuses to listen to me. So I need you to do some checking.

"Who's this other spirit? Is he the one that's throwing things?"

Nah, he just a guy who comes back every so often, or so he says, to see what's happening. Lived here about the same time as Louise. I think he had a crush on her and he follows her around. Since she's here, he's here too.

Ethan had been thinking about something and suddenly seemed to realize Michael had asked for a favor. "Sorry, Michael. What do you want me to do?" he asked.

You need to find out what happened to Tiny Brown. I think the bones under the third floor are his. I think he was murdered and buried there. I think Tiny is stuck here because he refuses to admit he died this way. I think, maybe, Gus Farmer was the one who did the murdering and somehow, Tiny got it backward. Whatever happened, he won't be able to leave the building until it's sorted out. You're going to have to do the sorting.

I stared at Ethan and Michael, not believing what I heard. This man and this spirit were going to solve a murder. And not just any murder, but the murder of a man who'd

lived in the building we were trying to rejuvenate. A man who had been dead a lot of years. Whose murderer had probably been dead for at least twenty years.

I started counting. First there was Lillian Yarman, then Margaret Moorhead. Next came Lester McGinley and Louise Walters. Now it was Tiny Brown.

"Is this building jinxed?" I asked Michael.

No. I think it's just you're stirring up all the old problems because you're tearing it apart. You have to find the diary for Louise and Lester. Now you have to solve a year-old murder to get Tiny out of here. And let's just hope the police can solve the other two real quick. You don't want to be starting with this many problems.

"Come on, Charli, we've got work to do." Ethan took my hand and hauled me toward the door.

I yanked my hand free and stopped short.

"Do you think I could at least get dressed before we hike out of here and start saving the world?" I was mad and didn't care who knew it.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart." He stood there, grinning unrepentantly at me, and I knew he found this funny. "Of course, get dressed. Your clothes are back in your room. I'll come with you, just in case Tiny is still hanging out around the large pieces of furniture." Ethan led the way down the hall, and I don't think he even realized I was angry with him. And Michael. Two men, one a here-and-now live being who, it would appear, had feelings for me, and the spirit of a man I'd loved and lost to Death, the ultimate mistress, were conspiring to help solve murders, dig up bones and find long-lost secret diaries. It would help any number of people living in the building I was trying to make a better place.

As for me?

I don't think either of them gave me a second thought this morning.

He escorted me back to my room, standing with his back against the closed door, and watched me while I grabbed clothes from the foot of the bed. I hadn't finished dressing when there was the soft thump of hurried footsteps in the hall. I heard a knock on someone else's door and turned to watch Ethan open my door. He stuck his head into the hall and called out, "Maddie? I'm in Charli's room. She needed clothes." He stood aside as she entered my room. "What's up?"

"Phone for you, Ethan. A Sergeant Riggs from Seattle PD. Said to tell you he had some good news."

Ethan was gone from the room before I even registered exactly what Maddie said. He must have thought it important because Ethan left me to fend for myself with Tiny without batting an eye.

That seemed to be my lot this morning. Every man who'd come near me was leaving me. Now I wasn't as important as a phone call.

Then I remembered who Sergeant Riggs was.

I tore out of my room, skirt in one hand, shoes in the other, and went flying down the stairs, trying to find Ethan. He wasn't in the hall, so I moved on to the library. By the time I'd tracked down all the phones, I found him in the spotless stainless steel kitchen, listening to whatever the sergeant was saying. Roland was sitting at the table with coffee and Vivien was moving around the room with the makings of a hurried breakfast. I smelled eggs, bacon and coffee. Any of which I'd have liked in large doses. I listened and finished dressing. Oddly, no one seemed to think I was doing anything strange.

"Right. I understand. Thank you, Sergeant. I'll see you there."

He hung up, turned and looked around. If he was trying to build suspense, it was working.

Well? Michael was the one I hadn't noticed and the one who couldn't wait.

"Sergeant Riggs has some good news and some bad news. It looks like we'll have to find seven new tenants instead of six, but they have semi-solved two of our murders. Lillian Yarman and Margaret Moorhead were both killed the same way and by the time the forensics team had collected everything they needed, they had a killer. Or at least they have the DNA profile of the killer. All they need to do is find the man with the matching DNA. Riggs said the DNA they're looking for is all over the building. On railings. On chairs in the front lobby. In the elevator. On doors. This morning, he'll be waiting for us at the building. All of the men are to be tested. Frank Yarman is back from his mother's funeral, poor guy, Gary Lawless has been asked to meet us there and the one tenant I haven't met, a guy named Tony Battola, is being held there until we arrive. Riggs is bringing Stan Medlar himself. Apparently Stan hasn't been too cooperative. He's been in a cell since yesterday. When they tried to get him to give a DNA sample he punched a cop. So they ran him in and charged him with obstruction of justice and assault on a police officer."

He took his coffee and headed for the front hall, calling back over his shoulder as he walked.

"Roland, they want us now. They have to take samples from all of us. You and I are in the clear but they don't want anyone making a scene over us not being tested even if we were never in the building until after Lillian Yarman died. Oh, yes, they think Margaret had been dead almost as long so we're in the clear for her, too."

Roland stood and followed Ethan from the room, presumably to get his coat and anything else he wanted to bring.

I breathed a little sigh of relief. To know neither of these men was a suspect made me feel a lot better. But to think someone who lived in my building was responsible for two deaths made me feel like crying. I wanted to hit out at their killer. Those women didn't deserve to die.

Then there was the problem of what to do with Lester and Louise. And Tiny Brown.

Those were the problems the police wouldn't be able to solve. In fact, they didn't know these three were a problem. It was one thing to be haunted by real "live" ghosts. It was quite another to admit it – out loud – to anyone.

I was in the hall with the two men, shrugging into my raincoat, when Michael's presence announced itself.

Promise me, Charli, you'll be real careful. I don't think Tiny is going to do anything more. I've talked to him. He knows how angry he'll make me if he so much as touches you.

"Take it easy, Michael. I'll make sure she's never left alone and not in any danger. See you there."

Michael disappeared and Ethan led me down the steps to the garage, taking the dry route to get to the Navigator. Roland was on his own behind us, turning back when Maddie called him to take something from her. I sat quietly as they got in. Ethan started the car and backed it out of the now open garage. The power door was descending before we even got turned around. Ethan wasn't wasting time this morning.

I felt a hand on my shoulder and turned to see Roland holding a travel cup out to me.

"For you, Charli. He didn't exactly give you time for breakfast this morning. And here." After I took the cup his hand reappeared with a bagel, spread with what appeared to be cream cheese.

"How did you do all this, Roland?"

"I didn't, Maddie did. She knows how he reacts to things like that call and knew he'd be in a hurry."

"And if you two are quite through, you don't have to talk about me like I'm not here." Ethan sounded annoyed, but when I stole a look he was smiling.

Roland's chuckle told me he had accomplished what he'd set out to do—break the tension growing since the phone call.

"Sorry, Ethan, you just seemed a little preoccupied. Poor Charli has done nothing but run to keep up with you this whole morning."

I saw Ethan look sideways at me and I think he knew Roland was right. His hand crawled across the seat and took mine.

"Sorry, love, I didn't mean to do that. Guess I was a little out of it. My mind was working on what I have to do when we get to the building." He rubbed gently across my fingers with his thumb and left my skin tingling from his touch.

Sooner, rather than later, I wanted to pick up where we'd left off this morning in the bedroom. But until we got things sorted out at Harmon Court, I knew we were in a holding pattern.

Chapter Seventeen

Sergeant Martin Riggs climbed out of his unmarked squad car when Ethan's Navigator pulled to the curb. He'd been involved so often over the last few months, he'd become more like one of the gang than an outsider. This morning I took a good look at him, something I hadn't done until now. Probably five-ten, at least two hundred pounds, he was built like a football player. He stood on the sidewalk, his raincoat hanging open, his jacket underneath, rumpled. The dark shadows under both eyes made me think he'd been up all night.

"Morning, Sergeant," I called as I approached.

"Ms. Robertson, gentlemen. Thanks for coming on such short notice." He turned and headed to the front door of Harmon Court. "The lab tech is inside taking samples right now. We started without you so we can hopefully be gone before your delivery comes."

I remembered hearing Ethan tell him on the phone we were expecting lumber today. I guess Riggs wanted out of the place before the two-by-fours, the plywood and the drywall started stacking up.

He held the door for all of us and we trooped inside to find a dark-haired young woman in the process of swabbing the inside of Bobby Turner's mouth.

"Just about done, Tina?" Sergeant Riggs asked.

"Yes sir, just those two over there left to do." She pointed a swab in the direction of the stairs and there sat Joseph Linden and Barnaby Barnaby, holding cups of coffee and chatting away like the good friends they'd become. I hoped, for both their sakes, it wasn't one of them.

"Where's your boss?" he asked her, looking around the nearly empty lobby.

