

A warm-toned photograph of a kitchen. In the background, a window is covered with sheer white curtains. On the windowsill, there are three potted plants with pink and purple flowers. Below the window is a white countertop with a stainless steel double sink and a chrome faucet. In the foreground, a white lace-trimmed cloth is draped over a wooden cabinet. To the right of the cloth, there is a small arrangement of yellow and red flowers.

The One You Love

Tina Van Zandt

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Hard Shell Word Factory

For my parents, Randall and Linda Potts, for always believing in me,
Jim for being the best husband in the world and convincing me that I
can do anything and last, but not least, for Rufus.

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All characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the author, and have no relation whatever to anyone bearing the same name or names. These characters are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the author, and all incidents are pure invention.

Prologue

New Orleans, June 16

Dear Paul,

I can hardly wait for you to arrive! You have no idea how happy I've been since you've decided to move back home to Maine. I've gotten your old room all ready for you here at the inn and one of our neighbors is building Rufus a doghouse. He said it would be finished before your arrival.

It will be so nice having you here to run the inn. My hip is healing well but I can use an extra pair of hands. And since you've been working all these years as a chef in those fancy New Orleans restaurants, why, I imagine that folks will come to stay at our inn just for the food!

But I am jabbering on, aren't I? The reason I am writing is to ask you to do another favor for your poor old aunt. I received a wedding invitation from your cousin, Brian, today. You knew he was living in Virginia, didn't you?

Anyway, he's getting married next week in a little town called Dublin. He and his new bride are moving back here, too, just after the wedding. Since there's no way I can go, I was wondering if you would mind going in my place. I know it will probably be out of the way on your drive, but it would mean a lot to me, Paul. And as close as the two of you once were, I'm thinking that you might want to go anyway.

I've sent the invitation and directions along with this letter. Be sure and wear a nice suit!

Give Rufus a big hug for me. Have a safe trip, Paul, and I'll see you soon.

*All my love,
Aunt Felicia*

Chapter One

"IT'S GOING TO BE okay." Christine Vance tried to comfort the Collie that lay across her lap, stroking the dog's silky hair. Mud and grass stained the skirt of her wedding gown where he lay. She blew out a breath before focusing on the situation at hand.

Things weren't okay. She was late for her own wedding. Worse, her stepfather, speeding to get her to the church, had struck the dog with his car. Her mind worked frantically. She had to help the Collie. *But what about her wedding?* How could she explain this to Brian?

There was no time to think. Christine glanced up to see Brian running towards them, looking like a movie star in his black tuxedo. Coming to a halt before her, his dark eyebrows arched in disbelief.

Taking in her disheveled appearance, Brian frowned. "What the hell happened?"

"Brian, we had an accident." Christine pulled back the lace veil from her face. "It's my fault. We were running late—"

"Where have you been?" he asked loudly, his face coloring.

"We had an emergency at the animal hospital." Christine watched his reddening face and added, "A Golden Retriever pup accidentally ingested some antifreeze in his owner's storage shed. He almost died."

Her reference to the pup drew Brian's attention to the Collie in her lap whose chin lay on the white satin of her skirt. The dog whined miserably, his brown eyes pleading for her help.

"Did you hit Rufus with the car?"

Taken off guard, Christine stared at Brian. "You *know* this dog?"

Brian raked a hand through his auburn hair. "He belongs to my cousin."

Of course he does. Cursing her luck, Christine took a deep breath. People drifted from the church to their small gathering, with her and the Collie at its center. Her cheeks grew warm under the curious stares of their approaching guests.

A soft whimper drew her attention back to the injured animal. She examined him, discovering that the dog's left front leg was broken, maybe in two places. His breathing was shallow with a rattling quality that she didn't care for. X-rays would be necessary to determine the extent of any internal injuries. Patting the dog's head, her stomach

churned with anxiety. The sooner she could tend to him at the animal hospital, the better.

"I'm sorry, Brian," her stepfather offered. "I didn't see him in time."

"Rufus?"

A tall man ran towards her and the Collie. Stopping behind Brian's shoulder, his eyes focused on the dog she held. He stood almost a head taller than her fiancé. The warm afternoon sun shone off the dark chestnut waves of his hair. His blue eyes, similar to Brian's, clouded with concern.

He dashed to the dog. "Rufus?"

Brian stepped closer. "Paul, they hit Rufus with the car."

"Rufus, boy," Paul crooned to the dog as he dropped to his knees and began to gently pet him. He looked to Christine for an answer. "What happened?"

Christine swallowed hard. As a veterinarian, her life was dedicated to the health and care of small animals. She was the last person on the face of the earth who should be responsible for the Collie's injury. She didn't want to explain the circumstances leading to the accident to Brian's cousin. Any more than she wanted to tell Brian why she was late on the most important day of their lives.

What choice did she have? "It's all my fault, uh—" What had Brian called him?

"Paul," the cousin offered, his hands stroking his pet's fur.

"We were running late. *I* was running late. I'm so sorry."

Rufus' pitiable whine made his owner wince. "We've got to get him to a vet."

Brian let out his annoyance in a hiss of breath. "Christine, how bad is it? Can he wait a few minutes? We're already an hour late, as I'm sure you realize."

It was Christine's turn to wince. She deserved the barb. But she hadn't *meant* to be late for her own wedding. Surely Brian realized that. But then, judging from the frequency of their arguments about her loyalty to her career, maybe he didn't. "His front leg is broken. There may be internal injuries. I'll need to do x-rays—"

"Christine, the minister is going to leave if we don't get moving."

From the corner of her eye, Christine saw Paul's head jerk up.

"Paul, she said that it was only a broken leg."

"She's a vet?" Paul asked, his tone edged with sarcasm.

"Yes," said Christine. She shook her head. "I don't know for certain that the leg is the only injury."

Brian's hands clenched into fists at his sides. "He doesn't *look* that bad."

Please shut up, Brian. Glancing sideways at her fiancé's cousin, she saw the red flush seeping up his neck. They were talking about the man's pet, his companion. But Brian wouldn't understand that kind of sentiment. Brian disliked most animals, dogs in particular. And Christine couldn't count on him, especially when he was upset, to guard against speaking his uncharitable thoughts aloud.

She would never forgive herself if Paul's dog died of unknown internal injuries during the wedding ceremony. She looked at her fiancé and saw the anger building behind his blue eyes. But would Brian forgive her for ruining their special day if she tended to the dog first?

Christine had put her career before Brian too many times. Looking up into his eyes, she hoped to find some understanding there. But his eyes were ice blue, cold. She knew that look. The line was drawn. She wasn't certain that he would forgive her for being late to their wedding. How could he ever forgive her for leaving him at the altar, even for a short time? Her heart sank. She could lose him.

"What if he's not okay?" Paul directed the question to Brian.

Brian rolled his eyes heavenward. "They just bumped him!" He threw his arms up in exasperation. "Isn't that right, Christine?"

"Well, I think it was more than a bump," her stepfather said, tugging at his tie as if it were suddenly choking him.

Christine nodded. "We were moving fast. We were late for my wedding."

"That was hardly Leland's fault," her mother chimed in.

"No one said it was, Mom," Christine responded. She didn't need her mother jumping in to elevate this disaster.

"Fine. I'll wait long enough for you to call one of the other vets at the clinic," said Brian.

"Todd's been on vacation. He won't be returning until tonight."

"What about Miranda?"

"Miranda went into labor this morning."

Paul regarded her as his large hand settled on the Collie's head. "You're really a vet?" he asked.

Christine nodded.

"Will he be all right?" Paul smoothed the dog's fur with his other hand but his gaze never wavered. "Long enough for your ceremony?"

Christine considered the Collie. What if there were internal injuries? What if he died because she'd chosen her happiness over his health? How could she ever think of herself as a caring veterinarian-as

a decent human being—if she allowed that to happen? But if she said yes, the wedding would take place and the dog might be fine. Brian would still be upset, but he'd have time to get over it on their honeymoon. The day would be salvaged and, in less than half an hour, she'd be a happily married woman.

"Tell him, Christine," Brian urged. "Tell him that Rufus is okay."

She turned to Paul, the words "he'll be fine" about to roll off her tongue. Paul looked from the dog to her, his expression serious. The sincerity in his eyes made her believe that he would trust her judgment.

Rufus exhaled a harsh, rattling breath giving her a moment's panic. She couldn't do it.

Her gaze flew to Brian. "Please," she pleaded, silently willing him to understand.

"Okay, fine!" Brian shouted at her. "I'm sorry that Rufus is hurt, but even *he* means more to you than I do."

