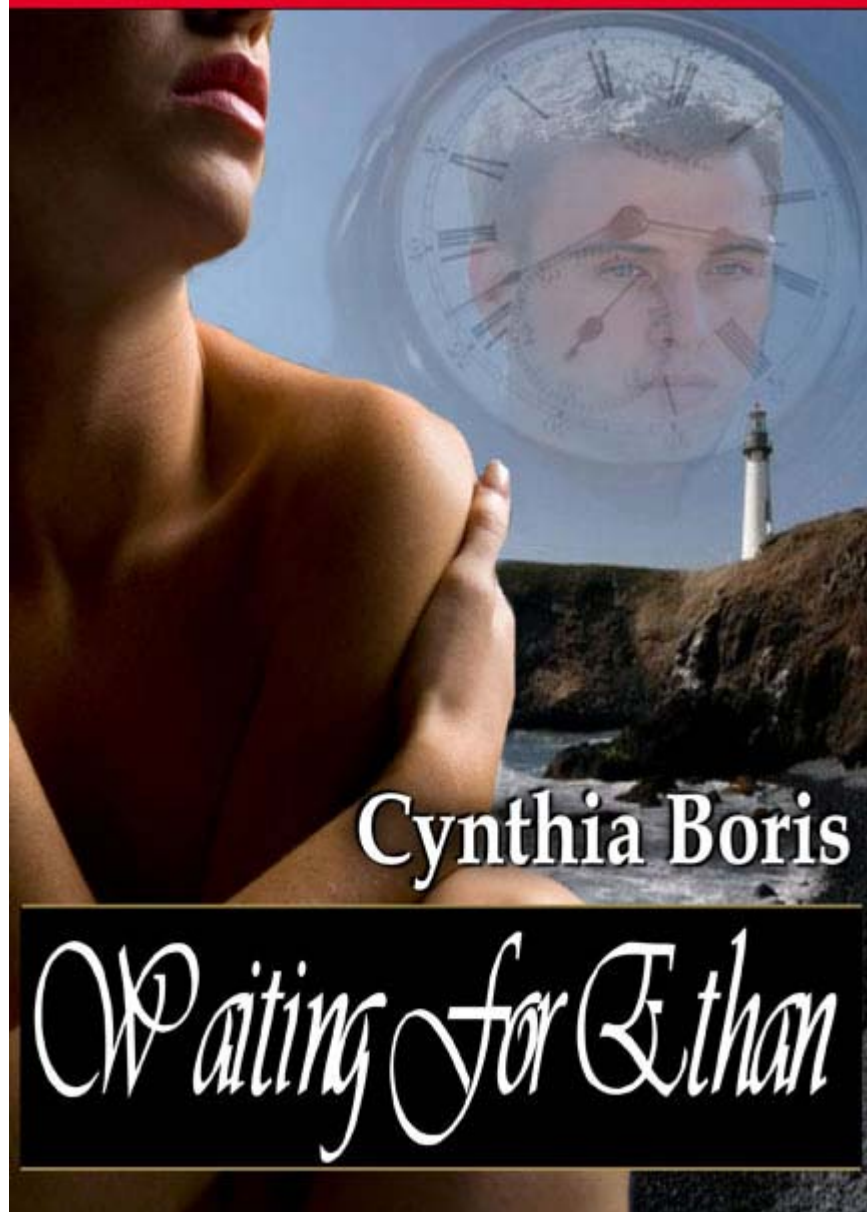


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Cynthia Boris

Waiting for Ethan

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Cynthia Boris

Waiting for Ethan

Joyce must choose between two lovers: Mack, the town's most eligible bachelor, and Ethan, the ghostly inhabitant of an old pocket watch. But falling in love with Joyce may have dire consequences for Mack as, together, they unravel a murder mystery.

~ ~ ~

In 1957, Ethan West disappeared on his way to pick up his girlfriend for the high school dance. Now, almost fifty years later, Ethan's determined to keep that date even though there are a few obstacles in his way—like, he's dead, and he's got the wrong girl.

Captivated by Ethan's spell, Joyce Erikson finds herself caught between two lovers. It's up to Mack Merritt to save Joyce from a ghost and a killer. The question is—are they one in the same?

The wait is over. Ethan is back.

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WAITING FOR ETHAN

Rate: Steamy

Cynthia Boris



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Waiting for Ethan

By Cynthia Boris

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Prologue

Mystic Harbor, Massachusetts, May 1957

Ardella Map sat alone on the porch swing, her eyes never straying from the street in front of her house. It was a beautiful, cloudless night. The air smelled of freshly cut grass—thanks to a neighbor boy's need for some ready cash—and mixed with the scent of roses from the garden, pink Betty Priors, lighter Dainty Maids, and blended yellow Golden Slippers. Those were Ardella's favorite roses. That was why she chose this particular dress to wear to the dance. It was a yellow satin gown with a swingy skirt and clouds of crinoline underneath. The crinoline itched where it touched her skin, but she would never complain. The puffy fabric gave her shape, something nature hadn't provided. The bodice was shiny and strapless, but Mother's beaded sweater covered every inch of bare shoulder. It was a cool night for so late in the spring, but still she planned to lose the jacket as soon as she got into the car. Mother would never be the wiser.

Ardella pressed the toes of her satin-covered pumps against the porch and gave the swing a push. For the tenth time, she raised a glove-covered hand to the tight chignon in her hair. It was still perfect, neatly tucked in with a fresh-cut Golden Slipper Rose clipped in the center. He liked flowers. He liked flowers and trees and everything nature provided. He wasn't the boy everyone thought he was. He was special, and he treated her like she was special. Just thinking of their last date made her face warm. The way he touched her. The way he kissed her. The way—

"Della?"

Caught. Ardella pressed herself to think of something else, her English homework, church on Sunday, washing dishes, anything that would drive the blush that burned across her cheeks. She didn't turn, didn't look, but she could hear her mother approach the screen door.

"What are you doing out here?"

"Waiting for Ethan."

"He's not coming," Mother said with a bit too much satisfaction. "I've warned you time and again about that boy. He's no good. Never finished school. Wears his hair like one of those hoodlums that hangs on the 12th Street corner. I've told you and told you, but you never listen. It's after eight o'clock, girl. The dance started an hour ago. Should have gone with your sister because that boy of yours is not gonna show."

Ardella made the swing move faster, forward and back. "He'll be here. Probably had to work late. Mr. Martingale trusts him to close up at night."

"Trusts him? Nobody trusts him. He's a bastard, you know. His mother never married the man that sired him. It's all over town."

"I don't care." Again she felt the knot in her hair, still wrapped tight just like the knot in her stomach.

"Come inside, Della. You look like a fool sitting there all dressed up. You should have gone with that other boy. Now he's a proper fella. Dresses nice, has real nice manners, says, 'How do, ma'am' and 'Can I give you a hand with that, Mrs. Map.' He's a real nice boy. Not like that piece of white trash you got your eye on."

Ardella ran her hand over her belly. Mother didn't know. No one knew, but she wouldn't be able to hide it much longer. Why wasn't he here? He promised to take her to the dance. He promised.

"I'm going into the living room to watch some TV. Perry Como is almost over, then Lawrence Welk is coming on. You know how I like to watch Lawrence Welk. You could watch with me. We'll make some tea to chase away the chill."

Ardella lifted her feet in the air then pulled them back to keep the swing in motion.

"Are you coming inside?"

"No, Mother. I'm not coming inside to see Lawrence Welk. Ethan's coming to take me to the dance like he promised, and I told him I'd be here on the porch. He'll be disappointed if he pulls up, and I'm not out here waiting."

"Ardella," said Mother, her voice a little softer now.

"I'm not coming inside, Mother. I'm waiting for Ethan."

Chapter One

Mystic Harbor, Massachusetts, present day

The tinkling notes floated in on a dream, soft, pretty, slow, like a music box with a dancing couple inside the lid.

A young man with dark eyes and slicked black hair—swaying with a young woman in a peach dress with gloves on her hands.

He held her as he should—one strong, calloused hand against her dainty palm. Another hand on her waist, just above the hip—oh, so proper.

And then he pulled her tighter so her body touched his.

We shouldn't.

They moved in a circle, his eyes never leaving hers. There was sadness in his gaze, longing.

Earth angel, earth angel, will you be mine?

His lips found hers, so tender, so sweet, so wrong. To her cheek then down to her throat. People were watching.

Who cares?

His mouth moved down to the small patch of skin above the neckline of her dress. She took a deep breath, all too aware of how her breasts rose and pushed against him.

One hand tangled in her hair, holding her in place as he pleased her. His other hand moved down her back, then up again. He found the zipper on her dress and gave it a tug. She knew she should protest. It was expected. It wasn't nice, but it felt so good.

The gown slipped off her shoulders, not much but just enough to expose.

Oh, please.

She had to stop him. It wouldn't be polite if they fell to the floor in a fit of passion. Not with all these people watching. Why were all these people watching? Why wouldn't they just go away?

I promised, and I would never break a promise to you.

A whisper in her ear.

A cold wind.

Joyce threw off the covers.

The rain was coming in the window.

And then she was somewhere else.

* * * *

Joyce turned off the car's engine but left the headlights on, illuminating the hulking shapes of the stilled machinery and mounds of debris waiting to be hauled to the dump. Beyond that, a tall, wooden monolith rose up in the night. The lighthouse stood dark and silent, a relic with no real use anymore.

She got out of the car. Wet, foggy air tickled the back of her neck and made the hair on her arms stand on end. Droplets of rain passed through the headlight beams and disappeared into the blackness. Joyce moved closer, choosing her steps carefully since the ground was rutted and dotted with deep puddles. There was a huge mound of dirt to her left and a stack of pipes to her right. No fence, but there was a sign warning her that she was trespassing. She ignored it and moved on. The wind played tag in the wide-open space. The rain started to feel more like snow as the drops landed on her unprotected head and hands.

Hands.

She slipped her hand into her pocket and felt the smooth, round metal surface of the pocket watch. It should have been cold, but it wasn't. It was warm, and it pulsed like a heartbeat against her palm.

The hulking shapes were much closer now. Metal vehicles. A bulldozer and a dump truck.

Something moved. She saw it in the corner of her eye. She whirled to the left. Her foot hit a slimy patch, throwing her off balance. She fought to stay upright, arms pin-wheeling as she struggled.

A crunch. Footsteps. Movement. A figure dashed through the darkness.

For the first time, she felt scared. Really scared. Joyce turned to run, but the ground shifted beneath her feet, knocking her backwards. She swung her arm out, instinctively searching for a way to break her fall. Bone connected with metal, but before the pain registered, her head hit something hard. The shattering jolt wiped out the sensation of her body landing on the muddy ground.

Someone stood over her. A young man with slicked black hair, dressed in a leather jacket and blue jeans.

It was the man of her dreams.

That was her last thought before she passed out.

* * * *

Normally, Mack Merritt drove home via the Post Road. It lay across the north side of the construction site and was accessible from the parking lot in front of his office trailer, but tonight, the Post Road was flooded. Rain compounded with loose dirt from the site and a drainage grate covered with fall leaves made it impassable, so he had no choice but to go the long way around. It was the hard way around.

That seemed to be his lot in life. From the day he'd signed that contract with the city, his karma had gone to pot. Mrs. Krechmeyer, who owned the bagel shop on Main Street, said he should hang a crystal or burn some sage to rid himself of his problems. Two weeks ago, he had laughed at the idea, but now...

He turned the corner on Jackson and headed west. That was how he spotted the car parked at the edge of the construction site. He wouldn't have seen the vehicle in the dark, except that the headlights were on—two harsh beams doing battle with the growing fog.

Mack pulled in next to the car, grabbed his flashlight from the glove compartment of his truck, and stepped out into the rain.

It was really coming down now, stinging his face and matting down his hair. It was cold, too. Mack zipped up his leather bomber jacket, then lifted the collar to keep the rain from sliding down his back.

With long strides, he moved through the darkness, the flashlight beam swinging left to right and back again, swinging so fast he missed her the first time. He brought the beam back and down and found her lying half inside the scoop of a front-end loader.

He ran closer and stooped down. There was blood on her face and in her hair. For a second, he thought she was dead. She was so pale and so cold. He felt for a pulse in her throat, didn't find it, but he wasn't good at it anyhow. He couldn't even find his own pulse. Instead, he put his hand over her nose and mouth and felt the warmth of her breath on his skin.

Alive. What the hell happened?

Mack slipped his left arm under her shoulders and his right under her knees. He lifted her with ease. She was so light. Even soaked to the skin, she felt like nothing in his arms. He swung around, used the headlights of her car to get his bearings, and started moving in that direction. He was nearly there when she came to. She gasped then struggled. He had no choice but to put her down, trying to set her on her feet, but she jerked away and landed on her rear end in the mud.

"Take it easy. I'm not going to hurt you."

"Who are you? Where am I?" She whipped her head from left to right. "How did I get here?"

"I'm Mack Merritt. You're on my construction site, sitting in a mud puddle. I imagine you got here in your car." He motioned toward the vehicle a few yards away. "That is your car, isn't it?"

She looked up at him as if he were mad, and it hit him like a football to the stomach. "Hey, did somebody bring you here?" He stooped down in front of her. "Did somebody hurt you?"

She brushed her hand across her bleeding forehead. "You. I saw you."

"I just got here. Come on, let's get out of the rain." He offered her his hand. She took it, allowing him to help her to her feet. The flashlight beam passed over her face. She blinked in response to the invasion.

"Maybe I should get you to a doctor."

"No, I don't need a doctor." She shivered. "I'll be all right. I just want to go home." She pulled away from him then stumbled a few yards before he caught her again.

"Home is that way," he said, pointing in the opposite direction. "I don't think you're in any condition to get there on your own. What's your name?"

"Joyce. Erikson. I just moved here."

Holding her by the elbow, he led her back to his truck. He opened the passenger side door and helped her step up and get in. Then he went to her car, shut off the lights, locked it up, and took the keys.

"I'm going to drive you home. I'll have one of my guys bring your car to you in the morning."

"Your guys?"

"Merritt Construction. One of my workers." He closed the passenger door and went around to the driver's side. "It wasn't one of my workers that brought you here?" he asked, almost afraid to hear her answer.

"No, not one of your men." Her hand came down on his arm as he shifted the car into reverse. "It was you."

Mack looked at the woman in his passenger seat. Young, pretty—even with her blood-streaked face. She had long, wavy auburn hair and very tired eyes, but despite her claiming to have seen him, he had never seen her before in his entire life.

Chapter Two

Joyce turned her back to the showerhead, allowing the harsh spray to rinse away the soapsuds on her legs. The soap mixed with the mud. It wasn't like she was covered in it, but there were streaks on her calves and forearms. Her elbow ached like a son of a gun, and then there was that cut on her forehead.

She took a step backwards so the water hit higher up, across her aching shoulders. There was no reasonable explanation for any of it. She might have gotten up during the night to go to the bathroom. Made a wrong turn in her sleepy state. Tripped on a rug. Smacked into a wall. She had only been in the apartment for four days, so it made sense that she would be disoriented. That scenario could explain away the bruised elbow and the crack in her forehead, but it didn't explain the mud. The mud was on her skin, on her clothes, on her sneakers.

No. There was no question that she had gone outside. She was in the rain. Someplace muddy.

She turned to her front so the water prickled over her breasts, warm, almost harsh, but not enough to change the setting on the showerhead. She picked up a fluffy nylon puff, then poured a line of strawberry shower gel over the folds. A quick rub, and it turned to lather, and the lather went onto her chest. She lifted her left breast with one hand and ran the rough puff underneath then across the nipple. It went hard almost instantly, transforming from a nearly flat, round button to a hard, compact square. She switched hands to give her right side the same treatment.

She closed her eyes as the steam rose and swirled around her body.

It was like being out in the rain, and yet nothing like it at all. The rain was cold and driving, and the shower was warm and titillating. She imagined him behind her, bare skin to bare skin, his erection nudging her backside, his strong arms holding her tight. It was he who was working her nipples—twisting and teasing—rough hands instead of the nylon puff.

Joyce let her head fall back so the water ran down her throat and rivered between her breasts. She leaned back against his shoulder, giving him access to her mouth so he could kiss her deeply as he stroked. The tingle began between her legs, barely there but so easily grown. A soft, wet noise came from her mouth, then a sigh, a breath. She grabbed the showerhead and plucked it loose from its moorings. She brought it closer to her body so the water really prickled like a million massaging hands. She set one foot on the seat built into the shower stall then slipped the pulsating head between her legs and made a small adjustment. The warm, forceful water bounced off her swollen clit. The wave washed through her body, followed almost instantly by a stab of frustration and disappointment.

Why couldn't it be for real? Why wasn't she entitled to a real lover who would hold her close and touch her there? Not technically a virgin, but still she felt like one. The event that had taken her virginity was hardly worth remembering—clumsy and awkward.

Herman Glitesburg wasn't the only reason she had left New Jersey, but he was up there. Their last date was like something out of one of those chick flick relationship comedies. He had shown up on her doorstep with a runny nose and watery eyes. Just hay fever, he insisted. Nothing contagious. Still, he sniffed and sneezed his way through the movie. Twice, he made that horrible gargling sound one made when one had too much phlegm. After the movie, they walked along the street and past a pet shop where Herman talked about a dog-mauling attack that had happened the month before. Great for his video store business, he said. Must have sold twenty copies of Cujo. Sniff, slurp, phlegm.

Not like one of those relationship comedies—because those usually had a happy ending. The heroine always found her Mr. Right at the end.

Well, he wasn't in New Jersey. That was for sure. Maybe he was here.

Joyce snapped the showerhead back into its mount, did one last turn and rinse. Then she saw it, a shapeless blob passing by the tropical fish scene on the fogged-up shower curtain. She stood still, held her breath, and waited for another sign of movement. Visions of Norman Bates in *Psycho* with his big, old knife was enough to make her knees go weak. Nothing. It was silly; there was no one in her bathroom. No Norman. No body.

"Be brave, old girl." She took a big breath, grabbed the side of the shower curtain, and yanked.

The bathroom was empty, of course. There was no movement except for the film of steam curling down the vanity mirror. Still, Joyce held her breath, moving nothing but her eyes. She stayed that way until she realized that the shower spray was splattering her fuzzy yellow throw rug.

"Oh, geez." She shut off the shower. Without the monotonous noise of rushing water, she could hear it, the tinkling sound of *Fur Elise*. The music rose like the steam in the bathroom, curling this way and that.

Joyce stepped out of the shower as the phone rang. *Good Lord!* She decided to dash for the phone, but the soggy rug bunched beneath her feet. She had to grab for the sink to steady herself, but her wet hands betrayed her. She landed on her knees on the cold tile floor. A bone-jarring pain ran up her already injured right arm.

"Ow! Damn." The phone kept ringing. Two more, then it would go to the machine. Joyce struggled to her feet and limped to the bedroom to grab the noisy thing, but she was too late. The answering machine *ka-chunked* to life. Soon, she was listening to her own voice. "Hi, you've reached Joyce at The Celestial Emporium. Leave me a message. Just wait for that beep." A long, annoying beep followed, then a female voice.

"Joyce? Are you there? It's Kathy. Pick up, would you?"

If Herman Glitesburg was the reason Joyce fled New Jersey, Kathy Cosmopolis was the reason she landed in Mystic Harbor. As college roommates, Kathy had been inviting her home to meet the family, all twelve of them, for four years. Joyce kept coming up with reasons to say no. They were good reasons. She had to work. She had to study. She had to spend time with her own family. After college, they went their separate ways. Joyce missed her friend almost immediately. Kathy was the wild one, always up for dying the fraternity bull dog pink or putting goldfish in their English professor's iced tea. She was fun and impetuous and a little bit dangerous, everything Joyce wasn't. When Kathy suggested a weekend excursion to the small New England town, Joyce had jumped at the chance. How a weekend holiday turned into a lifetime adventure...well, Joyce still wasn't clear on all that herself, but here she was preparing to launch her career as a storeowner in a brand new town a thousand miles away from home.

Joyce grabbed the extension on the bedside table. The answering machine was in the living room, recording everything that they said. "Hi, sorry, I was in the shower. Getting out of the shower and..." Should she tell her that she fell chasing shadow apparitions and ghostly music? "I slipped. No big deal."

"Well, I'm sorry I made you rush. I just wanted to catch you before I head out to work."

Kathy was a waitress at her family's diner. "First, before I forget, there's going to be a dance at the lighthouse, a big, hundred-bucks-a-plate thing to help save the old girl."

Joyce sat down on the edge of her bed. "Oh, well, geez. Put me down for two tickets then. I'll pop a check in the mail tomorrow morning."

Kathy groaned. "I thought you might like to work it. My father is catering the meal. We could use some help."

Working the tables for a bunch of society hats? Big whoop.

"He'll pay you a hundred dollars for the night, and we split the tips."

One hundred dollars? Visions of dinner with actual meat and vegetables danced in her head. "Sign me up. I can swallow my pride for one evening."

"Great! Misery loves company, you know, and second, don't forget we have a FOTL meeting at eleven-thirty."

"FOTL?"

"Friends of the Lighthouse—I told you about it. You've got to come, Joyce. All the business owners will be there."

The group that was fighting the destruction of the lighthouse, Joyce vaguely remembered Kathy mentioning it. "I'm sorry, I've just got a lot of things on my mind." Gently, she touched the sore spot on her forehead. "Eleven-thirty. I'll be ready. Oh, not fancy dress, right? Just casual?"

"Sure, come as you are. No bluebloods at this meeting, just us working class stiff. My brother needs the car, so he'll drop me at your place. See you then. Bye!" Kathy disconnected. Joyce hung up the phone.

She sat still on the bed for another moment, listening, but the room was silent. The fear she had felt in the bathroom had faded. Now, she felt stupid.

Convinced it was nothing, Joyce returned to the bathroom. She dried herself off with the fluffy towel then put on her freshly washed nightshirt. When she returned to her bedroom, an icy chill ran up her spine and sent her into a fit of shivers, but not the ghostly kind this time. She had left the window open to drive out the musty smell that permeated even to her apartment above the store. With the night had come the unseasonably crisp air. She closed the window except for a crack, then her eyes drifted to the bedside table. The watch was there, closed, silent. She picked it up and flipped the latch. The tinkling sound of Fur Elise floated out on the air.

She had bought the watch on an impulse. The same way she had bought the Celestial Emporium, but for considerably less money. The seller was Henry, the town drunk. He claimed it was a family heirloom and wanted more than a hundred dollars for it. She offered him twenty up front and twenty more in a week's time. He jumped at the deal. Joyce didn't know much about antiques, but she doubted that the watch was very valuable. The gold case was dented and scratched, and it had been caked with bits of dried mud clinging to the clasp and the chain when she bought it. The crystal cracked above the nine, but it wasn't awful. The hands were still at seven-twenty. It could have a broken spring, but that was certainly replaceable. Not that it mattered. She bought it because of the music. Each note was perfect, one slowly following the other. Not the rush of cheap music. No, this was perfectly timed with perfect pitch. The sound of it made her tingle inside.

Joyce brought the watch closer to her ear, letting the sound surround her and envelope her like a soft wind. Twice through, then the music stopped. There was no mistaking. This was the sound she had heard while in the shower. Giving up the puzzle, Joyce got dressed and prepared to start another long day.

* * * *

"So, how long before the old girl comes down?" Julian Scott pantomimed hitting a golf ball down the fairway.

"Please," Mack said as he stepped into the creaking trailer that served as his construction site office. "She's already been here once this week. Don't push it." There was no answer from Julian. Mack looked back over his shoulder and saw the old man watching him with a devilish smile. "You were talking about the lighthouse, weren't you?"

Julian stroked his fingers across his neatly trimmed white beard. "Hmm, let me guess. You were talking about Bebe."

Mack stroked his fingers over the thick hair on his own head. "Hmm, you're right. I was talking about Bebe." It was a joke they had shared for twenty years. Mack had always been envious of Uncle Julian's beard while a balding Julian had wished for Mack's silky locks.

Mack headed straight for his desk while Julian dropped his aging frame onto the worn vinyl couch.

"I can't believe Bebe actually came down here and risked dirtying her Prada shoes."

"She probably made my foreman carry her from the car," said Mack, and the two men shared a laugh over the image.

Bebe Merritt, Mack's grandmother, was the grand dame of Mystic Harbor. She ruled all she set her eyes on, from the cuts of meat the butcher sent over to the color of the flowers the gardener planted around the house. She ran the city's cultural society and constantly battled to keep Mystic Harbor from changing. That included keeping the lighthouse exactly where it was.

"So, when do you expect to begin the demolition on the lighthouse?" Julian asked.

Mack glanced at the large calendar that took up most of the wall behind his head. "This rain is killing us. We're at least two weeks behind schedule."

"Wait much longer, and you'll have soaring temperatures to contend with."

"I know, I know, but what can I do? I've got these picketers on my back, and the Cultural Society is working on a court order to stop the project."

"The Cultural Society?" Julian laughed deep in his belly. "Doesn't Bebe belong to that group?"

"Yes, and she's planning to hold this year's Charity Ball at the lighthouse, but she doesn't know that I know that."

Julian laughed harder. "Let me get this straight. You're going to go to a party held in the building you're trying to destroy, given by the people who are trying to stop you from destroying it. You're a better man than I, Gunga Din." Julian offered him a tight salute.

"I am not going to let Grandma Bebe run my life."

"Say that often enough, and we may all start to believe you."

Julian meant it as a joke, but there was too much truth in his words for Mack to laugh. Bebe chose the private school Mack attended as a child. She allowed him to attend the local high school only after Mack went on a hunger strike. She then chose the college he attended as an adult. She even planned his career for him. As the only living Merritt male, it was just assumed that he would take over and run the family construction business. It didn't matter if he wanted to or not. Most days, he didn't mind, but there were those occasional days, like today, when he wondered why he didn't just say goodbye and catch the first plane for Mexico. Julian could take over the business. He had taken care of

the family since the death of Bebe's husband before Mack was born. Why not let him take it all?

"Is it worth it?"

"What?" Mack said, suddenly realizing that he had missed what Julian was saying.

"Is it worth it? Is knocking down the lighthouse really worth all this aggravation? Here's what I think. You know that cannery on the north side of town that's been abandoned for years? What if they use that land for the mall and leave the lighthouse where it stands?"

"The city doesn't own that land," Mack replied as he opened the top file folder on a pile marked for his attention. "They would have to buy it, and they already own the land the lighthouse sits on. Doesn't make financial sense."

"It might if the Merritts bought the lighthouse from the city, giving them the money they need to buy the cannery. It's a better piece of land. You know that. The traffic pattern is better over there. The utilities are better. It's a natural. I think your troubles here at the lighthouse are only just beginning. I was around when your father moved that lighthouse in the first place. Remember? We had all kinds of trouble leveling the land and running power lines."

"I'm surprised at you."

Julian arched his white eyebrows. "Surprised?"

"I didn't think you subscribed to that whole 'the lighthouse is a shrine' mode of thinking."

While talking, Mack looked through his bills. Checks that needed signing, one thousand dollars here, five hundred dollars there—it was going out faster than he had budgeted, thanks to all the delays. He might have to hire extra men just to get back on schedule.

"Just offering my advice," Julian said as he lowered himself on to the couch. "But if you don't want it..."

"I want it. Keep offering. Just don't expect me to take it every time."

The metal door on the trailer creaked open. He hoped it was his secretary, Mrs. Hansen, but it turned out to be his foreman, George Eberly. The man shuffled his hat through his hands. He looked like he would rather be anywhere but there.

"I don't want to know, do I?" Mack steeled himself for what was coming.

"It's the front-end loader. Somebody poured Super Glue down inside the ignition. It's locked up tight. The whole ignition system is going to have to be replaced."

"I don't believe this! When is this going to stop?" Mack scrubbed his hands over his face as he growled. "Just get it taken care of. Today."

"Um, it'll be tomorrow. Lester has to order the parts from the manufacturer," said George as he backed up toward the door. "In the meantime, we'll just have to work on the north section."

"Fine!" Mack shouted. "Work on the north section. Work on something so we can get this damn project over with!"

George ran for it.

"Don't shoot the messenger," Julian said softly.

"I know. I know." Mack launched himself out of his chair then dashed to the door and flung it open. "George!"

The man stopped in his tracks, shoulders to his ears as he slowly came back to the trailer. "Boss?"

"Sorry. Not your fault. I appreciate that you already had the part on order before you came to me. Look, could you do me another favor?" He reached into his pocket and pulled out a set of keys. "There's a car parked on the north side. An old Escort. It belongs to the new owner of the Celestial Emporium. Could you have one of the guys drop it off?"

"Sure, but what's it doing over there?"

The image of Joyce lying against the scoop of the front-end loader flashed across Mack's mind. "You know what, never mind about the car. I'll take care of it." He closed the trailer door and went back to his desk. "What do you think, Julian?" Mack held the key ring up in front of his face—a large silver crescent moon with five stars dangling from shorter chains. "That girl I found on the site last night. Could she have done it?"

"Put Super Glue in the ignition? Be easy enough for anybody, but why?"

Mack dropped the key ring then picked up a stack of phone messages. "The same reason all these reporters are calling. The same reason there are picketers outside my door. The same reason our building materials have been disappearing."

"To stop the destruction of the lighthouse." Julian stroked his beard and hummed in thought.

"Seems odd for her, though," said Mack, playing his own devil's advocate. "She only just moved here. No real connection to the town or the lighthouse." He picked up the key ring again and fingered the engraved lettering on the moon, The Celestial Emporium. "She's the one who bought Ragsdale's old junk shop over on Randolph Street."

"The old Map house," said Julian. "Your Aunt Bebe and Della grew up in that house."

"I didn't know that."

"The purple Victorian with the swing on the porch. The Maps lived there for more than sixty years. It was a nice place. A nice neighborhood." Julian relaxed into the couch, his eyes locked on something that no one else could see. "But that was a long time ago. Things have changed, huh?"

"Yeah, now Grandma lives in a twenty room mansion, and she's still complaining about the lack of space." Mack sighed. "I hate to think that girl is our vandal."

"Why? Because she's cute?"

Mack smiled. "She is cute and...I don't know. I felt all George Clooney when I rescued her. Batman George Clooney, not ER George Clooney."

"I think he's made a few other movies since then."

Mack rolled his eyes. "Yeah, like I ever get to the movies." He fingered the keys on the key ring. "I'll return her car and talk to her."

"Maybe you should have Simms talk to her," Julian said as he got to his feet.

"The sheriff? He's not going to do anything. He's on her side, same as everyone else in this town."

"Not everyone," said Julian.

Mack gazed at the older man. That made him feel good and gave him strength. Uncle Julian, his staunchest supporter. "Yeah, you and me, in this boat together, and sinking fast."

Julian shook his head, refusing to go there. "Come on, I'll follow you over to the girl's place."

"Why?"

"If you're taking her car, you're going to need a ride back."

"True." Mack stood up, tried to push the key ring into his jean pocket, found it was too tight a squeeze, and gave up. He collected his own keys, jacket, and patted his pants for his wallet. "All set."

"To the old Map house," said Julian, his eyes nearly closed as he spoke. "I spent many a Saturday night on that swing, looking at the stars with Lawrence Welk playing in the background. Lawrence Welk and Perry Como. Mrs. Map couldn't get enough of those two."

"I see, and which one were you courting? Grandma Bebe or Aunt Della?"

A mischievous smile crossed Julian's pale lips. Then his eyes opened just a bit. "Both of them, at one time or another."

"But you never married either one. How come?"

The smile faded as quickly as it had come. Julian stroked his beard as he shrugged. "I guess they thought of me as more of a brother and not a lover. It was hard sometimes, but I figured if I waited around, one of them would come to her senses."

"Are you still waiting?"

Julian shook his head no, but Mack saw yes in the old man's eyes.

Chapter Three

"Miss Erikson!"

Joyce was perched on the top step of a ladder, the step marked *WARNING, Do Not Stand on This Step!* She was pulling a box off the perch when someone called her name. She turned too quickly and lost control of the box and her body. The cardboard container hit first, splitting open, spilling a river of paperback books onto the floor. Joyce nearly joined them. She grabbed the shelf for support, but her jerky movement made the ladder slide out from under her feet. She barely had time to shriek before she tumbled. Strong arms caught her.

"You're quite accident prone, young lady," the man said as he set her on her feet.

"Not usually," Joyce said as she struggled to find her footing. "Can I help you? I'm not really open for business yet."

The man held up the key ring before her eyes. In an instant, she went from surprise to confusion.

"My keys. Where did you get them?"

"Out of your car."

"I left my keys in the car?" Joyce ran to the front window. Her car was parked in the street just behind a black sedan with a man behind the wheel. "Well, thank you for bringing them in. It was careless of me to leave them in the ignition. I'm lucky no one stole the car."

"You didn't leave them in the car," he replied, a confusion squint in his eyes. "I took the keys when I drove you home last night. Nice to know I'm so memorable."

But he was, very much so, tousled brown hair that touched his collar in the back, brown eyes like chocolate kisses, and a square, all-man chin. He was dressed casually in jeans and a polo shirt with a leather jacket covering what looked like an all-muscle frame.

Say something clever, girl. "I guess I was so dazzled by your charm that I blocked out everything else, including your name."

He didn't react the way she hoped. Didn't smile. Even a laugh at her remark would be preferable to the flat suspicion on his face.

"That amnesia bit is running thin. I bought it yesterday because you were genuinely hurt. I did a good deed by bringing you home instead of to the sheriff—"

"The sheriff! Why would you do that?" Desperately, Joyce searched her memory banks for some hint as to what had happened last night. She came up empty. Even with him standing there so big and tall in front of her, she couldn't remember having seen him before. "Listen to me. When I got up this morning, I saw the cut. My elbow's banged up, too. I guess I must have gone outside because my clothes were muddy, but I don't remember doing it." Suddenly weak in the knees, she made her way to the counter and sank down onto the stool. "I wish that you would tell me what you know because I'm starting to get spooked by this whole thing."

The stranger joined her at the counter, the edge of anger still evident on his face. "I found you out cold at my construction site last night. That head wound." He reached out, caught a bit of her hair, and lifted it from her face. "You should have that looked at. Kind of puffy."

The close scrutiny brought a flush to Joyce's cheeks. She could feel it. She knew what was happening and was powerless to stop it. "I'm sorry. What did you say your name was?"

"Mack. Mack Merritt. Look, I want to believe you. I really do, but someone vandalized one of my trucks last night. Poured Super Glue in the ignition."

"You don't think I did that! I don't know what I was doing there, but I'm sure I didn't go to make mischief. Why would I?"

"To keep me from tearing down the lighthouse."

"I don't care about the lighthouse!" Joyce jumped to her feet, too quickly. The room began to spin. She reached for the counter to steady herself and found him instead. He felt like a brick wall, solid and unyielding. He gripped her back and helped her sit once more.

"You have to believe me. All I care about right now is getting this store up and running. That's it. I don't know why I went to the construction site. Maybe I was walking in my sleep, or I had car trouble. I don't know, but I'm sure I didn't go there to vandalize your equipment!"

A truck rumbled by on the street outside. The CD rack tipped toward Mack. Seeing it coming towards them out of the corner of his eye, he threw his hand out to catch it while cursing under his breath. He righted the thing before all the CDs could pour out, but his hand came back bloody. "Sharp edge. Geez," he swore. "Your accidents are contagious!" Pressing his thumb over the slice in his finger, he asked, "Do you have a bathroom?"

She pointed toward the back of the shop. "I think there are some bandages in the cabinet under the sink."

Muttering under his breath, Mack headed toward the bathroom, skirting boxes of books and trunks of old clothes, finally disappearing into the tiny room.

It was all just so odd. Joyce slipped her hand into her pocket and wrapped her fingers around the pocket watch. It had become her worry stone—a comfort to hold, to stroke when things went awry. She took a deep breath and let the calm slowly fill her. She was nearly there when the front door opened and a box with short legs wobbled its way into the shop.

"I hope there's nothing in my way because I can't see a thing," said the box. Then it hit the floor, creating a miniature dust storm and revealing Kathy Cosmopolis' chubby figure. "My brother, Jerry, drives me over here but won't get out of the car long enough to help me lug this up the walk. Can you believe? We'll have to put these in your trunk. Do you have one of those...?" She made a motion like pushing a baby carriage.

"A hand truck? I think there's one in the closet under the stairs, but what is all that?"

"T-shirts." Kathy bent over the box and came back up with a white shirt. On the front was a sketch of the Mystic Harbor lighthouse. Beside it, the letters *FOTL*, and underneath, *Friends of the Lighthouse*. "Check this out." She flipped it around to the back. The words were in large red letters. *Smack Mack. Save the lighthouse*. "Smack Mack. Don't you love it?"

"Very clever," Mack said, reappearing from bathroom, a fresh bandage wrapped around his finger.

"What's this?" Kathy tossed the t-shirt back into the box. "Fraternizing with the enemy?"

"Enemy?" Mack turned to Joyce. "And here I thought you had no interest in saving the lighthouse."

"You said that?" Kathy squeaked. "Are you crazy? And what happened to your head?" She stepped around the box and walked up to the counter. "Hey, that's a bad knock you got there. Did that happen when you tripped this morning?"

"No," said Mack. "It happened when she was prowling around my construction site last night. Slipped and hit her head on the truck she vandalized."

"You vandalized a truck!" Kathy exclaimed as if she couldn't be prouder.

"No. Stop it! Both of you!" Joyce pressed her fingers to her now pounding temple. "I didn't vandalize that truck, and I don't know if I care about the lighthouse being torn down! I feel like I arrived half way through the movie, so I have no idea what's going on. So, how about a break? Let me get my bearings, then you guys can hate me, either one or both of you."

A car horn punctuated her sentence.

"That's my ride," Mack told her. "Look, I don't know what's going on, either, but I'll be damned if I'm going to stand around and be made a fool of." He turned on Kathy. "You go ahead and wear your funny shirts. Protest as loud as you like and pass out flyers, but that lighthouse is coming down. If I catch anyone doing anything illegal to stop it, I'll have him," he looked over his shoulder at Joyce, "or her, thrown in jail. Is that understood?"

Kathy saluted with mock sincerity, which seemed to push Mack even further toward the brink. His fingers fisted and shoulders rose.

The car horn honked again.

"Have a nice day, ladies!" He stomped out of the store, leaving dishes rattling in his wake.

"Such a spoiled brat," said Kathy.

"Him or you?"

"Hey!" The smirk Kathy had been wearing fell off her face. "There's no way you can compare me to him. Nine brothers and sisters all living in the same house, struggling to make ends meet, to keep the family diner going. Do you know how many hours I have to waitress just to make enough money to buy a new outfit every once in a while? He probably has his jeans tailor made."

"He works, too," said Joyce, though she wasn't sure why she was defending him.

"He works because he wants to. It's a power trip. He doesn't need the money. His family has, like, more money than Donald Trump. Old money, too, the kind that goes back to the Mayflower or something."

"You don't even know what you're talking about, do you?"

"Well, I like that." Kathy hefted the box up off the floor. "Don't put yourself out. I'll get this to FOTL somehow without you."

Joyce's stomach rumbled at the thought of seeing her only friend in town running out mad. "No, Kathy, wait. I'm sorry. It's been a weird couple of days. My head hurts, and I'm stressed, okay?"

"Apology accepted." The box hit the floor. This time, it cracked open on one side. "Because I'm your friend. Don't think Mack Merritt's going to come around so easily."

But he had come around. Joyce picked up her keys from where he'd set them on the counter. He had rescued her from the night, driven her home, and returned her car. Joyce closed her eyes. His face flashed before her. Needed a shave, his face rough where it rubbed against her skin as he kissed her.

He'd kissed her? What else had he done? How could she forget?

"Do you want to?"

Joyce shook off the stupor and came back to the real world. "I missed that. Sorry."

Kathy came over to the counter. "Hey, you don't look so good, sweetie. You need to relax."

"Probably."

"Great. Well, help me get this box in the car, then you can relax over at Mystic Java where we're meeting. They have this great velvet, overstuffed couch where you can lounge about and sip cappuccino while we plot and plan." Her hand shot across the counter like a snake's tongue, grabbing Joyce's hand in her own. Feeling Kathy's warmth, Joyce felt cold.

"With you and me working on this, Mack Merritt will never know what hit him."

* * * *

By the time he returned to his office at the construction site, there were twelve picketers, all carrying signs and going on as if he was about to knock down the birthplace of Abe Lincoln. For heaven's sake!

Mack ducked his head and dashed past the line like a hockey player zooming in on the goal. He dived into the trailer and slammed the door behind him. He was about to breathe a sigh of relief when he saw the woman standing to the right of his desk. Standing, not sitting, even though there was a couch only a few inches behind her. Bebe Merritt wouldn't even think of letting her Olga Cassini suit touch the filthy, stained upholstery.

"Grandmother, this is becoming somewhat of a habit with you." *God help me.* Mack stopped to kiss the woman on the cheek. He towered over her even though she was tall for a woman. Her black hair was now gray, but she and Mack shared the same warm, outdoorsy complexion and chocolate-brown eyes. Bebe always said that Mack had a spot of laughter in his eyes, which was accentuated by high round cheek bones and an impish grin. He was twenty-eight last winter, but still she saw him as her little boy who liked to play in the dirt.

"I wouldn't have to come to your office if you'd come home once in a while."

"Grandmother, I come home almost every night." Mack took a seat behind his desk and started sorting through the mail. It was already opened and neatly stacked in order of importance, which reminded him. "Where is Mrs. Hansen?"

"I sent her away."

"Not for good, I hope," Mack replied, giving her only half his attention.

"Not a chance. She's a fixture in this office, like that horrible couch. It's amazing really. I swear she was over sixty when your father hired her thirty years ago, miserable old witch."

Mack let it ride. Mrs. Hansen was a combination secretary, accountant, receptionist, and psychiatrist all balled up in to one maddeningly efficient human being. Without her, Mack wouldn't be able to find his lunch in the refrigerator. "So, what can I do for you, Grandmother?"

"You can start by putting down that mail and looking at me."

With a sigh, Mack dropped the pile and swiveled his chair to face her. She was lovely. Poised and cultured. Although she would never admit it, her birth predated Mrs.

Hansen's by more than ten years, but on her, it didn't show. Money made that possible, numerous face lifts, bi-yearly trips to the spa, and only the best clothes, make-up, and jewelry.

"I need to speak with you about the Harvest Ball."

"I really haven't got the time. Besides, I thought you were handling everything."

"I am, but still, there's the little matter of your date to discuss."

Mack's hand wandered to a pile of messages on the desk. "Don't worry, Grandmother, I'll find a date for the party. I wouldn't want to embarrass you by coming alone."

"It's already arranged. You'll be going with Amanda Peters-Downy. Her mother is just thrilled that you asked, and she's accepted on her daughter's behalf."

"But I didn't ask." Mack scanned the thin, blue-lined message slips. The Mystic Tribune, the local news, gad, even some gossip rag from New York! How did this lighthouse thing get so out of hand?

"I asked *for* you. You're busy, remember?"

"And you couldn't take a chance on my asking the wrong girl, like Mrs. Hansen's grand-daughter, the maid at the Mystic Inn."

"Exactly." Bebe reached into her pocket and took out a pair of soft leather gloves. It was a signal Mack recognized. It meant 'this conversation is over and I'm leaving.' "You're taking Amanda. She's a lovely girl. Perfect teeth. I like perfect teeth."

Mack smiled at her, a long, exaggerated smile to show off his own perfect teeth.

Bebe's eyes rose to the clock above his head. "Oh, Lord, look at the time. The Cultural Society meeting starts in ten minutes."

"Are you still meeting at the lighthouse?"

"Yes, we are."

Mack sighed, dropping the messages on his desk like snowflakes. "Grandmother, it would make my job a lot easier if you stopped using the lighthouse as your private club."

"I don't want to make your job easier. That lighthouse is part of Mystic Harbor's history, part of our family's history. Your father Edward, God rest his soul, saved that lighthouse by having it moved to the mainland. I do not understand why you want to tear it down."

Mack's eyes widened. He did want to tear it down. He wanted to tear it down plank by plank then grind it up into sawdust for all the heartache it gave him. That lighthouse was Eddie Merritt's pride and joy, the first job he got on his own without the help of his father, the job that kept him out all night when he should have been home tucking his son into bed. It kept him at work when he should have been teaching Mack to play ball. It kept him *pre*-occupied when he should have been occupied by ramblings of his little boy.

Mack thought back to the line of family pictures on the mantel at home. There were photos of Bebe and Edward Sr., Mack's mother and father, and a photo of himself as a baby. One day, years ago, the baby photo mysteriously disappeared. In its place appeared a photo of the Mystic Harbor Lighthouse. Mack's mother had replaced his photo the next day, substituting a lovely new shot of her son at the beach, but Mack's point was made. After that, his father made an effort to spend more time with him, but it was too little too late. It was way too late.

Mack took a deep breath to quell the rush of tears that threatened to escape from his eyes. "That lighthouse is not a shrine, Grandmother," he said, using anger to beat down the sadness and frustration in his heart. "It's a building. It's wood and nails. It has outlived its usefulness, so it has to go."

"Well, I like that. Will you simply bulldoze me when I've outlived my usefulness?"

Fat chance. With Bebe's resilience, she'd beat the bulldozer into the ground and still come up swinging.

"It's a business deal, Grandmother. The city decided to knock it down so they could build a mall, and they hired me to do it. Business, pure and simple."

"It's a travesty." Bebe headed for the door. "If your father was here...."

He was spared the rest of her wisdom when the door sprang shut behind her.

"Well, he's not here!" Mack yelled to the closing door. "He's dead, and I am not my father!" One day he'd have the guts to say it to her face. Out of habit, he grabbed the coffee mug from his desk and took a swig. He had one gulp down his throat and another on the way before the cold, bitter bite of day-old coffee hit his taste buds. Insult to injury. Mack leaned back in his chair then dumped the rest of the brew into the wilting ficus plant that owned three-quarters of the top of the file cabinet. Ms. Hansen was always fussing over the damn thing. Watering it. Pruning it. Feeding it fertilizer. Still, the thing refused to thrive.

Mack never mentioned the coffee.

Chapter Four

"So, explain to me again why we're fighting this whole lighthouse thing. I mean, if the city owns the land, and if they want to knock it down, I'm not really sure we have a right to stop them."

Kathy pointed to the left, guiding Joyce to move into the left lane of traffic. "We have to stop them because that lighthouse is part of history. It's part of our heritage. This entire town is built around that lighthouse. Two more lights then make a left at the bakery. For two hundred years, she stood out there on the jetty, warning ships to stay clear of the rocks. Millions of sailors made it home to their wives and families, thanks to that old lighthouse. She's a regular hero."

Coming to a red light gave Joyce a chance to gaze out at the three-dozen sailboats moored along the boardwalk. She watched them bob and dance as seagulls hopped along the bows and masts. Then she closed her eyes and imagined a huge, three-masted schooner sailing into the same port. She'd be hauling tea from China and silks from France. Everyone would run to greet the crew, anxious to have their loved ones home at last, all thanks to the cheery, white lighthouse with the green and red trim.

"Hey, wait a minute." Joyce turned away from the harbor and gazed above the line of shops to her left. She could just see the top of the Mystic Harbor Lighthouse with its red tile roof and brass seagull ornament perched on the peak. Below the red roof was a circular catwalk painted a deep, forest green. The rest of the tall white cylinder was hidden behind three blocks of stores, hotels, and restaurants. "How did the lighthouse end up so far inland? I know that the ocean is receding, but this is ridiculous."

"Don't be silly. It was moved, like, twenty years ago. Green." Kathy said, nudging Joyce to hit the gas. "The lighthouse was falling apart after being pounded by the surf for hundreds of years. It got so bad it had to be condemned, but it had been the symbol of Mystic Harbor for so long, the city decided to save it by moving it inland. They hired a company to take it down and rebuild it, with a new foundation and a few new boards, of course. Actually, they hired the same company to destroy it, if you can imagine that. Merritt Construction."