"He and a photographer are downstairs taking more pictures of that bed in the room where the body was found. They thought they saw something in one of the shots, but it didn't show too well in the blow-up, so they're taking more photos."

"Okay, I'll go find him. These are the two gentlemen I was telling you about. We know it can't have been them, but they're to be tested so no one can cry foul later."

"Yes, sir." This cheery little woman in a spotless jumpsuit uniform smiled at the disappearing back of the sergeant and turned to Roland and Ethan. "I can do you next, sir," she told Roland. He stepped forward, opened his mouth and waited until she'd swabbed his cheek. He straightened and gave Ethan a gentle shove in her direction.

"Thanks, both of you. I know you didn't have to do this." She turned toward the stairs and called out Joseph's name and he and Barnaby sauntered over. We left them to it and rode the elevator up to the office space I'd set up on the fourth floor.

We'd barely let ourselves in when the elevator dinged again. Ethan went to the door and came back with Sergeant Riggs on his heels.

"Charli, they want you to take a look at something," he called as he returned to the office. In the sergeant's hand, neatly packaged in a plastic bag, was a black book. When he handed it to me, I smiled.

"It's Ruthie's bible. Where'd you find this?"

Ethan and the sergeant exchanged quick glances and I knew I wasn't going to like the answer.

"It was on the floor beside the mattress in the basement room where we found Margaret, Ms. Robertson. And that wasn't all." He pulled another plastic bag from his large raincoat pocket and held it out to me. If I'd had some warning, I might not have reacted the way I did, but when I saw the silver frame, my heart pounded, my knees buckled.

I fainted.

Ethan was holding me and carrying me to the couch when I came to. "It's all right, Charli, you're okay. I'm sorry. If I'd known..."

"Where'd you get it, sergeant?" I asked breathlessly. I couldn't seem to breathe right at all. My heart was beating a tattoo the others in the room should have heard and my hands were shaking. I reached again for the bag he held.

"I'll take your reaction as my answer. This is yours. Did you know it was missing?"

I shook my head, unable to speak. When the furniture change occurred I'd thought this photograph had been stuck in a drawer.

Roland appeared with a glass of water and I drank half of it before I tried to speak again. "Where was it?" I asked quietly. I held the frame, inside the plastic bag, staring at the photo of Michael and me in front of the Space Needle, only now it was stained, filthy with something unspeakable stuck to it. I pushed it away as the tears started. It was the only picture of Michael and me together that I had and I'd treasured it. It had been taken the day he proposed and I was grinning like some love-enchanted fool. It was all I had left of my happy times with him.

Ethan's arm circled my shoulder and his thumb wiped tears from my cheeks. He murmured soft words in my ear and rocked me gently beside him. I heard him whisper, "Michael's here," and looked up to see the blue-white glow shimmering through my tears, hovering behind the sergeant.

"It was with Ruthie's bible, Ms. Robertson. We also found a rosary and a wedding album. The album is Lillian Yarman's, we checked the photographs. The rosary we're not sure about, but if we eliminate everyone who's been hurt by this guy, we figure it must be Margaret Moorhead's. Would you recognize it? Have you ever seen her with one?"

There were suddenly two wavering auras behind Riggs. When I looked, I realized it was Margaret and Michael. Margaret was nodding furiously. Michael moved up behind the sergeant and spoke to me.

Tell them it's hers, Charli. Margaret says it is.

I'd have to tell a lie but I figured it was worth it to calm the poor ghost hanging about with Michael. I just hoped Ethan wouldn't give them away.

"Yes, Sergeant, it's hers. I saw her wear it when she went to Mass." If God struck me down for a liar, I could always say I did it for Him.

"Thanks. That's all I need for now. If I have any other questions I'll call Mr. Harwood and let him know. Sorry to interrupt you, folks." He turned and departed, carrying with him my last memento of my short time with Michael. Even if I could have it back, I wouldn't want it. Not marked and soiled like it was and not after some murdering son of a bitch had his damned hands all over it.

"Charli, honey, I'm so sorry. If I'd known what he had, I'd have stopped him."

"It's okay, Ethan. I'm sorry I fainted. I've never passed out before. Not even when they came to tell me Michael'd been killed. This was somehow worse. Then, it was two total strangers telling me Michael was dead and asking a few questions. Now, it's my last treasure from our time together, and someone I may know is responsible for what happened to it. Makes it so much worse."

He pulled me closer, pulled my head to his shoulder with his hand and gently kissed my temple. "Sweetheart, I'm sorry. So, so sorry." I felt a warmth on the other side of me and then a gentle, featherlight touch on my cheek. I peeked and saw Michael hovering beside me, his aura such an intense red I felt warmed through to my very core.

Charli, babe, I didn't know. Wasn't there anyone with you when they came that day? Nobody you knew? My mother? No, of course not, forget I said something so stupid. She'd be too busy feeling sorry for herself to remember you.

"It's all right, Michael. One of them was a chaplain. Richard Dixon. He was very nice and very comforting. When your mother tried to take over the funeral plans, he stood up for me. Made sure it was my choice, my decisions that counted. I was glad he was there for me. In fact, I went to his non-denominational meetings a few times, just to see if it would help me get over losing you."

God, Charli, why'd this have to happen to you? His aura moved to a corner and stayed there, a ghostly sulk if I wasn't mistaken.

"I remember the day it happened," Ethan spoke quietly beside me. "I got this call from someone who said he was a cop saying my interview was cancelled. There'd been a death in your family and you weren't coming. I didn't know it was your husband until you came in three weeks later. I remember I upset you, thinking you were just some blonde bimbo who hadn't wanted to show up so you'd had someone phone. Then I made you cry —"

Michael's aura turned blue-white and a book sailed through the air. Ethan saw and caught it before it hit him.

"I'm sorry, man, what was I to think? This tall, curvy blonde walks in, full of confidence, trying to appear like she owns the world, what would you think?" he asked Michael.

I'd probably give her the benefit of the doubt until I knew for sure.

"Let me tell you, I wish I had. I asked her rather snidely how the funeral had gone and she burst into tears. She was halfway to the elevator before one of my artists caught her. Seems he knew her and he knew about your death. He enlightened me while she mopped up the tears. It took a lot of talking to get her to forgive me and stay. I hired her on the spot, even though she thought seriously about turning me down. I felt lower than a worm, believe me. And LeRoy didn't let me forget, either. He holds it over my head every time I threaten to fire her."

While he and Michael talked about me, I thought back to the interview

"And now look where it's got me!" Ethan's words snapped me out of my little reverie and I looked around.

"What?" I knew I'd missed something, just didn't know what.

Ethan and Roland laughed, Michael's aura quivered. I guess whatever they'd said had been funny. They wouldn't tell me.

Their laughter did lighten the mood and for a few more moments we sat, talking quietly about what Riggs had found in the basement.

"You know," I stood and started toward the kitchen then turned back, "That bible of Ruthie's. Why would it be there? She isn't dead. And my picture. I'm not dead, either." I paced back and forth trying to figure out what was wrong with the picture Riggs had painted. "In fact, nothing's happened to me."

"Nothing? My dear Charli," Roland could hardly speak for laughing, "so many things have happened to you in the last six months, how can you say that?"

"I...I...guess you're right. Things have happened to me. But I don't think they were done by the same person who killed these women or hurt Ruthie so bad."

"True, we know who did most of the things to you. You aren't Stan Medlar's favorite person."

"I know. So why would my photograph be down there?"

We were silent while we thought about it but no one had an answer. Eventually, we gave up.

The delivery of lumber gave us something else to do and it wasn't until much later in the afternoon I had a chance to think about the question again.

Why? I hadn't been hurt by whoever this was. Had I?

What about the phone calls?

What about the furniture I'd found moved?

What about...

When it hit me, I sat down. I couldn't move, couldn't think.

Was it possible?

Was he the one?

I sat without moving for at least an hour. The immensity of it all staggered me. When the workers gave up for the day, Ethan and Roland came to find me.

"Charli?" Ethan looked around, turned on a light and hurried across the office to me. "What is it, sweetheart? You look ill!"

"I feel sick, Ethan. But not the way you think." I looked up at him, saw such tenderness in his eyes, and longed for him to just hold me, give me love without question then take me away from here forever.

"Ethan, did Riggs find anything else in the basement? Anything that didn't belong there? Or was it just those four things he brought up here?"

"I don't think there was anything else. Why? What's bothering you, Charli?"

I looked at him, knew I had to tell him, but didn't know how.

It was Roland who finally broke the silence.

"What have you remembered, Charli?"

"It's not what I remembered, Roland." I swallowed hard. "It's who."

"What do you mean, love?" Ethan moved closer and I turned my head into his shoulder when I whispered.

"I know who killed them."

Chapter Eighteen

"You know? How? Who is it?" demanded Roland.

"Take it easy, Roland, don't rush her. Whatever's happened it's upsetting Charli and you're making it worse."

