
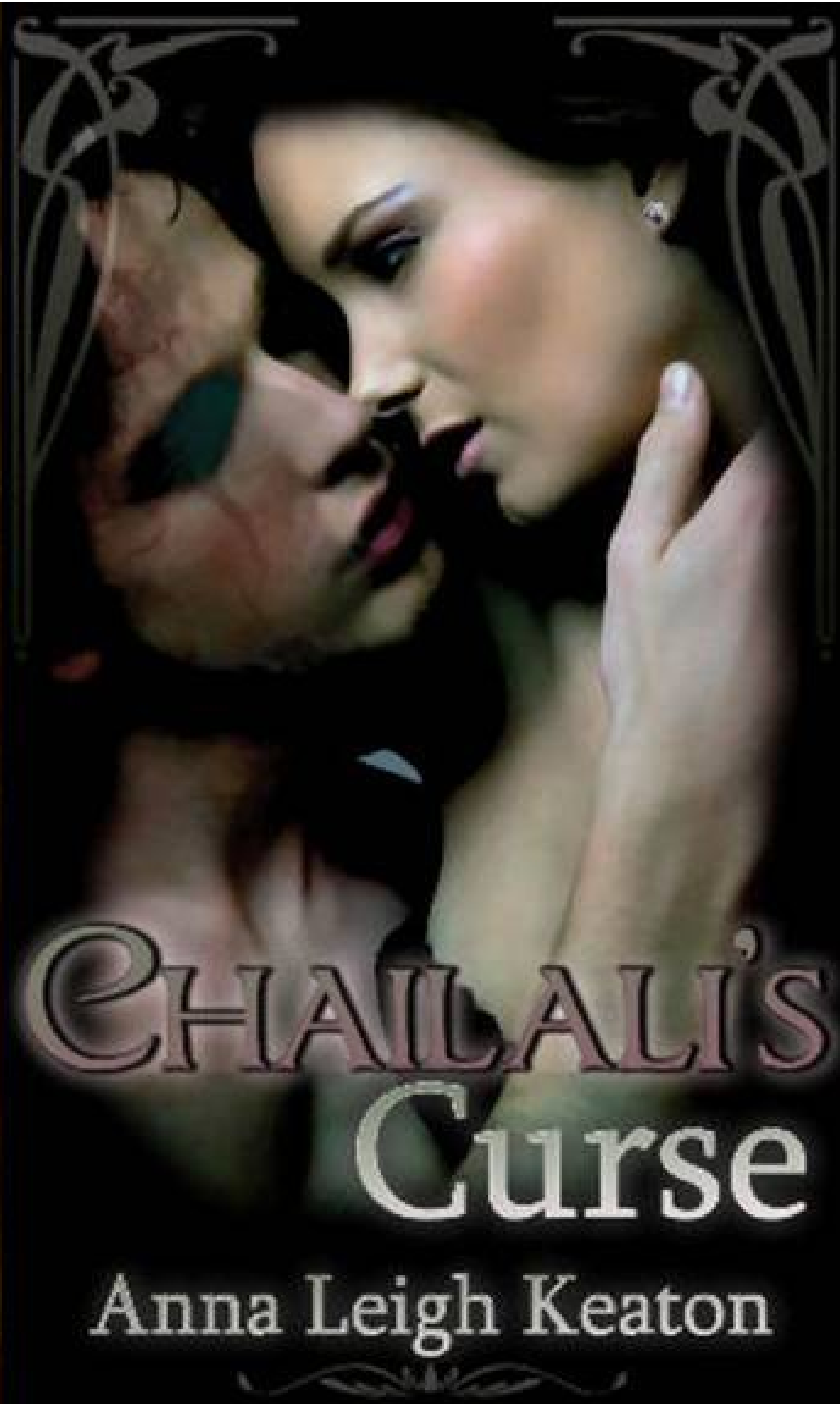


C  
O  
B  
B  
L  
E  
S  
T  
O  
N  
E  
  
P  
R  
E  
S  
S



# Chailali's Curse

Anna Leigh Keaton

# *Chailali's Curse*

*By*

*Anna Leigh Keaton*

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

## **Chailali's Curse**

Copyright© 2007 Anna Leigh Keaton

ISBN: 978-1-60088-179-4

Cover Artist: Emma Petersen

Editor: Melissa Darnell

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced electronically or in print without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews.

Cobblestone Press, LLC

[www.cobblestone-press.com](http://www.cobblestone-press.com)

## Prologue

*John ran his hand down Brandy's side, feeling her shiver, knowing that his time had finally come to claim her as his own. He'd waited a lifetime for her, and now she was finally in his arms, naked, writhing with a need that equaled his own.*

*Hot flesh against hot, sweaty flesh. His cock throbbed. His balls ached. Brandy moaned and begged, "Please, John. Fuck me."*

*His blood heated to a boil, and he covered her, spreading her legs with his and slipping between to prod at her hot, slick opening. "Say it again, Brandy. Tell me what you want." He needed to hear it. Needed to know he was the only one. Tomorrow it might all end. The murderer on their trail would never relent until he killed or they killed him.*

*"You," she cried as she raised her hips and took him into her depths. "You, John. Only you."*

Chailali perched on the window seat and listened to Michael Hanson's computer program as it read back the words he'd just typed. The voice was mechanic and monotone, but Chailali couldn't tear herself away from the magical, frightening, passionate story Michael weaved.

In this one, like so many, the hero and heroine were on the run from a psychopathic killer. He wanted to kill the couple because he thought they'd seen something they really hadn't.

Michael's stories always made her cry. The hero and heroine would fight and struggle and claw their way through the plot until finally, at the end, they'd have the showdown with the bad man. They always won the battle but, in the process, the heroine inevitably died.

Every time.

And Chailali would weep for Michael who couldn't, even after ten years, let go of his own wife's memory enough to move on. The accident, which had taken most of his eyesight and scarred his flesh, also took his beloved Caryn. Though his skin had healed, his heart never had.

Chailali had sat here on this window seat for ten years, watching and listening to him become an award-winning author as he hid himself from the world, only meeting with his agent once every three months to pass on a new, completed manuscript.

Michael took no joy in his work.

Chailali, being an earthbound spirit without a corporeal body, could do nothing to help him. She only prayed he could sense her presence and took some comfort in it. She hoped he experienced a bit of peace knowing he wasn't completely alone. Yet, only a few others she'd come across in her two-hundred-plus years stuck in limbo here in Moonlight Cove had.

## Chapter One

“Come on, sis. You know this is what you need to do.”

Christy Smythe stared at the three-story monstrosity set on a cliff overlooking the rocky shores of Moonlight Cove, Oregon. “I don’t know...”

Beth sighed and shoved her door open. The wind grabbed it and banged it shut once more. Christy took it as a sign she shouldn’t go in.

What a perfect setting for a horror movie. The cedar siding was old and faded to gray, perfectly matching the angry sky overhead. The porch looked as if it might fall off if they stepped onto it.

“Okay, sis,” Beth said with a sigh. “I didn’t want to get this way, but you’ve forced my hand.”

Christy turned toward her sister with a frown. “What are you talking about?”

“You can’t come home with me.”

Christy’s mouth dropped open on a gasp. “You’re kicking me out?”

Beth nodded. “You’re thirty-five years old, and it’s time you...”

Tears burned Christy’s eyes and made her nose itch.

“I love you, Chris, but you’re not going to hide in our house any longer. Roger agrees with me on this.”

Beth’s husband, Roger, had been so sweet when she went to live with them. He’d always been sweet. Treated her like a real little sister. “I can’t believe you’d do this,” she said, her voice little more than a strained whisper. “What if it doesn’t work out here? What if... What if he fires me or something? Then where am I supposed to go? The doctors—”

“The doctors say the next step in your recovery is to get your butt back out in the real world. It’s been almost two years, Christy! It’s time to move on. Get over it.”

Christy flinched. Her sister acted as if she didn’t try to move on. She *did*.

Beth reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out a pill bottle. “These are anxiety pills from Doctor Mackey.”

She opened her mouth to argue about taking drugs, but Beth cut her off.

“I know you don’t like the way they make you feel, but you have to do something. You cannot—*will not*—be welcome back into our house until you’ve straightened yourself out.” She pressed the pill bottle into Christy’s hand. “I love you, sis. You know that. But Roger and I agree that it’s time for some tough love.”

The pain and betrayal cut Christy to the quick. She stared at her sister, feeling as though she didn’t know the woman anymore. “So you banish me to this little town and thrust me on some poor blind guy. Thanks, sis. Appreciate the help.” She turned and fumbled for the door handle of the car.

“Chris—”

She threw the door open. “It’s fine. Just fine.” Tears blurred her vision as she hauled her overnight bag from the back seat. “I get it.”

Beth climbed out of the car and popped the trunk to remove Christy’s suitcase. The wind tugged at Christy’s hair, whipping it in her face then brushing it back. The clouds were low, steel gray, and the air smelled of rain. This place was nothing like L.A. All she could hear was the wind and the crashing sea beyond the cliff. No car horns. None of the ever-present buzz of the city.

"You'll like it here," Beth said as she headed up the steps to the wide, southern-style wraparound porch. "Roger and I had a wonderful vacation up here last summer. It's so peaceful."

"Then you stay here," Christy muttered as she hefted her duffle bag over her shoulder and trudged across the crushed seashell driveway to the house. It was cold and damp and... And damn it, she was terrified to be away from her sister. Why had she agreed to this trip? To this job? How was she going to survive without Beth and Roger? They'd been her rock, her support, for the past eighteen months, and now they were tossing her out in the cold—literally.

Beth pressed the doorbell then opened the door and walked right in as if she owned the place. "Come on. If he's working, he ignores everything."

Christy followed Beth into the house. It wasn't what she'd expected. For an award-winning, bestselling author who made more with one sale of a book than she'd made in her entire life managing restaurants, the place was rather...

"See what I mean," Beth said as she set the suitcase down and shut the door behind her. "He needs some help around here. Then again, I guess it doesn't matter what your house looks like if you can't see it."

Thick layers of dust coated every surface except for the leather sofa. In the living room area off to one side of the entryway, boxes were stacked practically to the ceiling against one wall.

"His books," Beth said as she grabbed Christy's hand and pulled her deeper into the house. "He's never unpacked them. But come on, you'll love the kitchen."

Christy let her sister drag her down a short hall and through a doorway into what had once been a beautiful space. Under the dirt, grime and dust, the counters were marble and the floor Spanish tile. The fridge was stainless steel, and so were the other appliances.

"Isn't this awesome? Aren't you going to have fun in here?"

Fun. Cleaning this place would take a week.

Beth dragged her to the far end where a small table sat piled with ancient papers. "Look out there."

Christy glanced up from a ten-year-old phone bill to look out the bay window. Her breath caught, and she stepped back in surprise. There was no ground below the window, just air. Three hundred feet below, the waves crashed against the rocks, the ocean as gray and dark as the clouds above.

"Isn't this amazing? Roger and I are looking for a vacation home in the area, but there's not much available."

To the south, walls of rock blocked the tide, the cliffs climbing even higher than where the house stood. To the north, the land sloped down to a wide, weathered beach. Moonlight Cove. She'd only caught a glimpse of the town as they drove through. It was pretty in a very unremarkable way.

"Where's the guy?" Christy asked. She didn't know what else to say. Yes, it was pretty. Yes, she supposed this would make a nice vacation spot. But she wasn't on vacation. Her dear sister was dumping her here for an undetermined amount of time to play housekeeper and cook to a total stranger.

Well, he was a stranger to her. Beth had been his agent for over five years, and she made a trip up here every three months to collect a manuscript from him because he was too...too *something* to put it in the mail like a normal person. A rich snob, she assumed, since he paid all Beth's expenses for her time and effort. Hell, Beth got rich off the fifteen percent she got from every book from this guy. She could easily retire and handle only his manuscripts.

Beth grabbed her hand again and tugged her out of the kitchen and back to the hall. "His office is down

here. He's probably working."

"Isn't it rather unsafe that a blind guy leaves his door unlocked and then ignores when someone comes in?"

Beth shrugged. "It's little-town life, sis. Everyone knows everyone, and his only visitors are the mailman and the delivery guys who bring his groceries and stuff."

Beth stopped in front of an open door. Inside was nothing but a wide desk and an empty leather executive chair sitting in front of a window. On the desk were a computer, printer, and a stack of papers.

"Hmm." Beth pulled her farther down the hall. "Mike?" she called. "Hey, Mike. Where the heck are you?"

The clang of metal on metal came from somewhere upstairs. Beth headed for the narrow staircase at the end of the hall, dragging Christy behind her. "He must be in the workout room. He lifts weights when he gets writer's block."

They climbed up the first flight of creaky, wooden stairs and veered off down another long hallway. It was dark, with only the dim light from windows filtering into the hall from the open doorways of mostly empty rooms.

"Mike?"

Another clank of metal. "Beth? That you?"

The man's voice was deep and rich.

"Hey," Beth said, stopping in front of an open door at the end of the hall. "How you doin'?"

Christy peered around her sister at the man seated on a weight bench. Her breath lodged in her throat, nearly choking her. His wide shoulders, bare stomach and chest looked like a Greek statue, while the left side of his face was something akin to a Frankenstein monster.

Mike grabbed the towel from the vinyl bench and swiped it over his face and chest. "Hey, Beth. I didn't expect you until later today."

"Mmm hmm. I see that. You're looking mighty fine, Mr. Horton."

He chuckled. "As you can tell, the new book isn't coming along too well." He fumbled for his cane on the floor and used it to lever himself up. "Let's head downstairs so I can get a shirt on."

Mike heard a faint gasp that didn't sound like Beth. He tipped his head to the side and tried to make out the shape in the doorway but could only see one silhouette. "Someone with you?"

"My sister. She's agreed to be your new housekeeper and cook. Say hello to Mike Horton, Christy."

The smile left Mike, and he clenched his jaw. Damn his meddling agent. He told her he didn't need her to find him another housekeeper. The four he'd been through over the last two years were enough to prove it wouldn't work out. He was perfectly able to take care of himself. Frankly, he didn't want anyone hanging around him and his house.

"Now, Mike..."

"No offence to your sister, but I don't need a housekeeper."

A soft chuckle he knew wasn't Beth's came from the doorway. Beth had a hardy, robust laugh, not a soft, feminine...anything.

"She's an award-winning chef, and she can clean like no one's business. And yes, you do need a

housekeeper.” He heard footsteps approaching him, and he steeled himself, focusing on the shadow moving toward him. A finger poked him in the stomach, making him jump. “I think you could use a few good meals. Christy’s cooking can make a grown man weep—I know, I’ve witnessed it.”

Beth’s husky chuckle made him shake his head. He dropped his voice, wondering where the mysterious sister stood. Still in the doorway? “I don’t like people in my house, and you know that.”

Beth sighed and put her hand on his arm. “She’s not *people*. She’s my sister. You don’t complain about me being here.”

That’s because Beth was like family. His one real connection to the outside world. He’d known her for years, but she hadn’t known him before the accident. He wasn’t an oddity to her. He was a client and a friend. “Beth...”

“Come here, Christy,” Beth said, and he felt her shift next to him, pick up his hand, then placed it in another hand. “Mike, meet my little sister, Christy Smythe.”

Christy’s hand was warm and smooth. Much smaller than Beth’s. “Why do I get the impression I have no choice in this?” he asked the dark shape in front of him. All he could make out was that she was at least a head shorter than him, which put her several inches shorter than her sister. A whiff of something rich and musky tantalized his nostrils. Not a perfume, but maybe a spiced shampoo? Body talc? Whatever it was, it nearly made his mouth water. He wanted to lean into her and get a better taste of the scent.

“No,” Christy said, her voice soft and sweet. “Beth’s made it pretty clear *I* don’t have a choice in this.”

Mike frowned. That sounded ominous. She didn’t want to work for him?

“I figure she can have the room I usually stay in on the third floor. It’s big and has a comfortable bed.”

Christy’s hand slipped from his, and it felt like a loss. He wrapped his fingers tighter around the handle of his cane and leaned on it. “That room’s fine. Are you staying for supper?”

“Nope,” Beth said. “I’ve got to get back to the Coos Bay airport. I have an eight a.m. meeting tomorrow.” She nudged him toward the door. “So give me my book, and I’ll be on my way.”

Mike tried to make out where Christy had moved to, but he couldn’t see her shadow. The light from outside was too dim today. She moved silently, and that disturbed him. He didn’t like people sneaking around him. He didn’t want her in his house. Small, soft women who smelled good were not a welcome distraction. Women in general weren’t welcome. Only Beth. She was his agent and his friend. She’d also been happily married for over a dozen years, which made her safe. He wasn’t allowed to entertain any illicit thoughts about her.

Chailali watched the three walk out of the exercise room, her mind awirl with possibilities. She’d seen the spark between the quiet little woman and Mike when they touched hands. Christy’s eyes had widened, and Mike had leaned into the woman just slightly and inhaled. She knew that was one of the ways he got to know a person, but...

*Hmm. I wonder...* Mike had been alone too long. He never left the house, and the very few guests he had only came to deliver food and mail and take care of paperwork. None but Beth came and talked to him. But it looked as if Beth’s sister would be staying a while.

A smile curved Chailali’s lips as she followed the trio out of the room and down the hall. This could be a very good thing for Mike. He needed companionship. No one should be as alone as him.

*Except me.* Loneliness had been all she’d experienced for the past two hundred years. But that was of her own making.

\* \* \* \* \*

Christy glared at her sister as they sat on opposite ends of the leather sofa. Mike had stopped off in his bedroom to put on some clothes. Apparently he wasn't used to greeting guests in nothing but sweatpants and sweat. Admittedly, the man had a body to die for, but his face...

The right side was chiseled and...*beautiful* was the only word she could think of. But the left... Scars criss-crossed from his forehead to neck. He had no left eye, or at least she didn't think he did, since his eyelid was permanently closed.

Whatever. Physical disabilities didn't bother her. She'd get used to it once the initial shock wore off. Then again, the look on the good side of his face had been unmistakable, and combined with his words... He didn't want her in his house, so she might not need to *get used* to anything.

"Would you stop looking at me like that," Beth said in a harsh whisper. "You act as if I just kicked your puppy."

Christy didn't answer. None was needed. Beth knew damn well what she was thinking. She wasn't kicking her puppy; she was abandoning her here with a man who didn't want her around.

"He's a nice guy. Just cook his meals, clean his house, and you'll probably never see him. Even when Roger and I visited, he spent most of his time at the computer. He's a loner and doesn't talk overly much."

"I don't get this," Christy said. "How is this supposed to help me? I'm still in a house. It's not inside a house that bothers me, it's out there." She pointed out the window. "You know that."

Beth pursed her lips and tipped her head to the side, a sure sign Christy was on her last nerve. "It's a start. You've been holed up in my house for almost two years. It's time to get out of there."

Christy rolled her eyes. "Eighteen months." She didn't bother telling her sister she still had no plans to go anywhere outside the house. Beth had told her that all of Mike's food and stuff was delivered. No need for her to go anywhere. She folded her arms and narrowed her eyes. *So there.*

*Jeez. You're acting like a two-year-old.* Christy dropped her hands to her lap. She couldn't exactly demand that Beth take her back to L.A. She was no better than a two-year-old because Beth and Roger had been babysitting her for months and months. The airport had nearly sent her into a coronary.

"It'll be okay," Beth said, laying her hand over Christy's. "I'm only a phone call away if you need me."

Christy nodded, wanting to squeeze Beth's hand and beg her not to leave her, but the sound of Mike's cane thumping down the hallway toward the living room stopped her. Damned if she'd let anyone but her family see her turmoil. She wasn't so far gone that she'd debase herself in front of a total stranger, even if it killed her.

"Here's the manuscript," Mike said, coming up to the back of the couch.

Beth reached out and took it. "Another bestseller, I'm sure." She stood and rounded the couch to lay a hand on Mike's now-clothed shoulder. "I've got to get back to the Coos Bay. My flight leaves in a couple hours."

Christy's heart lodged in her throat, and the initial tingling of a panic attack settled into her gut. She stared at Mike's wide chest covered by a thin, tight T-shirt, and breathed deeply.

Beth laid her hand on Christy's shoulder. "You okay?"

Christy nodded. It was the only response she could give right then. She took a couple more deep

breaths until her heart rate fell back to seminormal, then pulled her gaze away from Mike and looked up at her sister. She tried to tell herself Beth only had her best interests at heart, but this abandonment still seemed a betrayal.

Beth leaned down and whispered in her ear, "You're safe here. Mike's a good man." Then she stood up and gave Mike a hug. "I'll call in a few days and see how everything's going."

Mike returned the hug and gave a nod, though he looked a bit less than pleased. "Have a safe trip."

And then Beth was gone, the door closing behind her with an ominous click.

When Christy looked back at Mike, he was staring at her, or at least in her general direction. She stood up, and his gaze followed the movement. Beth had told her he wasn't completely blind in his right eye, but could see little more than light and shadow.

She licked her lips and folded her hands together. "Thank you for the job, Mr. Horton."

He shook his head. "Call me Mike. If we're going to be living in the same house, formalities are useless."

"Okay...Mike."

His brow furrowed, and the scars on his face puckered, making him look fierce. "I have some ground rules."

After another steadying breath, wondering if she should take one of those blasted pills Beth had been trying to push on her for months, she said, "Okay."

"Don't move anything. I don't want to be tripping over shit that isn't where it's supposed to be."

His voice was hard, and Christy wondered if he was a bit less sweet than Beth thought.

"My office and bedroom are completely off limits to you. Do not enter them under any circumstances. Everything is exactly where I need it."

"Bedroom and office. Gotcha."

"Your room is the only room on the third floor. It has a connecting bathroom, but you'll have to turn the water on. You know how to do that?"

He sounded awfully condescending, and she didn't like it. "Under the toilet and sink and stuff?" When he nodded, she said, "Yeah, I think I can handle that."

"Fine. Look." He sighed and shifted his weight, leaning heavily on the carved wooden cane in his hand. "Your sister has been trying to get a housekeeper in here for a while now. None last long. There's a reason I live alone. I like being alone. I don't want idle chatter, and under no circumstances are you to bother me if I'm working. I don't want to hear you. Do you understand that?"

She folded her arms over her chest and scowled. "I'll be as quiet as a mouse," she shot back. If he didn't want anyone here, why was Beth so damn determined that he hire help?

"Good." With that, he turned and walked away, disappearing down the hall.

Christy sank down on the couch again and fought the tide of worry, anger and sadness coursing through her. She didn't want to be here any more than he wanted her to be, so she supposed that made them even.

After a few minutes of self pity, she pushed to her feet, grabbed her bags, and headed for the stairs. She saw Mike sitting at his computer when she passed the open office door. He sat straight and tall, his fingers poised over the computer's keyboard, but he wasn't typing. She wondered how a blind guy ever

knew what he'd written.

She shook her head. *Not my concern.*

The bedroom assigned to her was spacious, with a big bay window, window seat, and a king-sized, four-poster bed. The en suite bathroom, sporting two sinks in the marble countertop and a deep, claw-footed tub, led her to believe it had once been the master bedroom. She wondered why Mike didn't use it now. Maybe he didn't want to deal with all the stairs.

Either way, it was pretty, if a bit dusty. She went to the bed and pulled back the comforter. A puff of dust rose, nearly choking her. Well, first on her To Do list was to wash the blanket and linens. She stripped the bed in short order and hauled the blankets down the stairs in search of the laundry room. As she passed Mike's office, he was still staring at nothing, his fingers unmoving.

## Chapter Two

Mike sat at his computer, listening to the sounds of Christy move throughout the house. She was quiet, but not silent. But then again, with the old, creaky house, one couldn't take three steps without a floorboard squeaking. Damn it, he didn't want her in his house.

He realized he shouldn't have been such a bastard when he laid down his rules, having been able to tell by her tone of voice and words used that she didn't appreciate his demands. But he figured it better to state everything now before she went messing with things that weren't her business—like his office. The last maid Beth had hired for him had decided to rearrange his private space. He'd nearly killed himself, and then her, when he couldn't find his desk, let alone anything that was supposed to be on it.

What did he care if his house was a mess? It wasn't as if he could see it. He did all right. He fed himself and—"Shit." She was probably going to rearrange the damn refrigerator, too. Then he'd be totally reliant on her for food.

He grabbed his cane and stood up. His thigh protested with a thudding ache to the sudden movement. The cold, wet weather didn't do a damn thing for his banged-up body.

"Christy?" he called as he entered the kitchen, knowing she hadn't passed by his office again to go back upstairs.

"What?" she snapped. "I'm sorry. I have to walk, you know. I can't help it if your house is so old it squeaks every time I move. How the hell does this washer work? Where's the knob?"

Mike bit his cheek to hide his smile as he went through the kitchen to the mudroom where the washer and dryer were. She didn't sound so sweet and sexy now. "Use the pliers. Three clicks to the left, then pull."

He heard a huff of breath. "Thanks. Sorry," she muttered. With the light coming in through the wall of windows, he could see her silhouette better.

"I wasn't going to say anything about the noise. I was coming to tell you not to move stuff around in the refrigerator or cabinets, either."

The washer clicked then started. "Fine. Don't move anything. You've made that clear."

"Look," he said on a sigh. "I don't mean to sound like a jackass, but as you can tell, I can't see. If things get moved, I can't find them."

"I thought I was hired to do your cooking," she said, her tone one of a woman who didn't want to be there.

"Well, you don't have to. I don't need anyone taking care of me. Beth thinks I do, but I don't."

She sighed. "What, exactly, do you want from me?" she asked, and she moved past him back into the kitchen.

He caught another whiff of the spicy scent that clung to her, and his body responded to her question. At least his penis did. This was why he didn't want a woman in his house. It was a reminder of all the things he could never again have.

He turned and followed her, stopping at the doorway to the hall. "I guess you can clean. Just make sure everything is put back where it was before."

"What about the pile of papers on the table? They're very old. Do you need them?"

He knew they were old bills—ancient, from just after the accident. Now he had his accountant pay his bills for him so he didn't have to deal with it. "Shred them and toss them."

"Where are the cleaning supplies?"

"Under the sink, I believe. At least that's where they used to be kept."

He heard her moving around the kitchen, opening cabinets. "Not much of anything here. A can of Lysol isn't going to do a heck of a lot for this place. You said you've had other housekeepers? Did they actually do anything?"

Once again he had to stifle a smile. Little Christy had some of her sister in her after all. Beth was never one to pull punches.

"I've had a few," he answered honestly. "But as I said before, they didn't last long."

"Wonder why," she muttered.

He ignored her snide remark. "The grocery store is just down the road about three quarters of a mile. I'm sure you passed it on your way in."

Silence greeted his statement.

"Christy?"

"Um. When is your next delivery from the store? Maybe it can be added on to your shopping list?"

Her tone had changed from sarcastic to...what? Her voice had gone soft, as if the thought of grocery shopping was something distasteful. Big city girl like her probably had all her groceries delivered, though not out of necessity as he did.

"Tuesdays is delivery day. It's Ryan's Grocery. You'll have to call directory assistance to get the number. Tell Ryan what you need, and I'm sure he'll throw it on the standing order."

"Okay," she said, her voice still quiet. "Mike...?"

He raised his eyebrow and waited. When a full minute passed and she hadn't said anything, he offered, "Maybe if we just try to avoid each other this will work out. What do you say?"

"Yeah." The word came out on a breathy sigh that had his blood pumping too hard. "I think that might be best. How about if I just cook supper, and you deal with your other meals?"

He nodded. "I can live with that." He turned to leave the room, but then stopped again. "I'm partial to baked chicken and beef." Lord knew he didn't want some fancy L.A. vegan cooking. "And you'll have to tell Ryan to double the order so there's enough for both of us. I only order enough to get me through the week."

\* \* \* \* \*

Chailali sat on the clean kitchen counter and frowned as she watched Christy on hands and knees scrubbing the floor. Things were not going well. Five days had passed since Christy arrived, and Mike and she had only spoken a handful of words once they agreed to stay out of each other's way.