Christine was nearly too shocked to feel Paul's hand rest briefly on her shoulder. Horrified, she watched as he rose to his feet to face Brian. "Give her a break. Wedding or no wedding, she can't walk off and leave Rufus in this condition."

"Stay out of this, Paul. You don't know a damned thing about what I've had to put up with for four years. I'm not taking second place to your damned dog!"

In two quick strides Paul stood before Brian; Christine's heart lurched in her chest. *Please don't let them fight.* The whispers of the guests around them halted as the two men stood inches apart, glaring at one another. Paul with his tall, athletic physique was the larger man. His massive shoulders filled the coat of his gray suit and blocked her view of Brian.

"Rufus is hurt," Paul said in a low voice. "He could die without her help."

Brian shook his head in disbelief. "Okay, Paul. You two stay here and play nursemaid to the dog. I'm out of here!" He turned his glare on Christine. "I won't have a wife who puts her career before me! I've been an idiot to have put up with it for this long!"

Tears built behind her eyes while her heart began to shred in her chest. "Brian, I never meant to put my job ahead of you. I love you."

"Tell it your animals!"

"Hey!" Paul watched Brian stalk off. The murmur of voices resumed as he darted after him.

"Sorry, folks. I guess the, ah, wedding is...ah, off for the time being." Her stepfather tugged at his tie again.

"I told you, Christine, but you didn't listen," her mother whined. "You should have come to the church instead of taking that emergency call."

Christine didn't answer. She snatched the veil from her head, buried her face in the scratchy material and cried.

WELL, WASN'T THIS a damned fine mess?

Watching his cousin speed away in his sports car, Paul shook his head. Brian and he hadn't been close since they were teenagers. They'd talked only once over the phone in the last three years. Paul had come to the wedding to please his aunt and nothing more. Brian's relationship with his fiancée wasn't his business.

Rufus was his concern. He made his way through the departing guests to the bride who eased his dog off her lap. Rufus whined. Shifting uncomfortably on his back haunches, he made a weak attempt to move his front leg. When the effort failed, he cast sad brown eyes at Brian's pretty fiancée.

"It's all right, Rufus." Christine swiped at the tears that streaked her face. "We're going to take care of you."

Big hazel eyes, reddened from her tears, watched him as he approached. She reminded him of the china dolls his Aunt Felicia collected with her smooth, fair skin set against the shining dark waves of her shoulder-length hair. She had lovely, delicate features. Her full lower lip trembled he noticed, as he drew closer, reminding him of a tearful child.

He didn't like the way his chest tightened at the hurt he saw on her small face.

Kneeling, Paul gathered his dog in his arms. Rufus yelped when he accidentally squeezed the broken leg so he soothed his pet with soft words of encouragement. With Christine's help, he managed to situate the furry bundle and slowly stand, which was no small task. Rufus was a hefty dog.

"Where is the animal hospital?"

Her hazel eyes focused on Rufus. "Only a few miles from here."

"Oh, Christine, we don't have to take the dog to the hospital in our car, do we?" asked a whiny, feminine voice.

Paul glared at the older woman who stood behind Christine. "We'll take my car," he said.

"Mom," Christine's voice was shaky, "why don't you and Leland go back to the hotel?"

Christine's mother, an attractive lady in her pink dress, nodded as

if the entire episode had left her emotionally exhausted. “Yes, of course. All this stress is not good for my poor Leland.”

Christine nodded at her mother. “I’ll call you as soon as I can.”

“Honestly, Christine, I don’t need this kind of anxiety. You know that my nerves are still in poor condition. They almost had to put me in the hospital with Leland. Why I—”

“Yes, Mom, I know,” she cut in. She nudged her mother towards her stepfather. “I’ll talk to you later.”

Paul led her to his car, which was parked only a few feet away. Christine scrambled to open the rear passenger door for him. Arranging Rufus so he could rest in the back seat, they climbed in and sped out of the church parking lot.

Peering at his dog in the rear view mirror as he drove, Paul frowned. Poor Rufus lay still with his chin resting on the seat. Anxiety spurted through him, made him feel restless. The Collie had been a good companion and friend to him. He was a young dog and Paul didn’t want to lose him.

“Do you really think that leg is the worst of his problems?”

Christine sniffled in the seat next to him. “I think so,” she managed. “But I don’t like the sound of his breathing.”

Nodding, Paul peered at the woman in his passenger seat. Christine’s head hung low and the dark curtain of her hair hid her face. She sniffled again. “Stay on this road until it ends, then turn left onto Route 11.”

“Is the hospital on Route Eleven?”

“Yes. Four or five miles down.”

They rode the remainder of the way in silence. Paul felt increasingly uneasy. What should he say? Should he say anything? What if she wouldn’t stop crying? Damn. He’d never been able to handle situations that involved crying women with any effectiveness. He never knew what to do. What if his attempts to make her feel better only made her feel worse?

Paul glanced at her again as they neared their destination. To his surprise he found her head and shoulders back, her expression stilled and serious. For the first time, he noticed that she was no longer wearing her veil. Something shiny in her hair caught his eye.

He turned his attention to the road ahead. The hospital in sight, he steered the car onto the long driveway and drove up the embankment to stop before its front entrance.

Out of the corner of his eye, he fancied that whatever he had seen in Christine’s hair had moved. Thinking it might be an insect he

reached out and snatched it from her soft hair. To his relief and chagrin he discovered the object was a hairpin.

Christine's features were composed and calm when she turned to face him. Only her eyes hinted at her emotions.

"I thought it was an insect," he stammered, holding up the hairpin.

Her hazel eyes lowered and she shook her head. No doubt she was wondering if he could have thought of something more idiotic to say.

"Where's your veil?"

"I don't know."

She held out her hand, palm up. She had slender hands, long fingers. Paul noticed a long, white scar running along her palm. He placed the pin over the scar and clasped her cold hand in his. For the moment, she looked lost, helpless. *Damn Brian*. How could he have humiliated her in front of everyone? Yes, she had been late, but it wasn't the end of the world.

And you don't know the whole story, so stay out of it.

Paul got out of his car and opened the back door to retrieve Rufus. The sharp sound of Christine rapping on the hospital's glass door rang in his ears as he reached into the car for his dog.

Rufus' body was limp and heavy. The dog lay still, his eyes closed. Nudging his pet's shoulder, he waited for a response. Nothing. Paul's heart lurched in his chest. Was he breathing? He scooped up the Collie and shook him, hoping for a reaction. "Rufus!"

Christine dashed to his side and pulled back one of Rufus' eyelids. Her calm gaze assessed the Collie's face, and then she dipped her head to his chest. "He's lost consciousness, but he's still with us," she said.

"Dr. Vance?" A small blonde woman leaned out of the hospital door.

"Terri, we have an emergency!"

The woman stepped out onto the concrete step holding open the door and waved them into the hospital. Paul followed Christine inside, his stomach clenched tightly as he clutched Rufus to his chest.

Rushing into the hospital's lobby, Christine reached to take the Collie from him. "We need to get Rufus to surgery."

Please let Rufus be all right, Paul prayed as fear knotted inside him. The dog had been his best friend since he'd found him starving in the street behind the restaurant where he'd taken his first job as a chef. That first week he'd saved all the leftovers from the kitchen for the skinny pup. By the top of the next week, Paul had taken him home. The Collie had slept at the foot of his bed that first night. He'd slept in the

same place every night since.

Rufus had been Paul's constant companion for the last three years. He jogged with Paul, watched ice hockey with him....

"I'll go with you."

"That's not a good idea, Paul." The hazel eyes that met his were gentle and understanding, pleading for his trust. She slid her hands under Rufus' body. "I need you to wait here."

Rufus' lifeless body grew heavier by the minute. The dog's welfare won out over his apprehension. What choice did he have but to trust this woman? Every moment was crucial.

His decision made, he relaxed his grip and allowed Christine and her assistant to take Rufus from him. The two women managed the dog's weight easily. Without another glance his way, they rushed with his pet down a narrow hallway. The lacy train of Christine's white gown flowed behind them as they disappeared from view.

Taking a deep breath, he sank onto one of the lobby's wooden benches. He had no control over the situation and it was already driving him crazy. He didn't care at all for being left behind while his dog fought for his life. But what could he do?

Paul fought the doubts that preyed on his mind. Yes, maybe Brian's fiancée had been indirectly responsible for Rufus' injury. But hadn't she put aside her own wedding to help his dog? He knew absolutely nothing about her experience as a veterinarian, but certainly her personal sacrifice said a lot about her dedication to her patients.