"Sorry, Charli." Roland mumbled his apology but I didn't think he meant it. Roland wanted to know who had done these horrific deeds and I knew. The only way he'd find out was to ask. I usually appreciated Roland's directness. Today, however, I found it abrasive.

"Ethan, call Sergeant Riggs and have him look in the front of the bible, or, better yet, have him bring it back here. I don't know the name of the person who pushed him to it, but it was Ruthie's son, Norman, who murdered those women. I'd stake my life on it."

"Why do you want the bible?" asked Roland. Ethan had left to make the call.

"Because there's a family tree in the front of it and the name of Norman's nanny is in it. At least the woman Ruthie called a nanny. She was really no more than a friend from the streets who lived with her. Ruthie showed it to me once. Someone wrote the woman's name in there. Upset Ruthie no end because the woman wasn't related, but the comment written under it said something like 'more of a mother than the rest'. Check out the name and I'll bet you'll find the woman died a mysterious death at about the same age as Lillian Yarman and Margaret. If not, then, hopefully, I'm wrong." The thought a son could try and kill his own mother was beyond my comprehension. But when you looked at just the facts, they were indisputable.

There was a sudden flare of light and I realized we had company. Margaret and Michael hovered there like two avenging angels.

If you're right, why was your photograph down there? asked Michael.

"Because according to his mother, he once said no woman should be allowed to live past thirty. They were 'old and haggard, not deserving of life' was the way he put it. I'd guess in the photo I was all right, but I've aged a bit, picked up a few wrinkles, especially after Michael di... Since you left. I'm probably next on his list now I'm no longer the same fresh young woman I was when the photograph was taken."

"Riggs was out. I left a message for him to call here." Ethan came back to sit next to me. "So you think the photo was there because you're next? Not because he thinks you're what all women should look like?"

I hadn't thought of that explanation.

"Charli wouldn't think that way, Ethan," interrupted Roland. "She's not vain enough to consider such things."

"Thanks, Roland." I smiled up at him. "I hadn't thought of it, but I'm sure I have the usual allotment of vanity most women have." I turned back to Ethan and frowned while I contemplated how to tell him my suspicions.

"I think I'm next. In his mind I've passed the point a woman should be allowed to reach. If I'm right about the nanny, I suspect she died because of her age and nothing more. I think Norman is the one who wrote in the bible and I think he did it to make his mother angry. I know Ruthie always said she considered herself a terrible mother."

"Why?"

"She never married. Norman was the result of a one-night stand and she didn't have any idea who the father was. Her family threw her out. She made no effort to find the father, just disappeared into the area of town where she knew she'd be welcome. In her time, she was a beautiful young woman." I stopped, took a drink then looked at Roland. "If you'll go down to the suite we've used to store her stuff, there's a photo album in one of the open boxes. Bring it up, you'll see what I mean."

"I'll get it in a minute. Finish what you're saying."

"I don't think he meant to kill her. Just hurt her badly, the way he thinks she hurt him. That's why she didn't die. He didn't hit her quite hard enough to finish it. He actually may have hit her harder than he intended."

"Where's this Norman been all these years?"

"I don't know. Ruthie told me she thought he was dead. He left home years ago and she says she's never heard from him. But something she said once made me wonder if she knew he was alive. She may have decided it was just easier to pretend he was dead. She could have been trying to protect herself."

"Probably. So you think this person who's been living in the basement here is her son?" Ethan looked baffled. "If it was Norman, why wouldn't he just have moved back in with her, lived in her apartment instead of living like an animal in that hell hole he created?"

"I don't know." I sighed and lay back in the chair. "Although, if you think about it, that's maybe how he felt safest. If he's been on the streets all this time." I shuddered just thinking about it.

"I suppose anything's possible." Ethan shook his head in amazement. "I guess I was lucky. I had two loving parents who wanted me, gave me everything. You, Charli, at least have a family, even if they aren't the loving kind. But this poor guy?" I think Ethan found it difficult to comprehend anything about Norman Simpson's situation.

"This poor guy, as you call him, had a mother who tried as best she knew how, if I read her right when she told me these things." I stood, paced back and forth, thinking as I walked. "She just didn't have a clue how to be a good mother. From the sound of it, she was looked after by the servants in her own home, saw her parents for about five minutes each day. The rest of the time they were doing whatever the rich and famous did back in the Twenties and Thirties. Don't forget, Ethan, we're talking about a man

who's at least sixty now. This isn't some young hood we're talking about. Norman is an old man."

I saw their shock when my words registered. They hadn't thought about the age of Ruthie's son. Just that he was a lone guy killing older women. And no one knew where he was.

"Has anyone checked the basement today, other than Sergeant Riggs and the lab boss?" I asked.

"I don't know, love. Why?"

"Because I think if they leave the space alone, Norman will come back. It's obviously where he's been for a long time, so this may be where he'll head, if there's no activity. You might also suggest they check the DNA they found against Ruthie's. If it's her son, at least half of it will be a match, or so I saw on an episode of that forensics show last week."

"We don't want him here," cut in Roland. "Not in this building, Charli. We want him gone."

"No, Roland, we want him stopped. There's a difference. And to do that, we have to let him come back."

Ethan stood and headed for the phone.

We waited in silence while he was connected to Sergeant Riggs. For once, the man was at his desk. He must have been on his way back from here when Ethan called the first time.

"It's Ethan Harwood. Do you have anyone watching the basement over here?" Ethan's head nodded as we watched.

"Okay, this is what we think will happen if you'll just pull your man out of there." He went on to explain my idea.

"Fine, and can you bring the bible with you? We may have another name for you to check on. Charli is certain you'll find another woman whose death he's responsible for. Her name's in the book." He listened for another moment. "Right. And Charli just mentioned something..." He told Riggs about the DNA testing then hung up.

"Well?" I asked impatiently.

"He's on his way. They'll pull the guard off the basement immediately. Riggs's going to set up surveillance cameras in the crawlspace so we'll know when he returns." He swung around to me. "You, my sweet, are outta here. You won't be coming back until he's caught."

Michael's aura suddenly glowed a warm red. *You won't be alone, Charli. We're all going with you. And we'll stay with you until Norman's caught.*

I looked from face to face of my protectors and knew they wouldn't like what I had to say. "You've all forgotten one thing. I'm the one he's coming back for."

The silence was frightening.

They'd all assumed we'd just leave the building and Norman would slink back to his hole in the basement. They'd forgotten it would take something—me—to draw him back. I was the only piece missing in his puzzle. He'd already killed two women, severely injured another. He had one more on his list.

Norman wouldn't be happy until I was dead.

Chapter Nineteen

Sergeant Riggs came to tell us the camera was in place and the DNA test was being run as we spoke. He'd already accepted I was probably right and, once I showed him the name scrawled in the bible, the department had an investigator checking to see if there was another murder they could lay at Norman's door.

The afternoon seemed to drag. Ethan and Roland refused to leave me alone and the constant worry gave me a headache. I took a couple of ibuprofen and lay down on the sofa in the office, intending to close my eyes and rest. No sooner had my head touched the pillow than the phone rang. One of the men answered it in the other room.

I waited for someone to tell me what was happening, but no one came near the office. It must have been nearly an hour later when the phone rang again. I bolted to my feet, stopped long enough to get over feeling dizzy, and crossed to the office door. When I tried to turn the knob, I knew why no one had come to tell me about the calls.

There was no one in the outer rooms. I was by myself, locked in.

Jiggling the doorknob accomplished nothing but to incense me, but somebody heard. Well, not a somebody, but somebody's ghost. Margaret materialized inside the door.

It's all right dear. They locked you in because you were asleep and they had to go downstairs and help Bobby for a moment or two. Michael said I should stay here and tell you.

"Why'd Bobby need help?"

The lumber order came and it wouldn't all fit in the lobby. Seems Gerry forgot and brought all the lumber for the second-floor alterations, too.

"Oh, no! How could he?"

According to Michael, it wasn't hard. Your Michael seems to think this Gerry has, now what did he call it, a screw loose.

"Michael said that?" I chuckled to myself and wandered to the chair behind the desk. The phone had been reconnected with the new number, so I could call Ethan's cell phone and find out what was happening.

I picked up the receiver only to discover the line was dead. "Well, damn. They told me this was working."

It was, dear, earlier. I saw that nice Doctor Roland talking to someone before lunch.

"Well, it's dead now. Can you do something for me, Margaret? Let Michael know. I really don't want to be up here, by myself—" I shut my mouth and chewed on my lower lip. How insensitive could I be?

It's all right, dear. I do understand. I'm not much use if someone has to protect you. I'll go tell Michael.

“Thanks, Margaret. And I’m sorry that came out —”

Margaret was already gone, leaving me alone in a locked room with a dead phone. It didn’t make me feel awfully secure, but at least no one could get in to me if I couldn’t get out.

Margaret had been gone about ten minutes when I heard muffled noises from the other side of the door. Someone was finally coming to rescue me.