Christy muttered to herself, which Chailali realized was a norm for her since she did it constantly when she was alone. Her words weren't loud enough for Chailali to understand, but she didn't sound happy. Then again, who would be happy cleaning up the mess of ten years of neglect to the house? Since Ryan delivered the groceries and cleaning supplies three days ago, Christy had been scrubbing every inch of

the kitchen, starting at the top and working down. The appliances gleamed, the granite counters were shiny enough to see a reflection in, and now...the floor.

Chailali wondered what room would be next on Christy's list.

Christy dropped the sponge in the bucket of sudsy water and sat back on her heels to survey her accomplishments. She heaved a sigh, pushed to her feet, and lifted the bucket to haul to the sink.

"All done?" Chailali asked.

Christy stopped moving so suddenly brackish water sloshed on the floor from the bucket. She turned and looked in Chailali's direction.

Had Christy heard her?

Christy shook her head, rolled her eyes, and proceeded to dump it down the drain.

"You...spilled some," Chailali said aloud.

Christy's back tensed mid pour. "Great," she muttered. "Now I'm hearing voices."

She *had* heard her!

Christy set the bucket in the empty sink then went to the mudroom and grabbed the new mop Ryan had delivered the other day.

"I think you should go talk to Mike," Chailali said softly as Christy passed her on the way back to the sink. "You can't ignore the man you share a home with forever."

Christy made a sound, a snort or something close to it, and ran water over the mop. "He doesn't want to talk to me," she muttered in response. "And what the hell...?" She turned around and scanned the room. "Oh, Lord. Maybe I should take those pills." She wrung out the mop then plopped the end on the floor and began to swipe it over the tiles. "Anxiety turned into schizophrenia? Great. Just what I need." She glanced around the room again. "I will not listen to voices in my head," she said louder, with force. "I'm not so far gone that I'll do that."

Chailali frowned and crossed her arms over her chest. Christy obviously thought she was hearing things, imagining the words Chailali spoke. There'd been only a few people throughout the centuries of her limbo who could hear her. Even less who responded as if she was real.

What in the world could she do to get these two people together? She knew Mike didn't hear her; she'd tried to communicate with him many times before. Only when he was asleep could she sometimes slip into his subconscious and get through to him. Once in a while he responded in his sleep, but she knew she was nothing more than a dream to him.

Shaking her head again, she floated off the counter and headed for Mike's office. There had to be something she could do, and she didn't want to scare Christy by talking to her too much. The woman seemed awfully fragile as it was.

\* \* \* \* \*

Christy waited until Mike was seated at the table before she set the plate in front of him. "Steak at three o'clock, potato at seven o'clock, and green beans at eleven o'clock. There's a cup of milk at twelve, and a mug of coffee at one."

"Thank you," he murmured as he felt around his plate for the knife and fork she'd placed there.

They'd worked out the system of telling him what food he'd find where at their second meal. For a blind guy, he was very self-reliant, and she admired him for that.

She took her seat across from him and cut into her prime rib steak. Mike ordered quality food. Chicken, seafood, and the best cuts of beef, along with fresh vegetables. He seemed to know what she liked working with, and she'd briefly wondered if Beth had anything to do with it, but then decided not. She didn't think Mike was a person to change anything about his way of life to accommodate another person. Especially not the hired help.

*Talk to him...*

Christy scowled and stuffed a green bean in her mouth. That damn voice. She'd been hearing it for almost a week. It kept urging her to talk to Mike. She'd gone to take one of those damn pills Beth left for her, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. She wasn't having panic attacks, and that was what they're for, not voices in her head.

*Talk to him, Christy.*

Maybe she needed to find a psychiatrist in the area. Then again, the thought of leaving the house terrified her, so that would just lead back to more panic attacks, which she'd enjoyed the loss of this past week and a half.

*Look at him sitting there eating. Why do you two ignore each other?*

Christy put a huge scoop of baked potato in her mouth. *Because he doesn't want to talk. He's made that clear.* Though, she was getting mighty tired of her own voice, and that of her...her what? At least the voice hadn't told her to get a kitchen knife and murder her employer. If that happened, she would seek professional help.

She swallowed the potato, waited until Mike was cutting another bite of steak, then asked, "How's the book coming?"

"Fine." He put the meat in his mouth and slowly chewed.

She rolled her eyes. *See, that's why I don't talk to him,* she thought with a nasty sneer. The man was beyond anti-social.

"What's it about?" she asked, unable to figure out why she bothered.

"Same as the rest of my books."

She licked her lips. "I...um...haven't read any of your books."

He looked at her, though she knew he wasn't looking *at* her but in her general direction. She appreciated the effort he made. He raised his right eyebrow in query. She had to admit one thing to herself—the more time she spent sitting across the table from him, the better looking he got. The scars were hideous, but the part of his face left untouched was...gorgeous. Strong jaw, straight, aristocratic nose. And his right eye was as green as the northern pines.

"Sorry," she said as she cut another bit of steak. "I stick mostly with romance. It's my one vice." She chuckled at herself. "Give me a mushy love story any day. I seriously doubt that's what you write. I know Beth doesn't represent romance authors...says they're a dime a dozen."

He shook his head. "Suspense." He reached for his milk, and she winced when she thought he'd knock it over, but he didn't.

"What kind of suspense? Spy thrillers or scary stuff?"

He frowned in her direction then drank down his milk in a few long swallows. "A bit of both," he said

as he set his glass down. He went back to concentrating on his meal.

Christy tried not to let his lack of communication get her down, but it was difficult. Dinners at Beth's house were always lively. With Roger and Beth and their eight-year-old daughter, there wasn't much silence. Conversation circulated about the adults' workdays and the kid's school activities.

God, she missed it.

"If you want to read one of my books," Mike said, surprising her by breaking the silence, "there's boxes of them in the living room. Take your pick. But don't expect any mushy, happy endings." He picked up his napkin, wiped his mouth, then grabbed his cane from where it hung over the back of the chair and pushed himself to his feet. "I don't do happy endings." With that, he walked out of the kitchen.

Christy slumped in her chair and crossed her arms over her chest, keeping the urge to throw his empty milk glass at his head firmly in check. Why did the man have to be such a jackass? Would one little, friendly conversation kill him? Then she sighed and reminded herself that the guy had lived alone for ten years. He wasn't used to having someone else in his house. Any social skills he may have once possessed he'd obviously forgotten.

She picked up the plates and took them to the sink.

*At least you tried...*

Christy rolled her eyes. "Lotta good that did, now didn't it?"

The voice was silent for a few minutes as she rinsed the dinner dishes and stuck them in the dishwasher. She thought maybe it was gone, until it said, *You should read one of his books. It might help you understand him better.*

*Maybe I don't want to understand him better.* She didn't need to understand him. She just worked for him. That was all. She saw him for less than an hour a day. He kept himself tucked away at the computer from morning till dinner, coming out for coffee and meals, which he prepared for himself at his insistence. Now that dinner was done, he'd head into his bedroom where she could usually hear the television or radio when she passed by his door.

*Do it, the voice urged. Read one of his books.*

With a sigh, Christy wiped her damp hands on the towel hanging from the oven door and headed into the living room. She'd tidied and dusted the room, but hadn't moved the stack of boxes against the one wall. She pulled down the first box and used her fingernail to cut the tape across the top. *Hawk's Shame*, the cover read. Shiny and black, with a shadowy figure of a half-man-half-bird face on the front.

She shrugged, tucked it under her arm, and headed up to her room. What else did she have to do except more scrubbing, which could wait until tomorrow?

\* \* \* \* \*

*Bang.*

Christy awoke with a scream trapped in her throat and sweat prickling her brow.

The nightmare bled into reality. She whimpered and shivered in the dark, gripping the blanket to her neck. A metallic taste coated her mouth.

“No,” she whispered to herself. “Not real. Not now.”

A bright flash blinded her, then the roar of another gunshot growled through the room. She was back in the bank, the masked gunman standing in front of her.

Bang.

“*No!*” she screamed and dove off the bed.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Wake up! Wake up, Michael!” Chailali shouted, but Mike didn’t respond. He slept heavy and peaceful, unaware of the storm outside or the fact that Christy was having a traumatic emotional meltdown.

She tried to slip into his mind, but her own thoughts were in too much turmoil, and the electrical currents zipping around due to the lightening distorted what little power she had.

“Mike! Christy needs you!”

Chailali heard another terror-filled scream from the third floor, proceeding another crash of thunder. She’d tried to calm Christy herself, but the woman was beyond listening to disembodied voices. Christy had clamped her hands over her ears and sobbed as she huddled in the corner of her bedroom.

Mike slept on.

Chailali reached for the clock on the nightstand and let her hand float over the plastic piece of electronics. The talking clock called out the time.

Mike mumbled but didn’t so much as move.

“Come on, Mike, *hear* me. Christy *needs* you.” She swiped her hand over the clock again, and it repeated the time.

Mike rolled over and reached for the clock just as Chailali forced it to repeat the time.

A flash of lightening sparked through the room, thunder roared, and then Christy screamed.

Mike sat up in a rush.

“That’s it,” Chailali said. “Go help Christy. Go. Go. *Go!*”

Mike’s heart thudded loud in his ears. Was that Christy who screamed? Or the remnants of a dream? He fumbled at the end of the bed for his pair of sweatpants and pulled them on. Rain or sleet pelted at the window. Flashes of lightening disorientated him for a moment. He felt for his cane hanging over the footboard of the bed, then pushed to his feet and headed for the stairs to Christy’s room.

Another scream rent through the air, spurring him into a jog up the narrow stairs, gripping the handrail, pulling his bum leg along as fast as he could move.

The only room on the third floor was the old master bedroom. He hadn’t stepped foot inside since Caryn died. Another round of thunder shook the house, and Christy wailed, the sound so filled with terror it ripped something inside him. He shoved the door open.

Another scream. Lightening flashed through the window, the intense white light spearing through his head. “Christy? Where are you?”

In the small space between rumbles of thunder, he heard whimpers and heavy breathing from the far

side of the room. Using his cane and an outstretched hand to check for obstacles, he headed in the direction of the sounds of her distress. He bumped into the corner of the bed, his fingers jamming into the thick post. “Fuck,” he mumbled. “Christy, honey, where are you?”

Another flash of lightening. A crash of thunder. A terrifying scream that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. She was close.

He went down on his hands and knees and felt his way to her. When his hand connected with cool flesh, she screamed again and tried scrambling away. He grabbed her flailing arms and pinned them to her sides as he brought his weight down over her.

“Christy. It’s me. Mike. Shh.”

She screamed and wriggled and fought. Her teeth clamped down on his shoulder at one point, making him grunt.

“Christy! Stop this *now!* Stop it!” He straddled her middle and pinned her hands above her head. He knew this wasn’t the best way to calm a woman, but shit, she was going to disable him if he didn’t get her still. He clamped her jaw in his hand and lowered his face to touch his cheek with hers. “Christy. Sweetheart. Shh. It’s me, Mike. You’re safe.”

That seemed to help a bit. She stopped struggling, but her soul-deep sobs tore at his heart.

“Make it stop,” she whispered. “God, please, make it go away.”

“Shh,” he soothed. “You’re okay, Christy.” He eased his grip on her wrists and was shocked at how cold her skin was. “Come on, honey. You need to get back into bed and get warm.” From what he could tell, she wore nothing but a thin T-shirt.

He moved off of her and was about to push to his feet when another flash of lightening pierced through the room, something banged against the roof—probably a loose shingle—and Christy launched herself against his chest, nearly strangling him with the way she wrapped her arms around his neck.

“Don’t leave me,” she cried, pressing her cool face against his neck.

## Chapter Three

Mike was able to maneuver Christy to the bed, but she wouldn't let him tuck her in as he wanted. She dragged him down beside her and wrapped her very curvy, very soft, very scantily-clad body around him. Her sobbing had ceased, but her body still shook with violent shudders every time the thunder clapped or the loose shingle overhead slapped against the roof.

With her face pressed against his neck and her body half laying over him, he had little choice but to pull the covers up over them both, hold her, and try to warm her.

He whispered soothing sounds and ran his hand down her back, which did nothing to help ease the painful reaction his body had to her. His cock hardened enough to pound nails. She had the sweetest scent, and damn, she was soft.

Scared of a storm. The woman was terrified of a little thunder. This would be one long-ass winter if she stayed. He couldn't come to her rescue every time this happened. He refused to. Distance kept between them was imperative for his well-being.

Christy's leg moved up, her knee bumping his dick, and he bit his tongue to hold in the groan. *Distance. Lots of distance.* "Christy. Stop this now. Nothing is going to hurt you. It's a goddamn storm. That's all." He tried prying her fingers from his shoulder, but she had one hell of a grip.

"I need...my pills," she said against the tender flesh of his neck, sending a streak of tingling heat racing through his blood. Her hot breath added to the thrill, her quick little pants the sweetest thing he'd heard in ages.

What an asshole he was, getting hotter and hornier than he'd been in ages, all because a woman was having a total meltdown over a stupid little storm. But shit, she felt good. So soft. Her breasts were large and mashed so sweetly against his chest. Her hands were small, delicate, and her short nails were currently digging gouges in his skin. But if he just ran his hand a bit lower...found the edge of her nightshirt— *Pills?*

"What pills?" he demanded.

"Anx...anxiety. Panic attack. Oh, God...I can't...breathe. *Help me.*"

*Hot little pants. Fuck! She couldn't breathe.* "Where?" He rolled sideways, pushing her off him and disengaging from her clinging limbs. "Where are they?"

"Bath—"

He had to hold both her hands in one of his in order to completely get out of her grasp. When he did, he rolled up off the bed, wincing when his thigh twinged. His erection stood out hard against his sweats, but he tried his damndest to ignore it as he felt his way to the bathroom without help of his cane. He knocked into the frame with his forehead, but he got the door open.

What was he doing? How was he supposed to find a pill bottle? He was fucking *blind*. "Christy! Where?" The thunder had lessened, and he could hear her wheezing. God damn it, he was useless.

She didn't answer. He felt along the counter; toothbrush, toothpaste, tissue box. No pill bottle. He opened the mirrored cabinet and went through two of the three compartments, knocking boxes and stuff onto the counter until his fingers closed over what felt like a prescription pill bottle. He could only hope she didn't have more than one.

When he got back to the bed, he heard her snuffle. "I have pills, but I don't know if they're the right ones."

A cold, clammy hand took the bottle from him. He heard the click of a light switch, and then another whimper.

“No...lights,” she whispered in a shuddery, halting voice.

He sat on the edge of the bed and reached out his hand for her, finding her shoulder. “Sometimes that happens during a big storm. They’ll be back on by morning.”

Her body shook violently, her breathing still puffing hard. He heard the bottle being opened and tipped.

He ran his hand down her arm to her hand and took the bottle from her. “Are you okay? Will you be okay?”

Silence, except for her staggered breaths and the rain beating against the windows. In his mind’s eye, he pictured the room as it had been ten years earlier. When his wife had shared this bed with him. He could picture the room, but not his wife. He hadn’t been able to see her for years now.

He dropped his hand from Christy’s shoulder, but then she pressed against him again, her arms going around his neck, gentler this time. She needed him right now. He could push away the haunting memories of a wife he couldn’t see, and a room that had held too many warm moments of pleasure, for just one night. For just this moment. Someone needed him. That hadn’t happened in a very long time.

He scooted up the bed until his bare back touched the cold wood of the headboard, then he wrapped his arms around Christy and settled her small, soft body on his lap. She tucked her head under his chin and sniffled.

“You’re okay, honey,” he whispered as he rubbed his hand down her back. For now he could ignore the painful strain of his cock against her hip. For now all that mattered was that Christy was okay. That she had someone to lean on. He could do that for her for a few moments.

The fact that he found so much pleasure in the simple, innocent touches...well, he was human after all, no matter what anyone thought. And he hadn’t had a woman in his arms in a decade.

“I’m sorry,” Christy whispered when her breathing had fallen into a more normal cadence. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

A harsh laugh slipped out. “The electrical surges before the blackout woke me up, not you. My damn clock kept telling me it was two-thirty-two a.m.”

She sucked in a shuddery breath. Within five heartbeats, her body went lax, and her hand fell from his shoulder. She was out. Had she overdosed on her pills? *Crap*. He laid her down next to him and checked the pulse in her neck. Strong. Even.

Just to be on the safe side, he probably shouldn’t leave her alone. He scooted down in the bed, pulled the covers up over them both, then pulled her against his chest—so he could keep checking her pulse, feel her chest rise and fall with her breaths.

“Yeah. Keep telling yourself that, buddy, and maybe you’ll start believing it.”

He breathed in her warm, spiced scent and willed his body to relax. Impossible. But the ache wasn’t unpleasant. It had been too long since he’d felt the weight of a woman against his side. He could indulge just this once. Only once....

\* \* \* \* \*

Christy awoke slowly, her brain fuzzy and her eyes blurry. Oh, God, those damn pills. They made her feel as if she'd gotten drunk last night. She rolled over, snuggled a fluffy pillow against her chest, and sighed. The scent of clean masculinity tickled her nose, and the events of the night before returned with a rush.

*Oh, goodness. Oh, no.* She closed her eyes and buried her face against the soft cotton pillowcase, breathing in Mike's scent. She groaned. Could she have found a way to embarrass herself with any more perfection? Bawling like a baby. Clinging to him like a damn octopus. She groaned again. And he'd been so...sweet.

And turned on, she reminded herself. She'd tried to ignore the length and heat of his straining penis pressed against her hip as he'd snuggled her on his lap, but even in her anxiety-ridden state, she couldn't help but notice it.

Rolling to her back, she scrubbed her hands over her face and blinked the sleep out of her eyes. How the heck was she to face the man today? And what happened? One second she was sitting on his lap, snuggled against that beautiful, hard chest, and then...nothing. Had she passed out?

"Ugh." Her head throbbed when she sat up and scooted to the edge of the bed. Those damn pills... The bottle was in the middle of the bed, and she grabbed it and set it on the nightstand. The instructions said she could take one or two as needed during an anxiety attack. She'd downed two last night, figuring one wouldn't be anywhere near enough to get her heart rate back to normal and ease the tightness in her chest.

And they'd knocked her clean out. Right there on Mike's lap.

Part of her wanted to hide away in this room and never come out again. She didn't know what to say when she saw him. Between her crying jag, her inability to deal with a little storm, and his hard-on...

Thank God he was a good guy, or he could have really taken advantage of her last night. In her state of mind, she'd have done him just to keep him nearby. Not that having sex with him would be a bad thing. Lord knew she liked what she'd seen of that beautiful body of his. His chest and abs were to die for. She certainly had never slept with a man with such a great body.

*Yeah, whatever...* She staggered to her feet and made it to the bathroom. A cool shower to wake her up, and then some of Mike's killer strong coffee. Maybe she'd be able to face the day—and him—if she woke up some first.

She turned on the shower taps and waited until the water was lukewarm before stepping under the stinging spray. She'd simply wait until he came out of his office for one of his coffee breaks, and then she'd apologize and promise it would never happen again.

Then again, how could she promise that when she wasn't sure why the attack had come on in the first place? She wasn't afraid of storms. The dream-turned-nightmare was what had sent her over the edge. Logically, she knew the thunder wasn't a gunshot, but last night, no matter how many times she repeated that fact to herself, she had no control over the anxiety—the complete panic—that had gripped her.

A year and a half since the incident, and last night it had felt as real as if it were happening all over again. Right here. When she woke up, hearing that crack of sound—she still didn't know what had made the noise—she could have sworn a gun was being fired right in the room. And the nightmare started all over again. The smell and taste of gunpowder and blood. The screams—which last night had been her own—echoed in her ears and heart.

She rinsed the soap from her hair then turned off the water. Feeling a bit more human, she quickly

dressed in a fluffy sweat suit and thick tube socks, then headed for the coffee pot in the kitchen Mike kept constantly full of coffee strong enough to eat through metal.

As she stepped off the stairs on the first floor, she heard Mike's monotone computer program reading back his book to him. She'd forced herself not to eavesdrop over the past two weeks, feeling that would be a breach of the privacy he demanded from her. But as she passed by the open door and glanced in, her breath caught, and her feet stopped moving.

*William stroked Brittany's naked flesh, sinking his fingers into her damp, silky heat. Brittany moaned and arched against his touch, urging him deeper. He slowly sank a second finger into her, his own arousal reaching the point of pain...*

Mike leaned back in the chair and stroked his cock as the words from his computer painted pictures in his mind. But the scene he saw was him and Christy, not the characters made from his own imagination.

He felt her soft curves, smelled the spicy scent that clung to her hair and skin. How would her lips feel around his dick? Sucking him? Taking him deep into her heat?

With a groan, he thrust his hips and pressed against his balls.

*"Will, my love. I need more," Brittany said, her voice husky, her words coming out on little puffs of air.*

*"Tell me what you want, Brit. Tell me." William leaned over her, pinning her hands above her head, aligning the tip of his cock with her moist center. She was so hot, so ready for him.*

*"Deep and hard," Brittany panted as she raised her hips to him as if in sacrifice. "You know how I like it."*

Mike groaned again, envisioning Christy laid out below him. He wanted to kiss her, taste her, feel her tongue tangle with his. He wanted to sink deep into her and hear her cry out his name in ecstasy.

He reached to the far edge of his desk and grabbed a tissue from the box.

*William thrust into Brittany, and she cried out, rising to meet him.*

*"Yes, baby," William groaned as he sank deeper within her heat than he'd ever done before. His Brittany. His woman. His love. "Mine," he said, then nipped the side of her neck, marking her.*

*Brittany rose up again, her fingers gripping his hands, her legs winding around his waist. "Yours. I'm yours."*

*William's thrusting pace quickened, and with each flex of his hips, she tightened around his cock, her slick heat milking him. He pulled one hand from hers, reached between their bodies, and rubbed her clit with the pad of his thumb.*

*Brittany screamed and tensed, her cunt like a vice around him.*

*"More," William demanded. "Do it again."*

Mike threw his head back and came into the tissue with a low groan as he stroked himself and imagined Christy's heat surrounding him, her body pressed against his, her cries of release echoing in her ears.

A gasp had him turning his head toward the door. And then he heard the sound of nearly silent footsteps moving away on the old hardwood floor.

He reached over and hit the button to shut off the computer's voice while William and Brittany were in the throws of their own orgasms.

*Fuck. Shit. Damn. Hell.* Christy had seen him... He grabbed another tissue, cleaned himself up, then put them in the garbage can next to the desk. Tucking himself back into his sweats, he wondered if he should go to her, talk to her. Explain why he'd been jacking off in front of the computer like an adolescent with a Playboy.

She had no business spying on me. None at all. She knows my office is off limits to her.

He pushed up from the chair, hobbled to the door, and slammed it closed.

Stay the fuck away from me!

If she hadn't been in his house, climbing all over him last night, he wouldn't have had to do what he just did. Very rarely did he indulge in masturbation. The part of him that made him need to do so was supposed to be dead.

Just like his wife.

\* \* \* \* \*

As Christy rounded the corner into the kitchen, she flinched as Mike slammed the office door.

Dear Lord, she shouldn't have watched him do that. She should have kept walking. Not stopped to gawk at the man. Definitely, she shouldn't be aroused to the point of being uncomfortable because of what she saw.

She went to the counter and stared at the empty coffee pot. He hadn't made coffee this morning. Why hadn't he made coffee? He always made coffee first thing.

Crossing her arms, she pressed against her aching breasts and closed her eyes. She hadn't felt this kind of arousal in ages. Not in months and months. Not since the incident. When her boyfriend decided he couldn't deal with the mental problems she sustained because of the robbery and left her, she hadn't thought much about sex or anything else involving men.

A small whimper escaped her, and she leaned over the counter, resting her forehead against the cool granite. How was she ever going to get rid of the image of Mike, head thrown back, mouth slightly open, groaning as he worked himself to orgasm? The sound of his soft groan echoed in her mind.

*Go back to his office and talk to him.*

That damn voice. Christy pushed up from the counter and scowled at the empty room.

*He's lonely.*

"And I'm not?" she whispered then felt foolish for talking to herself...again.

*He needs you.*

Christy snorted and grabbed the coffee carafe to fill with water. "Looked to me like that man could take care of himself." She pulled the canister of coffee from the fridge. "So...go away and leave me alone." She made a shooing motion to the room. She didn't know who the voice belonged to or why she was hearing it, but it wasn't in her head. At least, it didn't seem to be... Oh hell, she was losing her mind.

But the weird thing was, she could pinpoint from where the voice came. Usually near the window. And it wasn't her voice, not her thinking voice. It was softer, a little lyrical with a slight accent she couldn't place.

Her hand trembled as she poured a scoop of grounds into the filter. She turned back toward the room.

An old, creepy house. A dead wife.

A nearly silent, nervous laugh slipped out of her. *No fucking way. No. No, no, no.* Christina Smythe did *not* believe in ghosts or anything else supernatural. She had enough emotional problems without adding that to it.

“Hello?” she whispered. “Are you still here?”

No response.

Either it went away because she told it to, or she was ready to check into the loony bin.

Chailali crossed her arms and frowned at the silly woman. From how pale her face had grown, and the tremble in her fingers, it was obvious she was scared. Scared of Chailali. She refused to answer when the woman called to her. At this point, she assumed, answering would lead Christy to another panic episode, and this time Mike wouldn't come to her aid because he was in his office being angry.

Why were the living so difficult? Why couldn't these two people see how much they needed each other? Why had they spent two full weeks together in this house and barely shared a hundred words?

She'd hoped last night would bring them together. When she'd watched Mike be so caring and gentle with Christy, her hopes had soared like never before. She wanted Mike happy. He hadn't been happy since he arrived home from the hospital, a shell of the man he'd been when he had his wife.

Chailali could understand his heartache. She'd once thought she loved a man more than life itself. She couldn't go on living when he rejected her, or so she'd thought. But her pain and anger at his dismissal had led her to commit the biggest mistake of her life—and death. Suicide and a curse on her lover's head made it impossible for her to cross over and find peace in the spirit world. She was stuck here, earthbound, for eternity, it seemed.

The least she could do was help as many of the living find their peace on earth. She saw so much emotional pain poured out of Mike in his writing that it twisted her heart and made her realize that what she'd felt for Jacques over two centuries ago was not real love. It had been infatuation. She'd ruined his life by cursing him to an eternity of loneliness, using the power passed to her from her shaman grandfather. But she'd discovered that revenge was anything but sweet. In cursing Jacques, she'd cursed herself to walking in the shadows.

Jacques, at least, had broken his curse and found the love Chailali had never been able to give him.

She'd thought, once Jacques was free to live again, her own prison as an earthbound spirit would be lifted and she could walk with the spirits.

She'd been wrong.

The only bit of peace she found now was helping those living spirits she could find happiness. In the last hundred mortal years, she'd helped a dozen couples find each other, including Jacques and his dear, sweet Lilly.

Most had no conscious knowledge of her presence in their lives. But Christy, like a few others, could hear her. It should have made things easier, but Christy was obviously reluctant to believe that the voice she heard was real.

Chailali left Christy to her coffee and floated through the door of Mike's office to check on him. Mike, like so many, had no idea of her presence. He had such deep pain and anger inside him, it blocked him to anything spiritual or otherworldly.

He sat at his desk, head bowed, hands poised over the keys of his computer, but he did not type. His shoulders were rounded in what looked like defeat.

Chailali took up her post on the window seat and waited for him to begin.

Almost eleven years ago, she'd stumbled across the Hansons by accident. They were friends of another couple she'd been helping. Michael and Caryn had a beautiful marriage. Caryn was a nurse at the local clinic, and Mike had been a struggling author. He worked hard but hadn't been able to get any of his books published. Not until after Caryn died and his stories grew ominous and disturbing. Then the publishers wanted him.

After Caryn died, darkness enveloped Mike. Sadness and anger. A few times after he'd returned from months in the hospital, his fury was so forceful it had frightened her. He'd raged at the silence of the house. Cried for his wife. Blamed himself for her death.

And then one day he sat down at his computer and began to type. Since that day, he no longer had outbursts of rage, as if he could type away his pain. Maybe it helped, or maybe it didn't. When he approached the end of each book, Chailali could feel the darkness descend on him. The pain returned. And he killed off the heroine in some painfully tragic way.