Merritt Construction. Mack—her white knight from last night. The image of him popped up fresh in Joyce's mind. Square jaw, deep eyes, strong shoulders. She had this vague memory of being carried in his arms. Just like in a movie.

"What was he doing at your shop?" Kathy asked as she poked Joyce and pointed out a parking space.

"I told you, he was returning my car. He drove me home last night."

"And you can't remember anything," Kathy finished for her. "Knock on the head or not, I don't see how you forget a thing like that."

Or forget a man like Mack Merritt, but somehow she had. Joyce pulled the car into an angled space on the street, switched off the engine, then popped the trunk with the release on the floor. Since the original box had split open, she had divided the t-shirts into two smaller boxes, which made them easier to carry the half a block to Mystic Java. Joyce let Kathy lead the way, not entirely comfortable with her part in this whole thing. She was about to say so when Kathy plowed through the door of the coffee shop and began shouting 'hi' and 'hello' to the other women.

The rich, warm smell of freshly roasted coffee beans filled Joyce's lungs, replacing the musty scent of the Celestial Emporium. Maybe that was the secret to a successful retail operation, a good smell. Open bags of ground coffee behind the counter or maybe a perpetual supply of just baked brownies would do the trick.

"It's about time you arrived," snipped a bottle blonde with a store-bought tan. "I'm on my second latte already."

Kathy leaned closer to Joyce and whispered, "That's Amanda Peters-Downey. Hyphenated. Always hyphenated." In a louder voice, she said, "I'm sorry we're late. Joyce here forgot all about the meeting, so I had to wait while she closed up her store."

Joyce felt a warm blush creep into her cheeks as all eyes turned on her.

"You own a store here in town?" asked an older woman with thick, black glasses.

"Yes, The Celestial Emporium."

"Oh, yes," said the woman. "Martha told me she had sold to an out-of-towner."

Amanda Peters-Downey rolled her eyes. "Isn't that the old junk store over on Randolph?"

"It's an antique store," Joyce corrected, but no one was listening. They were all too busy claiming their seats at a line of tables by the window. Kathy sat at the head of the group, leaving Joyce to sit between Amanda and the older woman with the glasses.

"Anna Sullivan," said the woman as she gave Joyce a nod. "I own the bookstore, but if the city has its way, I'll be out of business by next year. We all will."

"Why is that?" Joyce asked, feeling as though she had been intentionally left without a clue.

"Because of the mall," said a redhead from across the table. "I'm Susan. My family owns this place," she said, motioning to the walls of the coffee shop. "Once they knock down the lighthouse, they're going to build a mall."

"It's an outlet mall," said Amanda Peters-Downey. "One of those sprawling eyesores where you buy dish remainders at half price."

"Actually," Joyce said, barely daring to speak, "an outlet mall could be great for business. People will drive hours to shop at a place like that, people who ordinarily wouldn't come here for any other reason."

"Well, that's fine for you," said Anna. "But my bookstore can't compete with a Borders or a Barnes and Noble."

"What about my summer help!" said a woman Joyce didn't know. "I have enough trouble finding teenagers to work in my ice cream shop as it is. Who's going to want to scoop for five dollars an hour when they can get a discount working at a clothing store in the mall?"

"Ladies, ladies." Kathy rapped her knuckles on the table and kept rapping until the women simmered down. "Mall or no mall, we're straying from the point, and that is the lighthouse. It's a historical treasure. We cannot allow it to be taken down. Now, we're arranging for picketers to work the construction site, but it's just not enough. We need to do more."

"Well, Amanda is going above and beyond the call of duty," said Susan. "She's got a date with Mack Merritt. They're going to the charity ball together."

The table was overwhelmed by giggles and cries of 'Amanda' and a few 'oh really.'

Dating Mack Merritt? That finished it for Joyce. Even if she could convince him of her innocence, there was no way flat and mousy could compete with busty blonde.

"Just a minute. Just a minute!" Kathy banged on the table with her spoon. "Amanda, do you mean to tell me that you're actually going to spend the evening with the enemy?"

The blonde paled for a second, thanks to Kathy's harsh tone, but she recovered quickly. "Of course, I am. You don't think I'd turn down an invitation from the richest bachelor in town."

"But he's the one who's destroying the lighthouse. He's the one we're fighting against."

"I know," said Amanda. "But that's business. This is pleasure. Pure pleasure."

Most of the women at the table burst into smiles at the thought, but not Kathy.

"I really don't believe you! Mack Merritt is a spoiled little brat. He's been handed everything he's ever wanted in life. He doesn't give a damn about the feelings of anyone else in this town. You want proof, just ask Joyce! He was at her store when I stopped by giving her all sorts of heck! Blaming her for some stupid accident at the construction site. Blaming her without a shred of evidence to prove it."

"Oh, I can't believe that," said Anna Sullivan. "He's a nice enough boy, but that grandmother of his! She makes Hitler look like a warm and caring person."

"At least Bebe Merritt is on our side," said Susan. "She wants to save the lighthouse, too. If she can't get her own grandson to listen to reason, I don't know how we're going to!"

"Girls!" Kathy banged her spoon again. "We made a commitment to try to save the lighthouse, and if anyone here," she turned her eagle eye on Amanda, "thinks that a date is more important than saving an historic treasure, she should just walk away from this table right now."

Amanda did just that. She pushed her chair away from the table, gave Kathy an insolent grin, then marched out the door of the coffee shop.

"Anyone else want to jump ship?"

No one else said a word.

"Fine. Let's get down to business," said Kathy. "Ladies, what we need are some ideas for making Mack Merritt's life miserable."

* * * *

It was nearly nine o'clock in the evening when Mack arrived home. He passed the dining room and saw a single place setting at the head of the table. He knew Frenchy was keeping his dinner warm in the oven. The woman had been with the family for as long as Mack could remember. She cooked, cleaned, and at one time, was the primary changer of diapers, a fact that she loved to make clear once a week or so. Another organized woman; he was surrounded by them.

Mack wandered into the room and stared absently at the fancy silverware, the bone china plate, and the empty crystal wine glass. It was becoming a familiar routine, eating alone. The scene was his life in a nutshell, surrounded by fancy trappings but nothing on the plate. He was still standing there when the chubby housekeeper bustled into the room.

"You're later than usual," Frenchy said, giving his arm a pat before setting a basket of bread on the table.

"One thing after another," he replied.

"I'll have your dinner in a jiff. Just sit down."

"Give me a few minutes, would you? I want to wash off some of this grime." He started for the stairs, all too aware of his work boots crushing the white pile carpet. He expected Frenchy to scold, but she moved off to the kitchen without a word. She was good at reading moods.

Once at the top of the stairs, Mack noticed a light under the door of the room next to his. He knocked lightly on the door then poked his head into the room. It was fairly dim inside with only a table lamp doing its job. An elderly woman was sitting up in bed. She had a book on her lap, but her eyes were closed. Her eyelids were so thin, he could almost see through them. The skin all over her body was thin and pale and stretched too tightly over sharp bones. Her mousy brown hair, tipped with gray, was cut to a point just under her chin, hanging straight with no particular style at all. Although Mack had never witnessed the event himself, he knew that Frenchy was responsible for keeping the

woman's hair trimmed, a job she used to perform on Mack as well until he outgrew homemade haircuts.

"Evening, Auntie," he said softly.

The old woman's eyes opened, and a smile lit her face. "Mack. Are you just getting home? It's late, isn't it?"

"So they tell me." He came into the room and sat down beside her on the bed. "Watcha reading?"

"Silly, old romance novel," she said, hiding the cover with her hands.

Mack wriggled the book out from under her fingers. "Castle of Love," he read aloud. The cover photo showed a medieval couple caught in the throes of a passionate embrace. How long had it been since he'd held a woman like that? Had he ever? He couldn't think of one woman who had looked at him with such carnal lust. All of his dates had dollar signs for pupils. "Looks exciting."

"Don't tease," said Della, snatching the book back.

"I'm not teasing. I'm sure it's much better than real life."

"My life certainly, but not yours. You're so handsome and smart and funny."

Mack eyed the cover once more. The couple was so intense he could almost see the steam rising from the book. "Maybe you'll let me read it when you're done." He bent down and kissed the elderly woman on the forehead. "Goodnight, Auntie."

"Goodnight, sweetie. Have pleasant dreams."

Mack could hardly contain a sigh. Dreams. They say you dream every night, but Mack couldn't remember a single one. He kept on moving into his bedroom and on to the bath, shedding his clothes as he went. It wasn't that late, but still he felt worn to the bone. Ironically, he pegged it as a lack of exercise. He had given up his morning run since taking on the lighthouse project. There just seemed to be too many things to do in a day, and no time to do them. Add to that the emotional and mental strain piled on by the picketers and other problems, and it was a recipe for exhaustion. All work and no play made Mack a dull boy.

Mack turned on the shower, stripped off his last piece of clothing, his jeans, then stepped in under the hot water. The relief was instantaneous. He turned his back to the showerhead, allowing the water to massage his aching shoulders. He'd been scrunching lately, pulling his shoulders up toward his ears as if that might block out all the bad news. He had to remember not to scrunch. He soaped his arms and chest then turned round to rinse. It was hot, almost harsh, but not enough to change the setting on the showerhead.

He closed his eyes as the steam rose and swirled around his body. It reminded him of the fog swirling at night, and that reminded him of Joyce. It was such a jolt, seeing her lying there on the ground, hurt, maybe dead. When he scooped her into his arms...well, there was something primal about rescuing a damsel in distress. Even soaked to the skin and muddy, she had drawn it out of him that urge to protect, the need to hold.

Mack let his head fall back so the water ran down his throat, rivering through the soft forest of hair on his chest. He could see himself kissing her, the blush rising in her cheeks as he tasted and touched. He set one foot on the seat built into the shower stall then soaped his leg, calf, and thigh. His hand roamed over his cock. It was lifting but not completely hard. There was an easy remedy for that. He took hold of himself and easily manipulated the skin over flesh. He leaned over, his forehead contacting with the side of the shower. He closed his eyes and pictured Joyce, imagined it was her hand caressing him before her lips surrounded his cock.

His breath quickened, muscles shivering. The touch was a little harder now. Faster. He wondered if she was a virgin. She seemed like one, so natural and a bit shy. Of course, he hadn't caught her at her best, but still, despite his concerns, he couldn't get the image of her out of his mind—the image of kissing her, caressing her, slipping inside of her while she moaned his name.

That was all it took. He hit the peak and had to grab the bar on the shower door to keep himself steady as his body let loose. Over and over—feeling like it would never stop. It had been so long, and it made him ache. This was some relief, to be sure, but it was a poor substitute for making love to a woman.

He slipped down to sitting with his back against the shower wall. All work and no play. Mack was tired of being a dull boy.

Chapter Five

"Her lawyer called."

"Whose lawyer?" It was noisy on the construction site, so Mack had a good excuse for yelling.

"The Erikson woman," Freddie Corbett, his lawyer, said as he followed Mack across the soggy site. "Mrs. Hansen gave me the message so I could talk to the guy before coming to you, since you've got your hands full and all."

"Got that right."

Already he had been hit with a raw egg from an angry protestor, lost two hours of work, thanks to a workman who took out a water pipe along with a wall, not to mention the dump truck that slipped its brakes and rolled into a—luckily unoccupied—scaffolding, and it was only eleven o'clock in the morning.

Cursed. No doubt about it.

"The lawyer's name is Leo Kuthukos. I've never heard of him, but he says he's going to sue you for slander and possibly assault."

"Assault!" Mack stopped walking and took a moment to clear all the extraneous thoughts from his mind. "I didn't lay a hand on her."

"He says you admit to being with her. She's hurt and has no memory. Maybe you were trying to force yourself on her, and now you're covering up with this vandalism charge. I suggest we offer her a settlement."

Mack tipped his head back and growled, "I don't believe this! She was trespassing. I did a good deed. Now, I'm the one getting sued? Why the hell should I settle?"

"Picture the headline, my friend. Local Woman Hurt. Merritt Construction Says Tough. You've got enough bad press already with this lighthouse mess. Do you really want to come across like a cold-hearted bully?"

"Bully? She had no right to be on my property."

"You know how courts are these days, Mack. Right or wrong, this guy could tie you up for the better part of the year with motions and subpoenas. Defending this case could end up costing you a fortune."

Mack knew Freddie was right. What chance would he have, a big construction company fighting against a young woman struggling to run her own business? It could end up costing him millions. "I understand what you're saying, but I hate like hell the idea of buying her off when the only thing I'm guilty of is stupidity." He sighed as he stared at the lighthouse in the distance. All of this trouble for some wood and nails. It was just a building, for God's sake. It was like he was the warden about to pull the switch on an innocent man. He was just doing his job. Now, this little gold-digger was going to come along and take him for all he was worth? Not likely. "Joyce Erikson wants a fight. Well, she'll get one!" Mack whirled in the mud then started for his truck with Freddie dashing to catch up.

"You're not thinking of going to see her, are you?"

"That's exactly what I'm thinking."

"Well, as your lawyer, I advise against it."

"As the one who pays your fee, I'd say don't give me advice unless I ask for it." Mack yanked his keys out of his pocket and headed for his truck.

"Mack, stop! You're only going to make things worse!"

The voice of reason seemed to belong to everyone but himself lately. "I understand what you're saying, Freddie, but I think paying her off sets a very bad precedent."

Freddie stuck his hands in his pockets then frowned at the mud he just noticed on his shoes. "How about a compromise? A little good cop, bad cop."

"Which one am I?"

"The good cop. I'll serve papers on her, charging her with trespassing and vandalism. There will be big fines and the threat of possible jail time. That should shake her up. Then you pay her a visit and charm her into dropping her suit. If she drops hers, we'll drop ours."

Mack shoved his keys back in his pocket. "Fine. We'll do it your way. If it doesn't work, I'm suing her ass. I don't care what the papers will say."

"If it doesn't work, I'll be right behind you on that, but let's try this avenue first."

Mack agreed then changed direction to head back to the office trailer. God only knew what other problems he'd find when he stepped inside.

* * * *

Joyce filled her mug with water and put it in the microwave to boil. While the appliance was humming, she chose a Big Band CD, which went into the player. By the time she returned to the microwave, the store was filled with the lively sounds of Benny Goodman and his orchestra.

She felt bright and cheery. She would think only good thoughts today.

With an Earl Grey teabag in her mug, Joyce began working on a new display by the front door. She laid out a square of black velvet and then artistically arranged a collection of vintage jewelry from the forties and fifties. These pieces were some of the nicest items in the store, yet they could be reasonably priced for the tour bus shoppers. In the next few weeks, Joyce planned to sell off most of the antiques at bargain prices then begin outfitting the store with gift items such as candles and figurines and crafts from the locals. On her first visit to town, she had met a woman who made apple dolls that were just superb. Joyce was certain she could sell the dolls with plenty of profit for both herself and the artist if she displayed them just right.

Joyce was caught mid-thought when she realized that the music had stopped. She paused, waiting for the horns to begin again, but the room remained quiet.

"Don't tell me I need a new CD player, please." Leaving the display, Joyce went to the shelves behind the counter. She popped the CD out of the machine, wiped the shiny side on her shirt, and then put it back. When she pushed play, the sound of swing, swing, swing filled the air once again. "Me and my dirty fingerprints." She'd have to remember to be more careful when handling the little discs. Joyce returned to the display.

"Good morning!" A plump, elderly woman waved her arm through the open door of the shop.

"Good morning!" Joyce called back. She was just happy to see a friendly face in the store. "I'm not really open for business yet."

"That's all right. I heard that Martha sold the shop. I just wanted to come by and meet the new owner. You must be her."

Joyce introduced herself.

"I'm Mrs. Peabody," said the woman. She was dressed in a heavy coat and had a mesh tote bag slung over one arm. "I live over in the back bay, but a couple of times a month, I come over here to buy yarn at the craft shop and to say hello to Martha. I guess now I'll have to come in to say hello to Joyce."

"I'd like that," Joyce said in all honesty.

"I got the most wonderful bargains at the craft shop." She hefted the mesh bag on her arm. "Six rolls of blue yarn for only a dollar! At the bookstore, I found back issues of True Romance for only fifty cents each. Can you imagine?"

"Sounds like quite a deal."

"Yes, indeed. I picked up a dozen romance novels, too. At my age, reading about it is as close as it gets. Ah, to be young again."

"Age has nothing to do with it, Mrs. Peabody. The last man I curled up with was a sexy cowboy with a mysterious past from 1882."

The old woman laughed. "In that case, I'll drop these books off when I'm done with them. In the meantime, welcome to Mystic Harbor!" With another happy wave, Mrs. Peabody went on her way.

Romance novels.

Joyce slipped her hand into her pocket and drew out the watch. She'd have to check the phone book to find a watch repair shop in the area. Replace the broken crystal and maybe a spring in the back. It couldn't be too expensive to fix, could it? It would be nice if the thing actually kept time. It felt so perfect in her hand, so cool to the touch, with just a bit of weight. She thumbed the latch to open the cover. Fur Elise began to play.

Benny Goodman took a break.

"Stupid thing." Joyce closed the watch then left it on the counter before going to check on the CD player. Eject. Close. Play. Nothing. Joyce tried a different CD, but this one wouldn't play either. "Great." Music played an important part in creating the Celestial Emporium's atmosphere. She would have to buy a new CD player, no matter what the cost. "At least it's a tax deduction."

The front door slammed shut.

"What is going on today?" Joyce reopened the front door and tested the spring hinge once to make sure it would stay put. Satisfied, she returned to her work on the display. She draped the delicate necklaces over velvet-covered pedestals and then arranged a number of dangling earrings in a seashell bowl. Now, the rings would be next. Joyce turned to her left, looking for the velvet ring roll. Something moved past the corner of her eye, a shadow or a beam of light.

"Hello? Can I help you?"

Silence.

Slowly, Joyce moved around the line of shelves, peering into the hidden corners of the shop. "Is there something I can help you find?"

Silence, and then the soft tinkle of a music box playing Fur Elise.

"What in the world?" Joyce wound through the maze of shelves and made her way back to the counter. The pocket watch was still lying there where she had left it—closed and silent.

The hairs rose on the back of her neck from a puff of warm air. Warm, wet air, like the breath of a lover about to whisper in her ear. Then it was gone. The music, the smell, the breath of air—all gone except for the chill that ran down her spine.

"Are you Joyce Erikson?"

She whirled and found the man standing just three feet away. Tall and thin, dressed in a black suit, he looked like an undertaker.

"Yes."

He stepped to within a foot of her. "Fredrick Corbett. I'm with Merritt Construction."

"Oh? You don't look like a construction worker," she said, trying desperately to sound light and carefree.

"I'm the lawyer." He reached into his jacket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. "We received the documents from your lawyer today. I wanted to come over here personally and tell you that you're making a big mistake."

"What lawyer? What mistake?" Joyce sucked in a breath, but her lungs barely filled. "What are you talking about?"

"Thinking that Mr. Merritt would be too soft-hearted to fight you on this, I promise you, that's not going to be the case. You were trespassing. I believe you vandalized that truck. Repairing the equipment is going to cost a pretty penny, plus the downtime, punitive damages. I'd say you're looking at \$50,000 in fines, and maybe even some jail time."

"Jail!" Joyce grabbed hold of her own hands to stop them from shaking. "I didn't do it! This isn't fair."

"You should have thought of that before you joined your friends at FOTL. This isn't a sorority prank, Ms. Erikson. This is a multi-million dollar construction project, and none of you are going to stop it." He shoved the folded paper into her hands. "I'll see you and your lawyer in court." Then he left the shop without another word.

Joyce stared after him for a full minute. \$50,000! Jail! For trespassing! She couldn't even explain why she was there. What judge was going to buy 'I don't remember' as a defense? Not one. Not one.

In that second, it all came crashing down on her. Instinctively, she reached for the phone and dialed her mother's area code. No, it was a bad idea. Prove that her mother was right, that she couldn't handle this on her own, and maybe she couldn't. Maybe she had bitten off more than she could chew. She was far from home and family, a new apartment, a strange bed, running a brand new business, making new friends...friends. Kathy.

Kathy was the queen of everything. She'd know what to do.

Joyce locked the front door. She put the closed sign in the window and then ran upstairs to the apartment.

* * * *

The place had come fully furnished, another lucky stroke since she didn't have the time or money to shop. It was an odd assortment though. The couch was a sixties modern, squared-off unit covered with mustard yellow corduroy. The coffee table was French Provincial. The leather side chair looked like something out of Sherlock Holmes. There was a plain square dining table butted up against one wall with three mismatched chairs around it and a serviceable bookshelf that held nothing but a few worn paperbacks. Joyce had been so busy with the store, she hadn't had any time to decorate the living space. She did have a set of pretty, pastel fairy prints that she planned to hang on the wall over the dining table, but even that simple project would have to wait.

Right now she had more important things than decorating on her mind. What she needed was someone to talk to.

Joyce dropped into the leather chair, picked up the phone, and dialed Kathy at the diner.

"Hey, it's me," she said when her friend answered. "I'm sorry to bother you at work, but I really need to hear a cheerful voice about now."

"What's the matter?" Kathy asked over the clatter of a busy diner kitchen.

"I'm getting sued." Joyce groaned. Saying it out loud made it sound so much worse.

"What! Who's suing you? Did someone get hurt at the store?"

"No, I'm being sued by Merritt Construction!" Joyce pulled her legs up underneath her in the chair.

"You're kidding! That rat! He knows you didn't vandalize that truck!"

That statement gave Joyce a small amount of joy. "And here I thought even you didn't believe me."

"Oh, don't be silly. I know you wouldn't do anything like that. I would, but you wouldn't."

"Well, apparently, he believes it. They're talking \$50,000 dollars in damages, and maybe even jail time. Jail, Kath! When I didn't even do it."

"Listen girl, we're going to make this right. I promise you. I already talked to Leo about your case, and he's going to help you."

Joyce wiggled around so her legs were hanging over the arm of the chair. "Leo? Who's he?"

"My cousin, Leo the lawyer. I talked to him yesterday after our meeting. I had a feeling Mack Merritt was going to make trouble for you, so I talked to Leo about it. He said you had a good case against Merritt—"

"Wait! The lawyer who came in here said something about my lawyer delivering papers to them. You don't think...?"

"Oops," was Kathy's soft reply. "Let me call Leo right now. I'll call you back." She disconnected the line, leaving Joyce listening to dead air.

The tears came on full force. She slipped her hand into her pocket and pulled out the watch, held it up close to her face. The metal appeared shinier than before, probably got a good polishing as it hopped around inside the pocket of her pants. She fingered the clasp and popped the lid. The tinkling music poured out of the watch and surrounded her like smoke from a cigar. Joyce closed her eyes and drifted with the sound. It was so pretty, so soft.

So soft.

Soft fingers brushed a strand of hair away from her face. So soft, it was more like the action of the wind than the touch of person. Still, she could feel his nearness. She could feel the warmth of a body so close to hers.

Soft lips touched her cheek, kissing away the tears and the tracks they left behind.

He smelled of ash and apples—like the air in the fall.

She wanted to be closer. She wanted to be with him, be a part of him. He could teach her those things. He could show her how.

Her lips parted as an invitation. He moved over her. His hand slid into her hair. His lips—

The phone rang.

The jarring noise brought Joyce upright once more as the watch tumbled from her hand and onto the floor. The second ring found her catching her breath. By the third ring, she answered it.

"Hello?"

"It's me." Kathy. "Gosh, girl, I am so sorry. I think this is all my fault. Leo got a little overzealous after we talked. He filed a motion or something against Merritt Construction on your behalf. I guess that pissed Mack off, huh? Made him retaliate against you. Look, I told him to rescind it or overrule it, or whatever he has to do to take it back. He promised he would. I'm sure it'll help. I mean, he did it without your knowledge, so I'm sure Mack will cancel his case once you cancel yours." She paused to take a breath. "Joyce? Are you all right?"

Good question. "Yeah. I'm just so—"

A heavily accented voice yelled for Kathy.

"Be right there, Dad," Kathy snapped back. "I really have to go. The joint is jumping. I'll call you later, okay. Buck up. We'll get through this."

Once again, Joyce said good-bye and returned the phone to the hook. Leaning down, she picked up the watch from the floor. It was open, but the music had stopped.

Overworked. Overtired. Overwhelmed.

Joyce squeezed the watch tight in her hand, closed her eyes, and drifted.

Chapter Six

"You sold me that scaffolding, Mr. Bennett. Now, I have men injured because the thing collapsed." Mack paced as far as the phone cord would allow, and then turned and paced back the other way. "I'm not accusing you of anything, but I want to know what happened before I endanger any more of my men. You get somebody out here to take a look at that thing, and make sure it's today." He slammed down the receiver to punctuate his point.

If it wasn't one thing, it was another. Mack closed his eyes and saw his blood pressure rising like a thermometer in a cartoon, up, up, up until the mercury bursts out of the top like Old Faithful. He kept on pacing, clenching and unclenching his hands as he walked. Rain delays were one thing, but accidents were something else altogether. There was nothing that irked him more than his men getting hurt.

Mack stopped pacing when the trailer door swung open. It was his secretary, Mrs. Hansen.

"Take a deep breath," was the first thing she said. "It's not serious."

"What do you call not serious?"

"Toby Parker has a broken wrist. That's it. Some bumps and bruises. Nothing else."

"Thank God." Mack dropped into his worn desk chair.

"You need a break."

"What I need is to get this job over and done with. Did you see the new crop of picketers with their clever new signs? Merritt is a ferret. Don't fall victim to the Mack Attack."

Mrs. Hansen laughed. "I like the one with a picture of you stomping on the lighthouse like you were Godzilla."

He wasn't laughing.

Mrs. Hansen stopped immediately. "Are those the papers from Freddie?" she asked, her eyes spotting something new on the desk.

"Yeah, it's a release. The lawyer said the filing was a mistake from the beginning, that he misunderstood his client's wishes."

"And what do you say?"

"I say I'll feel better when Miss Erikson signs these papers giving up her right to sue. Which reminds me." He snatched up the phone and dialed the number he had written at the top of his day planner. The phone rang four times before a machine picked up.

'Hi, you've reached Joyce at The Celestial Emporium. Leave me a message, just wait for that beep.' Beep.

"Miss Erikson, this is Mack Merritt. I've got those papers for you to sign. I thought we could meet tonight to go over them. Let's say the diner around five-thirty." Then he left his work number before hanging up the phone.

"Dinner at the diner? Nothing could be finer," said Mrs. Hansen.

"I've had business meetings over dinner before," he said, catching her drift.

"Business meeting." She made this little 'hmm' sound then waved at him to get up from the desk so she could sit down.

"It is business. I don't even know the girl, so why would it be anything else?"

"Because she doesn't know you." They switched places in the cramped space, her in the desk chair, him standing aside.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I've known you since the day you were born, Mack. Frankly, it's a wonder that you never packed up and left this place. Went where the name Merritt wouldn't mean anything to anyone. It's hard to know who your friends are when you're the richest kid in town."

Mack glanced around the messy, musty trailer and then down at his mud splattered jeans and boots. "Yeah, look at the rich kid."

Mrs. Hansen smiled as she began sorting through the piles of paper on his desk. "Looks like the real Mack Merritt to me. More comfortable in dirty jeans than a tux."

God knew, he had spent enough time in both of those outfits. He spent sixty-hour weeks in blue jeans, a hundred Friday and Saturday nights in a tux. There were charity balls and debutante parties, the Christmas cotillion and country club summer soiree. While his friends were having bonfires on the beach, he was waltzing with diamond-encrusted women. Yech.

Mack smacked his hands against his thighs and raised a cloud of dust. "Grandma Bebe be damned, I prefer the blue jean me."

Mrs. Hansen smiled. "And which do you think Miss Erikson would prefer?"

"The blue jean me," Mack said easily, no doubt in his mind. Amanda-Peters Downey preferred the tux. Amanda, Gwen, Abigail—for them, the lack of valet parking

constituted a bad day. Then there were the wannabe's—June, and Susan, the girl who made his latte at the coffee shop every morning. They were the ones with dollar signs in their eyes, the ones who thought life would be perfect if only they had Merritt as their last name, but Joyce Erikson—funny, he'd spent less than an hour in her company all told. He had every reason to think she tried to ruin him. Yet, something about this hard-working, honest young woman caught his attention.

Maybe it wasn't just a business meeting. Maybe, once they had this whole mess behind them, it could be something else. That thought made him smile.

"Mrs. Hansen? Which do you prefer? Blue jean Mack or Tuxedo Mack?"

"No contest. Blue jean Mack, all the way, which is why your grandmother dislikes me so."

Mack laughed as he rapped his knuckles on the desk. "Keep up the good work. I'll be on the radio if you need me." Then he left the office, feeling slightly renewed.

* * * *

Joyce played the message over twice. Mack's voice was so warm and friendly. Not that this meeting was anything but business. He called her Miss Erikson, and he mentioned the legal papers he wanted her to sign. They would meet, she would sign, maybe they'd sip coffee for ten minutes, and that would be that. She probably wouldn't ever see him again, a fact that left her both disappointed and relieved at the same time.

She switched on the CD player, turned the volume down low, and then went to sit down behind the counter. There she pulled out the wholesale catalog she had been studying earlier in the day and began to copy down her order on the form inside the book.

Mack was awfully cute. Now that their misunderstanding was sorted out, he was a very nice person. On the other hand, he was way out of her league. Despite his blue jeans and pickup truck, Mack belonged to another world, a world Joyce had only read about in books.

There was another reason not to set her sights on Mr. Mack Merritt, a more important reason. It would be like turning traitor against her best friend. Kathy was the general in the war against Merritt Construction. She'd go ballistic if she caught her dear friend crossing enemy lines for romantic reasons. Joyce could still hear Kathy bawling out Amanda Peters-Downey at the FOTL meeting for accepting a date with Mack.

Kathy!

The diner!

Mack wanted them to meet right under Kathy's nose. Could that have been calculating on his part or just a coincidence? He could have suggested they meet at Mystic Java, or he might have asked her to meet him at his office, but no, he wanted to meet at the diner.

Joyce slipped her hand in her pocket and drew out the watch. She popped the lid and noticed that the hands had moved, not the correct time, but it was as if they were trying. She needed to find a watchmaker to get the thing fixed.

Replace the crystal. Free the hands, but not the dent in the front. The dent needed to stay. It was important, somehow. Gave the watch character.

That was what it had, with its tinkling tune, a heavy song full of emotion and a kind of sadness.

"It's lovely," someone said.

"Yes."

"Will you take eighteen?"

"It's not for sale."

"Oh? There's a price tag on it." The woman turned the bowl upside down to show Joyce the sticker on the bottom. "See, it says twenty-two, but I thought you might be willing to go lower. I heard you were trying to get out of antiques and into more gift items."

Joyce blinked her eyes twice, but the woman was still standing there in front of the counter. Good heavens, she hadn't even heard her come in. "I'm sorry. I misunderstood you. Yes, I'll take eighteen." She took the ceramic bowl from the woman and placed it on a stack of thin packing paper, which she used to wrap it securely.

"I love these little fabric-covered boxes," the woman said, pointing out an item in the catalog that was lying open on the counter. "You know, my daughter is getting married this summer. Those little boxes would be perfect gifts for her bridesmaids. We're doing the wedding in a butterfly theme. Those would be just darling. Would you order six of them for me? I'll leave you my name and number so you can call me when they come in."

"Of course." Joyce set the paper-wrapped bowl into a bag and then set it aside and collected the woman's money. "I'll keep my eyes open for butterflies. We'll see what else I can find."

The woman jotted down her information on a pad of paper and then collected her package. "Yes, those boxes will be perfect. I'm so glad I came by today."

Joyce gave the woman her change and walked with her to the door. "I'll call you as soon as the boxes come in, but please stop by before then and tell your friends."

"I will." The woman glanced down at her watch. "Oh, lord, it's after five o'clock. Where does the day go?"

"Five? It can't be." Joyce stuck her hand in her pocket. Empty. "I would have sworn it was just a little after three-thirty."

"That's the way the day goes." The woman waved, crossed the porch, and climbed down the stairs to the street.

It wasn't possible. The customer might always be right, but not in this case. Joyce felt around on the counter. She felt a bump and found the watch under a stack of packing paper.

She popped open the cover, but the only sound that emanated from the works was a soft tick, tick, tick. No music.

It was the wrong time. Maybe that was how she got confused. Joyce turned to glance at the clock on the wall. Ten minutes after five. Mack would be at the diner in the next twenty minutes. He'd run into Kathy. He would tell her that he was meeting Joyce there. She'd never hear the end of it.

Joyce grabbed the phone. She dialed the number Mack had left on the machine. The phone rang twice then was answered by a woman.

"Merritt Construction."

"I'm looking for Mr. Merritt. Mack Merritt," Joyce added in case there was more than one.

"I'm afraid he's gone for the day. Is there something I can help you with?"

He was probably already on his way to the diner. "No, nothing. Thanks." Joyce hung up the phone. She was making mountains out of molehills. Her mother always accused her of such a thing. It was a simple business meeting. If Kathy saw them together, she would just have to understand.

* * * *

"Can I get you something else, Mack?" the waitress asked.

Mack looked up from his coffee and then glanced at his watch. Ten minutes to seven. He had been sitting there for more than an hour waiting for Joyce. "No, I guess not." He rocked forward on the chair so he could retrieve his wallet from his back pocket.

"Get stood up?" asked the young woman.

"Looks like." He flipped through the bills in his wallet, chose a ten, then slipped his wallet back in his pocket.

"Gee, I was only kidding," she said, accepting the money. "Maybe she got stuck in traffic or something."

"She lives just a few blocks away from here." Mack took a last sip of his coffee and grimaced. It was room temperature and bitter. "Probably got a phone call or broke her leg or something."

"Now, that's looking at the bright side. I'll be right back with your change."

"Keep it." Mack pushed himself up to his feet. She stood him up, and he knew why. He picked up the manila envelope from the table. No Joyce, no signature on the liability release. He should have let his lawyer take care of this matter from the beginning, but no, he had to indulge himself with his own little fantasy. Over the last few years, he had pretty much given up hope of finding a decent girl here in Mystic Harbor. He was convinced that only a stranger could see him for who he really was, see past his money and his name. He thought Joyce might be that stranger, but now he figured she was just like all the rest, a single woman with an agenda. Mack tore the envelope in half then in half again.

"You should go by," the waitress said as she cleared his dirty cup and spoon.

"Excuse me?"

"You said she was only a couple of blocks away. You should go by and see what happened."

"Yeah, I should." Meet her face-to-face. Demand an explanation. It would be worth it just to see her squirm. He would tell her that the deal was off, that he was thinking of suing after all. Then she'd go running to the newspaper saying that he refused to pay for her pain and suffering. It would be his word against hers. In the present climate, her integrity wouldn't be questioned. After all, he was the rich monster who didn't care about the town or its history. It was a lose-lose situation.

Dodging around a pair of incoming patrons, Mack left the diner. When he reached the sidewalk, he hesitated. Left would take him to his car. Right would take him toward the Celestial Emporium.

Mack went right. He walked down the block with long, purposeful strides. This wasn't about being stood up, he told himself. This was about being lied to, about being used. By the time he reached the shop, he was seething inside. He climbed the stairs to the front porch, making sure he stomped loud enough to be heard on each of the wooden planks, then he grabbed the front door handle and pulled. Locked. The lights were out, the blinds drawn. Stepping back, Mack looked up at the second floor windows, the windows of her apartment above the store. There was a light on in one room, but the others were dark. She was home, maybe. Possibly, she went out and left the light on for safety reasons. With a quick glance for cars, Mack dashed across the street and turned to look at the windows again. From this angle, he could see the top of a tall bookcase and a picture on the wall. Could be the living room or the bedroom. He kept watching, expecting to catch a glimpse of her moving in the apartment, but no one passed the window.

"Can I help you, sir?"

Mack jumped inside his skin. "What?" He whirled toward the man who had spoken. It was a cop. "Oh, officer. Hi."

"Hi." The patrolman followed the line of Mack's gaze. "Something interesting in that window?"

"No, I was just checking on a friend, a lady friend. I thought she might be hurt." God, that sounded stupid.

"Can I see some identification?"

"Sure. No problem." Mack reached into his back pocket. Nothing. He tried the other. Nothing. "My wallet! Damn it."

The officer took a step backward, his hand sliding casually toward his holster. "No I.D.?"

"Look, I just came from the diner. I must have dropped my wallet after I paid the bill."

"Sure."

"I'm serious. Officer, listen to me. You must be new in town. I'm Mack Merritt."

"Oh, yeah, the guy who's tearing down that beautiful, old lighthouse."

Mack groaned. "It's not my decision to tear down the lighthouse. The city wants to tear it down. The same city that pays your salary, I might add."

The officer didn't look convinced. "You were at the diner, then you came down here to look in the windows of that apartment because you thought your friend might be hurt?"

"Exactly."

"That's Miss Erikson's apartment," said the officer. "You know Miss Erikson?"

"We were supposed to meet for coffee. That's why I was at the diner, but she didn't show."

"She stood you up."

Mack stomped his foot on the ground. It landed squarely in a puddle, sending a shower of muddy water over his shoe. "She didn't stand me up! She didn't show up. That's why I was concerned. So, I tried the door. It was locked. That was when I decided to check her windows to see if she was home."

"Well, that's easy to check out." The officer waved for Mack to follow him back across the street."

What a mess, Mack grumbled under his breath. Now he was going to have to stand here and be humiliated when Joyce told the officer that she had no intention of meeting him ever. He was going through all this trouble, and for what? What was it about that brief meeting with Joyce that made him want to know more? She wasn't ravishingly beautiful, but what she did have was a natural glow, something he had never seen in his social circle. He would lay odds that Joyce never had a face lift or implants or eyeliner permanently tattooed on her lid, but it was more than her looks, he was sure of that. Something about her spirit grabbed him, but obviously, she hadn't felt the same.

The officer rang the bell next to the shop door and knocked a couple of times. No answer.

"She's probably not home," Mack said, wanting to get this over with.

Again the officer rang.

"You know what probably happened," Mack said, putting on his best 'am I dumb or what?' smile. "I got the days mixed up. Is today Friday?"

"No, Thursday."

"There you go." Mack slapped his thigh. "Our date is tomorrow, not tonight. Geez, I am really sorry that I bothered you, officer. Really." Mack was hoping to turn and walk away, but there was a noise from inside the shop. The blinds on the door slipped to one side, and a small face peered out at them.

"Police, Miss Erikson. Can I talk to you for a second?"

The blinds slid back into place, then the locks ticked to the open position. Finally, the door opened a foot, just wide enough to catch the little bell hooked to the jamb.

Joyce was dressed in a long nightshirt with Elvis pictured on the front. His gaze moved up her length from her bare feet and legs to her rosy flushed cheeks.

"What is it? Is something wrong?"

"Sorry to bother you, ma'am, but do you know this man?"

Joyce cocked her head slightly to get a good look at Mack. There was no smile, no spark. Her eyes remained dull and flat. "No, I'm sorry. I don't. Is there a problem?"

Mack wanted to scream, but he held on to it. Shouting at what appeared to be a poor, defenseless woman would only make things worse. "Joyce. Miss Erikson. Mack Merritt. Remember, we talked earlier today. You were going to meet me at the diner for coffee."

"Thought you said that date was for tomorrow," said the officer.

Mack groaned. Pick up shovel. Throw dirt on grave. One or two more scoopfuls ought to do it.

"Thank you, Miss Erikson, and again, sorry to have disturbed you. You have a good night." The officer caught Mack by the arm as the door to the shop slid closed. "You and I are going for a ride."

Mack didn't even bother to protest. Not one thing had gone right this entire day, the entire week or more, ever since he won the bid on the lighthouse job. At this rate, he'd be ready to tear the thing down with his bare hands just to be done with it. As the officer led him to the patrol car, Mack's thoughts turned to Joyce. Just exactly what kind of a game was she playing, anyhow? One thing for sure, he wasn't going to be suckered by her again.

* * * *

Joyce closed the door, turned the lock, and then walked back upstairs to her apartment above the store. She walked straight past the couch and the TV and straight into the bedroom.

"It was no one." Crossing her arms over herself, she grabbed hold of her nightshirt then lifted it up and over her head. She tossed the shirt on the floor then climbed onto the bed, naked. She stretched out like a lounging cat, her fingers lifting her hair, spreading it out on the pillow.

Her breasts tingled, the nubs rising and hardening within seconds. She let her own hand trail over one breast then down her side to her stomach. She rolled her hips forward as wetness pooled between her legs.

Mine, always.

If only he wouldn't tease her so.

Her fingers slid a little lower.

It wasn't allowed. It was wicked to want him.

Wicked.

The thrill ran through her like a jolt of electricity. She arched her back as her fingers knotted in the blanket beneath her body.

More.

Deeper.

"Please."

Forever.

Chapter Seven

It was almost noon when Freddie let himself into the office. He was dressed for work in a tailored suit and shoes that would have been shiny had he not come down to the site.

"So, we're all buttoned up tight, right," he asked, setting his hip on the edge of the desk. "You had her sign that release yesterday." The lawyer's eyebrows rose up a half-inch. "Right?"

Mack sighed as his head fell back against the headrest on his chair. "No, she didn't sign the release."

"She refused?" Freddie asked, his voice rising as fast as his eyebrows.

"Not exactly."

"Well, what exactly? Where are the papers I gave you?"

Mack rolled to his feet, knocking his chair back against the file cabinet with a resounding bang. "I tore them up. I was mad."

"At who?"

"At her, at me, at that stupid lighthouse, at my high school French teacher who failed me sophomore year. At everybody!" He kicked a trashcan for good measure. "I just can't believe Joyce was up to no good."

"Why? Because she's cute?"

"Well, she is cute, but no. She seemed so sincere."

Freddie picked up a letter opener from the desk. "Sincere or not, it's time you let the lawyers take over. Don't talk to her again." He tapped the point of the opener against his leg. "Don't make any more offers. She wants to go to court, we'll go to court."

"But I don't want to go to court," Mack growled. "I've got enough problems with this lighthouse mess. You said yourself that this would be adding fuel to the fire. Just settle with her. Whatever it takes, buddy. Just end it."

The lawyer replaced the letter opener and stood up. "Okay, but she's taking you for a ride."

"That seems to be my luck when it comes to women these days. Except for Mrs. Hansen, of course. She's the only woman I know who isn't trying to manipulate me."

"Just give it time, my friend. She'll get you one of these days." On that depressing note, Freddie let himself out.

Mack watched the lawyer leave and kept on staring long after he was gone. There was one other woman who wasn't trying to run his life, his Great-Aunt Della. The elderly woman expected nothing and asked for less. She offered her smiles, her hugs and her wisdom when asked, but she never imposed her will upon him the way Grandmother Bebe did. Mack smiled as he thought of the two sisters, so different in so many ways. He loved his grandmother; she had raised him. He knew she only wanted what she thought was best, but still, he always felt more comfortable with Della. When he was a young boy, he would sneak into Della's room, and she would read him stories. Even then, she had spent most of her days in her bed. So strange that such a sweet and giving woman would choose to spend her life alone, cut off from everyone but her family. What horrible event had caused her to lose faith in the world?

There was no time to ponder on the problem. The phone rang. The foreman came into the office to complain. It was just another average day.

* * * *

It was easy to spot Mack among the throng of construction workers. It wasn't that he was bigger or taller than the average guy; it was the way he stood and moved. His posture said 'boss,' there was no mistaking it. Joyce waited by the office trailer, not wanting to disturb him as he spoke to the men. He had his back to her, but she didn't need to see his face to know his mood. He was waving his arms and kicking the dirt. Maybe she should come back later.

Before she could decide, Mack turned and spotted her. There was no hesitation on his part. He marched right over and stopped only inches away.

"What do you want?" he shouted.

"I came to apologize for last night," she replied. She had planned on going for humble, but already the tone was changing.

"Save it. Have your lawyer call my lawyer." He tried to pass her, but she moved, blocking his way.

"Lawyer! We're back to lawyers just because I didn't meet you for coffee?" Mack looked down at her with an expression that she could only call incredulous. His eyes were shining and wide. His mouth was hanging open. A stray thought ran through her head, followed by a rush of excitement. What if he kissed her? What if he leaned over her right

now and kissed her hard? Like that was going to happen. Right now, it was more likely that he would hit her, a right cross to the jaw, perhaps.

"You are either the world's most gutsy con-artist, or you are completely nuts." He threw his hands in the air.

Instinct made her flinch, and he saw it. For a second, the anger that stretched the muscles of his face gave way, and the boy took the place of the man.

"Look, it's one thing to stand a guy up, but embarrassing me in front of that officer was past it."

"I didn't mean to stand you up. I fell asleep, I swear," she protested, but Mack wasn't listening. A workman had called for his attention. Now, his focus was on a line of picketers circling a bulldozer.

"Justifiable homicide," he muttered. Mack turned back to Joyce, his face set with anger once more. "Tell your lawyer I want this settled before the end of the week. If not, I may change my mind about suing you."

"I told you, I don't want your money," Joyce insisted, but he wasn't listening. Mack had turned his back on her. He bore down on a group of picketers. She had wounded his ego by flaking out on him, that was for sure, but still, it didn't seem reasonable. Yesterday, he was willing to forget the entire incident. Today, he was back to talking lawyers.

"Men," Joyce said aloud to no one. "If I live to be a hundred, I'll never understand them."

* * * *

Mack was tired. His life had turned into a chess game of late. Bishops and rooks countered each other, neither one willing to give up a little ground. You lose a pawn, you gain some space. If they didn't get you on the right, they got you on the left. Check and mate. There was no way to win. He crossed the site with ten long strides and then ducked beneath the linked arms of the picketers. Without a word, he climbed onto the bulldozer and started the engine. The human chain jumped as one as the low rumble hit them in the back.

"Jonah," Mack yelled to his man on the ground. "Call the cops."

"It won't help," said the lead protester. "We have rights."

Mack ignored the man. "Jonah, tell the sheriff that I'll plead to manslaughter charges. If he wants to save some time, he should call the county morgue before he comes over. Tell him to bring bags for, say..." Mack stood up in the cab and leaned forward so he could count heads. "Six should do it. I'll probably only kill the ones that are directly in front of the wheels. The ones on the sides should be okay. That is, unless they get pulled under by the others. Better make that ten body bags to be safe." He sat down and shifted gears, causing the dozer to rock and shiver.

"He's bluffing," said the leader, but already several people had broken the chain. "He's not going to kill us. Come on."

Mack gunned the engine. The dozer roared like an angry lion. That was all it took to dislodge the rest of the protesters. The leader was about to turn his wrath on his own people when the bulldozer lurched forward a foot. The scoop unearthed a small mountain of dirt, lifted it in the air six feet, then promptly dumped it. The protesters had scattered, but still, they couldn't escape the pursuing cloud of dust. Their complaints melded together until they sounded like a bunch of clucking hens in a farmyard. They clucked and cackled as they straggled away from the machine, rubbing their dirt-filled eyes and shaking grit from their hair.

As soon as they were gone, Jonah grabbed the side rail and pulled himself up to the cab of the dozer. "You took a real chance there, my friend. A couple of them were still pretty close when you started moving."

"I didn't do it." Mack switched off the engine. "I was bluffing. I didn't put it in gear. I didn't trigger the scoop. It just—happened."

"You telling me this thing has a mind of its own?"

"I'm just saying that I didn't do it. Must be a short or something."

Jonah laughed. "Hey, remember that old movie, *Killdozer*? It was about a bulldozer that was possessed by evil spirits. The spirits were mad because the construction company was digging up an ancient burial site. So the ghosts took over the bulldozer and used it to kill everybody on the job one by one."

"Nice." Mack stared at the starter as if expecting the engine to roar to life.

"There was a very successful apple orchard here until your dad brought the lighthouse over in the seventies. You know what they say about dead bodies."