The lights abruptly went out and I realized it had to be a full building blackout, maybe the whole area, because all the hums and thrums one hears in a building this size ground to a soundless halt. From the kitchen, I heard the rattle of the refrigerator compressor as it stopped cold. The new fridge was due tomorrow and I thought I might actually miss the comforting sounds of the old one. It took only a few seconds before my eyes found the outline of the window where the outside light filtered through.

The doorknob rattled and I felt my way back to the door.

“Who’s there? Ethan?” I leaned against the door, but when I put my hand on the knob, I felt it turning. If this was Ethan, why hadn’t he answered me? “Ethan?” I called again. Still no answer.

I backed away from the door, looking into the darkness for someplace to hide.

I dropped to the floor behind the desk and dragged my knees up to my chin, bringing my feet into the cramped space. I watched the dark shadows of someone’s legs and prayed this person, whoever it was, couldn’t hear me breathing. Without the normal building sounds around me, my breaths sounded loud in my ears. Being enclosed in the knee-hole of the desk probably contributed. When I heard the door close again, I had to restrain myself from struggling out of my hiding place for fear whoever this was turned around and came back. I’d just stay here until I knew it was safe.

Thank God I did, for no sooner had my pursuer left the room than he came back. My teeth were chattering by this time, from terror, not cold, and I was sure he’d hear.

At this point in time, I made one fatal mistake.

I decided if this was Norman, I could handle him. After all, he was a sixty-year-old man. I was probably in better physical shape, since I was half his age, and mentally one up on him. I knew he was here—he didn’t know about me.

Or so I thought.

A hand grabbed me about the upper arm at the same time a blinding light flashed in my face. Before I had time to scream, I was hauled unceremoniously from under the desk and pushed toward the chair in the corner.

“Sit, bitch.”

Oh, hell!

It wasn’t Norman.

It was Stan Medlar. A very angry Stan Medlar. What was he doing here? He was supposed to be in jail.

"Thought you'd get away with it, didn't you, slut. You should have known better." He was busy while he talked, using duct tape to tie my arms to the wooden arms of the chair.

When he got to my feet, I drew my legs back, thinking I might stop him if I kicked him hard enough, but his hand smacked my face, hard, rattling and shaking my head so bad it made me dizzy. Did nothing for the headache I had either.

"Don't try it, bitch." He slapped me again, as though to remind me he would hurt me if I didn't do as he said. "Sit still."

Ethan! Michael!

Could I get them up here before he decided to hurt me, or worse, kill me? I'd have to rely on Michael reading my mind again.

The tape around my ankles tightened with each turn Stan took and I realized he'd not only taped my ankles, he'd anchored them to a chair leg. I couldn't wiggle anything except my toes.

"That oughta hold you, bitch." He slammed the roll of tape on the desktop then turned to me, pulling my blouse to bring me closer to him. Taped to the chair, all he accomplished was to pull my blouse from my pants. In that instant I knew I was in trouble.

His hand pulled at the fabric, fumbling with the buttons until he lost his temper and finally used both hands to rip the fabric apart. Buttons flew and the fabric hung in shreds in his fists. His hand moved toward my breasts and I shrank back in the chair. He reached down and grabbed a handful of my pants' waistband, and realized he'd created a problem.

I was tied down with duct tape in too many places.

Stan pushed the chair and it tipped over backward, hitting the floor, and my head struck the edge of the desk on the way down. I tried not to black out, drawing breath between clenched teeth. I felt a juddering tremor pass through my head and neck and knew I was hurt.

"No, please..."

A fist slammed into my mouth, I bit my tongue and the taste of blood made me want to throw up. Before I could spit it out, his hand struck my cheek again, this time snapping my head back so hard my vision grayed.

The last thing I saw before I passed out was a large, worn work boot, descending...

I hear familiar voices. A man, a woman.

"How's things today, Ethan?"

"Not bad, Maddie, all things considered. We got the last of the work done on the building this weekend."

"Good. I'm so glad to hear it."

"Yeah." His deep chuckle fills me with warmth but I don't know why. "Now that it's finished the association wants to take on the building next door as their second restoration. Sort of take one step at a time and try and wipe out that whole slum area."

"It's too bad she'll never know what she inspired."

"Well, if there's any kind of justice in this world, she will know, somehow, that her accident wasn't in vain. Now that the building is..."

I tune out the voices, totally confused by what they're talking about. What association? What building? And why would I never know what I'd inspired? But most important of all...

What accident?

I try to open my eyes, make a noise. The blinding light is like an arrow piercing to the center of my brain. I feel like crying it hurts so bad.

"Maddie, look." I hear his whisper. He sounds frightened. "Get Roland, quick. Something's happening."

Someone hurries from the room and a warm hand takes mine. The voice sounds almost frantic.

"Sweetheart, if you can hear me, please, please, don't die. I don't want to lose you. I love you, Charli, so much. Please."

Die? Why in heaven's name would I be dying?

A combination of fear, pleading and something I can't name colors his voice.

Maddie calls him Ethan. The only Ethan I know wouldn't be talking about me as if I'm going someplace. Or am already lost. He's been with me through everything, so why is he talking like this now? As for Maddie, what is she doing here? She should be at the Harwood home.

Holding his hand tighter, I can't tell if he feels anything. Maybe if I give him some sign I can hear him he'll say more.

Before I can think of anything to say, footsteps come back into the room.

"He's on his way. Anything else happen?" Maddie again.

"No, nothing. Just that little noise."

"It might have been nothing more, Ethan. Don't go getting your hopes up. You know what they told you. After seven months they don't expect any further recovery."

"I know, but I can't stand to think that way. If, no, *when*, she wakes up, I want her to be whole again. She wouldn't enjoy life if she was tied to a bed in a vegetative coma."

Chapter Twenty

June 16, 2006

Coma?

Whoa, now. What's this about a vegetable? Anxious thoughts are cascading through my mind over what I'm hearing. And what's this about seven months?

"If I wake up", "tied to a bed", "a vegetable". Once more I try to open my eyes, to find out why this man is sitting beside me saying such negative things. After everything we've been through...

Another set of steps cross the room toward me. A heavy footstep, a man, if I'm not mistaken.

"So, what's up with our girl, Ethan? What did you see?" asks the new voice.

"Her eyes flickered, as though trying to open. Then I thought I heard a whimpering noise."

That's Ethan. If he, whoever he is, wants to know what the problem is, why doesn't he ask me?

I raise my hand, try and get someone's attention. Anyone's attention. Someone close by gasps and lays a hand on my arm.

"Charli, sweetheart, can you hear me?"

"Ethan, don't do this to yourself. You know she can't hear you. She isn't going to come out of this. It's been too long. These are just involuntary movements."

"Too long", "not coming out of what"? I finally recognize Roland Driver's voice. My mouth and my brain keep trying, but nothing comes out. Frustrated beyond belief, I try once more and hear a rusty squeak.

"Drink," I croaked.

There is complete silence all around me. Nobody seems to move and not one of the three voices I've heard so far says a word.

Maybe if I try harder, louder. "Drink." Maybe they can't hear me.

An ice cube suddenly settles against my lips, held in place by warm fingers. Even warmer lips brush across my forehead.

"You heard that, didn't you?" I don't know who Ethan's talking to. Getting my eyes open is now a priority. I have to see who's here and what's happening.

I try. God knows I try. But even when I think they're open, I can't see anything but darkness. It takes me a moment to realize there's a hand on my head, holding something over my face.

"If she opens her eyes now she'll really be in trouble—the shock to the retinas. Get those drapes closed. And turn out the lights. Leave that little one by the door." Roland's giving orders and someone bustles around, probably obeying.

Ethan's aftershave wafts my way. All of my senses seem to be starting up at once, bombarding my brain with more messages than it can handle at one time.

"Ethan..." I try, but I don't know if he can even hear that rusty little squeak.

From the depths of my memory come two questions. I'm burning for the answers. I have to try to get Ethan to hear me well enough to reply.

"Ethan..." It hurts to talk, but I try harder. "Ethan, is Ruthie—"

"She's fine, Charli. She's fine. She's got a couple of dandy scars, but she's fine."

Roland's questioning voice asks, "Ethan, how did she know about Ruthie?" He sounds both curious and slightly frightened.

Ethan doesn't answer him. It's time for the other question.

"Is the condo finished?" My voice still grates but it's getting stronger each time I speak.

This time the silence lasts longer. Apparently no one plans to answer.

"Roland, what's happening here?" Ethan's voice is loaded with anguish, he sounds tortured, distressed. "Is she all right?"

"I honestly don't know" comes Roland's reply, confusing me even more. "You know what the neurosurgeon said. There was too much damage. They couldn't fix it all. I have no explanation for this. None. I'm going to call Doctor Hardy right now and get him out here."