She'd heard him tell Christy that he didn't write happy endings. Chailali had vowed years ago that she'd see that Mike got one. And Christy seemed to be his only chance.

Chailali would have to figure out a way to bring these two living, lonely souls together. She shook her head and settled into the window seat. She never could understand why the living fought attraction so hard. Love *should* be a simple thing, shouldn't it?

## Chapter Four

Mike's stomach growled for the umpteenth time in the past hour. He hadn't had breakfast, hadn't had any coffee, and now he guessed the time was late afternoon, if he guessed correctly by the amount of light coming in through the window. It was overcast, but afternoon was always brighter here on the west side of the house.

He hadn't typed a single word all day, and all he could think about was what Christy had seen that morning.

The anger at her spying had abated, leaving him empty. Embarrassed. And guilty that he'd been fantasizing about her while he jacked off like a horny teenager. She'd done nothing to warrant his lust. She obviously had an anxiety disorder and couldn't help her actions of the night before. He couldn't blame her for needing someone to cling to if she'd been frightened. How many times over the years had he wished for someone—anyone—to lean on?

What had Beth been thinking to dump her sister out here with him? He was better off being alone. He liked being alone. He needed the solitude to work. Look how horribly last night and this morning had messed with his mind so he couldn't type a single word now.

He folded his arms across his chest. She had to go. It was the only way he could get back to work. She was too much distraction. He didn't want distraction. He liked his life just as it had been before she showed up. No more spicy smelling women in his house.

No more gourmet meals, either, but he could live without them.

He swiped his hand over his face as his stomach rumbled again. God damn it, what would he tell Beth if he asked Christy to leave? Beth had been his one constant friend over the last few years. She was the only one in his life he'd ever spoken to about Caryn, and only because she'd pretty much forced it out of him when he'd been in a funk and couldn't write.

Even then, he hadn't told her much. Not as much as she'd wanted to know. The guilt was his alone to bear. His punishment.

His stomach rumbled once again, and he decided he couldn't put it off any longer. He needed to eat, and he had to face Christy. He reached for his cane and levered himself to his feet. Pausing at the door, he sucked in a deep breath, trying to calm his nerves.

When he opened the door, the scent of coffee greeted him, making his mouth water.

"Hi," Christy said as he walked into the kitchen. "I made you a sandwich."

She sounded rather chipper and unconcerned with the earlier events of the day.

"I was just about to bring it to you. Would you rather eat it in here?"

He tried not to eat at his desk because if he spilled something, well, he couldn't exactly see to clean it up. He kept his coffee on a side table so there wasn't a chance of spilling it on his keyboard.

"Here's fine," he answered and headed for the coffee.

"I'll get it for you," she said, taking from his hand the mug he'd just pulled from the cupboard. "Have a seat."

The sweet scent of her spicy soap teased his senses, and thoughts of last night rushed back to him. The way her curvaceous little body had curled against his, pressed against his erection. How she'd clung to him as if he were the only person who could alleviate her fears.

Turning away, he tried to push the memories to the far recesses of his mind. Tried to tell himself once again that having her in his house was a bad thing.

He sat down at the table and hooked his cane over the back of his chair.

"There was some leftover prime rib from last night, so I made you a hot sandwich," she said, and he heard a plate being placed in front of him. "Coffee at twelve o'clock."

"Thank you," he mumbled and felt for the sandwich. The bread was warm and toasted crisp.

A gentle hand settled on his shoulder. He paused as electric currents zinged through his body and his dick grew hard in his jeans.

"Mike," she said, her voice low and soft. Sweetly tentative and insecure.

"I'm sorry," he blurted out, unable to raise his head. Even though he couldn't see her, he didn't want her to witness whatever his expression might reveal. Heat infused his cheeks, and he knew he was blushing like a girl.

Her hand didn't move, but the silence nearly deafened him.

She moved a bit closer—he could feel her body heat against his forearm. What was she thinking? Why was she hovering over him? He didn't like it.

She moved her hand from his shoulder to his neck, her fingers cool against his heated skin. He sucked in a breath as his cock jumped. Fucking son of a bitch, he'd just taken care of that problem a couple of hours earlier. Why was it back? His body wasn't supposed to react this way.

Those gentle fingers skimmed up his neck, over his jaw, and then her palm rested against his cheek. It took all his willpower not to lean into the touch, to take comfort from it. So long he'd gone without human contact of any kind until now when he was needy for it. Desperate.

"You have nothing to apologize for," Christy whispered, and he realized how close she was to him. Near enough he could feel her warm, sweet breath on his cheek. "I understand."

Her lips brushed over his, surprising him, making him jerk back a bit.

"Shh," she whispered. "I've been thinking about this all day, and it's what I want." She touched her lips to his once again, warm and moist. "I felt you last night. I know you need..." She closed her mouth over his bottom lip and lightly sucked.

He couldn't take any more. He brought his hands up, speared his fingers through her silky hair, tilted her head, and then he drove his tongue into her mouth and tasted her.

Dear God, she was sweet. And warm. And...*heaven*.

A whisper of a moan came from her, and her other hand found purchase on his shoulder as her fingers moved up to his hair, holding him to her.

He explored the recesses of her mouth. Lust strong enough to devour overtook him, pounding through his blood, and he trailed one hand down her back as she leaned over him. He pulled her forward until she tumbled against him, her luscious breasts pressed against his chest.

She groaned and wrapped her arms around his neck as he cradled her in his arms. He'd never wanted anything more than he wanted her. Needed her. Needed the release she could bring him. For ten years his only companion had been his right hand.

She broke the kiss and laid her cheek against his, her breaths coming in hard pants, brushing against his ear, sending spirals of heat through his veins.

“Mike,” she whispered. “Oh, Mike.”

She kissed his scars. He felt the heat against his damaged flesh and jerked back, shoving her away, his embarrassment returning tenfold.

His gut twisted, and he ducked his head to the side, trying to hide his disfigured face from her. “What the fuck are you doing?”

He heard her raspy breaths over his own and the pounding of his heart.

“*Answer me.*” He struck the table with his balled fist. Dishes clattered. “Why did you kiss me?”

“I...” He heard her take a shaky breath. “We’re both alone here, and there’s no reason... You don’t need to do...”

Gritting his teeth, he waited. If she said what he thought she was leading up to—

Her hand came back to his unscarred cheek, and he flinched.

“If you need sex,” she said, her words coming out slow, as if she were forming them in her mind as she spoke, “I... I’m willing.”

Her declaration cut through him like a dagger. He shoved to his feet, using the table as leverage. His chair crashed to the floor. Turning his face toward her, he let his fury show. Hoping his one eye stared directly at her, keeping his voice low, he said, “Get the fuck out of my house.”

She gasped.

“I don’t know what sick ass game you’re playing, but I want you out by morning.”

“I’m not—”

He knew he’d never find his cane on the floor without making himself look like a fool, so he moved away from the table, reaching for the wall for support.

“Mike...wait. I didn’t mean...”

*A God damn pity fuck.* He bumped into the doorframe as he made his way to the hall. His gut churned with humiliation. *She’s willing. Willing to have sex with me.* He made it to his bedroom and slammed the door before limping to his bed. He sank down on the edge and covered his face with his hands. *Go to hell, Christy. Go straight to hell!*

\* \* \* \* \*

Christy stared after Mike’s retreating back, her face hot, her hands cold and clammy. What a fool she was. What a total idiot.

She glanced at his untouched food, at the tumbled chair and his cane lying on the floor. She licked her lips and took a shaky breath.

Go after him! Don’t let him walk away!

She turned toward the voice and narrowed her eyes. She opened her mouth to tell the invisible person it was because of her that she’d kissed him in the first place, but then clamped her teeth together so hard her jaw ached.

Her mind was fried. She was sure of it. She was hearing invisible people and pushing herself on a man who didn’t want her, all because that damn voice told her to.

She groaned and sank down on the chair opposite Mike's side of the table. Schizophrenic. That's what she was. That's what those people had who live on the street, who talked to themselves and committed murders because the 'little voices in their heads' told them to.

She wasn't committing any murders, but she was throwing herself at a man who...who what? Last night she'd felt his erection. This morning he'd been masturbating to a sex scene in a book he wrote. When she'd kissed him, he'd returned her passion, her need. And, oh, God, it had felt good. He tasted like sin and made her want to do him right here in the kitchen.

But then she'd kissed his scar, trying to show him that she found him beautiful no matter what was on the outside, and he'd...freaked.

Now she was jobless, homeless, and she might as well join those street people. "I hope you're happy," she told the disembodied voice. "You made me lose my job."

Go talk to him! Why are you people so stupid? Why don't you go after him and find out why he reacted the way he did? Go! Now! Before he has time to sit and think about everything he doesn't have.

"Great. Now the little people in my head are calling me stupid." Christy rolled her eyes and got up, righted Mike's chair, picked up his cane, and hooked it over the back. He'd come for it eventually, she figured. She stared at his food on the table and decided to just leave it. She knew he hadn't eaten all day, so he'd have to come out of his room sometime.

She shook her head. He probably wouldn't show his face until she was gone. So what? She didn't care. He was a cantankerous, moody, obnoxious man to start with.

After washing her hands, she grabbed the ancient-looking cordless phone off the cradle on the counter and headed for her room. Beth better come pick her up. Even if her sister didn't want her living with her, she would not leave her here without a way to get home. If she did, Christy would kill her.

The hallway was silent when she passed between the office and Mike's room. The office door stood open, the room empty. His bedroom door was still shut.

She raised her hand to knock, to tell him his food was still on the table, but stopped herself. If he wanted to have a temper tantrum like a child, then he could just suffer. She'd been turned down by a man before—turned out he was very religious, though in the two months they'd dated he'd never told her so—and when she pushed to move their relationship to the next level, he'd told her he was waiting for marriage.

But even Mr. Religious hadn't kicked her out of his house. That was just plain rude. She did not take sex lightly, even though right now her body was wound so tight she was afraid she'd attack the first man she came across on the street—were she to leave the house.

*Be hungry*, she thought as she turned for the stairs and walked away from his room. *Sit in your room and be furious with me, and stay hungry.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Chailali watched Christy as she sat on the floor in front of the fireplace in the living room, pushing buttons on the phone again. She'd been trying to get a hold of her sister all afternoon. The hour was late now, and another storm shook the house. When the thunder started, Christy had come downstairs, lit a fire, and huddled on the floor next to the heat under a blanket.

"Beth," she said into the phone. "Where are you? You have to call me. Mike fired me and wants me out

by morning.” Her voice was pitched high, and Chailali wondered if another one of those panics was setting in. “You know I can’t leave alone. You know this. Why aren’t you returning my calls? You always answer your damn cell phone!”

She hit a button on the phone to disconnect the call then dropped it on the floor next to her. She bundled the blanket around her shoulders and scooted a bit closer to the fire.

Chailali shook her head and sat down on the sofa behind the huddled woman. Things had not gone well today, and she had only herself to blame. She’d urged Christy to kiss him, whispered in her ear that he needed her. She’d had no idea that a simple kiss would cause Mike to get angry.

No, she amended. It wasn’t the kiss. It was Christy’s bungled attempt at getting him into bed. That had to have been the stupidest proposal Chailali had ever heard. Knowing how Mike’s mind worked, he probably thought Christy pitied him and was offering sex because of what she’d seen him do earlier in the day.

If there was one thing Michael couldn’t stand, it was pity.

So what now? How did she get Mike and Christy together when he demanded she be out of the house in less than twelve hours?

Chailali wondered what Christy meant when she told her sister she couldn’t leave by herself, though that really wasn’t her concern. The longer she was stuck in the house, the better.

“Why won’t you two talk? Why is it so hard for two people who are so obviously attracted to each other to sit down and express their feelings?”

Christy turned around and narrowed her eyes in Chailali’s direction, but she didn’t say anything.

Since she walked out of the kitchen after the disaster, she hadn’t responded to any of Chailali’s questions. It had been rather nice having someone talk to her, even if it was only to argue.

She’d seen this so many times over the last century. The living had no idea how sweet life could be if they would just accept the happiness offered them. They fought attraction; they fought love. It seemed to her as if the living preferred the misery of their own minds rather than opening their hearts and souls to each other.

Why would they choose to be alone? Chailali had suffered over two centuries of loneliness. She’d give anything to have a companion, living or dead. Someone who saw her, heard her, was able to touch her and be touched by her. If she only would have known what she was doing to herself and to Jacques when she cursed him...

Thunder shook the house, and Chailali kept an eye on Christy to make sure she wasn’t going to scream or panic again. But Christy sat calmly, staring into the flames of the fire. Chailali moved from the couch to the hearth so she could see into Christy’s face. A single tear spilled from Christy’s right eye and trailed down her cheek. She blinked and wiped it away with the back of her hand.

“Why are you crying?” Chailali asked.

Christy didn’t answer. Didn’t look her way.

*This is ridiculous*, Chailali thought and floated down the hallway to Mike’s bedroom. She found him as he’d been all afternoon, lying on his side, staring at the window he couldn’t see out of. The desolation in that one dark-green eye broke her heart.

“She didn’t mean it the way it came out,” Chailali said as she lay down on the bed next to him. “Why can’t you hear me?” she whispered.

She reached out and ran her hand over his head. His eyelid fluttered, the only sign that he felt something when she touched him. She hoped it was a good feeling she passed to him.

“If you’d only give her a chance...”

Mike sat up and sniffed the air. He fumbled for his cane he normally hooked over the end of the bed, but he hadn’t retrieved it from the kitchen. Obviously realizing his error, he pushed up off the bed and hobbled to the door.

A slow smile pulled at Chailali’s lips. *He smells the fire*, she thought. Good. Once they were in the same room, she’d figure out something.

Panic seared Mike’s chest as he limped down the hallway, following the scent of burning wood. God, the house was on fire. The living room was warmer than the hall. He had to make sure Christy got out. He turned around and headed for the stairs. “Christy!” he shouted as he tried to go up the stairs without aid of his cane.

“Mike?” he heard Christy say from behind him.

He stopped halfway up the first set of steps. “Where are you?” he asked, his breathing labored, his thigh hurting like a son of a bitch.

“I’m in the living room.”

“There’s fire. We have to get out. Now.” He made it back down the stairs and, propping himself against the wall, had to wait for his leg to stop throbbing.

He heard Christy’s soft footsteps coming toward him. “I lit the fireplace,” she said. “Are you okay?”

*The fireplace.* He sagged with relief. He forgot the house even had one.

“Mike?”

He heard the concern in her voice, and he pushed himself away from the wall, bringing himself up to full height.

“I hope it was okay....”

“Fine.” He turned to go back into his bedroom, but her hand on his arm stopped him. Every muscle in his body tightened at the gentle touch. The memory of her kiss, of her tongue sliding against his, of the soft moan of surrender she’d given, crashed in on him. “What do you want?” he demanded, unable to keep the desperation out of his tone.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

Sorry for what? For the kiss? For offering your body to me if I needed a fuck? Making me realize that all I’ll ever get from a woman is pity because I’m a freakish monster?

Her fingers slipped off his arm, and the loss was like a punch to the gut. He wanted her. God help him, he was ready to take the pity if that was all he could have. He hated himself for his weakness, but he’d been alone for what seemed like an eternity.

Thunder shook the house, and he waited for Christy to reach for him, anticipated her arms closing around him as she sought comfort from her fears. But as the rumbling passed and she didn’t touch him, he wondered if he’d ruined all chances of her ever returning to his arms.

He heard her sigh, but it wasn’t a sound of fear.

“I have a problem,” she said.

“So do I,” he snapped, surprising himself with the roughness of his voice.

"I said I was sorry," she snapped right back, almost making him smile. There was the woman who'd come into his house two weeks ago. "I can't leave in the morning. I can't get a hold of Beth so...well...I can't leave until she can get here to pick me up."

"Why not? There's a motel in Moonlight Cove. You can stay there until she comes. How old are you anyway? Why do you need your sister—" He cut himself off and wanted to kick his own ass. What was he doing? He really wasn't that big of a jerk to throw her out in the cold. Especially since she had that anxiety disorder. He couldn't.

Christy growled like a snarling dog. "You are the biggest damn asshole I've ever met," she shouted. "Okay! So maybe I sexually harassed you. I thought you wanted me. Forgive me for misinterpreting a big ol' hard-on pressed against me. I said I was *sorry*. But you can't just kick me out without notice. You can't. I'm not going anywhere until my sister gets here, and that's final. I'll stay in my room if I have to. I'll make sure you never see me...er...hear me...whatever! God!"

Her outburst shocked him. She was right. He was being an asshole. And he did want her. But he didn't want her damn pity. He wanted her to want him. All of him. But what woman in her right mind could look past the scars? He knew what he looked like—or at least had a pretty good idea from what he could feel. He had only half a face. His eye was missing for God's sake.

She didn't seem to be having any anxiety now as she stood up to him and his attitude. "Did you take a pill tonight?" he asked.

Silence.

"I mean, you aren't crying tonight, and there's thunder and—"

"I don't believe this. I'm not afraid of thunder. And you shouldn't have been in my room to see me that way, anyway. *You* came into *my* room, not the other way around, so *you* started this whole mess."

She sounded absolutely disgusted with him, and she had every right. But that didn't stop him from finding the humor in her words. He folded his arms across his chest and leaned back against the wall. "I wasn't the one screaming down the walls," he reminded her. "And I didn't hear you telling me to get out. As I recall, you latched on to me like a leech."

"Yeah, that's really something to get turned on by," she said, her tone scoffing.

He shrugged and decided honesty was the only course with her. "When you haven't touched a woman in ten years, it doesn't take much."

"Then why'd you push me away this afternoon?"

He flinched at the softly spoken question. Maybe honesty wasn't so good here. He scrubbed his hand over his face, felt his scars, and cringed. Just the fact she'd kissed him there... He shook his head.

"Maybe the voice was right," she mumbled.

He frowned. "What?"

She sighed again, and he wondered if she'd hyperventilate.

"Look. I'm hungry. I'm going to make some food. Do you want something since you never ate anything all day?"

She was still willing to cook for him after he told her to get out of his house? "Uh...sure." He needed to tell her he'd overreacted.

"Fine. Go in the living room. The house is too cold, especially the kitchen. I'll rewarm your sandwich."

“Chris—”

“Just...drop it. Okay? I’ll get out as soon as I can. But I’m not going back up to my room tonight. It’s too cold, and I think there’s a shingle loose on the roof or something. How is anyone supposed to sleep with that thing banging in the wind?”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

A small smile caught him off guard, but he tried to stop it from showing. Little Christy had spunk. She was a lot like her sister. She might have an anxiety problem, but she wasn’t going to let anyone walk all over her. He admired that.

So why the hell was she willing to have sex with him?

## Chapter Five

Christy grabbed Mike's sandwich out of the fridge and popped it in the microwave, then she went back for more sandwich makings to put together for herself.

She couldn't believe she'd yelled at him. Not that anything she said hadn't been true, but she wasn't normally confrontational. She figured it was probably fear that spurred her on. She'd rather stand up to him than face the world beyond the front door by herself.

God, she'd almost sent herself into a panic just thinking about it. Her damn sister was avoiding her calls; she just knew it. Beth always answered her cell because it might be a client. She shouldn't have told her what the problem was on the voice mail. She should have just asked her to call.

Why the hell was Beth so adamant she be here? Mike didn't want her here, which made the living situation untenable. She had to leave before he called the cops and had her removed. He'd tell them she was a squatter or something.

Jeez, a squatter who heard voices. They'd lock her up for sure.

She stacked beef, lettuce and tomatoes on the whole grain bread and slapped another slice on top, shoved the extras back in the fridge—she'd arrange everything to Mike's liking in the morning—and grabbed his sandwich out of the microwave when it beeped.

"Here," she said as she walked into the living room to find him seated on the end of the sofa. "Take this. Twelve o'clock."

He reached out and wrapped his long, strong fingers around the edges of the plate, the tips brushing the back of her hand in the process. She ignored the tingles racing up her arm and set her own plate on the table at the other end of the sofa. "I'll get your coffee."

She poured him a cup from the carafe that had sat on the burner all day. It smelled a little burned, but she didn't really care. He deserved it. He was the one hiding in his room all day. She grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge then headed back to the living room. He was already halfway through his sandwich. *Uh huh*, she thought. *He's a bit hungry after avoiding the kitchen all day.*

Serves him right.

She sat down on the opposite end of the couch, curled her icy feet under her, and held out the coffee mug to him. "Three o'clock. And it's hot, so be careful."

He set his sandwich on the plate on his lap and reached out with both hands for the mug. She turned it around so the handle faced him and was able to avoid touching him this time.

After he sipped the acrid coffee without so much as a grimace, he carefully set the mug on the end table and went back to devouring his sandwich. It was gone in two minutes flat.

She picked up her own and glanced at it. She wasn't *really* hungry. "Want another?"

"Please."

She couldn't help but smile at his politeness now as she removed his empty plate from his lap and set hers there. "It's not a hot one this time."

"That's fine," he said as he picked it up. "You're a really good cook."

She snorted. "Going for compliments and politeness now, are we?" Biting her lip, she cringed. That wasn't supposed to have come out of her mouth.

*Stop being such a witch*, the voice said, making Christy grit her teeth.

She was not going to respond to it anymore. Not ever. It could just go the hell away!

Mike didn't say anything for a few bites, and she wondered if he was afraid to start another argument, which would make him get up and leave his food again.

"I'm serious," he said when he'd reached the halfway point. "Your food is better than some five-star restaurants I've eaten in." He took another bite.

"I didn't realize five-star places made sandwiches." Damn, she *was* being a bitch. She cleared her throat. "Forget I said that. Thank you for the compliment."

That's better. He's trying to be nice now. So should you.

Christy bit her tongue to keep from shouting for the annoying woman to go away. Lord, what woman? They were alone. It was in her head. Just in her head. Maybe she should go get one of those pills. Would anxiety pills stop voices? She needed to call Dr. Mackey in the morning. Maybe he could prescribe something over the phone so she could have the local pharmacy deliver it. She hated taking pills, but she'd do it if it would shut up her annoying...*other*.

"Your sister said you used to manage a restaurant?" he asked between bites.

"In my former life." She turned sideways in the seat to face him and propped her elbow on the back of the sofa.

For the first time, he turned his head toward her. "Why...uh...how'd you go from that to being here?"

She thought about telling him, but it wasn't really any of his business. He'd fired her. Her problems were *so* not his concern. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Were you incarcerated or something?"

Christy had just raised her bottle of water to her lips when he asked the question, and she nearly choked. "What?" The laughter bubbled out of her. "Um, no. I'm not a criminal." She chuckled. "And if I had been, don't you think Beth should have warned you I might pilfer the family silver?"

He shrugged. "I've no use for it. It was my wife's anyway."

Christy's humor fled, as did her pique at him. Maybe he still loved his wife with all his heart and couldn't stand the idea of sleeping with another woman. Maybe his erection had to do with physical contact rather than attraction to her. He hadn't touched a woman in ten years... Beth told her the car wreck that took his wife's life and damaged his body had happened ten years ago. The poor man had been alone for an eternity.

Mike put the last bite in his mouth and wiped his hand over his lips. A few crumbs fell onto his shirt.

"Let me," she said softly as she leaned over and swiped the crumbs from his chest, trying to ignore how his muscles rippled beneath her touch. Then she picked up the plate from his lap and laid it on top of the other on the end table. She watched as he reached for his coffee, carefully feeling for the handle before he picked it up and sipped.

"This tastes like shit," he said then took another drink.

She fought the smile trying to take over. "I made it around noon. Your coffee always tastes like shit, though, so how can you tell the difference?"

The corner of his mouth kicked up into a small grin. "There's a difference between strong and old. This is old." But he tipped the mug and drained it in a few long swallows.

*What now?* she wondered as she watched him set the cup back on the end table. He set his hands on his thighs and stared in the direction of the fire.

Talk to him...

She cleared her throat. "What do you see?"

"Light and shadow. I can sometimes see the outline of your body if you stand in front of the window in the kitchen." He shrugged. "That's all. And it's always fuzzy. Monochrome."

"Can you see the fire?"

He shook his head. "A lighter patch on the dark wall. A little movement there. Right after the crash, I couldn't see anything. It took three surgeries to give me this little bit."

Sadness played over his features, and the rest of her upset at him slipped away. The uninjured side of his face was toward her, and if she didn't know what the other looked like... Well, he was still a very handsome man. Gorgeous, really. Mel Gibson, Christopher Meloni, young Clint Eastwood type handsome. Chiseled jaw line, high cheekbones, a killer smile.

Christy glanced over to the mantle and the photo taken at his and his wife's wedding. His wife was fair complected to his olive skin. Blonde to his dark. The woman looked like a Barbie doll in her sparkling white wedding dress, and handsome, young Mike looked ready to take on the world with his new bride.

"What was her name?" Christy asked, keeping her voice low. She prayed Mike wouldn't get up and walk out again. She enjoyed his company, even though he made her so uncomfortable, made all her emotions bump around inside her, confusing her.

He raised his chin a bit, as if she'd pulled him back from some faraway place. "Caryn." His fingers curled into his right thigh, making her wonder if it was a reaction to thinking about his wife or if his leg bothered him.

"How long were you married...before...?"

"Five years to the day."

*Oh, goodness.* "What happened?"

He slowly shook his head, but then turned his face toward her. "You tell me first."

"What?"

"Tell me what happened last night. Why are you afraid of storms?"

With a groan, she slouched down into the soft cushions and reached for the blanket she'd dropped on the floor earlier. "I'm not afraid of storms." She spread the quilt over her and tossed the end over his lap. "Need some? How do you sleep when it's so cold?"

He shrugged and smoothed the blanket over his lap. "Cold doesn't bother me."

"It can't be more than fifty degrees in here." She pulled her foot out from beneath the quilt and laid her toes against his bare arm. "I'm a Popsicle." As she made to pull her foot back, he caught it in his warm hand, knocking the breath from her.

"Damn. Why aren't you wearing socks? Where's the other one?" He felt around under the blanket until he got a hold of her other ankle and stretched her leg out so her feet were on his lap. His warm hands wrapped around them under the blanket, lightly chaffing them.

Pleasure coursed through her, and she dropped her head back. *Oh, my goodness.* She'd always had a thing for a guy rubbing her feet. Her own little fetish.

“Hello-o? Socks? Heard of them?”

She nodded then shook her head at herself, realizing he couldn't see her action. “I had a pair on earlier, but I spilled some water and then stepped in it, and they got wet. It seemed too far to walk on the cold wood to go all the way to my room for another pair.”

Mike grunted, and she raised her head to look at him, but he was staring into space again. She tried pulling her feet away, but he gripped her ankles. “Leave them. I'll warm them up.”

He obviously had no idea what his touch did to her insides. He rubbed her soles with one hand and the top of her feet with the other. Tingles shot up her legs, straight to her pussy. She shivered and wrapped her arms around herself, pulling the quilt to her chin.

It might not have been ten years, but it had been a heck of a long time since any man had touched her.

“Okay,” he said, turning his head back toward her. “Start with something simple, like telling me just how old you are.”

“Thirty-five.”

His eyebrow shot up, and she laughed.

“What? You thought I was a baby? Or did you think I was old, like my sister?”

He shrugged. “Beth called you her baby sister, but then, she's what, only thirty seven?”

“Yeah, almost thirty-eight.” She swallowed a groan as he massaged the arch of her left foot with his limber fingers. She would have never thought that typing could give a guy such great hands. Smooth and strong and sure.

“You thought my episode last night was because I'm a child and scared of a storm,” she said when she could think straight, which grew increasingly difficult as her body throbbed with a need that a foot rub couldn't come close to satisfying.

“Not once I got my arms around you. You don't feel like a child.”

His blunt comment caught her off guard, and she stared at him. He looked back in her direction, as if he could really see her. She took a deep breath and dropped her gaze, unable to look at him when she said, “I'm sorry about that. It's...never been quite that bad.”

“What hasn't? The storm?”