Mack shook his head. "No, what do they say about dead bodies?"

"They make great fertilizer. Maybe we should check with a local historian."

Mack clapped the man on the shoulder. "Maybe we should check with a local mechanic. In the meantime, this baby is off limits." Mack jumped down to the ground. He eyed the pile of dirt that was dug up and tossed at the protesters. It was the strangest thing. Add it to the list of strange things that had been happening lately. He looked back to the spot where Joyce had been standing, but she was gone.

* * * *

At one in the afternoon, a busload of senior citizens from New York descended on the Celestial Emporium. As the only sales person in the store, Joyce was kept quite busy answering questions and ringing up sales. Five dollars for two Nancy Drew Mysteries, thirty for a Bakelite salad set. The highlight of the morning went to an elderly German couple who were happy to pay more than three hundred dollars for a Chambord standing mirror in a cherry wood frame. Joyce nearly died when she heard them talking about what they intended to do with the mirror—or rather, in front of it! And at their age!

As Joyce waited for the credit card charge to be approved, she wondered if she'd ever find someone with whom she could be that comfortable.

"Can't be a problem with my card," the old woman was saying. "It's all paid up, unless it's the strip on the back. You know what happens to those strips. They get all scratched up. What's that thing about magnets?"

"Your card is fine," Joyce replied as she pressed the button to finish the transaction. "The system's just running a little slow today." A strip of paper ran out of the machine. Joyce ripped it off and handed it to the woman to sign.

"Such a nice town you have here," the woman said as she slowly signed her name with an arthritic shake. "So pretty, so peaceful. It's nothing at all like the city." She turned her head and caught sight of herself in the mirror. She smiled at her own image.

Joyce could see herself reflected in the glass as well. Long face, too pointy of a chin, kinky hair, and built like an ironing board. Imagine stripping down in front of the glass with a lover there to watch.

Watch.

Joyce slipped her hand in her pocket. Her fingers wrapped around the cool, smooth edge of the pocket watch. Her thumb caressed the dent in the cover. She imagined him standing there, his hands on her shoulders, his face in her hair, bodies pressed together, her back to his front. His hands would move down along her arms, over her hips. He'd hold her still, keeping her tight to him as his body betrayed his desires. He'd kiss the back of her neck then her throat. If she turned her head just right, he could capture her mouth while his fingers found the swollen buds of her breasts.

"I'm so glad we stopped by."

Then the mirror was gone, and the lady was gone. Everyone was gone from the shop. Suddenly, she realized she'd been holding her breath. Joyce let it out with a sigh. Her heart pounded like a caffeine rush. There was a funny little knot in her stomach. Stress.

It was nothing to worry about. It has been a good day so far. There was another tour bus due by at three. Just time to clean up the litter left behind, wipe up the fingerprints on the glass shelves, and reorganize the jewelry display that was now in disarray. As she worked, she did a quick mental calculation of how much money she had taken in. Nickels and dimes, but the mirror really racked up the total. It was considered a good day, but big deal. She could sell everything in the store and still not have enough money to pay off Merritt Construction. Which meant going to court. She would lose the case, of course, because she had trespassed, then he'd get a judgment against her, and her perfect credit rating would be shot to pieces.

Joyce found a half empty cup of coffee perched on the edge of a shelf. People. No consideration for others. Whatever was easy—never mind that it made more work for someone else. She picked up the cup and tossed it into the trashcan behind the counter.

She guessed that was how it was with Mack Merritt, too. Not like he needed the money. Not like she had done any harm. No, this was all about him. Proving that he was right, in charge, unbendable.

Joyce sighed. How could she ever have seen him as boyfriend material? Material? Yes. Boyfriend? Not in a million years.

* * * *

Mack tromped through the mud puddles between his office trailer and the generator shack. It was after nine at night. He had meant to shut the work lights off earlier in the evening, but as usual, he got involved in piles of paperwork and lost track of the time. As he crossed the construction site, his eyes never left the tall, round structure that was the cause of all his troubles. Eddie Merritt's 'other' child. Some part of him understood. Edward Merritt II had to prove that he wasn't just Eddie Jr. He was so young when he took over the company. He undoubtedly felt the need to show everyone that he was as good a man as his father was, and now, here was Mack trying to do the same. Not a day went by that he didn't hear about it. 'Your dad would have done it this way.' 'Your dad wouldn't let them get away with that.' 'Your dad was a heck of a boss, heck of a friend, heck of a guy.'

"Why couldn't you have been a heck of a dad?" Mack kicked a rock that had the misfortune of being in his path. "How many hours did you spend fighting for that lighthouse? How many hours did you spend dismantling the pieces so you could build it like new over here? How many hours did you spend that you could have spent with me instead?"

Mack shivered in the cold night air. He zipped his leather jacket, but it didn't seem to help. Should have knocked the lighthouse down first thing, but for some reason, he had chosen to start the job in the far south corner of the adjoining property. He had chosen to knock down the old storefronts first, saving the demolition of the lighthouse for last. Maybe he wasn't as anxious to knock it down as he had thought. Maybe there was an attachment there, a connection to his father that couldn't be denied.

Mack shook that thought from his head. It was just a building, like the old storefronts. Nothing more. He fished his keys out of his pocket, opened the generator shack, and punched the shut-down switch. With what sounded like a sigh of relief, the huge work lights went out. The night became instantly dark and silent. Mack switched on his flashlight, then played the beam over the mounds of dirt and parked equipment. He lifted his light higher and to the left, aiming it in the direction of the old lighthouse, but the building was too far away to be illuminated by the flashlight beam. The tall structure was nothing more than a dark spot in a night full of shadows.

A soft crunch drew Mack's attention. Then another. Footsteps. Boots crossing the expanse of crushed rock.

"Hello?" He swung the light to the right. "Is somebody there?" He swung the light back to the left. The beam caught a face, then an arm lifting to shield the eyes. The hand was holding a bottle. "Henry? Is that you?"

"Mr. Mack?" The old man lowered his arm a bit, and then peered over the top with one eye like a teen watching a horror movie. "Mr. Mack? Thought you'd gone home by now."

"Just making the last rounds."

"It's all quiet." Henry looked at the bottle in his hand. "It's a cold night. Rains a comin'. Would you like a toot?"

"That stuff will kill you, Henry."

"Naw." He waved at Mack with a hand that could use a good manicure. "I don't drink as much as I used to. I swear. Don't need it, now that the spirits are gone."

Mack took the bottle from Henry and gave the mouth a sniff. He recoiled when the acrid scent of fermented fruit touched his nose. "Smells like the spirits are still in here."

"Not those spirits." Henry took the bottle back and held it to his chest like a teddy bear. "The spirits." He waved his free arm in the air. "They've been bothering me since I came to work for you. Every night, I walk around this construction site picking up trash and finding nails and boards that are good enough to use. Every night, I done a good job, and every night, they'd complain."

"Complain?"

"Well, not in words you could hear, but they'd poke at me and pinch my skin, and there's one—one in particular. He used to whisper evil thoughts in my ear."

Could be worse, thought Mack. Could be pink elephants. "I'm sorry, Henry. I didn't know, or I would have done something to stop them. Eviction? Exorcism?"

"No need. They're gone now. He's gone, anyway. The whisperer. Haven't heard from him in a couple of nights now."

"That's good." Mack shivered as an electric tingle lifted the hair on the back of his neck. A crack of lightning lit up the sky. "You better call it a night, Henry. Looks like a big storm is brewing. Can I give you a ride home?"

"No, sir, Mr. Mack. Got a poker game waiting for me at the Mystic Tavern. Just two blocks from here. I'll be there before you can get your truck around."

"All right, then. You have a good night."

"You, too, Mr. Mack. You, too."

Mack stood still, his flashlight pointing at the ground, watching until Henry had disappeared into the night.

Spirits.

Whisperers of evil words.

Mack laughed. He wondered if Henry's spirits were the product of too much to drink or too little.

Chapter Eight

"Joyce, you might want to try putting wine in the glasses before you serve them."

Joyce looked down at the tray she was carrying. There were eight fluted wine glasses, all empty. "Guess my mind's not on my work."

"I'll say." Kathy took the tray from her friend. "You haven't been yourself at all tonight. Are you feeling okay?"

"I'm just a little tired, I guess." Joyce plopped down on a stool next to the counter in the all-chrome lighthouse kitchen. A week ago, the idea of waitressing for a hundred bucks at the charity ball had seemed like a great idea, but now she wasn't so sure. A week? Had it only been a week since Kathy called and asked? It seemed like so much longer. Since then, the store had opened for business. She and Mack had gone from strangers to friends to enemies in the course of a few short days. To top it off, Joyce wasn't sleeping well. If it wasn't the worry of being sued keeping her up, it was the strange dreams arousing her from sleep. "I forgot that waitressing was such hard work. I don't know how you do this everyday."

Kathy picked up her feet to show off the thick, rubber soles of her shoes. "It's all in the footwear, my friend. If my feet aren't happy, nobody's happy."

Joyce looked down at the black pumps she had worn for the occasion. Yes, definitely a wrong choice.

"Hey!" George Cosmopolis yelled from his station at the stove. "What's all this sitting down! We have guests to serve."

"We've got it, Pop," Kathy yelled back. "I know what's really bothering you." She grabbed an open bottle of wine and began filling the glasses. "Mack Merritt. Am I right?"

How did she know? Could Mack have said something about their date while he waited for her in the diner? If so, why hadn't she mentioned it before now? "Look, I didn't tell you because you'd make a mountain out of a molehill. You'd think it was a date when it was just business."

Kathy topped off the last glass then set the nearly empty bottle of wine back in the ice bath. "What are you talking about?"

"Mack!" Joyce took a deep breath, and then the words came rushing out. "He asked me to meet him at the diner, for coffee. It sounded like a date, I mean. He seemed like he was interested in me, but it really was just business. He needed me to sign some papers saying I wouldn't sue him, but something happened. I guess I fell asleep. I stood him up even though I didn't mean to. So now, he thinks I'm going through with my lawsuit against him, all because I didn't show."

"Well, I guess I better get Leo back on it then." Kathy grabbed an empty tray from under the counter and began filling it with warm triangles of filo dough stuffed with crab and shrimp.

"I don't want Leo on it. I just want this over with." Joyce dropped her head into her hands. "Kathy, I know you're not that fond of Mack. You probably love the idea of making trouble for him—"

"But not for you," Kathy said, giving her a firm shake of the arm. "I was only trying to help, really. I'll get Leo to make it right, I promise."

"Hey," Kathy's father yelled again. "You two gonna yack all night? Serve the guests!"

"I'm on it." Joyce hopped down from the stool and picked up the tray of wine glasses, but Kathy kept her from leaving by blocking the way.

"You've got a thing for him, haven't you?"

"Leo?"

"Don't be funny. Mack Merritt, the enemy. The guy who's trying to destroy this lovely lighthouse that we're standing in. What is it about that guy?" Kathy grumbled, still not budging. "Am I the only person immune to his charms?"

"Serve!" yelled Mr. Cosmopolis.

"Kathy, will you let me out of here before your father blows a gasket?"

"Fine." She took one step to the side and then stepped back, leaving Joyce to struggle with the balance of the tray. "I just want you to know that I'm angry at you because I care about you."

Not a surprising statement considering the normal volume of the Cosmopolis household.

"He's going to hurt you, Joyce. Mack's a playboy. He has lots of women and no interest in settling down with any of them. Trust me. I grew up around here. I know everything there is to know about the mighty Merritts." Then she stepped aside and allowed Joyce to escape the kitchen.

* * * *

The Cultural Society Charity Ball guests had spread out onto the four floors of the lighthouse. Balancing her tray, Joyce skirted around the noisy dance floor and climbed the spiral staircase to the second floor, which was nearly as loud with voices drowning

out the music. They had drawn quite a crowd. All of the local luminaries were in attendance, as was the county commissioner and the mayors of the two nearest towns. There were also a half dozen reporters collecting photos and quotes to add to their stories about the city tearing down the historical landmark. The politicians called it a farewell to the lighthouse party, while many of the guests were busy writing checks to save the old girl. Right now, Joyce didn't care one way or the other. She just wanted to serve the drinks, collect her cash, and head home.

Joyce offered her tray to blue-haired ladies dripping diamonds and men with gold cufflinks. The chatter leaned toward money, making it and spending it, stocks, bonds, and even some talk of a horse in the third race.

"Young lady." A woman's snappish voice caught Joyce's attention. "Come here this instant." Turning, Joyce saw that the speaker was an elegant, sophisticated older woman dressed in a peach-colored gown. She was holding a wine glass at arm's length. "This glass is filthy," she said as Joyce approached. "Just look at it."

Joyce took the glass with her free hand and held it up to the dim lighting in the room. There was a lipstick stain around the rim in a color that matched the woman's lips. There were two fingerprints on the curve near the stem. "I'll take it back to the kitchen. Would you care for another glass?" She offered the tray, but the woman wasn't buying.

"I don't want another. I want to know why the glasses aren't clean. It's horribly embarrassing, not to mention unsanitary. You tell Mr. Cosmopolis that I want every glass checked before it leaves the kitchen."

"Yes, ma'am," Joyce said with as much enthusiasm as she could muster.

"What was that?"

"I said, yes, ma'am, I'll take care of it." Joyce turned to go, and there he was, Mack Merritt, standing not two feet in front of her with a blonde on his arm, Amanda Peters-Downey. Joyce whirled again, hoping to avoid making eye contact with him. The woman caught her by the arm as she turned, and suddenly the tray was falling. Joyce felt the balance shift, but there was nothing she could do to stop it. The tray went askilter, and the glasses followed, dousing the older woman in red wine.

A dozen different voices exploded at once, but one stood out above the others. It was Mack saying only one word, "Grandmother!"

Grandmother? Joyce wished she could shrink to the size of a marble. Then she could just roll away unnoticed. Unnoticed? Hah. The rate she was going, she would roll under the shoe of Grandmother Merritt, causing the woman to fall and break her leg. "I'm so sorry. Let me get some towels."

"Don't bother. You've done enough." Bebe Merritt crunched across the broken glass and made her way to the ladies room. Joyce just stood there staring at the floor.

* * * *

Mack set a chair over the broken glass and spilled wine to prevent anyone from stepping in the mess. "Perhaps you should get a broom," he suggested to Joyce.

"Yes, I'll get one." Suddenly spurred into action, she slipped through the crowd and disappeared from sight. Mack shook his head as he watched her go. Funny, she was like a walking accident zone. First the fall at the construction site, then the bulldozer going haywire, now this.

"It wasn't her fault, you know."

Mack turned to face Kathy. "I know," he replied. "My grandmother grabbed her by the arm and threw off her balance."

The woman rolled her eyes and sighed. "Not that. Leo." She folded her arms tightly across her chest. "Joyce didn't know that he was going to sue you. She thought you were going to sue her for trespassing on your land."

"I wasn't."

"But she didn't know that, so I talked to my cousin because he's a lawyer."

"Leo."

"Right, Leo, but she didn't know that Leo was going to talk to you before he talked to her. Then you talked to her. She was going to meet you and sign the papers, but she fell asleep, so that wasn't her fault, either. She probably had a concussion from banging her head on your equipment, so it's really all your fault that things are confused."

"I see," said Mack.

"Really?" Kathy puffed up, a smug smile on her face. "And another thing. I don't appreciate you leading her on, making her think you're interested in her."

That was news. "She thinks I'm interested in her? Is she interested in me?"

"Just you never mind that. Joyce is a poor judge of character, is what she is. She thinks everyone has good intentions. She's the sweetest person in the world. Everybody thinks so."

"Well, I don't think she'll make my grandmother's Christmas card list, but I see your point."

Kathy ignored his glib remark. "When she comes back here, I want you to take her outside and put an end to all this nonsense. You're not going to sue her. She's not going to sue you. It's time you went back to your opposite corners."

"Mack." Amanda Peters-Downey slipped her arm around his waist. "You haven't danced with me once this evening. Let's go before dinner is served."

"In a minute," Mack said without returning her hug.

Amanda pulled harder. "I know you're used to supervising, but I think the hired help can manage cleaning this up on their own."

Joyce had returned in time to hear Amanda's comment. She had a dustpan in one hand, a roll of paper towels in the other, and a broom tucked under her arm. "Yes, sir, I believe I can handle this on my own. It's a bit of a stretch for me, but I'll give it the old college try."

"See?" Amanda attached herself to Mack's side and nuzzled his neck with her nose. "Let's go dance."

Mack ignored the girl, his eyes focused on Joyce instead. She lifted her chin so high in the air, it was a wonder she could swallow. Her eyes were slightly wet, but he knew she wouldn't let a tear fall. She couldn't. Mack took hold of Amanda's arms and unhooked her as if he were removing a belt. "Go on. I'll be there in a minute."

The blonde looked from him to the young woman laden down with cleaning tools like Cinderella. "You're kidding me, right?" She clucked her tongue in the same disapproving way his grandmother did. "Well, personally, I've never seen the allure of slumming, but to each his own." She turned and headed off, and Mack felt strangely relieved to be rid of her. Amanda had spent the entire evening talking about her clothes and her ski trip to Switzerland, and how she was hoping her parents would move to Florida so she could take over their home overlooking the beach. He had tired of her almost immediately, but his manners had kept him from doing anything but listen politely.

"If you'll step back, please," Joyce said, breaking into his thoughts. "I'll get this cleaned up."

"No." Kathy took the broom and dustpan from her friend. "I'll do it. I think you two need to talk."

Mack jumped on the opportunity. "Yes, it seems our lawyers have their wires crossed. If we could talk for a few minutes, in private, perhaps we could work things out?"

Joyce was going to protest, but Kathy cut her off with a look. "Go outside and settle this. Just be back to help me serve dinner in a half hour, okay?"

"This really isn't a good time," Joyce protested.

"Oh, but I disagree. There couldn't be a better time than now." He opened his arm in a gesture for her to precede him, and then followed her to the stairs and down to the lower level.

* * * *

Joyce was shaking when she stepped out into the cool night air.

"Too cold?" Mack asked.

He was dressed in an expensive three-piece suit while she wore a short-sleeved white shirt and plain black pants from Sears. That said it in a nutshell. She was the servant, and he was the boss. "I'm fine. We won't be out here very long."

Mack jammed his hands in his pockets as he rocked back and forth on the heels of his shiny leather shoes. "Your friend Kathy tells me you're a poor judge of character."

"Kathy said that? To you?"

Mack nodded. "Yeah. She said you see the good in everybody, even when there isn't any good to be seen."

That sounded like Kathy, but still Joyce wasn't sure if she should be insulted by the remark. "What about you, Mr. Merritt? Did I misjudge you?"

Mack shook his head. A late-night breeze caught a lock of his dark, wavy hair. "I might ask you the same thing. Why did you stand me up that night at the diner? Did you change your mind about signing the papers?"

Joyce wrapped her arms around her herself, but it did little to stop the chill from cutting into her bones. "I told you, I fell asleep. I've been working hard trying to make a go of the shop. I guess I've been overdoing it."

Mack took a step closer to her, blocking the wind with his body. "I could buy that except for one thing. Why did you tell that cop you didn't know me? I ended up spending three hours at the police station trying to convince him I wasn't a stalker."

If he hadn't sounded so frustrated, Joyce would have accused him of making it up. "I swear I don't know what you're talking about."

Mack told her about the incident, about losing his wallet and how the cop had knocked on her door for confirmation.

"And I answered the door? I actually spoke to the officer?"

"Yes. It was pretty obvious that you had been sleeping. I mean, you were dressed in your nightshirt."

"I was?" She crossed her arms a little tighter over her chest. "You saw me in my nightshirt?"

"Yep. I didn't see Elvis. I am Elvis."

Joyce's mouth dropped open. He really had seen her in her nightshirt. She wondered if that was all he had seen. The material was pretty worn in spots. Depending on where the light was coming from, the gown could be mighty sheer. She never wore anything underneath. "That's all that happened? I said I didn't know you, and then you went home?"

"Then the cop took me down to the station for three hours, then I went home." Mack expression softened a little. "You really don't remember?"

"Scout's honor," she said, holding up two fingers.

"Geez, maybe that head injury was worse than you thought." He touched the discolored spot on her forehead, but as soon as his fingers slid over her skin, she turned away. It wasn't that she didn't want him touching her. Under different circumstances, in a different place, she might have actually welcomed it, but not now, not here. Everything was different here.

The hulking shadows of the construction equipment could be seen just a few dozen yards away. They were getting closer to the lighthouse. Another week or more, and that would be the end of the old girl. The machines would soon be chewing up the dirt with their cold metal mouths. Lifting the earth, crunching the rocks, burrowing down to where the apple tree roots had been.

"Hey!" Mack caught her as she started to fall. She lay there like a boneless cat, totally supported by his muscular arms. "What's wrong? Joyce?"

* * * *

Her eyes flickered open and shut. Soon she was looking at him with the same blank stare that she had that night with the cop.

"Don't dig it up. Not yet," she whispered.

Mack lifted her in his arms, holding her small body close to his chest. She was shaking and struggling to breathe. "It's okay. I'm going to get you to a hospital. Just hang on."

Her eyes opened at the sound of his voice, but there was only confusion in her gaze. "Ethan?"

"It's Mack."

"The lighthouse."

"Yeah, I'm the guy who wants to rip down the lighthouse." The heartless soul who wants to destroy the landmark his father worked years to save. Maybe she was a bad judge of character after all. Maybe everyone else was right. "Take it easy, sweetie. Everything's going to be fine."

Chapter Nine

"She may have a mild concussion. We'd like to keep her here overnight." The doctor eyed Mack's fancy clothes. "Was it a good party?"

"Truthfully, doc, coming here was the highlight." Mack dropped his head and ran his hand over the back of his neck. His muscles were like small rubber bands stretched over a very large box. Only a year ago, he would go to the gym, swim a few laps, punch the bag, and lift some weights. Within an hour, he'd be stress free. These days, he couldn't find the time to go the gym. Even when he did, he couldn't concentrate on the workout. He carried his troubles with him, from work to home to bed. That last one hurt the most. How long had it been since he shared his bed with a woman? What a great stress-reliever that used to be. College exams? A redhead. Smash the car? A brunette. Visit his parents? That called for drastic action, a blonde to be sure, a real looker with pouty lips and curvaceous hips. Mack laughed at himself. What kind was best for tenacious picketers, overbearing grandmothers, and accident-prone shopkeepers?

"Doc, she got that whack on the head about a week ago. Could it really still be bothering her all this time?"

"Oh, certainly. She told me she's had trouble with her vision, and that she'd been forgetful and unnaturally tired. All of these things could be related to severe head trauma. She really should have had it checked out the night it happened."

"But she's going to be all right?"

"I think so. We're going to get some X-rays, run a few tests, but I think she'll recover nicely." The doctor slipped Joyce's chart into a holder on the wall, chose another, and then went on his way.

Mack hesitated to leave the nurse's station. He thought about going in to see Joyce, but maybe she wouldn't appreciate him hanging around. They weren't exactly friends. Then again, he hated to leave her all alone. Knowing nothing about her background, he had fudged the information on her admission papers, listing Mr.

Cosmopolis as next of kin. If she did have relatives nearby, he really should notify them. That was his reasoning for going to see her one last time.

* * * *

There were six beds in the room. Four of them were occupied. Joyce was nearest to the door, lying with her head on a pile of pillows and a sheet pulled up to her chin. "I hate hospitals," was the first thing she said when he came in.

"The doctor said you have to stay. He said you might have a concussion."

"But I feel fine." Gingerly, she touched her fingers to the wound on her head. "What happened?"

Mack stopped at the foot of the bed. "You passed out." He set his hands on the footboard. "One minute we were talking, then you got sort of foggy, and boom."

"Foggy?"

"Talking about digging things up and stuff. It didn't make much sense."

"Nothing makes much sense lately." She crossed her arms over her chest as she had done outside the lighthouse hours earlier. "I'm sorry I keep bothering you."

"It's not a problem. I was having a lousy time. You gave me a good excuse to bolt." He tapped his fingers against the footboard. "Is there someone I can call for you? A relative?"

"My folks live in New Jersey, but you could call—" Joyce popped up to sitting. "Kathy! She's probably wondering what in the world happened to me."

"It's okay. Mr. Grant from the bank was in the parking lot when you fainted. I asked him to tell her what was going on. I'm sure she's worried though. I'll call and let her know you're okay."

Joyce lay back down. "You're not going back to the party?"

Mack shook his head. "I've had enough excitement for one night." He gave the footboard a tap with his knuckles. "Hey, look, if you need a ride in the morning..."

"No, I'm sure Kathy won't mind picking me up, but thanks."

"Sure. Well, you take care." Mack bounced on his toes for a second. "I better let you get some sleep." But he couldn't take his eyes off her. She looked so pale and small in the hospital bed, so vulnerable. "I'm going to go."

"Good night, and thanks."

"No problem." Mack tore his eyes away from hers, and that made it easier to walk out of the room. Actually, walking wasn't easy at all, not with the hardening that was going on below his belt. Geez, he thought. He felt like a teenager again. Back then, just the scent of a girl could send him into agony. Touching, kissing, back seat groping, that was all he needed to go over the edge. Ah, the good old days.

"Mr. Merritt," a nurse called, catching Mack just before he stepped through the emergency room doors. "I was told to give this to you." She handed him a large brown

envelope with Joyce's name written on the front. "These are Miss Erikson's valuables. Just some jewelry and a few dollars from her pocket."

Mack took the envelope but eyed it suspiciously. "Why are you giving this to me?"

"The hospital doesn't like to be responsible for valuables. We prefer to give them to a family member or friend for safekeeping."

"But I'm not..." He didn't bother to finish. He had brought her in. There was no one else. "Thanks, I'll take of it for her."

"We'll take care of Miss Erikson for you. Don't worry. She'll be just fine." The nurse gave him a reassuring pat on the arm and returned to her work.

Mack pushed through the emergency room doors, then walked through the nearly empty receiving room and back out into the night.

He felt slightly guilty for giving Joyce a hard time about standing him up at the diner. The doctor thought her head wound was serious, serious enough to cause memory loss and strange behavior, but that still left one mystery unsolved, a very important one. What was she doing at the construction site in the middle of the night in the first place? That was a question that still needed answering. Mack reached his car, unlocked the door, and climbed in, tossing the envelope on the passenger seat. Joyce was either one very sick young lady or a truly convincing con artist. The second possibility made his head ache.

* * * *

It was only nine-thirty when Mack climbed the stairs to his bedroom, but it felt as if it was a lot later. His stomach was growling, reminding him that he hadn't had any dinner, but he was just too tired to go back downstairs.

"Mack?" A soft voice beckoned him into the first bedroom.

"Evening, Auntie." Mack stopped in the doorway and leaned his shoulder against the jamb. Della was sitting up in bed with her book in her lap and a tray of half-eaten dinner at her side.

"The party can't be over already," she said after glancing at the clock on the bed table. "Aren't you feeling well?"

"I'm tired, that's all. I ended up having to take a young lady to the hospital. She fainted in the parking lot."

"Amanda fainted?"

Mack smacked his palm against his forehead. "Amanda! I forgot all about her!"

Della raised an eyebrow at him. "You forgot you had a date?"

"No, I took her to the party, but I left her there. Someone else fainted. Joyce Erikson. She was a waitress at the party."

"Oh, yes, you told me about her. The one who got hurt at the construction site. Is she all right?"

"I guess. The doctor said she was probably still suffering from a concussion." Mack pushed off the jamb and forced himself to stand on his feet alone. "I guess I better go back to the party."

"Is she pretty?" asked Della.

"Amanda? She's okay."

"Miss Erikson. Is she pretty?"

Mack was going to reply with a simple 'I guess,' but he felt his expression would give it away. "She's very pretty. Natural, you know. Not a lot of make-up or hair color. She doesn't even wear nail polish."

"Oh, you noticed her hands, did you?"

Mack dropped his chin to his chest to hide the doofus smirk that he felt must be on his lips. "Yeah, I guess I did."

"Call over to the lighthouse," Della suggested. "Have them give Amanda a message. She can find her own way home, I'm sure. When Miss Erikson is feeling better, invite her over for dinner. I'd love to meet her."

Mack twisted his lips together. "Joyce dumped a tray of wine glasses on Bebe tonight."

Della laughed. It was a warm, hearty sound that Mack rarely heard. "I like her already."

"I love you to pieces, you know that?" Mack blew a kiss her way and then went on down the hall to his own room. Dropping down onto the bed, he grabbed the phone and called the lighthouse. Kathy picked up the phone. They talked about Joyce's condition for a moment, then Mack asked her to relay a message to Amanda Peters-Downy. *So sorry, slight emergency, but I'll be back in a half hour.* As much as he wanted to tell her to find her own way home, he couldn't. He had been raised a gentleman, and a gentleman always left the party with the same girl he came with.

Mack finished the call and hung up. It was all he could do to resist kicking his shoes off and releasing his tie. His stomach growled again. If he hurried, he might be able to manage dessert and coffee. Maybe Kathy would take pity on him and whip up some leftovers from the kitchen. He was sitting on the edge of the bed mentally reviewing his choices when the sound started. It was a tinkling sound, musical but muffled. Glancing around, Mack noted the envelope on the bed where he had dropped it. The sound came from inside. Picking up the envelope, he opened the brass wings that held it shut and opened the flap. The sound poured out, plenty clear now. It sounded like a music box playing Fur Elise. He tipped the envelope over, dumping its contents on the bed. There was a silver ring with symbols etched in the band, a thin gold necklace, a small roll of dollar bills, some coins, and a pocket watch. Mack picked up the watch. The lid was open just a crack. When he shut it, the music stopped. He leaned over and held the watch beneath the light of the lamp on his bedside table. There was an etching on the cover, a map and an airplane. The watch was too manly for such a pretty, young woman. He thumbed the latch, allowing the lid to open all the way this time. The soft music poured

from the works and tickled his ear. Soothing music, and he was so tired. He started to drift.

Mack sat upright, forcing his eyes open. *Can't lie down.* Amanda was waiting for him to return to the lighthouse. He looked down at the face of the watch. Not even ten o'clock yet. The party would be going strong for at least two more hours. He could drive over, apologize to Amanda, and dance a couple of dances...

Dances.

Dance.

They were going to be late for the dance. He promised her he'd take her. Never break a promise to a lady.

Mack's eyes slid closed. His head nodded to one side. He just needed to do a few things. Just a few more minutes.

He snapped his head back to center again, but his eyes remained shut.

It was cold. *Might actually have frost tonight. Have to light the heaters or else the apple trees will freeze.* It was unusual for this time of year.

Mack tipped to one side, then stretched out across his bed. He wanted just a quick nap. Just a couple of minutes, then he'd get up and go back to the lighthouse.

No, not to the lighthouse. That's way out on the pier. The dance is at the high school.

Mack folded his arms beneath his head.

What do I know about apples?

He was lying down.

He was standing up.

Must be a dream.

A shadow moved among the trees. A man.

He's not good enough for you. Bastard. He's nothing but poor white trash.

Then he felt the pain radiating through his skull, like a hot poker jabbing him behind the ear.

Wake up. If this is just a dream, I should be able to wake up.

Another burst of pain. He stumbled and fell. A warm, wet trickle ran down the side of his face. Blood, running out like juice from an apple.

Bastard.

Another smack. And another.

I'm late. I have to pick her up for the dance.

Mack forced himself up to his knees, but a wave of nausea drove him back down to the bed.

Wait for me. I'm coming.

The man was hovering over him. He felt a kick to the ribs. God, it was hard to breathe. Another kick. More words, but it was all so muted inside his brain. It hurt so badly. More kicks. More punches. He couldn't even feel them anymore.

A hazy red curtain covered his eyes. Not a curtain. Blood pooled behind his eyelids.

No help. No one was coming. She was waiting, and he was dying, that he knew for sure.

* * * *

Mack rolled to his back and then sat up all in one fitful motion. He grabbed his head to stop the flow of blood, but despite his fears, his fingers came back clean. Clean. Mack stared at his hands, hands that should have been smeared with red.

"Oh, Jesus." He rolled off the bed and onto his feet. The bedside lamp was still on, casting a pale glow over the room.

"You better have an excellent excuse, young man."

Mack jumped inside his skin at the sound of the voice. He whipped his head toward the bedroom door and saw Bebe standing there. "Grandmother?"

The anger that he saw on her face faded. Something else took its place, some emotion he had never seen before. Confusion? Shock?

"Are you all right?" she asked, her hands clutching the doorframe. "What happened, Mack?"

"I had to go the hospital."

"What!" Finally, she ran to him. "You're hurt? How did it happen?"

"Not me. I'm fine." He reached for Bebe's hand and pulled her to sit on the bed beside him. Her dress was still reeking of wine. "I had to take Joyce Erikson to the hospital. She fainted."

"Oh, her. Overcome with embarrassment, I should think. I'll never get the stain out of this dress, you know."

"I came back here. I meant to go back to the lighthouse." Mack rubbed his hand across his eyes. That was when he caught sight of his watch. It was nearly two in morning. "Oh, no. Amanda!"

"I had her dropped off at home. Really, Mack, how could you do such a thing? Standing up the daughter of my best friend!"

"Best friend? You hate her mother!"

"That's even worse. I'll never hear the end of this."

Mack ran his hand over the back of his neck. The muscles were stiff enough to break. "I must have fallen asleep. I don't understand it." *I must have fallen asleep...* Joyce's words echoed back at him. He honestly hadn't believed her flimsy

excuse, but now, here he was in the same boat. Funny. "Honestly, Grandmother, I meant to go back to the party, but I had this dream, no, a nightmare. I was in an apple orchard. It was my job to take care of the apples, but..." Mack tried to grab hold of the images in his head, but they were fading. Bebe watched him with a strange look in her eye.

"I think you need to go back to bed. All that trouble at the construction site must be taking its toll on you."

"I guess."

She got up to go. "Good night, dear. Have pleasant dreams."

Pleasant dreams? Anything would be better than the one he just had.

Chapter Ten

It was well after three o'clock by the time Joyce turned the sign on the shop's front door from Closed to Open. Not like there was a big rush of customers waiting to get in, but she was anxious to get back to her routine. She was feeling a hundred percent better, especially after the good night's rest she had at the hospital. The nurses swore they hadn't given her anything to make her sleep, but Joyce didn't believe them. It was the first time in a week that she had woke up feeling well rested, no nightmares, no tossing and turning, and no walking in her sleep.

Sleepwalking! How else could she explain her middle-of-the-night trip to the construction site and the apparent conversation she had with Mack and the cop? It was a weird feeling to know she had walked and talked and carried on a conversation without any memory of it later on.

Joyce grabbed the feather duster from behind the counter and began the job of redistributing the dust around the store. She was nearly done when the front door swung open, tapping the bell above the jamb.

"Good morning. No, make that afternoon." Joyce popped up from behind a shelf. "Oh, hello."

It was Mack. Gone were the suit and the shiny shoes. Once again, he was dressed in jeans and a leather jacket, a look that suited him more than the fancy party duds. He smiled and waved as if he were signaling her from the other side of a railway station. "How are you feeling?"

"Great. Just fine. I'm really sorry I put you through all that trouble."

"My pleasure." Mack twisted his lips. "Well, not exactly a pleasure." He rocked forward and back on his boot heels. "You gave me quite a scare tumbling into my arms like you did."

"Well, I'm sorry about that, and I'm sorry I ruined your night."

"You didn't." His shoulders relaxed a little, coming down out of his hair. "I brought your stuff." He held out the envelope. "The hospital gave it to me."

Joyce put her hand to her neck to feel for the chain that wasn't there. "I must be losing my mind. I didn't even realize my necklace and my ring were missing." she said, glancing down at her hand.

"And a few dollars, and this." Mack reached into the envelope and pulled out the pocket watch. "It's a lovely old piece. Family heirloom?"

Joyce snatched the watch from Mack's hand then went back for the envelope. "No, actually, I bought it just last week." The watch went into her pants pocket. She upended the envelope on the counter, spilling the contents across the glass. "Thanks for bringing my stuff back."

Mack leaned his elbows on the counter, closing the distance between them. "I was going to keep it all, but the ring didn't fit."

She reached for the ring, but he snatched it up first. Then he caught her hand and carefully slipped it in place on her finger. Long, thin fingers with nails that could do with a fancy manicure. He held on longer than necessary, holding on until she pulled back.

"I was seriously tempted to keep the pocket watch," he said, staring at what must be the flush warming her cheeks. "The music was so soothing I actually fell asleep listening to it last night. It was the weirdest thing. I was supposed to go back to the party at the lighthouse, but I just zonked right out."

"Really?" Joyce picked up the chain that had been in the envelope and draped it around her neck.

"Just like what happened to you the other night."

"Yes, I guess." She tried to thumb the tiny clasp, but it kept slipping from her fingers.

"That was an apology," said Mack. "I didn't really believe you when you told me that story about falling asleep. Here." He walked around the counter and took the two ends of the necklace from her hands. "Let me help you."

He was standing so close, she could feel his breath on the bare skin of her neck. It gave her a tingle in her spine. It was all she could do to stand still as he fastened the necklace. When he was done, his hands came to rest on her shoulders. "There you go. That clasp is so tiny, I don't know how you manage to hook it by yourself."

"I don't usually take it off."

"Ever?"

Joyce shrugged his hands off her shoulders. "I've got so much work to do. I'm sure you do, too." She had meant the remark to sound professional, one business owner to another, but instead, it came out sounding flip, and that was the way he took it.

"Right, I have tons of work to do. I have a historical landmark to destroy." Mack rounded the counter and headed for the door. He was nearly there when Joyce called to him.

"Why?"

Mack stuffed his hands in his pockets and then turned his face to the ceiling. *Why?* "Because the city hired me to do a job."

"But you could have said no. Instead, you took it on knowing that half the town would oppose it."

Now, Mack turned his gaze to the floor. "Joyce, you bought this shop. If it turns out to have been a bad decision, are you going to walk away from it?"

"No, of course not."

"Same here." He turned his head toward her but not his body. "I may have gotten into this for the wrong reasons, but I'm in it now, so I have no choice but to see it through." Mack pulled open the door, banging the little welcome bell. "You have a leak."

"Excuse me?"

He pointed to the ceiling where he had been staring a moment ago. "See the slight bulge in the tile? It's full of water from the recent rains. Another good storm, and you'll be in need of buckets."

Joyce ran to where he was standing and eyed the ceiling herself. There was a bulge, damn it. Why didn't the inspectors catch that before she signed on the dotted line? "Just great."

"I'll send a guy over to give you an estimate, but in the meantime, check your sales agreement—it may be covered under warranty." Then he left, letting the door swing shut behind him.

Joyce moved to the doorway where she could watch him as he jogged down the porch steps and along the front path to his pickup truck. He seemed quite anxious to leave when only a moment ago, he was standing closer than any man she could remember. Not that there was anything behind his actions. He was simply giving her a hand with her necklace and nothing more. At least she hadn't made a fool of herself by leaning back against him or sighing or something silly like that.

This wasn't a romance novel. This was a businessman who was still waiting for her to sign papers saying she wouldn't sue. Once that was done, he'd be through with her. He'd go back to Amanda Peters-Downey while she'd be emptying buckets from the leak in the ceiling. Joyce slipped her hand into her pocket and drew out the watch. She popped the lid and eyed the cracked crystal.

Why not?

Joyce stuffed her wallet in her pocket, grabbed her keys, and headed out of the store. She took a moment to lock up, jogged down the steps of the old Victorian, turned left, and headed down the street toward the center of town. She passed the bagel shop still bustling with lunchtime activity and Anna Sullivan's bookshop, which had only a single customer inside. When she reached Beach Street, she turned right, passing another block of storefronts and the only gas station in town. The beach ended at the Harbor Boardwalk, a five-mile stretch of sidewalk that ran parallel to the Atlantic shoreline.

Today there were plenty of people on the boardwalk, bicyclists, skaters, and others just out for an afternoon walk.

Stopping on the corner, Joyce turned and looked back at the lighthouse with its bright red peak. It was such a tall structure, one could see the point from anywhere in the city. From right here, it was just perfect, with the smell of salt water in the air and the sound of waves lapping the shore. If only the lighthouse could be moved back to its original home, that would solve everyone's problem, but if the city wasn't considering it, there had to be a good reason why.

"Excuse me," someone called.

Joyce turned back to see that she was blocking the bicycle path. "Sorry." She stepped over the yellow lines that marked the way and followed the pedestrian path down another block. She watched the numbers on the shops go from 2070 to 2050. She climbed the steps to an enclave of small buildings clustered in a semi-circle. There was an arcade, an ice cream shop, and the place she was looking for all along—Treasures of the Deep. The tiny jewelry store traded in shell necklaces, pearl earrings, and pins and hairclips with a nautical theme. Taped to the front window was a hand-lettered sign. Watch Repair, Batteries, Crystals, Cleaning.

Joyce stepped into the store after a woman stepped out dragging a stroller along with her.

"Good day to you!" The elderly man behind the counter smiled and waved to her as if she were two hundred yards away. "A lovely day, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. Your sign says you do watch repair." Joyce slipped her hand into her pocket and pulled out the watch. "I wonder if you could take a look at this for me."

"What have we here?" The old man put on a pair of bottle-thick glasses and sat down on the tall stool behind the counter. "Family heirloom?"

"No, I bought it, actually. I know it's a wreck, but..."

"Now, now, now." The man waved a finger at her. "Let's not be hasty." He thumbed the latch, popping the lid open. Strains of music filled the store. "Lovely. Excellent quality. The notes are clear, not tinny."

"That's what I thought."

"You have a good ear. Let's see. Let's see." He fiddled with the stem of the watch, then opened the back and peered at the works. "Got a broken spring back here. Some rust, but nothing I can't fix."

"Is it very old? Can you tell?"

The man wrinkled his nose and pushed his glasses back on his face. "Probably. Can't tell yet. Have to clean her up some. Want me to take the dent out of the front?"

"No, just fix it so it works, if you can."

"Oh, I think I can. Got my start working on dandies like these, but customers today want new and fancy. They want a plastic watch they can wear in the ocean, or

some watch they saw on a movie star in a magazine. No appreciation for quality. Can you give me an hour?"

"Sure, but..." How to ask this without sounding tacky? "Will it be expensive?"

The man smiled and patted her hand with his bony fingers. "No, it'll be a pleasure to work on a watch like this. Twenty bucks?"

"Fine," Joyce agreed before calculating the consequences. It wasn't exactly money out the window. The watch, if he could get it working, was a practical thing. Maybe, once it was cleaned up and ticking, she could sell it in the shop for double what she paid for it. That was the trick in the antique business, spot a diamond in the rough, clean it up, and cash in.

"I'll be back in an hour," she told the man. She headed back outside to walk the boards.

* * * *

"I was in an apple orchard. I remember thinking it was really important for me to light the heaters, but I was in a hurry. There was a girl waiting for me. I remember thinking that we were going to be late." Mack offered Julian the box of donuts, waited for him to choose one, then set the half-empty box by the coffee pot before returning to his desk. "Then I saw this shadow, a person, I guess, coming towards me. All of a sudden, I'm in pain. It was like I was being hit on the back of the head over and over. I fell to my knees. He kept on hitting. He was calling me names. He was so angry." Mack ran his fingers up his neck to the bone behind his right ear. "He was killing me. That was the scariest thing about the dream. I knew that I was going to die, and I'd never see my girl again." The dream was so vivid, even now, a day later. He could still see all the details in his mind, still feel the pain, still experience the dread of knowing that death was imminent. "What do you think, doc?" Mack turned in his chair to face Julian on the couch. "Am I a puzzle?"

"On the contrary, I'd say that dream was very easy to interpret. You were trying to do your job, light the heaters, but someone was hitting you, knocking you down, beating you up for just doing your job."

"So, the shadowy figure was actually the Save the Lighthouse Committee, people who have been metaphorically beating me up for the last few weeks."

"No metaphoric about it." Julian took a bite of his powdered sugar donut, then frowned at the light dusting of white that littered his navy blue polo shirt. "The committee has been beating you up in a very real sense, and not just the committee. I know Bebe's been giving you hell as well. It's only natural that you feel stressed out about it." Julian got up from the couch, dropped the rest of his donut in the trash, and then searched for something to wipe his fingers. "As for the girl and the dance, that makes sense as well. You fell asleep knowing that Amanda was waiting for you at the charity ball, another concern that wormed its way into your subconscious."

"But why an apple orchard? What's the symbolism there? Apples? Adam and Eve? Snow White and the poisoned apple?"

Julian wiped his hands clean on a paper towel and then used it to brush away the sugar from his shirt. Instead of removing the flakes, the wiping action smeared the white powder, making it worse than it was before he started. He muttered something unintelligible under his breath.

"Wait a minute," Mack said, still wrapped up in his own thoughts. "The other day, Frank told me that there used to be an apple orchard on this very spot."

Giving up the sugar battle, Julian wadded up the paper towel and threw it in the trash on top of the half-eaten donut. "Yes, he's right. I believe there was an orchard here sometime ago. Mystery solved."

"Yeah, I guess."

Instead of returning to his seat on the couch, Julian sat his hip on the edge of Mack's desk. "So what else is on your agenda today? Are you still meeting with that junk man? What was his name? Glimmer?"

"Rimmer. Hans Rimmer, and he's not a junk man. He runs an architectural salvage company." Rimmer and three other companies had all expressed interest in buying the moldings and hardware from the old lighthouse. There was quite a market for antique fixtures that were carefully removed and preserved. The city would get its cut, but Mack expected to clear a pretty profit from the assorted doorknobs, railings, and fancy trim. "I'm meeting him at eleven-thirty." Mack glanced at his watch. Still a good twenty minutes before Rimmer would arrive. Looking at his modern, digital timepiece reminded Mack of Joyce's elegant, musical pocket watch. "Did you ever carry a pocket watch, Julian?"

The old man hesitated, his eyebrows arching upward just a bit. "A pocket watch? No. My father used to carry one though. He had it attached to one of those belly chains. Every time he'd check it, he'd announce the hour like a train conductor. Used to drive my mother nuts."

"Joyce has a pocket watch."

"The girl from the store? The one who hit her head?"

"Yeah, her. When I took her to the hospital the other night, the nurse gave me her jewelry for safekeeping. There was a gold pocket watch with an etching on the front of a map and an airplane. When you open it, it plays the most beautiful music."

"Really? I'd like to see it sometime. Maybe you should invite Joyce over for supper, and she could show it to me."

"You know, that's not a bad idea." Mack leaned forward in his chair, dropping his elbows on the desk. "But I don't think she's quite ready to face Grandma Bebe."

"Is anyone ever ready to face Bebe?" Julian shuttered. "I think not." He slid off the desk and onto his feet. "I'm going to head out of here. Go play a round of golf or something."

"Okay. I'll see you." Mack watched as Julian left the trailer. Then he glanced at his watch one more time.

Joyce.

He kept coming back to her no matter how he tried.

Mack picked up the phone and dialed.

* * * *

Joyce followed the boardwalk for five blocks, window shopping in several stores and sometimes stopping just to watch the waves. It was beautiful and refreshing. It was one of those times where she was glad she had moved to Mystic Harbor.

When she returned to the jewelry shop, the old man was waiting for her. "Come and see!" he said, waving for her to sit on the stool in front of the counter. There was a piece of black velvet on top of the glass. On that was a shiny, gold pocket watch. "How do you like?"

It took Joyce another moment to realize that the bright, gleaming watch was hers. "Wow, it looks great. What did you do to it?"

"Old family recipe and a lot of elbow grease. She's a beautiful piece of work. Made by Stern and Elliott, Chicago in 1943, I found the mark inside. Oh, and look at this." He turned the watch over on its face then popped the back. Inside, the tiny gears and coils gyrated to a happy rhythm.

"It's working."

"Of course., but look at this." The man grabbed the neck of a work light then pulled it down closer to the watch. "See the engraving inside the back cover? It's not the work of a professional. I'd say someone scratched out the markings with a sharp metal object."