Obviously this isn't a hospital or he wouldn't be bringing a doctor "out here". Wherever "here" is. My apartment? No. I seem to remember I don't have drapes on my bedroom window that could keep out the light, I have pastel sheers. All that tells me is that I'm not at home.

By the time Roland Driver comes back from making his phone call I'm getting plenty peeved. No one talks to me, no one answers my questions. No one does anything.

Except the hand holding the ice cubes. They just keep coming—melting and trickling down my throat. Glorious cool. Heavenly thirst-quenching.

Maybe it's my temper that provides the extra boost I need. Whatever it is, this time I know I'll make myself heard. "Ethan, tell me. Is the condo finished yet?"

His hand moves again to my face, strokes my cheek and when he leans over me, I feel something wet on my skin. I finally manage to pry my reluctant eyelids open and, after focusing as best I can on what's around me, realize it's Ethan's tears I feel.

He's crying. My hand makes its way to his cheek. "Shhhh. It's all right. Everything will be all right," I tell him.

"Charli, please, lie still. Don't talk. Don't even move until Doctor Hardy gets here. Please, love?"

When he asks like that, how can I refuse?

"Okay. But tell him to hurry. I want to get up."

I hear a gasp from the other side of the bed and see Maddie Waltham standing there, tears running down her cheeks. That does it, polite request or not, I have to ask. "Why are you two crying? I'm fine. I'm not sure what's happened, but I'm fine. And as soon as your precious Doctor Hardy gets here, I want to get up."

At my words, Maddie bursts into loud sobs and leaves the room. I turn to Ethan in time to see him wiping tears from his eyes.

"Charli, you are something else." I can hear the tears in his voice but he seems to have his eyes under control again. In fact, I think he might be trying to laugh.

When Roland Driver takes Maddie's place at the side of the bed, I'm surprised to see that he, too, has tears in his eyes. All this wetness is becoming somewhat depressing.

"Okay, so who's peeling onions around here? That's the only reason I can see for all these tears. You, Roland. Maddie and Ethan. I'm the only one not blubbering."

I sense the laughter bubbling up in Ethan before I hear it. Finally. Someone is going to act as though they're happy.

"Charli, shut up. No, don't shut up. I want to hear your voice. You can talk all you want. But at least wait until Doctor Hardy gets here to try anything else."

He exchanges a look with Roland Driver that should warn me something's wrong. But it doesn't. I ignore it. "Can I at least ask questions?" I try to sound like I'm sulking, but I don't succeed. I'm just not a sulking kind of person.

"A few. Then you have to rest." Roland Driver wraps his hand around my wrist and I realize he isn't just holding my hand, he's taking my pulse. That seems to be his lot in life.

"Okay. First I need to know what happened to Tiny Brown. Ethan, did you ever find out?" The shock is there on their faces but I haven't a clue what put it there.

"Yeah, Charli." He looks at Roland when he answers me, then back at me. Something about the question bothers him. "He was murdered. By Gus Farmer. The police are looking into it."

"Louise Walters. Is she still there?"

"Uh, I don't know." Again I get the feeling my question is causing him some concern.

I close my eyes for a moment, wanting to go back to sleep, and at the same time I want to get out of bed. My body feels exhausted—from what I have no idea—yet my mind doesn't.

"Ethan," Roland whispers, "I'd say she's going to go back to sleep, but from what I can see, it will be just a natural sleep. Not like before."

The words cut through the fog in my head but they don't really make sense. And I am tired.

Time to worry about it later.

When I wake up again, the low murmur of male voices assures me Ethan and Roland are still in the room.

There's another male voice, one I don't recognize. It sounds familiar, but I can't put a name to it. Probably one of the men I've been working with on the condo for so long.

"I don't have any explanation for this. Sometimes we do things, fix them as best we can, and know that the final outcome will be no good. But I'd say this time some kind of great healing happened. I wouldn't have thought I'd see it here, but from what you tell me, it's nothing short of a miracle."

What miracle are they talking about? Maybe all the good accomplished on the condo. I keep thinking I know the man who's speaking, but I still can't put a name to the voice.

"Doctor Hardy, how long do you think it will be before she remembers everything, or will there be any memory of the fall? And what happened before that?"

I hear the familiar voice, when he answers Ethan, but his answer sounds like some kind of bad joke.

"She may never remember any of it. She might remember all of it. If she's lucky, she won't remember what happened before she fell. That's about the best answer I can give you right now. It's going to be a case of wait and see."

I've had enough of these men talking about me as though I'm not here.

"Ethan." My voice sounds better. Not so scratchy. He pushes his chair back and is at my side in moments. "Ethan, what's he talking about?"

Here is another of those silences. I've heard them referred to as "pregnant pauses". Not a bad description really. A silence with the expectation of something fruitful at the end of it. A pregnant pause. I like that.

I'm still waiting. The other two men rise and approach the bed.

The older of the two sits down on the side of the bed, holds my wrist and is taking my pulse again. I think my pulse has been taken about eight times since I woke up the first time.

It suddenly strikes me that maybe I've been sick.

"Mrs. Harwood. I need..."

My name is Robertson, not Harwood.

"Just a minute. Stop." He's looking at me as though he's never been interrupted before. "Why did you call me Mrs. Harwood? My name is Charli Robertson."

Ethan's chuckle turns my head and he's wearing the sweetest smile, a smile hot enough to melt bones if he isn't careful where he shines it.

"Just accept it, my love. I'll explain it all later. For now, your name is Harwood."

When I frown at him, he winks.

My burst of laughter catches everyone off guard. They all gawk at me and I wonder if I missed something. I've never seen Ethan wink before and it makes him look so young and carefree. Not at all like the man who has endured the last six months with me. I'm still gazing at him

when I tell Doctor Hardy, "Okay, start over. I stopped listening when you called me Mrs. Harwood."

I wouldn't admit it, but I kinda like the sound of it. But if I'm Mrs. Ethan Harwood, you'd think I'd remember getting married.

"I'll call you Charli. Less confusing. Now. What your husband, what Ethan was talking about with us... How do I put this?" Doctor Hardy looks at Ethan then Roland and shrugs. I don't think answering my question should be all that hard.

"You had an accident. Do you remember anything about it?"

What's he talking about? I stare at him, thinking maybe this is all a bad joke.

"No. What kind of an accident?" I leveled a stare at Ethan. I want him to tell me. Something about this is beginning to frighten me. He must feel my fear.

"Charli, love, you fell. Down a flight of stairs at your apartment. Do you remember that?" Ethan moves to sit beside me, nudging Doctor Hardy back from the bed.

"No. You've got it wrong. I didn't fall, Ethan. I was tied to a chair in the office, with duct tape, and Stan Medlar was trying to rape me."

Think of every cliché you can imagine about total quiet.

That about describes these three men. The proverbial pin drops. The silence is deafening. And the looks on the faces of these three are something else altogether.

Shock. Incredulity. Disbelief?

Doctor Hardy looks at me as though I've taken complete leave of my senses. He tips his head at Roland Driver and indicates Roland should join him, away from my bed. I watch and wonder what they're talking about.

Ethan continues to sit close to me, biting his lip, staring into my eyes. He turns briefly to the other men as though looking for support then looks back at me.

"What are you talking about, sweetheart? Stan had nothing to do with it. And you weren't in the office."

What am I talking about?

What's *he* talking about? Why is he asking me these questions? He was there. Wasn't he?

"Ethan, don't you remember, you were in the basement with Sergeant Riggs and I was upstairs in the office. The door was locked and when I heard a noise I thought it was you, but you didn't answer me so I hid. Under the desk. Then Stan came in and he...he found me...and—" God it hurt to remember what happened! "Then he tied me

up, and he...he tried to pull my clothes off...he ripped my blouse and was mad because he'd taped me so tight he...couldn't...couldn't get my pants off. I remember hitting my head when the chair tipped and I must have finally passed out." I thought about everything that happened a moment longer. "That's all I remember."

"Charli, love, who is Sergeant Riggs?" Ethan looks at me as though he's never heard of the sergeant before, but I know he has.

"You know him. You were with him in the basement, he arranged for the DNA testing, he brought Ruthie's bible—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! I don't know what you're talking about here, my love. Help me out, will you? What exactly do you think... No. Go back to the beginning. Tell us everything that happened. Everything you can remember." Ethan moves up beside me on the bed so he ends up sitting next to me, his arm around my shoulders, and pulls me to lie against his chest. "Okay, from the top. All of it."

"Do you remember the day of the big meeting, about the ad with the dog?" He shakes his head but he doesn't speak, doesn't interrupt. "In the afternoon, you sent me to get LeRoy and from there everything just seemed to go from bad to worse. After I cut my feet..."

I continue relating what I remember, answering their quiet questions, while Ethan hands me the water glass whenever my voice gets scratchy, until I suddenly realize the little bit of sky I can see through the slit where the heavy drapes meet is dark. "What time is it? How long have I been talking?"