“I'm *not* afraid of storms. Do you see me freaking out because of the thunder now? No. It had nothing to do with the storm.”

“So tell me. What was it?”

She jerked her feet from his grasp. “What's it matter? I'll be gone as soon as Beth answers her damn phone.”

“Don't do that,” he said softly as he reached for her, grasped her calf, and pulled her right foot back to his lap. “I don't want to argue anymore. And I don't want you to go.”

“You don't want me... You fired me. Told me to get out.”

“I overreacted.”

“I molested you in your own kitchen.”

His soft chuckle was sweet, the curve of his sexy lips sinfully seductive. “If that was a molestation—”

Christy growled and tried pulling her foot back again, but he wrapped his fingers around her ankle and

held tight. “What? You got pissed off because I can’t kiss right?”

“Stop it,” he said and reached for her other leg, fumbling under the blanket. His fingers brushed her inner thigh, stealing her breath, before he got hold of it and tugged it from under her other leg. “You want some honesty?” he asked as he resumed his gentle massage on her arches.

Her head dropped back, and this time she did moan. Out of sexual frustration and confusion.

Mike didn’t seem to notice her discomfort, though, and said, “After the car wreck, I was in a hospital bed for months. Blind, in agony every second of the day, only able to sleep because of the drugs they fed me through my IV. Can you imagine going from being an active, thirty-one-year-old, happily married, very sexual man to being bedridden with a fucking tube up my dick because I couldn’t piss without it?”

Christy opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

“And on top of that, the doctors, after weeks, when I was finally able to talk and ask where my wife was, why she hadn’t come to see me...they wouldn’t tell me anything. They’d told my own parents not to tell me about Caryn because it might upset me, hamper my recovery. I thought she left me. I thought she didn’t want anything to do with me because if I hadn’t had too much to drink that night and wanted her to drive when she hated driving the coastal roads at night in the rain, she wouldn’t have driven off the road. I thought she blamed me.”

“Mike. No.”

“I was in that goddamn hospital for three months before anyone told me she was dead.” He made a pained face, his brow furrowing. “They didn’t tell me a goddamn thing until my dad brought me home.”

Mike closed his eye and dropped his head forward. His hands had stilled on her feet but held them tight. “I was so angry I kicked my parents out of the house. I wanted to die. I thought I would. Caryn didn’t need to blame me. I know it was my fault. I knew she hated driving the coastal roads at night in the rain. We’d gone down to Coos Bay for our anniversary, and I had too much to drink. She wanted to get a hotel room, but I scoffed at her. Called her a chicken...”

Christy did pull her feet from his grasp then, went up on her knees next to him, and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, pulling his head against her chest. “It’s not your fault.” She rubbed her fingers through his silky hair and cradled his head. “It’s not.”

Her heart broke for him. She wanted to take away his pain, but she didn’t have a clue what to do or say. All she could do was lend her comfort and hope it was enough.

Slowly, he raised his arms and encircled her waist, turned his face against her neck, and let out a ragged sigh. “Until you walked into my house...”

“What?” she asked when he didn’t continue.

“Christy,” he said softly as he released her and leaned back. He reached up and touched her cheek, running those gentle fingers over her nose, her lips. “I wish I could see you. Look into your eyes and know what you’re thinking.”

The anguish in his voice ripped at her. She laid her hand over his and leaned her cheek into his touch. “I’m thinking that you’ve spent a decade beating yourself up for something you had no control over.”

His brow wrinkled. “I made her drive us home.”

Because he called his wife a chicken? She shook her head, knowing he’d feel it since he was touching her. “It’s okay, Mike,” she whispered. “I understand now.” He still loved Caryn and wasn’t going to let

her go anytime soon. She'd never try to come between him and the memory of the love of his life.

She went to pull away, but he caught her around the back of the neck and held her in place. "What do you understand?"

She laid her palm against his cheek. "I understand why you don't want me. You want Caryn. You barely know me." Tears prickled her eyes, but she blinked them back. She could only hope someday someone loved her so deeply.

Mike scrunched his eye closed and shook his head. "You don't understand anything."

"Wha—"

Pulling her hard against his chest, he brought his mouth down on hers, his tongue delving between her lips. She moaned and clung to him, lust and need returning with the force of the lightening outside. His breath was warm, and he tasted of coffee. She could drown in the sensation of his tongue gliding against hers.

He ripped his mouth from hers, his breaths coming in ragged gasps. "I want you so damn bad I can't think straight. I've wanted you from the moment I shook your hand and got a whiff of your sweet scent. But why the hell would you want to fuck a disfigured monster?"

## Chapter Six

Mike held her away from him but still close enough to breathe in her spicy scent, to feel her breath against his lips. "Tell me, Christy. Tell me the truth." He needed to hear the words from her. Honesty, even if it killed him.

When she did speak, her voice was barely stronger than a whisper, accompanied by her cool fingers on his face, touching his scars. "You're not a monster."

He had her by the shoulders, and he gave her one gentle shake. "Look at me. Look at my face and tell me this doesn't disgust you."

Her hands left his cheeks, and he nearly cried at the loss. He let go of her and gripped the arm of the sofa, ready to pull himself up, to get away from her. Why couldn't she tell him the truth?

But then she was over him, straddling his thighs with hers, her soft, full breasts pressed against his chest, her face nuzzled against his neck as she wound her arms around him, holding him. She stroked her hand through his hair, over his shoulder.

He stilled, but his cock jumped back to life with painful force inside his jeans, feeling her heat even through their layers of clothes. He'd give anything to sink into that warmth, to lose himself there.

"Don't," he whispered. A plea for his sanity.

"You're like the Phantom of the Opera, hiding away in your lair, never letting anyone close. The phantom made sweet music, just as you produce bestselling books. You're gifted and beautiful."

Mike chuckled, which turned into a full-blown laugh. "You have got to be kidding me. Do you know anything about that play?" He cupped her face between his hands and once again wished he could see her. "Honey, the phantom is a psycho who captures Christine and holds her captive. Christine was only intrigued by him because of his...strangeness."

Christy sighed. "You don't get it."

He shrugged. "And how do you see it differently? By the way, I was a theater major in college and played Raoul, the man Christine truly loved."

"Why are you so argumentative? Why can't you see the beauty behind the phantom? He was lonely, and he loved her with all his heart."

"He lusted after the hot chick with a pretty voice until he could get her alone and have his way with her. Locked in the catacombs."

"He did not have his way with her!" Christy pushed back, her hands settling on his chest.

Mike grinned. "But he wanted to."

Christy growled again, and he found it sexy. He was a sick man. He knew he was, but the conversation helped cool his lust. At least now he wouldn't do something stupid, like toss her on her back and have his way with *her*.

"So you're some creepy old guy who lives in this big house alone waiting for the first innocent woman to come along?"

"I have a feeling you're not all that innocent."

She smacked his shoulder. "That's rude. You know nothing about me."

He chuckled again. “No blushing virgin offers her body as sacrifice...should I have need of one.”

Her fingers curled into his T-shirt. “You are making me insane.”

With a shrug, he said, “You’ve still never answered my question.”

She huffed. “I don’t remember the damn question anymore.”

“Why,” he said, growing serious again.

“Why do you think?” She took that opportunity to grind her crotch against his.

With a groan, he grabbed her hips, sliding her back away from his dick. “Innocent my ass.” He couldn’t take so much teasing, or temptation.

“You want to know what I really think?” he asked. “Fine. I think you feel sorry for me. I’m sure your sister told you I’ve lived alone for the last ten years. And then you watch me jack off in front of the computer—while, I might add, I was thinking about you.”

Christy’s fingers tightened even more in his shirt over his chest.

“That’s right, honey. I was imagining what you felt like in my arms last night while I stroked my own dick. What do you think of that?”

She didn’t answer, but she didn’t pull away either. He’d hoped to shock her, to get her to leave him alone before he couldn’t let her go.

But she didn’t leave, so he continued. “So, you see me stroking off, and you feel sorry for me. Figure you’d give the gimp a taste of your sweet pussy because you’ve got a soft spot in your heart for people like me.”

“Fuck you,” she said, her voice low and strangled. When she would have slid off his lap, he grabbed her waist and held her still.

“Truth not so pretty when you hear someone else say it?” he demanded as ice settled in his veins because she didn’t deny the accusation.

The stinging slap that landed on his right cheek shocked him enough that he let go. She scrambled away, nearly gelding him with her knee.

“I wanted to sleep with you because I’m just as lonely as you are, you fucking bastard!” Her shout came from across the room, in the direction of the fireplace. “You held me last night, and took care of me. I thought maybe there was a little tenderness inside you!”

She sobbed, and the sound ripped his heart out.

“After the robbery, when my boyfriend realized... He fucking walked out, couldn’t deal with me, yet you held me and told me everything was going to be all right.”

“Christy...” What could he say to take back his cruel words?

She sniffled. In a voice hoarse with tears, she said, “You obviously don’t think much of me if you honestly believe I’d have sex with you because I felt sorry for you.”

She was right. He hadn’t thought of it that way. He’d offended her because of his own insecurities, his own fears.

“I don’t give a shit about your scars. You’re a physically attractive man—very attractive. Anyone who can’t look beyond the flesh isn’t worth knowing—a lesson learned in grade school. I’ve watched you for two weeks. You work constantly. Beth sang your praises all the way up here from L.A. about what a great guy you are. But I think you showed me just how ugly you are on the *inside*, the only place that

really counts.”

Mike’s stomach roiled with nausea at her words. “No... I’m not. I swear.”

She sniffed again.

“Christy... I’m sorry. God, I’m sorry I said those things.”

She sucked in a shuddery breath. “Why? ’Cuz the truth isn’t so pretty?”

She was right. He was ugly on the inside. Empty and dark. And he just pushed away the only person who ever offered him something sweet and pure. Her gentle affection.

The darkness threatened to consume him as it had so many times before. He slouched into the sofa cushions and closed his eye, willing it to just take him. Why had he hurt Christy that way?

“Mike?”

He shook his head. “I wanted to push you away, but I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

The cushion dipped slightly, and he felt the warmth of her next to him. “Why do you want to push me away?”

He couldn’t find the words to answer. There were too many reasons. He settled on a question of his own. “What good am I to you? To any woman? I can’t do...anything.”

“Can’t do anything? You’re an award-winning author. Your books sell thousands if not millions of copies. What you *can* do amazes me. If I didn’t have my eyes, I’d be useless.”

“No.” She didn’t understand. “I can’t do anything outside this house. I scare people.”

She snorted. “Give me a break. It’s not that bad.”

“I’ve heard talk.” And it had nearly killed him.

“What talk? Who’s talking? What can you hear if you never leave the house?”

Mike took a deep breath. He hadn’t shared this with anyone. Hell, he never shared *anything*. He had talked more tonight with Christy than he had to a single person since his mom died three years ago.

“Two years ago, Beth came and got me and took me down to L.A. for a book signing. Only one I’ve ever done. She promised to be by my side and help me through it. She assured me that my scars weren’t that bad. My books sold like hotcakes, and my...injuries...might even boost sales. I should get out and mingle with my fans. Readers loved to meet the authors and learn their life’s story, she’d said. So like a dumb ass, I agreed, even though I knew from the start it was a bad idea.”

“What happened?” Christy asked, and he was glad to hear her voice strong and normal again. Her tears had obviously dried. He wanted to reach out to her, take her hand in his, take her in his arms again. But he’d lost that right when he accused her of...

“Barnes and Noble, downtown Los Angeles. Hundreds of fans wanting to meet me, Beth had said. I was fucking terrified. Only time I ever left home was to see the doctor, dentist or chiropractor.”

“And?”

He shrugged. “It went well for most of the afternoon. I talked with people, shook hands, signed books...”

“Would you get on with it?” Christy said, annoyance plain in her tone.

“Since losing my sight, my hearing is sharper. Every time you walked past the office, I heard you, even when I knew you were trying to be as silent as a mouse.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be. I prefer to know where people are than be surprised by them. But being that I can block out some things and concentrate harder on others, such as I can block the sound of the surf outside the window in order to hear the sound of the shower running upstairs in your bathroom, I inadvertently eavesdropped on a conversation I wish to God I’d never heard.”

“Some woman commenting about your scars?”

He pursed his lips and nodded. “You could say that. She said that for the size of my wallet, she’d fuck even a disfigured monster like me.”

“Oh, God.”

Mike shrugged. “It’s burned into my brain for eternity. Since I knew you weren’t after my money, or at least I assume you’re not, the only logical reason left would be...pity.”

Reaching for the end of the armrest so he could pull himself up, he said, “I am sorry. I’m a writer and can’t come up with anything more profound. I hate that I made you cry. I hate that...” He swallowed the lump growing in his throat. He didn’t want her to see him as ugly. If he could redo the night, he’d show her he could be whatever she needed.

“Goodnight, Christy.” He gripped the armrest and started to stand, but cool fingers on his bare arm halted him. He plopped back onto the sofa.

“Wait,” she said. “Tell me one more thing...”

“What?”

“Were you really thinking about me this morning when you were in your office?”

Christy curled her fingers around Mike’s wrist and prayed he wouldn’t leave. She hadn’t understood. Now she knew he hadn’t been trying to make her sound like a... She didn’t know what, but his accusations had scored her heart worse than anything any other man had ever done or said to her. But he’d been lashing at her out of self-preservation. How could she condemn him for trying to shield himself from more pain?

Mike dropped his head forward, his shoulders rounded in defeat. “I shouldn’t have said that to you.”

“But was it true?” she pressed. After the roller coaster her emotions had been through in the last hour because of this man, one still outweighed all the others. She wanted him. And now, after hearing his deepest hurts, she thought he needed her, too, and not just for physical gratification.

She could take away some of his emotional pain and replace it with good memories. If he’d let her.

“Yes, Christy. It’s true. I know I’m a bastard, but I told you I wanted you from the first day.” He turned his face toward her. “Now do you see why I live alone? I’m not good with people. And with you...” His eye closed, and he let out a slow breath. “You scare me,” he whispered.

Oh, this is wonderful. He’s opening up to you. Don’t let him stop now.

Christy glared in the direction from which the voice came. The woman had been yapping in her ear the entire time, telling her that Mike didn’t mean any of the hurtful things he’d said, that he was lashing out. The fact that she’d been right just made Christy more determined to ignore her.

Of course, she’d been ready to run to her room and lock the door after she’d gotten done yelling at Mike for being so rude. The voice had begged her to look at him, and when she had, she’d seen the agony etched on his features. Her words had cut him to the quick, as bad as his had her.

She closed her eyes for a moment to steady herself. "I don't think I've ever had any man fantasize about me to the point of..." A little smile tugged at her lips. She wasn't used to discussing such...personal matters. But now was not the time for shyness. If they were going to work past their argument, then the only thing warranted here was honesty.

"I'm not sure you fantasizing about me is any worse than me standing there watching you masturbate. It turned me on, and all I wanted was to be in that chair with you, straddling you, feeling you deep inside of me."

Mike groaned. "Please, stop." He pulled his arm from her and scooted to the edge of the couch, readying to stand.

"I don't want to stop. I want to make it happen." She licked her lips, and her breathing grew shallow as she again envisioned taking him inside her. She'd wanted it all day. "I want you to...um..."

"What? Say it."

She'd never used the word in this context, but *making love* didn't sound right either. Even though her heart knew the truth of her feelings, she didn't want to scare him away. She doubted he was ready to make even the smallest commitment, and *making love* for a man was another beast entirely.

So she raised her chin, looked into his one eye, and said, "Fuck me."

He stared at her—or at least in her direction—but didn't say anything.

"No strings. No...anything," she promised. "But I think it's what we both want tonight, isn't it?" She wasn't so sure, though. His lips had pressed into a thin line. The muscle in his jaw ticked as he clenched his teeth.

Finally, he spoke. "How could you? After all the things that were just said here, how could you possibly still want—"

She surged forward and pressed her lips against his. He gasped in surprise, and she stroked her tongue into his mouth, testing the ridges of his teeth, the silkiness of his tongue. He tasted so good. Smelled so good. Pure masculinity. No cologne, just clean, healthy male.

When he dragged her onto his lap and wrapped his arms around her, she moaned at the sizzling sensations that zinged through her blood, heating her body, tightening her nipples, and making her clench her thighs to alleviate the throb in her core.

Mike pulled back from the kiss in slow increments, until his lips just barely touched hers.

"You apologized," Christy whispered. "I accept your apology and ask you to accept mine. You're not ugly inside. You're just...hurt. Like a wounded bear, you lash out."

A gusty chuckle breezed across her lips from his. "First I'm a phantom, and now I'm a bear. Maybe you should start working on your similes."

Christy chuckled then placed a light kiss on his lips, his cheek, and over his scars. "Don't push me away anymore. I'm not going to hurt you. Stop trying to hurt me."

Mike cradled her in his arms, holding her tight. He leaned down and nuzzled her neck with his lips. "I don't want to hurt you."

She tipped her head to the side as he skimmed his teeth along the sensitive tendon. "Then give me what I need," she said on a groan as he slipped one hand beneath her sweatshirt and slid it up toward her aching breast. "Give us both what we need."

"Christ, you taste good." His hand rose up and up until his palm splayed over her breast.

She arched her back, pressing her aching, tingling nipple against his warm palm.

He kissed his way up her neck to her ear. His breathing was heavy, his breath so hot against her cool skin. "I can't believe..." He suckled her earlobe between his lips, and a soft cry slipped from her throat. "I can't believe you want this."

"I do. With all my..." *Heart*. She closed her eyes and let his mouth and hands spiral her into a space where only the two of them existed. Where nothing could come between them. Where his soul was whole and her life wasn't ruled by fear. She felt no panic in his arms, only pure, driving lust. And the small, warm glow of blossoming love.

He plucked her nipple between two fingers as he moved back to her mouth and caught her bottom lip between his teeth. He growled and shifted slightly back onto the couch, sinking into the soft cushions. Her hip rested against the long, hard ridge of his stiff cock.

She tugged his shirt up and splayed her hands against his skin.

"Ahh," he sighed into her mouth an instant before he took possession and speared his tongue between her teeth, expertly gliding it along hers, teasing, coaxing her to do the same.

Wrapping her arms around his neck to keep from losing contact, she sat up and threw her leg over his, regaining her perched position, straddling him as she'd fantasized doing since that morning. She ground her pussy against him and cursed the clothing between their bodies.

"Honey," he groaned as he caught her hips and held her tight against him. "You're killing me."

The laugh that slipped out of her was low and throaty. "I'm right there with you."

Well, since you two obviously don't need me anymore...I'll leave you to finish up here.

Christy jerked her head back just as all the lights in the living room snapped out.

"What is it?" Mike asked, his hands on her lower back under her shirt. "What's wrong?"

"The power went out again."

Mike tipped his head to the side then shook it. "I hear the refrigerator running. Power's still on."

A shiver went through her, and she glanced around the room. She couldn't hear the fridge, but she believed him. Oh, good grief. What if the voice wasn't in her head?

"You okay? You're not having another anxiety thing, are you?"

A snort slipped out, and then she tugged his shirt up to his armpits. "No anxiety, just thinking I'm hearing voices is all."

Mike raised his arms so she could pull his shirt off. "Voices? Saying what?" He didn't seem too concerned with the fact she sounded crazy.

"Oh, man," she said in appreciation as she ran her hands over his well-formed pecs down to his washboard stomach. "I didn't do anything naughty about it," she said with a grin, "but I've been fantasizing about this chest since the day I met you."

The soft glow of the fire danced over his gorgeous skin. He chuckled, leaned back, folded his hands behind his head, and flexed his biceps. "I hope you do something naughty about it now."

She laughed, amazed at how fast they'd fallen back into the teasing. "Oh, Michael, I will." She leaned over, caught one flat, pebbled male nipple between her teeth, and lightly sucked.

Mike's breath hissed out, and his hands found their way into her hair. She moved to the other nipple while running her fingers through his silky chest hair.

His hands moved down her back and caught the bottom of her sweatshirt. She sat up long enough to let him pull it off of her, then went back to teasing his nipples, nipping at his pecs, and running her palms over his hard, six-pack abs. The man was so gorgeous it nearly killed her. She wanted him in her, on her, over her. Now.

But she didn't want to rush it, either. She wanted tonight to last, to be the perfect memory for the both of them.

The chilly air raised goose bumps on her arms and sides, adding to her pleasure. When his heated hands came back to her skin, she cried out and ground her pussy against him. His big hands cupped her breasts, his thumbs teasing her nipples to the point of agony.

"My turn," he said in a gravelly voice that didn't sound like him. Then he pushed her back a bit and leaned forward, unerringly homing in on her left nipple.

Gripping his shoulders, she bit her tongue to keep from screaming. Fire and ice shot through her, nearly sending her over the edge with just that simple touch. No, not simple. Nothing was simple about the way his tongue swirled around her areola, or how he knew just how hard to suckle to make her feel it in her core.

He switched to the other breast, repeating the slow, sensual caress.

"Please," she whimpered.

As he kissed his way back up to her mouth, his hands slid around to her back, then down into her sweatpants where he squeezed her butt.

Yes!

He grunted. "What a sweet ass."

She sucked his tongue into her mouth to shut him up. She wanted him lower, inside her. When he did drop one hand and curled his fingers through her pubic hair, she nearly came undone as pleasure raced through her.

With his other hand, he came around her front. In a simultaneous stroke, he sank two fingers deep in her pussy and flicked the pad of a finger over her clit.

Christy threw back her head, screamed, and gripped his shoulders. She rotated her hips against his hands and came as bright spots of light exploded behind her closed eyelids.

His teeth closed over her nipple, and he sucked it deep into his mouth. She cried out again as another wave broke over. He pumped his fingers deep inside her, hitting just the right spot, and she shook with the force of the orgasm while he pinched and lightly tugged on her clit.

"That's it, honey," he said while his hot, ragged breaths fanned over her breasts. "That's it. Come for me again."

Whimpering, she ground against his long fingers. She opened her eyes and looked down at the top of his head, his dark hair showing golden streaks in the dancing firelight. She cupped his cheeks in her palms and raised his head.

"Kiss me," she begged.

He did. With hard, driving passion, he stroked his tongue inside her mouth at the same slow, steady pace his fingers delved into her core.

Heat infused her entire body, a fine sheen of perspiration coated her skin, and then the building pressure broke. She whimpered as another flourish of ecstasy rushed over her, through her.

No man had ever made her come so hard or so fast with just a touch of his hands and mouth. She collapsed against his chest, panting, waiting for the world to stop spinning.

As she calmed and a chill settled over her, she realized every muscle in Mike's body was clenched, and he panted hard, his arms banded tight around her middle.

How selfish of her. He was aching, and she'd only taken her pleasure. She kissed his shoulder, his neck, then reached between them and flipped open the buttons of his jeans.

"Stop," he said, his voice strangled.

"No. Let me." She reached into his snug briefs and drew out his long, thick, rock-solid cock. "Oh. Yeah," she said in anticipation. She ran her hand from base to tip then skimmed her thumb over the silky drop of pre-cum.

Mike caught her wrist but, instead of pulling her away, he pressed her palm harder against him, wrapping her fingers tight around his width. "We can't," he said on a pant, then groaned a sound of pain. "I have no protection. I don't have any goddamn rubbers."

## Chapter Seven

Mike waited for some response from Christy. Part of him didn't care about the lack of protection. He was dying to get inside her slick heat, to sink deep and find the pleasure he knew her body would bring him. To feel her tight muscles clenching around his cock the way they had around his fingers. But he wouldn't take a chance with her. He couldn't get her pregnant, though the thought of her giving him a baby...

*No. God, no. No, don't go there.* Why would he be fantasizing about family and children now? He'd given that dream up while he lay in a hospital bed hooked up to so many machines he thought he'd been assimilated.

Christy's hand tightened around his dick, and she leaned into his chest, her skin cool against him. Her breath was warm, though, when she whispered against his lips, "We can work around that." Her tongue delved once into his mouth, and then she trailed hot, damp kisses over his jaw, down his neck, then over his chest as she scooted off his lap.

His thigh cramped slightly, but he ignored the pain. Her mouth on him felt too good. Her small, soft palm stroking his dick took him so close to the edge he knew he wasn't going to last long. Having her touch him was beyond anything he'd imagined. So much better than his own hand.

She spread his thighs a bit and wiggled between them. She was on the floor. On her knees... *Oh! Fuck!*

Warm, silky lips closed over the tip of his cock, and he thrust into the soft recesses of her mouth.

She sucked hard, pulling a groan from him. He sank his hands into her hair, gripping her head, needing to pull her away but unable to force himself to accomplish that simple task.

"Babe. Stop. I'm going to—"

She dipped her head again, pulling him to the back of her throat, lightly grazing her teeth along his length.

He had no control left. She sucked it out of him. Took it away. One more stroke of her clever tongue over the tip, another draw deep into her mouth, and he shouted. His balls drew up tight, every muscle in his body tensed, and his cock strained as he came. The orgasm seemed to last forever, sucking the air from his lungs, sending him into a peaceful euphoria he hadn't known in too long.

Dropping his head back onto the couch, he gulped in deep breaths, trying to come back to reality, but Christy's sweet mouth continued to lightly suckle, lick and tease him. He groaned and pulled her way when the sensations became too much to bear.

Christy chuckled, the sound soft, husky, and sexier than hell as she wrapped her arms around his waist and laid her head against his chest.

Mike sucked in a couple more deep breaths and willed his heart to slow to normal.

"You okay?" he asked when he could think straight.

She nodded against his chest. Her fingers skimmed over his stomach. "Uh huh. I feel great."

It was his turn to chuckle. "That was...*damn.*"

Christy shivered. When he skimmed his hands down her back, her satiny flesh was chilled. "You need to put your shirt back on, hon. You're going to freeze."

Her one arm tightened around his waist, and he wondered if she felt as he did; that he didn't want this

sweet moment to end. He was more than willing to sit here, snuggled with her, all night. Maybe...

“Christy?”

She pulled away then, and the cold air rushed over him at the loss of contact of her soft body.

“Does this house even have a furnace?” she asked.

A smile tugged at his lips at her disgruntled tone. “Yes. The thermostat is on the wall in the hall. Feel free to turn it up.”

“Thanks. I will.”

He felt around on the couch next to him for his own shirt, but came up empty.

“Here.” She wrapped her fingers around his wrist and pressed his shirt into his hand with the other. “But I like you better without it.”

He grinned and tipped his face up toward the sound of her voice. “Do you now?”

She brushed her lips over his. “Yeah. You have got the best body I’ve ever seen.”

With a groan, he reached for her, but she pulled away with a soft, sensual laugh. “I need to brush my teeth, and I want to grab a snack—since you ate my sandwich.”

“You didn’t tell me that second one was yours.” He frowned. Was she going to go to her room now?

“No big deal. Want something?”

He shook his head. “No, thanks.” He found the tag on the collar of his T-shirt so he knew which was front and back then pulled it over his head. He heard Christy’s footsteps leave the living room.

“I’m turning it up to sixty-five, okay?” Christy called from the hallway. “You won’t melt or anything, will you?”

“That’s fine.” He tucked himself back into his pants and buttoned the fly. *So that’s that? All over? Time for bed?*

Christy barely made it to the kitchen before her knees went weak, and she practically collapsed into a chair by the table. Her heartbeat thudded so hard she thought it would crack a rib. Her body tingled in places that hadn’t come to life in ages. Dear God, what he could do to her.

“What am I supposed to do now?” she whispered aloud then waited for a response from *the voice*.

Nothing. Nada.

“Where are you? What do I do now?”

Still no answer came.

She rolled her eyes and propped her forehead against her hand. What she wanted to do was climb into bed with him and snuggle up next to that gorgeous body. Who needed a furnace when his body gave off so much heat?

But she had to keep it light. Couldn’t let him know what she was feeling, what she longed for. Less than twelve hours ago he’d fired her and told her to get out. If she pushed now, she’d still be headed out the door. He was a man, and men didn’t confuse sex and love or even sex and affection. Why couldn’t she be that way? What she wouldn’t give to be able to say, “Thanks, that was great,” then not think about it again until the itch presented itself once more.

Oh, Lord, she could have made love to him all night.