He regretted her situation with his hotheaded cousin, but he wouldn't toss his hat into that ring. Helping someone with a medical crisis, as she was helping him, was one thing. Interfering where affairs of the heart were concerned was another matter entirely. The relationship Paul had once enjoyed with Brian had been irreparably damaged because he'd taken it upon himself to help his cousin woo the girl who'd stolen his heart when they were in high school. Paul had ended up losing his own heart to her and blowing the situation apart when she chose him over Brian.

With a shake of his head, Paul pulled his hand down over his chin. No, that incident taught him early on to avoid getting into the personal business of other people. It was a personal policy that had served him well ever since.

Praying that Christine would be able to pull his pet through, he sat back and waited, trying to relax. If Rufus lived, they'd be back on the road as soon as the dog was able to travel.

Chapter Two

PULLING THE SURGICAL cap from her head, Christine walked toward the lobby where Paul waited. The clock in the hallway told her that she'd been in surgery for over two hours. The muscles in her back were stiff; her neck and arms ached. The stained surgical gown tied clumsily over her wedding dress served as a vivid reminder of what a disaster the day had been.

The day hadn't been a total loss. She'd been able to hold her emotions in check long enough to operate on the injured dog.

The realization that she'd made the right decision lessened the burden on her heart. She knew now that had she went through with her wedding ceremony, the dog would have died from internal bleeding before he ever reached the hospital. As it was, Rufus rested comfortably in the surgery ward, still groggy from the anesthesia. The surgery had been, thank God, a success.

But she hardly deserved a pat on the back for her efforts. If not for her, the dog might have been outside playing with his master right now. And if the dog had not survived...she wouldn't dwell on that possibility.

How could she ever hope to convince Brian that she'd made the right choice? What could she possibly say to make him understand why she'd chosen to treat the injured dog over marrying him? The questions played over and over again in her mind. What if she had lost him?

She found Paul standing by the lobby's front window, looking at the darkening sky. Briefly closing her eyes against the regret, she took a deep breath. She had to be professional now.

Not wanting to startle him by speaking abruptly, she cleared her throat. He turned away from the window to face her.

"How is Rufus?" His voice sounded tired.

Christine pulled down her surgical mask. "Rufus is stable."

Paul stepped closer. He towered over Christine as it was; his broad shoulders seemed to fill the room. His eyes, darkened by worry, stared down into hers. "He's going to be okay?"

Christine smiled, trying to put him at ease. "There's a good chance that he will recover."

The tense lines on his face eased only a little. "A chance?"

Fighting the guilt she felt for the entire situation, she took another deep breath. The question that preyed on her mind had to be running through Paul's head, too. *What would happen now?* She needed to reassure him. At least she could answer his questions about Rufus' future. She had no idea what would happen with her own.

"How bad was it?" he prompted.

"I don't want to give you a false sense of security. Rufus' leg is broken in two places and he has four broken ribs. Granted, they are injuries that he can recover from, but he's not out of the woods yet. Two of the broken ribs dipped into his chest cavity. They didn't pierce his lung, but there was a little damage. Rufus had some internal bleeding as a result. I think I was successful in stopping that bleeding, but there is no way to be immediately certain."

Paul rubbed the back of his neck. "How long until we do know for certain?"

"By morning."

The anxious expression on his face intensified. "Will someone be here to check on him through the night?"

Christine had anticipated the question. "I am going to stay with him, Paul. I'll be here in case anything happens."

"I am staying, too."

"That's not a good idea." The suggestion irked her. She was more than unhappy with the way the day turned out and she was angry with herself. She wanted to be left alone to watch over her patient. A worried owner was more than she could deal with right now. "There is nothing you can do but wait."

"And I choose to wait here." His voice was firm.

Folding her arms across her chest, she suppressed her annoyance under the appearance of indifference. "Owners are not allowed to stay overnight. I'm sorry."

Paul spun on his heel and strode out the front entrance. She sighed at the sound of his car door opening. Yes, she was sorry for all of the trouble she had caused him and his pet. But she needed time to herself, to think about her situation with Brian. And Todd Marcus, the veterinarian she worked for, really wouldn't like the idea of an owner staying in the hospital.

Her mouth dropped open when the door swung open and Paul walked in carrying a duffel bag.

"What are you doing?" She fought to keep the irritation from her tone.

Paul tossed his duffel bag on the front counter. "I am going to

change clothes,” he answered, tugging at the zipper of his bag. Pulling out a rolled-up pair of jeans, he proceeded as if she weren’t still in the room and she hadn’t just told him that he could not stay.

Christine struggled to keep her fragile control. When he fished out a blue tee shirt, she realized he meant business.

“Really, Paul. Staying here is not a good idea,” she reasoned in a calm voice. “There’s nothing you can do to help Rufus. He’s in recovery and it will be at least an hour before the anesthesia wears off.”

“I would like to be here when he wakes up.”

“I have no comfortable place for you to sleep.”

“Under the circumstances, I doubt I’ll get much sleep.” Stripping off his suit coat, he studied her for a moment. “Look, I appreciate your position and I know there’s nothing I can do but wait, but I’d feel better waiting here. Rufus has been with me since he was a pup.”

“I know, but—”

“And it isn’t particularly safe, even in a small town like this, for you to be here alone all night.”

Christine shook her head. “I am here by myself on emergency calls all the time. It’s no big deal.” Most of the emergency calls she saw were the pets of existing clients. Only a handful of cases involved people who were strangers to her. And Brian had never expressed any concerns, save for his constant complaints of the amount of time her career demanded.

Paul shrugged. “Something to think about.”

“Well, for that matter,” she said with a dry laugh, “how safe am I here with you? I know nothing about you except that you are supposedly my fiancé’s cousin.”

Blue eyes, a darker shade of blue than Brian’s she realized, locked with hers. “I suppose you are right.”

“How did you come to be at our wedding?” Brian had never mentioned having a cousin named Paul. There had been no one named Paul on the guest list that she and Brian had put together.

“You sent an invitation to our Aunt Felicia,” he explained, resting his elbows on the counter. “She wasn’t able to come so she asked me to attend in her place.”

Christine nodded, remembering the name Felicia Spurling. A wave of guilt washed over her at her own selfishness. “And look how you’ve been rewarded for your efforts. I’m so sorry for all of this, Paul. I guess it would be all right if you stayed tonight as long as you remain out here in the lobby. There is a restroom down the hall on the left where you can change your clothes.”

Paul snatched up the jeans and shirt he'd pulled out of his bag. "Thanks."

She glanced down at the hem of her wedding dress that peeked out from under the surgical gown. A drop of blood stained the white satin. Swallowing hard, she said, "I guess I'd better change clothes, too."

Christine began to return to the recovery room, but Paul's voice stopped her. "Are you going to be all right?"

The question surprised her. "Yes, I'll be fine," she said easily, praying that he couldn't tell she was coming apart inside.

Paul's eyes searched her face. "That cousin of mine can be a real hothead. Give him a day or two to cool off. He'll see what an idiot he is."

Christine managed a small, tentative smile. "You're probably right. About giving him time I mean."

She took a deep breath as she watched Paul leave the room, hoping with all of her being that he was right.

A cold knot formed in her stomach as she considered Brian. She'd give anything if she could start the day over. If she'd been less stressed from the emergencies she'd handled earlier, perhaps Leland wouldn't have felt the need to drive so fast and could have avoided hitting Rufus. The wedding would have gone wonderfully. She and Brian would be packing for their trip to Paris where they'd spend their honeymoon. Upon their return they would begin the move to his hometown in Maine where they would live happily ever after.

Instead, she'd spend the night alone on a cot in the surgery ward watching over a dog whose injuries were her fault.

Walking behind the front counter, Christine spotted the office phone. Lifting the receiver she began to dial Brian's phone number, her mind a crazy mixture of hope and fear. She hung up before she heard the first ring. Cradling the receiver, she sighed. *No, Paul is right.* She turned and headed towards recovery. She'd give Brian tonight to think about everything and she'd call him in the morning.

Brian wouldn't just throw away the four years they'd spent together. He'd realize that what they had was special, would still be special. Everything would work out fine.

CHRISTINE AWOKE THE next morning to the sound of the light snapping on and a loud feminine gasp. She bolted up in the small cot where she'd slept.

"Oh, Dr. Vance! You scared me!"

Wincing with sleepy eyes in the bright light of the surgery ward, Christine made out Ellen's tiny form. She would have recognized the kennel assistant's squeaky voice anywhere. Christine inwardly groaned.

"Um, Dr. Vance? Like, weren't you supposed to get married yesterday?" the girl asked. "I thought Dr. Levy was supposed to be here."

"Dr. Levy went into labor yesterday. What time is it?"

"Eight o'clock."

A soft thumping sound drew her attention to the large cage where Rufus lay. Wiping at her eyes with her hands, she rose and made her way to the Collie. The thump of his wagging tail grew louder as she approached. His brown eyes were bright and friendly as they gazed up at her.