AM & EW

"Initials," said Joyce.

"Young lovers," said the man. "The front engraving, now that was done by a skilled hand." He snapped the back shut and turned the watch over once more. The polish had settled in the fine detail of the design, making it easy to pick out a map of Europe with an airplane flying over it. An old airplane, like one would see in a WWII movie. "Excellent work. Truly excellent."

Joyce picked up the watch as if it were a piece of fragile glass. She held it carefully to keep her fingerprints off the polished metal and then thumbed the latch, releasing the lovely musical notes. With the lid open, she could see that the hands were no longer stuck at seven-twenty. They were now set to the correct time. "You're an artist."

"I like to think so!" the man said, puffing up proudly. "I don't suppose you'd like to sell? I'd offer you a good price."

A small electric tingle ran through Joyce's fingers and through her hand. "No, I won't be selling it." Joyce slipped the watch into her pocket and then dug around in her purse for her wallet. "I'm so glad I came by today."

"Lucky," said the man.

Joyce found a twenty among several ones in her wallet. "What do you mean lucky?"

"Usually, on Sundays, I close at one, but yesterday, I forgot to finish my bookkeeping, so I decided to stay later to do the work. You're lucky you caught me."

"Yes. Lucky." But Joyce had a funny feeling that fate was a much better word. "Here you are. You said twenty, right?"

The man took the bill, opened his cash register, and took out a five, which he returned to Joyce. "Didn't take as long as I thought it would. If you do decide to sell, let me know."

"I will, thank you. You have a great day." With the watch ticking away in her pocket, Joyce left the store and walked back down the boardwalk and up the street to the Celestial Emporium.

Chapter Eleven

He called her.

He asked her out.

The high-school girl in her wanted to shout it from the rooftops. The most popular boy in town asked me out! Me! Plain-old Joyce Erikson with the kinky hair and curveless body. The grown woman in her said that shouting from the rooftops would be tacky, but it would be fine to shout it to her best friend.

Kathy.

The one reason Joyce had agreed to meet Mack for dinner was because he chose a restaurant that was out of town. There would be no chance of Kathy seeing them together unless she happened to spot them riding in the car.

Joyce pressed play on the answering machine and listened to the message again.

"I know we got off to a rocky start, but I'd like to make up for all that. Will you have dinner with me? Tonight? I was thinking The Salmon Grill. It's about a half hour up the coast, but it's worth the trip. I know it's short notice."

Short notice? *Hmmm, could you wait while I check my calendar?*

Joyce said yes before giving it a second's thought.

He called her. He didn't say, *hey, you have legal papers to sign, or I called that contractor about your leaky roof.* He called to ask her out to dinner. That thought put a huge smile on her face.

Inside her apartment, Joyce flipped on the TV and then went into the bedroom. What was she going to wear? The Salmon Grill was probably a fancy restaurant, a suit and tie sort of place. She'd have to wear a dress, and she didn't have many to choose

from. Before taking off her pants, she emptied her pockets on the nightstand. The pocket watch, some change, a scribbled note reminding her to order more shopping bags for the store. Then she pulled off her pants and shirt and dropped them both on the bed. Dressed in her underwear, Joyce went into the bathroom. She groaned when she saw her reflection in the mirror.

"That can't be me!" Her hair was flying in all directions, her eyes were red-rimmed, and her pale skin was even paler than normal. "I really need to get some sun." Two blocks from the beach, and she had yet to take advantage of it.

Joyce wound a scrunchy around her hair to secure it behind her head and then bent over to wash her face in the bathroom sink. She soaped up, then rinsed with handfuls of water and patted her face dry before standing upright once more.

There were two reflections in the mirror, and one wasn't hers.

Joyce whirled, assuming her best Charlie's Angels karate pose. No one came flying at her. No one laughed at her attempt to defend herself. No one.

But there was someone. She was sure of it. He must have made a run for it when she turned, back through the open door and into the bedroom.

Holding her breath, Joyce did a mental inventory of the bathroom. What did she have that she could use as a weapon? The shampoo bottle was plastic. Her razor was electric. No real danger there. Toothbrush? Air freshener? Perfect.

Without turning away from the open door, Joyce reached behind her and wrapped her fingers around the aerosol can of Spring Bouquet air freshener. If she had a lighter, she could ignite the spray when it came out of the can. She saw that in a James Bond movie, but even without a lighter, the spray would do its job if she could catch her intruder in the face.

With her fingers tightly on the trigger, Joyce crept slowly into the bedroom. Should she call out? Warn him that she was armed? Or maybe a truly piercing scream would scare him away. She had never screamed before, not intentionally, and she wasn't sure that she could. What if she opened her mouth and a mouse-like squeak came out and nothing more? That would be encouraging, not discouraging, for the intruder.

The closet.

Still barely breathing, Joyce wrapped her shaking fingers around the doorknob, counted silently to three, and then yanked. She pressed down on the button, flooding the closet with a burst of Spring Bouquet.

Nothing.

Even the most stalwart intruder would be coughing after that.

Joyce closed the closet door and then dropped to her knees and checked under the bed.

Nothing.

Standing upright once more, she snatched the pocket watch from the bedside table. "You're coming with me." Clutching the smooth, metal circle in her left hand and

the spray can in her right, she made her way out into the living room. The front door was still closed. There were no places to hide in the sparsely furnished room. That left only the kitchen.

Joyce ran forward spraying all the way. The caustic scent of Spring Bouquet swamped her, driving a deep cough out of her lungs.

Nothing.

"The downside of living alone." Cough. Joyce left the aerosol can on the counter and went back into the living room. She stood there for a moment, wondering if she was going nuts, then realized that she was in full view of the window with nothing but her bra and panties on! Imagine Mack's reaction if he had arrived to pick her up just then. Joyce laughed at the idea, then felt warmth burn into her cheeks as she pictured him standing there with his eyes bugged out.

"Oh, Lord." Joyce made a run for the bedroom. What if he wanted to come in after dinner? What if he wanted to get to know her a little better? She looked down at her plain cotton bra and nylon panties with tiny flowers on them. Not exactly the latest lingerie from Paris, but there wasn't anything different in her dresser.

What kind of underwear would he have on? Were they boxers or briefs? Another warm flush filled her face. Would she actually have the answer to that question before the night was done? Joyce took a deep breath. There was still a touch of Spring Bouquet in the air, but underneath that was a sweet, earthy scent, not flowery, more fruity.

"Probably a banana rotting in the kitchen." She dropped the pocket watch on the bed and went back to the bathroom to finish getting ready for her date.

* * * *

"So, have you always been interested in antiques?" Mack asked once they settled at their table at the Salmon Grill.

"I don't know anything about them," Joyce replied, her eyes fixed on the menu. *Wow, fifteen dollars for an appetizer?*

"I just figured you run an antique store, so you must be interested in antiques."

"Actually, I plan to turn the place into a gift shop. I have so many ideas of what I want to do with the place, but I've got to sell off a lot of the old inventory for room and capital."

The waiter stopped at their table just as she finished speaking. Mack ordered wine for both of them and a fifteen-dollar shrimp appetizer. Joyce used the time to settle on crab cakes for dinner and then set her menu aside.

"So, what are you into?" Mack asked when the waiter was gone.

Joyce hesitated. "Well, I like to read."

"I always swear I'm going to read. I have books stacked to the ceiling by my bed, but I never seem to get to them. You probably don't have that problem."

"No, not really. I'm a pretty fast reader, although I've been falling behind since taking over the store."

"I'll bet. What do you like to read? Mysteries? No, romance, I bet." She could feel herself blushing. "Hey, I don't knock romance novels. My Aunt Della, I swear, reads one a day. She loves those big, thick historical novels like the Lord of the Scottish Highlands who masquerades as a pauper. Then there was this one with a female pirate who captured a wealthy Frenchman and held him for ransom. Only when his family paid, he didn't want to go back."

Joyce giggled. "Sounds like you really know your romance novels."

It was Mack's turn to blush. "My Aunt Della is bedridden. I sit with her, and she tells me all about her books. Sometimes I read to her. I'm not too much of a man to admit that I enjoy a lusty, romantic fairy tale." Mack smiled. "You remind me of my Aunt Della."

"I remind you of your aunt?"

A silent waiter appeared to fill both their glasses with wine.

"Oh, don't worry. She's nothing like Grandma Bebe. They're sisters, but they couldn't be less alike. Della is kind, naïve, and gentle. Bebe is materialistic, aggressive, and demanding." Mack laughed softly. "I guess I'm sort of a combination of the two of them, a kind and gentle construction boss who demands nothing less than perfection."

Joyce smiled. "A winning combination."

Their waiter arrived with the appetizer, took their dinner order, and then left, a quiet and discreet servant.

"What about your parents?" Joyce asked as she reached for her wine. "Are they kind and gentle or aggressive and demanding?"

Mack stilled with his wine glass just barely at his lips. "My parents died when I was very young. They were both killed in a car crash."

* * * *

Joyce's sweet smile fell away. He could see that she was pained by the sudden turn of the conversation. "I'm sorry."

"It's all right. It happened a very long time ago, and we all go on, don't we?" He took a sip of his wine, let it roll in his mouth a moment, and then swallowed. "Della and Bebe took over and raised me, with a little help from my Uncle Julian. He was my substitute father. He taught me how to pitch a baseball. He took me sailing and let me drag him to Boy Scout meetings and father-son camping trips."

"Sounds to me like there was a lot of love in your house."

Mack nodded, his eyes transfixed by the dancing candle flame. As much as Bebe pushed him to be more, be smarter, be better, he knew she did it out of love. She wanted the best for him. They all did, but that was a detail he often forgot. He tore his eyes from the flame and caught Joyce's gaze. "You're right. There was a lot of love. Thanks for reminding me." Mack picked up a shrimp by the tail and dipped its headless form into the accompanying sauce. "So what about you? What's your story?"

Joyce shrugged, apparently uncomfortable with having the spotlight turned in her direction. "I grew up in South Jersey, not far from Philadelphia. Mom, Dad, and two older sisters."

"You were the baby. That's probably worse than being an only like me."

"Sometimes," Joyce admitted. She took a shrimp off her own plate, dipped it in the sauce, and then realizing she couldn't talk and eat at the same time, she returned it to the plate. "Being the baby has its advantages. You get the best presents from Grandma. You can throw a tantrum without anyone saying, 'You're a big girl now, stop that.' On the downside, my sisters were always looking out for me, even when I didn't want them to. Learning to ride a bike, doing homework, walking to the store for a gallon of milk, I wasn't capable of doing any of these things all by myself."

"But now you're running a store all by yourself."

"Yeah, I am." She shifted in her seat and lifted her shoulders.

"Must be tough," he said as he watched her over his wine glass. "You're all alone. If the people don't buy enough, how do you pay the rent?"

"That's why I work parties like the one the other night. I'm also available for weddings, Bar Mitzvahs, babysitting, dog walking, you name it."

"Ah, a true entrepreneurial spirit."

The waiter returned again to deliver a plate of freshly baked bread and Caesar salads. He offered them freshly ground pepper, refilled their water glasses, and was off again, taking Mack's finished appetizer plate with him.

"Such service," said Joyce. "They must know who you are."

Mack picked up his wine glass and tilted it slightly so the deep red liquid colored the glass almost to the top. "Just who am I?"

Joyce hesitated, perhaps unsure if he was teasing her or not. He hadn't meant to sound harsh, but somehow it came out that way.

"You're Mack Merritt of the Massachusetts Merritts."

"What if I wasn't?" He set the glass down, reached across the table, and covered her hand with his. "What if I was John Smith, local fireman or traveling circus clown?"

"Don't you like being Mack Merritt?"

"I guess it's like being the baby of the family. Sometimes, it's a nice perk. Sometimes, it's the source of all my trouble." He let go of her hand and sat back in his chair. A shadow flitted past her eyes, disappointment maybe? Or was that just wishful thinking on his part? "When you look at me, you probably see a guy who has everything he's ever wanted, lots of free time, loads of money, and friends galore. The truth is, I don't have everything I want. My 'free time' is somewhere around three o'clock to four o'clock in the morning. As for money and friends, when you have money, it's very difficult to tell who your friends really are."

Joyce set her fork down and dropped her hands into her lap. "Oh, I see. I tell you that I'm a former spoiled baby of the family who's now struggling to make it on her own."

So you automatically assume that I look at you and see a flashing beacon that says Easy Street. Even after everything I've said and done, you still think this is about money."

Mack shook his head slowly from side to side. "It is about money. It's about the fact that I have it, you don't, and that makes you very uncomfortable." He held his breath, sure that she was going to get up and run or maybe throw a glass of wine in his face. She did neither of these things. What she did was leaned forward in her seat with her hands folded on the table as if she were about to say grace.

"You're right. See, I just don't understand how a guy like you could be interested in someone like me."

Mack got up from his seat across from her and moved to the chair to her right-hand side. She was about to pull her hands off the table once more, but he caught them before she managed.

"Joyce, even from the little I've seen of you, I know that you're a bright, sweet, hard-working woman. That puts you head and shoulders above every girl I've ever known. I think I'm falling in love with you."

She couldn't have been more shocked if he'd dumped the salad on her head. Her big, brown eyes grew ever larger. Her jaw dropped a mile. It took a few seconds before she managed to speak again. "That's silly. You hardly know me!"

Not exactly the response he was hoping for, but pretty much what he had expected. They were practically strangers, just a chance meeting here and there. Still, she lingered on his mind like a tune one couldn't stop singing. What he had never considered was the notion that she didn't feel the same way about him. Mack let go of her hand. "Yeah, crazy, huh? I don't know what came over me." He stood, intent on returning to his original seat, but she caught him by the arm.

"It's not crazy." She twisted her lips to the side in the same way he did when he was caught in a lie. "Okay, it is crazy, but it's sweet. I'm at a loss for what to say."

"Don't say anything just now. I'm good right here." He shook loose from her and returned to his seat across the table just as the waiter returned with their dinner plates.

The table was crowded now with too many dishes, most with barely touched food. Joyce told him to take away her appetizer and salad even though she'd only eaten a bite of each. She then excused herself from the table.

Mack watched her walk away. She turned left in the direction of the ladies room and not right toward the front door. That was a good sign. He grabbed his wine glass and downed several swallows without really tasting. *You blew it, buddy. A lovely dinner date, ruined because you had to play Prince Charming.* He thought of all those romance novels stacked up on Aunt Della's bookshelf, all those cowboys and knights and highwaymen who rode into the mire and seduced the heroine with a lusty smile and a quick line. Maybe it was time he did a little more reading out loud.

* * * *

The ladies room at The Salmon Grill was just as elegant as the rest of the place. The countertop was made of marble, the sink and fixtures of shiny brass. Soft classical

music poured out of some hidden speaker. That reminded Joyce of the watch. Eyeing her own reflection in the mirror, she slipped her hand into her pocket, only to find she didn't have one. She only owned two skirts, and neither of them had pockets. Her good purse was a small, flat clutch that was barely big enough for her wallet and keys, so she had no choice but to leave the watch at home.

The shiny, round pocket watch had become something of a security blanket of late, so Joyce sincerely wished she had found a way to bring it along. She could use something familiar and secure about now.

I think I'm falling in love with you.

Well, he did say 'think.' He didn't say, 'I'm sure I'm in love with you.' So maybe it wasn't love at all. Maybe it was just a misguided sense of guilt because of her accident. Joyce lifted her hair from her face and gazed at her forehead in the mirror. The area was still slightly discolored, but the wound at the back of her head had healed without benefit of stitches, which was lucky. She'd done a stupid thing that night, refusing to go to the hospital. Going to the construction site in the first place was stupider still!

Joyce sighed but tried to catch it as another woman came into the restroom.

"Long day?" asked the middle-aged, well dressed, and perfectly coiffed woman. "No." Keeping her eyes on the mirror, Joyce ran her fingers through her long, wavy hair. The other woman's reflection appeared beside hers.

"Bad date?" She took a lipstick out of her purse and proceeded to revive her lips.

She was a stranger after all, never going to see her again. What the hell! "First date, and he just told me he's falling in love with me."

"Extremely sweet or a gushing geek?" The woman sucked her lips together to even out the color.

"Extremely sweet. A real catch."

"But you don't feel the same about him."

Joyce sighed with her whole body this time. "I don't know. I haven't thought about it. Well, maybe I thought about it a little, but in that, 'wouldn't it be funny if,' sort of way. I never thought we'd have a second date, let alone an 'I love you' kind of thing happening."

The woman dropped her lipstick in her purse and then pulled out a compact. "Well, if he's such a catch, why fight it?" She powdered her nose and forehead, raising a small cloud around her face.

Good question. Was it Kathy's opinion that bothered her? No, Kathy was a good friend She'd get over it. Was it the difference in their backgrounds? Mack didn't seem to mind. So, what was it? "I've got to make it on my own," she said the words out loud without really meaning to. "You see, I just moved here. Not here, but nearby. I bought a store. It's the first time I've ever done anything truly on my own with no help from my family."

"And that's important? Doing it on your own with no help?"

Joyce turned away from the mirror so she could look at the woman head on. "Well, sure. I need to know that I can do this. I need to prove it to myself."

"And to your family," said the woman as she returned her compact to her purse. "What about your date?"

"That's my problem! What if he starts giving me advice and helping me do things, and I start to depend on him? I want to make it on my own."

The woman turned to face her as well. "Here's how I see it. If you *need* to have a man, any man, in your life to feel successful, to feel alive, then you've got a rough road ahead of you, but if you *want* a man in your life, not just any man, but *this* man, then go for it. If he's the man you think he is, he'll let you stand on your own two feet."

Joyce took her first deep breath in an hour. "That is exactly what I need to hear. Thanks." Loaded with newfound wisdom, Joyce headed for the door.

"There is one more thing you should consider," said the woman. "After a hard day of trying to make it on your own, nothing relieves stress better than a properly placed penis."

The heat that burned in her face rose like the mercury in a thermometer on a July afternoon. Joyce dashed out of the bathroom, looked toward Mack, who had his back to her, then skirted the tables and made her way to the front door. She couldn't go back to the table just yet, not with this heat filling her face. Just a breath of cool air, that was all she needed before going back to the table. Just a breath of cool clean air, and she'd be fine.

* * * *

As soon as Joyce stepped outside, she could hear the sound of the surf pounding on the rocks just a few yards away. It was a beautiful sound, one she could listen to forever and ever without tiring of it. The wind had the power to move a shoreline, and yet, it also had the serenity to whisper like a butterfly's wings. She took a deep breath, filling her lungs with the scent of the sea. A cool breeze washed over her. She could feel the blush fade from her face even though the woman's words were still clear in her head.

What would it be like, making love to a muscled, aggressive man like Mack Merritt? Joyce didn't have much experience in that department. There was Lee back in college, only interested in his own pleasure, never hers. There was Ronny, the greeting card salesman, back in Philly. Ronny made it plenty clear that she had a lot to learn, but he had no interest in teaching her. *Come back when you've got it right*. Man, that had stung worse than a good rap in the mouth.

Mack probably had loads of experience. How happy would he be with a woman who was still finding her way?

"There you are."

Joyce whirled right into Mack's open arms.

"I was wondering what happened to you. I sent a waitress into the ladies room. When she didn't find you, I got worried. I thought maybe you skipped out on me." He didn't smile when he said it. He was serious.

"I just came outside to get some air, that's all. It's so lovely out tonight, here, with the sound of the waves."

Mack cocked his head slightly, his eyes focused on nothing. "You can hear the waves. What do you know? I'm so used to the sound, I don't even hear it anymore."

"That's such a shame."

"Yeah, I suppose so." He looked down at her, still in his arms. He brushed a long strand of hair away from her face. His rough fingers skimmed the skin at her temple, just the barest touch, but it sent a shiver up her spine.

"That's the whole reason I moved to Mystic Harbor. It was because of the ocean. I just love the ocean, especially the sound of waves hitting rock. It's different than waves coming up on a sandy beach. That's good, too, but this is really special. As soon as I can manage a day off, I'm going to go down to the Harbor and maybe go out on one of those tour boats. Have you ever done that? Taken a tour boat up the coast?"

Mack didn't answer. He was looking right at her, but it didn't appear that he'd heard a single word. Not one, the way she rambled on and on about nothing. "I'm sorry. I get carried away sometimes. You really have to stop me."

"What?" His arms tightened around her, pulling her closer to his chest. "I'm sorry. My mind was wandering. That's entirely my fault. What were you saying?"

"Nothing, it was nothing. I talk too much, especially when I'm nervous." She tried to hide her face, but he caught her beneath the chin with one finger, holding her steady.

"I'm going to come clean here because I don't want you to feel bad. See, I'm having a wonderful time. I am interested in everything you have to say, really. It's just that you are so beautiful, I can't seem to keep my mind on the conversation."

Joyce thought she would melt right there. Straight on down into a pool of goop on the front walk of The Salmon Grill. "You're certainly better with words than I am."

"I'm serious, Joyce. I am so captivated by your warm eyes and silky hair and perfect lips that I can only think of one thing." Still holding her chin up, he leaned forward and set a delicate kiss on her mouth. "Okay, I can think of several things, but they're all related, and most of them can't be done in a public place." Joyce giggled, and he responded with a warm smile. "What say we go back inside and finish our dinner, then we can take a stroll along the beach. How does that sound?"

"That sounds wonderful."

Mack stepped to the side and linked his arm through hers. "Shall we?"

They were just stepping up to the entrance when the door to the restaurant swung open. A couple came out, the woman from the ladies room with a much younger male escort. Joyce tried not to make eye contact, but it didn't matter. As soon as the woman saw them, recognition registered on her face.

"Mack! How nice to see you." She grabbed Mack by the shoulders and kissed him on the cheek. "Tell Bebe that I'll be by next Tuesday for bridge. I couldn't make it last week. I had a gallery showing in New York."

Mack! She knew Mack and his grandmother! Desperate, Joyce tried to recall every word of their conversation in the ladies room. Had she said anything unkind? Anything weird? Anything she wouldn't want repeated to the Merritt family?

"Oh, you better call my grandmother," Mack was saying, "I think she canceled bridge, something about an emergency meeting at the Harbor Club."

"Everything's an emergency at the Harbor Club."

"I'm sorry." Mack slipped his arm around Joyce's back, pulling her closer to him as she attempted to shrink away. "Joyce Erikson, this is Alyson and Michael Brenner. Alyson's an old friend of my grandmother's."

"Not that old, darling."

Joyce was frozen, holding her breath in fear of what the woman might say. 'Oh, so this is the young man you were talking about in the ladies room' or 'He's a marvelous catch. An excellent stress reliever.'

"How do you do," was the best Joyce could manage.

"It's very nice to meet you," Mrs. Brenner replied. "Have you known Mack long?"

Joyce nearly sighed with relief. "No, actually this is our first date."

"How lucky for you." She gave Joyce a gentle pat on the arm. "Mack is as sweet as they come. I'd fight you for him if I didn't have Michael." Mrs. Brenner gave her husband a hug.

"We'd ask you to join us for a drink," said Mr. Brenner, "but we really have to run."

"Rain check then," said Mack.

They exchanged goodbyes. The Brenners went on their way toward the parking lot.

"Her fourth husband," Mack said when they were out of earshot. "Each one younger than the last."

Joyce couldn't even think of a return comment. All she could think about was the interesting conversation Mrs. Brenner could have with Bebe Merritt the next time they met for bridge. 'You'll never believe who I ran into in the ladies room of The Salmon Grill...'

Chapter Twelve

They stood on the porch with nothing but the glow of a single light illuminating his face. He slipped his arms around her waist, pulling her tight to his chest. He was so much taller, she had to tip her head back to look him in the eye. That was when he bent down and kissed her. It wasn't the same delicate kiss he had bestowed upon her outside the restaurant. This was warmer, deeper. His tongue played over hers gently, never rough, giving her the option of pulling away if she wanted. And she wanted, but not for him to stop. She wanted it to be like this, always, his arms around her, his broad shoulders for her to lean on, the taste of his lips on hers.

Mack broke the kiss and buried his face in her hair as he breathed her name. His hips rolled forward to meet hers. There was no mistaking his intentions. Joyce pressed back against him, felt his hardness brush against her thigh. She played the fast forward button in her mind. They would rush upstairs, shoes and coats tossed aside when they hit the living room. Their hands and lips would be connecting and discovering. Maybe they would do it right there on the couch. Maybe he would lift her in his arms and carry her into the bedroom. There would be no time to undress. He would unzip his pants and pull off her panties. He would be deep inside of her before she could voice any words of reason. He would be strong and hard—nothing tentative about his thrusts.

A sound rose in her throat, a cross between his name and a pleading moan.

Then suddenly, he stepped back, putting an arm's length between them.

"I've gotta get out of here," he said, forcing the words out between deep breaths. "I had a wonderful time, Joyce." Then he swept up her hand and touched his lips to the backs of her fingers.

And that was how he left it.

Left her.

What the hell had just happened?

Joyce closed the door to the shop, locked it, but stayed there peering out around the shade, watching as Mack crossed the street and climbed into his parked car. As she watched him, the strangest warm glow filled her body. He was just so sweet and so cute. Most women, she supposed, would be disappointed at the idea of being left with only a kiss. Maybe she was supposed to feel insulted, but she didn't. It was perfect. It was right, and it was a bit of a relief. What would she have done if he had asked to come in or to spend the night? Would she have been able to say no? Would she even have wanted to?

Mack tapped his horn lightly and then waved as he pulled away from the curb before driving off into the night like Cinderella two minutes before midnight. He knew she was watching. Was that a good thing or a bad thing? Joyce groaned. Over-analyzing every move? *That* was a crush thing.

"I've got a crush! A mad, impetuous crush!" It tickled her to shout into the empty store where no one else could hear. It was just a simple kiss. Okay, not so simple at all.

She should have been crushed, disappointed, but Joyce felt a smile spread across her face, a big, wide, and probably goofy smile, along with the fluttery feeling that had taken over her stomach. Macklin Merritt. It was too good to be true.

A gentleman. That was why he left. He didn't want to push, to put her in a compromising position. Slowly, she made her way upstairs to her apartment.

Oh, sure, part of her wished he had, but another part found it sweet, endearing...

A crash wiped the smile off her face in an instant. She froze only two steps down from the door. Maybe Mack going home wasn't such a good thing after all. Joyce backed down three steps and then held her breath and waited to hear another sound. Silence.

Allowing just a bit of air into her lungs, Joyce climbed the stairs once more. Couldn't be an intruder. Who would want to break in to her place? Anyone in town knew she had nothing worth stealing. If one wanted to rob a house, the Merritt home would certainly be higher on the list. With a shaky hand, she grabbed the doorknob and turned it. All quiet. One, two, three. Joyce shoved the door open so hard, it banged against the wall and came back in her face.

"Come on in, Mack!" she yelled. "I don't mind at all if you bring your dog! He's very well behaved for a pit bull!" Joyce ran straight for the bookshelf, grabbed a stone bookend shaped like a gargoyle, and raised it over one shoulder like a baseball bat. "Your dog sounds hungry, Mack! Maybe I can find some raw meat in the kitchen." Joyce ran into her bedroom, swinging the gargoyle in anticipation of anything that might come her way. Nothing did.

A quick check of the bathroom proved it was empty as well, as did checks of the closet and under the bed. Did burglars generally hang out in the kitchen? When she returned to the living room, she saw the broken picture frame with its glass scattered over the top of her dining table. It was one of three fairy prints that hung on the south wall. Apparently, this one had come loose, and when it fell, it hit a glass candleholder directly below it. Giving up her gargoyle, Joyce picked up the bent remains of the metal frame along with the nail that had held it in place.

"This is why you're supposed to hammer nails into a stud. Or get a stud to hammer your nails."

Joyce went to the kitchen and got a trashcan and a dishtowel, then returned to the living room to clean up the mess. The frame was garbage, as was the print inside. Those went into the trash along with a shower of glass shards big and small. The candleholder survived the fight with just minimal damage, and beside that, she found the pocket watch.

"You are just a magnet for trouble, aren't you?" Joyce wiped the cloth across the face of the watch and was pleased to see it was no worse for the wear. She thumbed the latch, expecting to hear the soothing sounds of *Fur Elise*, but the watch remained silent. She held it close to her ear. Still ticking. Maybe the crash had caused some damage after all.

Closing the lid, Joyce set the watch on the table. She went back to the bedroom to change for bed.

* * * *

Della looked at the clock on her bedside table. "You're home early. I thought you had a date."

"I did." Mack leaned over and set a kiss on his aunt's cheek. "A very pleasant date at that."

"But you're home already? It's barely eleven o'clock. I didn't expect to see you before morning."

Mack narrowed his eyes and frowned. "Auntie, are you suggesting what I think you're suggesting? I think you've been reading too many steamy romance novels."

"I may be old, but I'm not dumb. I know what goes on between a young man and a woman." She leaned closer and whispered, "I had a tryst or two in my time, too, you know."

"Auntie, I'm shocked!"

She slapped his leg with her frail hand. "You stop that. So what happened? She wasn't Miss Right after all?"

Mack let his chin drop to his chest to cover the broad smile that took over his face. "That's just it, Auntie. She might be Miss Right. That's why I kissed her good-night at a decent hour and went on my way like a gentleman." He looked up again, expecting to see a laugh on her lips. Instead he saw something completely different. Her eyes were misty, and her mouth was pressed in a tight line. "Are you going to cry?" Mack took her hand, surprised by how breakable she felt. "What did I say?"

"You just reminded me of someone, that's all. A young man." Della shook her head as if to push the thoughts away. "I think that's very sweet. When are you going to bring her here so I can meet this gem?"

"As soon as Grandmother's dress comes back from the cleaners." They both laughed, and for a moment, their two voices sounded like one. "He's a jerk."

"Who?"

Cynthia Boris

"The man who broke your heart." Mack lifted her hand and kissed the tissue-paper skin. "Good night, Auntie."

"Good night, sweetheart."

Chapter Thirteen

Joyce's heart skipped a beat every time the phone rang. Each time she heard the jangle, she let it ring at least twice so as not to appear too anxious. She prepared herself to sound calm and disinterested, then answered the phone with a cheery hello, held her breath and waited for the sound of Mack's deep, warm voice.

She was disappointed three times in a row. The first call, at nine-thirty, was the giftware distributor saying that her delivery would be late by two days. Joyce took it as a bad omen. The second call was a woman wanting to speak to Mrs. Ragsdale and no one else. Joyce explained that she was the new owner of the shop, but still, the woman steadfastly refused to speak with her. At eleven-forty, her mother called just to see how things were going. Joyce was tempted to tell her about Mack and the lovely evening they had shared, but she didn't for fear of jinxing the whole thing. She could just imagine her mother calling back once a week for six months still asking, 'Whatever happened to that nice young man you told me about?' Forget it. Joyce decided the news could wait until their second date, if they ever had a second date.

By quarter-to-one, Joyce was sure that there would be no phone call, let alone a second date with Mack Merritt. Frankly, it was hard to hide her disappointment. Maybe dropping her on the porch with nothing but a kiss hadn't been such a good sign after all.

Determined to get her mind off the lack of a phone call, Joyce set about erecting the new CD stand that arrived that morning. Fitting the wire rack together was a bit of a puzzle, but after struggling with it for a half-hour, she finally had it built and ready to go. She was loading CDs into the wire baskets when Kathy showed up.

"I come bearing gifts!" she exclaimed and bestowed a long, greasy paper bag on Joyce. "Italian Hoagies, just like we used to get in Philadelphia. Mr. Spinelli on the boardwalk made them. Just don't tell my dad."

Joyce stuck her nose in the bag and sniffed. The wonderful, spicy aroma of oregano and salami renewed her spirit. Suddenly, she realized how long it had been since she ate. "You're an angel."

"I try." Kathy checked out the new CD rack by giving the unit a spin. "So, how's it going?"

"It's going...slowly, but going. I've had a couple of big sales and a dozen or so little sales, but not even enough to pay the rent." Joyce went to the front door, shut it, and turned the sign to Closed.

"Things will pick up, especially with the new merchandise. Like this—" Kathy pulled a CD out of the rack. "Gnos Larutan?" She flipped the plastic CD case upside down. "Ah, Natural Song. You might sell more if you put them in the rack the right way." Kathy frowned at the display, then plucked two more CDs from their spot and flipped them around before returning them to the rack. "I think you need your eyes checked."

"I guess I have other things on my mind."

"Oh? Like what?"

To tell or not to tell? Kathy would be angry, but Joyce was never very good at keeping secrets. "Let's go upstairs and talk. These hoagies are calling my name." Carrying the bag, Joyce led the way up to her apartment. Once inside, she set the food on the dining table and went into the kitchen to get plates, two glasses of soda, and plenty of napkins. When she returned, Kathy had the sandwiches unwrapped, filling the room with an aroma that actually made her homesick.

"My dad used to buy the best hoagies from this little hole-in-wall deli near our house. They were party food—birthdays, graduation, Father's Day. Any time people gathered at our house, it was hoagie time." Joyce inhaled long and deep. "I miss my folks," she admitted on the exhale.

Kathy pouted like a spoiled two-year-old. "But you have me."

"Yes, I do." Joyce threw her arms around her girlfriend and gave her one of those hugs that men wouldn't understand. So what if Mack Merritt didn't call? She had everything she needed, right here.

Giving Kathy some breathing room, Joyce took the seat across from her and dove into her half of the hoagie. The greasy, spicy taste was like a little bite of heaven, so much so she closed her eyes to get the full enjoyment out of the bite. It was funny. The food at The Salmon Grill was probably the most expensive Joyce had ever eaten, but none of it topped the taste of this cheap, boardwalk sandwich.

"So, what's on your mind?" asked Kathy.

"Mack Merritt." The words came out without her really thinking about it.

"Merritt! I thought you two straightened out that whole trespassing mess."

"We did." Joyce wiped her fingers on a napkin then took a sip of her soda. "And now we're..." It sounded so funny to say it. "Dating."

"Dating! As in going out? Have you lost your mind?"

Joyce had expected Kathy to be angry, but still, the venom in her voice was a bit hard to take. "No, I haven't lost my mind. He's a very nice person. He's not at all the spoiled brat everyone makes him out to be."

"But he's knocking down the lighthouse!" Kathy yelled, waving her arms and nearly knocking over her own glass of soda.

"I don't care about the lighthouse!"

Kathy's mouth dropped open. She looked as if she'd been slapped. "Oh, I see. A week ago, you were all set to defend the lighthouse to the very end. Then a man comes along, and suddenly it's not worth the effort."

"It's not like that. I was never very into this lighthouse thing. You dragged me to that meeting. All I wanted to do was run my store and get settled, but I went because it was so important to you."

"It is important to me. I grew up with that lighthouse. It's just like you and these hoagies. They remind you of the good times with your family, and see, when I was a kid, I'd go sailing around the pier with my family, and we'd search for crabs around the rocks. When I was very little, my father taught me to always look for the lighthouse if I got lost. You could see the tip of it from anywhere in the city, so no matter where you were, you could find your way home."

"I know," Joyce protested, suddenly losing her taste for lunch. "But it's not like Mack's knocking down the lighthouse for his own nefarious reasons. He's just doing his job."

Kathy shook her head. "You know what's funny about all this? I've been doing some research on the lighthouse. I found out that it was Mack's father who got the city to save it in the first place. His father came up with the idea of moving it. Merritt Construction paid almost eighty percent of the costs. Then here's Mack, eager to knock it down. What's that all about? Doesn't he care that his father's sweat equity is in that building?"

"Mack told me his parents were killed in a car accident when he was little. I got the feeling he really didn't know his dad."

"What's that supposed to be—a sympathy play?"

"No, just a fact. Kathy, I really like him. Really. I realize I haven't known him very long, but he's not like anyone I've ever met before. I want to see more of Mack. I don't want to have to choose between you and him."

"Well, you may have to." Kathy stood up, shoving the dining room chair back with her legs. "Saving the lighthouse is very important to me, but if he's more important to you, then so be it." She stomped toward the door, ignoring Joyce's pleas to stop and be reasonable. "Boyfriend or girlfriend," Kathy called over her shoulder as she left. "Pick one." Then she was gone, leaving Joyce with a wretched stomachache and a pout of her own.

* * * *

"Goddamn it!" Mack shoved the office door open with enough force to rock the trailer.

"What happened?" Mrs. Hansen cried.

Mack was holding a handkerchief to his head. There was blood running down the side of his face. "I got hit by a wrench."

The older woman took Mack by the arm and guided him to the couch. "Someone hit you with a wrench?"

"No, the wrench hit me all by itself. It fell from the scaffolding. I was just standing there talking to Frank, and *pow*, it smacked me right in the head. No warning." The day had started out so well, too. Mack had arrived at work that morning with a smile on his face, an event so unusual his crew backed away in fear when they saw him. Even Mrs. Hansen did a double take, but Mack assured her that his smile was the result of a lovely dinner date and not an aberration of a mind that had finally snapped.

He had spent a good portion of the morning with Joyce Erikson on his mind. He saw her face when he was still lying in bed. He smelled her hair when he was in the shower. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get past the feeling of her small body cradled in his arms. Three times, he picked up the phone to call her, but each time he convinced himself that it was the wrong thing to do. Joyce was a bit skittish. Any more push on his part might just push her far, far away.

Now, the only thing on his mind was a place to sit down and a couple of aspirin.

"Let me see." Mrs. Hansen took hold of the cloth, pushing Mack's hand away. Slowly, she lifted it off the wound. "You're going to need stitches."

"I don't need stitches." Mack stared at her, blinked, and then focused again. "I didn't know you had a twin sister."

"I'm calling an ambulance."

The office door banged open once more. It was Julian. "I've got the car outside," he said, holding the door open. "Let's go, Mack."

"I'm fine," he grumbled. "Who the hell was up there? Why didn't he yell when he dropped the wrench?"

"Frank is checking into it. Come on, boy. You'll live to fight another day." Giving up the door, Julian came to help Mack to his feet. He stood, felt light-headed, and began to tilt sideways.

"Is it warm in here?"

"I'm calling 911," said Mrs. Hansen.

"No need." Julian put his arm around Mack's waist and steered him toward the door. "I'll have him there in ten minutes."

"Is it warm in here?" asked Mack. "It's really warm in here."

"Good thing he's got a hard head, just like his father," said Mrs. Hansen.

"Yeah, good thing." Julian held the door open with his left arm as he guided Mack down the shaky metal stairs. They were almost to Julian's car when Henry came running.

"What happened to Mr. Mack? Is that blood?"

"Got hit on the head with a wrench," Julian explained as he opened the passenger side door.

"A wrench?" Henry ducked to the right, trying to get a better look. "The scaffolding the other day, and now this. I had a bad feeling. It's the spirits, Mr. Mack. I thought they were gone, but they're not."

"Henry, relax. I'll be fine," Mack assured as he tilted his head back against the headrest.

Julian ran around to the driver's side of the car and slid in behind the wheel.

"I shouldn't have done it," Henry moaned. "I shouldn't have." He reached into his coat and pulled out a flat bottle of whiskey. "I thought the spirits were gone, but they're here, and they're mad." He took a swig from the bottle as the car sped out of the lot, tires kicking up pebbles. "Never should have sold her that watch. They're mad, and I expect they want it back."

* * * *

Joyce spent the rest of the day contemplating the idea of selling the shop and moving back to New Jersey. Her loneliness and homesickness had grown tenfold since Kathy's tirade earlier that afternoon. Her only hope of solace, Mack Merritt, had abandoned her. She was about to settle down for a good cry when she heard the bell above the door tinkle. Unable to see who had entered, Joyce wished for it to be someone tall, dark, and handsome. Instead, it was someone, short, blonde, and cute—Kathy.

"I'm sorry."

Joyce knew those words didn't come easy, so she appreciated them all the more.

"I shouldn't have gone off on you like I did," Kathy continued, keeping a safe distance between them. "I want you to be happy here. I feel like I talked you into moving here and buying this place, so I feel kind of responsible for you. If I complain about Mack, it's just that I'm looking out for you." Then she cast her eyes to the floor and rubbed a spot with the toe of her shoe. "Maybe I'm just a little bit jealous."

"Jealous? Of me?" Joyce couldn't remember anyone saying that about her—ever in her whole life. Kathy was always the one with the boyfriends and the clothes and luck, the one everyone envied when they saw her laughing and carrying on with her large circle of friends.

"I've lived here all my life, and he's never once given me a tumble. You move in a couple of weeks ago, and he's head over heels."

"Well, I wouldn't say head over heels."

"What would you say?"

Joyce hesitated; dying to tell but not sure if she wanted to derail the train. "He said he was falling in love with me."

Kathy's mouth dropped open, but this time it wasn't out of anger. "In love? He actually said in love?"

"He actually said." Joyce's face felt warm. "Oh, Kathy, he's so sweet and charming and..."

"Sexy?"

"Definitely, sexy."

That did it. Kathy closed the space between them and then some. She caught Joyce by the arm and steered her toward the corner of the store even though they were alone in the space. "So, spill it. Did you do it? Did you have sex with him?"

It was Joyce's turn to drop her jaw. "What kind of a question is that?"

"A perfectly naturally one. Oh, come on, give. Is he something? I mean, he's a construction professional, so I imagine he's got a professional-sized screwdriver. Am I right?"

Forget warm blush. Joyce's face was on fire. "I wouldn't know." She barely managed to get the words out. "Because we didn't—do *it* or anything. We had a dinner date, and we walked on the beach, then he brought me home and kissed me good-night, and that was that."

"That was that?" Kathy clucked her tongue as she shook her head. "I don't get it. When a guy tells you he loves you, he generally does it just to get you into bed."

"Mack's different," Joyce said and felt immensely proud of the fact at that.

"Apparently, he is." Kathy gave a high-pitched, 'hmmm' then walked away shaking her head, obviously perplexed by it all.

Joyce took advantage of the silence to will the heat from her burning cheeks then filled her lungs with a few deep breaths to slow her pulse. Just talking about having sex with Mack had given her quite a rush. Imagine what it would happen if they actually did it!

If?

Joyce crossed that thought out of her mind.

When.

Despite his lack of phone call, Joyce found herself with a renewed sense of hope, for Mack, for the store, for her new life, for everything.

The tinkle of the front door bell cut into her thoughts. She turned, expecting to see a customer, but it was only Henry looking a bit more off balance than the first time they'd met.

"Lookin' for Martha," he said, his fingers reaching for something only he could see.

"Henry, I told you before, Mrs. Ragsdale doesn't live here anymore."

The old man shook his head. He reached into his pocket and pulled out—nothing.

"Gotta see Martha about the watch."

Apparently, his memory wasn't all that bad, but Joyce's was. "Oh, that's right. I still owe you twenty dollars. I forgot all about it. I'm really sorry." Joyce went around behind the cash register, keyed in a no sale, then pulled two tens from the till. "Here you go. All paid up."

Henry shook his head. "No, can't take it. I need the watch back."

Joyce slipped her hand into her pocket. Her fingers wrapped around the smooth, round metal case. "Whatever for?"

"Spirits are mad. Shouldn't have taken it in the first place."

Taken it? Joyce groaned. So he had stolen it after all! That made her an accessory after the fact. "You told me you found it in your mother's attic."

"Lies." Henry's eyes strayed to the right. He picked up a feathered hat, examined it for a second, then put it on his head. "Me mum had a hat like this."

"Henry!" Joyce snapped. "Tell me about the watch. Where did you get it?"

"Probably pick-pocketed it from some unsuspecting tourist," said Kathy.

"Did not!" Henry threw the hat on the floor. "I didn't steal it. I did find it in the dirt. It didn't belong to no one. Mr. Mack always lets me keep the things I find in the dirt."

Mack? Now he really had Joyce's attention. "Mack Merritt? What's he got to do with this?"

"I work for Mr. Mack, so I wasn't trespassing or nothing. He pays me to clean up after the workers. I get a bonus if I find stuff they can use again, straight nails, good boards, like that."

"At the construction site? Over by the lighthouse?" Joyce squeezed the watch tightly in her palm.

"Yeah, that was where I found it. I thought maybe it was an old doorknob, one of those expensive ones they sell in the fancy stores. So I dug it up, and it was the watch. It didn't belong to nobody. It was all caked with mud. It had been in the ground a long time. It didn't belong to nobody." Henry stopped speaking, but his lips continued to move like a cow chewing cud.

"Well then, there's no problem. You found the watch. I paid you for it. Now, it belongs to me. It's fine," said Joyce, but her stomach was doing flip-flops. She had to keep the watch. She just had to. "Look, if Mack complains, you just send him to me, all right? I'll take care of it."

"He don't know about the watch. Maybe I should have turned it in to him, but he never minds if I take stuff I find. He lets me take all the cans to the recycle place. I get to keep the money, so he'd want me to have the watch. I gotta have it back. I gotta put it back in the dirt. I thought the spirits were gone, but they're not. They're mad. Mad at me."

"Spirits?" Kathy asked, hardly able to keep from laughing. "You mean ghosts?"

"I know what you think. Old man with a bottle." He patted his coat where he kept his stash. "But you, girl." He pointed a shaky finger at Joyce. "You tell me you ain't seen weird things since I gave you that watch. You tell me."

The shadow in the shower, the fussy CD player, the feeling that someone was watching, the face in the mirror, not to mention her unexplainable compulsion to visit the construction site the night she got hurt. None of that mattered. The only thing that mattered was sending him away empty-handed. "I don't know what you're talking about, Henry. I think you've had too much to drink. You better leave."

Henry dived for her. He grabbed Joyce by the arms and shook her with more force than she would have thought possible in his condition. "I need that watch back! I've got to put it back in the ground." He reeked of liquor and rancid food and urine. Stained fingers tightened around Joyce's upper arms as his glassy eyes bore into hers. "Bad things are happening over there, missy. People are getting hurt, and it's all my fault! Wait until you see Mr. Mack! Wait until you see what they did to him. I gotta put it back."

"Henry, let go!" Joyce shouted.

The old man flew backwards and smashed into the CD rack. The wire spinner tipped, held for a moment, and then toppled, sending plastic CD cases skittering across the floor.

"Oh, my God," Joyce breathed. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to...I didn't..." She offered her hand to him, but Henry crab-walked backwards, CD's cracking beneath the weight of his body.

"I just don't want nobody getting hurt 'cause of me. Don't want nobody getting hurt." Finally, he got his feet under him. "You talk to Mr. Mack. You tell him he has to stop what he's doing out there. Stop before somebody gets killed. You hear me?" Henry stumbled backwards, knocked down a hat rack and a pile of books, and then made it to the front door. "He's gotta stop. You gotta put it back." Then he ran out the door and disappeared quickly.

Joyce stared after the man even after he was long gone. Spirits? He said the spirits were angry because she had the watch. People were getting hurt, including Mack?

"What the hell just happened?" Kathy asked, frozen in her tracks.

What did happen? Joyce looked down at the CD rack and the scattering of thin plastic squares. "He was hurting me. I pushed him. I didn't mean to push him so hard." She righted the rack and began picking up the CDs.

"You didn't push him. You never laid a hand on him," Kathy protested.

"Then he fell, tripped. He was drunk." Two CD cases were broken. Those went onto the counter, the others back in the rack.

"What about this watch he was talking about?"

"What about it?" Joyce snapped.

Cool. Take it easy. Nothing's going to happen.

She raked her fingers through her hair from her forehead to the back. "I'm sorry. He scared me, okay? He was angry and drunk. God only knows what he might have done."

"Maybe you should have given him the watch back," Kathy said softly.

Joyce found another CD that had slipped halfway beneath a bookcase. She fished it out, returned it to the rack, then went to right the stack of books Henry had knocked over.

"Joyce, why didn't you give it back?"

"It doesn't belong to him. It belongs to me. I paid good money to have it repaired at that jewelry shop on the boardwalk. It's mine."

A soft classical tune wafted through the air. Joyce stuck her hand in her pocket and found the watch shut tight. Funny. The music was so clear...