Her heart rate nearly normal, she stood up and moved to the fridge. She grabbed a slice of cheese and a couple of pieces of sandwich meat. It'd do. She just needed to make it until morning.

Shutting the door, she listened for sounds of thunder or wind, but didn't hear anything. Maybe she'd be able to sleep, as long as that damn shingle didn't wake her up and send her back into her nightmare world.

"You in here?"

Christy yelped and swung around.

Mike stood in the doorway, leaning against the frame, his brow furrowed in a frown. "Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you. Do you know where my cane is by any chance?"

She grabbed his cane from the back of the chair and took it to him. "Here. It's been on the back of your chair all day since..." Could she bring up something else uncomfortable?

A little, almost self-deprecating smile tipped Mike's lips as she slipped the cane into his hand. "I meant what I said. I overreacted to everything, and I hope you won't leave."

Because she'd given him a blowjob? No. He'd told her before that. She swallowed hard and looked down at the food in her hand, her appetite gone.

"You know. It's really hard for a blind guy to figure out what you're thinking if you don't speak. I can't see your face." His tone was matter of fact.

She cleared her throat. "I...um..." She didn't want to go either, but she also knew that if tonight's episode on the sofa was a one-shot deal, she wasn't sure she could stay in the same house as him.

"Morning after regrets?" he asked, his tone light, but his expression was very serious, his lips turned down in a frown. "That didn't take long."

"No." She laid her empty hand on his over the handle of the cane. "Mike, I don't regret anything. I just don't know where..." Where was her voice when she needed it? Why abandon her now? Wasn't this what that person—being—whatever the hell it was—had been pushing for? So why wasn't she here being her annoying self to help Christy figure this out now?

Because the voice was in her head, that's why! Jeesh, she really was losing it.

Mike stared at her with his one unseeing eye, obviously waiting for her to finish her thought.

She ran her fingers over the back of his hand and sucked in a breath, then counted to ten as she slowly let it out. After coming this far, it would be stupid not to go all the way. "What do you want?"

A dry, humorless laugh came out of him. "I've been alone in this house so damn long, I don't know anymore. You turned my world upside down tonight. This morning all I wanted was for you to get out so you didn't tempt me. Now..."

"Now?" she prompted when his voice faded away.

He shook his head. "I still can't believe it."

She frowned and pursed her lips. "What?"

"That you'd...do what you did. With me." He lifted his hand and ran a finger over his scars.

Huffing out a breath, she stepped away from him and leaned against the counter. "Do we need to go there again? And, by the way, what I did had *nothing* to do with pity. Just to set you straight."

With a shake of his head, he said, "No. It didn't feel like pity. It felt...damn good." He smiled then, and her heart melted. He was so...sweet. A wounded teddy bear.

Enough of the pussyfooting around the heart of the matter. It needed to get out in the open or they'd never get anywhere. Shoring up her defenses until she thought she could take the rejection that might come, she said, "Was this a one-time shot or..." She licked her lips. "Or will it happen again?"

"I want you." The admission was blunt. "I want you in my bed tonight, and the next night, and as long as you want to be there. But that's not my decision, it's yours."

Her breath caught, and her tense muscles relaxed. She smiled. It wasn't a declaration of love or anything more than him being honest. Enough for now, though.

"That's where I want to be, too," she finally said and stepped up to him, wrapping her arms around his waist. She laid her head against his chest, his body heat soaking through layers of cotton. Closing her eyes, she breathed in his warm, masculine scent.

"Thank God," he said on a sigh and hugged her tight. "I think we need to work on this communication thing."

She chuckled and nodded. "Yeah. We need to work on that."

He kissed her forehead. "Why don't you go do whatever women do before going to sleep, and I'll go warm up the bed?"

"Okay." But she didn't want to let go of him. "But not too warm. We still don't have any condoms."

He disengaged from her and stepped back. "You'll have to run down to Ryan's tomorrow and grab some." He grinned. "First thing in the morning."

Before she could open her mouth and tell him why that was an impossibility, he turned away and started down the hall, his cane tapping against the hardwood floor.

Great. She still had to tell him about her problems now that they'd gotten past his.

Waiting until he'd stepped into his room to head upstairs, she munched on her late-night snack on the way, then brushed her teeth, grabbed a clean pair of socks, and headed back to his room.

She frowned. His bed was only a double, which would make for very close sleeping. That wasn't completely bad, but she'd always liked her space when she slept. Falling asleep cuddling was fine, but she inevitably moved away during the night. Some men, she knew, found this upsetting—one boyfriend from the past had left her because of it; he'd felt rejected. In this bed, there wouldn't be anywhere to go.

"If you close the door," he said, stepping out of the attached bathroom, "it'll stay warmer."

That's when she realized the floor was warm. She could feel it through her tube socks. "Hey," she said, squatting down to put her hand against the hardwood. "Why...?"

He chuckled and pulled his shirt off over his head, then tossed it on a chair at the side of the bed. "Hot water pipes running through concrete below the flooring."

She cleared her throat and crossed her arms. "This is why you aren't cold? While I was up in that attic freezing my behind off?"

His grin was playful and mischievous. He shrugged. "I really didn't think about it, but yes. It's not an attic, though."

Then he dropped his jeans, and she couldn't care less about the cold room she'd slept in for two weeks. His thighs were thick and muscular, his legs long, his butt the best she'd ever seen. "Goodness," she said on a sigh.

“Are you ogling me?” he asked as he sat down on the edge of the bed and pulled the covers down.

That’s when she saw the long scars on the top of his right thigh. She went to the bed, sat down next to him, and traced her fingers over his leg. “Is this why you limp?”

He nodded. “Metal rods holding my femur together. It was shattered in the crash. Don’t even get me started on the amount of metal in my face. Going through airport security was a barrel of laughs.”

Christy didn’t think anything in Mike’s life since the crash had been a barrel of laughs. She leaned over and kissed his shoulder, nuzzled against his neck. “I’m tired.” She didn’t want to talk about anything else tonight. The emotional landslide she’d been through all day, topped off by the most amazing orgasms of her life, had drained everything out of her.

“Get in, then,” Mike said, sweeping a hand over the bed.

She crawled to the other side of the bed, snuggled down under the blankets, and sighed. The entire room smelled like him, but the bed held his elemental scent and wrapped her in it.

Mike lay down, pulled the blankets up, and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her back snug against his front. “This sweat suit might as well be metal armor. I don’t get any skin?”

Christy chuckled and laid her hand over his on her belly. “Punishment for keeping all the heat to yourself for so long.”

He nuzzled the hair away from her neck then kissed her, his warm breath tickling her ear, reigniting her body, sending tingles to her fingers.

She groaned. “Go to sleep.”

His semi-erect cock nudged against her backside, and she chuckled. Within three breaths, she fell asleep, warm and safe in Mike’s strong arms.

\* \* \* \* \*

Morning sun shone through the east-facing window, warming the bed. Not that more heat was needed. Mike’s blood was already at the point of roasting, having Christy pressed against him, the sounds of her soft, steady breaths taking the chill from his heart that had been there for too many years.

He wanted to see her. To look into her eyes and know if she felt even a bit of what he did. The heavy-petting session of the night before had been...exceptional. Having her come at just the touch of his hands was amazing. But what came next?

Rolling to his back, he sighed and propped his hand behind his head. His other arm was firmly planted beneath Christy, half numb from the weight of her upper body, but he didn’t mind. She’d stayed snug against him all night. Even when he rolled away, she would scoot up to his back and wrap her arm around him.

If he were normal, he’d want to take her out. Dinner, dancing, movies, a walk along the shore. But he wasn’t normal and couldn’t take her anywhere. What kind of man was he if he couldn’t...

He scrubbed his hand over his face. For the last few years, he didn’t leave the house more than four times a year for his doctor appointments. He’d told Christy about his one foray into a book signing—something he would never repeat. He was content to stay inside, but wouldn’t she want to do things? The stuff normal, dating couples did?

She had to, because he wanted to now.

Was she still his housekeeper? Did she want to continue as before with sex thrown in?

The memories of their arguments from last night echoed in his mind, and he wished he could take all the hurtful words back. She said she accepted his apology, but he'd been so cruel. Could she be the one woman in the world who truly didn't care about his scars? Didn't care that he wasn't a whole man?

The only people who saw him regularly were Ryan from the store, his accountant, and Christy's sister. None of them had a problem with him. Beth had even brought her husband for a short stay last summer, using the master suite that Christy now used.

Could she be right that he'd made himself into something in his mind that he wasn't? Had hearing that woman at the book signing messed with his mind? Even if the scars didn't bother Christy, how would *she* react to going into public with him? How would she handle the whispers?

Christy scooted closer and laid her head on his shoulder. Her breathing had changed, and he knew she was waking up.

"Good morning," he said softly and kissed the top of her head, pausing to breathe in her spicy scent.

"Hey," she mumbled. "It's too bright in here."

He chuckled. "First day of sun we've had since you arrived, and I don't hear any wind. Should be a nice walk down to Ryan's to get those rubbers." Rolling to the side, he pressed his hard-on against her soft belly and wished she wasn't wearing those thick sweats. "I know I'm ready for them."

When she didn't respond to his teasing and her body tensed, his good feelings crashed inside him. Here came the morning-after recriminations. Bright light of day—literally—and she got a good look at his face.

Right. He pulled away and rolled to sit on the edge of the bed. Stupid idiot, getting your hopes up. It was nothing more than sexual release last night. You are the dumb ass who got your emotions involved, opening up to her the way you did.

"Can't we just call Ryan and have him add them to the grocery list?" Christy asked, her tone tentative.

Confusion battered at him, and *damn it*, he needed to look into her eyes. He swallowed and pressed on, deciding to just let the conversation continue and see where it led. "It's Thursday, isn't it? Delivery isn't for days. Do we just...play around...till then?" He wasn't sure he'd survive. He'd gone so many years without a woman, and he never thought it bothered him. But now, having her here was like having an entire chocolate cake laid out before him, and he was only allowed a little lick of the frosting.

"I thought the playing around was good."

He dropped his head forward and gripped the edge of the bed. "Good doesn't begin to describe it. But... Damn, Christy, I want more. I want it all. I want you."

"Don't get mad," she whispered.

Her soft voice had him turning toward her and gathering her in his arms. She was the type to bark at him, not beg him not to be mad. Stretching out next to her, he ran his palm over her cheek, pushing her long hair back over her shoulder.

"I'm not mad. I'm frustrated and horny as hell, and I can't go to the store. I'd probably wind up walking into the ocean and drowning. I haven't left the house by myself since I lost my eyesight. The store isn't that far. This is a safe town, so I don't understand you not wanting to go there. It's not like

downtown L.A. where you have a chance of getting mugged every time you leave the house.”

She let out a deep breath and burrowed her face against his neck. “I guess it’s my turn to tell you my problems,” she said, her words slightly muffled, her tone filled with anguish.

## Chapter Eight

She had avoided telling him last night rather effectively. “About your anxiety problem?”

She nodded against him. “Uh huh.”

“Are you agoraphobic? Is that why you don’t want to go to the store?”

She leaned away a bit, and he got the impression she was studying him. He carefully raised his hand and cupped her cheek. “It’s okay. You know all my dark secrets. Tell me yours.” God, he wished he could look into her eyes.

“It’s not leaving the house that causes me problems,” she said, her words halting and unsure. “It’s going into public buildings.”

He frowned. “I don’t understand. What does that have to do with the storm the other night?”

With a huff, she shook her head. “I told you I wasn’t afraid of the storm. I’m not. It was the banging on the roof. I woke up to it, and...” Her breathing sped up, as if just talking about it was bringing on a panic.

“Shh,” he whispered and pulled her back to his chest. “You’re safe here. You’re safe with me.”

“I know. I just don’t like talking about it. Remembering it.”

He waited a few long moments, rubbing her back, holding her tight.

When her breathing had fallen back to normal, she said, “Sometimes I have nightmares about the most terrifying day of my life. There’s no rhyme or reason about when they come, but when they do, I wake up scared out of my wits. Usually I can talk myself out of a full-blown anxiety attack, but the other night...”

“Tell me.”

She let out a slow breath that ruffled the hair on his chest. It spurred his lust, his need for her, but he knew now wasn’t the time. He wanted to hear what she had to say. Needed to understand in case it happened again.

“Even though my brain told me that the sound of that loose shingle slapping against the roof wasn’t a gun shot, the...the...I don’t know what it is inside me... Mixed with the nightmare I’d been having, that bang was a gunshot, and I woke up thinking I was back in the bank with the robber holding a gun on us. I swear I could even smell the gunpowder. Taste the—” She gagged.

“Okay, honey. Okay. Shh.” He rubbed her back and felt her tremble. “You’re not there now. You’re with me. In bed. Safe.”

She nodded against his shoulder and lay silent for long minutes. Her hand snuck over his side and splayed open on his back. “I’ve been through months and months of therapy,” she whispered. “I’m not crazy.”

“I didn’t think you were.”

“It was almost nineteen months ago, and I still can’t walk into a store or any other public building without my blood pressure skyrocketing, my heart beating so hard it feels as if it will break a rib, and this feeling of...of loss of control.” A sharp, almost hysterical laugh came out of her. “I can’t even walk by a bank without it happening.”

“What about those pills?”

"Yeah," she said on a sigh. "Drugs. They dull...everything. I can't even think straight when I take them, which was fine the other night. I didn't want to think. I just wanted it all to go away. But...when I take them...I don't feel *anything* anymore, and that's almost worse."

Mike felt stupid for his earlier comment about getting mugged. What Christy had been through was so much worse. Being in a bank during a robbery...he couldn't imagine the terror.

"My best friend was shot that day," she said in a whisper. "We were on our way to lunch, and I needed to drop the weekend deposit from the restaurant at the bank. Cindy died protecting me."

"Oh, hon..."

She shook her head. "The robber told us all—there were a dozen of us in the bank—to sit on the floor in front of the counter and be quiet while the one teller put money in the bag." She shuddered. "My cell phone rang, and the man turned and pointed the gun at me. Cindy threw herself over me, and he shot her in the back of the head."

Dear Lord. Mike rocked her and kissed her hair.

"There was blood everywhere...I could taste..." She gagged again and jerked away, out of his grasp.

He reached for her, finding her sitting up on the other side of the bed. "That's enough, hon. That's enough."

"No matter what I do, the memory of that... The smell and taste and..."

"Sweetheart. That's enough. I understand."

"No. No one understands. Beth brought me here and dumped me because she said I needed tough love. That she wasn't going to allow me back in their house until I got over it."

"I *can't* get over it! Every time I close my eyes, I see Cindy. The only thing that makes it go away are those fucking pills, and I can't stand them. I'd rather live with the memory, and be stuck in a house, than to just be...numb. Because when the pills wear off, it all comes back. Nothing makes it go away forever."

Mike pulled her back into his arms and pinned her under him when she tried to fight him. "I *do* understand, Christy." Her knee came up and almost caught him in the groin. "Damn it, woman. Calm down. I understand. You can't control your physiological reaction to the trauma any more than I can make myself see."

She went limp under him. Only her heavy breathing and the slight whimper that came out with each heavy breath told him how upset she was.

"I understand, honey. Your emotional trauma is as real as my physical one."

"Yes," she whispered.

He moved to her side and cupped her cheek, feeling the moisture of her tears streaming into her hair. "Come here," he whispered, and she moved back into his arms, snuggling up against him. "Fine pair we are, hmm?"

She nodded again. He hated her like this. He preferred the fighter in her to this insecure, hurting woman.

"Even the psychiatrists told me it was time to get over it. I had to take the pills and deal with life."

"Did they give you any other techniques to help you through it? Breathing exercises? Going to your happy place?"

“No. Take the pills, then you’ll be fine, they told me. Though I do the breathing thing on my own, and sometimes it helps.”

“That’s a crock of shit.” He brushed her hair back from her cheek then leaned down and brushed his lips over hers. Mmm, she was so sweet. He stopped himself from taking it deeper and pulled back slightly.

“I had a therapist at the hospital that taught me techniques for blocking out the physical pain with my mind. I don’t know if it’ll work the same for you, but I can tell you what I know. Teach them to you.”

“I’d like that,” she whispered. “Could you kiss me again? Please?”

He grinned. “You never have to ask twice for that.” He speared his tongue between her warm, moist lips and moved over her. Good thing she was in those damn sweats, or he’d sink into her, protection be damned.

Her hands roved over his shoulders, into his hair, and she tipped her head slightly so he could go even deeper. His cock throbbed, straining against his underwear, and he couldn’t keep himself from grinding against the apex of her thighs. Even through layers of cotton, he could feel her heat, knew she was damp and slick and hot. All for him.

He slid his hands up under her shirt and cupped her breasts. She arched into his touch and moaned into his mouth. Her nipples puckered against his palms. He trailed kisses along her jaw, lightly nipped her neck, which made her moan, and he knew it wouldn’t take much to send her over the edge.

It had been years and years, but he knew he’d never had a woman respond so quickly to him. It made his ego inflate and his need for her expand.

He leaned up and shoved her shirt over her head. Her hands went back to his hair as he scooted down, first taking one pebbled nipple between his lips, then the other, sucking, licking, teasing. Her skin was as soft as a rose petal, and she smelled of spice and heat. He couldn’t get enough. Would never have enough of her. They’d deal with their problems later. Now, she needed him to give her release, and he was more than willing.

He scooted farther down the bed, kissing and suckling her silky flesh. Over her ribs to her belly. When he flicked his tongue into her shallow navel, she arched up and moaned.

Slipping his fingers into the waistband of her pants, he slid them down as he scooted even farther.

“Mike?” she asked in a breathy voice that set his blood to pounding.

He ripped her pants off and tossed them to the floor. “Spread your legs, honey,” he said even as he gripped her thighs and pulled them apart.

She raised her knees on either side of him and spread wide. He trailed his fingers up her inner thighs, feeling her quiver at his touch. When he found her damp curls and spread her slick pussy lips with his fingers, she whimpered.

“What color is your hair?” he asked as he fingered her slick folds, gathering her moisture and bringing it up over the tight, hard nub of her clit.

“Brown,” she said on a pant. “Chestnut brown.”

Mmm. “Your skin, love. What color is it? Pale? Olive? Dark?”

“Fish belly white.”

He stopped moving, and she groaned, raising her hips toward him.

He burst out laughing.

She giggled and ran her hands over his cheeks. "Sorry," she whispered. "I don't go outside much."

"We can tell which one of us is the writer here," he said, and then he dipped his head and ran his tongue over her heated, plumped flesh. Her scent was heaven, her taste good enough to make his mouth water.

She thrust up against him with a cry.

He grinned, knowing she would come with only a few strokes of his tongue. "Milky white," he whispered then licked her again, savoring her spicy cream. "Soft as a white rose." He flicked her clit with his thumb as he delved his tongue deep into her pussy.

She lifted her ass from the bed, and her hands that gripped his head pressed him hard against her. He turned his head slightly while he suckled her hot folds, intentionally abrading her sensitive flesh with his morning whiskers. Her pants grew faster, harder, nearly driving him over the edge.

"As smooth as white chocolate."

"Shut up," she cried and ground herself against his face. "Please!"

Her need undid him. All teasing done, he suckled her clit into his mouth and slid two fingers deep inside her, aiming up for her G-spot.

Her inner muscles clamped around him like a vise, and he imagined his fingers were his cock, sunk deep inside her, feeling every tight clench of her velvety core.

She screamed and rode his face while he pumped his fingers and suckled her hard little nub. When she shouted his name, he pressed his hips into the bed, grinding his cock against the mattress, and came with her, imagining he was inside her.

Christy's legs slid down onto the bed on either side of him, and he rested his cheek against her smooth thigh as he tried to catch his breath.

Her heavy breaths turned into gasps of laughter. "Oh, my God."

He raised his head, and once again wished he could see her. Why the hell was she laughing when he could barely move? He frowned in her direction.

"I have never come from oral sex before," she said as her giggles subsided. "Never."

He grinned. "Happy to be your first, ma'am." What kind of idiots had she dated?

"Come here," she said. "Let me do you now. It's only fair."

He pushed up to his hand and knees and moved up over her. "Too late, hon. But you're going to have to wash the sheets."

There was a moment of silence, and then she burst out laughing again, threw her arms around his neck, and kissed him hard. She moaned as her tongue delved into his mouth. Knowing she could taste herself on him, and that she enjoyed it, almost brought him back to full attention. But then she loosened her grip around his shoulders and collapsed back on the pillows, pulling him down over her.

"Hold me then," she whispered. "And teach me what you know about controlling my emotions."

\* \* \* \* \*

Chailali perched on the counter, watching Christy make breakfast for Mike. Everything had worked out. The two of them had spent the night in Mike's room, in bed together—she'd peeked to find out for sure sometime in the middle of the night. This morning they couldn't seem to keep their hands off of each other. Their argument last night had led to a wonderful making up, and Chailali knew it was almost time for her to move on.

She smiled, even though she was a little sad. She hated leaving the couples she helped bring together, but ten years was a long time to spend in one place. The longest she'd ever stayed, in fact. But knowing that Mike would now be well cared for, she was ready. There were more lonely people out there, and if she could keep helping them one by one... Well, it was the least she could do.

"The weather channel says it's near sixty degrees," Mike said as he settled in his seat at the table. "And sunny. Should be a great day for a walk into town."

Christy set a plate in front of him. "Omelet, twelve o'clock. Bacon at six. Coffee at one. Are you sure you're up for it?" she asked, her tone indicating she wasn't very excited about the prospect of a walk.

Chailali hadn't popped back in on them until they left Mike's bedroom, and she had a feeling she'd missed something important. Why wouldn't Christy want to go for a walk with him? If Chailali could touch a man, hold his hand, she'd want to go everywhere with him.

"I'm up for it," he said, his voice heavy with underlying meaning, which made Chailali grin. If they'd done all night what they'd started when she'd left them alone the night before...

Christy took another plate from the counter and sat down across from him. "But your leg. I don't want you overdoing it and winding up in pain."

Mike's smile was tender and patient. "My leg will be fine. I work out several times a week, if you hadn't noticed. It's as strong as it'll ever be."

Christy's shoulders drooped, and she cut into her eggs with the edge of her fork. "I don't know..."

Mike reached across the table and held his hand out to Christy. She laid her palm against his. "Why don't we just walk into town, and if you aren't ready to go in the store, that's fine. We'll take it as slow as you need. But I'll be there with you. This isn't going to be easy for me, either. I haven't stepped foot in town since..."

"I thought you said you went to the doctor and stuff," Christy said as she squeezed his hand.

He shook his head. "I go into Coos Bay. I hire a driver."

"Oh. I didn't... Are you sure you want to do this?"

Mike rubbed his thumb over Christy's knuckles, and Chailali wished she could feel a touch so tender.

"I'm sure, honey." He gave a soft, endearing smile. "We can lean on each other."

"Okay," Christy whispered. "We'll go after we eat." She pulled her hand away and lifted her fork. "But I'm not making any promises."

Mike winked his one eye, which made Christy laugh. "No problem. No promises."

Chailali floated over to the window near the table. She loved these two people so much, and she was so glad they'd found each other. "I'm glad you finally talked," she said softly. "Didn't I tell you it was all a misunderstanding?"

Christy dropped her fork and turned her head in Chailali's direction.

"What's the matter?" Mike asked.

“Uh...” Christy turned back to her food and picked up her utensil from the edge of the plate. “Nothing. Dropped my fork.”

“He can’t hear me,” Chailali said. “I’ve been here for years, and he’s never once heard me. I have to make his electronics talk in order to get his attention.”

Christy made a shooing motion in her direction, which made Chailali laugh. “I think your sister’s husband heard me when they were here but, like you, he thought I was just in his head.”

“You are in my head,” Christy said under her breath.

“What?” Mike asked, looking toward Christy.

“Nothing. Talking to myself,” Christy said with a fake, forced smile.

“Oh, I am in your head, but only because you can’t see me,” Chailali said as she crossed her ankles and leaned back against the window. “But believe me, I’m real.”

Christy shook her head.

“Why are you fidgeting so much?” Mike asked. “Your chair is squeaking,” he added when Christy just looked at him.

“Uh... Nervous about going into town. Sorry.” She cast another glance toward the window and mouthed a very clear, though silent, “Leave me alone.”

Chailali laughed. “Watching the two of you is so much fun. My goodness, when you kissed last night, I thought the house would go up in flames it was so hot.”

Christy’s eyes widened.

“Oh, I left when it was obvious the argument was over. Don’t worry. I’m not into voyeurism to that extent. But your arguments are so heated, and then when you came together...” She sighed. “It was more arousing than the love scenes Mike writes.”

Christy leaned forward and covered her face with her hand. “Mike?”

“Hm?” he asked as he lifted his cup.

“Do you ever...hear strange things in this house?”

He sipped his coffee and raised his eyebrow at her. “Such as...?”

Christy pushed her food around her plate with the fork.

“I told you he can’t hear me.”

“Voices,” Christy said.

“What? Is my computer acting up again? Sometimes it starts playing back my book when I’m not even in the room. I’ll turn it off before we go.”

“No,” Christy said slowly. “Other voices. Well, one voice in particular.”

Mike cleared his throat and lifted a piece of bacon from the plate. “Are you hearing voices, honey?”

Chailali laughed. “He won’t understand, because he can’t hear me. Don’t make him think you’re crazy.”

“I think I am crazy,” Christy mumbled. “Never mind,” she said louder to Mike. “Just an overactive imagination, I guess.”

Mike frowned in Christy’s direction for a moment. “Are you sure you’re okay? Do you...should we

call...someone?"

The phone rang, making Christy jump. She stared at the telephone on the opposite wall, but didn't move to answer it.

"I didn't do that," Chailali said. "It's not me this time."

"Christy?" Mike said. "Are you going to get it?"

"What?" She turned back to look at him. "Oh. Right. Sure." She jumped up from the chair and caught the phone on the fourth ring. "Hello? Oh, hi, Beth. Nice of you to return my call." Her tone was filled with sarcasm, and Mike turned toward her, but Christy had her back to him.

Mike sighed after Christy began speaking into the phone, and turned back to his food.

Chailali was more than pleased to see that the hard lines that normally bracketed his mouth and fanned out from his eye were softened this morning. The only word for the look she saw on his face was contentment.

With a smile, she decided to leave them alone for a while. Maybe she'd stay around the house a little bit longer, though. Just to make sure these two didn't find some reason not to be together, as new couples seemed wont to do.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You're making me feel like a blind guy."

"What are you talking about? You *are* blind."

Mike grinned at Christy's disgruntled tone. "Yeah, but gripping your elbow is making me feel like it." She'd been silent and stiff, edgy, since they left the house nearly ten minutes ago, and he wanted to loosen her up or for sure she'd have a panic once they got into town.

Walking down the steep hill was hell on his leg, but he was glad she'd agreed to go. Even if she didn't make it into the store, he thought this little trip was a big accomplishment for her. He was proud of her.

"So, exactly how am I supposed to guide you if you don't hold my arm?"

She'd stopped walking and now faced him. He still held her arm, and he used it to pull her next to him so he could wrap his arm around her waist and snuggle her against his side. "There," he said. "That's better, don't you think?"

Christy sighed and laid her head against his shoulder for a moment as they started walking again. He kissed the top of her head and breathed in her sweet, spicy scent. It was her shampoo, he'd found out when they showered together that morning. She said it was green apple and chamomile. He didn't really care what made her smell so delicious, he just knew the scent was forever burned into his memory. Just as Christy herself was.

"What did you do before the...uh...accident?" she asked, her words soft. She wrapped her arm around his back, her fingers teasing his side.

The air was crisp and fresh from the days of rain. A light breeze ruffled the leaves overhead, sending a strange, almost disorientating play of light and shadow through his limited vision.

He sighed in contentment. A warm fall day that smelled of fresh sea air, and a soft, gentle woman at his side. "I wrote."

“But I thought Beth said you hadn’t published until you found her.”

“True. But I’d been a writer since I was a kid.”

“The starving artist type?”

He chuckled. “Naw. Caryn was the breadwinner in the family.”

“Tell me about her? How’d you meet? What did she do for a living?”