Christine crouched before the cage and opened the door. Rufus looked alert. Hell, she thought, remembering how he'd looked yesterday after the accident, he looks good. Greeting her patient with an affectionate rub on the head, she relaxed as a warm wave of relief washed over her.

"Dr. Vance? There's some guy sleeping in the lobby—"

"Yes, Ellen," Christine cut her off. "I was supposed to have gotten married yesterday, but things...have been postponed." At least she hoped so. "Mr.—" she didn't even know his last name, "Er, that man's dog came in as an emergency late last night, so that's why he is here."

"Oh."

"Let's go ahead and get started, okay? Would you get the Whitman's cat from Ward A for me? He's due his insulin at eight-thirty."

When Ellen didn't respond, Christine glanced over her shoulder. The short, plump teenager had an uncertain look on her freckled face. Christine knew the girl wanted to ask more, but hoped that she wouldn't. She didn't think that she could handle inquiries in her present state.

"Go on," Christine prompted.

Ellen left the surgery ward and Christine exhaled.

"Let's look at that leg," she said to Rufus. Christine ruffled her patient's fur before gently pulling away the medical tape she had used to bind his leg after surgery. "There's no swelling," she explained to the dog. Fastening the tape back to his leg, she pulled the thick bands of tape away at his rib cage. No sign of infection. The clear, easy sound of the dog's breathing let her know that she had been successful in stopping the bleeding. "You are going to be fine, my friend."

Closing the cage door and rising to her feet, she stretched the aching muscles of her back. Paul would be pleased with Rufus' condition this morning. She was glad he'd been able to sleep. It had been a long night for them both. She had allowed Paul to see Rufus after the anesthesia had worn off and the dog was reasonably alert. Paul had tapped on the door to the surgery ward nearly every hour after that to ask after his pet. He had to be exhausted. She decided to get a few things done before waking him with the news.

The phone was the first thing she saw when she flipped on the light in the treatment room. *Brian*. Lifting the receiver, she punched in Brian's phone number with trembling fingers. Her heart pounded furiously in her chest as she waited for the first ring.

She got a busy signal instead.

Did he have the phone off the hook? Could he be trying to call her? Her mind raced with possibilities both good and bad as she listened to the busy signal drone on. Hanging up, she tried calling Brian again. The same signal blared in her ear.

Waiting for Ellen to bring the Whitmans' cat, she dialed the animal hospital's answering service that announced there were two messages. Christine's heart swelled with hope. One of them could be from Brian.

The first message was from her mother. Why hadn't Christine called? Where had she been? Christine blew a long strand of dark hair off her forehead. She'd deal with her mother later.

The second message was Miranda Levy's husband calling to let her know that Miranda had safely delivered a healthy baby boy. Christine hung up after the cheerful message. Brian hadn't called. Her heart sank.

"Dr. Vance?"

Christine turned at the sound of Ellen's voice. "Yes?"

"The guy out here is awake now," the girl explained, holding the Whitman's huge male cat. "He says he'd like to speak with you."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, and he's, like, more hot-looking when he's awake." Blushing under the curious look Christine gave her, she handed over the gray tabby. "What do you want me to tell him?"

"Tell him that I'll be out in just a few minutes," Christine answered and the girl sped off to do her bidding.

She had just set the cat on the shiny, metal table when the phone rang. *Please let it be Brian*. The phone rang a second time as she hauled the tabby into her arms and snatched up the receiver. "Peak's

Knob Animal Hospital,” she greeted.

“Hello, Christine,” Brian’s voice was low and smooth.

“Brian!” Holding the phone to her ear with her shoulder, she carried Razzle to the examination table. “I was hoping it was you.”

“How’s Rufus?”

She didn’t miss the sarcasm in his question. “He’s fine. It turned out that his injury was very serious. He had broken ribs, a fractured leg...”

Brian sighed. “Christine, I love you—”

“I love you, too.”

“But I can’t handle this anymore,” he finished.

The phone slipped from her shoulder. Hissing up at her from the table, her feline patient worked his way free from her hands. A wave of dread washed over her. She didn’t like the way the conversation was starting out.

“Christine, are you there?” Brian’s voice called from the dangling receiver.

Watching the cat dash from the room she grabbed the receiver with a shaking hand and pressing it to her ear. “Brian?”

“Did you hear what I said? I can’t do this anymore. I used to tell myself when you were in vet school that once you settled into your career that you’d have time for me. I really thought we could make this work.”

“Brian, we *can* make this work,” Christine pleaded. “I know I’ve been busy lately, but—”

“Lately?” Brian’s voice turned icy. “Try for the last two years. Nothing but long hours and emergency calls late at night and on the weekends when I stayed over. It gets old having to call off vacations at the last minute and waiting at restaurants for you to never show up.

“You never thought about my feelings, Christine,” he continued. “And now it’s too late.”

The shock of his words held her immobile. “Brian, no. It’s not too late.” She felt a stinging behind her eyes. “It can’t be.”

“I’ve got to go.”

He had to go? Christine’s heart lurched as a realization swept over her. His apartment. The lease expired this week. They had planned to share her townhouse until the move to Maine. He’d already packed most of his belongings. She had helped him.

“What do you mean?” she asked in a choked voice.

The silence stretched out painfully. “I’m going home, Christine, *alone*. I think that it’s for the best.”

"You're leaving me? Brian, can't we talk about this? Please don't throw everything away."

She wrapped her arms around herself, waiting for him to say something, listening. She heard the muffled sound of traffic on his end of the phone line.

Oh no. He's on the road. "Brian, where are you?"

"Doesn't matter. I've got to go."

Did she imagine the thawing in his tone? "Brian, wait! Please, meet me—"

"Goodbye, Christine."

"Brian!"

But he was gone. The dial tone droned in her ear. Just like that, he was out of her life.

The Whitman cat peered at her from the doorway. Christine took two steps towards the cat and he dashed away. Fighting the tears that threatened, Christine dropped the receiver and stood dazed in the center of the room.

Brian was gone. Numb from disbelief, she closed her eyes. He was really gone.

"DR. VANCE?" ELLEN called out as she reached the doorway. Paul stopped behind the girl's left shoulder, holding the hefty, tabby cat he'd caught scrambling into the lobby. The frightened cat squirmed in his hands, glaring up at him.

Paul's gaze swept across the room with its shiny metal tables and tubs, its cabinets filled with medicinal bottles and jars. Christine stood near the center of the room, her big hazel eyes seeming to stare right through them. From where he stood Paul saw tears shining on her long, black lashes.

"Dr. Vance?" the girl asked. "Are you okay?"

The teenager, who had been gawking at him since he woke, turned and grabbed the struggling cat from him. And it was a good thing she did because his patience was growing thin. He wanted to know how his dog was faring. But the sight of his pet's doctor, her clothes and lab coat wrinkled, a glazed look of sadness on her face was hardly reassuring. A flicker of apprehension coursed through him.

"Mr.—"

"Toulon," Paul offered.

"Mr. Toulon caught Razzle for us," Ellen explained.

Christine's gaze met with his and she tried to smooth her lab coat. "I c-can see that. Thank y-you."

When the cat began to kick at the girl's arms with his back feet, she held him away from her body. "Dr. Vance?"

"Put him back in his cage for now, Ellen." Christine opened the door behind her for the girl, but her grim expression remained. "I'll give him the injection in a few minutes."

"How is Rufus?" Paul asked after Ellen shuffled from the room with the feline patient.

"Rufus?" she asked as if the name were unfamiliar to her.

What the hell has happened? Why wasn't she telling him that Rufus looked great this morning? He wanted to hear that his dog was alive and well, that he'd recover. She'd said that the ribs and leg could heal.

"He's gone," she said out loud. "Gone, gone, gone."

"What?" Paul's heart began to race. "He's gone? When did you know? What happened?"

The same shock that he felt reflected in her eyes. He stood staring at her like a fool, his hair and clothes mussed from sleep. His dog was dead. And he guessed from her silence that she didn't know what else to say.

But finally, she spoke. "He just called. He's just packing up and going home to Maine without me. He's already on the road."

What the hell is going on here? Paul shook his head trying to clear it. "Whoa! Wait a minute. What are you talking about?"

"Brian." She raked her hands through her dark mass of hair. "He's broken up with me. He says he can't deal with it anymore. He's leaving." Paul watched as she sank down on a small stool. "Oh, God. I can't believe this."

Paul let out an impatient hiss of breath. "So you are saying that Brian is gone—"

"Yes," she cut in. "He—"

"Not my dog?"