Kathy stuck her hand in her purse and pulled out her cell phone. When she hit the answer button, the music stopped.

Not the watch at all. Just a bit of Bach from Kathy's cell phone. Joyce righted the hat rack and replaced the three spring bonnets on each of the pegs. Henry's words bounced around in her head as she worked. Accidents at the construction site and angry spirits, but why listen to the words of a drunken old man?

"That's my dad," Kathy said, returning the phone to her purse. "He needs me to come to work. One of the waitresses called in sick." She slung the strap of her purse onto her shoulder. "Are you going to be all right?"

"I'm fine. Don't tell me you believed all of Henry's nonsense about spirits."

"I wasn't buying it until I saw him fly across the room like that." Kathy lifted Joyce's hair off her shoulder. "If he comes back, you should call the police."

"I don't think he'll be back." Joyce opened the front door and stood aside for Kathy to exit first. She followed her friend out onto the porch. "Thanks for your help today."

"Sure. I'll call you tonight." With a wave, Kathy trotted down the steps.

Joyce sat down on the swing, watching as Kathy made her way down the sidewalk to her parked car. The swing began to glide with very little effort. Once she had it going, Joyce pulled her legs up to the side. It was a lovely, sunny day. The roses were in bloom, and the grass was the brightest green she had ever seen. She slipped her hand into her pocket and drew out the watch.

It felt so warm in her hand, so alive. She couldn't bear the thought of being without it, of burying the object back in the dirt as Henry suggested. He was wrong about that, wrong. Joyce closed her eyes and clutched the watch to her chest. She felt a sense of time running out, but for whom?

Chapter Fourteen

Mack spent six hours in the emergency room waiting to be seen, waiting for stitches, waiting for another doctor to check the stitches once they were done, and then the final indignity, a tetanus shot. As he lay there listening to the hushed din that surrounded him, his spirits sank lower and lower.

What was the point of all of this?

A grown man, still living at home, still following his grandmother's orders, still doing just what other people expected of him. It was nauseating, or maybe that was the head wound making his stomach flip. It was time to get out—of the house and the job...and he would, as soon as this job was done. Knocking down the lighthouse and erecting the new Mystic Harbor Mall would be his last hurrah, but then what?

Mack's thoughts were interrupted by a nurse with a stack of papers and a pen in hand.

"Time to go, Mr. Merritt. If you'll just sign here...and here...and here..."

And there and there and there—Mack's head was swimming.

The next thing he knew, Julian was at his side helping him down from the rolling bed. "Let's get you home, boy."

"I've got work to do," Mack protested.

"Not today. You're done for now." Julian guided him toward the door.

Once Mack was up and walking, he found the movement helpful. Once outside, the cool evening air was refreshing. Of course, anything would beat the smell of hospital antiseptic. Moving slowly and carefully, Mack crossed the parking lot and then climbed into the passenger side of Julian's car. As soon as his butt hit the seat, he closed his eyes and laid his head back against the rest to quell another wave of nausea.

He felt the car dip as Julian climbed behind the wheel, then the rumble of the engine and the forward motion of movement.

"Ready to call it quits?"

Mack opened his eyes and was pleased to find the world straight and not tilted. "Quits? The lighthouse project or life in general?"

Julian laughed deep in his chest. "Maybe it is time you moved on."

"That's funny. I was thinking the exact same thing. I'd like to have a house of my own and a job I chose instead of one that was chosen for me."

"What's stopping you?"

The car rolled to a halt at a red light. Mack turned to look out his window at the quaint row of Victorian style houses that populated Mystic Harbor. "It's not so easy. I have responsibilities. You don't just walk away from your responsibilities. I mean, if I shut down Merritt Construction, a lot of guys will be out of work."

"That's very commendable, but there are ways around it. You could hire someone else to run the company. Your foreman, Frank, is a good man."

"Yeah, he's good at what he does, but he's not really a paperwork person." Mack turned away from the scenery and looked at the man behind the wheel. Julian had been such a large part of his life for so long, always there when he needed advice and always ready to listen when all he needed was an ear. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

"You could run Merritt Construction. You did it before, when I was a kid. Frank could handle the labor. You could handle the business."

Julian scrunched his features into his 'maybe' face. "I'm not a young man anymore."

"Oh, please," Mack chided. "I'd say you still had a few good years left in you."

"What about you?" Julian countered.

"Me? I hope I have *at least* a few good years left—don't rush me."

"Time flies, my boy. You put off things thinking there's always tomorrow, but before you know it, your tomorrows are gone."

"That's depressing."

Julian turned the car onto Beach Boulevard and then climbed the hill to the fancier homes that lined Mystic Inlet. "All I'm saying is, you shouldn't leave your dreams just lying around gathering dust. Take this girl, Joyce."

The sound of her name gave Mack a funny little flutter, a sensation he hadn't experienced in quite a long time before she came along. "What about Joyce?"

"You've got feelings for her." Julian glanced over at Mack. "I have eyes. I can see."

"She's pretty special," Mack admitted. "But she's kind of skittish. I'm afraid that I'll scare her off if I move too fast."

Julian nodded knowingly. "Your Aunt Della was like that. Always shy, wary of a gentleman's attention. Let her know you understand. Let her know you're willing to wait until she's ready, but don't give up. If you walk away from her now, you'll regret it."

You just reminded me of someone, that's all. A young man. He could hear Della's words in his head. Was Julian the man who broke her heart? How strange would that be, since they had been friends, almost family, all these years?

Speaking of broken hearts—"Grandma Bebe won't be very happy if I tell her I'm moving out and quitting Merritt Construction."

"Are you kidding? It'll give her something new to grouse about. She'll be happy as a clam."

Mack reached across the car seat intending to give the older man a tap on the shoulder, but it turned into more of a one-handed hug. "Thanks."

"For what?" Julian asked as he turned the car into the driveway.

"For being you."

Julian threw the car into park and turned his whole body toward the passenger side of the car. Mack expected to see a smile, or even a questioning eyebrow lift, but what he saw on the old man's face was something he didn't expect to see at all—sadness. It was a deep, buried sadness that welled up for just a moment in the dim glow of the driveway lights.

Then the guard dog of Hades appeared to break the mood.

* * * *

"Mrs. Hansen called and told me you were hurt and had to go to the hospital," Bebe ranted before Mack was even out of the car. "Why in the world did I have to hear that kind of news from a stranger?"

"First of all," said Mack evenly, "she's not a stranger. Second, I was in the hospital, so I couldn't call you myself."

"And you, Julian?" Bebe waved an accusatory finger at the older man. "Why didn't you call me?"

Julian climbed out of the car and came around to the passenger side. "Just a natural propensity to keep out of the line of fire, I suppose." He offered Mack a hand, but he didn't need it.

"I'm fine. I just want to get upstairs to bed." Mack stepped out right in front of Bebe. Instantly, her eyes widened in horror.

"Good heavens! Look at you! That is a Ralph Lauren shirt that you have ruined! The blood will never come out. It's garbage now."

Behind her head, Julian made a face that only Mack could see. "Thank you for your sympathy, Grandmother."

"Sympathy!" She turned and headed back up the walk, muttering something about getting Frenchy to change the pillowcases in his bedroom—not the silk. He would just ruin those, too.

Yes, indeed, it was time for a change.

* * * *

She was weightless in his arms, strong, well-muscled arms of a man who worked hard for a living. It was warm. It was safe. Here, there was no fear, no worry, and no thought that they might ever be apart or alone. His fingers, rough, but gentle, stroked the length of her arm and then onto her bare hip.

So close to that secret place.

Lips brushed her throat. An unshaven chin tickled her breast.

Mother would die if she knew. Nice girls didn't, but she couldn't resist. There wasn't anything else in the world that felt this good. Nothing better than his lips on her lips, his fingers on her bare skin, and—

She gasped when he touched her *there*.

What would he think of her if she asked for more? What would he think if she asked him to take her as if she were his wife? Maybe she wouldn't have to ask.

Just lift your hips, part your legs, make it clear that this is what you want.

Words weren't necessary. He had already begun.

* * * *

The phone woke Joyce from a fitful sleep. At first, her hand went to hit the snooze button on the alarm clock, but when the ringing continued, she realized that it wasn't the clock at all. Groggy, she scooped up the receiver and brought it to her ear.

"Hello?"

"I woke you. I'm sorry." It was a male voice. *His* voice?

Joyce forced her eyes open as she turned her head to the clock. Ten after eleven. Funny. She didn't even remember crawling into bed. "Who is this?"

A laugh. "It's Mack."

Mack? Mack! Joyce sat upright so fast she yanked the phone off the bed table. The base of the unit clattered against the wood and then tumbled over the side, caught only by the short curly wire between it and the receiver. "Oops, wait. Don't go." Frantic, she fished for the base and finally managed to right it. "Are you still there?"

"What happened?"

"I dropped the phone. Sorry."

"I shouldn't have called so late, but I've been thinking about you all day."

Joyce's chest tightened. She had been thinking about him, too, but not in the same way. Ever since Henry's strange visit to the store, Joyce was caught up in worry about

Mack and what was happening over at the lighthouse. "I've been thinking about you, too," she said, her voice more serious than flirty.

Mack didn't notice her tone. "What exactly have you been thinking about me?" There was a lusty innuendo in his voice, but now that her head was clear, she couldn't allow herself to play the game. There were more important matters at stake here. Things she had to know.

"Mack, is everything all right at the construction site?"

He hesitated. "I wouldn't say all right—protestors, paperwork problems—"

"Accidents?"

That stopped him.

Henry was telling the truth.

"Why do you ask?" The note of suspicion in his voice made her stomach rumble.

"I heard from some people that you were having problems."

"Like, which people?" Mack asked, his voice growing tighter with every word.

"Like, Kathy maybe, or some of the other members of FOTL?"

"No, not FOTL," she replied, getting a bit defensive herself. She reached over to the bedside table and picked up the pocket watch in her free hand. "From Henry. He said—"

"I can't believe you're listening to anything Henry says. He's a drunk. He sees pink elephants in the parking lot."

"So he's wrong. You didn't get hurt today?"

Again Mack paused. "It was nothing. Just an—"

He was going to say accident. Maybe Henry's imagination wasn't working overtime. Joyce closed her fingers around the watch, feeling the smooth, round metal press into the palm of her hand. "Henry thinks the construction site is haunted."

"That's nonsense," Mack countered without giving her a chance to say more. "I don't believe in ghosts. Even if I did, they aren't the cause of my problems."

"What are you saying?"

"What I've been saying all along. The Friends of the Lighthouse are getting a little carried away. One more stunt from them, and they'll be protesting from behind bars."

Joyce dropped the watch into her lap and switched the phone to her other hand. "You're wrong, Mack. FOTL isn't the cause of your troubles."

"Oh, no? The other day, one of my scaffolds collapsed. I had the manufacturer come down and have a look at it. You know what they found? The bolts had been loosened with a wrench. I'm telling you, Joyce, the only mischief makers I have at the construction site are the human kind."

The human kind? Was that good news or bad? Joyce couldn't imagine any of the ladies of FOTL doing something as dangerous as monkeying around with a scaffold, but

Mack seemed to have definitive proof that the deed was done by a real live person, not a ghost. She ran her finger over the face of the watch, detecting the slight dips and grooves of the engraved design. "I'm sorry, Mack. I didn't mean to upset you with all this talk."

He sighed loud enough to be heard through the phone. "I'm not upset. I'm frustrated, but it's not your fault." Mack's voice relaxed a little. "Okay, some of it is your fault. I'm so busy thinking about you, I'm having trouble concentrating on my work."

There was just enough tease in his voice to bring warmth to Joyce's face. "I'm having the same problem, so I guess we're even."

"Oh, no. It's much worse for me. Close your eyes."

"What?"

"Just close your eyes. You're sitting down, right? No danger of you falling downstairs or tripping over a table or anything, right?"

"I'm sitting down." She closed her eyes as she squeezed the phone tighter in her right hand. "My eyes are closed."

"Good. I'm sitting right in front of you. Can you see me?"

His wind-swept hair, his intense brown eyes, his sexy bowed lips. "I can see you."

"I can see you, too. I'm touching the backs of my fingers to your cheek. Now, my fingers are in your hair, combing through the silk, touching the back of your neck."

Joyce shivered.

"Now, I'm leaning forward. In half a second, my lips are going to be on yours."

Joyce leaned forward too, anticipating, imagining, and remembering what it was like when he kissed her outside the restaurant. A whole band of butterflies broke loose in her stomach, and then there was that tickle between her legs. Joyce lifted her knees to her chest, tenting the blankets, causing the watch to tumble off her lap and onto the floor. She wrapped her arms around herself, imagining that it was his muscular arms holding her tight. "Mack, I wish—"

A crash from the living room brought Joyce back to reality in a snap. She gasped. Mack heard it, too.

"What's the matter? What happened?"

"Nothing. Something fell. Hang on." Joyce set the phone on her bed, threw off the covers, and then ran into the other room. There, on the dining room table, was a broken picture frame and a collection of shattered glass shards. Another fairy print bites the dust. She went back to the phone. "Sorry about that. One of my pictures fell off the wall and shattered. That makes two this week. Guess I should have used those plastic thingies you stick in the wall before you put the nail in."

"Wall anchors," Mack supplied. "It's a good idea. Plaster tends to give way after a time. I hope there wasn't much damage."

"The picture wasn't expensive. I don't own anything expensive."

Mack said nothing, but it was a pointed silence. "I should let you get back sleep."

"Wait." Joyce climbed under the covers once more. "Can I see you tomorrow?"

"I'd like that. How about breakfast? I could meet you at the bagel shop, say around eight? Would that be too early?"

Five in the morning wouldn't be too early if it meant spending time together. "I'll be there at eight."

There was more silence on the other end of the phone.

"Mack? Is something wrong?"

"Nothing devastating. I'm just feeling kind of lonely tonight. I mean, I was feeling lonely, but not anymore. You go back to sleep and have pleasant dreams." Then he hung up, leaving Joyce holding the line.

Chapter Fifteen

Joyce set her alarm for six so there would be no chance of her oversleeping and missing her breakfast date with Mack Merritt. Choosing her clothes for the occasion was nerve racking. She had started with a pair of jeans and a sweater, but that looked too casual when she eyed herself in the mirror. Her springy, cotton shift with the tulip pattern was pretty and girly but seemed too dressy for breakfast at the bagel shop. Besides, she'd have to wear sandals with the dress. The only pair she owned weren't suited for even such a short walk. In the end, she settled on a pair of navy blue slacks with a sunny yellow Henley pullover and sneakers on her feet. Joyce thought it was like getting dressed with the three bears—too casual, too dressy, just right.

By seven-thirty, she itched to leave home, but she was afraid that arriving too early would make her look anxious. By seven-forty, she couldn't stand the suspense a minute longer, so she left the store and began walking to the bagel shop.

Once she was outside and walking, she was even happier with her choice. The morning was overcast and damp as if threatening to rain. The sleeveless shift would have been too light on such a day. She walked a little faster than usual and made it to the bagel shop in less than ten minutes. The small courtyard to the side of the bagel shop was jam packed with green wrought iron tables and matching chairs. Every third table had a gaily striped, green and white patio umbrella to block the afternoon sun, but today a space heater would be of more use.

Mack was already seated at one of the outdoor tables with food and drinks in place. For an instant, Joyce thought she had screwed up the time and was late, but as soon as she was close enough to hear, Mack began apologizing.

"I hope you don't mind. I got here early, so I ordered for you. Good thing, too, since it's pretty crowded now." He held out the chair adjacent to his and waited for Joyce to sit before returning to his spot. "Veggie cream cheese on an egg bagel, is that all right?"

"My favorite." She settled into the chair, took in the food and the bottle of orange juice at her place, and turned to offer Mack a smile. The smile never quite made it to her lips. "Oh, my gosh, look at your head! You said it was nothing!"

"It is nothing." Gingerly, Mack touched his wounded forehead with the tips of his fingers. "I had a run-in with a wrench, that's all."

"It looks terrible. Are those stitches? Did you have a doctor look at that?"

"This from a girl who wouldn't go to the hospital when she cracked her head open on a front-end loader."

Joyce's face felt warm from her embarrassment. "Okay, that was dumb, but two wrongs don't make a right."

"I went to the hospital, they stitched me up—end of story. Except that now, we have something in common."

"What?"

"Head wounds."

"How romantic."

Mack reached across the table and placed his hand over hers. "Ya think?"

"No, not really." She pulled her hand away and grabbed her bagel. She lifted the round to her lips but couldn't bring herself to take a bite. "Mack—"

He touched a long finger to her lips. "Ssh. I don't want to talk about the accidents or Henry or the lighthouse or any of that. I just want to spend some time with you talking about—nothing." Mack pulled his hand back and picked up his bagel. "Have you ever watched them make bagels? They drop the rounds of dough into this huge vat of boiling water. They cook, then they float to the top, and they're fished out with a wire basket on a stick. Somebody gets up at, like four in the morning, every morning, so you and I can have delicious," he took a huge sniff, "fragrant, chewy bagels for breakfast." Then he chomped the bagel with an exaggerated bite that made Joyce laugh.

"I admit I've never watched them make bagels, but I have watched people make fudge."

Mack made an 'oh' sound as he chewed.

"When I was a kid, we'd spend a week every summer in Wildwood. That's a town at the Jersey Shore. It has this huge boardwalk, which is lined with rides and games and shops. Anyway, when you walk along the boardwalk, you get this incredible mix of smells: the ocean, popcorn, cotton candy, suntan lotion, and chocolate—deep, dark chocolate. My sisters and I would follow that chocolate smell right to the window of Douglas Fudge. We could stand there for a half hour watching the candy makers pour this thick, creamy batter out of this huge copper bowl. Then they'd smooth it out in a tray and put it aside to cool." Joyce relaxed in the metal café chair, her mind traveling back to those days at the shore. "It was always so hot on the boardwalk, but when you stepped inside of Douglas Fudge, it was always freezing. I guess they had to keep the air conditioner turned up high to keep the chocolates from melting. Between the smells and

the wonderful crisp air, it was the best place on the boardwalk. I can still—" Joyce stopped when she noticed the smile rise on Mack's face. "What?"

"Nothing. It's just nice to see you all caught up like that. It's sweet."

"It's silly."

"No, it's not. Tell me more."

Joyce gazed into his alert brown eyes as she pondered whether he was teasing her or not. He was such a boy. When one got past the responsibility and the frustration, there was a man who would rather be a kid again. "I bet you like roller coasters."

"I love 'em. The big, double loopy kind. No, wait." Mack smacked the table with his palm, drawing the attention of everyone around them. "Old fashioned wooden coasters! Those are the best, like the Cyclone at Coney Island. Have you ever been there?"

Joyce shook her head. "Nope."

"It's the best. You ride up the hill in this old train-style car that was probably built back in the thirties or something. No fancy shoulder restraints or lap bars. You go chugging up that first hill, shaking and rattling, and you swear the whole thing is going to fall apart any minute." Mack used his hand to demonstrate the motion of the car. "When you reach the peak, you hold your breath. For one second, you're a bird. Then it's down the hill and racing for home." He zoomed his hand down, around a sharp curve, up another hill and down again before coming to a screeching halt right in front of Joyce. "It's a wild ride."

"I'll bet."

"You don't like coasters," he surmised. "So, what do you like? You said there were rides on your boardwalk in Wildwood. What was your favorite?"

"When I was a kid? Teacups. My sisters and I would pile into one cup, then we'd use all of our strength to turn the wheel so we'd go spinning out of control. We'd laugh ourselves sick. When it was over, we'd beg our parents to let us do it again. Of course, these days, I get nauseous just watching the laundry go around in the dryer. I'd never last on the teacups."

"How about a Ferris wheel?" Mack asked.

"Those are cool."

"Great. This weekend, they're having a fair in Lumberton. Come with me. We'll ride the Ferris wheel together. If you're nice to me, I may even knock down the milk bottles and win you a Kewpie doll."

Joyce was about to accept the invitation when the sound of tinkling tones touched her ear. She slipped her hand in her pocket, expecting to find the watch had sprung open, but the lid was shut tight.

Mack groaned. "Can't get a moment's peace," he said, then slipped his hand into his own pocket and drew out his cell phone. He flipped the lid open and punched the answer button, stopping the music mid-note. "Merritt," he barked.

Inspector Gadget, thought Joyce. Mack's cell phone tone was the theme from the children's cartoon. She would have been amused, but the look on his face kept the smile from her face.

"Fine, fine. Tell him I'll be there in twenty minutes. I swear!" Then he snapped the phone shut and returned it to his pocket. "I've got to go," he said to Joyce, his voice loud and strained. "My morning crisis has arrived earlier than usual. I'm sorry."

"Duty calls. What can you do?"

Mack stood up, leaned over, and kissed Joyce on the lips, catching her completely by surprise. It wasn't the fact that he hadn't kissed her before, but this place was so public, with so many people who knew them both and were apt to talk.

'Guess who I saw Mack Merritt kissing right in the center of town!'

Well, no matter. At least she didn't have to worry about Kathy finding out. That cat was already out of the bag.

Suddenly Mack yelped and straightened. Joyce's eyes, closed with the kiss, now popped open in time to see him all tangled up inside a collapsed, green-and-white-striped umbrella.

"Jeez! The thing is trying to eat me!" Mack grumbled as he tried to extricate himself from the carnivorous parasol.

"Be careful of the points!"

"Ow." Mack scrunched down into a stoop, then shimmed out from under.

All of the other patrons were snickering quietly, and some not too quietly. One commented that he wished he had a video camera so he could win first prize on one of those blooper shows.

Joyce probably would have laughed to, were it not for the strange, warm throbbing she felt against the side of her leg. She slipped her hand into her pocket and cupped her palm around the watch. It was hot, nearly too hot to hold. When she closed her fingers tightly around the metal, she could feel the cover rising and falling, like a man's chest after a hard run.

"Is that okay?"

Joyce did a double take and realized that she had missed the beginning of Mack's sentence. "What? I'm sorry." She pulled her hand free of her pocket.

He gave her shoulder a pat. "I'll call you later." Then he left the café patio and jogged across the street to where his truck parked.

Joyce watched him go, his lean, muscled body moving with such ease as he dodged the traffic. As she watched him, she was aware of eyes watching her.

Again she slipped her hand into her pocket, but now the pocket watch had grown cold.

* * * *

Mack did call—twice—but as luck would have it, Joyce missed his call both times. The first time he called, she was talking on the phone to the distributor of a line of ocean-related rubber stamps that Joyce wanted to carry in the store. By the time she discovered Mack's message on her answering machine, it was after one, and he had gone out to lunch. His secretary said it would be all right for Joyce to call him on his cell, but she didn't want to bother him, so she left a message and waited once more.

The second time Mack called, Joyce was hauling trash out into the cans behind the store, a simple project that ended up being not so simple. A pair of hungry seagulls had attacked the cans, strewing garbage up and down the alley. Feeling that she couldn't just leave the mess, Joyce picked up the worst of it, then found a way to anchor the trashcans lids down tight to prevent the gulls from feasting again. When she returned to the store, she went up to her apartment to shower off the smelly trash residue. When that was done, she found Mack's message on the phone.

"Hey, just me again, returning your message that you left about my message that I left. It's funny how we keep missing each other. Seems to be the way my life goes of late. I'm off to see a man about a bulldozer, so I'll be out of touch for the rest of the day. Bulldozer man is buying me dinner. I'd rather have dinner with you, but bulldozers are important, too. Maybe I'll call you tonight, if I don't get home too late. Take care." Then the machine clicked off, leaving Joyce with an empty, hollow feeling in her chest. She so wanted to speak to him, to have a conversation, not just listen to his voice on a tape, and it sounded like the feeling was mutual.

That was different, a guy who couldn't wait to see her as much as she couldn't wait to see him. All of her relationships in the past had been so one-sided. She wanted to be together, to chat, to see a movie, to have coffee, but they complained of being bird-dogged, smothered, forced into a commitment they weren't really ready to have.

Mack didn't feel that way at all about her. As a matter of fact, it was more the other way around. The more Joyce protested their relationship, the more he pursued her. It was nice.

With that thought in her head, Joyce headed into the kitchen to see what she had that would pass for dinner.

* * * *

Joyce was modeling lace-covered Easter hats for two elderly women when the package arrived. The box was shaped like a brick and not that much lighter. It was wrapped in glittery gold paper and had a gold mesh ribbon anchoring an envelope to the top of the box.

The customers were both delighted by the arrival. They tittered and goaded, trying desperately to get Joyce to open the gift in their presence. By her third refusal, they gave up, bought two hats and a patent-leather purse, and went on their way.

"Thank you very much, and come again," Joyce called as she followed them out to the porch. She stood there a moment longer watching as they walked down the path and out to the sidewalk. Once the ladies were gone, Joyce returned to the shop. She went behind the counter, sat down on the stool and stared at the package as if it might move or jump if she wasn't careful.

Could be a gift from mother, she thought, but her birthday was months away. Too expensive looking for Kathy's taste, she was more the crazy gift-wrapped-in-comics type. It wasn't anything Joyce herself had ordered, so that left only one option. Mack Merritt. It had to be from him.

With trembling fingers, Joyce plucked one end of the mesh ribbon, pulling the bow apart until the fabric tumbled away from the package. She picked up the envelope and noticed her first name only, printed in sharp, square, black letters. It was a man's handwriting. Turning the envelope over, she carefully tore at the flap, trying to do as little damage as possible. Once she had a clear path, she reached in and plucked out a card. On the front was a clip art picture of a double loop-the-loop roller coaster. Beneath the picture were the words: *What's Scariest Than This?*

She opened the card.

Inside were the words: *Dinner at My House.*

Then it continued.

When: Tonight, so you won't have much time to think about it (7 o'clock)

Where: 9 Back Bay Drive (my house)

Dress: Yes! Geez, my family will be there.

RSVP: Immediately, so I can talk you out of saying no.

Then a number followed.

* * * *

Joyce couldn't help but smile. It was good to see that Mack understood her fears, especially her fear of his grandmother. The woman was sure to think that she was a gold-digger, interested in Mack for his money and nothing else. Joyce wasn't, after all, a member of Mystic Harbor Society, or the daughter of an ambassador, or the niece of a famous opera singer. She was Joyce Erikson from New Jersey, daughter of a factory supervisor and a housewife. In their house, dinner was often eaten on paper plates with plastic utensils. After-dinner fun meant a round of Scrabble or Michigan Rummy.

Joyce's stomach began to rumble. The Merritt table was bound to be set with heirloom china and six dozen forks and spoons. What if she used her shrimp fork for the salad? What if she spilled a drink, or worse yet, broke a glass? Was any man worth all of this fear?

Then her eyes settled on the box with its pretty, gold wrapping, too narrow for a book, too big for jewelry, too small for a dress. Forget careful. Joyce tore at the paper, feeling like a three-year-old on Christmas morning. What she found underneath brought a tear to her eye. A box of Douglas Fudge straight from Wildwood, New Jersey. Joyce shook off the lid, brought the box up to her nose, closed her eyes, and inhaled. The scent was just too heavenly, thick, rich chocolate, the oily touch of walnuts, and the sweet tingle of sugar. It was just like being on the boardwalk with her family.

She opened her eyes and surveyed the square chunks of candy, all perfectly arranged in the paper-lined box. Milk chocolate, dark chocolate, white chocolate, and

white chocolate cherry. With her mouth watering, Joyce plucked a dark piece from the box and brought it to her lips. She started with one small bite, just enough to get the taste, then she put the rest of the one-inch block in her mouth and savored the sensation.

Better than sex.

Joyce giggled as that thought popped into her head. Or was it? Would sex with Mack Merritt be incredible enough to beat a piece of Douglas dark chocolate fudge? She wanted to find out, and that thought made her face go hot.

Whirling around on the stool, Joyce grabbed the portable phone and dialed the number on the card. After three rings, she started to feel a wave of disappointment, but suddenly a man answered with a rushed, "Merritt."

"It's Joyce."

"What took you so long?" he asked, his voice softening.

"I had my mouth full."

Mack laughed. "Let me tell you, when that stuff arrived this morning, I was tempted to eat some of it myself, but I thought it would be rude to give you a half-eaten box as a gift."

"I would have understood. The smell is pretty irresistible."

"You're pretty irresistible yourself. Hang on a second." Mack's voice trailed off as he turned away from the phone and yelled to one of the workers. "Like kids, you gotta watch them every second." The hubbub around him decreased as if he was walking away from the construction site. "So, how about dinner tonight?"

"I'd love to have dinner with you, but could we do it somewhere a little...further away from your grandmother?"

Mack laughed. "Not this time. I want you to meet my Aunt Della. I've told her all about you. She can't wait to meet you. She's bedridden, so you have to come to my house, but don't worry. My Uncle Julian will be there, too. He's a great buffer for Grandma Bebe. Probably the only person on the planet who dares tell *her* what to do."

"And lives to tell about it? I like him already."

"I try to use him as a role model, but so far, I haven't been very successful." Mack sighed. "Hold on again." His voice faded, but she could still hear him speaking—no, yelling—at someone else. After a minute, he returned to the phone. "Sorry. Look, I gotta go. It's one crisis after another. Enjoy the fudge, but save me a couple of pieces, okay?"

"One of each," she promised.

"I'll see you at my house, by seven. Do you mind driving yourself? I'm not sure when I'll get out of work."

"I'm fine, as long as you're there before me."

"I'll leave my truck parked out front as a signal that it's safe to come in." Then his voice softened. "I'll see you tonight. Bye."

The call clicked off.

Dinner at the Merritt house.

"Oh, my God! What am I going to wear?" Frantic, Joyce dialed Kathy at the diner.

* * * *

Back Bay Drive was lined with large, antique Colonial homes, each stalwart and square with rows and rows of windows. The houses were set far back from the street, but a mailbox at the end of each driveway helped her count off the numbers. Number nine was even more imposing than the first eight houses. With three brick chimneys, a widow's walk on the roof, and freshly painted slate blue shutters on the windows, it was easy to see that the Merritt home was a showplace in the town of Mystic Harbor.

Feeling a queasy roll in her stomach, Joyce steered her little Honda into the driveway and then slowly rolled forward, crunching gravel all the way. Still three yards from the front door, she realized that Mack's truck was nowhere to be found. That realization made her stomach go from queasy to clenched. She checked her watch—quarter to seven—then she ducked her head and surveyed the rest of the land. No truck. There was a huge garage to the right of the house. It was possible that Mack had forgotten his promise and had parked inside.

Joyce took a deep breath and then let it out slowly. Spending the evening with Bebe Merritt was daunting enough, but the idea of meeting her without Mack at her side was just too much to consider. Joyce threw the car into reverse, turned to look over her shoulder, and then released the brake in order to back-up. If anyone watched from the house, they would think she was just a lost motorist who had turned into the wrong drive, not a crazed, gift shop girl who was shaking in her shoes.

The Honda was still two cars' length from the end of the drive when a set of headlights bounced off her rear window. A cheery *honk-honk* told her it was Mack, even though the glare prevented her from seeing the vehicle that had pulled in behind her. With a bit more confidence now, Joyce put the car in gear once more and rolled back up the drive. She drove all the way this time and then parked. A second later, Mack's truck drove up alongside of her Honda, the engine stopped murmuring, and the lights went out.

"Were you trying to escape?" Mack asked as he came around the front of the truck to meet Joyce as she stepped out of her car.

"I thought I had pulled into the wrong drive." It was a lie, and he knew it. She could see it in his face. Still, he had the decency not to call her on it. "Running late?" she asked, trying to change the direction of the conversation.

"Actually, this is an early night for me. Lately, I've been working until midnight just trying to keep up. There is way too much paperwork needed in this world." Mack slipped his arm easily around her waist and gave her a soft, quick kiss on the lips. "Welcome to Merritt Manor. My great-great grandfather built the place back in the 1800's. Or maybe he was my great-great-great grandfather? I get confused." With his arm still around her waist, Mack led Joyce up the path to the front door. "You look lovely, by the way."

She didn't think so, but she kept her opinion to herself. Choosing an outfit for the evening had been sheer agony. After two hours of trying on everything in her closet, she and Kathy had made an emergency trip to the dress shop in town where she bought a brand-new outfit for the occasion. The dress was a scoop neck, short sleeved, floral print with a double hem that skimmed her ankles. On her feet were canvas sandals. Her hair was caught up in a tortoise shell clip that came from the store. Mack might have actually liked the look, but Joyce was sure the dress would be a flop in the eyes of his Grandmother, too dowdy, too long, the wrong material, and definitely the wrong label.

'Who did your dress, darling?'

'Oh, that marvelous French designer, J.C. Penney,' said with just the right accent.

Joyce's stomach did an Olympic-sized flip-flop. "Are you sure your grandmother doesn't mind my being here?"

"She's wearing a burgundy colored dress just in case."

"Mack, that's not funny."

"Sure it is." He squeezed her shoulder to his chest and then let her go as they reached the front door. "Don't worry so much. Grandmother Bebe has a reputation. Mostly it's true, but she promised to be on her best behavior tonight."

"Oh, you're a real comfort."

"Come on." He held out his arm to her, which she took after a moment's confusion. All his stately gestures and manners were sometimes lost on her. She was used to opening her own doors and hanging up her own coat. If they were to happen upon a puddle on the ground, she suspected Mack would throw his jacket down for her to walk on. He certainly wasn't the average construction boss. Mack Merritt wasn't average in any way at all.

With Mack's arm for comfort and balance, Joyce stepped into the foyer of the Merritt home.

The area was decorated to match the era in which the house had been built. A chair rail ran through the middle of the wall with striped wallpaper beneath and eggshell white paint above. There was a large mirror over a Colonial desk just inside the door, so Joyce couldn't resist a peek, first at herself, and then at the image of Mack and her together. They made a handsome couple, she thought, both rustic, outdoorsy types—not a lot of spit and polish on either one.

He took her purse and her wrap, an antique shawl that also came from the store, and placed them both inside a small closet beneath the stairs. Then he took Joyce by the arm again and led her past the mirror, down a hallway toward the back of the house, then through the entrance and into the room on their left. "This used to be the study and the dining room, but my grandfather had it converted into the living room since it had the best view in the house."

"I guess your grandfather isn't..." Joyce's words trailed off when she saw the immense wood paneled room with the grand piano and the stone fireplace. "Geez, I've seen concert halls smaller than this."

Mack laughed. "My grandfather died just after I was born, but as you can see, he left Bebe well-off." He pointed to a large bay window to her right. "Check out the view."

Even though it was night, a full moon made it easy to see the backyard. There was a long, thin expanse of patio with several chairs and a table. Beyond the patio was a low rock wall. After that was beach and ocean. The waves broke high in the air, their foamy white tips giving off a spray of sea water before sliding down to engulf the beach. She could hear them pounding with nature's rhythm. It was better than any sound she could have imagined.

"Mack, it's wonderful."

Suddenly, he was standing behind her, his body barely touching hers. "I knew you'd like it. The funny thing is that I had forgotten how beautiful the view is, and how soothing the sounds are. My bedroom is right above us, so my balcony looks out on this same view. I hardly ever bother to go outside, but the other night, after we walked along the beach together, I stepped out on my balcony for the first time in years, and it was wonderful. The sound, the smell. You gave me a whole new appreciation of the sea."

"I'm jealous. You can smell the ocean from my apartment window, but you can't hear the waves. Imagine lying in bed at night listening to the sound of the surf. I can't think of anything better."

He lowered his chin so it bumped the top of her head. "Well, I can, but we'll call the pounding surf a close second." Mack caught her by the shoulders and whirled her to face him in time to see the warmth in her cheeks. "I love how you blush."

"I don't." Joyce covered her cheeks with her hands. "It's embarrassing."

"It's beautiful." He pulled her hands from her face and then leaned in and touched his lips to hers. The first touch was gentle, but then he came back for more. His fingers dived into her long, loose hair as the heels of his hands skimmed the line of her jaw. For a moment, she saw his deep brown eyes watching her, touching her, then she closed her lids and allowed herself to fall.

The second kiss was nothing like the first. This kiss was hungry, needy. He covered her mouth with his, nipping at her lower lip as he fought for ways to take more, to get closer. Her hands went to his back, her palms sliding over board-hard muscles at his waist, then up behind his shoulders, her actions closing up what little space there was between them.

Mack's hips rocked forward. He was hard. She could feel it, in his moves, in his kiss. She could hear it in his moans. Joyce was moaning, too. She hardly recognized the deep, throaty sound that came from her own body. Never before had anyone made her feel so needy, so desperate. No, that was wrong. There was someone else, the dark man in her dreams. He, too, had brought the moans from the depths of her soul. He, too, had left her aching for more.

"Perhaps you two would be more comfortable upstairs."

Mack broke the kiss at the sound of the deep male voice. He turned on his heels, blocking Joyce completely, giving her a chance to steady herself. "Uncle Julian."

"I assume you have your young lady behind you there? Am I allowed to lay eyes on her, or are you afraid I'll steal her from you?"

"No, of course not." Mack stepped to one side. "Uncle Julian, this is Joyce Erikson."

The dizzy spell hit Joyce almost instantly. She was sure it was an after effect of the last few breathless moments, but that didn't help her feel any better. She tried to focus on the man who now stood in front of her.

He was an older man, thinning on top, with a silver-white beard and mustache and ice blue eyes. He was smiling at her, but his expression held no warmth. There was something familiar about him, though Joyce was sure they had never met before.

"It's nice to finally meet you," said Julian. Holding his wine glass in his left hand, he extended his right hand to her. Before she could take it, the glass shattered, showering him with glass and red wine.

"What the hell!" said Mack.

"I'm so sorry," Joyce mumbled. A shiver rose up from the inside of her bones.

Julian held his arms open as the red wine soaked into his white shirt. "Damnedest thing," he said with more amusement than anger.

Blood. The dark red stain looked like blood splattered over his shirt. Joyce clutched her stomach as if that would stop it from rolling. "I need to go home."

"What? You just got here. Dinner," Mack protested.

"Please," Julian added, "don't leave because of me."

"I'm sorry. I don't feel well. I need to go." Joyce slipped past the men and ran back to the front door. She grabbed the knob in two hands and pulled, but the massive door didn't budge. Trapped. Stuck. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw Mack coming toward her, Mack and the other man, the one with the blood. Desperate, she yanked on the door. Why wouldn't it open? Why wouldn't it budge?

"Joyce, what's wrong?"

"Let me out. Please. I can't get out. I can't get away. Please, help me."

Reaching past her, Mack snapped the deadbolt to the right. Without the lock to hold it in place, the door flew open on the next tug. Joyce fell backwards with the force, catching Mack in the ribs with her elbow.

"Calm down. I don't know why you're so upset." He reached for her arms, but she wriggled away like a fish that wasn't ready to be caught.

"I have to go home." Joyce ran out into the night.

"Wait, your wrap."

Mack stopped to retrieve the shawl and her purse, but Joyce didn't care. It was cool outside, but not nearly as cold as it was inside the house. That man, Julian, there was something about him, something sickening. She reached the car, but she couldn't find her

keys. Where the hell were her keys? Joyce patted her pockets but came up empty. Her purse? Did she have a purse?

"Let me drive you home." It was Mack. He draped the shawl over her shoulders. "You're obviously not feeling well. Let me drive."

"No, I just need my—" She snatched her purse from Mack's hands and dug to the bottom for her keys.

"Macklin! What in heaven's name is going on?" Bebe yelled from the front porch.

"Great, another county heard from," Mack grumbled.

"Macklin, don't you ignore me. You come here right now."

"Go, I'm fine. Please. I just need to go home." Joyce fit the key into the door lock with some trouble and then managed to pop the lock. Bebe was coming toward them now. That was enough to get Mack's attention off her. Then she heard his voice, the older man that Mack called Julian. He was coming outside, too. In seconds, he'd be in front of her again, and that she couldn't bear. Without another thought, Joyce slid into the driver's seat, started the engine, and pulled out of the drive. The last thing she saw was Mack arguing with his grandmother while the man with the blood-soaked shirt just stood there laughing.

* * * *

"Seems to me your new girlfriend has a drinking problem, or should I say spilling problem."

"Bebe," Julian soothed. "She didn't spill the drink on me. The glass shattered. Her only fault was exciting me so that I squeezed too hard."

"Oh, please, do you have to be vulgar?" Bebe tapped Mack on the arm with one long, perfectly manicured fingernail. "Dinner is being served in ten minutes. I expect you at the table in five."

"I'm not hungry, Grandmother."

"I expect you at the table in five." Then she left the two men in the front yard.

"Why is my life so complicated?" Mack complained.

Julian slapped him on the back. "Because you're a Merritt, my boy, because you're a Merritt." With one arm over Mack's shoulders, Julian turned them both around and headed up the walk toward the front door.

"Oh, my lord!"

The voice was so unexpected, Mack wasn't sure if it was just the wind. "Auntie?"

Della was standing on the porch. She was dressed in a peach colored dress that was more suited to the fifties, the shade adding nothing to her pale, paper-thin skin. She clutched the porch column with one hand, balancing on ankles that Mack could swear wouldn't have held even her tiny frame. "Julian, is that blood?"

"Blood?" He looked down at his shirt and gave a hearty laugh. "Don't think I'd still be standing if it were. I had a close encounter with a glass of wine. No damage except the tear I shed for losing so much of a marvelous vintage."

Mack galloped up the porch stairs and took the woman by the arm. "It's so good to see you out of bed. You look terrific."

"I look awful, but it's the best I could do on short notice. I didn't want your new girlfriend to see me in bed. Where is she?"

Mack sighed. "She's gone. She wasn't feeling well. I'm sorry, Auntie, I really wanted you to meet her."

"Oh, how disappointing." Della clutched Mack's arm a little tighter as they turned to head back into the house. "And here I am all gussied up and no place to go."

"Are you kidding? I just happen to be short one dinner date. Will you do me the honor?"

Della gave Mack's arm a squeeze. "I'd be delighted."

Mack thought of Joyce driving home all alone, not feeling well. He knew he should go after her if only to see her home safely, but this was just too good to pass up. Auntie Della, out of bed, dressed for a party. How could he leave? Joyce was fine. It was probably just nerves anyway. He would give her fifteen minutes to drive home, and then he would call to make sure she was all right. In the meantime, he would enjoy his dinner with his first and oldest love on his arm, Aunt Della.

Chapter Sixteen

Joyce scooped up a spoonful of tuna fish and dropped it on the slice of white bread. One slice of lettuce, a pinch of salt and pepper, and there—her dinner. Not exactly the elegant meal she had planned on having that evening, but it would fill the hole in her stomach. She took her sandwich and a glass of milk into the living room where she sat down on the couch in front of the TV. One thing was for sure, she was going to stay away from wine for the rest of her life. The fruit of the vine was like a bad omen.

Joyce switched on the TV and flipped channels until she found an old episode of the Dick Van Dyke Show on TVLand. Here at home, with her TV and dressed in her worn, comfy nightshirt, surrounded by her own things, Julian didn't seem so scary. He was Mack's friend after all, the man who had helped raise him. How could he be anything but a nice, caring man? Was she going crazy?

You tell me you ain't seen weird things since I gave you that watch. You tell me.

Henry's words resonated in her head.

I thought the spirits were gone, but they're not. They're mad. I gotta put it back.

Joyce picked up her purse, rummaged around, and drew out the watch. Gently, she ran her fingers over the cover and fingered the latch to pop the lid. The music tumbled out slower than usual. The notes sounded almost sad.

EW & AM.

Lovers.

Then he stood there before her, slick-backed black hair, jeans, jacket, with Mack's square jaw and boyish smile. Mack.

"Look at you, all gussied up and no place to go."

He touched his hand to her face. His fingers were rough with calluses. He worked hard for a living, just like—just like... Why couldn't she remember his name, the

handsome young man with the square jaw and boyish smile? She could see his face...or could she?

"It doesn't matter what they say. I'll take care of you, always." His lips touched hers as his hands made their way down her body. "This time, I'll take you with me. I promise."

He pulled off her nightshirt and laid her down on the couch.

The couch?

She could smell the oily, buttery scent of upholstery wax and the acrid pine-scent of a cardboard air freshener. She moved to the side and felt her skin rub and catch on the vinyl seat. When she straightened her leg, her foot hit something solid, with a handle—the car door.

A car?

His hand went behind her back and expertly popped the catch on her bra. Her breasts rose then fell, looking for a way to escape the fabric. He shifted then, positioning his knees between her spread legs and then grabbed her bra and pulled it loose from her arms.

This wasn't allowed.

Mama would be mad.

Good girls...

Then he was on top of her. His mouth latched onto one breast. Her hand weaved into his too-short hair. Should she complain? Should she ask him stop? Would he stop?

His knee slid forward until it met the wet spot between her legs.

She was wet. That proved it. Mama was right. She was a tramp. Only tramps let themselves go wet for a boy.

What the hell is going on?

Joyce lifted her hips and ground her crotch against his jean-covered leg, but it wasn't enough. She needed something more, something long and thick that would caress her insides. "I want you."

"In a minute." He switched to the other breast, making sure he sucked both thoroughly; the nipples peaked into rock hard nubs. He was growing hard as well, but his jeans were merciless in their attempt to keep him down. "Gotta get out of these..." Balancing one hand on the back of the seat, he used the other to undo the buttons on his fly. The pants were new, and the metal button studs resisted as he tried to force them through the holes. "Damn."

"Let me. Let me." Joyce brought her hands into the space between their bodies, wishing she could release him as easily as he had undone her, but he was more experienced, and she was just learning. She had never unbuttoned a pair of jeans. She didn't own jeans. Mama wouldn't let her buy such tempting, body-hugging clothing. Nearly gasping for breath, she worked the metal studs, over and over, until one after the other came loose. *Finally! Done!*

He groaned with satisfaction as his inflated cock wriggled into the fresh air. She shifted again and again. Her sweat-soaked body hung on the seats, and it made a funny sucking sound. "Should have put down a blanket," she said with another great sigh.

"I like it like this. I like the smell and the sounds." He rubbed his hand across the seat back and made a sound like two balloons rubbing together. She grabbed his cock, surprised by her own brazen moves.

He jumped and his head hit the roof. "Hey!"

"Should have put the top down."

That he didn't argue with, but the intense look on his face indicated he wasn't about to stop now. Sitting back on his knees, he slipped his arms under her legs and lifted her up and out, opening her wide for his invasion. She was ready, wet, but he wanted more. He shifted again, nearly fell off the seat, then caught himself. Joyce giggled, but it died as soon as his tongue probed between her legs.

Her body jerked. His tongue played over her, dipping in and out, occasionally catching the flesh with his teeth. "Please..." She could hardly catch her breath as he played her swollen clit. Another taste, another lick...he slid two fingers up inside her. Joyce gasped for breath as the waves of pleasure overcame her, wave after wave. The tingle in her muscles reached the point of pain, but it was so sweet, so new, so completely wanton.

"No, we shouldn't." Mama wouldn't approve.

"But you want to."

"Yes." It was more of a cry than a word.

Holding her thighs, he pulled her toward him, sinking deep inside her on the first round. He went at her again and again. He pumped harder and harder until she thought he might break her. Then he came. She gasped for breath. She grasped for words. Then she spoke, one word, clearly.

"Ethan."

* * * *

The phone rang four times before the answering machine picked up. After the outgoing message played over, Mack's voice came through the speaker.

"Joyce? Are you all right? It's Mack. Can you pick up, please?"

Joyce slowly picked up the phone without moving from her place on the couch. "Hello?"

"Finally. I was about ready to drive over there. Is everything all right?"

"Fine. What is it?" Joyce reached for the soft blue granny square afghan that hung over the back of the couch and pulled it down over herself.

"You were asleep," Mack surmised. "I'm sorry. I should have called you sooner. I just kind of lost track of the time."

"Whatever," Joyce mumbled, her eyelids sliding shut once more.

"I'll let you go back to sleep. I hope you feel better. Goodnight." He hung up the phone, leaving Joyce still hanging on the other end.