He didn’t speak much of his wife, and it felt odd doing so now with his new lover. But he figured the conversation would keep Christy’s mind off her worries about this foray into town, so he’d talk. He’d loved—still loved—Caryn. But after ten years, the pain of her loss had eased. Until Christy came into his life, he hadn’t realized the ache of loneliness had been nearly overwhelming.

“We met by accident one afternoon in the library. We were both attending U of O at Portland. She was in pre-med, and I was majoring in English and Economics.”

“Economics?”

Mike grinned at Christy’s stunned tone. “Yep. By order of my father, who was paying for my education. He knew I wanted to be a writer, but he wanted me to do something I could fall back on in case I sucked at it.” He chuckled. “So, my choice was writing or accounting.”

“Couldn’t you have been an English teacher?”

He cleared his throat, stifling a laugh. “Have you not noticed my oh-so wonderful sense of patience? Can you see me as a teacher?”

She chuckled and gave his waist a bit of a squeeze. “Point taken.”

“Caryn did her residency in Portland, and I worked odd jobs to help pay the bills after we both graduated, but I wrote every free moment I had. After she finished, she got a job in the clinic here in Moonlight Cove, we got married, and we moved here.” He shrugged. “Dad footed us the down payment on the house because Caryn fell in love with it at first glance.”

What more was there to tell? They’d had a good marriage, for as long as it lasted. Until the night he put her behind the wheel instead of forking over the seventy bucks for a room in Coos Bay.

“Are you still close with your parents?” Christy asked.

“Dad died of a heart condition a few years ago. Mom went less than a year later. I think she died of a broken heart.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she whispered and gave him another squeeze.

Mike had never been comfortable with condolences. He lifted his cane on their next step. “Dad got this for me the year before he died. He and Mom went to Alaska for a month, something he’d always wanted to do.”

“I noticed before how pretty it was, and how heavy,” she said. “What kind of wood is it?”

“Diamond willow. I guess it’s pretty common up there. Dad said they make a lot of canes and such out of it. The handle is made from Caribou antler.” Gripping the handle of the cane, he realized he tried not to think of his parents much. It hurt. The loss of them was still too fresh. When he missed them, he sat and caressed the smooth, yet textured wood of his cane. The knots and indents that formed the *diamonds* reminded him of his rough life. But just like the tree that grew this wood, he’d survive.

Well, that was a stupid thought. The tree had been chopped down and turned into a cane. He chuckled.

“What’s funny?” Christy asked.

He shook his head. “It’s amazing what we tell ourselves just to survive, isn’t it?”

She nodded her head against his shoulder, gripped his waist hard, and stopped walking. “We’re here.”

## Chapter Nine

Christy's insides twisted, and her heart sped up to triple time. Her breaths grew shallow, and she got a little lightheaded. She couldn't do this. Couldn't go in there. Why had she thought she could?

Mike's arms came around her, and she turned into his warm embrace.

"Breathe, honey," he whispered in her ear. "Breathe deep. I'm right here. Hang onto me. You're safe."

She nodded her head and tried to take a deep breath, but she almost choked on it. *Concentrate on one thing*, she reminded herself. Mike had told her to pick something to focus on when the panic hit. His smell. His dark, musky scent. She breathed it in and found her pulse settling a bit. His fleece sweatshirt was soft, warm from his body, holding the elemental scent that was Michael.

"That's it," he whispered in her ear, his breath brushing her cheek. "Deep breaths. Nothing to be afraid of. You're safe."

She nodded and loosened her grip on his arm.

"Okay?" His big palm coasted over her shoulder, down her back, while his other arm banded her tight against his hard, muscled chest.

She drew in one more deep breath. "Okay."

She felt his smile against her cheek. "That's my girl."

She liked being *his girl*. Pulling back just the slightest bit, she looked up into his face. As she raised her hand and cupped his scarred cheek, she wondered how someone who'd been through so much pain could be so sweet—once they got past the initial mistrust.

He turned his head and kissed her palm. "I love holding you in my arms."

She grinned and bumped her belly against his growing erection. "I wonder why."

He chuckled. "You're definitely not innocent." Dipping his head, he found her lips with his. "And I love that about you." His tongue thrust once, then twice into her mouth, and she moaned and clung to his shoulders, the world tilting on its axis as the kiss heated her blood and made her nipples tighten, her pussy heat and throb.

She pulled away, panting. "Condoms," she whispered against his shoulder. "We need to get some. Now."

"Agreed. But are you ready?"

She nodded. "Yeah." Her physical needs were starting to outweigh her emotional fear. In order to get the condoms, she had to go inside. She stepped out of the safety of Mike's arms and slid her hand down to lace her fingers through his. "Just stay with me, okay?"

"Of course." He raised her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles. "I'm right here, hon."

She turned around and faced the street in front of Ryan's grocery store. "Oh. It's so pretty."

"What? Describe it to me."

"I forgot Halloween was so close. All the shops have fall leaves in the windows, pumpkins on the sidewalks, and bright baskets of mums in yellow, orange and red. I've never seen anything so...homey."

She hadn't noticed the town much when she drove through with Beth, and now that her brain wasn't

dealing with the stress of entering the store, she realized how picturesque a place it was. The ideal coastal town that most people drove through and never paid any attention to—her included.

The buildings were old with faded cedar siding, the street clean and decorated to look like something out of a Norman Rockwell painting. She could easily picture children, dressed as ghouls and goblins, running along the sidewalk. Right now, though, the street was nearly deserted. Mid-morning on a weekday, off-season. There weren't any tourists around, but she'd bet a place like this got inundated with them in the summer.

"Moonlight Cove has a moonlight dance the weekend before Halloween every year. I guess it's coming up this Saturday." He coasted his thumb over the back of her hand.

Turning to look at him, she saw a bit of longing in his face. Did he want to go to that dance? With her?

"It's a costume party held out at the Baker's farm, in the barn. They string white Christmas lights in the rafters and..." His voice faded away and he turned his head a bit.

"Mike..." She wasn't ready for that. She wasn't sure she could make it inside the store. To be in a building with who knew how many people?

"I know." He gave her a lop-sided smile. "It's just been so long since I had someone to do anything with. Maybe next year."

Her heart clenched. Next year? He was thinking they'd still be... That she'd be here...living with him...? She wanted that more than anything.

She squeezed his hand. "Next year," she said, promising him and herself that she'd overcome her phobias before then.

His smile turned warm and tender. "Next year."

She turned back to the store and saw the bushel baskets of fresh apples out front. Tugging lightly on Mike's hand, she went to them, the strong scent of fresh fruit calming her even more. Then she stooped down and picked up a fat, hard, green apple and lifted it to Mike's nose.

"Mmm." He grinned. "Do you make apple pie?"

"Uh huh. It can make grown men weep, it's so good."

"Make me cry, baby."

She laughed. "I'm going to let go of you for a second and grab a bag to put some in, okay?"

He nodded and released her. She tore a plastic bag from the roll lying in one of the baskets and chose a half-dozen tart Granny Smith apples. Then she laced her fingers through his again. "Okay, Mike." She sucked in a deep breath. "I'm ready. Let's do this."

Mike worried he'd pushed for too much too soon. Not just the trip to the grocery, but saying things about next year. Their relationship was too new and too fragile to start thinking in the long term, but he couldn't imagine letting her go now. Not after he'd held her, tasted her...fallen in love with her.

*Worry about that later.* Right now they had to get through this foray into an area Christy might not be ready for. "Okay, hon," he said as he pulled her closer to his side. "Lead the way."

They took a few steps then stopped again. They were now standing in the shade, and he assumed they were beneath the white and green awning over Ryan's front door. Cane in one hand, Christy in the other, he waited, wondering if she'd have the courage to face her fears and enter.

Christy's hand grew cool and damp within his, and he strained to hear how fast her breathing might

have grown, but she was taking slow, deep breaths. She had her bottle of anxiety pills in her little purse hanging over her shoulder—she'd told him she had them at least—so if worse came to worst, they had a backup. But he prayed she could do this on her own.

Until he'd mentioned the moonlight dance, he hadn't realized how much he wanted to reenter the outside world. With Christy by his side, he knew he could do it. Without her, he may have never left his house. Until she came along, he'd never let himself feel the loneliness—the emptiness—that his life had become.

“Okay,” Christy whispered, and her grip tightened on his hand.

He assumed she was talking to herself and not him.

She moved a bit, and he heard the door open, a small tinkle from the bell over the door. Some things never changed. Being the only grocery store in Moonlight Cove, he and Caryn had shopped here a couple of times a week.

A few more steps, and she stopped again. This time her breathing sped and her grip became almost painful.

“Well, hello, Mike.” Ryan spoke the words from his left.

Mike turned his head and smiled in the direction from which the voice had come. “Ryan.” He pulled Christy against his side, wrapped his arm around her shoulders, and leaned down to whisper in her ear, “Grab the first thing you see, and concentrate on it.”

Her muscles moved in her arm as she reached for something.

She whimpered, and he prepared himself to turn and usher her back through the door. But first...

“What is it?” he asked.

“Bubble gum.”

“What brand?”

“Hubba Bubba.”

He tried to remember what the packages looked like from so long ago when he'd last seen one. “Pink?”

“Uh huh.” Her voice was high and strained.

“Concentrate on the H,” he said. “Stare at it until all you see is that letter. And breathe, honey. Deep breaths.”

“H,” she whispered. “Yellow H on pink package.”

“That's right. Focus on the letter, and let everything else go out of your mind.” When the shrink at the hospital had taught him this technique for blocking pain, he'd used the sprinkler over his bed as his focal point. By the time he left the hospital, he'd felt as if he intimately knew that sprinkler head.

He prayed it would work for Christy. Moving behind her, he wrapped both arms around her waist, giving her his physical support, and wished he knew more about emotional trauma than he did.

“Mike?” Ryan said, and Mike heard him nearing.

He held up one hand, palm out, hoping Ryan would stop. Mike didn't think having anyone approach her right this second would be a good thing.

As the long moments stretched on in the silent store—the only sounds coming from the cold cases, freezers, and the slight hum of the fluorescent lighting—he felt Christy slowly relax as her breathing

evened out.

“That’s my girl,” he whispered. He kissed her hair and smiled. “I’m so proud of you.”

“I’m okay.”

“That’s right. You hold onto that gum, and if anything starts bothering you, you stop and concentrate on the H.”

He felt her nod.

Christy looked up from the pack of gum in her hands, and tears prickled her eyes. She was okay. She’d walked into a building, and she was able to breathe. Her chest didn’t hurt. Between Mike’s warm, tender embrace and the concentration thing he’d taught her, she’d done it.

But even as she thought about her accomplishment, her heartbeat sped, and her breath caught. She looked back down at the gum package in her hand and focused on the H until, blocking everything else out except the single yellow letter and Mike’s arms, his warm breath against her neck, she calmed.

She sucked in another big breath and looked up again. They were facing the gum rack, and it almost made her laugh. “Okay,” she said on a breath. “Okay.” They needed to move, to walk down the aisle and look for what they’d come for, but she was loath to let Mike release her.

She shifted slightly and turned so he was next to her. “Keep your arm around me?” she whispered.

“I’m right here,” he said, his voice low and gentle.

He had the patience of Job right now, and she wondered why he was so willing to go through this with her.

She shifted a bit more to take in the whole store and saw Ryan standing near the front counter. He smiled at her. Her body shook slightly, but she managed a small smile in return. “Sorry,” she said to him. “I have a bit of a...problem...with...um...public places.”

Ryan nodded. “Take your time. It’s good seeing you both out and about.”

She’d met Ryan the two times he’d delivered groceries to the house. He was an older gentleman, probably in his early sixties, with a shock of white hair and a gentle demeanor. She was glad his was the first place they had come to.

Mike shifted a bit and turned toward Ryan. She glanced up at him and found him smiling with what could only be pride. In her. Those tears threatened again. She knew he must be uncomfortable, too, being out in public, but his only concern was for her, not himself. She tried to remember her first reaction to his face, his scars, but right now all she saw was the man she loved with all her heart.

“Is there anything in particular you’re looking for?” Ryan asked.

She held up the bag of apples from outside. “I need some spices for making pie.” Because Mike only had the basics of onion, garlic, salt and pepper in the kitchen cabinets.

Ryan picked up a basket from in front of the cash register and brought it to her, held it out to her, yet kept his distance. A soft, breathy laugh slipped out of her. She wasn’t afraid of him. Walking through the door was what had put her over the edge, not the nice man who owned it.

She took the basket and set the apples inside. “Thank you.”

“Baking supplies are against the far wall.”

Mike cleared his throat, his hand flexing against her side. “We also need some...”

Christy glanced around the store from where they stood near the door, and said, “I think what we need

is on aisle five.”

Ryan’s face broke into a wide grin. It was probably obvious what they needed, since from what she could see, aisle five held the pharmacy type stuff, feminine hygiene products, and...whatnot.

“Take your time,” Ryan said. “Just holler if you need anything.” He stepped back behind the high counter and picked up his newspaper.

She wanted to thank him again for his courtesy. For not making a big deal about her problem, and for giving them space. Now she just had to get up the courage to move deeper into the store and away from the safety of the door.

The shop was small, with only seven aisles. She could see cold cases for frozen foods against one back wall, and the spices were all the way down at the other end on another wall.

“I can do this,” she whispered to herself.

Mike’s reassuring grip on her side encouraged her.

Bins of Halloween candy were on the aisle end caps. Bags of chocolate mostly. “Should we get a couple bags of candy for trick-or-treaters?” she asked.

“Honey. They don’t come to my house.”

She turned and frowned at him. “Why not? There’s other houses near yours. Surely—”

“Christy,” he said, sounding a bit irritated. “I’m the monster that lives on the hill. The only time kids come to my house is to play ding-dong-ditch and dare each other to run up on my porch and ring the bell.”

Christy gasped. “No.”

He nodded. “They think I’m a monster, and that the house is haunted.” With a shrug, he said, “Maybe they think I’m the undead.”

She couldn’t believe that. He wasn’t that...bad. She bit her lip. Well, maybe to a child he was scary looking. And as for the house being haunted... She had her own suspicions about that.

“It’s because you never leave the house. You’re never seen in public. If they saw you as a normal person, maybe—”

Mike chuckled. “Then you better hang around, honey. Because unless I’ve got you to cling to...” He tightened his arm around her. “...I can’t leave the house.”

Her heart twisted. “I’m not going anywhere,” she whispered as she went up on tiptoes and brushed her lips over his.

He laid his palm against her cheek and deepened the kiss just a bit. “I like the sound of that.”

She did, too. Maybe she could return to some normalcy in this little town, with its lack of crime and kind people like Ryan.

“Okay,” Christy said. “Let’s get what we need and go. I’m...” She thrust her tongue into his mouth just once, letting him know exactly what she wanted.

He cleared his throat and whispered, “Is Ryan watching?”

She turned her head and looked over at the storeowner, still perched behind the counter. He raised the newspaper a bit, but not before she saw his grin.

Her face heated with embarrassment. “Yes. And enjoying the show, too, I think.”

Mike chuckled. "Let's get our stuff and go, then, before we make a spectacle of ourselves."

"Too late," Ryan said from the counter, humor lacing his tone.

She groaned, and Mike chuckled—probably the sweetest sound Christy had heard in her life.

\* \* \* \* \*

After a few tense moments when a couple of other patrons entered the store, in which Mike held her and talked her through another round of deep breathing and concentration, they made it to the counter with their purchases.

"Could you add this to next week's bill?" Mike asked Ryan.

"Sure. No problem."

Christy tried not to be embarrassed by the three boxes of condoms in the basket, but it was impossible. This wasn't some big, faceless drugstore in downtown L.A. where she normally bought such items. Moonlight Cove was tiny, and she wondered if Ryan was a gossip.

Even if he wasn't, she was pretty sure those other two ladies that had come in for milk and eggs would be. Once her brain kicked back in after she calmed—the jingle of the bell over the door had set her off that time—she'd heard them whispering about Mike. One had said she hadn't been sure he was even real. The other said she hadn't seen him for years, and wondered why he'd come out in the light of day now. Good thing they hadn't seen what was in their grocery basket or the answer would be all too obvious.

Christy didn't know these people, but Mike probably did. Or had. If his wife had worked in the only clinic in town, everyone must have known her.

Ryan wrote down the items on a notepad then put the items into two plastic bags. "It really is great to see you out and about, Mike. I hope you'll come by more often."

Mike smiled, but she saw the strain on his face. He'd obviously heard the old biddies, too. Her heart cried for him. Maybe if they did make more trips into town, not only the kids would come to accept him, but the other townsfolk would, too.

"We will," she told Ryan. "Thank you."

His smile was warm and congenial. "My pleasure."

Christy picked up the bags and took Mike's hand. He followed her out the door onto the sunny sidewalk. The joy of their small adventure seemed to have deserted him. His shoulders were now slightly slumped, and he kept his head tipped forward, as if trying to hide his face.

"Mike?"

"Hmm?" He didn't turn his head in her direction.

"You can't let stupid old women like that bother you."

He nodded but didn't raise his head.

She stopped walking as they came to the end of the sidewalk. When they crossed the road, they'd be heading back up the hill toward his house. "Listen to me, sweetheart," she said, stepping in front of him and laying her hand over his heart. "If we make more trips to town, they'll get used to you."

“No one should have to get used to this.” He trailed his fingers down his face, over his scars. “They’re right. I shouldn’t show my face in public in the light of day.” He gave a dry, harsh laugh. “And I’d wanted to take you to the—”

Christy fisted her hand in his shirt and gave him a little shove. “Would you stop feeling sorry for yourself? For God’s sake, Mike. You’re acting like a child.”

His fingers wrapped around her wrist, and he shoved her away. “It’s not me I’m worried about,” he all but growled. “Why the fuck would you want to be seen with me? God, you’re gorgeous. You could have any man you wanted. Why me? Why let people talk about you like that?”

She narrowed her eyes. “What the hell are you talking about? They weren’t talking about me. And you’re blind. You don’t know what I look like.”

He scrubbed his hand over his face.

Had they said something about her before she clued into their conversation?

She huffed out a breath. “Even if they were, so what?”

“You don’t get it. No matter where we go, there’s going to be talk. And you shouldn’t have to be put through that.”

“You’re being stupid now. Doesn’t it matter to you that I *want* to be with you? That I went through going into a public place so that we could get...” She shook the plastic bags so they rattled. “Why is it okay for you to stand by me and help me through my hang-ups, but not the other way around?”

“Shh. You’re going to draw attention.”

Christy shut her eyes for a moment and bit her tongue. Standing on a street corner yelling at him wouldn’t solve anything. She blew out a harsh breath then opened her eyes. He was so handsome. She barely noticed his scars anymore. If she could take them away, make him whole, inside and out, she would in a heartbeat. Even if she had to take them upon herself.

“Come here,” she said, grabbing his hand and tugging him up to the outside wall of Ryan’s Grocery. She pushed him back a step, until he leaned against the faded cedar siding. “You want a spectacle? Let’s give them one.” Dropping the bags to the concrete, she wound her arms around Mike’s neck and melted against him, pulling his head down so she could press her lips against his.

## Chapter Ten

He stiffened in response for an instant, but then he wound his arms around her, crushing her against his chest, his tongue delving into her mouth. Inside she smiled as her body heated, and the lust she always felt when he touched her spiked through her.

When she broke the kiss—because she needed oxygen—Mike’s heartbeat thrummed against her hand, and his cock pressed hard against her belly.

“I don’t give a damn what anyone thinks,” she said. “I...” *Love you*, she finished silently. She wasn’t sure he was ready for declarations of love yet. “I want you,” she whispered, nuzzling her lips against his jaw, his ear. “Only you.”

Mike panted in her ear, and she knew he was as hot as she was. When they kissed, it was like spontaneous combustion. He groaned and thrust his hips once, grinding his hard-on against her belly. “I want you, too. *Now*.”

“Only me?” she teased, trying to break the tension.

He nodded then captured her lips again. “Only you.” Leaning his head back against the side of the building, he groaned. “It’s going to take forever to walk home.”

She grinned, knowing it wouldn’t take that long. But it must be rather...uncomfortable...walking around with that thing in his jeans. She giggled, and he pinched her butt, making her gasp.

“You’re a cruel woman.”

“How’s your leg holding up?”

“What leg?”

She laughed. “Come on.” Feeling wicked, she picked up her bags, took his hand, and led him across the street to the public beach access just a block away.

“Where are we going?” He gripped her hand harder, and she made sure when to tell him to step up or down.

As they came to the end of the road to a small parking lot overlooking the beach, she grinned as she looked out at the shore. “Ever have sex on the beach?”

“Uh...”

She laughed again. “It’s deserted, and I think I see... We’re going down a slight incline. There ya go. Now onto the sand.”

He stumbled slightly as his feet sank into the soft sand, but she wrapped her arm around his waist.

“Fifty yards,” she told him as they slowly made their way toward a rock outcropping with a towering boulder on the end, just yards from the foamy fingers of the waves. They were at the edge of town, and she didn’t see any buildings set up against the hill. She scanned the cliff as it rose over them and could see his house at the top, a ways off still. A few other houses dotted the top of the cliff, the ones they’d passed on their way into town, but she knew, if they tucked up against the base of the cliff, no one would ever be able to see them.

“Maybe I’m glad I’m blind, so I can’t see you leading me to my doom.”

“You think sex on the beach is doom?”

He shook his head and wrinkled his brow at her. "No, but a jail cell for public indecency is."

She laughed and hugged him tight. "Trust me."

He stopped walking and grabbed her up against his chest. "I do trust you, Christy. With my life."

Her breath caught at his sincere declaration. "Thank you," she whispered. "You'll never know what that means to me. And...I feel the same." He cared about her more than anyone ever had, she realized. More than any man ever had. She went up on tiptoe and kissed him with just a soft press of lips against lips. "But right this second," she said against his mouth, "I want your body."

Mike laughed and squeezed her tight, his heart soaring. He didn't understand why, after all these years, luck, or Cupid, or blind fate had led Christy to his house, into his heart, but she was there, and he was sure that was where she'd always be for as long as he lived.

As they slowly made their way along the beach, Christy's arm wrapped snug around him for support, he contemplated the incident on the street. When he heard those women whispering from an aisle away, wondering what such a beautiful woman was doing with him, all his fears and insecurities reared up. He knew they were right, and hadn't he asked himself that same question a thousand times since last night?

Had it only been last night? It seemed as though he'd known Christy a lifetime. He couldn't deny his physical attraction to her any more than he could deny that hearing her say she wanted only him had opened his heart the rest of the way to her. He wanted to tell her how much he loved her. How he never wanted her to leave him. But how could he make such a declaration when...when comments such as he'd heard those women make in the store rang so loud in his memory?

He didn't know why she chose to see past his scars. He found it hard to believe that eventually, if they did make more trips into town, if he reentered the daily life of Moonlight Cove with Christy by his side, that the comments wouldn't get to her. How could they not when they tore him apart?

"Turn," Christy said, steering him to the left, which was away from the water. The sand grew softer and more difficult for him to trudge through.

"Almost there."

"Where is 'there'?"

She laughed, and the happy sound softened his troubled thoughts. "Right here."

Taking his hand in hers, she pressed his palm against a boulder, the cold, rough texture unmistakable, and he thought he had an idea where they were. A small, almost hidden stretch of beach behind a short jetty of rocks stretching from the cliff face.

"No one can see us here," she said, leaning into him. "And the rocks block the wind, so it's nice and warm." She nibbled on his neck, which made him grow hard in less than a heartbeat.

He grinned and speared his fingers through her hair. "You are a naughty, naughty girl," he said as he brushed his lips over hers.

She nodded. "I know." A giggle slipped out of her, the curve of her smile against his lips.

He laid one hand against the boulder and turned her until she pressed back against it, his body aligning with hers as he ate at her lips, nibbling and suckling. She tasted of everything good. Pure. *His*.

His breath hitched, and he buried his face against her shoulder. Could this be real? Could she be for real? Or was she just a dream? A figment of his imagination because he'd been alone so long?

Christy fumbled with his buttons until they popped open in quick succession, and then her cool, soft

hand reached into his briefs and freed his cock.

He groaned and pressed himself into her palm. This was too real to be all in his head. Christy was real, as was his love for her. “Yess,” he hissed as she stroked him from tip to base then fingered his testicles. “Can you sit on the ground?” Christy said between quick, shallow breaths as she nipped at his neck. “I don’t want sand up my ass.”

He burst out laughing and wrapped his arms around her. Her humor warmed him almost as much as the pleasure her touches and kisses did. He loved that she stood up to him and knew her own mind, and he wondered how difficult her anxiety condition must be on her—to so completely lose control.

“Give me your hand,” he said, pulling away, realizing he didn’t mind her seeing his weaknesses, either. He’d never let anyone, including his parents, know about his discomfort or inability to do something. “Help me down.”

Going down on his good knee and keeping the other leg straight out in front of him, he was able to roll onto his ass and bring his other leg out from beneath him. “Getting up will be the hard part,” he informed her with a grin. “Now get down here, woman, and make love to me.”

“I’m taking off my pants. Hold on.”

And that he did. He wrapped his hand around his dick and slowly pumped, keeping himself hard while he waited for her to join him. He leaned on his elbow and tipped his head back, reveling in the cool breeze flowing over him, the warm sun on his face, the knowledge that within moments, he’d be inside Christy for the first time.

“Don’t you dare come yet,” she said as she straddled his legs.

He chuckled and reached for her, finding her arms first. She still wore her sweatshirt, so he grazed his hands up underneath it and pushed her bra up, freeing her soft, lush breasts to his hands. “I’m not coming until I get inside you. After that, I make no promises.”

Her nipples tightened against his palms, and she moaned, leaning into his touch.

“What color are your eyes?” he asked. He’d formed a picture of her in his mind. He knew her body, each luscious curve and hallow. Her face was slightly rounded, and she had a stubborn little chin and full, juicy lips... But the fine details were still a mystery he wanted to know. He wanted to *see* her. Her silhouette blocked out the sun, but all he could see was a shadow of her.

“Hazel,” she said on a moan. “More green than brown.”

Her fingers wrapped around his cock again, and his hips jerked, pressing him into her palm. And then she was rolling on a condom, and he had to bite his tongue to keep from groaning as his body tensed. He worried he wouldn’t last long once he got inside her, so he reached between their bodies, tangling his fingers in her crinkly pubic hair.

She whimpered, and her grip tightened around him.

As he rubbed his thumb against her hardened clit, he slipped two fingers deep into her silky heat, finding her hot, slick, and ready to take him. A shudder ran through his body, and he lay back in the cool sand. “Take me in, honey. I need you.”

When she went up on her knees, he withdrew his fingers and gripped her hips. Her skin was cool to the touch, smooth as the rose petals he’d compared her to just that morning. And then she was lowering over him, sinking down so slow it was torture.

Fingers biting into her soft, smooth flesh, he thrust up and buried himself. His balls tightened as she

cried out and fell forward, her hands landing against his chest. She panted, and her inner muscles contracted around him.

“Oh, my God,” she whispered. “You feel better than—”

He thrust again, feeling her hot, sweet wetness against his testicles. She moaned, and her fingers tightened in his shirt.

*Too close. Too close.* He gritted his teeth and squeezed his eye shut. No fucking way was he going to come before she did. No way.

“Ride me,” he said, clenching his jaw.

“I can’t... I’m going to...”

Instead of flipping her over and pounding into her as he wanted, he thrust up into her, deep and hard, and reached between them again. Fingering her clit, he kept up the hard pace, holding his breath, praying he could last.

“Mike... Oh... *Oh... Ohh!*”

Her inner muscles clenched around him, milking him. He grabbed her hips once again and thrust two more times, as much as he could take. A shout ripped from his lungs as stars exploded in his mind, and he came so hard he thought he’d died.

Christy collapsed over him, her puffed breaths hot against his neck, her tight warmth still pulsing around his cock. He wrapped his arms around her and buried his face in her hair. Good thing he was lying down, he thought as he went lightheaded.

“That was so worth the trip to the store,” Christy said. “Good thing we got so many condoms.”