She hesitated, blinking with bafflement. He knew his words had finally registered. "Your dog? Rufus is fine. I just checked on him—"

"He's fine?"

Christine nodded.

Exhaling, Paul felt the tension ease from his limbs. Rufus was fine and that's all he needed to know. As he took in the woman's small trembling figure he fought a troubling urge to comfort her in some way. Annoyed as he was with the start she'd given him, his heart still went out to her. He felt genuine sympathy for her trouble with his cousin. But it was just that, he reminded himself. *Her* trouble.

"Can I see Rufus?"

"Yes, you can," her voice was hardly above a whisper. She rose from the stool, not meeting his gaze. "I am sorry for scaring you. I'll take you to the surgery ward to see him."

Walking by him to exit the room, she tripped over his feet. He clutched her upper arm to stop her fall. Holding on to her until she was steady, he felt her tremble under his fingers.

When he didn't release her, she gazed up to him. Her dark hair hung in limp layers about her face. Gone were the soft curls that felt so satiny under his fingers yesterday in the car. There was no trace of the delicate makeup that enhanced her pretty features on her wedding day. The pale face he saw before him was scrubbed clean. Even with the miserable expression she wore on her face, he couldn't help thinking her to be adorable.

Her vulnerability stirred an emotion in him that he couldn't name. "I am sorry about Brian," he said.

Hazel eyes searched his as if she would find the answers she sought. "If only I could talk to him. If he'd only give me a chance to explain."

"He's always been a stubborn ass. He wouldn't listen to what you have to say even if you followed him all the way to Maine." Paul didn't know why he continued to talk to her about his cousin. It was not his affair. The best thing he could do for her was to stop the conversation. That way he wouldn't be giving her false hope or stirring up hard feelings.

But he could tell from the faint gleam in her eyes that he'd already said too much.

"He couldn't have already left town, could he?"

"I don't know," he said, hoping she'd drop the subject. Releasing her arm, he stepped back. "Can I see Rufus?"

"Yes, of course." She led him from the room to the surgery ward. Pulling open the door, she held it for him.

The soft thudding of Rufus' wagging tail greeted him as he stepped into the ward. The Collie tried his best to stand as his master kneeled in front of his cage. Paul opened the cage door to give his dog a warm rub on the head. "He's out of danger now?"

Paul found her staring at the floor. "Is he out of danger now?" he repeated.

Christine's reverie was broken by his words. "What? Oh, yes," she answered. "He should be on his way to a full recovery."

Nodding, he turned to his pet. "Thank you for taking care of him."

"Oh, please don't thank me, Paul. I'm the reason he was injured." Sighing deeply, she cast her gaze to the floor again. "If I'd done things differently, you two would be on your way and I would be married right now."

Don't say anything. He would not allow himself to become involved. "When will Rufus be able to travel?"

"I'd like to keep him another day. I plan to set his leg in a temporary cast this morning." She studied Rufus for a moment before reaching out and scratching his head. "He should be well enough to travel a short distance by tomorrow or Tuesday. Where are you going?"

"North," Paul's answer was curt. He was not about to tell her that he was going to Maine same as Brian.

"Yes, but how far?"

"Not far," Paul lied.

Rufus whined to gain his attention and he stroked the dog's head. When neither Paul nor Christine spoke, she opened the door to the ward. Just when he thought she would leave, she let the door close.

"Surely Brian's stopped by his office or called his employer," she thought aloud. "He wouldn't just quit his job without working out his notice."

Don't bet on it, Paul mused. He remembered well the extent of his cousin's temper.

"He could be at the office, gathering his things." Her dark brows drew together and she frowned. "I don't have my car here."

But his car was outside. Well, his rented car. Maybe Brian was at his office and she could reason with him. He reached into the pocket of his wrinkled jeans and pulled out the keys to the car. "Here," he said, offering them to her. "Take my car. Maybe you can find him."

"Oh, no. I couldn't." But the hopeful gleam in her eyes told him she wanted to accept his offer. "Thank you, but—"

"Go," he said.

Her hands were shaking as she took the keys from his open palm and darted out of the ward. Paul sighed in relief. Probably not wise to loan his rental car to someone he hardly knew, but she had saved his dog. He owed her for that. And at least he'd have some time to spend with his dog. She wouldn't be gone long, he reasoned. She had patients to tend. It was obvious to him how seriously she took her responsibilities.

"We'll be back on the road soon, boy," he told the Collie

He sat on the floor of the ward for several minutes; thankful his dog was alive. Drowsy from relief and lack of sleep, he considered

stretching out on the small cot behind him. He wouldn't be going anywhere for the time being.

When Ellen burst into the ward, he jerked to full alertness. Instinctively his heart pounded in dread.

"Sir! Dr. Vance has had an accident! Please hurry!"

"Is she hurt?"

The girl shook her head before darting off ahead of him. "I don't think so," she called over her shoulder.

His car. He rose from the floor and followed the girl through the lobby and out the front entrance. Immediately he spotted his black rented car, its front end smashed into the pole of a streetlight that was situated near the bottom of the steep incline.

He ran down the hill to the car. A shaken Christine gingerly climbed out of the driver side and he ran around the car to reach her. Clutching her shoulders, he looked her up and down. He couldn't see any injuries. "Are you hurt?"

"No." She pulled away from him, avoiding his gaze. "I am sorry. I don't know what to say. I—"

"What happened?"

"I can't drive a stick shift," she admitted.

Paul hung his head. Aunt Felicia had no idea what she'd gotten him into by sending him to this woman's wedding.

Chapter Three

“YOU’RE DOING WHAT?” Miranda’s voice was loud on the phone line.

Holding the receiver to her ear with a shoulder, Christine continued to fold the clothes she’d thrown onto her bed and arrange them in her suitcase. “I’m following Brian to Maine.”

“Chris, he left you at the altar and broke up with you,” Miranda pointed out. “Don’t tell me that you are going to chase after him.”

She could picture her friend with a disapproving frown on her face. Miranda Levy had been her dearest friend since vet school. She’d never have made it through many of the trials of her life, including her parents’ divorce, without Miranda’s unwavering support. But as much as she valued her friend’s opinion, she couldn’t agree this time.

“I have to talk to Miranda,” her voice shook as badly as her hands. “I have to talk to him. I can’t let him walk away thinking that I love my job more than I love him. That’s what he thinks, you know.”

The sound of her friend’s sigh whispered into her ear. “Chris, please, think about this. I know you don’t want to admit it, but things have been strained between you two since you got engaged.”

Miranda was right, of course. Brian had fully expected that once she had agreed to marry him that she would devote less time to her career and spend more time with him. She had accepted his proposal with every intention of doing just that.

And she’d tried. But since he’d asked her to marry him a year earlier, circumstances at the animal hospital had demanded more of her time than ever. Miranda had been out frequently with morning sickness during her pregnancy. Todd had gone out of town to several workshops and seminars on exotic pets because he wanted to expand his practice. Christine often had enough work for two veterinarians but she managed. And if the truth were told, she’d enjoyed the challenges she’d faced.

She’d told herself that Brian loved her and that he understood. Time and again she told him that soon things would return to normal. Soon Miranda’s baby would be born. Soon Todd would know all he needed to know about rabbits and iguanas. Soon....

“He just got frustrated yesterday,” she tried to convince herself

more than her friend. "I was late for our wedding after all. Then Leland hit the dog and—"

"Leland hit a dog?"

Groaning, Christine cursed inwardly. She should have known Miranda's ears would perk up at that. She explained the events that led up to Brian's angry departure from their wedding. The silence on the other end of the line told her that Miranda listened carefully to the tale. Christine sighed. She had only meant to call and congratulate her friend on the birth of her baby. Well, that and let her know that she was leaving for a couple of weeks.

"So did the cousin's dog live?"

"Yes, he will be fine."

"Now was it his owner's car you totaled? What are you going to do about that?"

Even caught off guard, Christine didn't miss the mirth in Miranda's voice. "Who told you that?"

"Ellen. She came over to see the baby right after her shift."

Damn! She'd never live this one down. Heat crept over her face as she relived the embarrassment of the moment. In her mind's eye she could still see Paul Toulon stomping down the hill toward her and his totaled rental car. The man would never forgive her. Not only had she inadvertently injured his pet, she had wrecked the car he'd rented for his travels after he'd been kind enough to offer it for her use.

"I don't know what to do, Miranda. My insurance should pay for the repairs to the car. But..."

"What happened?"

"I can only drive a car with an automatic transmission." Guilt weighed on her miserably. "I managed to get the car started and pull out but I was concentrating so hard on trying to get the car in gear that I didn't see the light pole until it was too late."

"Get it all off your chest," Miranda coaxed. "You know you'll feel better."