"It's evening. Don't worry. You feel okay?" Ethan looks at the others, asking questions with his eyes. I have no idea why they seem to be acting so strangely but I continue.

"Anyway, this morning, while you and Sergeant Riggs set the trap for Ruthie's son, someone locked me in the office and that's where Stan found me. Where he...where he tried..." I can't finish—the words will only make my memories worse.

Complete silence.

Nobody says a word. No one moves. We sit like this for a few minutes, then I feel Ethan shift beside me. He clears his throat.

"Hardy, I'm going to tell her. She has to know." He waits until the other man nods. It's obvious neither Hardy nor Roland is going to say anything.

"You weren't attacked by Stan in any office, love." When I start to interrupt, he shushes me, holding a finger to my lips. "No, now it's my turn. I'm going to tell you what actually happened." He pulls me closer, his arm tighter.

"Last November," he looks up at Roland as though looking for his confirmation, "in fact, seven months ago today, you were attacked outside your apartment by a man who grabbed you as you came out the door, hit you over the head with something, we think a piece of iron pipe, then pushed you down the stairs. The guy must have had a real psycho problem, too. He cut you. He cut the bottoms of both your feet. The only reason

we could see for that was to keep you from being able to run away after he finished with you."

"Finished doing what?"

"You don't want to know."

"Yes, I do, Ethan." I nearly choked on my words. Feet shuffle around me. "Tell me."

"He was trying to rape you, Charli. Ruthie Simpson came out of her place and screamed. That's the only reason he left you alone."

I want to say something but I can't get my breath. Ethan doesn't seem to notice and continues. "Ruthie scared him off. If the doctors were right, he kicked you as he left. You had bruises on your ribs that were consistent with the toe of a work boot, not the edge of the stairs."

"No, Ethan." I finally manage to get enough breath to talk. "It was Stan. I saw him. He was yelling at me. Calling me names. Bitch. Whore. Made me angry. I hadn't done anything to him but he'd been mad at me since we fired him. I tried to get a message to Michael but nobody came." The bewildered expression in Ethan's eyes is scaring me.

"Charli, Stan Medlar has been in jail for nearly seven months. He couldn't have assaulted you."

"Jail?"

"Jail. He couldn't make bail, they set it so high. He's been charged with attempted rape and assault with a deadly weapon. For a while they were thinking about attempted murder." He draws a deep breath and I suddenly think I should have left well enough alone. "For hurting you, Charli, and putting you in this coma."

"Stan did this to me?"

Ethan nods. "And he'll be behind bars a while longer. He should get about six years before he's eligible for parole, if found guilty."

Okay. So if I'm getting the part about Stan wrong, how much more —

"If I'm mixed up about Stan, what about Lester and Louise?"

"Who?"

"Lester McGinley and Louise Walters. When we met them, Lester was looking for the diary buried under the floor in Louise's apartment. Remember? He was trying to find it so he could prove to his wife he wasn't having an affair with Louise. Wanted us to plant a story in the paper about it so everyone would know."

"Sorry, love." He shakes his head as though he's truly disappointed he can't help me. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Now I'm stumped.

"Don't you remember meeting him that day when we all sat on the stairs? Lester arrived first, then Louise showed up. You bowed to her, Ethan. Like she was a proper lady. And I slid down the stairs on my butt, landed right at your feet." I smile, remembering how he picked me up and hugged me.

"Sweetheart, this is another of those things I'm afraid you've dreamt. How could I have met people who've been dead for so many years? Mind you, I'd have loved to meet Lester McGinley. Such a great businessman in his day."

"Well then, what about Michael? Where's he?"

There's silence in the room. Doctor Hardy appears totally mystified. Roland Driver gazes anywhere but at me. Ethan is, well, let's just say he doesn't look well. His face is white. His lips are clamped. The perfect picture of someone in mental distress.

"Anyone? I want an answer."

I'm getting annoyed with him and I think he knows it. He slides himself to the edge of the bed, pushes off and commences pacing. Up, down the length of the room, then from side to side.

"Where is Michael?"

"Michael is dead, Charli. You know that."

"Oh, for crying out loud, of course I know he's dead. He's been dead for more than three years. You know what I mean so why are you giving me such a bad time?" I watch him a few seconds more. "Where is he?"

Three men stand speechless and I wait. It isn't very pleasant and I'm beginning to think things might get worse before they get any better.

"You know, Charli, I think something must have happened when you were attacked. You have a lot of the information right, but you have the things you think are most important totally wrong. I don't know why. I don't know if Doctor Hardy knows why, or Roland. Any of us. I just know something happened while you were lying in the hospital and it's messed up your memories. Like this thing with Michael. And how did you know about Ruthie?"

"What are you talking about? I was there. You were with me. You saw Michael. Remember? You never saw him until he passed through the door. Then you could hear him."

"I wasn't there, sweetheart. I didn't see Michael or Michael's ghost or whatever it was you think you saw. And Ruthie? Ruthie was hurt while you were lying in this bed, unconscious. Nearly six months ago. Her accident, I mean."

I stare at him, unable to believe what he's telling me. I don't know what to say. He couldn't have it right. I was there. That's not how it happened.

"Did Sergeant Riggs arrest Norman for attacking his mother?" I asked. "I hope somebody caught him."

"Who the hell are Sergeant Riggs and Norman?" Ethan must have been having trouble with his patience or his temper. He paced the room, his hands shoved deep into his pockets and his shoulders so hunched forward he looked like, well, he looked like he was mad. Angry with me. Or maybe with what I said?

"Sergeant Martin Riggs came out to see about the murders of Margaret Moorehead and Lillian Yarman, the two bodies we found." From the look on Ethan's and Roland's faces, I'm wrong again. "Don't tell me, there was no sergeant and no murders."

"No, Charli, but there was Lethal Weapon," said Roland as he moves toward the bed.

We all stare at Roland as if he's nuts, which of course is ridiculous as it's me that's having the memory problems.

"Geez, Roland, now *you're* doing it!" exclaims Ethan as he walks back to the other side of the bed.

"No, Ethan, I'm not. Remember when you said if you talked to Charli, she'd hear you? Well, I think that's exactly what happened. About two weeks ago, you watched a DVD of Lethal Weapon while you sat beside this very bed."

"Are you saying she heard it, then made it part of her unconsciousness?"

"What else do you remember, Charli?" asks Doctor Hardy, stepping nearer to the bed. "No, make that *who* else do you recall?"

He turns to Ethan and Roland before I can answer and tells them, "For every name or incident she can remember, I want her to think about what happened in the real world that could have been what she's talking about. Like this Lester and Louise." He turns back to me and I can see that he's suddenly found something interesting to a man of his medical expertise.

"Can you think of any reason, Charli, that you'd have included them? Did you read something about them? A book, perhaps? Maybe a newspaper article? Or maybe it was something as simple as having been to McGinley Park."

"No," I tell him, seeing where he's going and already knowing the answer. "I went to that Seattle film festival sometime late last fall where they screened a fantasy piece about Lester and his so-called love affair with Louise. A sort of 'did they or didn't they' movie short."

"You see? It was as simple as that. Something you'd done in the real world encroached on the dream you were living. And I bet we could find things like that to explain all your experiences."

"What about Ruthie's son, Norman? How do you explain him?"

"I'm sure if you think about it, you'll come up with the answer. It might be nothing more sinister than hearing his name. Maybe his mother was talking about him."

I rack my brain, trying to come up with the answer and when I do, it's so simple it scares me. I twisted something so innocent into a story of murder and mayhem.

"I don't believe it! I know the explanation and it's frightening to think I took such a molehill and built a mountain from it." I pause, take another sip of water, anything to stall. "I remember Ruthie telling me the state had finally declared Norman dead. He didn't turn up in any of their searches, the detective she hired found no trace of him, so

she petitioned the courts. She got the letter telling her it had been done and when I saw her she was standing beside her mailbox, crying over it.

"Charli, you too, Ethan, I might have an explanation for all this. And it has to do with what some people call a 'near-death experience'. An 'out-of-body experience'." Pulling a chair up beside the bed, he gestures to Roland and Ethan to sit.

Ethan crowds as close to me as he can get and takes my hand in his. Roland smiles at him, an indulgent uncle kind of smile. Doctor Hardy harrumphs and begins to speak in a lecturer's tone of voice.

"You, Charli, nearly died. In fact, twice during the surgery we thought we'd lost you. It was touch and go there for about thirty minutes—each time we got your heart started again, you crashed. And when we finally got you fixed up as best we could, we gave you a very slim chance of surviving, certain you'd be nothing more than a vegetable if you lived. If anyone had asked, I'd have said you had about a one in a million chance of making it."

When he says that, I suddenly remember what Ruthie told me about anything worth doing and worth doing right. "You mean I had a one in a million chance of living and so I had a one in two million chance of living right. Without brain damage. Without physical impairment." That might be pushing it because, as of this moment, I've made no effort to get out of the bed I'm in. I look at Ethan and I'm sure he can sense my fear. "Am I physically all right? Does everything work?"