"Who was that?"

"I don't know, Ethan." Stretching her arm over her head, Joyce returned the receiver to its cradle, then curled up under the afghan and fell back asleep.

* * * *

Mack dropped the phone beside him on the bed. Joyce was fine. Nothing to worry about, but still, he felt the urge to drive over to her place and see for himself. Or maybe it was more than just worry that was driving him.

Rolling to his feet, Mack got up off the bed and went to the French doors that took up the east wall of his bedroom. He opened the double doors and stepped out onto the balcony. A cool, crisp wind hit him in the face along with the invigorating smell of salt water in the air. Clouds covered the light of the moon, so he could no longer see the ocean breaking against the wall, but he could hear it. It pounded like a heart beat, or was that the sound of his own heart doing the tango?

He had hoped for a different ending to the evening, not that seeing Aunt Della at the dinner table wasn't a delight, but standing here alone on his balcony wasn't what he had in mind. For the last few days, Joyce had buzzed around his brain day and night, distracting him from his work and from his sleep. He would close his eyes and hear her voice, see her shy smile, and note the softness of her lips. He was falling for her, hard, but was the feeling mutual? Joyce was unpredictable, happy one moment, then skittish the next. Was he pushing too hard? Expecting too much? What?

"Mack? Could you come help me?"

The voice was so out of place, he hardly recognized it. Coming in from the balcony, he saw Della standing in the doorway.

"I'm sorry to bother you, honey, but I need a pair of strong arms. Would you?"

"Of course." Mack followed the elderly woman back to her room.

"There's a photo album up there on the top shelf of my closet. It's awfully heavy. Could you fetch it for me?"

Mack scanned the closet and saw the bound edge of a leather volume way in the farthest corner of the highest shelf. Even he had to stand on his toes to reach the book. When he gave it a tug, he found it to be as heavy as Della had predicted. "What's in this thing? The family jewels?" The book was covered with a layer of dust, which Mack promptly removed with a swipe of his sleeve. Della gave him a sour frown for it, but that only made him smile all the more. Who was this new and different woman?

"Why the sudden interest in family photos?"

"Oh, I don't know. All that reminiscing at dinner, I suppose. Just put it on the bed."

Mack did as she asked. "Can I look at it with you?"

"Oh, it's just a bunch of old photos. Nothing to interest you."

"Are you kidding? I want to see if Grandma Bebe was always perfect."

"She was. Trust me, she was." Della sat down on the bed while Mack flopped down on his stomach in front of the big book. Her frail hand touched the cover, but she didn't open the page right away. She hesitated, making Mack wonder if there were bad memories inside this album as well as good ones.

Maybe it held memories of the young man who had broken her heart.

"The suspense is killing me," he teased. That was enough to urge her on.

The first five pages of the book were full of photos of two little girls under ten years old. There was no mistaking which sister was which. Bebe was bright and shiny, always sporting a fashionable bow in her hair and a perfect smile. Della's shyness was evident, even in these early photos. She often turned her face from the camera or hid behind her sister. It was funny how the pattern had become set so early in life.

Slowly, with little comment, Della turned the pages, and the little girls began to grow into young women. When they were teenagers on the pages, she stopped. Della pointed to a photo of a couple, both dressed to nines, posing in front of a forties style divan.

"That's Bebe all done up for the Homecoming Dance. Wasn't she lovely?"

"Who's the boy?" Mack asked, pointing to a dapper, young fellow in a boxy suit and bow-tie with thick glasses perched on his nose.

"That's Edward."

"My grandfather?" Mack laughed. "He was kind of a nerd."

"Edward? Yes, he was." Della ran her finger over the picture. "He and Bebe were high school sweethearts."

Mack leaned a little closer to the photo. "You know, Bebe always said I reminded her of Edward, but frankly, I don't see the resemblance."

"Of course not," said Della, then she grabbed the edge of the page and flipped it over.

The next set of pictures were taken on the porch of the Map home, the same building that was now the Celestial Emporium. Mack recognized the turned posts and the Victorian trim on the windows. In one picture, Della and Bebe sat on a porch swing with a devilishly handsome man between them. He had one arm around Della and the most wicked smile on his face. The smile looked vaguely familiar.

"Oh, my gosh, is that Uncle Julian?"

"Yes, it is."

"You two look pretty cozy," Mack said, giving her knee a nudge with his shoulder.

Della smiled just a bit. "Well, he was rather sweet on me back then."

I spent many a Saturday night on that swing, looking at the stars with Lawrence Welk playing in the background. Mack could hear Julian's stardust memories echoing in

his head. The three of them—Julian, Bebe, and Della—so many years between them, yet they all ended up together but alone.

"I think Uncle Julian still has the hots for you, if you ask me."

Della's cheeks blushed, and in that moment, she looked just like Joyce. "Don't be silly. Julian hasn't been carrying a torch for me all these years."

"I'm not so sure. He could have left town. He could have married, but he didn't. He's been right here beside you—all these years."

"Beside Bebe, perhaps, but not me."

Mack lowered his face to the photo album to get a better look at the old picture in the dim light. "No, it's clearly you he's eyeing in this photo. How could you walk away from such devotion?"

Walked away, she did. Della got up from the bed and went to stare out her bedroom window. "Julian was a very nice boy. My parents would have been quite happy to have him as a son-in-law, but I was in love with someone else."

In love.

She said the words with such intensity, no hesitation, just the plain, hard truth. Mack wondered if he would ever hear those words from Joyce—or if he even wanted to. She certainly came with her share of strange baggage. Right now, he wasn't sure if he was up to the challenge.

"I know it sounds silly," Della continued, her eyes still fixed on the darkness outside. "I was only about fifteen when that picture was taken."

Mack rolled off his belly, sat up, and pulled the photo album into his lap. He began flipping the pages, looking for an image of Della and her true love. Easter, Christmas, sailing in the bay, lots of pictures of family members, but no young men other than Julian and Edward. "So, is he in here, your true love? Do you have a picture of him?" He flipped a few more pages and then stopped, did a double take and went back a page. One particular picture caught his eye. It was a birthday party photo, just a bunch of family members gathering around a cake. *Happy 30th Birthday, Bebe*. Della stood off to the side as always, fresh faced, long, dark hair falling in waves to her waist. "How funny. When I first glanced at this picture, I thought it was Joyce."

"Joyce?" Della's eyes were still locked on some far away star in the sky.

"My date. The one who ran out on us. Joyce. You looked a lot like her when you were young." Mack rolled off the bed and went to stand behind Della. "No wonder I'm attracted to her. She's a looker, just like you." He set a kiss on her cheek. "No more pictures tonight?"

"Not tonight. Just put the book on the dresser for me, would you?"

"Sure." Returning to the bed, Mack closed the heavy volume and set it on top of the dresser. "When you want to take another trip down memory lane, let me know. I'd like to go with you."

Della turned from the window, a frown marring her delicate face. "I love you, sweetie."

"I love you, too, Auntie. Have a good night and pleasant dreams."

Chapter Seventeen

When Mack left the house, he headed for the construction site. Halfway there, he changed direction and took a left on Beach and then down Second Street. He found an empty spot on the street, eased his truck against the curb, and then cut the engine. He sat in the cab of the truck for a moment, staring at the little Victorian house that was The Celestial Emporium. The old building with the garden of roses and porch swing, just like in the pictures. He could almost see Bebe, Della, and Julian sitting on the swing, laughing and carrying on as young teenagers. Mack couldn't remember the last time he had fun like that, real, childish fun. His life was full of responsibilities and a job that began when he was barely out of high school.

Joyce could change all that. She made him see his world through new eyes. Now that he had a taste of it, he wanted more. He wanted to take her sailing. He wanted to picnic on the beach. In the summer, they could go to the amusement pier at Rocky Point and ride the roller coaster together—all things he hadn't done since he was a child, all things that he wanted to do again and with her. If only they could get past her unpredictable behavior. She blew hot and cold.

"Glutton for punishment. That's what I am."

Mack climbed out of the truck, jogged up the walk, and climbed the porch stairs in twos. Before he could open the door to the store, it opened for him, and Joyce stepped out.

"Mack. What are you doing here?"

"I thought I'd check on you, after what happened last night."

"Last night." Joyce looked around the porch and took her time searching for the morning paper, which lay just inches away from her feet. "I'm really sorry about that. I should probably go back to the doctor and have my head examined, in more ways than one." She grabbed the paper and stood up, tucking it under her arm. She looked lifeless.

"I know what you mean. If I lean over too fast, I still see stars," Mack said, trying to make light of the whole thing.

She tipped her head to the side and stared at the stitches at the side of his brow. "How did you get hurt?"

"I told you, I got hit with a wrench."

She continued to stare as if processing a new piece of information. "An accident. You've had a number of accidents lately, haven't you?"

"A few. Why?"

She turned and headed back into the store. Mack followed despite the lack of an invitation. "What do you know about the accidents at the site? Why are you bringing this up?" He asked, hating himself for going there again, but after all, she had started it with her questions.

"No reason. I just wondered. Strange things have been happening."

"You can say that again." He followed her around a display case of dishware and then to the sales counter. "Maybe you know more about the accidents than I do. The work of your friends at FOTL, perhaps?"

She tossed the paper on the counter and whirled on him. Finally, some light sparked life into her eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"Friends of the Lighthouse," said Mack. "The group your friend, Kathy, belongs to."

"So does *your* friend, Amanda Peters-Downy."

"So do you." He had acquired information from spies that he hadn't meant to use against her.

"I went to one meeting. That hardly qualifies me as a dyed-in-the-wool member. Besides, they wouldn't go so far as to sabotage the construction site."

"Would you tell me if they did?"

"FOTL is not the cause of your problems, Mack. They're just a bunch of local women who protest because it makes them feel worthwhile. If it weren't the lighthouse, it would be something else. I mean, really, can you see Amanda Peters-Downy sawing beams or cutting engine wires? She might get dirty, or worse, she might break a nail!"

That much was certainly true. He couldn't see any of them risking the lives of his men for the sake of a building, not Amanda or Kathy, and certainly not Joyce. God, this was maddening. "Listen to me." He caught her by the arms and forced her to look him in the eye. Despite the tone of the conversation, despite her variable moods, he still felt a rumble deep inside when he looked into her sweet, little girl eyes. "What I told you at the restaurant the other night was true. I am falling in love with you. You're in my mind. You're in my dreams. When I lie in bed at night, I can't help but wish you were there beside me." She turned her head, cast her eyes at the floor, but he caught her chin and brought her face back to his. "Then you go and do crazy things like what you did last

night. Just now, you're asking about the accidents as if you already knew the answers. How can I not wonder if I'm making a mistake?"

"You think I've been seeing you so I could use our relationship to stop the destruction of the lighthouse."

"Tell me why you were at the construction site that night. Prove to me that I'm wrong about this."

She pushed away from him, but it wasn't anger that made her distance herself. It was something else. "You won't believe me. I'm not even sure I believe me."

"Try me."

Joyce glanced back at the stairs that led to her apartment but made no move to go that way or any other way. "I went there because of this." She slipped her hand in her pocket and pulled out the watch. "It led me there. For some reason, it wanted me to go there."

"It? The watch told you to go prowling around the construction site?" Another new twist.

"This is useless. Never mind." Now, she made for the stairs, but Mack grabbed her arm, holding her back.

"No, don't run away. I'm listening."

"It's haunted!"

That made Mack let go. "Haunted. Ghosts."

"Ghost. One ghost, and he wants me."

* * * *

It was the first time Joyce had said the words aloud, the first time she had given voice to the idea of a ghostly lover. Mack clearly thought she was nuts. He was probably making plans to have her committed right then and there. She had come this far, so she decided to keep going.

"Let's talk upstairs." Without waiting for his answer, Joyce climbed the steps to her apartment. She was half way up when he started to follow, his footsteps reluctant and plodding. She couldn't blame him. At best, she sounded like a fruitcake. At worst, she was a schizophrenic, mad woman who was going to push him down once he reached the top of the stairs.

She kept on walking ahead of him into the living room where she paced until he caught up and joined her. "Strange things have been happening ever since I bought the watch," she began. "Things that mean nothing if you take them one by one but form a pattern if you look at them all together, a shadow, a noise, a picture that falls off the wall. A dream."

"A nightmare." Mack settled himself on the arm of the couch, but thought about it and dropped down to the sofa instead.

"You felt it, didn't you?" Joyce said, coming to sit beside him. "That night I spent in the hospital, you had the watch. You told me how you listened to the music and fell asleep, but there was more to that story, wasn't there?"

"It was nothing," Mack protested. "A nightmare caused by the stress I'm under and nothing more."

"What kind of a nightmare? What was it about?"

She saw him hesitate, struggle with himself to bring up the words. Obviously, the nightmare was bad enough to shake him up, even now in the light of day.

"I dreamed that I was being killed." He swallowed hard. "Beaten to death. It was so real. I could feel the pain. I could feel the life flowing out of my body."

Joyce wrapped her arms around herself, but that didn't stop the shiver. She knew a little something about realistic dreams. The one she had last night was a doozy, but all her dreams were full of passion, not horror. "Mack, it's the watch. I know it's hard to believe. I denied it myself until Henry came to see me the other day."

"You mean..." Mack threw back his head and guzzled an imaginary beer. "Henry? What's he got to do with it?"

"He's the one who sold me the watch. He found it buried in the dirt at the construction site. He took it, and now he said the spirits are angry, and he needs to put it back."

"Ah, yeah, he was babbling to me about that, too." Mack got to his feet, paced to the far wall, and then walked back again. "Joyce, he's a drunk. I'm not surprised he sees ghosts. He sees elephants and leprechauns, too."

"I know that. I wouldn't have paid him any mind—except that he's right. There's some being attached to this watch, a young man. Even though I don't feel threatened by him, I'm afraid he might be a danger to others. What about your nightmare?"

Mack shook his head before she was finished. "What about it? I'm stressed, and it manifested itself in my dreams."

"The accidents?"

"Are just that. I got hit on the head because someone left a wrench too near the edge of the scaffolding. If there is a *being* responsible for the other accidents, it's a flesh and blood being, not the kind you can see through." Mack whirled again, paced to the kitchen doorway and then back to the side table by the couch. "Your *spells* are caused by a smack on the head and an over-active imagination fueled by the ramblings of a man who drinks a bottle of whiskey for breakfast."

"Fine." Joyce switched her position on the couch so she could face him. "If you would rather believe that I'm a lunatic, or that I have some ulterior motive for carrying on about ghosts, then go ahead. I'll never—" She was distracted by the red blinking light on the answering machine. How did she miss a call? She was home all morning, except for the thirty seconds it took to go out on the porch for the paper.

"That was probably me," Mack said, pointing to the light. "When I called you last night, the machine came on before you picked up."

"You called me last night, and I answered?"

"Yeah, you were pretty sleepy, but we talked for a minute or two."

It was her turn to shake her head in disbelief. "I didn't talk to you after I left your house last night."

"You did!" Mack insisted. "Jesus, not another game of you say black and I say white, okay. We talked." He punched the play button before she could stop him.

The machine *ka-chunked*, then whirled back to the start of the tape where it began to play.

"Joyce? Are you all right? It's Mack. Can you pick up, please?"

"Hello?"

"Finally. I was about ready to drive over there. Is everything all right?"

"Fine. What is it?"

"See, I told you," Mack said.

"You were asleep. I'm sorry. I should have called you sooner. I just kind of lost track of the time."

"Whatever."

"I'll let you go back to sleep. I hope you feel better. Good night."

Joyce was about to comment, but the voices continued. It was a new voice, a man's voice. A voice she didn't recognize at all was recorded on the tape.

"Who was that?" he asked.

"I don't know, Ethan."

"Ethan! Of course. The E-W!"

"Of course?" Mack mocked. "Now, I understand your sudden need to get home last night."

He started for the door, leaving Joyce momentarily confused.

"What are you talking about? It's him. It's his watch." Joyce chased after Mack, catching him just as he reached the door. "His initials are inscribed in the back." She looked down at the watch still clutched in her palm. "Look." Popping the back open, she showed him the scratched letters in the heart. "AM and EW. E is for Ethan. That's his name."

"Ethan is a ghost. That was his voice I heard on the tape." Mack ran his palm across his forehead. "Do you see the word *gullible* stamped up there? Goes nicely with the word *welcome* that I stamped on my chest."

"Why would I lie? Why would I accept a date with you, then play sick just to run home to be with another man?"

"Maybe he's not so rich? Maybe he can't afford to take you out to fancy restaurants like I can? Is that it?"

"No, Mack. Please, you have to believe me."

"What I believe is that I fell in love with the wrong girl. I thought we could really be something. I thought I finally found a girl who wasn't interested in my money or my name, but I was wrong. If I catch you trespassing again, there won't be a settlement; there will be big trouble. For you." Then he ran down the stairs and out the front door, leaving the bell above the door ringing violently in his wake.

Chapter Eighteen

"Big emergency," Kathy shouted as she came charging into the store. "It is time for you to go to work."

"I am at work," Joyce said, motioning to the shelves of goods that surrounded her.

"Go to work on Mack, I mean."

"Oh, him." Joyce returned to dusting.

"Oh, him? I thought you had *him* trapped in your beguiling web." Kathy grabbed the feather duster as it passed and pulled it from Joyce's hand. "What's the matter with you?"

"I don't know," Joyce snapped and was immediately sorry. "I don't know. It's all very confusing. Can you go crazy from a bump on the head?" She went behind the counter and plopped down on the high stool.

"You're serious." Kathy followed. "What happened?"

Joyce tried her best to relate the tale, the ghostly happenings in the shop and in her apartment, Mack's dinner invitation, her reaction to Julian, running from the scene, then the voice on the tape. That last part was the hardest to explain. "Unless I've developed a split personality, there was a man named Ethan in my apartment last night."

Kathy's bright eyes dulled with concern. "You're serious. You actually heard a man's voice on your answering machine? Maybe it was just some kind of echo off of Mack's voice."

"It was no echo."

"Party line?"

Joyce shook her head.

"Maybe there really was a man in your apartment last night."

"What, a burglar? And he simply stood there while I chatted with Mack on the phone?"

"He made you answer the phone, so Mack wouldn't be suspicious. Maybe he drugged you, and that was why it was all so foggy." Kathy stepped closer so she could peer into Joyce's eyes. "You do look a little glazed. I'll bet it was one of those date rape drugs you always hear about." As soon as the words came out of her mouth, Kathy's concern turned to real horror. "Oh, my God. Joyce, he didn't force you, did he?"

Joyce sighed. What she could remember was the way he played her, the way he teased her until she was wet and aching and begging for release. Rape? Not at all. Even though it was wicked, even though she knew it was wrong, it wasn't by force. She wanted to take as much as he wanted to give.

"Joyce," Kathy snapped. "I'm taking you to the hospital."

"No! He didn't hurt me." She slipped off the stool and pushed past Kathy. Suddenly, the store seemed so small and cluttered. "He wouldn't hurt me. I told Mack that. I think he loves me."

"Mack?" Kathy asked, taking Joyce's place on the stool.

"Ethan...and Mack, too, I guess."

"Wow, less than a month in town, and you've got two men fighting over you."

"Only Mack's not fighting. He's given up." Joyce picked up a man's felt hat that had fallen to the floor. She gave it a finger dusting before returning it to the rack. "And Ethan, well, he's dead."

Kathy shivered. "You're creeping me out here."

"That's how I felt at first, but now I'm sort of getting used to it."

"You know what I think? I think you should have done like Henry said and reburied that watch in the dirt by the lighthouse."

"I thought about it." *Just for a second.* "But Mack said if he caught me trespassing again, he'd have me thrown in jail."

"Well, it may be too late anyway," said Kathy. "They're going to start dismantling the lighthouse today. That was my big emergency. I know the guy who runs the lunch wagon, and he heard it from the foreman. They're going to tear out the insides and then run a wrecking ball through it, no later than tomorrow. By this time next week, they'll be pouring a foundation for a new mall."

Pouring the foundation for a new mall.

"It'll be over," said Joyce.

"Thank heavens. I was all for stopping them before, but after listening to you, I think I've changed my mind. Right now, I just wish this whole thing *was* over with, the lighthouse, Mack, the watch, everything. Mostly, I wish Ethan would go back to wherever the hell he came from."

"Don't say hell," Joyce said softly.

"What, all of a sudden you have sensitive ears?"

Knocking down the lighthouse, once and for all. Pouring a new foundation. Covering up—"I need to stop him." Joyce started for the door. Suddenly, Kathy was in front of her.

"What you need is a vacation. Why don't we go to Florida for a week? The change might do you good."

Joyce stomped her foot on the floor. "Stop making fun of me!"

Kathy jumped, her eyes growing as wide as her father's pitas. "I wasn't making fun. I just don't know what else to do or say. You're worrying me. You're a whole different person from the girl I knew back in New Jersey."

"That was the point of my moving here, wasn't it? I don't want to be the girl I was back in New Jersey." Joyce grabbed the nearest breakable, an orange Fiestaware dish, and heaved it at the wall.

"Are you crazy?"

"Yes! That's the only explanation everyone will believe! I have gone stark, raving mad! Now, will you leave me alone?"

Kathy stared down at the broken pieces of pottery. "I don't think I should."

"Fine, then you stay here. I have things to do." Joyce went back to the counter, grabbed her keys, and headed for the door with Kathy on her heels.

"Where are you going?"

Joyce didn't answer.

"You didn't lock the store!"

Joyce kept on walking down the steps and along the path.

"You don't have your purse! You don't have your driver's license." Kathy ran ahead and blocked the door to Joyce's car. "Just tell me where you want to go. I'll take you there."

"Take me to the lighthouse."

* * * *

"I want you to get the crew to work on the moldings. Take them off carefully; they're worth a lot of money," Mack instructed. "Also, the hardware, the doorknobs, the light fixtures, we can sell them all at auction."

"Working carefully, it'll take us an extra day to get it done," said Frank. "When's the wrecker coming?"

"Day after tomorrow. That's plenty of time. Don't rush it."

"I'd like to rush it. I'm ready to be done with the whole job. Never had so much trouble on a site in all my life."

"You and me both, but we're almost there. Just get the lighthouse stripped. Let me know if you run into any more snags." *Like picketers or vandals or machinery with a mind of its own.* Mack ran his hand through his hair as he sighed. It was a losing proposition. No matter how much he ended up netting on the job, it wasn't going to be worth the headaches and aggravation. It was the perfect ending to a not so perfect career. More than ever, he was determined to put the construction business behind him. Two weeks from now, he'd be pounding the pavement looking for a new job in a new place, Boston maybe or even New York. He had plenty of skills. He could run a company. Didn't have to be construction. Maybe he'd open a nursery. He had always had an affinity for plants—the wilting fern in his office, notwithstanding. Or maybe he'd chuck it all, buy a boat, and spend the next few years sailing the seven seas.

That idea actually soothed his soul—if only for a moment.

Kathy from the diner was coming his way. What the hell was she doing here? He pretended he didn't see her as he kept on walking toward his office.

"Mack! I need to talk to you."

From the corner of his eye, he saw her pick up speed, hopping over two potholes before finally catching up to him. "It's about Joyce. Please. Listen to me."

Mack stopped in his tracks and turned on her like an angry wolf. "Look, I don't have time for any more games."

"This isn't a game. There's something wrong with Joyce."

"You're telling me." He turned to walk on, but Kathy jumped in his way. She was pretty spry for such a little one. "Forget it. You lose. The lighthouse comes down, day after tomorrow, so just give it up." He sidestepped her and moved on, but she chased him down, having to run to keep up with his long strides.

"Mack, please."

"What do you want from me?" He whirled around so angry that she jumped in startlement.

"I want you to do something! About Joyce! She loves you."

"That's bullshit. She has another man, Ethan. I know all about him."

"No, you don't!" Kathy stamped her foot in a puddle, splattering mud over the legs of his jeans. "There isn't a guy named Ethan. I'm telling you the truth. There isn't anybody but you. That's why I'm so worried." He started to walk around her again, but she stopped him with a hand to his chest. "She's in your office. My dad's screaming for me to get back to the diner. Will you just talk to her? Please?"

"I don't know what there is to talk about."

"Please, Mack. She's convinced that the watch is the cause of her troubles. Help her bury it. Help her get over this, and I swear, I'll call off the dogs. We'll let you knock down the lighthouse without another peep from any of us."

Mack set his hands on his hips, his shoulders relaxing a little. Now, she was speaking his language. "No more picketers, no more signs, no more trouble? You'd do that? You'd admit defeat?"

"For Joyce. Only for Joyce." She glanced at her watch. "Damn it, I've got to get back to the diner. Promise you'll look after her."

He should have said no. He wanted to say no, but how could he say no? He couldn't, so he said yes.

* * * *

Joyce was waiting in the trailer. She was pacing back and forth in what little space there was between his desk and the couch—three strides in one direction, three strides back. Mrs. Hansen was in the corner filing folders in the cabinet, chatting idly about the change in the weather and the flowers in her garden. When Mack stepped into the trailer, the old woman prepared to leave, but he waved for her to stay put. He didn't want to be alone with Joyce. Despite how his brain felt, his body felt otherwise. Just seeing her there, all meek and girlish, made him soft in the heart and hard somewhere else.

"What is it you have to say?" he asked, hoping that it came out sounding impatient and tough.

"You're going to knock the lighthouse down, soon."

That caught him off guard. He had expected her to beg and plead and swear he was the only man in her life. At the very least, he hoped she would make amends, promise to give up this nonsense about Ethan and ghosts, but once again, she surprised him. "Yeah. My crew is gutting the interior right now. It'll be bulldozed day after tomorrow."

"Don't." She ran to him, grabbed onto his shirt as if it was a life preserver and she was bound to drown. "We need more time, another couple of days, a week maybe. Please?"

"A couple of days for what? To get a court injunction and have the place declared a national landmark? What? What can you do in a couple of days?"

She stared at him as if he were speaking a foreign language. "Time for him. It's too soon. It can't be over when it only just began."

The trailer door squeaked as it opened.

"Well, look who's here." Julian Scott took two steps inside the office. That was as far as he got before Joyce was on him. She hammered at his chest with her fists, screaming as if he were attacking her and not the other way around.

Mack wrapped his arms around Joyce, locking his hands over her wrists. She fought him every inch of the way, but he was taller and stronger, so in the end, it was no trouble to pull her away from the older man. "Just stop it. This is ridiculous."

"Don't let him..." Those were the only intelligible words that came out of her mouth.

Mack folded her arms with his, capturing her tightly, her back to his chest. She was sobbing now, the fight gone from her body. He wanted to sob right along with her. How many nights had he dreamt of holding her in his arms? Holding her, but never like this. He tucked his chin beside her neck, felt the silk of her hair against his face. "What is happening?"

Joyce tipped her head to the side until it met his. "I don't know. I swear to God, Mack. I don't know." She was nearly limp in his arms, but her body still shook slightly.

Gently, Mack stepped back toward the couch. Then he sat, pulling her down with him.

"Should I call someone?" asked Mrs. Hansen. "An ambulance?"

"No, just get me a wet cloth, would you?" He plucked at a strand of hair plastered to her cheek with tears. "It's going to be all right."

Mrs. Hansen handed Mack a wet paper towel. "Her color looks terrible. Are you sure I shouldn't call for help?"

"No, I think she'll be okay." With his arm supporting her shoulders, Mack dabbed her tear-streaked face with the cool water.

"She's obviously not well," said Julian, maintaining his position by the door. "Look what happened last night."

"What happened last night?" asked Mrs. Hansen.

"She came to the house for dinner, but she got upset, panicky." Mack looked from his secretary to his old friend. "It was you. She was fine last night, until she saw you."

Julian laughed. "While I have been known to drive women wild, none of them have ever run screaming into the night before."

Mack patted the wet towel over Joyce's forehead. Her eyes were closed now, her breath regular. It was as if she had fallen asleep in his arms. "Just the same, maybe you should wait outside."

"Why don't I go see how the demolition is coming?" Julian stroked his white beard and waited for Mack to perform his end of the joke. He didn't. "I'll check in with you later." He let himself out of the trailer.

As soon as the older man was gone, Mack got up from the couch and gently guided Joyce to lie down. She stretched out like a lazy cat, the tears gone, a smile on her lips. She was happy again, oblivious to the world around her.

"Can you believe this?"

No answer.

Mack looked back over his shoulder and then turned completely to face Mrs. Hansen. There were tears running down her face, a tissue clutched in her fingers. She looked so pale; Mack feared he'd have another fainter on his hands. "What's wrong?"

"Your mother..." She teetered slightly.

Mack caught the elderly woman by the arm and led her to the chair behind his desk. The entire place was turning into a mental ward. "What about my mother?"

"It wasn't like this," Mrs. Hansen sniffed, then dabbed her nose with the tissue. "I mean, she wasn't as bad as this poor girl, but..."

"But what?"

"Julian," the woman said as if that one name would explain it all. "Your mother tried so hard to avoid him. Whenever they ran into each other, she couldn't look him in the eye. I remember, one afternoon, she came down to the office so you could spend some time with your father. Edward was so busy with the lighthouse project. He hardly ever went home. We were talking, she and I, when Julian came in. She kept her back to him, like she was hoping he would leave. Julian made some joke, he gave you some candy, always kept his pockets full of candy just for you, and then he touched your mother's arm. She went crazy. She pushed him away, yelled at him, told him stay away from her, from you. Your father came in in the middle of it. He asked me to take you outside, so I never heard what happened. A little bit later, your parents came out of the office. Your mother put you in the car, and then she drove away. Your father never offered an explanation, and I didn't ask. Maybe I should have asked."

Mack searched his mind for some memory of the incident, but there was nothing. "What do you think it was all about?"

"I don't know. Really. Everyone was so tense back then." She tossed the tissue in the trash and yanked another from the cardboard box on the desk. "It was the lighthouse project. From day one, it was a losing proposition."

"Some things never change," Mack said, trying to lighten the mood.

She gave a sort of sniff-laugh. "Yes, I suppose. Your father was so set on completing the project—just like someone else I know." She gave Mack a raised eyebrow. "But the costs were draining the company dry. Rather than go bankrupt, your father started pouring his own money into the job. It was great for the workers, but it caused a lot of strife between your parents. If only they'd known..." A whole new flood of tears fell from the old woman's eyes. "Known that they only had weeks to be together. Only had weeks to be with their son. Only weeks left to be alive."

Mack's memories of that night were hazy, mostly implanted images from listening to other people talk about what happened. Still, it made his heart ache just to think about his mother and father and their last day on earth. "Tell me about the night they were killed."

Mrs. Hansen hesitated, not from any need to think hard. Mack could see that. She simply needed time to compose herself before going further down that road. To help her along, Mack brought her a cup of water from the cooler and then sat down on the edge of his desk with his legs close to her chair.

"Tell me everything you can remember."

She filled her lungs and then let it out with a shuddering breath. "I remember it like it was yesterday. Your father's last day in the office was miserable. The lighthouse project was behind schedule. It was costing a fortune to keep the crews waiting around."

"Why were they waiting around?"

Mrs. Hansen closed her eyes so she could travel back to that time. "There was some delay in getting the new foundation poured. I remember because the concrete company gave me such a hard time about our constant rescheduling. When I went home that day, your father was still in the office. Your mother was with him. They were both so moody, but I thought it was just the job getting them down. I said goodnight, and I went home, and that was the last I ever saw of them. The next morning, I got a phone call from a man. I don't remember whom. Maybe he didn't say. He told me that both your father and mother had been killed in a car crash on their way home that night. The man needed some papers that were at the office. I guess he was a lawyer. It's all sort of blurry." Mrs. Hansen grabbed a fresh tissue from the box and used it to pat her eyes. "I remember asking about you, and he said you were safe. A small blessing on such a horrible day." She balled the tissue in her hand and pressed her fingers to her lips as more tears slid down her face. "Oh, Lord, Mack. I miss them both so much."

Mack dropped to his knees in front of the woman and clutched her hands where they lay in her lap. "I miss them, too. It's been so long since I've heard my mother's voice, I can't remember what it sounds like, and my dad...I can't see his face." Mack felt tears stinging in his eyes, but he refused to let them fall. "That goddamn lighthouse! It was more important to him than I was, more important than my mother's feelings. He wasted the last weeks of his life on a losing proposition."

Mrs. Hansen set a soft hand on his cheek. "Edward did it for you, honey. He thought the lighthouse would be his legacy. He thought you would look at it everyday and be proud that you were Edward Merritt's son."

"Mack?"

He struggled to his feet and saw Joyce sitting up on the couch. "Ah, Sleeping Beauty wakes."

She planted her feet on the floor and set her elbows on her knees. Some of the color had returned to her cheeks, and gradually, the light returned to her eyes. "Don't tell me I passed out again."

"Okay, I won't tell you." Mack ran his sleeve across his eyes. "How do you feel?"

"Besides foolish? I'm freezing."

"A few minutes ago, you were burning up. Somewhere in the middle of your body, it's raining cats and dogs. How about a cup of coffee?"

"I'll get it," Mrs. Hansen offered.

Mack walked around the desk and sat down beside Joyce. "You're scaring me pretty regular now."

"I'm nothing if not consistent." She took the cup Mrs. Hansen offered her, but instead of drinking, she pressed the warm mug to the side of her face. "My head hurts."

Mack ran his fingers through her tangled hair, his thumb skimming her pale cheekbone. No matter how crazy she acted, he couldn't get past the tingle he felt

whenever he looked into her eyes. There had to be a reasonable answer, a solution that would allow them to be together in every way.

Suddenly, the trailer door burst open, and Frank came running in. "Mack, we've had another accident. The floor gave way. We got a couple of guys trapped. We're gonna need some help, and we're gonna need an ambulance."

* * * *

It took three hours to free the trapped men, but luckily, the worst injuries were a broken leg on one and some cracked ribs on another. After sending them off to the hospital, Mack made the trek back to his office with Frank on his heels.

"Stop all work on the lighthouse. Pull everyone off the job. I don't know what's going on, but I'm not taking any chances. Send everyone home for now. Tell them they'll get paid. We'll let them know when they should come back."

"Are you sure? Mr. McGarry from the city has been screaming about the delays. He's got leases on the line. If that mall isn't finished in time, there will be penalties to pay."

"Then I'll pay them," Mack snapped. "This is just getting too weird. I need a little time to sort things out. In the meantime, everyone stays away from the lighthouse, and I mean it." Finished with Frank, Mack stepped inside the trailer and was surprised to find Mrs. Hansen there all alone.

"How bad was it?" she asked.

"Nothing life threatening, but we've got three guys on their way to the emergency room. Make sure the bills are all covered, would you?"

"Of course." She poured Mack a cup of coffee and handed it to him after he flopped down on the worn office couch.

He glanced around the tiny trailer office. "Where's Joyce?"

"She wanted to go home, so I had one of the men drive her. I told her she should stay, but she wouldn't listen." Mrs. Hansen sat down behind her desk once more. "She's pretty hardheaded, that one. Just like someone else I know."

Mack knocked his knuckles against his skull. "It's a prerequisite for becoming a Merritt." He took a slow sip of the coffee. "Mrs. Hansen, does the name Ethan mean anything to you? Maybe someone who worked for my father back when he was moving the lighthouse?"

"Doesn't ring a bell, but we had so many people on the payroll, and it was so long ago."

"I know. I'm grasping at straws."

"You could check the records if Bebe hasn't thrown them out."

"Bebe?"

"Every year after taxes, I'd pack all the records in a cardboard box, all properly marked and labeled. They went into the attic at Bebe's house. I remember having to go

over there a time or two to locate an old contract or bank records, but that was twenty, thirty years ago. She may have tossed them all out by now."

"I'll check. Thanks." Mack stood up, set his coffee cup on the desk, and stretched his arms in opposite directions. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Oh, please, you'd be just fine. You'd hire yourself a young, sexy secretary—"

"Who couldn't type or file or keep the books. No thanks." He bent down and kissed the woman on her cheek. "I've got you. Why don't you take the rest of the day off?"

"Heavens, why?"

Mack took a deep breath and then let it out slowly. "I would just feel better if everyone was safe at home."

"What about you?"

"I have some work to finish," he said, but what he really had in mind was work of a different kind.

* * * *

Joyce slipped her key into the door lock, turned it, and then triggered the handle latch and pushed. The door held firm. What now? She tried the latch again. Nothing. Her head was still pounding, and now, her stomach was churning from the lack of food. All she could think of was lying down on the couch, in the dark, and now the stupid door wouldn't open. Close to tears, Joyce fit her key in the lock and turned in the opposite direction until she heard the bolt move. This time the door opened easily. Locked? Unlocked? That meant she had left the store unlocked all afternoon. Great. She hoped the neighborhood lived up to its friendly reputation.

Entering the shop, Joyce took a quick look around. Everything was as she left it, including the shattered pottery on the floor. That was when it all came rushing back to her; Kathy's visit, her own temper tantrum, and the full-blown sense of panic she felt when she saw Julian Scott in the flesh. What in God's name was that all about?

Even though it was still early, Joyce closed the shop and locked the door. She trudged upstairs to her apartment, did another sweep for burglars, and then fell onto the couch with a loud groan. Her eyelids were at half-mast when the phone rang behind her head. She jerked up to sitting, her pulse soaring from the unexpected noise. It was on its third ring by the time she found the presence of mind to answer it.

"Joyce? I've called five times!" Kathy. "Are you all right?"

"Fine. I'm sorry about what happened earlier. I just don't know what's wrong with me."

"Nothing a good exorcist can't fix."

It was a joke, but Joyce didn't laugh.

"Did you work it all out with Mack Merritt?"

"Not really. There was trouble at the lighthouse. The floor collapsed. His men were hurt."

"Oh, my God. That's awful."

Joyce lay down on the couch. "He thinks we're responsible. FOTL. He thinks we've been vandalizing the site, causing all these accidents."

"No wonder he was so rude to me when I dropped you off. You know, I told him we would disband if he just made his peace with you."

"Really? What did he say?"

"He was glad to hear it." She paused, then turned from the phone and spoke to someone else. "I've gotta go. I'll come over as soon as I'm done with the dinner shift, okay? We can stuff ice cream in our faces and watch chick flicks. How about it?"

"Sure. That sounds like fun."

"Joyce, do you still have that watch?"

Joyce slipped her hand into her pocket. Her fingers curved around the cool, metal round. "Why?"

"I told Mack he should help you bury it. Henry may love his booze, but I'd feel better knowing that thing was back where it belongs."

It belongs with me. "Forget about it. I have." Joyce rolled up to sitting once more. "I'll see you tonight." Then she hung up the phone. Leaning over the arm of the couch, she noted the message light was blinking.

Ethan.

She punched the play button and waited for Mack's voice.

"What does a mother have to do to get her daughter to call her once in a while? I'm not checking up or anything, I just want to see how you're doing. We love you, honey. We're proud of you for making it on your own."

After that were two messages from Kathy asking her to pick up.

The machine *kachunked* then rewound the tape. The Ethan message was gone. Recorded over.

Joyce picked up the phone again and dialed a long distance number. A woman answered on the first ring. "Hey, ma, it's me. Sorry I haven't called for a while. It's been kind of crazy around here..."

Chapter Nineteen

Merritt Construction Owner Killed in Car Crash

Suspicious Car Crash Claims Two Lives

Merritt and Wife Killed in Fiery Car Crash

Mack ran his finger over the grainy, black and white photocopied pictures of his father and mother. She was young and beautiful, so full of life. He was kind and boyish, a young man in his prime. The Daily Trumpet had a photo of the burned-out car. That one was hard to look at. Another paper had photos of the accident site with firemen and police swarming the scene. A week later, there were funeral photos, two coffins side-by-side. Bebe was nearly hidden behind a black veil, Julian at her side. Aunt Della was crying into a handkerchief while holding tightly to the hand of a little boy. Mack didn't recognize himself. He had no memory of that day, so it couldn't really be him in the photo.

The door to the trailer opened, admitting a sea breeze and Julian.

"Business hours are over," he said.

"Business hours? What are those again?"

Julian came around the desk to peer over Mack's shoulder. "Some things are better off forgotten, my boy."

"Ignorance is bliss?"

"Sometimes." Julian tried to collect up the newspaper articles, but Mack stopped him with a firm hand.

"I'm not done yet." For a second he thought Julian was going to fight him on it, but in the end, the older man gave up and went to sit on the couch.

"What exactly are you looking for?"

Mack shrugged. Good question. What was he looking for? Ghostly images in the newspaper photos? Mention of a man named Ethan? "The Daily Trumpet called the accident suspicious."

"Of course, they did. Who wants to read a story that says unfortunate accident? Suspicious accident makes them want to tune in tomorrow."

True and true. In the end, the authorities had ruled out foul play. The roads were wet. It was late. His father was probably tired and might have fallen asleep at the wheel. How mundane. How tragic, but still, he felt that there was a puzzle piece missing. "Julian, why was my mother upset with you in the weeks before she died?"

The older man didn't miss a beat. "Who told you that? Mrs. Hansen?"

"What does it matter who told me if it's true?"

Julian opened his hands in an empty gesture. "I didn't like her new hair cut? I didn't notice that she lost five pounds? Who knows why women get upset?"

Mack wasn't buying. His mother wasn't the kind of woman who lost it over petty things like compliments and haircuts, but then again, maybe she was. He was just a child at the time, so his memories were certainly skewed. His eyes returned to the funeral picture. His finger stroked the coffin that he imagined was hers. "Tell me the truth, Julian. I'm not a boy anymore. I want to know the truth."

"No matter how ugly?"

That question made Mack look up from the photocopied page. He looked at the man who sat across from him, good old Uncle Julian, always there when he needed him, always there for Bebe and Della. The family protector, but who was he protecting now? "Tell me the truth."

Julian sighed as he shifted to the edge of the seat, his forearms balanced above his knees. "Your father was a driven man, but you know that. His work was very important to him, so important that he often forgot about the people who cared about him."

"Like my mother."

"Like your mother. Helen was a beautiful young woman, but in Bebe's eyes, she had no background, no breeding. Bebe made her life very difficult, and Eddie, your father, he let it happen. Helen was so alone in that big old house of yours. She simply wanted someone to care about her, make her feel special." Julian's voice changed. It turned mellow, wistful. There was no doubt about where he was headed.

"I don't want to hear anymore."

"You asked for the truth. The truth is, we never meant to hurt your father. It just happened. When it was over, Helen could barely stand the sight of me because I reminded her of what she had done."

"I said I don't want to hear anymore." Mack scooped up the newspaper articles and stuffed them into the trashcan by his desk. "Everything I've heard just leaves me with more questions and no answers."

"Tell the city to forget it, Mack. It's not worth all this anguish. That lighthouse has never been anything but trouble for the Merritts. It consumed your father. Don't let it consume you."

"This isn't just about the lighthouse." He spun his chair around and kicked the file cabinet, causing a satisfying, resounding *clang*. "It's about Joyce, too."

"That woman has problems," Julian said as he pushed himself up to stand.

"Then I have a problem, because I can't just walk away from her." Mack set his elbows on his desk and dropped his head into his hands. A car accident, an argument, an affair, a watch, a frightened young woman, and a man named Ethan. Information overload. "Just leave me alone, would you? Just leave me alone."

He sat that way, with his head in hands, long after he heard the trailer door open and close.

* * * *

One scoop of Rocky Road, one scoop of Chocolate Chip, strawberry sauce, whipped cream, and a cherry on top. "Perfect." Kathy lifted the bowl in the air like an Olympian showing off his gold medal. "Now, what are you having?"

"Making mine a double." Joyce filled two glasses with soda and carried them out into the living room. "What do you want to watch first? Cruise or Swayze?"

"Oh, let's go for a little Dirty Dancing," Kathy shouted from the kitchen. "If we watch Tom sliding into his cockpit, it'll melt our ice cream."

Joyce laughed. It felt so good to laugh. She slid the movie out of its sleeve and popped it into the VCR. It felt so good to have mindless fun, just like their old, sorority days. While she certainly didn't regret the move to Mystic Harbor, the last few weeks had been the hardest of her whole life, the stresses of being on her own combined with the responsibilities of running a store, not to mention visits of the ghostly kind.

She slipped her hand in her sweatshirt pocket and gave the watch a squeeze. Now that he had a name, he didn't scare her anymore. Ethan, with the blue jeans and black leather jacket. Ethan, who whispered sweet words in her ear while they danced. Ethan, who made love to her like no one else ever had.

"Here, before I eat both bowls."

"What? Sorry." Joyce took her bowl from Kathy and climbed on to the couch with her legs curled beneath her. She was dressed in tight leggings with a baggy Princeton sweatshirt that came down almost to her knees. She settled the bowl in her lap and dug the remote out of the couch cushions. "I'm glad you suggested this. I think it's just what I needed to clear my head." She pressed play to start the movie, dumped the remote back on the couch, and dove into her ice cream. "Swayze time."

"Did you see him in Road House? He is so hot in that movie, I have to watch naked."

Joyce laughed with a mouthful of ice cream.

"Oh, and then there's that other one he did with Demi Moore and Whoopi."

Joyce swallowed. "Ghost."

Kathy's smile faded in an instant. "Forget that one. Let's go back to Road House."

Joyce gave her a nudge in the shoulder. "Eat your ice cream because there is plenty more."

They were five minutes into the movie when the phone rang. Joyce was going to let the machine pick up, but on the final ring she reached over, snagged the receiver, and mumbled a half interested "Hello."

"Hi, Joyce. It's Mack."

"Hi." She glanced at Kathy, sitting beside her on the couch, and mouthed the word 'Mack.'

Kathy rolled her eyes and used the remote to turn down the sound on the movie.

"What can I do for you?"

"So formal," he replied.

"Well, I'm having trouble keeping track if I'm foe or friend."

"Sorry." His voice was so quiet, so sullen, nothing like the other morning when they chatted over bagels. "Can I come over? I'd like to talk."

Again, Joyce looked at Kathy. Her hesitation was long enough to trigger a backtrack from Mack.

"If you're busy, never mind."

"Kathy's here. We're just watching movies."

"Just," Kathy whined. "Well, I like that."

Joyce waved at her to be quiet. "Is it important? I mean, can we do it tomorrow?"

It was his turn to hesitate. "That's okay. You two have fun. I guess you're feeling better."

"Yes, I am. I'm feeling a lot better."

"Good. I'll talk to you later." Then he hung up.

Joyce replaced the receiver and dug a big spoonful of ice cream out of her bowl. It was girlfriends before boyfriends; that was the rule after all. It wasn't like Mack was much of a boyfriend, one date, a second attempt, and a whole lot of confusion in between.

"He wanted to come over," Kathy guessed as she pumped up the volume on the TV.

"Yeah, but it's okay. It's girl's night, right?"

Kathy plucked the cherry from Joyce's bowl, held it over her own mouth by the stem, and then caught it like a fish on a hook. "Right."

* * * *

Mack stared at the phone for a minute after he hung up. He was disappointed. He wanted to see her, but he wouldn't push it. If she wasn't that anxious to see him, he could let it go another day. What difference would a day make? He didn't know any more now than he knew four hours ago. What he did know confused him all the more. There was nothing to be solved tonight.

He pushed himself out of his chair, suddenly weary beyond all measure. He grabbed his jacket from the hook in the wall, checked his pocket for his keys, and then shut off the coffee pot. *Oh, one more thing.* He went back to his desk and fished the photocopied articles out of the trash, then he locked up and headed home.

* * * *

It was midnight when Joyce waved good-bye as Kathy pulled away from the curb in her old VW Bug. It had been a good night, lots of giggles, lots of girl talk, and after the phone call, no mention of ghosts, lighthouses, or Mack Merritt. So why were all those things still on her mind?

Joyce locked up the store and wound her way through the display shelves and started back upstairs. She was almost to the top when the doorbell sounded. Kathy didn't get very far. Joyce turned round, galloped back downstairs, and yanked open the front door.

"What did you forget?"