Miranda knew her too well. "He was concerned about when Rufus would be able to travel. I've already disrupted his trip by injuring his dog. Rufus won't be able to travel for another day or so. And his car...I feel terrible."

"Did he say where he was going?"

"North," Christine replied. "But he didn't say where."

"Ah. If you are so hell-bent on chasing Brian to Maine, you could offer him a ride since you are heading that way yourself."

"What? Oh, no, I couldn't," Christine was immediately

uncomfortable with her friend's suggestion. "I don't think I'll be able to face him again after today."

"Yes, you can," Miranda said simply. "It makes good sense. You're going north, too. And you'll be able to keep an eye on his dog until he reaches his destination. That should balm your guilty conscience."

Christine smiled at the playful condescension in Miranda's voice. "Are you saying you wouldn't feel guilty if you were me?"

Miranda laughed. "No, I would. But Chris, things happen. I'm sure that this guy understands that."

I doubt it in this case, but didn't voice her concern. "I'll think about it."

"Would you feel safe traveling with him?"

Christine folded the last item of clothing on her bed and seated herself on the mattress. Unbidden, the thought of Paul's concerns for her safety at the animal hospital at night entered her mind. She knew her safety hadn't been the reason he'd insisted on staying. He'd stayed out of concern for Rufus.

"I would feel safe with him," Christine answered honestly.

"Well, then, ask him along," Miranda bid her.

Not knowing where she'd get that kind of courage, she decided she'd try. Considering what she'd put him through, it was the right thing to do.

There was a pause before Miranda asked, "Are you sure you won't change your mind about this?"

Christine shook her head although her friend couldn't see her. "No, Miranda, I have to go after Brian. I love him."

"Okay. I hope it works out for you."

"It will." *It has to.*

"Are you coming by to see the baby?"

"Are you kidding?" Christine wouldn't miss the chance to see her friend's newborn son. "I'll be by tonight."

"Have you called Todd yet? He called me here at the hospital when he got home last night."

Grateful for the reminder, Christine resolved to call her boss next. She wasn't looking forward to it. "He's going to kill me. I've told him that I'll be leaving at the end of July. Now I'll be asking him for a couple of weeks off."

Miranda's chuckle dulled her dread to a small degree. "Todd will be grateful to keep you as long he as can, Chris. You're a good doctor and you enjoy what you do."

I won't have a wife who puts her career before me!

Feeling her worries weighing on her, she sighed. "Thanks, Miranda."

Cradling the receiver, she decided to finish packing before calling Todd Marcus.

"HE'S HERE," TERRI announced, poking her blonde head into the office Christine shared with Miranda Levy.

Nodding, Christine rose from her desk. "Thank you," she said. "Would you please show him to the first exam room?"

The assistant bobbed her head and left. Christine glanced at her watch in annoyance. Paul had certainly taken his time getting to the hospital. It was nearly noon. Whether he accepted her invitation or not, she'd be lucky to reach Pennsylvania by nightfall.

Briskly, she walked from the office to the surgery ward. Rufus wagged his tail enthusiastically when she entered, his eyes clear and bright. The progress the dog had made pleased her. She wished he could have another day or two to rest before traveling with his master.

As she opened the cage door and looped a nylon leash about Rufus' neck, she fought back a wave of dread. She'd mentally rehearsed her conversation with Paul at least a dozen times, but she still had no idea what she would say to the man. The dog she led toward the hospital lobby served as a grim reminder of her intrusions on Paul's life. She wouldn't blame him if he refused to speak to her. And she wouldn't be surprised. After her explanation of how his rented car came to be wrapped around a light pole, he'd had nothing to say. Even when she'd provided information about her auto insurance.

When she opened the door to the exam room, Rufus yanked the leash from her grasp as he hobbled happily toward his master. Paul hugged his pet before bending to examine the hot pink cast she'd used to set the dog's broken leg. He seemed unaware that she was in the room.

"You look good, boy," he crooned.

Paul really was a handsome man, she thought. His face was boldly handsome with firm, sensual lips. The fluorescent light of the room reflected off the thick dark waves of his hair, highlighting the deep tan that darkened his skin. The eyes that finally gazed up at her were varying shades of blue, and held a note of curiosity. Not the contempt she expected. That was something at least.

He rose from the small wooden bench where he sat, his powerful well-muscled body moving with ease. He wore a blue work shirt that

stretched nicely across the broad expanse of his chest. Khaki shorts stopped at mid-thigh to reveal long, well-muscled legs. When he straightened to his full height, Christine took a step back disliking the way he towered above her.

“Good morning,” she said.

He nodded, his face a mask of implacable calm.

Proceeding with caution she said, “Rufus’ recovery is going splendidly.” In her nervousness, she rambled on explaining the procedures used in the dog’s surgery, the pre-surgical blood work she’d done. When Paul’s gaze began to wander about the room, she decided to wrap up her analysis by discussing the dog’s current condition. “I’ve seen no evidence of infection—”

“When can he be released?”

His abruptness pricked at her anger. “I realize, Mr. Toulon, that I am probably the last person you want to talk to right now. But I thought you would at least like to know what type of care Rufus will require until he is fully healed.”

A dark brow shot up. “Sure, I want to know. I’m wondering if you will ever get around to telling me.”

“I was *trying* to tell you—”

He ran a hand over the back of his neck. “I’m not trying to be rude. I want to know what I need to do for Rufus, but I need to find out fast. I was supposed to be in Maine today and now I have no idea how I’m going to get there. I found out yesterday that your auto insurance excludes coverage of rental cars. The rental company has already maxed out my credit card to pay for the repairs and I’ll still owe them half a grand. And I can’t get another rental car with a maxed-out credit card.”

Christine’s annoyance disappeared in a wave of surprise. “You’re going to Maine?”

When he nodded, Christine’s eyes closed. He’d said that he was going north, but that he wasn’t going very far. If she asked him to share a ride with her, she’d have to endure his company the entire way. Her apprehension doubled.

Opening her eyes she focused on Paul. “You said you weren’t going far yesterday,” she pointed out.

He snorted. “I hardly wanted to tell you that was my destination in the state you were in.”

Admitting to herself that he was right about that, she nodded and handed him a copy of the post-surgical care instructions for pets. By the time she’d reviewed the instructions with him, she’d talked herself out

of inviting him to come with her to Maine. Paul made her nervous in a way that she couldn't explain. She knew she'd be uncomfortable the entire trip if he accompanied her and she wasn't certain that her nerves could handle his presence.

Still one question remained. "Why are you going to Maine?"

At first she didn't think he would answer. What business of hers was it, anyway?

"I'm moving to Maine to help my aunt run a small bed and breakfast she owns," he explained in a low voice. "She broke her hip a few months ago."

The guilt returned full force. All he had been trying to do the entire time was help his aunt. He'd attended the wedding in his aunt's place and planned to help her with her business.

All Christine had managed to do was hinder his efforts.

"How much do I owe you?" his question cut through her thoughts.

"Nothing," she answered easily, feeling more miserable by the second. "Rufus' injury was my fault."

"Thank you," Paul muttered. Bending to pull the leash from the Collie's neck, he handed it Christine. Ushering the dog toward the closed door of the exam room, Paul headed out of the hospital. He'd nearly made it out the door when Christine stopped him, her throat tight with emotion.

"Wait."

He stopped, his broad shoulders filling the doorway. "Yes?"

"I'm going Maine, Paul," she explained, her conscience urging her on. "I'm leaving this evening. Why don't you and Rufus come with me?"

Paul took a step back into the exam room. The Collie waited just outside the door. "Why are you going to Maine?" he asked. A corner of his mouth lifted into a half-smile. "If I might ask?"

"For Brian," she answered. "I'm going to find him and I'm going to get him back. We are going to work all of this out."

She didn't care for the way he rolled his eyes at her words. He took another step toward her, his blue eyes locking with hers. "Do you think that is a good idea?"

"I didn't ask for your opinion on my personal life. I asked you if you would like to accompany me." She wanted to halt any words that would discourage her in her quest.

Paul's steady gaze never wavered. "Thank you, but I don't think that's a good idea either."

"Why?" His answer caught her off guard.

Paul said nothing then he shook his head. "It's just not a good idea."

Christine was perplexed by his reaction. "I don't understand. I'm offering you a free ride. This way you don't have to rent another car. They certainly don't allow dogs on planes or buses."

An indecipherable emotion flashed in his eyes. When he didn't speak she continued. "And I can keep an eye on Rufus during the trip. The incision at his ribs needs to be watched closely for a few days."

"So you said."