"We won't know until you try, love, but considering everything else, I suspect you're just fine. Nothing about you seems to be normal." His smile takes the sting out of his words.

"Sorry, Doctor, go on. I want to hear the rest of this."

"Well, I'd have said your odds were even slimmer than one in a million if it's possible. And you can thank this young man here you even had the chance to get this far. You tell her Ethan, you were there, I just heard about it."

"When Doctor Hardy called you Mrs. Harwood, it's because, well, you *are* Mrs. Harwood. Mrs. Ethan Harwood. I married you, Charli, while you were unconscious."

"You what?" I'm totally flabbergasted.

"I married you. It was the only way I could stop your parents." The look on his face tells me I'm not going to like the next part, and he doesn't seem to be in any hurry to tell me about it.

"Ethan?" I look at him and see this is harder on him than even my wild imaginings.

"When we notified your parents you were hurt, they decided not to come to Seattle. They knew you were unconscious, they were told of your chances and they directed the doctor who phoned them to take no heroic measures to save you. No surgery. No life support. I was there when the call was made. You had my number in your purse, to contact in case of an accident." His eyes take on a faraway look, and I know he's remembering.

"See, I told you I needed your number in my wallet. You were the only one I knew, except LeRoy, in Seattle."

"Thank God you did! I was there when your parents gave the orders to do nothing. I tried to fight it. The hospital told me I didn't have the right—the only person who could overrule your parents would be your husband. So I lied. I told the doctor you were my wife, that we'd been keeping it a secret because you worked for me. That no one else knew. And you went by Robertson so no one would find out."

Roland smiles even more broadly. I ask him, "Roland, what do you know about all this? Did he really do that?"

"Yes, he really did. I don't believe I've ever seen Ethan as upset as he was when he heard what your parents wanted done. Or rather not done. I was there. I heard him tell all these lies. I helped him make it happen. You were married by proxy, Charli. I wasn't even sure it was legal, but apparently, in extreme cases, it can be done."

"So I'm really Mrs. Harwood." The more I think about it, the more I like the idea, but I can't say so in front of these two doctors. "And you overruled my parents." My eyes meet Ethan's and I find myself falling even deeper in love with this man, brave enough to marry me to save my life.

"I sure did. I wasn't going to let them hand you a death sentence. Not if there was a chance of you making it. And even with the slim odds they gave you of surviving the surgery, I wanted them to try." He pauses, looking at our joined hands. "I care for you too much to let you die without trying to save you."

"Thank you." It comes out as a whisper but I know he hears. "Thank you for my life."

"Anyway, Charli," poor Doctor Hardy is trying again, "what I think happened is you must have heard some of the voices of the people in the hospital room, talking about what was happening at your building. And if you had an out-of-body experience any of the times we thought we were losing you, then maybe you really did see Michael. And Attitude. You might even have seen the building and everything going on there. We don't know what happens when a near-death experience occurs, only what people tell us. And your story would fit in with what we've heard from others who have had the experience." He smiled, a little sheepishly I thought. "I've just never heard so many details of one trip before."

"So the tenants got together and did all the things I thought I was involved with?"

Ethan's nodding before I finish asking. "Everything. All the things you described. They did them. And now they want to do them to other buildings in the area. Try and pull the district up, one slum block at a time."

"I think it's a wonderful idea." I stifle a yawn, trying not to let it show.

"You're tired, sweetheart. Do you think you can wait until tomorrow to try sitting up? You're going to need some help. And a lot of physiotherapy. Your muscles haven't been used for a long, long time. You're going to have to learn to walk and do things for yourself all over again."

I hadn't thought about it. All the talk about seven months hasn't prepared me for anything like that. I look at Ethan in total disbelief.

"How long will it take me to get up and about? I have to get back to work. I can't afford to lie here. I won't be able to pay the rent on my apartment." Suddenly I'm babbling, not thinking straight and afraid of the future..

"Hush, don't worry. You're married to the boss, remember?" He smiles at me, leans over and kisses me, then stands. "I'll be right back. I'll just see Doctor Hardy out."

Ethan follows the doctor, leaving me alone with Roland.

"Charli, I am so glad you're back with us. I don't like to think what would have happened to that boy if you'd died. Or if you hadn't eventually awakened. He's been working himself sick trying to get that apartment building of yours fixed up. I think he was running out of steam."

Roland tells me again how Ethan cared for me, protected me from my own parents when they finally condescended to visit me.

"On the sixth day after your accident, they showed up, wanting to get your things. Your 'after-effects', your father called them. To say they were stunned to find out you'd had surgery and were still alive would be putting it much too mildly. Your father was tearing up and down the halls trying to find a doctor and yelling that he wasn't paying for your surgery. He was abusive to the nurses and then when he looked at Ethan and told him..." Roland stops, but I need to know what my father said. I want to know if I'm right.

"Tell me, Roland. Please. I think I know, but I need you to tell me." I feel the tears rolling down my cheeks and hastily wipe my eyes. I can't cry. I won't. No way was I going to give my parents the pleasure of making me cry.

"My dear, it hurts to talk about it. I don't want to do this to you."

"Please, Roland, I have to know." Then I realize I can ease Roland's pain. "He said I wasn't worth saving, didn't he?"

Roland nods, "Yes. He was in your room, swearing and cursing and telling anyone who'd listen that he wasn't paying for your private room or any of the specialists they'd told him about. Then he walked up to the side of your bed, looked down at you and left us reeling. Said you weren't worth saving. That's when Ethan rounded the bed after him and before any of us could stop him, Ethan decked him. Knocked him cold. Your mother just stood back and said nothing. But when your father came to she was concerned about him. She was upset about him but hadn't given a damn about you. They just...walked out."

Roland went on to tell me about the hours Ethan sat beside my bed, holding my hand and talking. Just talking, telling me what he'd done with his day.

"He kept saying if he talked to you, one day you'd hear him. He put a lot of faith in that. And he wasn't disappointed. If you could have seen the look on his face when you said 'drink' this afternoon."

"Roland, I guess I never met you before today, but you were in my dream, my apparition, my out-of body experience, whatever you want to call it. I actually looked on you as my sort-of uncle, someone to talk to, laugh with. I told you my dreams and I told you my fears. I even knew your face. I've seen you here, beside this bed and in the apartment where I live. Lived. Whatever."

"Please, dear, keep looking at me that way. I feel you're part of my family. We might have just met today, but I feel I know you."

"And Maddie? Same thing for her. I know Ethan's mother. Vivien must have been very upset when Ethan married me. Seattle's star bachelor, married to a barely living hospital patient."

"Actually, you'll like Vivien. She stood fully behind Ethan when he told her he was marrying you. She's taken her turn at the apartment and she's stayed with you when Ethan was over there. We all took turns. Ethan wouldn't allow you to be left alone. I think he was afraid your father would come back and try and make them pull the plug. When you were able to survive without the respirator, Ethan persuaded them to let him bring you home. So, you see, we really do feel you're one of the family. And before I forget, Charli, as your doctor, I'll be around tomorrow to remove the IV lines and the catheter. One more night with them won't hurt you. Then you'll have to start getting yourself out of bed and work on building some muscle."

"I suppose now I'm back in the land of the living, Ethan will want to start annulment proceedings." The thought rises out of nowhere, making my heart feel leaden and dead.

"I think you'd better talk to him about that, my dear. You might be in for a big surprise."

I think I might have misunderstood Roland. I smile at him, he bends over to give my cheek a kiss and then he says goodnight. As he goes out the door I hear him speaking to Ethan. I can't hear what he says but it must be funny. I hear the laugh that has entertained and entranced me for the three years I've worked for him.

Now I'm his wife. Without having any say in the matter, I've become Mrs. Ethan Harwood.

I'm not at all unhappy about it.

The door closes and I follow Ethan's progress across the room. When he gets close enough to the bed he can sit, he slides his length onto the mattress beside me. He doesn't touch me, just lies beside me.

"Roland told me as he was leaving he filled you in on what's been going on. About the people you think you know here, in this house. My mother is over at the apartment right now. Maddie went over to tell her the news. They phoned to say they'd be back as soon as they're finished. They were painting the trim in the last apartment." He gently rubs his thumb over my knuckles as he holds my hand. "You'll like what we did. And if it hadn't been for you and Ruthie Simpson, it would never have happened. It was like everyone who lived in the building decided to do this for the two of you. Bobby Turner

and his wife are the new building managers. I had to fire Stan. Useless, good-for-nothing, sonofa... Sorry. We only lost two of the tenants when we gave everyone the option to either buy or continue renting. And it had nothing to do with what we were doing. Both couples were buying houses and moving out and up. Ruthie moved down to the main floor, across from Bobby and his wife. She didn't want to miss what was happening and decided she'd rather be where she could see the door. And I think she's enjoying the role of babysitter to Serena's baby."