He chuckled and swept his hand down her back, then up under her shirt so he could feel her skin. Goose bumps popped out against his palms. “Oh? Why’s that?”

“‘Cuz once we get back, I don’t think I’m ever letting you out of bed again.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“I’m hungry,” Christy said as she straightened Mike’s shirt for him then went up on her toes to kiss his lips. He tasted so good, and part of her wanted to stay right here with him all day. But her stomach was telling her it was lunchtime.

“We have apples,” he said with a teasing smile as he stroked his fingers along her jaw line, making her tingle. The man had the most magical hands of anyone she’d ever met. Just a touch set her blood to zinging.

She made sure Mike was steady on his feet then knocked sand from her shoes before slipping them on. “The apples are for pie.” And what she really wanted was to spend more time with Mike in town. To get him better accustomed to being in public. If only she could push her own problems aside for the day.

“We better get home then,” Mike said as he held out his arm for her.

She picked up her purse and put the long strap over one shoulder. “Actually...” She grabbed the grocery bags then tucked herself against Mike’s side and wound her arm around his waist. “There’s a place in town I saw that had an outdoor deck. Just down and across the street from Ryan’s. Do you think they’d

serve us lunch out there, even though it's October?"

"Hank's?" he asked. "He's Ryan's brother—Hank is. The pub has been around for over twenty years. Caryn and I used to eat there quite a lot. I'm sure he'd be willing to let us sit on the patio, but...are you sure you're ready for that?"

If she could be outside, rather than in the restaurant, she'd most likely be okay. Especially if they were the only idiots sitting outside at this time of the year. The weather was beautiful, though. And in town, blocked by the big pine trees and buildings, there was less wind blowing through off the ocean.

"Could we try?" she asked, wondering if his reluctance had more to do with him than her problems. "I mean..."

"I don't have any money on me. I didn't expect to stop anywhere but Ryan's, and he just sends the bills to my accountant."

"I have cash."

As they made their way back up the beach to the parking lot, Mike was silent. Maybe she was pushing him too hard too soon. He might need more time to acclimate to reentering society. She wanted to tell him she'd protect him from women like those in the store earlier. And she needed him to know, to really believe, that she didn't give a damn what anyone said about him or her or them as a couple. After being so isolated for the past year and a half, after finding him and the love for him that grew every second inside her, she wanted him to know she'd stand by him no matter what.

With him by her side, talking her through the steps that calmed her, she thought she'd like nothing better than to sit down and have a meal prepared by someone else for a change. A meal she could share with Mike.

"We're stepping up onto the pavement now." She let him feel his way with his cane and guided him up onto the incline that led to the parking lot.

"All right," he said as they passed the first buildings on the way back into town. "If you want to go to Hank's, we can." He didn't sound as if he really wanted to.

She laid her head against his shoulder as they slowly walked down the sidewalk, passing pretty little touristy-type shops, a veterinary clinic, and the tiniest post office she'd ever seen. What a wonderful place to raise children.

The thought hit so hard she felt as if she'd been slapped. She nearly stumbled, and her breath caught.

*Children?* Why was she thinking about children? Three years ago, when she turned thirty-two and had no serious prospects for love, marriage or any of that kind of stuff, she'd firmly told herself she wouldn't think about it anymore. Obviously the chance to have kids had passed her by. Any hope that had been lingering died when Peter walked out on her after the robbery.

"What's wrong?" Mike asked, coasting his hand up and down her arm. "You tensed. Have you changed your mind?"

She shook her head. "No. No, I was thinking about something else. Sorry."

An old pickup drove past on the street, and the passenger, a middle-aged woman, turned her head to stare at them. Christy would just have to get used to things like that happening. Being from L.A., and being a very common-looking woman, she'd never elicited stares before, and it was a bit discomfiting. She wondered just how many people knew Mike—or had known him and Caryn before...

"What were you thinking about?"

If she asked him if there were good elementary schools in the area, he'd probably freak out. "We're here," she said instead. She knew she'd have to go through the restaurant to get to the deck. There wasn't any way to get up on it from the outside unless she crawled over the hand rail—now that might attract a bit of unwanted attention.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Mike asked, concern lacing his voice.

"Uh huh." She could see through the window there were only a few patrons, a half-dozen at most. The pub was small and cozy looking. From the front door to the door of the patio was only a few feet, with the front counter and cash register just inside to the right.

"Honey. I can't remember how it's set up, but I think we have to go inside to get to the patio."

"I know." She sucked in a deep breath and reached into her pocket to withdraw the pack of bubblegum. "I have my focal point, and I have you. I'll be fine."

"Okay then," Mike said and gave her hand a reassuring squeeze when she laced her fingers through his.

She took a few steps forward then instructed him on the four steps going up to the door. When they stood on the wooden porch, she did her deep breathing and forced the muscles in her neck and shoulders to relax. As soon as she thought she had herself under control, she reached for the ornate knob and turned it.

The sound of an old Willy Nelson song floated to her from a jukebox in the far corner. The pub was quaint with scuffed hardwood floors and booths lining one wall. A smattering of tables took up most of the floor. The bar itself looked like something out of an old west movie, with brass rail, mirror behind it, and all.

"Michael Hanson? Well, I'll be goddamned!"

Christy turned with a start at the boisterous voice to see a white-haired man coming toward them from the direction of the bar. Her heartbeat sped, and she gripped Mike's hand as her only anchor.

The man came toward them, and she steadied herself. He looked just like Ryan, only a bit younger. He must be Hank.

"Ryan called and told me you were in town, but I didn't believe him." Hank slapped Mike on the shoulder in greeting, a huge grin splitting his face. "Good to see you, man."

"Hello, Hank. If you don't mind, could we sit out on the patio?"

Hank turned his gaze on her then, but his grin never wavered. "Of course, of course. You go right on out. Can I get you anything to drink?"

"Water," Christy said, her throat parched. She tugged Mike's hand as she headed for the safety of outside. As soon as she crossed the threshold, she sucked in a deep gulp of air and realized she'd been holding her breath.

Not so bad, she told herself. Better than the store. A little better anyway.

"You okay, hon?"

She nodded then realized Mike couldn't see it. "Yeah." A small smile of triumph flitted over her lips. "I'm okay. He seems nice." She led him to a table made out of a giant cable spool. The chairs were metal and thickly padded. Once Mike was situated and hooked his cane over the back of his chair, she set down the grocery bags and pulled her purse from her shoulder. Then she moved her own chair close to his and sat down, immediately reaching for his hand.

"Hank and Ryan are both great guys," he said, skimming his thumb over the back of her hand, making

her shiver with pleasure. She loved his touch, and it soothed her like nothing ever had. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Uh huh. I’m fine.” She smiled at his concern then leaned over and kissed his cheek. “It was easier than the grocery. Maybe I’m...getting better.”

He smiled at her then released her hand to wrap his arm around her shoulder and pull her close for a moment. “I’m so proud of you,” he whispered.

The door opened, making her jump a bit, but Mike smoothed his hand down her arm as he held her close.

“So, Ryan tells me you’re Mike’s new housekeeper,” Hank said as he set two tall glasses of ice water on the table, then laid down two menus.

“She’s much more than that,” Mike answered before she could open her mouth to agree. He grinned in Hank’s direction.

She picked up her water and gulped some down.

Hank chuckled. “I can see that. Anything that gets you out of the house and back into the Cove, I’m all for it. Pretty little thing you got yourself, too.”

Christy’s face heated at his comment, and she ducked her head to hide the blush she was sure turned her face bright red.

“Hank, meet Christy Smythe, my agent’s sister. Christy, this is Hank Robins, Ryan’s brother.”

When Hank held out his hand to her, she shook it. “Nice to meet you,” she murmured.

“Pleasure is definitely all mine, sweetheart. So, do you need a few minutes to decide?”

“Ah, no,” Mike said, even as she reached for the menu. “You still have those big ‘ol burgers?”

“You know it.”

“Okay. Two with everything, and a cherry malt with two straws.”

Christy grinned. Seeing Mike comfortable, and around someone who was obviously a friend, was heartwarming. “That sounds good.”

Hank winked and picked up the menus. “Good enough. It’ll be out in a few minutes.”

When Hank had gone back inside, Christy poked him in the ribs. “What gives you the right to order for me?”

Mike chuckled. “There’s only three things on the menu, love. Burgers, fish and chips, and booze.”

“Maybe I wanted fish and chips.” She tried to sound put out, but her tone was more petulant and teasing than anything—which they were.

Mike ran his hand over her shoulder then tangled his fingers in her hair, pulling her close so he could kiss her. “Next time,” he whispered before he caught her lips in a sizzling kiss that curled her toes and made her blood zing through her veins.

She moaned and clutched at his shoulder, wishing the arms of the chairs didn’t separate them.

Mike pulled away and tipped his head back as he sucked in a deep breath. “Damn.”

“What?” she asked, concerned he was hurting. The look of agony straining his features was unmistakable.

“How long’s it been? A half hour?” He tilted his head, his forehead bumping lightly against hers. “I need you again.”

She glanced down at his crotch to see his erection straining against his jeans. A breathy laugh slipped out, and she smoothed her hand down his chest before pulling his sweatshirt down a bit to cover the evidence of his arousal.

Mike chuckled. “What you do to me, honey...”

She laid her head on his shoulder. “The same you do to me.”

“We need to change the subject.”

She laughed. “Okay. What do ya want to talk about? The weather? It’s nice, isn’t it?”

“Smartypants.” He tugged on a lock of her hair then kissed her forehead. “I want to know more about you.”

“Like what? You already know everything.” Everything important, anyway, she thought with a frown.

“How did a girl from L.A. get to a fancy east coast culinary school? And then how did she wind up managing a sandwich shop back in L.A.?”

She shook her head and laughed. “Beth tell you that?”

He shrugged and smiled. “Maybe.”

“Well, for your information, it wasn’t a sandwich shop—she makes it sound like I worked at Subway or something. Bistro Italiano is a little, upscale, Italian restaurant that yes, specializes in sandwiches, but also has the best pasta anywhere in L.A.”

Christy sighed and turned slightly so she could look out over the street. A little bit of traffic was picking up here and there, but it was still mostly quiet. The fall decorations, along with the crisp, cool air, made her smile. It was almost—though not quite as festive—as the little towns on the eastern seaboard in the fall.

“I always enjoyed cooking,” she said, picking up where the conversation had left off. “By the time I was fourteen, I’d pretty much shooed Mom right out of the kitchen and taken over. I took a couple cooking classes at the junior college my senior year in high school, and it was there that I got a chance to participate in a nationwide contest. The winner got a full-ride scholarship to a New York culinary school of their choice.” She shrugged and grinned. “I won.”

“Pretty impressive. What did you make that won?”

“Apple pie.” She tipped her head and looked into his face to see his wide grin.

“I’m very much looking forward to that pie.”

She laughed. “I spent three years in New York, and then came back to the west coast. I’d been offered a job working under Wolfgang Puck after I graduated, but I just couldn’t stay out there. I missed Beth and Mom too much.”

“Where did you work once you were back out here?”

“Here and there. It took me a long time to find my niche. I landed a job in an upscale pastry shop, and was there for about five years. But the owner sold the business, and I didn’t care for the new guy, so I left. That’s when I was hired at Bistro Italiano. I was there until...”

She didn’t want to talk about it, and she definitely didn’t want to think about it. “I moved up from chef to head chef, but it was after the owner fell ill and I stepped in to cover his responsibilities for a couple

of months, that he offered me the position as manager—since he didn't have one before that. I still got to play in the kitchen on occasion, and the pay was good. I was happy there.”

Mike gently feathered his fingers through her hair as she fell silent. She'd really liked that job, and she missed it. She missed the life she'd built for herself. Her condo she'd had to sell to support herself after she moved in with Beth and Roger. The people she'd called friends for years.

Mike's voice was low and gentle when he asked, “Do you think you could be happy in a small town like this once you get your...problems...under control?”

Like this one? Or *this* one? With him?

Only with him.

She turned her head and brushed her lips against his jaw. She wanted so badly to tell him how she felt, and with a lead in like the one he'd just given her...

Opening her mouth, she was cut off when the door opened and Hank came out carrying two plates piled with French fries and a humongous burger in one hand and a tall milkshake in the other.

“Here you go,” he said as he set everything on the table in front of them.

Christy sat up straight and smiled at Hank. It was probably best she hadn't said what she wanted to. It was way too soon to open up so fully to Mike. She might have been out of the dating loop for a heck of a long time, but she wasn't stupid. A woman dumb enough to admit strong feelings to a man one day after first having sex with him? Well, he was likely to run as fast as he could.

“Thank you, Hank,” Mike said as he sat up straight. “It smells wonderful. Been too long since I had one of these.”

“You just holler if you need anything else,” Hank said, pulling bottles of condiments from his bar apron and setting them on the table.

Christy watched Mike as he felt the edge of his plate then grabbed a French fry and stuck it in his mouth.

“Mmm. Thanks, Hank. We will.”

Hank smiled at Christy then turned to go back inside.

Christy picked the top bun off the burger and squirted ketchup and mustard on it. She'd keep her feelings to herself for a while. This relationship was too important to do anything to put it in jeopardy. She'd wait until he revealed more of himself, of his feelings. Then maybe she'd find the courage.

## Chapter Eleven

“Mmm. This is good,” Christy said.

Mike nodded in agreement and chewed a healthy bite of his juicy burger. Once he swallowed, he said, “Gourmet.”

Christy chuckled, a sound he’d grown to love. “Yes. It is about the best burger I’ve ever had.”

Trying to push back the disappointment that weighed down on him because she hadn’t responded to his question about her living in a small town, he forced a grin and reached for the shake. He hadn’t had a milkshake since before the crash, and the sweet, fruity flavor made him sigh.

He held the icy glass out to her. “Try this, hon.”

She took the shake from his hand, and then she moaned. “Oh. Man. That’s so good.”

He went back to his French fries. Why would he think they had a future? They’d known each other only a couple of weeks, *been* together for less than twenty-four hours. But the thought of her not in his life—of her going back to L.A. and never returning—ripped his gut out.

He wanted to tuck her away and never let her leave his house. Hold her hostage. Tie her to his bed so she couldn’t get away.

What did Moonlight Cove have to offer her, though? She would get past her anxiety eventually—he didn’t doubt that—but then what? She was a chef and restaurant manager. Only one restaurant existed in the Cove, and they were sitting on its patio now. Hank might need a cook at some point—Mike had no idea if the town was any busier now than it had been ten years ago—but grilling burgers and dipping fish wasn’t much of a challenge for a woman trained at an exclusive culinary school.

“What are you thinking?” Christy asked. “You’re awfully quiet all of a sudden.”

He lifted his burger between his hands. “Just enjoying the meal,” he said then took a bite.

No way could he tell her his thoughts. He wasn’t some needy sap. He’d been alone for a decade—had decided he’d be that way the rest of his life until Christy came along.

“Ohh,” she said on a sigh, almost the same way she had when she’d been coming as he thrust inside her tight, slick body.

Mike’s cock twitched, more than ready for another round of sex with her.

“I wonder if Hank would give up his recipe for this malt.”

Mike chuckled. “He makes the ice cream himself using fresh Baker’s Dairy milk. The cherries are handpicked by his wife every year. No secret.”

“And where does the beef come from for these burgers? I know fresh meat, and this is about as fresh as it gets.”

“From a ranch down by Coos Bay. He—”

A loud sound pierced the air, and Christy screamed.

Mike’s heart shot up to his throat at the same time he heard a thud against the wooden floorboards of the patio.

“Christy?” He dropped his burger and reached for her, but she wasn’t in her chair.

He heard a scuttling sound moving away from him against the floorboards.

“Christy? Honey...”

With the cars driving by on the street, he couldn’t hear her, though he strained for some sound.

A car motor turned over a few times, as if it was having problems, and then the loud bang echoed through the buildings again.

Christy screamed again; she was off to his left. The backfire of a car, he realized. *Shit.*

Pushing his chair back, he grabbed his cane and headed in the direction from which her terror-filled scream had come. “Christy, honey.” He bumped into the outside wall of the pub and then felt his way along. “Christy.”

Then he heard her. Heavy breathing, whimpers, sobs. *Fuck.* He went down on his hands and knees and moved closer to her. When he was close enough that he bumped her denim-clad leg with his hand, she shrieked and kicked out, catching him in the center of his chest.

He fell back against the wall with a thud and tried to catch his breath, even as Christy’s tortured sobs ripped at his soul. “Christy, honey,” he gasped as he moved back toward her.

“No,” she shouted when he touched her, but he blocked her thrashing leg this time and sprawled over them so she couldn’t disable him.

“It’s me, Christy. Mike. You’re safe.” Turning, he wrapped his arms around her upper body, pinning her arms against her sides. “Don’t fight me, babe. Don’t fight,” he begged, trying to keep his voice low.

Holy shit, what was he supposed to do now?

Christy’s pants were harsh and wheezy, as if she were having an asthma attack. Her heartbeat thudded in a wild tattoo against her chest. “Come on, honey. Come back to me. You know you’re safe with me. It was just a car. Just a car.”

The door crashed open, making her yelp.

“What the hell is going on out here?”

Big, beefy hands closed around Mike’s upper arms, ripping him away from Christy. She screamed again.

“Get her purse,” Mike shouted as he twisted out of Hank’s grasp and sank back to his knees. “Get her purse. *Now*, for Christ’s sake.”

Hank released him and, a second later, he returned and stuffed Christy’s purse into his hands. Mike found a zipper, jerked it open, then reached inside. It was full of...women shit.

He held it out toward Hank’s silhouette. “There’s a bottle of pills in here somewhere. She needs them.”

He heard the rattle of pills.

“How many?” Hank asked.

“Two.” God, he knew she hated them, but...

Hank pressed the pills into his palm, and he turned toward Christy. “Honey. Listen. I have your pills.” He edged closer to her and thankfully, this time when he touched her, she didn’t lash out, but she did whimper as if still terrified.

“Take these, baby. Please. Take them.” He lifted them to her mouth, and she opened for him. After he placed them on her tongue, he felt a cold glass press against his hand. Hank had brought it.

Mike took the glass, held it to Christy’s lips, and heard her gulp. “That’s it, honey. That’s it.”

She burst out in noisy sobs and launched herself into his arms, knocking the glass from his hand and nearly strangling him. Her body shook with a violence he couldn't comprehend, her heartbeat so hard against him he thought it would burst from her chest.

He smoothed his hand down her back and whispered soft shushing sounds in her ear. "You're okay. Just a damn car backfiring."

"Do you need something?" Hank asked.

"Yeah," Mike said. "Can you give us a lift home?" No way would Christy make it up the road. If the pills went to work as they had last time, she'd be out cold in a matter of minutes.

"I'll call Sheryl to bring the truck."

Hank only lived a couple of blocks away, so he walked to work—or at least that was the way it had been a decade ago.

"Thank you." Mike turned his face into Christy's hair and rocked her like a child. He doubted he'd ever felt quite so impotent as he did at this moment. He'd forced her into this trip to town, and now look at her. He'd probably set her recovery back exponentially. And what could he do? He was useless to her.

*Fuck.* He was such a loser.

\* \* \* \* \*

Chailali heard the front door open, and she glided down the hallway from her window seat in Mike's office—her favorite place to sit and watch the ocean far below. When she saw the strange man carrying Christy, the woman's body limp, fear spiked through her.

"Bedroom on the left," Mike said, coming in behind the man.

Chailali watched the man gently place Christy on Mike's bed. "Is she going to be all right?" he asked as he stared down at Christy's wilted body splayed on the bed.

Mike limped into the room, dropped some plastic bags and Christy's little purse on the floor, then sat down on the bed next to her. "I think so." He swiped his hand down his face and gave a weary sigh. "God, I hope so."

The big, white-haired man laid a hand on Mike's shoulder. "If you need anything, you just call me or Ryan, okay?"

Mike nodded. "Thanks, Hank. Thanks for...everything."

The man named Hank patted Mike's shoulder before moving toward the door. "I mean it. If there's anything we can do..."

Mike nodded again. "I don't know what can help her. I thought..." He trailed off with a shake of his head.

"Do *you* need anything?" Hank asked.

"No. I'm fine. Thanks."

"I'll let myself out then."

Chailali moved around the other side of the bed and sat down next to Christy. Her breathing was deep and heavy, as if she were asleep. But this wasn't a normal slumber. Something bad had happened, and

Chailali worried it had been another panic.

Mike sat opposite her, running his hands over his cane, his head bowed and shoulders hunched.

“Oh, no,” Chailali whispered. This wasn’t good. Mike had that look about him. Depression and sadness. She’d seen him in this state many times over the years. He blamed himself for something. He was hurting, and she’d bet guilt was eating away at him. Chailali looked back at Christy. Guilt over whatever happened to his newfound love.

“No. No, you’re not going to do this, Mike,” she said. “You’re not going to blame yourself for whatever happened. You can’t. Christy needs you. You need her. You *need* her!”

Of course, he didn’t respond to her plea. He couldn’t hear her. Only Christy could. She turned back to Christy. “Come on, wake up.” What she wouldn’t give for a corporeal body so she could shake the woman. “Christy!”

Christy moaned and rolled to her side toward Mike. Mike jerked around as if he thought he could see Christy, but of course, he couldn’t. He carefully propped his cane against the nightstand then reached out for Christy, touching her shoulder, then her side. He ran his hand down her leg to her ankle, slipped off one of her shoes then the other. A bit of sand fell onto the bed, and that’s when Chailali realized there was no sheet on it.

Frowning, she wondered why the sheet was missing, but then Mike stretched out next to Christy and wound his arms around her, pulling her limp body against his chest. He gently palmed the hair away from her face then kissed her forehead.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, his voice hoarse.

What had he done?

And then Chailali’s heart broke when Mike shut his eye and a single tear slipped down his cheek.

“I’m so sorry.”

Chailali wanted to shout at him to tell her what happened. She should have followed them into town. She shouldn’t have thought...

As much as she tried to help the living find their happiness, sometimes it was impossible. She’d been so sure when Christy came into the house that she was the one to end Mike’s self-imposed exile. To make him smile again the way he had before his wife died. He’d once been such a wonderfully happy, carefree man.

Because of the warmth and love in this house, she’d stayed around to observe. She wanted to find ways—things—that would help other couples become as content as Mike and Caryn had been. But then it all ended one rainy night.

Mike had opened old wounds so deeply buried inside him, and Christy had held him, helped heal him. Chailali been so sure everything would be all right.

But now...

Seeing Mike’s pain ripped something inside her soul. He apologized to Christy—for what she couldn’t fathom. But she suspected—no, she *knew*—that whatever had happened while they were away from the house, Mike blamed himself. This time, she wondered if he’d be able to move past whatever guilt he piled upon himself.

“Christy,” she said. “Wake up and talk to him. Please. I’m begging you.”

Christy didn’t make a sound, not a single move.

Mike's hand coasted over Christy's back, her side, her arm. He kissed her forehead again. And then, to Chailali's utter dismay, he moved away, pulled the blanket up over her, picked up his cane, then limped from the room.

"Christy!" she shouted.

But even Christy couldn't hear her now.

\* \* \* \* \*

The room was dark, the house silent, when Christy awoke. Her tongue had the consistency of cotton, and her head throbbed behind her right eye. She groaned and stretched, then rolled to the side to look at the clock.

10:06. But the digital readout was red, and the one in her bedroom was green. She rolled onto her back and stared up. There were no posts on the bed. She was in Mike's room, she realized finally, the thought coming through her fogged brain.

For a long moment, she couldn't remember how she'd gotten there. The last thing she remembered was eating a burger.

And then the memory hit, and she covered her face with her hands and groaned.

But still, how had she gotten in this bed? She remembered hearing the gunshot. And then...what? She had a vague recollection of Mike giving her pills and holding her, but how had they gotten home? Surely Mike couldn't have carried her. Hell, he probably wouldn't have been able to find his way back to the house alone. And with his leg...

She rolled to the side of the bed and slowly sat up. The movement made her head worse, but she needed to find Mike, to make sure he was okay. She stumbled to the door and turned the knob.

*Oh, good. You're awake.*

Christy groaned. "Leave me alone." The last thing she needed right now was the voice yakking at her.

*Mike's in the exercise room. You really must speak with him. What happened while you were away? Why is he blaming himself?*

Christy leaned her forehead against the doorjamb. The voice was not in her head. She couldn't pretend any longer that it was. Great, a haunted house. Hadn't she thought this place was the perfect setting for a horror movie when she arrived?

"Who are you?"

*I am Chailali. Daughter of the Chief Dai' Co Shu of the Melukitz Tribe. Thank you for asking.*

Christy made a face and pressed her fingers against her closed eyelids, praying the throbbing would end soon. "You're the daughter of a chief of a tribe of Indians?"

*Yes. I am. Or was. I've been dead for over two hundred years.*

"Right." She'd completely lost it now. Not only was she imagining a voice that may or may not be a ghost, but that voice had a whole family history. Pushing away from the doorframe, she glanced across the hall into Mike's office, but it was empty. All the lights toward the living room and kitchen were off, so she headed for the stairs to see if he actually was in the weight room. And if he was, what did that mean about the chief's daughter?

“Mike?” she called as she reached the second floor landing. She was not about to entertain the idea that this Chail person was real. She’d rather have voices in her head than ghosts wandering around the house.

She heard the sound of the weights being set on the floor as she headed down the hall. “I’m here,” Mike said.

Thank God. She rounded the corner into the room and went to him where he sat on the weight bench. Wrapping her arms around his bare shoulders, she buried her face in his hair and breathed in his dark, soothing scent. His skin was warm, slightly damp from his workout. She’d never felt anything better.

“What happened today? I can’t remember anything after I heard the gunshot. Was anyone hurt? Who was doing the shooting?”

Mike splayed his hands on her hips and gently nudged her away from him. “They weren’t gunshots. It was a car backfiring in the parking lot across the street.”

*Oh.* She sank down on the bench next to him. *A car backfiring.* She groaned and covered her face. “God, I’m such an idiot.”

“No. You’re not. You were scared. And I should have never forced you to go into town.”

When she lowered her hands and looked at him, he was gripping a towel between his hands, twisting it so hard his knuckles turned white, his face turned away from her.

“You didn’t force me to go to town,” she said slowly, her stomach churning with what could probably be called fear. She didn’t like the way he was acting. Not at all.

“Yes, I did.” He turned toward her, and the lines around his down-turned mouth, around his eyes, seemed etched deeper than she’d ever seen them. “I forced you to go, and for what? To get some goddamn rubbers so I could have sex with you?”

“You didn’t cause my anxiety attack. The noise did. Why are you blaming yourself?” The ghost’s words came back to her then, and she caught her breath. That woman had known he was blaming himself. She’d warned Christy.

“Because if I hadn’t been so insistent, you wouldn’t have been there, and none of this would have happened.” He stood up and gripped the bench press bar as he moved away from her. “Because I couldn’t keep my dick in my pants, I sent you into another anxiety attack.”

Christy opened her mouth, but no sound came out. His anger—at himself—was palpable. It rolled off him in waves.

“Are you saying that...it wasn’t worth it?” That her having an anxiety attack put him off? How bad had it been? What had she done?

He lifted his hand and scrubbed it down his face, and that’s when she saw the bruise on his chest. Oh, no. What had she done to him? She stood up and went to him, caught his hand, and pulled it away so she could examine the purple mark over his breastbone.

Jerking his hand from her grasp, he turned around, giving her his back. “You and I are a mistake. A tragedy waiting to happen.” His voice was so low, so cold, tears prickled her eyes. “I’m not throwing you out, but we can’t be...together.”

Christy gritted her teeth against the physical pain his rejection caused her heart.

She’d been right from the beginning. He was too good to be true. Mike wasn’t any different than the man she’d been seeing before the robbery. He couldn’t handle her problems, and when things got too

*real*, he discarded her.

Anger pierced through her pain, and she fisted her hands. “I can’t believe...” She swallowed. “After last night...” The tears sprang free, scalding a path down her cheeks. He’d said he’d be there for her. Wanted to help her. Next year they were going to the Halloween dance in the barn.

There would be no next year.