Blushing at his reference to her earlier ramblings, she frowned. Paul glanced at Rufus before returning his gaze to her. He waited several seconds, seeming to weigh his options. His grin was wicked. "Given your bad luck with automobiles, I'll go on one condition."

Christine frowned. "What?"

"I drive."

Chapter Four

THE EARLY AFTERNOON sun hung high overhead as Paul drove Christine's sleek sports car north on I-81. She'd put up a fuss when he insisted on driving. Apparently she hadn't taken him seriously when he'd told her that was the only way he would accept the ride. He'd been serious. In his opinion, with the emotional state she'd been in for the last couple of days, she had no business driving a car. Totaling his rented car had proven that. Impatient to get going, she'd finally relented.

She had said little since they left Dublin three hours before. He glanced at her sitting in the passenger seat next to him staring out the window. Physically she was in the car with him, but her mind was a hundred miles away. Paul knew what she was thinking about. No, who. And even though it had nothing to do with him, it irked him. After the horrible way his cousin had treated her at the church, she should be happy that Brian was out of her life.

Bad luck, pure and simple, had dumped him into the car with his cousin's jilted bride. He would have liked nothing better than to have said goodbye to Christine in Virginia. But he'd really had no choice but to accept her offer of a ride to Maine. He was low on cash at the moment. Paying for a hotel room and a couple of meals was about all he could manage. Renting another car would have been out of the question.

Sparing her another quick look, he sighed. Even with the disaster that Christine had brought when she entered his life, he couldn't deny the fact that she was easy on the eyes. True, he didn't care much for her conservative clothes; the drab slacks and pressed white blouse that she wore. An attempt to appear more professional he guessed. But she had a slender figure with pleasing feminine curves that any man would appreciate. And full lips made for kissing.

From the corner of his eye he saw her twist around so that she could see Rufus who reclined in the small back seat. Peeking at her wristwatch she turned back around.

Normally the silence would have suited Paul just fine. For some reason it didn't now. "Where do you want to stop for the night?"

He gazed from the road ahead to her and quickly back. The pained

expression she wore told him she would rather drive straight through and reach Maine as soon as possible. After another look over her shoulder at Rufus, she consulted her watch again. Paul easily read her thoughts. It was not the best choice for her patient.

"We should reach Pennsylvania by nightfall, don't you think?" she asked.

Paul nodded.

"Pennsylvania, then." When she said nothing else, Paul assumed that she had returned to staring out the window. He nearly jumped in his seat when she said, "We'll have to find a place to keep Rufus. Perhaps we can find a veterinary hospital that offers boarding."

Snorting at her suggestion, Paul shook his head. "Rufus is staying at the same hotel I am."

"It's tricky finding a decent hotel that allows pets, but we might get lucky."

"I don't care if the hotel allows dogs or not," Paul stated. "He's staying with me."

"When we reach the hotel, I am not going to let on that I know you," she replied. "At least I won't get thrown out."

He chuckled at that. "We won't get thrown out. I've done it dozens of times. Most of the larger chains have so many guests at a given time that they don't notice what any of them are doing."

"I suppose," she muttered in an uncertain voice. "But it's against the rules."

Paul could feel her gaze on him, but he focused on the road ahead. *The rules.* Rules were fine with him as long as they weren't trivial. And, in his opinion, rules against pets in hotels were trivial. He had other things to worry about.

"I need to go to the restroom," she said after a few seconds. Peering at the panel of gauges before him, she gasped. "Slow down!"

"I am only going seventy-four," he said.

"The speed limit is sixty-five!"

Amazed at her growing anxiety, he decreased the pressure he applied to the gas pedal. "I can read."

Christine released a harsh exhale. "Why did I agree to let you drive my car?"

"I believe I am handling your car better than you handled mine," he countered.

Christine's wince let him know that he'd gotten his point across. She couldn't say anything about *his* driving.

"I'm sorry," said Christine. "I don't want to get pulled over."

Insurance rates are already high. And there is always a greater risk of accidents at higher speeds—”

Pulling the car into a small gas station just off the ramp, Paul grinned in her direction. Her hazel eyes flashed at him as he stopped the car by a short row of fuel pumps.

“What are you smiling at?” she demanded.

Paul hadn’t been laughing at her, but her question did make him chuckle. He stopped the car and turned just in time to see her little nostrils flare. Christine looked adorable in her growing annoyance.

“Well?” she prompted when he didn’t say anything.

“I am not laughing at you,” he explained, noticing the glittering flecks of deep green in her eyes. “I just think it’s ironic. You ruin your own wedding to save my dog because it’s the right thing to do. You worry about speeding and getting thrown out of hotels for having pets in your room because it’s against the rules. And yet you drop everything to chase a guy all the way to Maine. A guy who dumped you, I might add.”

She gaped at him as if he were speaking a foreign language.

“And that makes sense to you?” he asked.

Her full lips puckered in annoyance. “Perfect sense.” Jerking the car door open, he thought she would jump out of the car. Instead she glanced over her shoulder at him. “Why wouldn’t that make sense?”

With his hands still clasping the steering wheel, he shrugged. “If someone dumped me, particularly at our wedding in front of our family and friends, the last thing I would do is chase after her.”

Slumping against the seat, she cast her gaze down. Paul knew he had struck a nerve. He also knew he was shooting himself in the foot by trying to talk her out of continuing her journey to Maine. But as much as he could use the ride, he’d find another way to make it north if it meant she’d give up her misguided mission. He’d witnessed her devastation at his cousin’s hands and couldn’t say that he looked forward seeing her hurt again. And that was the likely outcome of this trip.

Shaking her head, she met his gaze. “No, this is all a misunderstanding. Brian overreacted, that’s all.” Looking out the window before her, she continued, “I deserved his anger.”

“No one deserves that sort of humiliation,” he pointed out, amazed that she was blaming herself for Brian’s despicable behavior.

Studying him with an enigmatic gaze, she sighed. “Maybe not. But none of that matters now. I’m going to find Brian and I’m going to put him first this time.”

With that said she eased out of the car and tilted her seat forward. Rufus stretched and made his way out of the car as quickly as he could manage with the pink cast on his leg.

Left wondering what she meant by her parting remark, Paul climbed out of his side of the car. By the time he filled the gas tank, Christine and Rufus were heading his way from a small grassy island separating the station lot from the highway. The Collie dashed to his master's side as Christine squinted in the sun trying to read the gages of the gas pump.

"How much is it?" she asked him.

"Eleven and a half," he muttered leaning over to rub his dog's head.

"Would you like anything?"

Paul nearly shook his head and left it at that. Curiosity wouldn't let him. "Yeah. I want to know what you meant by saying that you would put Brian first this time."

Tilting her head to one side, she eyed him warily. "Why?"

It was none of his damned business and he wouldn't have blamed her if she'd told him as much. But now he wanted to know what had happened between them. "You brought it up."

Christine shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "I put my career ahead of our relationship for too long. If I am lucky enough to get him back, Paul, I won't make that mistake again."

As she headed for the gas station leaving Rufus with him, Paul shook his head. Knowing Brian, he seriously doubted that the issue of Christine's career was the true reason for their split.

THEY REACHED SCRANTON, Pennsylvania that evening and Christine sighed with relief. No matter how badly she wanted to be with Brian in Maine at that moment, she needed a break. She no longer had any feeling in her posterior from the long ride and her stomach growled.

Not only that, it would give her a respite from her opinionated travel companion.

No, that wasn't fair, she admitted. She had only herself to blame for his criticism of her plan to win back Brian. If she hadn't opened her big mouth about her plan in the first place, he wouldn't have had the opportunity to tell her that it made no sense to him. And it did make sense. A woman didn't love a man for four years only to give him up without a fight.

The only positive thing that had come from inviting Paul along,

albeit to assuage her guilt, was the fact that she didn't have to drive. Besides, he wasn't a bad driver. He'd even managed to keep the speed down the last couple of hours. With him behind the wheel, her mind had been free to work on her plan to win back Brian.

Christine frowned. She didn't have much so far.

Paul's gaze scanned the strip of hotels ahead of them, slowing the car. "We'll have to stay at one of the larger hotels. It will be easier to sneak Rufus into one of those."

"Paul, I wish you would reconsider boarding him at a qualified—"

"No, Rufus stays with me," he said firmly. "I've been keeping him in my hotel rooms all the way up from Louisiana."

So he'd come from Louisiana? But what did that matter? She pushed aside her curiosity. At the moment she wanted a good meal and a good night's sleep. She wanted to be well rested when they reached Maine the next day.

"How do you get him past housekeeping?"

He turned a mischievous smile on her. "Ever hear of a 'Do Not Disturb' sign?"

She scoffed at that. "What if something got him excited and he started howling? That 'Do Not Disturb' sign would be of no help to you then."