"I knew she was nosy, but that's carrying it a little far, isn't it? What did Serena have?"

"I won't tell you about the little window to the hall Ruthie had us put in beside her door, then. And Serena had a baby girl. They called her Charleen Ruth Turner. After the two people who started all this."

I don't reply, can't.

Reality interrupts and I remember I'm married to this man, at least until he can do something about an annulment. Even though I hear him calling me love, and sweetheart nearly every time he speaks to me, I'm sure it's just a habit. Endearments he's allowed into the conversation as part of his plan to make everyone think we're married. Soon I'll have to go back to my apartment and live my life with the people I knew before the accident.

"Charli, my love. About us? I'm sorry if you're upset about what I did, but it was the only thing I could think of to stop your parents. They'd have let you die and I couldn't let it happen." He stops for a moment, whether to gather his thoughts or his courage I'm not sure.

"But?"

"But nothing. I'd like us to stay married, but I'll leave it up to you. You didn't get any say in the matter. And I didn't realize until I nearly lost you what it was I felt for you." He slides off the bed again, bends over and kisses me gently. "Tomorrow, my love. We'll talk about it then." He fixes the blankets around me, kisses me again and starts for the door.

I don't know what makes me do it but I stop him.

"Ethan? I love you." I watch his face and see there the happiness I know we found in my "other world". "I fell in love with you wherever I was while I was away. Actually, it probably goes back to the day you hired me."

"Are you sure?" He's back beside the bed, his look intense. "You're really sure?"

"I'm sure. Really, really, sure." I smile up at him. "So sure, I'd like you to stay with me...tonight."

"Well, now, that's the second best thing I've heard today."

"What was the first?"

"Drink'."

Epilogue

Six months later, Ethan and I moved into the top floor of Harwood's Victoriana Court. He hadn't mentioned one word about what had been done to my old apartment. Just told me to wait and see.

And see I did.

The new, carved cedar sign was the first surprise. The inside of the building looked exactly as I'd imagined it in my time away, wherever I'd been during those long seven months.

Upstairs, he opened the door to 4A and then turned to pick me up and carry me across the threshold. When he put me down again, I couldn't say a word. I was stunned speechless.

He'd knocked down all the walls between my apartment and Ruthie's and made it into a penthouse suite, if you can have a penthouse on the fourth floor. He'd added every luxury a woman could ask for—the furniture, the appliances and all the little doo-dads sitting on the shelves but especially the mullioned windows looking out on...well for now they looked out on another slum apartment, but that was soon to change as it was the next one in line for a fix-up. But it was the little things, a few of the plants I'd had in my old apartment, the old recliner with the footrest, the pen and ink drawings of eighteenth century England I'd had on my walls. He must have had a lot of faith in me. To believe I'd come back. To believe I'd stay with him.

I'd gone through some heavy physiotherapy to get me back on my feet and I thought I was as good as new.

Ethan still treated me like a delicate little flower. He thought I should have help whenever he could give it, but I had come to the conclusion just recently it was only an excuse to make sure he could touch me, help me, treat me the way he wanted to. And he treated me like a queen.

We'd learned to love each other, find the way to each other's heart through touch, through words. We'd spent nights too numerous to count just lying next to each other and talking.

I'd been afraid at first that he'd tire of me awfully quick when I was finally awake, but the reality was even better than the other world. Maybe because we were married, it didn't take us as long to get inside each others heads or attuned to the each other's bodies. All he had to do was look at me to make me hot and bothered. Seems like I spent a lot of time that way but you'd never hear me complaining!

When we entered the apartment this afternoon I had a lump in my throat. He'd done all this for me. Gone were the small windows and the beige walls. He'd turned it,

instead, into a Victorian wonderland. We walked all around. He watched me. I looked at what he'd done for me. And as I walked, I marveled. He'd known what I liked without being told.

"Ethan, it's wonderful!"

"I knew you'd like it. The colors and the furniture just sort of talked to me, if that doesn't sound too stupid."

I reached up to kiss him, loving him for the things he is.

When I got to the dining room, I couldn't find my piano. It was no longer jammed in the corner where it belonged and it certainly wasn't sitting in the middle of the living room where I last remembered seeing it. I turned, looking for it.

"My piano?"

"Come here." He took my hand and led me down the hall.

What had probably been Ruthie's bedroom was now my music room. There were high windows casting light on the front of the piano and there was a big armchair in the corner that looked as though he'd spent some time sitting there, thinking. An afghan throw sat in a pile on one arm, the table beside it had a cream pitcher and sugar bowl. My music was stacked on a table in the corner.

"Oh, Ethan..." I threw my arms around his neck and gave him another kiss.

"Come here. There's something else I want to show you." He took my hand and led me down the hall. There, in a small nook, was a mini-atrium. The rest of my plants, along with a few new ones, were thriving in the alcove, almost totally surrounded by windows. On the counter in the corner was the ugly yellow water jug I had seen broken in pieces in my other life. It looked just fine. And in the center of the room was the biggest surprise of all.

A large dog kennel sat there, its door covered with a towel.

"What's this?"

"It's—"

"Mikey!" I thought I might faint. Before Ethan could say anything more I turned to him. "What is he doing here? Is he the one LeRoy got from the pound to impress your client?" I was on my knees in front of the kennel pulling the towel away. Sure enough, there was the yellow Lab I'd rescued from a certain death at the pound. And if the banging on the back of the kennel was any indication, his tail hadn't slowed down one bit.

"Charli, how..." Ethan seemed incapable of going any further. He was shaking his head, looking totally bewildered.

"Is this another of the things I shouldn't know about?" I looked up at him while Mikey licked the fingers I stuck through the openings in his kennel door.

"Unhuh. I guess I should learn to stop being surprised about these revelations. Mikey has been staying with Bobby and Serena Turner while you were recuperating. I didn't want to take a chance on introducing him to you then find out you wouldn't be

able to handle a dog his size if there were any lingering physical problems. While you were unconscious, Mikey took his turn guarding you. He slept on the foot of your bed every night."

I turned back to the kennel and opened the door. Mikey shot out of the crate then turned on me, licking my face as if I were some long-lost buddy. I put my arms around his neck and buried my face in the soft yellow hair on the side of his neck. That meant something to him. He stopped licking and sat absolutely still. Well, almost still. I could still hear the soft swish of his tail on the floor beside me.

"Mikey, thank you," I whispered. I could feel the dog trying to pull back. I released him and he moved back just far enough he could look at me. We gazed into each others' eyes for what seemed a long time, bonding in the here and now, bringing back all the memories I had of him during my time away.

That's how I'd come to look on it. My time away. Away from people, away from real life.

"Come on, we've got one more place to check out here." Ethan held his hand out and pulled me to my feet. As he helped me regain my balance, he leaned toward me and kissed my ear gently then took my hand in his, hanging on as if he were afraid I might disappear if he let go. He led me down the hall to what I assumed would be our bedroom.

Instead of the heavy drapes and spread I remembered from my last ethereal visit here, there were Venetians and what looked like a handmade quilt. I turned to him, wondering how he'd known.

"Thank you, thank you so much. I was afraid I might find the ones I hated hung up."

"I couldn't have done that to either of us. They were quite ugly, if you don't mind my saying so."

"I don't. Michael's mother gave them to us. We both hated them."

"That showed good taste." I was glancing around the room, taking in the small ornaments he had placed on the dresser, when I saw the silver frame. It was the photo of Michael and me in front of the Space Needle. The one I liked the most of the few I had left.

"Ethan..." I couldn't think what I should say to him.

"It's all right, love. He was your first love, I'm you're last. I'm not one of those men who feels threatened by another guy's ghost." I leaned against him, reached up and kissed his warm lips.

I heard the low warning growl Mikey gave and saw his hackles rise along the length of his back and his tail. He stared intently in the direction of the bedroom door. Suddenly, he yelped and dropped to the floor. He never took his eyes off the doorway.

When I turned back, I saw a shimmer of light, the outline of a man. The light shining brightest was red, what I remembered to be Michael's color of love.

I winked at Michael as his manifestation faded.

He'd done what he set out to do. He'd helped Ethan protect me.

From what?

I guess I'll never know for sure, unless it was death itself. But there's one thing I know for a certainty.

He won't be back.

The End

About the Author

Kelsy George is the pen name of a writer living in Canada, where she, her husband and three Labs are full-time RVers, going wherever the road leads.

Writing wasn't always important to Kelsy except as a way to make a living. For years she wrote copy for newspaper ads, radio scripts for a classical music program, radio commercials, and the occasional script for serious issue-type programming. An article in an equestrian magazine was her first published work, with a children's coloring book story next.

Kelsy is an award-winning (RWA Golden Heart—twice—for *Blind Justice*), multipubbed author in the romantic mystery and suspense genres.

Kelsy welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.cerridwenpress.com.

Also by Kelsy George

Blind Justice



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