But it wasn't Kathy. It was Julian.

Joyce tried to slam the door shut, but he blocked it with his body. "I just want to talk to you. It's about Mack. If you care about him, you'll listen."

Joyce gave up on the door. She moved backward into the store, putting a few feet between him and her. "What do you want?"

"Just to talk. I'm sorry for the late hour, but it couldn't wait."

But he had waited. Obviously, he had waited outside for Kathy to leave. A heavy weight pressed down on her chest as her heart rated doubled. Where was the phone? There was a portable in the shop, but she had a bad habit of leaving it lying around off the hook. Even if she did get her hands on it, it might not be charged. Julian wasn't likely to stand around and wait while she ran upstairs to use the standard phone.

"Joyce, I don't know why you're afraid of me. I've never done anything to hurt you. All I want is what's best for Mack." He took a step forward.

Joyce backed up a step, running smack into a shelf of dinnerware. Plates, cups, not bad as weapons went should she need one.

"When I left Mack at the office, he was reviewing the news reports of his parent's death. He'd been at it for hours, digging up the past, Joyce. There's nothing good to come of it. It hurt him to see those reports, pictures of his parents and their burned-out car. It hurt him, but he had to look because of you."

"Me?"

"I'm sure you never meant to hurt him, but that's exactly what you're doing."

"I don't understand."

"He told me it had something to do with a pocket watch. A very special pocket watch."

Joyce slipped her hand into her pocket. Her fingers curled around the smooth metal case. "Where did you get it?" he asked, his cool gray eyes betraying not a hint of emotion.

"It doesn't matter."

He took another step toward her. With the shelf at her back, she was forced to step left to keep the distance between them.

"You found it at the construction site, didn't you? May I see it?" He held out his hand, palm open.

"I don't have it anymore."

"I think you do."

She shook her head no.

"Don't play games with me, girl!" He stamped his foot on the floor as his eyes went wide and cold. "Give me that watch!"

Joyce's eyes shifted toward the stairs. She was young and fit. He was an old man. If she made a run for it, she could make it to her apartment with time to spare. She didn't get a chance to test her theory. Julian grabbed her by the arm. He was stronger than she would have thought, able to hold her still with just his fingers digging into the flesh of her arm.

"You have no idea who you're playing with," he said, his voice deep and menacing.

Joyce spoke without thinking. She opened her mouth, and the words came out. "Neither do you!"

Julian went flying backwards. He stumbled a few steps and then landed on his back on the floor. Joyce knew she should run upstairs to safety, upstairs to the phone, but her feet were rooted on the spot.

"Get out." The words came out of her mouth calm and clear.

Then the shelf of dinnerware pitched to the side, dumping ceramic plates, cups, and bowls all over the floor just inches from Julian's body. The sound of shattering dishes echoed through the store like the pounding of a strong surf. Chips and shards broke and bounced, sending debris in ten different directions. When the dishware was depleted, the four-foot shelf unit prepared to join the fray. It wavered and tipped and finally fell, but only after Julian had rolled safely to the side.

"What is going on? What is happening?"

"Get out! Now." This time, her words weren't so calm. Joyce was shaking, close to sobbing, but she held on, held back until the old man gathered himself up and left. Then she ran to the door and threw the deadbolt.

Stay away from him.

"I try, but he won't leave me alone. I'm afraid."

Strong arms wrapped around her, holding her tight as the tears started to fall.

I'll protect you.

"What does he want?"

You, but you're mine. Don't worry. I won't let either one of them have you.

His lips touched hers. They were warm, sweet lips, like the first juicy bite of a fall apple.

Chapter Twenty

The grandfather clock in the foyer chimed twelve times, the brassy, booming sound making it all the way up to the attic. Mack stretched out his legs, set his hands behind his hips on the floor, and then arched his back. He had been at this for far too many hours. His eyes felt dry and bleary from reading in the poor light. His nose was constantly running, thanks to the layer of dust that coated the room. Bebe thought he was nuts, digging through forty years of old files, but Mack didn't have to search all the boxes. As Mrs. Hansen had said, they were all well labeled by year and content. He started with the payroll records the year Merritt Construction took on the lighthouse job. There were plenty of Elmers, Ernies, and even an Ezekiel, but no Ethan. Then he tried the two years before, thinking Ethan might be a disgruntled employee who was fired. No luck there, either. Not that he expected to find a connection. There was really no reason to think Joyce's 'mystery' man had anything at all to do with Mack's father, the accident, or even the moving of the lighthouse. It was a just a feeling, or maybe it was more of a hope.

Around eleven, Mack gave up on the payroll records and moved on to his father's work logs and handwritten notes. Each year's box held three or four spiral notebooks, each of those filled with page after page of senseless scribbles.

Pick up MM

364 x 88

Don't forget Louie

35-648P Section 84

Mack's birthday—radio control car? Legos? Football?

That notation made Mack smile. Apparently, his father had spent some time thinking about his little boy.

Mrs. H—recheck deposit slip

Figures are wrong

Mack dropped the steno book on the floor and fished through the pile of ones he had already scanned. Six months earlier. He flipped the pages to almost the end of the book.

Bounced checks—WHAT HAPPENED HERE?

He flipped a few more pages.

Mrs. H—verify balance sheet—doesn't add up.

Mrs. Hansen had mentioned the fact that the business had fallen on hard times. That was why his father had paid for the lighthouse job with so much of his own money. Still, these notes made it seem as if his father was questioning the bank.

Mack was buried in accounting reports when the clock struck twelve. Someone had used a highlighter to mark several lines of debits. One page had a huge circle drawn around a dozen numbers, and next to it was written—????

He didn't have to be a forensic accountant to see that these numbers weren't adding up. Why? Was someone juggling the books? Stealing from the company? But who had access? Mrs. Hansen? That hardly seemed likely. The accountant did it, perhaps? What he needed was his father's notebook from the week before the accident. He sifted through the books on the floor, but the closest date was still a good three months before that fatal night. Rolling up to his knees, Mack peered into the box to see if he might have missed a notebook. There were plenty of files and an old address book but not another notebook. He double-checked the date on the box to be sure he had the right year. He sat back down and sighed. It was missing. Every other month of that year and every month for the year before were accounted for. Had his father simply stopped keeping notes in those last three months? Not likely. Mrs. Hansen was quite shaken by his father's death. Perhaps she hadn't been so careful about packing the books and papers from that month. There was, of course, one other option. Someone had stolen the notebook to keep its contents a secret.

There had to be more. There had to be. Mack stuck his hands into the box, pulled out a stack of file folders, and began sorting through them page by page.

* * * *

Still dressed in her leggings and sweatshirt, Joyce lay down on her rumpled bed. Even though the doors were locked and the phone was at hand, she couldn't shake the fear that settled in her chest. Julian was gone, and he wasn't coming back, thanks to Ethan.

Mack was never going to believe her story.

Mack.

Joyce grabbed a handful of the comforter and pulled it close so it formed a long, pillow-like bunch next to her body. She closed her eyes and ran her hand over the lump. How many nights had she slept like this, imaging that there was a lover beside her? Over the years, the rolled blanket had been a substitute, her latest TV crush, a character in a romance novel, sometimes a real person, but rarely. Rarely, before Mack came along.

Ever since their date, she had imagined this was Mack lying beside her with his strong, broad shoulders and muscular thighs. She imagined him brushing his fingers through her hair with her head lying on his chest, the sound of his heartbeat in her ear.

It was quite the fairy tale. What chance would she have once she told Mack the truth about his dear uncle Julian Scott?

Mack, he attacked me—sort of. He demanded the watch. He said I was hurting you! He only wanted to save you from pain.

Oh, great. That didn't make Julian sound like much of a villain.

Joyce squeezed the comforter tighter as she ran the conversation over in her head again. Perhaps she had been mistaken. Perhaps the old man's intentions really were good. Still, that didn't explain the horrible, stomach crunching feeling she got whenever Julian was in the room.

The phone rang.

Joyce sat up with a start. She glanced at the clock, saw it was nearly one in the morning, and that made her heart pound faster. Could only be bad news at one in the morning. She grabbed the phone, steeling herself for the worst.

"Joyce? It's Mack. I know it's late. I'm sorry. I seem to be making a habit of waking you up at ungodly hours."

She ran a hand through her hair, pushing the tangle away from her face. "It's okay. I wasn't asleep." Not by a long shot. "What's wrong?"

"I need to talk to you. Can I come over? Right now?"

Julian. He got to Mack, told him some story that made her sound like she was at fault. That had to be it. Why else would he be calling her at this late hour? "What's the matter? Did something happen?" She held her breath, waiting for the answer.

"I'd rather not talk about it on the phone. I'm home. I don't want anyone to overhear."

Anyone? Bebe and Della? Or was Julian standing there right beside Mack as he spoke on the phone.

"Come on over."

"I don't mean to be so much trouble."

"You? I think I win the trophy for the most trouble. Come on over. I'll put on a pot of coffee. We can both lose sleep together."

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

* * * *

Mack arrived in less than fifteen minutes, which meant he had broken a number of speed laws getting there. He parked at the curb and moved slowly up the walk as Joyce waited in the doorway. He climbed the stairs one at a time as if just lifting his foot was too great an effort.

"I'm sorry," was the first thing he said. His eyes were red rimmed and dull. He was in need of sleep, and so was she, but it didn't look like either one of them would be sleeping any time soon.

"Come on in." Joyce stepped aside so he could enter the shop, then closed and locked the door behind him.

"Jesus, what happened?" Mack asked as he surveyed the mess of broken pottery.

Joyce hesitated, not sure where to start if she should even begin at all. "Your Uncle Julian was here."

"He did this?"

"Not exactly." Joyce crossed her arms over herself, cold even though she was wearing a sweatshirt. "He came here about an hour ago. He said he came because of you, because you were upset, and it was all my fault."

"Your fault?" Mack bent down to pick up half a Fiesta Yellow coffee mug.

"He wanted the watch. He knew it came from the construction site, and he wanted me to give it to him." She snuggled her arms up even tighter. "How did he know, Mack?"

"I think I told him." With his eyes focused on the floor, Mack nudged a small pile of debris with the toe of his boot "I must have told him." He spotted something a few paces away and went to pick it up. It was the other half of the yellow coffee mug, minus its handle. "So, what happened?"

"He tried to take it from me."

That statement made him look up. He turned to face her for the first time since he entered the shop. "He didn't hurt you?"

"He would have, but Ethan stopped him. He pushed Julian off me, and then he tipped over the shelf, but just to protect me," she added, feeling the need to defend the actions of her ghostly savior. "Ethan could have dumped the whole thing on Julian, but he didn't. He tipped it to the side so all the dishes fell out. Then he waited for Julian to move before he let the shelf fall all the way. Ethan wasn't trying to kill him. He just wanted to scare him, get him to leave me alone."

Mack fit together the two halves of the broken mug. Almost perfect, except for a pie-wedge missing from one side. "You still have the watch?"

Automatically, her hand went into her pocket. "Yes. Mack, you don't seem too surprised by all this."

He pursed his lips and sighed. "Invite me upstairs, would you?" He set the two halves of the mug on top of the jewelry display counter. "I've gotta sit down."

* * * *

Mack was tired, but it had nothing at all to do with the late hour. He trudged up the stairs, following Joyce to her apartment and then collapsed on the couch without waiting for an invitation to sit. "I've spent the last couple of hours going through my father's old records from the construction company."

Joyce sat down on the far end of the couch, leaving a good two feet of space between them.

"I found all these notations that made it look like someone was stealing money from the company and juggling the books to cover it." Mack rubbed his forehead and sighed. "I think it was Julian. At least my father thought so. He had legal papers drawn up to remove Julian as a signatory from the company, but he never signed them. I bet he wanted to talk to Julian about it first, give him a chance to explain." Mack sighed as he got to his feet. "Then they were dead, my mother and father, killed in a car accident." He set his hands on his hips and bent slightly backwards, focusing his eyes on the ceiling. "Only one reporter thought it wasn't an accident. He thought it had been arranged."

"Arranged?" Then the pieces fell into place. "By Julian."

"I can't believe that!" Mack whirled around to face her in anger. "It's just paper, twenty-five-year-old bits of paper. What if I'm reading them wrong? What if there was a reasonable explanation, and my father worked it all out before he died?" Even as he spoke the words, he knew what the truth was. "Julian has taken care of me since I was little. He took care of Bebe and Della before that. He wouldn't do anything to hurt my family. It just doesn't make sense."

Joyce stood up, took a step, and then suddenly, she was in his arms. Mack pulled her tight to his chest, tucking her head beneath his chin. She smelled so good, fresh and clean like the air after a rain. For a moment, he cleared his mind of all the questions and let himself fall. His eyes closed. His fingers combed through her soft, wavy, hair. Something stirred deep inside him. He wanted her, now, but he couldn't, not with so many unresolved questions. Gently, he caught her by the shoulders and took a step back. "I need to finish this. I have to talk to Julian. I need to give him a chance to explain."

"What you need is some sleep. You look like you're going to fall down if you don't lie down soon."

"Sleep? How can I sleep knowing that the man who was more of a father to me than my real father may be a murderer?" Mack clamped his mouth shut as if he might catch the words from coming out, but it was too late. He had said it out loud. A murderer. "This is crazy. This is all crazy."

Joyce touched a soft hand to his cheek. "Forget it, just for tonight. I don't want you to go."

Mack turned his face toward her hand and set a soft kiss inside her palm. "I don't want to leave you, but I can't think straight."

"That's why you have to stay. Mack, I'm afraid for you. There's more to this than you know. Julian is dangerous."

"He's not. He's an old man. Whatever happened had happened a long time ago."

"No, there's more. I know there is. Please, stay with me." She wrapped her arms around him, but she wasn't strong enough to stop him if he wanted to leave. She was small and shaky, and he had wasted so much time. Since the night they went out to dinner, Mack had wondered what it would be like to finally have her in his arms, to lie with her, to make love to her.

Why not make it happen tonight? What could be solved in the remaining few hours before dawn, with his eyes bleary and his brain frazzled? What he needed was a chance to unwind, a way to shake off the tension and relax so he could think straight in the morning. What he needed, she was offering. Why shouldn't he accept?

"You're right." Mack caught Joyce under the knees and then lifted her into his arms. "I'll stay." He carried her into the bedroom. He then laid her carefully on the bed. Her hair spread out around her head like a warm, chestnut glow. His weary body responded to the sight of her, filling him with a rush of excitement that he wouldn't have thought possible after the day he had had. Seeing her lying there, waiting for him to join her, it was energizing. Mack pushed aside his worries and concentrated only on her. He thought about burying his face in her hair. He wanted to kiss her, taste her, touch every inch of her. "You are so very beautiful. So perfect."

She opened her arms, beckoning him close. He set one knee on the bed, but that was as far as he got. Mack's body slammed back against a chest of drawers. The top of the piece caught him in just below the shoulder blades, knocking the breath out of him. He dropped to his knees, gasping to fill his lungs. When he looked up, a lamp flew his way. Mack threw up his arms to deflect the blow, but the base of the lamp made contact, sending a bone shattering pain up to his shoulder. What followed was the warm welling of blood.

Earth angel, earth angel, will you be mine?

Joyce had the watch in her hands. She thumbed the latch, opening the cover. Music poured out. "Ethan."

"No! Damn it!" Mack stumbled across the room as smaller objects pelted his back, a brush, a book, and a picture frame, which shattered at his feet. "Stop it! I'm not trying to hurt her."

What was left of the table lamp smacked him in the back of the head. The force sent him pitching forward onto the bed.

Joyce didn't even turn. Her eyes were still locked on the face of the watch, so he grabbed it. He slammed the lid shut, trapping it between the palms of his hands.

The music stopped mid-note. The room fell silent except for Joyce's labored breathing.

You think you're better than me?

A fist slammed into Mack's jaw. A book rammed his right shoulder. Another hit in the mouth. Blood welled up from a cracked lip. Mack got up and was pushed backward almost off his feet. The room tipped before his eyes. He turned and grasped the doorjamb for support.

You're no better than me. No better than me.

Mack looked back over his shoulder. Joyce had rolled to her side and curled up with a pillow in her arms. She was smiling. Content. Safe. The door opened, and Mack was propelled across the threshold. The door slammed behind him, catching him in the hip and driving him to the floor once more.

Ethan tried to protect her, as he had protected her from Julian. Who the hell was he, and what exactly did he want with Joyce?

Mack rolled to his feet and ran at the door, hitting it squarely with his shoulder. The wood groaned and strained but held.

"Joyce! Open the door!"

He hit it again, and once more, the pain in his shoulder forced him to stop. Mack leaned forward, hands on his thighs as he listened for any sound that meant Joyce was in danger. All he heard was his own heaving breaths and her deep-throated moans. Not moans of pain, but moans of lust of passion.

He stood upright once more and brought his hands up in front of his eyes. The watch. He held it between his thumb and forefinger. Such an innocuous looking object, yet it seemed to hold the key to all of the strange goings on.

"You can't have her," he said aloud, then stiffened, waiting for the next attack.

Silence.

Nothing.

Ethan was too busy to respond. Busy with Joyce.

Mack sighed as he collapsed against the door in one last attempt to break it down. Apparently, Ethan could have her, would have her, and right now, there wasn't a damn thing Mack could do about it.

Reluctant, but defeated, Mack left the apartment and went back home.

Chapter Twenty-One

Mack stood under the steaming hot shower with his head bowed so the pulsating spray hit him in the neck. Every muscle ached like he was on the losing end of a three-hour hockey game, but at least he wasn't bleeding anymore. When he first stripped down, he found a sliver of glass in his arm and broken stitches in his forehead. By morning, he would have bruises to show for his trouble. Wait—come to think of it, it was morning, or just about. He turned around in the shower stall so the water cascaded over his hair and down his face.

Ghosts.

He had laughed when Joyce first suggested it, but now he had seen it with his own eyes. It was poltergeist activity, straight out of a horror movie. At least Joyce's head didn't spin. That was a small comfort.

Ethan.

Whoever he was, he had his sights set on Joyce, but why? Was it only the watch that connected them, or was there something more?

Julian.

Accepting the presence of a malevolent spirit was easier than accepting the truth about his old friend. He thought about those sailing trips when they would talk about how much Mack missed his mother. He thought about the hundreds of dinners and lunches and rides in the car, all the advice, all the laughs, all the hugs—all the things they probably wouldn't have done together if his father had lived.

Mack tipped his head back, allowing the water to hit him in the face. The spray was like a dozen tiny needles, but it felt good, the steam, the hollow quiet, the alone time, but he couldn't hide in the shower forever. He had a job to do. Mack shut off the water and slid the shower door open. A cool breeze touched his wet skin, creating a shiver from the top of his spine to his toes. He grabbed a long, fluffy towel from the bar on the door and wrapped it around his waist.

The bathroom was thick with steam, the mirror completely fogged. The warmth that had felt so good in the shower now was slightly cloying. He opened the bathroom door a crack, letting cool mix with the warm. Slowly the mirror began to clear, and that was how he got his first good look at himself.

A thick band of stubble covered his chin. A purplish bruise marred one cheek. His eyes were bloodshot and puffy. The crack in his forehead oozed once more.

"You handsome devil, you." Mack reached for his razor. That was when the music began, a tinkling music box tune. *Fur Elise*. His breath caught in his chest. He stood completely still, thinking it might be all in his head, but the music continued.

The watch. It was on his bedside table just a few yards away from the bathroom door. What else was out there? Who else? Was Ethan waiting to bombard him with knick-knacks and lamps? He filled his lungs with moist air and then, slowly, carefully, opened the door.

"Aunt Della! You scared the living daylights out of me."

She was sitting on the edge of his bed looking down at the open watch, which was cupped in the palm of her frail left hand. When Mack spoke, she looked up at him. The confusion on her face turned to horror when she saw him battered and bruised.

"Oh, my lord, what happened?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you. Do me a favor and shut that watch, will you?" He returned to the bathroom where he discarded the towel and put on his robe. When he went back to the bedroom, Della was still sitting there just as he had left her. "What are you doing up anyway? It's late. It's so late, it's almost early." Mack dropped down onto the bed beside her, and his body cheered with delight.

"Where did you get this watch?" Della asked. It wasn't just a curious question, no, indeed.

"Do you recognize it?"

"It belonged to Ethan."

Ethan! Mack had never been so happy to hear that name. "I got it from Joyce. One of my workers found it buried in the dirt around the lighthouse. He sold it to her for a couple of bucks."

"I don't believe it." Della ran her fingers over the design on the cover. "Ethan would never have left it behind. It meant everything to him."

"Tell me about it."

Della caressed the watch as if it were a fragile kitten. "Originally, it belonged to my uncle. He was a flyer in the war. See the engraving on the front? It's a map, for Captain Francis Map of the U.S. Air Force. He said it was his good-luck piece, that the watch had protected him during the war. He gave it to me when I was ten. I had to have my tonsils taken out, and I was scared to death. Uncle Francis said the watch would protect me, so he gave it to me and told me I could keep it. When I was sixteen, I gave it to Ethan. He had gotten into a terrible fight with some other boys. He was all battered

and..." She looked up at Mack, at the bruises on his face. "I thought he needed some protection. So I gave him the watch." She flipped the case over in her hand and then opened the back plate. "See EW and AM. Ethan West and Ardella Map. Isn't that awful? I couldn't afford to have it engraved by a professional, so I scratched the letters in with a knife. Looks silly now, but I thought it was so romantic at the time, and Ethan, oh, how his eyes lit up when he saw it. Ethan never had anything fancy. His family was poor."

You think you're better than me. All these years, and Ethan still had a chip on his shoulder about that.

"He was so excited, so pleased that I would think of him and offer him such an elegant gift, a family heirloom of sorts. From the day I gave it to him, he never let it go. He wore it day and night, to work or to play. He was never without it after that. Never."

Mack reached for the tissue box on the bedside table when he saw the tears well up in the woman's eyes. "Is he the man who broke your heart?"

Della accepted a tissue and used it to pat her eyes. "It wasn't like that. He loved me, and I loved him, but Mother didn't approve. Ethan was from the wrong side of the tracks. He was a high-school drop out. His father died when he was very young, so he had to work to support his mother and himself. He worked in the apple orchard that used to stand where the lighthouse is now."

"That must be how the watch ended up there. He dropped it while he was working, and it got buried in the dirt over time."

"No." Della shook her head. "I can't believe that. This watch was so important to him. He would have noticed. If he lost it, he would have looked for it. I know him—knew him," she corrected. "I thought I knew him so well."

Mack caught her hands in his and pulled them into his lap. "What happened to Ethan, Auntie?"

"I don't know. The last time I saw him was on a Saturday morning in the spring. I always offered to walk to the corner store on the weekend to pick up bread and milk, whatever mother needed. Ethan would meet me there before he went to work. He met me that morning, too. He was upset. You see, there was going to be a dance that night, and I wanted to go. I wanted him to be my escort, but he was afraid he wouldn't fit in. Sometimes, there was trouble when people saw us together. Bebe's boyfriend, Edward—"

"My grandfather," said Mack, trying to keep all the facts straight in his mind.

"He didn't care for Ethan, and neither did Julian. I swear those boys could be terrible mean when they put their minds to it."

A fact that no longer surprised Mack, not with all he had seen and heard in the last few hours. "So, what happened? Did Ethan take you to the dance?"

"Well, it took some convincing. He thought I should go with Julian, but I didn't love Julian. I loved Ethan. I really did, Mack. I loved him in a way that there are no words for. He finally agreed to take me. He said he had to work at the orchard. He would finish around seven. Then he would change and come right over to pick me up. I told him I'd be waiting on the front porch swing, and I did. I was dressed in a yellow satin gown

with loads of crinoline under the skirt. I had Mother's beaded sweater and a rose clipped in my hair."

"I bet you were a knock out."

Della blushed, just like Joyce, a sweet, innocent, girlish blush. "I waited for him for hours. I waited for him until I was so tired I fell asleep on the swing. When I woke up, I was in my bed, dressed in my nightgown. I could hear my mother telling Bebe that Ethan was gone for good."

Mack touched a finger to her cheek, catching a solo tear as it slid toward her chin.

"I still don't understand why he left me. We were going to be married. It couldn't have been because of the baby. He didn't even know." Della stopped, frozen by her own words. She yanked her hands away from Mack and turned her body to face the open bedroom door.

"You were pregnant?" Mack set his hands on her shoulders, but she shrugged them away.

"Can you imagine? Your lonely old aunt who reads romance novels by the dozen, an unwed mother at age sixteen."

"What I imagine is that you were pretty scared."

She nodded, her whole body trembling with the tears. "When my parents found out, they were furious. They wanted me to marry Julian, but I refused, so they sent me to a convent school. I lived there until my son was born."

Mack got off the bed and knelt on the floor in front of her, capturing her hands in his. "I'm so sorry, Auntie. It must have been terrible having to give up your baby. I'll bet you still think of him and wonder what he's like, who he's become."

"No, I don't wonder." She pulled her hands away from him as she turned her gaze to some invisible spot on the wall beyond him. "I know everything about him. He was kind and gentle, and like Ethan, he loved to be outdoors. Even though he spent too much time making a living, I know he loved his wife and his little boy more than anything in the world." Using Mack's shoulder for support, Della got to her feet. She wavered slightly, the pocket watch still clutched tightly in one hand. "I want to show you something. It's time I showed you something."

On unsteady legs, she walked out of Mack's room, down the hall and into her own bedroom. He followed her, containing his questions, almost afraid to push her any closer to the edge. He seemed to have that effect on people of late: Joyce, Mrs. Hansen, Della, and probably Bebe if he ever got the courage to tell her what he had discovered.

Once they were in Della's room, the elderly woman collapsed into the rocker by the French doors that matched the ones in Mack's room. "Look in the drawer," she said, vaguely waving toward the bedside table.

Mack sat on the side of the bed, opened the drawer, and fished around: a pad of paper and a pen, reading glasses and an old, worn, paperback romance novel. "What am I looking for?"

"Inside the book," she said. The tears were gone now, replaced with a sense of calm determination.

Mack took the paperback out of the drawer and flipped through the pages until he found a fragile, black and white photo. It was a picture of a handsome young man with slicked-back black hair wearing a leather jacket and blue jeans.

"My dad."

"Ethan," Della corrected. "That's a picture of Ethan. The only one I have."

That bit of news made it all come together. "My father was your son, Ethan's son. Not Bebe's."

"It seemed the only reasonable thing to do." Della pressed her slipper-clad toes to the floor and started the rocker rocking. "Shortly after my son was born, Bebe married Edward Merritt. Mother thought it would be best if they raised my son as if he were their own. So, they went away on a honeymoon in Europe, a trip that lasted more than a year. When they returned, Bebe and Edward showed off their brand new baby boy to the world. Some people suspected that my sister had been indiscreet, the baby being born so quickly after the marriage, but no one ever suspected it of me. Not me. Not mousy little Ardella."

"You're my grandmother, not Bebe. She's my great aunt, and you're my real grandmother."

Della nodded slowly, the tears starting up again. "Your father never knew. He never knew that Ethan West was his father. I was afraid to tell him. How could I tell my only boy that he was a bastard?"

"Don't say that. You loved Ethan. It wasn't a dirty, sordid fling. You loved him. You probably would have married him had your mother not stood in the way."

"Say it anyway you like, but in the end, there's no excuse. I let my emotions run away with me. I flirted with a boy, and then I allowed him to touch me. I disgraced myself, my family, and my son."

"No." Mack got off the bed and went to her side. He stopped the chair from rocking, then laid a soft kiss on her cheek. "No, you didn't disgrace anyone. You were a young girl in love in the fifties. You followed your heart. When life threw you a curve, you did the best you could."

"It was the best solution. I was afraid they would make me give the child up for adoption. This way, I got to watch him grow into a man and have a child of his own. I can't tell you what it meant to me to be able to watch you go from a squalling baby to a handsome gentleman. Bebe loves you, too, Mack, just as if you were her own. She loved your father, and she loves you."

Della picked up the watch lying in her lap. She ran her finger over the lid as a distant memory brought a smile to her lips. "I can't believe that Ethan left this watch behind. It was so important to him."

With a heavy sigh, Mack sat down on the floor beside Della's chair. "I don't think he did. I mean, not intentionally. I don't think Ethan ever made it out of the orchard that night."

"What are you talking about?"

"I think Ethan was killed after work. That was why he never picked you up that night."

"Killed? Who would want to kill him?"

Mack was afraid to think about that. A boy from the wrong side of the tracks could make a lot of enemies. Still, Mack suspected the answer was closer to home. Della herself had said that Julian and Bebe's husband, Edward, both had bad feelings for Ethan. Could they have been involved, separately or collectively? If so, why? "I need to keep the watch for a little bit longer." Gently, Mack pried open the old woman's fingers. "I think it's a clue to what really happened that night. As soon as I find out, I'll give it back to you. Promise." He popped up to his toes then and set a kiss on her cheek. "I love you—Grandma."

Della sighed. "I guess it wasn't a very good talisman after all," she said. "It may have protected my uncle and me, but it obviously didn't help Ethan."

"Maybe not, but I wouldn't give up on the watch, or Ethan, just yet."

The phone rang, startling both of them into a few gray hairs. Joyce was all Mack could think of, given the late hour. He grabbed the extension in Della's room.

"Mr. Mack, it's me, George, down at the construction site. I don't know how it happened, but the lighthouse, she's burning. The firemen are on it, but you better get down here just the same."

Chapter Twenty-Two

The lighthouse was fully engulfed when Mack reached the construction site. He drove as close as the fireman would allow, then climbed out of his truck and ran until the fire chief stopped him.

"Whoa, boy. Nothing for you to do," said the chief. "Just stay back and let us handle this."

"What happened? How did this start?" Mack demanded.

"One of your guys got careless, I'd say."

Mack couldn't take his eyes off the structure. Huge, orange flames leaped out of the sides of the round tower. The sky was full of smoke. The smell of the ash crept into his lungs and started a tickle that wasn't likely to go away any time soon. "Nobody was working in there at this hour. My men weren't working inside at all! I shut down the job yesterday because—" Mack sighed as he ran his hand through his hair. "We've been having problems."

This seemed to perk the chief's interest. "What kind of problems?"

"Faulty equipment, a collapsing scaffold. I've had a couple of men hurt over the last week or two."

"Not just your men," the chief added, motioning toward the bruises on Mack's face.

"Yeah, not just my men. Look, I don't believe this was an accident. This fire was set intentionally. I'm sure of it."

"Who would want to do that? The whole town's been fighting to save the old girl, but look at her, she's a total loss. I can imagine the picketers causing some of your problems, but not this. Nothing to gain by setting a fire..." The chief's eyebrow rose a fraction as he gave Mack the bird's eye. "Of course, now that she's wrecked, it's over and done. Who's going to picket now?"

"Just a minute! Are you suggesting that I started this fire just to end this mess once and for all? I wasn't even here when it happened. I just arrived from home. You can check on that."

"Maybe not you, but maybe one of your men, thinking he was doing you a favor."

Mack couldn't believe his ears. If he wasn't so achy and tired, he might have actually protested with real force. "You're all wrong, Chief. That lighthouse was loaded with thousands of dollars of antique moldings and hardware. I had a salvage company all ready to pay, but I can kiss that cash good-bye now. I might be able to rescue a doorknob or a brass light fixture, but those beautiful wood trims aren't going to survive that!" Mack waved toward the burning lighthouse and was suddenly taken in by the intensity of the flames. A breeze came in off the ocean, strong enough to fan the flames and push them toward the line of shops in the next block. "Can you keep it contained? Is there any danger of the fire spreading?"

"Always that danger, but I think we've got it covered. We'll put it out, then we'll investigate. I promise you, we'll get to the bottom of this. If it was intentional, somebody is going to jail." With another warning look, the chief turned and headed back to his command.

Mack didn't move. His body was so tired, he could barely stand up straight, but still he didn't move.

It was arson, but by whose hand? Ethan? If a ghost could hurl a lamp across the room, he certainly should be capable of starting a fire. The structure was old, mostly wood. It wouldn't take much to set the building ablaze. The next question was why. What could Ethan hope to accomplish by taking the lighthouse down to the ground? Mack slipped his hand in his pocket and pulled out the watch. He ran his fingers over the cover detailing. The watch went from Captain Francis Map to Ardella Map to Ethan West to Joyce Erikson. It was a good luck piece in the war, a security blanket for a child in the hospital, a symbol of love and courage, and now, a ghostly charm. The watch had more lives than a cat.

* * * *

Joyce rolled over in bed and smiled as the bright sun played across her face. She threw off the covers and stretched, the cool morning air teasing her bare skin. It was going to be a lovely day. Sitting up, she ran her fingers through her long hair, scooping it away from her face, and then she opened her eyes and saw the mess.

The room was trashed. The bedside lamp was on the floor, shade missing, bulb shattered next to what looked like shards of glass from a mirror. There were books on the floor, her comb and brush and her jewelry box upside down with its contents spilled around the doorway.

The watch.

Joyce patted the bed all around her, feeling for the round pocket watch in the covers and under the pillows. Nothing. She rolled off the bed and dropped to her knees and felt under the bed. Nothing. Scanning the room, she found her sweatshirt and leggings tossed in a heap a few feet away. With shaking hands, she checked the pockets and underneath, but still nothing. The watch was gone.

Mack.

She remembered him coming to see her late last night. They talked. He was upset about Julian. She remembered how he held her, how he scooped her up in his arms and laid her on the bed. After that, it was pretty much a blank. Had they made love? Was it possible that she made love to this man but couldn't remember?

Joyce ran to the bathroom, dodged the debris, grabbed her robe, and slipped into it as she returned to her bed. She sat down with her legs crossed and pulled the phone into her lap and dialed Merritt Construction.

The phone rang three times and a woman answered. Joyce asked to speak with Mack.

"I'm sorry, he's not available at the moment. May I take a message?" was the woman's professional reply.

It was Mack's secretary. Joyce recalled meeting her that day she visited the site but couldn't remember the woman's name. "This is Joyce Erikson," she said. "I just need to know that Mack's all right."

"Oh, hello, Joyce. I haven't actually seen him today, but I know he's here. He's been here all morning since just after the fire started."

Joyce wasn't sure she had heard right. "Fire?"

"Yes, the lighthouse fire. I'm sorry, I assumed that was why you were calling."

"No, I didn't know about the fire. What happened? Was anyone hurt?"

"I don't have any details. It started very early this morning. There wasn't anyone inside, but I understand it's a total loss."

Well, so much for the works of FOTL. "As long as no one was hurt, that's all that really matters. Would you have Mack call me as soon as he's free?"

"Of course, but it may be awhile. Is it urgent? I could send a man to find him."

"No, I don't want to take him from his work. Just have him call me when he can." Joyce hung up the phone and sat there another moment with her hand on the receiver. The lighthouse was gone. The watch was gone. Was Ethan gone, too? She closed her eyes and tried hard to remember the events of last night, but there was nothing after Mack laid her in bed. It was as if she had fallen asleep instantly. Yet, at some point during the night, she had stripped off her clothes and climbed under the covers, not to mention the fact that she had slept through World War III.

Joyce opened her eyes again and surveyed the mess. Someone was very angry. Yet, Joyce didn't feel afraid. That was the funny thing. Even with all of the power Ethan exhibited, she didn't fear him at all. Julian, the human being, he was the one that truly frightened her. Because of that, she feared for Mack.

She climbed off the bed and headed for the bathroom. There was a vague recollection in her mind of Mack speaking about his parent's death, money being stolen from the company, and suspicions that Julian might be involved. Joyce turned on the tap on the sink, cupped her hands beneath the spigot, and then splashed cool water on her face.

But how did Ethan fit into all of this?

Joyce closed her eyes and let her mind float back to the dreams—there was a dance, music—Elvis? Images of a leather jacket and a DA haircut flashed before her eyes. The fifties. Everything she remembered spoke of the fifties. If Ethan was a teenager in the fifties, then he and Julian would be about the same age.

Did they know each other?

She had to get to the bottom of all of this. She couldn't go on with all of this uncertainty hanging over her head. There were too many blocks of time unaccounted for, too much strange behavior on her part, as noted by others.

Ethan had a hold over her—no question. He was her lover, her protector. So what would happen to Mack if he got in the way?

Call me, Mack.

Call me.

* * * *

It was past one in the afternoon when the firemen packed up their gear. When they were gone, what was left behind was a warm pile of ash and a burned out frame surrounded by a half acre of mud. Mack kept his distance as he surveyed the area. He was almost glad to see the lighthouse in ruins. The damned thing had caused him enough trouble to last the rest of his life. The rest of his life. Mack thought of his father standing in this very spot as the ground was leveled for the pouring of a foundation.

Mrs. Hansen had said that they put off pouring the foundation several times. Because of the delays, it didn't happen until after his parents were killed.

Killed.

Mack stuck his hand in his pocket and wrapped his fingers around the watch. Was it easier to believe that a ghost had driven them off the road, or that his father's best friend and confidant was to blame? He squeezed the watch tighter inside his palm. Julian was hiding something. He wanted Mack to stop looking into the deaths. He wanted Mack to give up the construction plans. Why?

He wandered closer to the ruins of the lighthouse. The foundation was the only part of the building that was still intact. Of course, it was covered with water and ash, and there were cracks running the length of the floor.

That was where he would find the answer, under the inches of concrete, down in the cold, hard ground. If it was true that Ethan never left the orchard that night, then he was still here. Mack was going to find him. With that thought to spur him on, Mack was tempted to jump on a bulldozer right now, but he knew that would be foolish. The firefighting effort had created a small lake for several yards around on all sides. He could never maneuver the bulldozer through such a swamp. He'd have to wait until at least tomorrow, but could he afford to wait even one more day? How much more havoc could be caused in just twenty-four hours?

Mack was about to walk away when the fire chief called his name. "Hang on a second," the man shouted and then jogged a bit to catch up. "I think you're right about this not being an accident. We found signs of an accelerant. Diesel fuel is my guess. It looks like your guy poured a couple of gallons of the stuff around inside, then went outside and tossed a Molotov cocktail through the window. Crude, but effective." The chief undid the hooks on his jacket, then stripped it off and hung it over his arm. "The cocktail was mixed up in an old whiskey bottle. You know who that makes me think of?"

"Henry?" That was a logical possibility Mack hadn't thought of. Maybe old Henry had decided to rid himself of the ghosts for good? It was one piece of information too many. "You do the detective work, Chief. I'm worn out."

Mack started to walk back to his office. Instead of leaving, the chief followed along. "You said you've been having trouble. Does that include threats? Phone calls? Letters?"

"No, nothing."

The chief caught Mack by the arm, stopping him in his tracks. "Then why do I get the idea you're hiding something? If you know who did this, you better speak up. Don't plan on taking care of it on your own. An arsonist is just one step away from being a murderer."

Mack couldn't bring himself to mention Julian's name. Why should he? There wasn't any concrete evidence against the man. At this point, it seemed just as likely that the fire was set by a desperate, teenaged ghost. "I haven't got a clue. Not a clue." Then he continued on to the office and was glad when the fire chief didn't follow.

A crowd of workers had gathered around the office trailer. Mack ignored them as he went inside. Mrs. Hansen sat behind his desk, taking notes on a pad as she talked on the phone. Without looking up from her work, she raised one finger for him to wait, uttered a few more 'yes' and 'got it,' and then hung up the phone.

"That was the insurance company," she said. Then she looked up. "Oh, my God. What happened to you?"

Mack looked down at himself and then realized she was talking about his face. Thanks to a handful of aspirin, the aches had faded, but the memory lingered on. "I slipped in the shower."

"How many people were in there with you?"

He dropped down on to the sofa and considered staying there for the rest of his life. "You won't believe the real story if I told you, so I'm sticking with that one for now."

Mrs. Hansen shook her head. "You look beat, and not just in a punched-with-fists way."

"That could be because I haven't slept in over twenty-four hours." He turned sideways on the couch and lay down with his legs dangling over the arm. "I'm just going to close my eyes for a minute. If I fall asleep, don't let me go too long."

"Oh, I almost forgot. Joyce called. She was worried about you. Wanted to know if you were all right." There was a question in her voice, but Mack let it go.

"I'll call her. Thanks." Lying down was good, very good. He heard the desk chair roll back into the wall, then footsteps. "Where are you going?"

"I've got some errands to run. I put the phone on night, so it'll go straight to voicemail."

Mack rested his arm across his forehead and shifted to a less uncomfortable position. "Good. Hey, have you seen Julian today?"

"Now that you mention it, I haven't. I'm surprised. The news of the fire is all over town. He must have heard about it by now. You want me to call his house?"

Mack opened his eyes and stared up at the water-stained ceiling of the trailer. "No, I talked to him yesterday. He had some stuff to do. Forget it."

"You're the boss."

"That's me. The boss." His eyes closed once more. Then he heard the trailer door open and close as Mrs. Hansen went on her way.

Remember to call Joyce. She was probably worried, especially if she heard about the fire. He knew he should get up and call her right now, but it felt so good to be horizontal. Just a few minutes rest was all he needed. Then he'd be good as new and raring to go. Ready for...anything.

* * * *

She was a feather in his arms, so light he had to hang on to keep her from floating away. His lips moved from her ear to her throat then down to the valley between her breasts. She tossed her head back when he touched her, sending her dark hair down her back like a glorious waterfall. He wanted to dive into that hair. He wanted to feel her silky locks against his face, against his chest, against his entire body.

"Mack?"

He hushed her with another kiss, his mouth capturing hers, his tongue searching.

"Mack."

The need rose inside his body. He wouldn't be able to hold on much longer. He didn't want to hold on. He wanted to know what it felt like to take her, to make her part of him, to make her his own.

"Joyce, I don't want to lose you. Not now. Please."

"Mack."

Then the room was on fire. The flames rose in a ring around the two of them, stinging his skin with the prickling heat. He scooped her into his arms, but every time he tried to jump the ring, the flames rose higher. Inch by inch, the circle closed up around him. Then she was gone, and he was alone, all alone as the fire licked his legs, all alone as the smoke crept down his throat and squeezed his lungs, all alone in death.

"Mack! Wake up!"

In one move Mack sat, rolled, then stood. "Fire."

"It's out. The fire's out."

Mack blinked his eyes then refocused. "Joyce?" A dream. A nightmare. He dropped back to the couch and lowered his head to his hands. "That was bad. Started out nice, but ended up bad."

Joyce sat down beside him and set a soft hand on his back. "I got worried. I called hours ago. Your secretary said you'd call me back."

"I meant to, but I guess I fell asleep." Mack ran his hand over his face and up through his hair. His skin felt grubby. The smell of ash was stuck in his nose. Inside his brain, a hot meal and a hot shower were tied for best idea. "What time is it?"

"After six."

"Damn. I didn't want to sleep away the day." He pushed himself to his feet, stretched out his back, and walked to the coffee machine.

"I tried to call a couple of times, but the voice mail picked up."

"Yeah, Mrs. Hansen—" There was a note taped to the wall above the coffee maker.

Tried to wake you when I came back, but you were really out. Guess you needed the sleep. I'll see you in the morning.

Mrs. H.

"She put the phone on night so it wouldn't wake me." As if the soft *brrrring* of an incoming call could have done what she couldn't. "Want some coffee?"

"No, but I could use some dinner. Why don't we go to the diner? I think we need to talk."

Mack blew out a breath. "I think you're right, but I'm not really up for facing the public. How about we order a pizza and stay right here? It's not exactly The Salmon Grill, but it's private. I found out a few things, and I came up with some new questions. So, I'd say we have quite a lot to talk about." Forgetting the coffee, Mack went to his desk and plucked a handwritten note from the bulletin board. "Here's the number. Order whatever you want, and a couple of sodas. I'm not picky." He handed her the slip of paper and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?"

Mack twisted his lips then said, "No place you'd ever want to go, believe me."

* * * *

Joyce ordered a large pizza, half veggie and half pepperoni, figuring that would cover all the bases. She told them to bring a couple of cans of soda, plates, napkins and salad, then realized she didn't know the address. Luckily, the pizza shop was very familiar with Merritt Construction. They delivered there at least twice a week.

It was funny. Here was Mack, the richest guy in town, yet he spent a good portion of his life in a cramped, dirty trailer eating take-out pizza. It was just another one of the incongruities that made Mack, Mack.

After ordering the pizza, Joyce whirled around in the desk chair and tacked the number back on the bulletin board. Then she took a moment to survey the other items that were anchored there: a construction license, two business cards, one from a fuel company and one from tool rental place. There was a faded blue ribbon with the words *You're #1* printed in gold and a parking stub that obviously had some significance she couldn't understand. The most interesting piece on the bulletin board was a photo of a very young Mack, surrounded by three men and three women. She recognized only two of them, Bebe and Julian, but from the age of the others, she guessed them to be Mack's parents and his Aunt Della. The family posed in front of a Christmas tree that rivaled the one in Rockefeller Center. Mack had the sweetest smile on his face.

Feeling intrusive, Joyce turned away from the bulletin board when she heard Mack's feet on the metal trailer steps. The door squeaked open, and he came inside, his face washed and his hair wet. "Best I could do without a tub," he said as he wiped away a drip from his hair. "When I get home, I'm going to have to shower for three hours straight to get rid of this smoky smell."

Smoke? There was something about the smell of ash on a man's skin. Why did that feel so familiar? "I ordered the pizza. They said it would be here in twenty minutes."

"Great. I don't think I could last much longer than that. The last time I ate was...I don't remember the last time I ate. That can't be good."

Memory loss? That was a trait Joyce was getting used to. Like last night. What would he say if she asked him flat out? 'Excuse me, Mack, but did we have sex last night?' Joyce picked up a pencil and bounced the point against the desk blotter. "Mack, what happened last night?"

Mack set his hip on the edge of his desk, his leg swinging free just inches from hers. "Did you ever see the movie *Poltergeist*?"

The color drained from her face. "You saw it happen? You saw Ethan trash the place?"

Mack nodded. "I have to admit I wasn't buying the whole ghost story bit until that lamp came flying at me."

"It was smashed," said Joyce.

"Yeah, apparently, Ethan didn't like me hitting on his girl, so he hit on me, literally." Mack touched two fingers to the bruise on his cheek. "I had no choice but to leave. Believe me, I wouldn't have left if I thought he might hurt you, but the only danger you were in was the danger of getting caught in the crossfire. It was pretty obvious that he tried to protect you from me, just like he protected you from Julian."

"So, you believe me. You know I wasn't cheating on you, and I'm not crazy."

"I think we've both gone a little crazy to believe in ghosts, but right now, I can't think of any rational explanation for the things I saw last night."

Joyce squirmed a little in the big desk chair. "Speaking of last night, how far did we get before Ethan spoke up?"

Mack laughed, a warm sweet smile lighting up his poor, battered face. "I could make you really nuts and tell you we made mad passionate love before he got the better of me, but we didn't." He swung his leg so his foot bumped her thigh. "Not that I wasn't hoping we'd get there."

That was all it took to fill her cheeks with heat. Joyce covered her face with her hands.

"Don't do that," Mack chided. "I love it when you blush. It's sweet. It's nothing to hide from." He leaned over and gave her arm a tug. "Please."

She let her hands fall into her lap. "All this trouble, and yet you keep coming back."

Mack slipped off the desk and leaned over and placed a delicate Prince Charming kiss on her lips. "Some girls are worth a lot of trouble."

With him leaning over her, his hands on the arms of the chair, there was nowhere she could look but into his eyes. Mack had the biggest chocolate brown eyes, eyes that could be happy and smiling one minute, warm and deep the next. He tipped his head and came back for another kiss, but this one was far from Prince Charming. This kiss was the cowboy who'd been out on the range for months with nothing but his horse for company. She gave it back to him as best she could, sending her tongue to meet his, catching his lower lip with her teeth. Her fingers gripped his upper arms. She could feel the muscles working hard beneath the shirt, supporting his weight as he leaned ever closer. Joyce wished for a way to press herself against him, but he had her trapped. He was in control right now. It felt so sweet. Just the touch of his lips caused her heart rate to quicken. The warmth of his body sent a shiver down her spine. When he whispered in her ear, it took her breath away.