“Fuck you,” she said through her tear-tightened throat.

*No! Christy! Don’t let him push you away! That’s what he wants. He wants you to walk away, and you can’t let him do that!*

“Shut up,” Christy screamed. “God damn it, *leave me alone!*”

Mike turned at Christy’s shriek, but he heard her footsteps running down the hall then pounding up the stairs to the third floor. The slamming of the door to her room made him flinch.

He moved back to the weight bench and sank down onto it. Everything would work out better for Christy if she was mad at him. She might not believe it now, but he’d only hurt her if they stayed together. How foolish he’d been to insist his breathing and concentration techniques could help her. Anxiety was nothing like physical pain, and they’d not always worked for him, either.

She needed someone who knew what they were doing. Someone who could take care of her properly. He couldn’t even find her pills in her purse. What would have happened—how long would she have stayed in her state of terror—if Hank hadn’t been there? What if they’d been out for a walk alone, in the middle of nowhere, and a car drove by and backfired?

How would he have taken care of her? Gotten her home?

He’d thought about it all day, and he couldn’t think of one damn way that he’d be any good to her outside this house. And what kind of life could she lead if she was kept sheltered here? Hidden, the way he had been for a decade.

She would have none. Tomorrow morning he’d call Beth and tell her everything that had happened. Christy needed some good, professional help to work through her problems—or at the very least medication that wouldn’t knock her out cold. How could she live this way?

He wouldn’t allow it. He wouldn’t kick her out, but he’d try to convince Beth to come get her, to take her back to L.A. and find her a real therapist who could work with her, not some pill pusher. If Christy didn’t have the money, he’d pay for it. He owed her that much for what she’d given him.

He wasn’t sure how he’d survive not having her around, but at least he had those few precious hours with her to remember. Remember her... Maybe it would be better to forget what he was missing. Going back to his hermithood would be near impossible now. Especially after he’d held her in his arms and fallen in love with her. Knew now what warmth and sweetness could be like when given freely. Had opened his soul and let her in.

\* \* \* \* \*

Chailali followed Christy upstairs and floated through the door after she slammed it. Christy flung herself on her bed, sobbing as if her world had ended.

“Stop that now,” Chailali said, firming her resolve and not letting herself feel sorry for the woman.

“Get out of my room, whoever the hell you are.” Christy threw a pillow in her direction. It swished through her and hit the door.

“I don’t have a body, so throwing things at me won’t help any. You need to go back there and talk to Michael. He’s not thinking right.”

Christy swiped at her eyes. “I’m not going to throw myself at someone who doesn’t want me. It’s not like he’s the first guy to lead me on and then dump me when things got difficult.”

Chailali grunted. “He’s not dumping you. He’s running away from his fears again. Why do you think he’s hidden away in this house for so long? He’s afraid of rejection, and now he’s afraid of hurting you.”

A sound of disgust came out of Christy as she rolled over and pulled the remaining pillow over her head.

Chailali moved around the bed so Christy faced her. What she wouldn’t give to have a body, to have hands in order to rip that pillow off her head and shake some sense into her. “He is blaming himself for whatever happened to you in town today.”

Christy rolled over the other way.

“I’m not going anywhere, and I’ll stand here and talk at you all night.”

“It won’t do any good, because you’re not real!”

“I am real. I’m a ghost—or a spirit—or whatever you want to call me. I committed suicide in 1778. I’ve been wandering around this area—which was once the land of my father—ever since then. Where I was born and grew up. But because I killed myself and cursed my lover, I’m stuck here. *Believe* me, I’m real.”

Finally, Christy rolled over again and faced her, her brow drawn into a fierce frown. “Why can’t Mike hear you then?”

“Because very few people are open enough to the spirit world to do so. But you can.”

“You’re a figment of my very overactive, messed up imagination.”

“You don’t believe that.”

Christy sighed.

Chailali perched on the bed beside her. “I know that believing I’m here, that you’re not imagining me, must be difficult. Some people over the years have tried to exorcize me from their homes, some refuse to acknowledge me. Some have left their houses, never to return, because they fear me. But I’m not dangerous, and I only want to help you and Michael.”

Shaking her head, her brow drawn into a fierce frown, Christy asked, “Why?”

“I love him,” Chailali admitted for the first time even to herself. She’d loved Michael since the first day she saw him and Caryn together. They’d just returned from a day at the beach. They were sunburned and laughing, teasing each other. He’d carried Caryn to their bedroom—this very room—and he’d rubbed lotion all over her body. When Caryn fell asleep, he’d kissed her shoulder as if she were the most precious woman he’d ever known. She’d seen in Mike the kind of love she’d once dreamed of possessing.

Instead, she’d done the unthinkable by ending her life, cursing herself and her lover—a man who *didn’t* love her—to an eternity of pain and loneliness. She’d come to learn over the centuries that one did not possess that kind of love. It must be freely given, and it was tenuous at best. Too easily lost—or

stolen, as in Mike's case—by a tragic accident.

"If you love him, why do you want me with him? I'd think you'd be jealous and try to keep me away. Isn't that what ghosts are supposed to do?"

"Because I want him to find happiness. I am a ghost. He doesn't know—or at least he doesn't acknowledge—that I exist. But you're a real, whole woman, and you love him. You can be the one to put the light back inside of him. I know you can. I saw it this morning. He fairly shone with his love for you.

"Go to him and don't let him self destruct again. I don't think his soul can take it."

Christy shook her head. "He doesn't love me. If he loved me, he wouldn't push me away. He said he'd be there for me, but when I needed comfort, he turned away. Besides, I don't think I can blame him if I put that mark on his chest, which I'm fairly sure I did. I think I remember kicking him."

"He thinks he's not worthy of you. Why can't you see that? You need to convince him otherwise. Show him how much you love him."

"Nu-uh. No. I'm not throwing myself at him. He said it was over. It's over. That's that." She sighed and rolled onto her back, throwing her arm over her eyes. "Thank God I never told him how I felt. If he's running now, imagine what he would have done if I told him I had fantasies of having his children and living here in this beautiful little town."

"He does love you!" Chailali wanted to hit something. Throw something. She shoved her hand into the alarm clock until it set to beeping.

Christy grabbed the clock and ripped the cord from the wall. "Go. Away."

Chailali headed for the door. She had no idea what she could do to get these two stubborn people together. Part of her wanted to give up, but she couldn't. They needed each other. Why couldn't they see it?

## Chapter Twelve

“How dare you call my sister!” Christy stomped into Mike’s office, fury coursing through her so hard she wanted to pound him over the head. “You said I wasn’t fired. Damn it, why’d you call and...and...*tattle* on me?”

Afternoon sun streamed through the window and over Mike, making him look good enough to eat. His dark hair shining, his broad shoulders so tempting. She growled and shoved her hands in her pockets to keep from wrapping her arms around him or punching him—she wasn’t sure which action would come out first if she gave herself the chance.

Mike slowly turned his office chair to face her. “I thought it best, honey.”

“Don’t you call me honey,” she spat.

“And you’re not fired. But you have to agree that you can’t get the help you need here. Beth sees that now.”

“For the love of... You know what she told me? She said that you think I need to see another shrink. Since when do you get to make a decision like that? This is *my* life.”

“A life you’re not living being cooped up inside a house because you’re too afraid to leave.”

Christy snorted. “And you’re so different?”

He compressed his lips and folded his arms over his chest. “I have a career that I can do well enough right here.” He flicked a hand toward the computer then refolded his arms. “I don’t need to leave the house. But what about you? Are you going to clean my house for the rest of your life?”

“If that’s what I want to do, then yes. Beth is the one who dumped me here in the first place. How come all of a sudden because the Mighty Michael Horton tells her something she’s willing to listen? I told her for over a year that I wasn’t faking my anxiety attacks, and I wasn’t going to just get over them because she demanded it.”

“She never thought you were faking them.”

Christy shut her eyes and tipped her head forward. Pain and anger warred within her for top priority. He hadn’t spoken to her since last night in the weight room, and now he was banishing her.

“Honey...”

“Don’t call me that,” she growled between gritted teeth. She felt like the redheaded stepchild. No one wanted her. Not her sister, not even Mike.

She turned away, but stopped at the door. “I really thought you were different. I thought...we had something special.” She turned back, and the look of hurt splashed across his face nearly brought her to her knees. But she wouldn’t take it back. He was the one throwing her out.

When he made no verbal response, though, she had her answer. Whatever he’d felt for her didn’t transcend the fact he couldn’t deal with her problems. He wasn’t willing to give them a fair shot.

Gripping the doorframe, she bit her lip to keep from crying. She’d cried herself to sleep last night, and then done more before she got the nerve to come in here after she’d talked to Beth. Enough tears. She hadn’t known Mike long enough to feel this much pain over his betrayal of her heart.

“Beth will be here the afternoon of the first—that’s just two days away. I’ll be leaving then.” She couldn’t keep the words inside, even though she knew that saying them might well kill her. “I would

have gladly stayed in this house with you forever.” She turned and left the room.

Mike tipped his head back and fisted his hands. God, it hurt. He’d never felt such pain. It was worse than a dozen crushed bones. Worse than losing Caryn. Worse than anything he’d ever experienced in his life. Letting Christy go was like giving away his own soul.

She would have gladly stayed with him forever.

He thought of getting up and going after her, begging for forgiveness and asking her to stay.

But he couldn’t. She needed...something more than he could ever give her. She needed professional help. She needed to gain control over her life again. If he kept her from accomplishing that by letting her hide away here, he might as well put bars around her and hold her prisoner. He couldn’t do that to her. He loved her too much.

Maybe someday she’d return, but he doubted it. Hearing the pain and anger in her voice, he knew he’d killed whatever had been developing between them.

Turning back to his computer, he told himself it was for the best. He had nothing to offer her. Nothing but himself, and he wasn’t even a whole man.

He raised his hands and set his fingers on the keys, trying to remember where he’d been before Christy had come in.

*Moron.*

He jumped, jerking his hands back, when his computer spoke. His heart sped up. He hadn’t typed that word. Not ever in this book.

*Idiot.*

A prickle went up his spine.

*Need her.*

“Christy?” he called.

*Love her.*

His heart thrummed against his ribcage as he pushed his chair back from the desk. He searched the room, looking for any shadow that would tell him that Christy was there playing a trick on him, but he saw nothing besides the outline of his desk and the monitor sitting atop it.

Chailali collapsed onto the window seat, her energy sapped. So many things she wanted to say to Mike, but she couldn’t do it. She’d never tried communicating with him this way, and it took too much from her to make his computer say what she wanted.

“Christy?” he called again, a twinge of fear in his voice.

She didn’t want to scare him, but she couldn’t allow him to let Christy leave, either. When he’d called Christy’s sister that morning, she’d tried then to get his attention with the computer, but only garbled noise had come out, and he’d shut it off.

“Don’t let her go,” Chailali pleaded.

Mike scooted his chair back to the computer and reached for the power switch, but he stopped. He typed something then hit the button to make it vocalize what he’d just written.

*I do love her. That’s why I have to let her go.*

\* \* \* \* \*

"If you want dinner, you better come get it," Christy called down the hall from the doorway to the kitchen.

Her last night with Mike. The anger inside her had managed to squash out the hurt, and now she just wanted to be away. She was ready to go. They'd barely spoken ten words since the other afternoon. He'd literally locked himself in his office after she confronted him, only coming out for his meals. It was worse than the first week she'd been there.

He wanted nothing to do with her, had even told her she didn't need to make his suppers any longer. The crowning blow to her heart had been the check lying on the kitchen counter that morning written out to her. Parker Sholand, Mike's accountant, had come by yesterday to do the month-end bills. All Mike had to do was sign the checks. Apparently she was a month-end cost.

She'd never discussed pay with him, but now she assumed Beth had dealt with it, and well overcharged him. The check was close to what she'd once made at Bistro Italiano.

It was what the accountant had put in the subject line, though, that nearly ripped her heart out. *Housekeeping*. That's all she'd been. The housekeeper. If that panic attack the other night had never happened... If she hadn't seen him masturbating in front of the computer... If she'd kept her hands to herself and not urged him to open up to her...

Well, she should have kept her business to herself. She'd never had a relationship in a workplace. Why would here be any different? How'd she let herself *fall in love* with her employer?

Besides, he was a crotchety old bear. What was there to love about him anyway?

Mike came into the kitchen and headed straight to the table without saying a word. His limp seemed more pronounced since the trip to town, and she wondered if he'd strained his leg.

Rolling her eyes, she turned to the oven and pulled out the casserole dish. *I do not love him. I do not love him. I don't care about his leg, his limp, or anything else about him. I'm leaving tomorrow. End of discussion.*

Maybe if she told herself that enough, she might start believing it. Someday.

She dished up the food onto his plate, poured him a mug of coffee, and took it to him. "Salisbury steak at ten, mashed potatoes at three, and buttered carrots at seven. Coffee at twelve."

"Thank you," he muttered as he picked up his fork.

The pain returned along with the anger. She went to the counter, grabbed the apple pie she'd made that afternoon, and plopped it down in the center table. "Your apple pie."

He stilled, his fork halfway to his mouth, but he didn't tip his head to look up at her. Was this it? This was the last conversation they'd have? If one could even call it a conversation.

"Thank you," he said again, and Christy had to suppress the urge to turn the pie over his head.

This was it. This was all there was. Her chin trembled as she bit back the tears. How could he be so cold, so distant, when all she wanted was to feel his arms around her again?

*Say something to him.*

Chailali had been pressuring her to talk to him since she chewed him out for calling Beth.

Chailali, the ghostly figment of her imagination. She wasn't real. Christy had invented her to explain

her strange behavior—her urges—to be with Mike.

“I guess I’ll go finish packing.”

Mike gave one curt nod as he cut into his steak, his heart breaking again...and again. He wanted to reach out to her, pull her into his arms. The words to ask her to stay were too close to the tip of his tongue. If he opened his mouth to say *anything*, they’d come out.

The sadness in Christy’s voice echoed his heart’s pain.

When he heard her leave the kitchen, he set down his utensils and dropped his head into his hands. Tomorrow couldn’t come soon enough. The faster she got out of his house, the better off they’d both be. In time, she’d forget about her short stay with him, and he’d be able to get back to his life as it had been for so many years.

Yeah, he had to keep telling himself that. They’d both be better off away from each other. She needed to go back to the city where she belonged. He needed to concentrate on his book. He hadn’t written a word worth printing in days.

What was the point anymore, though?

He got up from the table, his appetite gone. Christy held his heart and soul. The emptiness inside him was complete. He’d thought he’d lost everything before, but apparently there was still a part of him that wanted to go on. As he made his way down the hall to his room, he wasn’t sure even that remained without her.

\* \* \* \* \*

I can’t believe you’re going to leave him.

Christy ignored that annoying voice echoing her own thoughts and folded another T-shirt to put in her suitcase.

Can’t you see how much he’s hurting?

As if she wasn’t hurting? She picked up another shirt from the stack on the bed.

If you leave, he’s going to curl in on himself and probably won’t ever come out again. Do you know how big of a deal it was for him to open up to you the other night? To tell you everything about himself?

As much of a big deal as it had been for her to open herself to him. But that didn’t seem to matter now. He’d shut her out. Wouldn’t even speak to her other than to say thank you for the meals she prepared.

Are you listening to me, Christy? How can you do this to him?

“He’s the one doing it to me,” she all but shouted, then closed her eyes and bit her tongue because she’d promised herself not to speak to the voice ever again.

The voice growled, and Christy frowned as she laid another folded shirt in the bag.

Why are the living so difficult? Do you know that I’d give anything I ever had to have a man like Mike? He’s loving and gentle, and so sweet—

Christy snorted. She’d thought he was sweet, too, until their trip to town. Now he was just like every other man she’d ever known. For better or worse didn’t seem to be in their vocabulary. She had too many things to deal with in her own life. She wasn’t about to try and talk a man who didn’t want her

into letting her stay with him.

Finished with all of her clothes, she zipped the suitcase and hefted it in her hand. She might as well take it down now. She could stuff her dirty clothes in the corner of it in the morning.

As she turned the corner on the second floor landing and headed down the last stretch of steps, she heard Mike's voice.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"Shut up. Tell me where the money is."

Christy silently set her bag down on the top step and crept down the stairs, wincing when the old stairs creaked under her weight.

"There's no money in the house," Mike said. "I swear it. There's silver in the cabinet over there. Take anything you want."

Christy's heart lodged in her throat, and she stopped moving.

*Put the money in the bag,* the robber at the bank had said.

"Don't fucking lie to me, asshole! You're stinking rich. Where do you stash the cash?"

Christy! Christy. He's got a gun!

A gun. He's got a gun. She sank down onto the stairs and covered her head as her breathing grew shallow and her chest pained.

Don't just sit there!

"There's no money. I swear my life on it. I don't keep cash in the house. Take anything you want. The silver. There's some antiques in the hutch, too. Take anything you want."

Something crashed to the floor—glass shattering. Christy bit her cheek to keep from crying out.

The lights in the house went out with a loud pop that made Christy gasp.

"What the fu—"

The sound of a gunshot echoed through the house, and Christy screamed.

*He shot Mike!* Chailali shouted.

Heavy footsteps came down the hall, and then rough hands grabbed her by the front of her shirt, dragging her down the hall.

"What do you think you're doing hiding? Fucking bitch. The house is supposed to be empty."

He shoved her, and she fell to the floor, landing on top of... "Mike," she cried.

He groaned and pushed at her. When she put her hand on the floor to lever away from him, her palm slipped in sticky, warm...*blood*.

"Tell me where the money is, bitch, or you get it, too."

The scream built inside her. She felt it coming. She couldn't breathe, she couldn't see a thing because it was pitch black, all she could feel was Mike's sticky blood on her hand as he lay beneath her.

"Where's the money?"

And then, low and soft in her ear, she heard the voice of the woman who'd been her companion for weeks. If you don't stop this man, he'll kill you both. There's nothing I can do. There's nothing Mike

can do. Don't panic, and stop him.

"How?" she whispered, her throat so tight with the need to scream, she wasn't sure how she choked out the one word.

Something cold and hard jabbed her in the side of the head as she stared down into Mike's face, barely discernable in the dark. The barrel of the burglar's gun. He was going to shoot her.

"Goddamnit, lady. Tell me where the money is or you're *dead*!"

She didn't move a muscle, but suddenly she felt Mike's cane bump her fingers, the rubber tip pressing against her fingernails. Her entire body shook with terror, but she knew what she had to do.

"Help me," she mouthed, praying Chailali was truly real and not a figment of her imagination.

"Answer me!" The cold steel of the handgun hit the side of her head in a glancing blow.

She rolled to the side, taking the cane with her, and swung it as hard as she could in the direction of their assailant.

The gunshot nearly deafened her. She kept rolling, up onto her knees, and swung again. This time it contacted flesh and bone with a thud that reverberated up her arms. The burglar shouted, and another shot rang out, the white muzzle blast blinding in the dark.

"I can't see him!" she cried.

The lights flared on, and she lunged to her feet, swinging the cane like a bat at the masked man's head. He raised the gun toward her. The lights went out. The cane glanced off the wall, knocking her aim askew. Another blinding shot. Pain seared through her left arm. Raising the cane over her head, she brought it down with all her might and a scream torn from the depths of her soul.

*Thud.* The assailant hit the floor. The clatter of the burglar's handgun on the hardwood.

Silence.

The lights came on, and she blinked into the brightness. The man covered in black from head to toe lay at her feet. She stepped to the side and picked up his handgun, then nudged him with the handle of the cane. He didn't move. Black mask. Black jacket. Just like the bank robber.

A hot tear leaked down her cheek. "Fucker," she said between harsh breaths as she gripped his gun.

Mike groaned.

Training the gun on the man, she swiveled around to see Mike trying to sit up. Blood poured from the wound on his side. "Don't move, Mike. Don't move!"

He flopped back to the floor with another groan.

She pulled the cord of the light on the end table and jerked it out of the wall, then out of the lamp base. The light went out, but others remained on. She flipped the masked man onto his stomach and wrapped the cord around his wrists behind his back, knotting it several times.

Then she fell to her knees at Mike's side. His flesh was torn through on his side. She prayed no organs were hit. Tears coursed down her cheeks as she jerked off her sweatshirt and pressed it to his side. "I have to get the phone," she sobbed. "I have to call for help."

Mike laid his hand over hers. "Go. I'm okay."

She pushed to her feet, picked up the handgun, ran into the kitchen, and grabbed the phone off the wall, pressing 9-1-1 as she sprinted back into the hallway.

The operator answered as she landed hard on her knees next to Mike again. He'd passed out, his hand slipping off the balled-up sweatshirt.

"I need an ambulance and the police at 854 Pinewood Street," she sobbed as she pressed on the wound. "He's been shot."

*Calm down, Christy. Everything will be okay now.*

She nodded at the disembodied voice.

The operator asked her questions, but she wasn't sure if she answered. Tears poured from her eyes, blinding her.

"Come on, Mike. Don't you dare die. Don't you dare!"

*He'll be okay. He'll be okay. You saved him.*

*You saved both of you.*

## Chapter Thirteen

A cool hand touched Mike's fevered cheek.

Wake up, Michael. You have to wake up now. Christy's worried about you.

Mike tried to nod in agreement, but he hurt too much. Everything ached. His head, his back, especially his side. Pain radiated through him with each beat of his heart.

*Wake up, Mike. It's time for you to wake up.*

"I'm awake," he whispered through his dry throat.

*That's it. You can hear me now, can't you?*

He puckered his brow. Who was talking to him? It wasn't Christy. The voice was too low, slightly accented. But it was a woman.

"Christy," he croaked.

A soft laugh. *No. I'm not Christy. She's getting a drink with her sister. She'll be back in just a moment.*

"Where am I? Who are you?" He opened his eye and gasped at what he saw.

*Don't be frightened. That cool hand slid over his brow, down his unscarred cheek. I'm Chailali, and I've been watching over you for years. But it's time for me to go now.*

Her long, black hair flowed over her shoulders in beaded braids. Her skin was dark, her features pronounced. The clothing she wore was made of soft, tanned leather, and the beads in her hair and on the fringes of her outfit tinkled when she moved her arm.

Don't let her go, Michael. You need each other. Christy is your chance to live again. To love again.

His heart rate sped. The monitors beeped loud in the silent room, and he realized the woman's lips weren't moving, though he heard her.

Shh. Calm down or the nurses will come. Don't be frightened.

He swallowed the lump in his throat as his brain reached for some explanation.

Another figure—that of an old Indian in a great feathered headdress—appeared in his line of vision. It is time, Chailali. You've done all you can for this man. He must make his own decisions now. And it is time for you to come home.

"Wait," Mike croaked when she began to move away.

The door opened, and he jerked his head in that direction. His heart nearly stopped as he saw Christy enter the room. She looked just as he knew she would.

Look at her, Michael, the Indian woman whispered. I wish I could let you see forever, but you only have this one moment. Look at the woman you love. Don't let her go.

"Christy," he whispered.

She stopped so suddenly the woman behind her bumped into her. "Mike. You're awake." She rushed to the bed, set something on the nightstand, then leaned over him, touching his cheeks, running her thumb over his lips. "Thank God. Oh, thank you, God."

A tear dripped from his eye. She was the most gorgeous thing he'd ever seen.

"Mike? Sweetheart. Talk to me." She looked him right in the eye. In just that moment, he memorized

her features, her bright, beautiful hazel eyes—more green than brown. Her chestnut hair, long and wavy. Her creamy skin.

Slowly the vision of the woman he loved fuzzed, then faded to just a silhouette.

Tell her you love her, Michael. And tell her goodbye for me. You two will always be my favorite couple.

“Mike?” Christy said again, and he felt her lips against his forehead. “Mike, say something. Please. They said your head was fine, but can’t you speak?”

A slow smile spread over his lips as another tear leaked from his eye. He swallowed hard. “I love you, honey.”

A sob tore from Christy’s throat, and she brought her mouth down to his, kissing him with such tenderness his heart nearly exploded with the love he felt for her.

“I was so scared. So scared. I thought I’d lost you.”

“I love you,” he said again, this time stronger as he raised his hand and speared his fingers through her silky hair.

“I love you, Mike,” she whispered against his lips.

“Stay with me. I need you.”

She buried her face against his neck, and he felt her warm tears against his flesh. “Yes. With you is right where I need to be.”

\* \* \* \* \*

*Four weeks later.*

Shelton laid his fingers against Ellen’s neck and found her heartbeat strong and steady. “That’s it, my love. Stay with me. You’re going to be fine.”

In the distance, sirens blared, and he knew help was on its way.

Ellen’s eyes fluttered open, and their clear blue depths captured him as they always had. “Shel—”

“Shh. You’re going to be okay now. Everything’s going to be okay.”

He scooped her into his arms and carried her from the warehouse. The forensic team would have a heyday with all the gore left inside, but he and the love of his life were alive. They’d survived the worst the world had to offer and come out on top. As long as they had each other, nothing else mattered.

“I love you,” Ellen whispered as she relaxed against his shoulder.

“I love you, too, baby. I always will.”

Mike typed *The End* and hit the Save key. He smiled, which turned into a grin. His first happy ending. He wondered how his fans would take it.

“Christy, honey!” he called as he grabbed his cane and levered himself from his office chair.

“Yeah?” he heard from down the hall.

"I smell food, is it done yet?"

"Would you come out and spend some time with our guests? Jeez, they've been here since yesterday, and you've barely said ten words to them." Her voice grew louder as he ambled down the hall toward the kitchen.

He heard Roger chuckle, then Beth said, "He knows I'm not leaving until I get that book."

He stepped into the kitchen. "I just finished it. Where are you, hon?"

Christy wrapped her arms around him, and he lowered his head for a kiss.

"Mmm, you taste like cinnamon."

"Dinner's ready," she said, her voice low and soft, so beautiful. "And I made my apple pie for desert."

"Yum," he said against her soft, juicy lips. His love grew for her every moment, with every touch, every gentle word she spoke. Looking back, he couldn't imagine that he'd ever wanted her to leave him.

They'd exchanged vows the night before. They were spending Thanksgiving—the first day of their honeymoon—with the in-laws, and he'd never been happier. They'd take a real honeymoon next year, after they were one-hundred percent sure Christy's anxiety attacks were truly gone.

He raised his hand and cupped her cheek as he brushed his lips over hers. Her tongue snuck out and teased his lips, making him smile. She hadn't had an episode since she knocked the burglar clean out and saved his life—in turn taking her own life back under her control.

"I love you," he whispered, wishing he had words that better expressed everything he felt for her. She was his everything.

Frannie, Beth's daughter, made a gagging sound.

"These two are mushy enough to make even me sick," Beth said, teasing in her tone.

Roger chuckled. "I remember when we were like that. Gotta give them a few years until the honeymoon stage wears off."

"Ugh," Frannie said. "Can we eat, pahh-leeze?"

Mike chuckled and hugged Christy hard. "Let's feed the hoard," he whispered in her ear. "And then I'm taking you to bed, guests be damned."

"Sounds good to me, husband." She squeezed him, and he knew he was finally right where he was meant to be.

\* \* \* \* \*

Chailali sighed and smiled as she opened her eyes, pulling herself away from Mike and Christy. She'd known they were meant to be together, and now they knew it, too.

"You've done well, daughter. I am proud of you," Chief Dai' Co Shu said as he laid a gentle hand on her shoulder.

She turned into her father's comforting embrace and breathed in the smoky scent of fire-cured leather that always clung to him. The spirit world was more spectacular than she'd ever imagined. Her family was here. Everyone she'd been separated from for so long. Turning her head, she looked out over the

lush green valley and the ocean in the distance. *Home*.

She'd made amends for her crimes against life and love and had been allowed to join her tribe.

"Be happy," she whispered to Christy and Mike as her father led her toward their village.

### **The End**

### **Author Bio**

Anna Leigh has been reading and penning romances for as long as she can remember. After she met and married her very own real-life hero, romance took on a whole new meaning. She now knows married life can sizzle and romance can be erotic - even in her own home. Now her writing has taken on a spicier flavor, and while hubby's off at work, she lets her imagination soar...

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

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