"I want you, Joyce. I want to caress every inch of your body. I want to touch you in ways no one has ever touched you before. I want to hear you call out my name when I come inside of you."

A flood of wetness pooled between her legs, legs that were made of rubber and couldn't hold her up if her life depended on it right now. She wanted to tell him how she felt. When she opened her mouth, a moan came out instead of words, a moan that sounded vaguely like his name.

"I like the sound of that." He dropped to his knees in front of her. His hands went to her waist, pulling her hips forward until they met the very edge of the chair. Deft fingers slipped under her shirt, finding bare skin and then around the back to the clasp of her bra. Mack was well practiced. He had the hooks undone in less than five seconds, then his strong, calloused hands wiggled beneath the fabric and cupped both of her breasts.

"Don't stop. I want you to hold me, touch me, anything you want. Just lead the way."

"My pleasure." Still on his knees, Mack leaned forward, capturing her mouth with his.

She sent her fingers into his wet, wavy hair as she returned his hungry kisses.

Mack's hand ran up her sides, pushing her shirt and bra up toward her shoulders. "You smell so good." He moved his mouth away from hers and over to the nape of her neck. "I'm so hungry, I could just gobble you up."

Joyce's eyes rolled shut as she tipped her head back and relaxed in his arms. So sweet, so wanton, so—

A sharp, metallic rap made her shriek. "Ethan!"

The trailer dipped and bounced then the door swung open.

Mack jumped to his feet.

"Evening, folks!" The plump, uniformed pizza deliveryman did a double take, and then his face broke into a wide smile. "Little jolt of adrenaline, Mack? Just like the old days, huh? When your parents caught you necking in the driveway?"

Mack relaxed, dropping his weight back against the wall of the trailer. "I'll say. You scared me out of ten years."

The two men shared a good laugh but Joyce didn't see the humor in the situation. Feeling her face suffuse with heat, she sat up in the chair and yanked her shirt down, all too aware of the way her unfastened bra was hanging down on the sides.

"What do I owe you?" Mack asked as he reached into his jeans for his wallet.

The deliveryman set the pizza on the desk, along with a plastic bag, and checked the bill. "Twelve-fifty, and no charge for the adrenaline rush. It's on the house."

Mack took a ten and a five from his wallet. "Keep the change, and get lost."

The man stuffed the money in his shirt pocket then gave them both a hearty salute. "Have a great night." He turned and left, sending the trailer bouncing under his hefty form.

Joyce crossed her arms over herself as she tried to come up with a dignified way to handle her underwear situation. A trip to the bathroom would be best, but right now, she wasn't sure she could stand, let alone walk. The prospect of wrestling with her clothes in a portable toilet was just too much to bear.

"Would you like me to...um...give you a hand?" Mack asked, still amused by the situation.

"No, you've done enough, thanks. Just—" She made a brushing motion with her fingers. "Turn around for a second."

He did as she asked, even though he obviously thought it was a needless gesture.

Joyce pulled her arms out of her shirt, slipped off the bra straps then passed on the idea of setting it right. "When I heard that noise, and the trailer dipped, I was sure it was Ethan." She stuck her arms back in the sleeves, then balled up the white cotton bra and stuffed it in her purse, which was sitting on the floor by the desk.

"I know. I thought the same thing for a second, but you don't have the watch, so we should be safe."

"Where is the watch?"

"In my truck along with a cassette of Elvis' greatest hits. Ethan should be very content."

"Elvis?"

"Oh, I didn't tell you. I found out who Ethan is—was." Mack opened the pizza box and chose a slice. He folded the piece in half and bit off the pointed end.

"Hey," Joyce protested. "Don't eat. I want to know!"

Mack pointed to the cans of soda and then to the small, office refrigerator.

"You're going to keep me in suspense."

He nodded, still chewing.

Joyce got up from the desk and went to the fridge. She found a tiny ice tray inside, popped the cubes into two coffee cups, and returned to the desk as Mack took a second bite.

"I'm starving."

Joyce cracked open a can of cola and poured half into each cup. As soon as she was done, Mack took a swig from one of them.

"Now, I can talk." He set his half-eaten slice on the plate Joyce offered. "I took the watch home with me last night. You're not going to believe this, but my Aunt Della saw it, and she recognized it."

"You're kidding? That's a heck of a coincidence."

"More like Ripley's Believe it or Not. She knew Ethan. Intimately. He was her boyfriend in high school."

"High school?" Joyce did a fast calculation. Della was Bebe's sister, which meant she was probably in her sixties. That would put her in high school in the fifties. Elvis, of course, that explained it. "Ethan lived in the fifties."

"More importantly, I think Ethan died in the fifties." Mack took his pizza and his soda and went to sit on the old vinyl couch. "Remember the initials on the inside of the watch, AM—that's Ardella Map, and EW—for Ethan West. She gave him the watch as sort of a protective amulet."

"Did he need protecting?"

"She was kind of vague about that. Aren't you going to eat?"

Just to appease him, Joyce put a slice of veggie pizza on her plate, but she didn't take a bite.

"So why did he need protection?"

Mack twisted his lips. "He needed protection in more ways than one. She gave him the watch because he had been worked over by a couple of bullies. I guess he was considered the town bad boy, poor side of the tracks, no father, and limited education, but getting beat up wasn't his biggest problem. Della was pregnant with his child." Mack took another bite of pizza, giving Joyce a chance to process everything he'd said so far.

"Did Ethan know about the baby?"

Mack shook his head.

"So, what happened? Did she ever tell him? What happened to the baby?"

"She never got a chance to tell him or anyone else. She was just a teenager. Her parents hated Ethan. They never would have let her marry him, baby or no baby. They wanted her to marry Julian."

"Back to Julian again. Like the proverbial bad penny, he keeps turning up."

The smile Mack had in his eyes faded. His lips turned down into a frown.

His 'little boy lost' expression cut right into her heart. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. I forget how much he means to you."

"It's okay." He waved it off and then downed the last bite of his pizza.

"So, what happened to Ethan? Why is he haunting the watch instead of resting in peace?"

"I think he was murdered. See, there used to be an apple orchard right here under our feet. Ethan worked in the orchard. Della said that he had to work on the night he disappeared. He was supposed to finish and then pick her up for a dance." Mack tipped his head to the side, his eyes narrowed. "She was living in your house back then."

"Pardon?" Joyce picked a mushroom off her pizza.

"Yeah. Your house used to belong to the Map family. Della grew up there. She would have been outside on that porch swing waiting for Ethan on the night he disappeared."

"It sounds like Ethan found his way back after all these years."

"Only Della doesn't live there anymore." Mack hesitated. He tipped his head to the side and scrunched his eyebrows. "He thinks you're her. That's why Ethan wants you—but it's not you. He's looking for Della, and he thinks he found her."

Joyce shivered. The more sense it made, the creepier it felt. "So, why was he killed? Could it have been an accident?"

Mack shook his head adamantly. "I don't know why he was killed, but I do know it wasn't an accident. Ethan was working in the orchard that night when someone attacked him. They fought. He dropped the watch. Maybe he was looking at it, checking the time, when he was hit. In the end, it appears Ethan was beaten to death."

"That was the nightmare you had when I was in the hospital, and you took the watch home."

Mack nodded. He stood, grabbed another slice of pizza from the box and went back to the couch. "His body was never found, so I suspect he was buried right where it happened, in the orchard."

Joyce glanced down at the floor. "Right under our feet?"

"Close. Under the lighthouse."

"But that doesn't make sense. I thought your father dug up this whole area when he moved the lighthouse here years ago. He would have found the body, right?"

"Maybe, if he had been around when it happened, but he wasn't. He was killed the night before they laid the foundation."

"Intentionally," Joyce said softly. "Mack, maybe the car accident wasn't about Julian stealing from the company. Maybe it was about keeping a body from being found."

"Wait, we're going off in the wrong direction. My father's death didn't stop the construction. The crew went ahead anyway, somebody would have found something."

"Somebody? Who would have been in charge after your father was killed?"

Mack didn't answer right away, and that was answer enough.

"Julian?"

"Yeah. With my father gone, Julian was in charge of Merritt Construction. I was too young. Bebe and Della were never involved in the business. Julian could have done anything he wanted at that point." Mack rolled to his feet, carried his barely eaten pizza to the trashcan and dumped it in. "You know what's funny? I remember the first time I looked at that foundation. I told my foreman it was a lousy job. It wasn't level, and there were cracks. I was surprised my father had allowed such shoddy work. I'll bet Julian did it himself or hired some cut-rate company to do a half-assed job, no questions asked."

"Maybe." Joyce sat back in the chair as she sipped her soda. She thought about everything she knew of Ethan, the stuff of her dreams, the images that came to mind. It all fit. The slicked back hair and the black leather jacket, the attitude, the back seat groping—he was a teenager, but a very passionate teenager. He loved with his whole heart and soul even while his body lay in an anonymous, cold, wet grave. "Wait, you said Della was pregnant. What happened to her baby?"

Mack twisted his lips. "Her baby was named Edward Merritt, Jr. He was my father. Ethan was my grandfather. Apparently, there's quite a family resemblance."

"No wonder I've been so confused. There were times when I couldn't tell the difference between you and Ethan. I wasn't sure if there were two of you or only one."

"Only one," said Mack. "I'm an original." He tried to force a smile, but it was slow going.

Joyce set her soda on the desk, being careful to avoid the piles of paper. "So, what do we do now?"

"We?" This time his face brightened, though just a little. "I have a couple of ideas."

"That's not what I meant. What about Ethan and Julian? If he's guilty of murder, we have to go to the police."

Mack shook his head no before she was finished speaking. "I'm just not sure. All we really have is speculations, certainly not enough evidence of anything to go to the police." His voice softened. "Even if I did have proof, I'm not sure I would want to turn him in. Now, Ethan, he's an easier problem. Tomorrow, I'm going to bulldoze what's left of the lighthouse, and then I'll dig up the foundation. Once I find Ethan's body, we can give him a proper burial, watch and all. That should put an end to the haunting."

That thought bothered Joyce more than she cared to admit. Apparently, it showed on her face. Mack tossed his cup in the trash and wiped his fingers on a napkin before coming back to sit on the edge of the desk. "What's the matter? Don't you want Ethan put to rest?"

"I don't know. This is going to sound silly, but I've gotten sort of attached to him. He looks after me, makes me feel good. What real harm is he causing? What would be the harm in letting him—live on?"

"There would be a great deal of harm." Mack took Joyce by the hands and pulled her to her feet. "As long as he's around, I can't have you. I'm not about to give you up." He wrapped his arms around her and caught her lips for a kiss. She warmed up instantly, her body reverting to that exact moment when the pizza man had interrupted them. Mack went there, too. He lifted her shirt and ran his fingers over her bare skin. She arched backward at his touch, leaving him open to mark her throat with his kisses. Down to the hollow, then down again below the lift of her shirt. He caught one of her bare breasts with his mouth. His tongue found the hardened nub. The feel of his mouth on her made her hips gyrate against his.

She could feel him, rock hard, straining at the button fly of his jeans. Then he was past rational thought and had moved on to pure lust. It was in the way he pressed back on her, the needy way he suckled her breast, the way his hands roamed and stroked and massaged.

Suddenly, Mack slipped his arm beneath her knees and lifted her off the floor. The space was so small, it was a tough maneuver, but he managed to carry her around the desk and over to the couch where he laid her down.

He dropped to his knees on the floor beside her. Warm, wet lips went to the flat muscle of her stomach. That was so heavenly, so damn close to where she wanted him to be.

With a frustrated sigh, Joyce searched for a handhold. Her fingers ended up tangled in his longish hair. She urged his head down, closer to her breasts. She closed her eyes and inhaled the scent of him—smoky ash—just like...Ethan. Damn. She didn't want to go there.

"Talk to me, Mack. Talk to me."

"No more talk." He skimmed his lips over her rib cage and down to her stomach and on to her hipbone. He popped the snap on the front of her pants and worked loose the

zipper. She lifted her hips, signaling him that it was all right to go further. He complied by drawing her pants and underpants down as she kicked off her sneakers.

It seemed endlessly complicated, and then he was there, looking down at her with such warmth, such lust in his brown eyes. Gently he brushed the strands of hair from her face. "You are so beautiful." He touched his lips to her cheek, then kissed his way down to her chin, her throat, to the patch of skin at the neckline of her shirt. As his lips worked, his hands were busy, too, slipping under her shirt, teasing the nubs beneath the fabric.

Joyce's hand slipped from the couch, found his jean-covered thigh, and then moved across to the bulge of his erection that was too large for her palm to cover. "Mack, I..."

"Ssssh. Just close your eyes, and let's enjoy."

She did. She shut them tight and concentrated on the feel of his strong fingers playing her body like a piano, soft but sure. No question. No hesitation.

She started to drift in the waves of sensation, caught up in the tingles and the skipped beats of her heart. Her body quivered.

"Don't lose that," he whispered in her ear, and then he moved away. Not far. She could still hear him. Heard the sound of movement—of clothes being shed. She was tempted to look but didn't want to break the spell.

Then his weight was on top of her, crushing but not uncomfortable—a welcoming weight. She circled her arms around his back and found nothing but bare skin.

His hands slipped beneath her hips, lifted, and he settled himself between her legs. She almost opened her eyes then, almost. She tried to speak, but the only thing that came out was a breathy puff of air.

Air.

Warm, wet. It made her squirm, but the squirm turned into a jolt when the tip of his tongue touched the folds of her sex.

Oh, God. No one had ever done that to her before. Or had they? It felt so familiar, and yet, so new at the same time.

She wanted to speak his name, but it was all confused inside her head. Mack. Ethan. Mack. "Please. Now."

He chuckled deep in his throat. "Patience."

Impossible. She rocked her hips, intent on forcing the contact, wanting, but he simply backed away. "My rules," he whispered. "Your joy." He came back—straight to the hard nub of her clitoris between the folds, his mouth tormenting her. Joyce cried out, her hand grabbing and finding the thick locks of his hair, pressing his mouth into her. He continued to tease with tongue and hands until she writhed like the most wanton creature on the planet.

This is wrong. Not supposed to feel this way. Not supposed to allow a boy...

"You're so wet." He laughed when he said it, fully enjoying what he was doing to her and what was he doing...

Joyce squeezed her vaginal muscles tight, forced herself to hold still so as not to lose this perfect touch. Then his lips caressed her inner thigh, his fingers slipping up inside of her. She gasped and wiggled into his hand in spite of her determination to hold still.

"So tight. So wet, and still so tight."

She felt him move again, changed position, squeezing himself onto the small confines of the couch.

"Look at me, Joyce. Open your eyes and look at me."

She obeyed.

He was on his knees between her legs. Naked. The muscles were well-defined in his shoulders and arms. There was a sprinkling of light brown hair across his chest. Her eyes followed one arm, down to his hand, down to where he had hold of his cock—long and hard in want of her.

"Look at me," he said softly.

Joyce brought her gaze back up to his face, that handsome, boyish face with the big brown eyes. When her eyes locked on his, he pushed into her, his cock filling her to the point where it took her breath away. Heat flooded her completely and radiated up throughout her body.

"Perfect," she said and saw the smile light his face. "Take me there."

"On my magic carpet." Mack leaned into her, thrust as deeply as he could and then pulled back. The second time, he lifted her legs, angled her hips, his cock delving impossibly deeper than before.

Sounds came from her throat—she moaned and mewed, no real words, no ability for coherent thought.

Joyce closed her eyes and turned her face to the back of the couch. It made her feel surrounded, cocooned between the wall and his weight pressing against her.

She felt so hot and getting hotter. He thrust over and over, teasing her sometimes when he nearly pulled out. She whimpered, grabbed for him, wanting to hang on and on forever. He moved faster now. His hands slipped beneath her hips as he lifted her body up off the couch to increase the angle.

Oh, God. His cock hit the back of her body. The pain. The pleasure. So intense, it hurt. So intense, she lost her mind. Just their bodies now. Two bodies made to be one. Blood rushing, breath catching. She was not sure she could stand another moment of such sweet agony, and yet she hoped it would never end.

Safe. Warm. Loved. His forever.

Mack. Mack.

It was the man of her dreams.

Ethan.

Chapter Twenty-Three

A mechanical clatter snuck into Mack's sleepy brain, tickling until he woke. He opened his eyes and listened. Nothing was as it should be. He couldn't hear the ocean, but he could hear the sound of someone breathing, and then there was that other noise.

Mack tried to push himself up to sitting before realizing that his right arm was still asleep. He shifted. Bare skin caught and dragged. He wasn't in bed. Where the hell was he?

It all came back. Mack smiled. It came back, indeed.

He was on the couch in his office.

Joyce.

He reached for her.

The mechanical clatter echoed in the air.

Moving through the darkness, he groped on the floor, found his shirt, and laid it over her. Then he found his jeans, pulled them on, and then stepped into his sneakers.

The noise. Machinery. Close by.

Mack stepped out of the trailer.

The area around the lighthouse was bathed in a halogen glow. Work lights. He remembered turning them on during the fire, but thought he had turned them off at the break of day. He stood still for a moment, listening to the electric hum of the generator. Then he heard it again. This time, he knew what it was. A jackhammer. Someone was going to town on the lighthouse's foundation.

* * * *

“Looking for Ethan?”

Julian whipped up to standing at the sound of Mack's voice, a six-inch block of concrete in his hands. He had broken and cleared a four-foot square section of the

foundation, but apparently, he hadn't found what he was looking for. The jackhammer lay on the ground along with a shovel and mesh frame used for sifting dirt. The old man was winded and sweaty. His expensive clothes were covered in mud and grime. There was a look in his eye that Mack had never seen before—desperation.

"You killed him, and you buried him right here." Mack tensed as Julian hefted the block of concrete, but it landed far short and off to the left. Still, for a single second, Mack had felt fear. It was real fear of this man who had been his confidant, mentor, and friend.

"Stay out of this, Mack. Just turn around and walk away. I'll do what I have to do, then it's over."

"It's over now."

"Don't get in my way!" the old man shouted, then instantly, he softened. "God, please, Mack. Don't do this. You don't understand. You mean everything to me."

"Everything? Fine. Come with me to the sheriff. Tell the truth, the whole truth, about Ethan and the fire and my parents."

Julian's eyes shifted. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't I?" Mack snapped back. "My father was about to have you removed from the company. You were stealing from him, and he found out."

"I can explain that."

"Can you? Did you? Did you explain it to him, or maybe it didn't matter because you had a bigger secret to hide? After all, you've killed once. What were two more?"

"Two more?" He wiped his arm across his sweaty forehead. "You think I killed them? Your parents?"

"Some coincidence, huh? My father dying the night before he was going to dig up Ethan's grave?"

Julian hesitated, rocking on his feet side to side. "No, you're confused. Edward wasn't going to be here when we broke ground. I had it all worked out. Sully, the man who worked the job, wasn't the kind who would go to the police for anything." He rubbed his thumb over his fingers. "I took care of that. I filled his eyes with dollar signs, and he couldn't see past them."

"Money from the company. Money you stole."

"All right! I admit that. I made a mistake. I paid for it when Eddie found out, but I swear to you, Mack, I didn't hurt your parents. That wasn't me."

"Then who?"

Julian picked up the shovel and jabbed it into the broken earth. "Ethan, maybe? He'd been a thorn in my side since I was sixteen years old."

Mack took a step closer. "But he's been dead for almost fifty years, and you've been living."

"Doesn't matter. He still won the game."

"Game?"

Julian laughed. "It was a game, only the winner didn't take it all." He began to dig again, funneling all of his anger and frustration into each jab of the shovel. "Ethan was a disgrace. He was a no-class, high-school dropout who couldn't support himself, let alone a family. Ardella couldn't see it."

"She loved him."

"He conned her! He dragged her into the gutter beside him. He got her pregnant with a bastard child. In the end, he ran out on her."

Mack gave his head a shake. "He didn't run out on her. You killed him."

Julian stopped shoveling, and then slowly he turned to face Mack. There was a far-off look in his eye, made all the more eerie by the strange, harsh glow of the halogen work lights. "I went to the orchard that night to make him see reason." He stopped and looked down at his feet as if realizing that he was standing in the same place. "Ethan was going to take Ardella to the dance at the high school. It would have been laughable. He didn't have the clothes. He didn't have the manners. It was like inviting a savage to Mozart. He was out of his class, and he knew it."

"What does that matter? His clothes, his manners? I'm sure he didn't even want to go to that dance. He knew it would be a risk, but he did it all for Della. He did it to make her happy."

"Make her happy? Make a fool of her, you mean. Causing the tongues to wag. I told him, if he really loved her, he would give her up. He should leave town and let me have her."

"That was really why you killed him, wasn't it? Because you loved her, but she wasn't interested in you."

"She was a fool." Julian drew his hand through his sweat-soaked beard. "I would have given her everything."

"Everything? What did you have?"

"I had class," Julian shouted, cutting him off. "Bebe was going to marry Edward Merritt. Even then, the Merritts owned half of this town. Can you imagine Ethan, with his sixth grade education, sitting down to dinner with the Merritts?"

Mack thought of Joyce and her fears of sitting down to dinner with Bebe. Could Ethan have felt the same way, in love but outclassed?

"He had no social graces, no manners, nothing. He had nothing!"

"No," Mack countered. "He had love. Real, true love, not just the desire to position himself in a wealthy, respected family."

"It wasn't like that!"

The halogen lights brightened, bathing the site in an overly white incandescent glow. The air filled with a whiny mechanical hum; the generator supplying power to the lights.

"Della wouldn't have me, but still, I gave up everything for your family. I never married, never moved, never had a life of my own. I took care of Della and Bebe and you, for all these years. I kept the business running when your grandfather died. I made sure there was food on the table and a roof over their heads. I made sure you had an education and all comforts—"

"Comforts! Taking care of someone isn't about comforts. It's about love and security and trust!"

Julian shook his head violently from side to side. "You sound just like your father. You don't understand. You—were brought up privileged. You—always had the best of everything. You—never had to scrounge and scrape for every nickel."

"But you did, didn't you?" Mack countered. "Della said you were from a well-to-do family. That was why her parents wanted her to marry you, but that was a lie, too, wasn't it? Your family wasn't well-off, were they?"

"I worked hard—"

"So did Ethan!" Mack shouted. "You thought you were better than he was!"

"I was!" Julian jammed the shovel down the freshly revealed earth. "My father was killed in the war. My mother had eight children. She couldn't make it on her own, so she remarried the first man who asked. He was a gambler, a drunk. He would steal the grocery money if he needed a fix. He didn't care that we were hungry. He would just slap me in the mouth and tell me to shut up. I came from poverty, Mack. When I was just a child, I swore that I would get out and never go back."

"No matter what it took?"

"No matter what it took. Starvation will do that to a man."

Mack couldn't believe what he was hearing. Who was this man? Where was the kind, patient, family friend who helped raise him? "I looked up to you my entire life. Now, I look at you, and it makes me sick."

Julian swung the shovel.

The metal scoop caught Mack on the bare shoulder, slicing his skin and sending a bone jarring pain throughout his entire body. Before he could catch his breath, the flat of the shovel slapped him on the back, driving him down to his knees.

"Della still needs me, boy. She and Bebe, they can't go on without me. I ran this company for years. I made sure there was always money coming in. I made sure they never wanted for anything!"

Mack dug his fingers into the dirt as he concentrated on clearing the buzz in his head. He just had a few more things to do. They were going to be late for the dance. He promised her he would take her.

It was cold. *Have to light the heaters or the apple trees will freeze.*

"You're not going to ruin it. Not now, not after everything I've done, everything I've worked for."

A warm wet trickle of blood ran down his arm. Blood, running out like juice from an apple.

Mack sat back on his heels. Instantly, a wave of pain drove him back down to his hands and knees.

Julian hovered over him. Mack felt a kick to the ribs. God, it was hard to breathe. Another kick. More words, but it was all so muted inside his brain. It hurt so badly. A hazy, red curtain covered his eyes. Not a curtain. Blood pooled behind his eyelids.

He was going to die. Beaten to death.

Ethan.

"Julian!" It was a woman's voice.

Julian stumbled and fell just inches from Mack. The shovel flew from his hands, changed direction, and was about to come down on the old man's head when Mack intercepted it. The shovel fought back, like a cat that was tired of being held. It twisted and turned, trying to wrench itself out of his grip. Mack held on tight. He had to. No matter what Julian had done, Mack couldn't let it end like this.

"Don't do it, Ethan. He'll be punished, I swear. Do this, and you're no better than he is. After all these years, prove to Della that you're better than he is." The shovel stopped fighting back. The sudden change in dynamics sent Mack to the ground in a heap.

"Oh, my God, are you all right?" Joyce dropped to her knees beside him.

"I'm fine. I'll be fine." Mack wiped his hand across his face. What he thought was sweat rolling down his cheek turned out to be blood. "Go back to the office."

"No, you're hurt. Come with me."

"Not yet." Using the shovel as a crutch, Mack pushed himself up to his feet. "I'm going to finish this, once and for all." He filled his lungs, then jabbed the shovel into the fresh earth.

"What are you doing?" Joyce grabbed Mack's arm, but he pushed her away.

He filled the shovel with dirt and then tossed the scoopful to the side. "Is this the spot, Julian? How far down do I need to go?"

The old man didn't answer. He simply lay there on his back on the ground unable or unwilling to move.

Mack scooped another shovel of dirt, then another.

"Stop it!" Joyce demanded. "Stop doing that!"

"Why? It's time we put Ethan to rest."

"No, not yet. He's not done! He has to do what he came to do." Joyce opened her palm under his eyes, and there was the watch. Mack made a grab for it, but she was quicker. "Stop digging, now."

He jabbed the shovel into the earth.

"When he's done, you can bury him, but not yet!" Joyce thumbed the latch on the watch. The lid popped open, but no sound came out.

Joyce stared at the watch. She shut it and then opened it again. "Where is he? Why isn't he stopping you?" She lifted the watch to her ear, and then her face went blank, almost calm. It was as if she was listening to the ocean in a seashell from the beach.

"What is it?" Mack asked.

"Unfinished business." Joyce turned and ran.

Mack made a grab for her, but the shift in balance made his head spin. He ended up on his knees again. He yelled her name, but she didn't stop. Even if he could follow her, that would mean leaving Julian alone. That wasn't something he was ready to do. Ethan had never hurt Joyce before; he had to hope he wouldn't do it now.

Mack pressed himself up to standing and then whirled on Julian. "Where is he? Where did you bury him?"

Painfully, the old man rolled up to sitting. "I don't remember. I swear, Mack. I thought it was around here, but I'm not sure. It's been so long. The landscape has changed."

Mack could dig for twenty-four hours straight and never find the bones of Ethan West. He couldn't let Joyce go for that long. The body would have to wait. He grabbed a handful of Julian's shirt and pulled the old man to his feet.

"Come on. You have a date with the sheriff."

"I never meant to hurt anyone. I didn't intend to kill him that night. It just happened. It all just happened, Ethan, your father, the money I stole. I never wanted to hurt anyone. I just didn't know what else to do."

Wise, benevolent, invaluable, those were the words Mack used to use to describe Julian Scott. Now there was only one word that came to mind. Pathetic.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Joyce drove home on autopilot. She went straight through the store and up to her apartment. She had to change. She couldn't go to a dance in jeans and a t-shirt. What would people say? Never mind the fact that she wanted to look pretty for him, wanted to look special. The yellow sundress was perfect, a bit cool for this time of year but the prettiest outfit in her closet. Besides, if she got too cold, Ethan would just wrap his arms around her, and it would be all right. Everything was always perfect when Ethan had his arms around her.

Before she dressed, Joyce went to the bathroom to freshen up. Just a touch of color on her cheeks and a swipe of lipstick. She didn't dare try anything more. Now, for the hair. Joyce scooped her long locks into a ponytail and then twisted the tail into a bun at the back of her head. A few bobby pins held the hair in place. Bobby pins he would be removing before the night was over.

Satisfied with her look, she dressed, slipped into flat shoes, and grabbed her purse. One last thing! The watch! Damn. The dress didn't have any pockets. She thought of dropping the case into her purse but changed her mind. With a smile that would make her mother shriek, Joyce slipped the watch down the front of her dress where it rested between her breasts and the band of her bra.

So close to my heart. That's where the watch belongs.

Joyce left the house only twenty minutes after she had arrived, but she didn't go straight back to her car. She ran down the steps around the porch to the bush where the yellow roses were in bloom. She chose the most perfect flower, snapped the stem an inch below the bud, and tucked the stem into her hair, settling the rose petals in the middle of her bun. When that was done, she went back up the porch steps and sat down on the swing.

She was waiting—for Ethan.

* * * *

Mack brought Julian back to the trailer, then called the sheriff and waited impatiently for him to arrive. He used the time to clean up as best he could, using only the water from the cooler to wash his bloody wounds. Every time he bent over or stretched too far, his achy, weary muscles groaned and complained, begging him to give it up and lie down. He ignored the pain, pushing himself to keep moving for Joyce's sake. She needed him, even if she didn't know it.

Unfinished business was what Joyce had said. Ethan had to finish what he came for. Mack was pretty sure he knew what that business was. Ethan was here to reclaim his lost love. He was here to take Della to the dance, just as he had promised her nearly fifty years ago. Just like that night, Ethan fought with Julian in what was the old orchard, but this time Ethan was the victor, not the victim. Mack had no doubt that Ethan was on his way to the little Victorian house on Randolph Street where he would pick up his beloved before heading over to the high school for the dance. Only it wouldn't be Della who was waiting. It would be Joyce.

Mack assured himself that Ethan wouldn't hurt her. It was just the opposite, in fact. He was her protector—he loved her, but Mack loved her, too, which meant he was going to have to fight for her...and he would. He would do whatever it took to get Joyce away from Ethan, whatever he could to put the ghost back in his grave for good.

Whatever it took.

"Oh, God." Mack dropped into his desk chair and set his gaze on the weary, old man on the couch. Julian perched on the edge with his elbows balanced on his knees, face in his hands. He had been muttering to himself for the last fifteen minutes. 'I'm sorry' and 'I didn't mean to'—words Mack didn't believe or want to hear at first, but now—now, he could feel it for himself.

"You really did love Della, didn't you?"

Julian shook his head from side to side. "Not did. I still do. I always will. Despite what you think of me, I really did do it for her."

Mack closed his eyes and imagined. What if Ethan were a flesh and blood threat, not a ghostly apparition? Would he be willing to commit murder just to keep Joyce from following that path? Not cold-blooded murder, surely, but it was easy to imagine a fight. That night at Joyce's when Ethan attacked him with the lamp and books—that night, it would have been easy to hit back if there had been a person to hit.

A sleepy lull threatened to pull him down, but Mack fought it by jumping to his feet. "I'm going after Joyce." He was at the door before he was able to turn and meet Julian's questioning stare. "The sheriff should be here soon. What happens after that is up to you."

Then he left the trailer before he changed his mind.

* * * *

Harbor High School had been educating the students of Mystic Harbor and the surrounding beach towns since 1922. The building was old and outdated. Most kids dreaded crossing the threshold every day, but Mack would have changed places with them in a minute. He would have been happy to give up the responsibilities of adulthood

for another year of high-school hi-jinks. Friday night bonfires on the beach in the fall, cheering on the football team on a nippy winter afternoon, constructing sets for the spring musical and the hormonal thrill of the Summer's Here Dance. Thinking of those days made him feel all warm and happy inside—the same way he felt when he thought of Joyce. She made him feel like a teenager all over again. It was a feeling he was bound and determined to hang on to.

Mack parked his truck in front of the school's double entrance doors, ran up the steps, and gave the handles a yank. Locked. Stepping back, he stared up at the half circle window above the door. No lights inside. He ran back down the stairs, retrieved a large flashlight from his truck, then circled the building to the right. All of the windows on this side of the building were dark as well. He was sure they were here or would be heading here.

Mack kept circling. When he reached the back of the building, he spotted the gym. It was a low, boxy structure that had been added on twenty years after the school had opened for business. Playing his flashlight across the wall, he could see the words *Go Harbor Gulls* painted on the side of the building, along with a fanciful representation of a seagull dressed for a round of basketball. Just beyond the over-grown gull was a set of double gym doors. Under the doors was the pale glow of light. Mack jogged over, grabbed the handle, and pulled. This time, the door opened easily. The sudden burst of bright light blinded him for a moment, so he stood his ground in the doorway and waited for his eyes to adjust.

The gym was decorated with an underwater theme. Colorful paper fish hung from the ceiling in between twists of blue-green crepe paper twisted to look like seaweed. The walls were decked with fishnets full of plastic crabs and lobsters except for the left wall that housed a set of collapsed folding bleachers. The stage was set for a DJ, two big amps, two turntables, a tape deck, and four speakers. There was a small microphone on the DJ desk and another standing one at the front of the stage. Above the stage was a banner declaring the event *The Mermaid's Ball*. Blue gels over the spotlights gave the whole room a dreamy, underwater feel. In the middle of it all was Joyce swaying to Elvis's rendition of *Love Me Tender*; the tape from Mack's truck. She had her back to him, her left arm extended as if holding a dance partner's hand. Mack took a step toward her. Suddenly, she swung around. She did have a partner—a well-built young man in blue jeans and a leather jacket—and he was completely transparent.

Now you see him, now you don't.

Mack blinked his eyes, sure it was just a trick of the blue-gelled lights, but the image refused to go away. He could see the young man, and through him, Mack could see Joyce. He was still deciding on his next move when the couple stopped swaying. Ethan turned. His eyes narrowed, apparently perplexed by the sight of Mack who looked so much like him.

Would it do any good to speak to him? *Do ghosts talk? This one does*, Mack thought, recalling the voice on the answering machine. "You've got the wrong girl."

"Leave us alone." The words came out before his lips moved, like in an old, out-of-sync, Japanese, horror movie.

The streamers above Mack's head shimmered and danced like wind chimes caught in a breeze. Then something hard smacked him on the back of the head. Mack whirled. A plastic lobster from the net on the wall lay at his feet. He bent over to pick it up and was nearly overcome by a wave of nausea from his earlier encounter with Julian.

"You're going to have to do better than this." He tossed the lobster aside, sending it skittering across the floor. Then Mack found himself skittering after it.

He slammed into the collapsed bleacher seats, taking most of the impact on his left shoulder. The heavy flashlight, his only weapon, flew out of his hand. Mack crumpled to the floor, his entire body reeling from the bone shattering pain.

First Julian, and now Ethan. *Damn it.* Enough was enough. He rolled to his hands and knees, his head hanging, still trying to find a clear point in his brain. The bleachers creaked and moaned. Mack turned and saw that the unit was breathing—slowly—in and out, in and out. *Damn!* He dropped and rolled to the right as the bleachers pleaded outward like an accordion. The lowest riser caught Mack on the side, giving him an extra push. He came down hard on his left shoulder, then gasped from the jolt of pain.

Elvis asked if he could be 'your little teddy bear.'

"I told you to leave us alone." Ethan's voice sounded like a 45 record player on 33, slow and sticky. "Fancy house, fancy car, fancy name—doesn't make you better."

"No, it doesn't," Mack yelled, then gasped for a clean breath. "But you're confused. It's a different time."

"Running out of time." Ethan grabbed Joyce by the hand and led her up the stairs to the stage. She went willingly, not wanting—or not able to resist.

Mack pushed himself to his feet. He wavered, his head still swimming, his shoulder throbbing. That was when he realized the fatal error in his plan. All he had thought about was saving Joyce. He had never thought about saving himself. Ethan had powers he hadn't imagined. Mack knew of no obvious way to stop him.

"Where's a ghostbuster when you need one?"

"Ghost?" The word sounded even more eerie coming from Ethan's unsynchronized lips.

"Yeah, ghost. That's what you are. A ghost."

Ethan lifted his own hand to his face. He peered at it, apparently unable to see anything unusual about it. "Some things are different. The town, the people."

Mack took a slow steady breath. He was getting through, but to what end? "It's not the 1950's anymore. It's the new millennium." He told Ethan the year.

Ethan laughed. "Things haven't changed that much." He set his hand beneath Joyce's chin, directing her eyes toward his. "Some things haven't changed at all."

"That's not who you think it is. That's not Della."

"Liar!" The bleacher seats shook, and all the streamers in the ceiling did a fancy dance. "I promised her a dance. She's going to dance." He turned toward Joyce, took her in his arms, and began to sway to the music in his head.

Mack ran toward the stage.

Suddenly, he was doused with water from the sprinkler system. It rained down like a summer storm, soaking his clothes and stinging his face.

Ethan stepped up to the microphone. "Attention please, I have an announcement to make."

The sprinkler system shut down.

Ethan switched on the microphone and tapped the padded tip, filling the room with a feedback squelch. "She loves me, not you. You took her from me once. I won't let you do it again." Ethan pushed the microphone stand over the edge of the stage.

Mack ran to the bleachers and scrambled up three steps as the metal stand clanged and clattered onto the soaked gym floor. The microphone popped out of its bracket, bounced, and landed squarely in a puddle. The casing could be waterproof, but he wasn't about to take a chance. Soaked as he was, it wouldn't take much voltage to give his heart a charge.

"I thought you weren't a killer, Ethan! I thought that was Julian's deal, not yours."

Ethan's eyes narrowed at the sound of his old friend's name. "Julian. He wanted her so badly. Had me beat up a couple of times. Thought that would make me run, but I didn't. How could I leave Della with a fellow like that?"

"It's all over, Ethan."

"I remember the pain. I remember I had to work late, and Della was waiting."

"That's right. She did wait for you. She waited the rest of her life, Ethan. She's still waiting."

Ethan sighed. "The waiting is over." He picked up one of the amplifiers and pitched it over the edge of the stage. The unit cracked open. Sparks arched from the guts as the water on the floor leaked into the works. He held his hand out to Joyce. She took it and then slipped into his arms. Gently, he set a kiss on her lips. "Together, forever. This time, I mean it." He led Joyce to the edge of the stage and guided her to sit with her legs dangling.

"No!" Mack ran down the length of the bleachers, closer but still so far away. "Joyce, don't!"

The bleachers shook beneath his feet. The metal struts groaned as the seats began to fold, one row, two rows—they closed up tight. Mack, on the third row, ran up two flights, lost his balance and fell, smacking his knee as his leg fell between the fifth row seat and floor. The bleachers kept rolling toward him, closing up gap after gap. Mack got to his feet, wavered, and then jumped down to a dry patch of floor that had been protected by the open bleachers. He scanned the area around him, desperate to find a path to the stage.

"Jump down," Ethan whispered to Joyce. "Jump down, and we'll be together forever."

"Joyce, don't move. Please," Mack pleaded. She turned her head toward him, but there was no sign of recognition in her eyes. "It's me. Mack. Remember."

"Jump down," Ethan said, his voice soft yet commanding. "I've waited so long for this day. Just do this one thing, and we'll be together for all eternity."

"No!" Mack had to get closer. Maybe he should take the chance. Maybe the water had shorted out the electrical equipment, and there was no danger at all. "Joyce. Joyce. Look at me."

Again she turned, her face still blank.

"Think. Remember last night, in the trailer. We made love. Remember?"

A fluorescent ceiling light shattered above Mack's head. The hail of glass and sparks caught him on the back of his neck.

"Oh, fuck!" he yelped and then swore again at the sudden pain.

Another bulb shattered, blanketing them in a hazy near darkness.

"Ethan, stop!" someone else spoke.

Careful to keep out of the water, Mack shook off the shards and turned to the new voice. A small female stood by the big double doors.

The figure moved from shadow into light.

Della. She was dressed in a lovely, peach, party dress. Her gray hair swirled and secured on the top of her head, a yellow rose in her gloved hand. "Ethan, my darling. You don't understand, do you?"

Ethan looked from Della to Mack, back to Della again as if sensing this was some sort of trick.

"I don't know you."

"I'm Ardella."

"No." He turned back to Joyce, his fingers closing over her shoulders. "This is Della. I went to her house. She was waiting there for me. She had my watch."

"You're mistaken," said Della. "Things have changed since you've been gone, Ethan. I've aged, I know, but I'm still the same girl who was so in love with you. Remember the time we snuck down on the Crab Hill Rocks? We were so busy with each other that we didn't notice the rising tide. We nearly drowned. I remember how we celebrated your birthday at the movies. We saw *Forbidden Planet*, and I didn't understand any of it." She took a few steps closer.

"How do you know these things?"

"The only way I could know is because I was there with you. I'm Della." Ardella kept walking forward.

"Auntie! Stop," Mack commanded. "Don't step in the water."

She stopped just short of the puddles on the floor. "This young man is Mack. He's your grandson, Ethan. He certainly has your looks, doesn't he? Almost the image of you."

He's the son of the child I carried for you. Your son, Edward, was killed in a car accident, but he left a part of himself behind." Della's eyes shifted toward Mack. "You've been such a comfort to me all these years, sweetie. You've grown into such a handsome, hard-working, kind young man."

Ethan dropped down from the stage. An arc of blue light surrounded his feet when they hit the water. Not deadly, since he was already dead. "I didn't know about the child."

"I was going to tell you that night after the dance."

Elvis wanted to know, *Are You Lonesome Tonight?*

"We never had our dance, Ethan."

He stepped closer, his hand beckoning her to him. "I didn't mean to stand you up. I wanted to bring you here, to show everyone in town that I had the prettiest date. Let's have that dance, Della. Dance with me now."

"No!" Mack ordered.

"It's all right, sweetie," Della soothed. "It's what I've been waiting for all these years." Ardella took one last step. Her dainty feet landed in the electrified water just as her hands grasped Ethan's. There was a tremendous flash of white light as the remaining fixtures shattered. The air crackled, lifting the hair on Mack's arms and sending a shiver up his spine. Then the room plunged into darkness.

"Mack?"

"Joyce, don't move. Stay right where you are."

He backed up to the folded bleachers and then followed the line of the wall to the corner and around to the front doors. Fumbling in the dark, he found the large flashlight he had dropped on the floor, switched it on, and illuminated the room.

There was no one in view of his beam other than Joyce. He swept the beam across the floor passed the wrecked amplifier and the loose microphone. Nothing. No bodies, ghostly or otherwise. Was that a good thing or a bad thing? Mack wasn't sure.

"What happened?" Joyce asked, her voice trembling.

"Ethan finished what he started. Della's not waiting anymore."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Joyce pressed the toes of her white sneakers against the porch and set the swing in motion. It was a beautiful, spring day. The sun was shining brighter than ever. The sky was a lovely shade of blue. It was like the first day after a bad cold. Her head was clear. The air felt so nice every time she took a breath. After the night's activities, she should be feeling exhausted. On the contrary, Joyce felt exhilarated, refreshed and in love.

Every time she closed her eyes, she felt Mack's body pressed to hers. She felt the warmth of his kisses and the strength of his touch. That thought brought a warm heat to her cheeks. Some things never changed.

The roar of a truck engine made Joyce open her eyes. The pick-up pulled up to the curb, parked, and Mack hopped out from the driver's side. Just seeing him again made her heart do a little dance. The dance missed a step when he rounded the front of the truck. His left arm was in a sling. There was a fresh bandage on his forehead. Joyce hopped off the swing and dashed down the porch steps to meet him halfway up the walk.

"Dislocated shoulder," Mack said, holding up a hand to stop her from administering a sympathetic bear hug. "Just kiss me, no hugging."

Joyce popped up on her toes and kissed his lips as he requested. "Does it hurt badly?"

"Only when I move, talk, breathe. Yeah, it hurts."

She hooked his good arm and led him back up the porch stairs to the swing. "I'm sorry. You really got the worst of this deal, but I'm going to make it up to you, I swear."

"I like the sound of that." Mack sat down on the swing and carefully adjusted his arm as Joyce took a seat beside him. "Do you remember much about what happened in the gym?"

"No, not really."

He laced his fingers in hers and then pulled her hand into his lap. "My Aunt Della was there, but she wasn't there at all."

"What do you mean?"

"When I went home, I found her in her bed. The doctor said she passed away in her sleep."

"Oh, Mack, I'm so sorry." Joyce dropped her head to his good shoulder. "I know she was very important in your life."

"She was, but it's okay. She's happy now, now that she's with Ethan."

"Speaking of Ethan..."

Mack sighed. "His body is under the lighthouse. Tomorrow, I'll have the foundation removed, and we'll find him. Aunt Della has a burial plot in the Mystic Cemetery. I'll see if I can arrange to have him laid to rest beside her." Mack let go of Joyce's hand, slipped his arm around her shoulder, and pulled her close. "Murdered because he fell in love with the wrong girl."

"No, he fell in love with the right girl. It was Julian who got it wrong."

Mack kissed her on the top of the head. "I still can't believe he did it. Julian was the nicest man. I never saw him lose his temper or blow up about anything."

"Well, I think he may have justified it by saying that Ethan was a bad man, that he was going to ruin Della, but really, he did it for his own selfish reasons. I think Julian needed to be needed. Does that make sense?"

"But Aunt Della didn't marry him. So, it was for nothing."

"It was not for nothing. He still became part of the family. He was the man of the house for years until your father came along. Bebe and Della gave Julian money, position. Most of all, they gave him power."

Mack said nothing, but Joyce could feel his heart pounding hard inside his chest. She wanted to make it all better, but even love and kisses couldn't wash away such a horrible betrayal.

"You have some decisions to make," Mack said as he guided her to sit up again. "First, what do you want to do with this?" Mack reached into his pocket and drew out Ethan's watch.

Joyce took it from him. For a moment, she just held it tightly cupped in her hand, waiting for some of the old feelings to return. The longing, the need, and the comfort she used to derive from just holding the watch. Nothing. Then she held her breath and thumbed the latch. The lid popped open and Fur Elise poured out of the case, the notes sounding sharper and clearer than before. "It's still pretty."

"But no longer haunted. See." Mack bent down and kissed her hard on the lips. No ghostly interference—nice. "Ethan has found his true, true love, so he doesn't need you anymore."

"Gee, thanks. So what's the decision I have to make?"

"Are you going to keep it? Or do you think we should give it back to Ethan?"

"Bury it with him?" Joyce closed her fingers around the watch, snapping the lid shut. She would have sworn the attachment was gone, but the thought of burying the watch forever made her shiver.

"The watch meant a lot to him. It was his last gift from Della, a gift he would have kept and cherished his whole life if he had the chance."

"I know, but—"

Mack set a single finger under her chin and lifted so her teary eyes met his. "How about we make a trade? You give me the watch, and I'll give you this." Again Mack dipped into his pocket, but this time he drew out a small padded box. He snapped the lid open to reveal a thin gold band with three large diamonds. "Usually, three's a crowd, but this time, it seemed appropriate. Will you marry me?"

Joyce opened her mouth to say something, but no sound came out.

"Is that a yes?"

She nodded as her eyes clouded with tears.

"It's true we haven't known each other very long, but when I look at you, I feel like I've known you all my life."

"Me, too."

Mack switched the box into his left hand, which was barely peeking out of the sling, and he removed the ring with his right. "You know, Della sat right here on this swing waiting for Ethan to take her to that dance."

"It must have been awful for her when he didn't show up. She must have really loved him a lot to have spent the rest of her life waiting for him."

"Tell me something, Joyce. Would you have spent your whole life waiting for me?"

Joyce thought of the bungled blind dates and the endless evenings home alone, dates refused because she would rather be alone than waste her time with a man she didn't like, let alone love. "Would I wait for you? I did, Mack. I did."

Mack slipped the ring on her finger. "The wait is over, my love. Now, we'll have nothing but time."

WAITING FOR ETHAN

THE END

Cynthia Boris

Cynthia Boris is a freelance, pop-culture writer. She is the author of three books, including *The Official Buffy the Vampire Slayer Pop Quiz*. A true TV fanatic—she still can't believe people pay her to visit the sets of her favorite TV shows, interview actors, and write about them.

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