"Howling is common in hotels," he winked at her before returning his gaze to the road. "I doubt anyone would make too much of that."

Christine felt her cheeks go up in flames. Now she had her mind made up. "I am definitely not acting like I know you."

He laughed, the sound rich and deep. "Suit yourself."

Pulling the car into the parking lot of a large hotel several stories high, Paul exhaled loudly. "We're here."

In a smooth motion, he unfastened his seat belt, the ripple of muscle in his arms and chest catching her eye. She had to admit that he had a nice physique. Quick as lightning, those blue eyes caught hers and she looked away.

Following his lead, she climbed out of the car and stretched. Her back and shoulders ached, mostly from the ride, partly from stress. A nice long shower was in order, too, she decided.

On the other side of the car, Paul petted his dog who tried to stand in the back seat. "You stay here, boy. I'll be back for you in a few minutes."

Those deep blue eyes swung to her. "Roll your window down a little."

Nodding, she did as he asked. Once Rufus rested comfortably

again in the back seat and had enough ventilation to tolerate the warm summer evening for a few minutes, Paul led her to the front office of the hotel.

The lobby of the hotel was as clean and modern as the outside, making her anxious to reach her room. Paul reached the front desk ahead of her with long-legged strides. He already spoke with the clerk when she walked up to the counter.

A lovely blonde girl smiled up at him from behind the desk, her face dimpling prettily. Handing him a blank form and a pen, she said, "I'll just get you to fill this out." A slim hand with long scarlet nails indicated an office to her left while pale green eyes swept appreciatively over him. "If you need anything, honey, I'll be right in there."

For reasons she didn't care to explore, the woman's well-groomed appearance made Christine self-conscious. Perfectly styled hair, a wealth of make-up expertly applied. The clerk's uniform hugged a full figure that had Paul staring in male appreciation beside her. And those long red nails. How could the woman do anything with those daggers at the end of her fingers?

She glanced down at her own hands. The nails were filed short with no polish and small scars from animal scratches and bites littered her skin. Her hands were a perfect reflection of her as a whole. Neat, imperfect, plain, and right now, injured.

Before the clerk could float away, Christine cleared her throat. "Excuse me."

The woman, whose white plastic name badge read 'Debra,' walked back towards them. No sugary-sweet smile for her, she mused. The gaze she leveled on Christine was polite, aloof. "May I help you?"

"I'd like a room please."

In an instant a form and a pen rested before her and the pretty clerk had already bustled into the office behind the desk.

"Friendly service," Christine muttered.

"I thought so."

Concentrating on her penmanship, Christine worked at completing her form. She didn't even glance at him. "You would think so, *honey*."

"Jealous?"

"Hardly."

Finished with his own form, he leaned against the counter facing her. She looked so cute standing there concentrating on the form. He knew he shouldn't tease her but he couldn't help himself.

“So what happened to your plan to pretend you don’t know me?”

She kept writing. “I still haven’t claimed to.”

The clerk shuffled papers at the opposite side of the desk and Paul lowered his voice, “Maybe not.” He caught the sidelong look the clerk shot Christine. “She might be on to you though.”

She stopped writing. Her gaze darted from the clerk to him. “She has nothing to worry about from me,” Christine stated firmly.

She returned to completing her form, oblivious to the small, secretive smiles the blonde clerk sent Paul from the other side of the counter.

“Why?” Paul stepped closer to Christine. “Because Rufus would be in my room?”

She stopped writing. “No, I meant that you and I...that we...ah...”

He’d known that she meant that she posed no threat to any romantic intentions that the clerk had toward him. But he wanted to use that particular train of thought. There was still a chance he could convince her to reconsider her trip north.

“Oh, right,” he said, watching her cheeks flood with color. “To some it might look like you and I were an item, traveling together, staying at a hotel. I could see where someone would get the idea that something was going on.”

“All done?” a sweet, melodic voice cut in before Christine could respond.

Picking up Paul’s form, the clerk read it quickly. Her fingers flew as she entered the information into the computer before her. Snatching up the money he left on the counter, she bustled toward the office. “I’ll be right back,” she called over her shoulder.

As Paul’s stare followed the woman, Christine frowned. Brian’s jealous nature and what he might think of her traveling with Paul had never entered her mind until now. Granted, Paul was his cousin. But watching Paul beneath lowered lashes, she knew that Brian wouldn’t approve of her traveling with a man with his dark, dangerous good looks and his stormy blue eyes—cousin or not. She’d have to handle her explanation to Brian carefully. It wouldn’t be too difficult for Brian to make the leap that something might have happened between her and Paul.

No, that was nonsense. Someone who looked like Paul couldn’t possibly notice someone like her.

The pretty clerk would be more Paul’s type. And in a small corner of her heart that bothered her. Nodding toward the blonde, she said, “She is very, ah, attractive.”

Curiosity and something else she didn't know what to do with flashed in his eyes. "Not bad. But you have to wonder what she would look like under all that paint. Someone like you is more attractive."

His words pleased her. And they shouldn't have. "You don't have to say things like that to make me feel better," she tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "I'm plain and I know it."

Paul didn't even glance at the pouting woman who handed him his room key from the other side of the desk. His eyes never left Christine's. "There is nothing plain about you."

Before she could reply, he winked at her, grabbed the key and strode out of the lobby towards her car.

Chapter Five

WRAPPED IN A soft white towel, Christine padded across the plush, brown carpet of her hotel room. Drying her hair with another towel, she sank down on the bed. The shower did much to ease the tension in her body. It did nothing, however, to slow the thoughts plaguing her mind.

There's nothing plain about you.

Frustrated, she hurled the towel she'd used on her hair to the floor. Why did she keep thinking about that odd conversation in the lobby? This trip was about finding Brian, making things right with *him*. The man she loved.

Of course, Paul had been teasing her. She knew little about him but she was sure about that quality. A man who looked like him no doubt flirted often and well with most women.

Shaking off thoughts of Paul, she decided to put her focus where it belonged—on Brian.

She tried, really concentrated, on planning out what she'd do once they reached Maine. Nothing came. By the time she'd dressed and styled her hair, the silence plucked at her nerves and not a single sensible approach had come to mind.

What would she say when she saw Brian? Would she apologize? Beg him to understand? She had done that at the wedding. And Rufus would have died if her decision had been different. How could she apologize for saving his life? If she had it to do over, she would make the same choice.

She knew it would be too much to hope that he had forgiven her. Would the mere sight of her make him happy enough to forgive her? No, Brian's temper lingered. He held grudges.

Maybe the sight of her with someone else would change his mind. She was traveling with Paul. But he was Brian's cousin and surely he wouldn't be jealous of him. They couldn't have been too close; Brian had never mentioned anything about Paul to her.

Uncomfortable with that approach, she shook her head. She certainly wouldn't ask Paul to participate in such a ruse after all that she'd put him through. And Brian was already angry enough....

There was also the fear lurking in the back of her mind that Brian wouldn't be jealous at all. Wouldn't care a bit.

And that would be worse than anything because many of her days and nights with Brian had been so wonderful. Her fiancé's quick anger was a minor annoyance when she compared it with his warmth and ability to make her feel loved, needed. Brian could make her feel like the most desirable woman in the world, convince her that he couldn't live without her.

It wasn't until she'd had to step back, after he'd left her at the altar, that she realized how easy it would be to drown in such love. He wanted all she had to give and more. She wondered if everything she had to give would be enough for him.

Annoyed with the muffled sounds coming from the room next to hers she snapped on the television. Sound blared from the small set and she jumped. As she lowered the volume her stomach rumbled in hunger.

She could try reasoning with Brian. Almost immediately she crossed that idea off her mental list. Brian had sounded anything but reasonable in the church parking lot. And with his indifference towards animals—no, dislike—how could she ever convince him that she'd made the right choice? That it had been the right thing to do?

If he loved me he would have understood.

Shaking her head at the unwelcome thought, she began to pace. Brian did love her. Of course he loved her. Even now he must regret leaving her. He had to. The possibility that he no longer loved her was too terrible to think about.

The sound from the television droned on as she walked back and forth, more restless by the minute. No, she couldn't stay in the room, she decided. She needed a distraction and she needed some food.

Normally she enjoyed reading her veterinary newsletters in the evenings before she went to bed. Of course, in her haste to throw clothes and toiletries in her suitcase she hadn't thought to bring any. It wasn't like her to forget things like that. Usually she was so careful to plan, to pay attention to details.

She'd examined Rufus' injuries earlier while Paul brought her things up from the car. The Collie's recovery was coming along nicely. She wouldn't need to take another look at him until morning.

Not that she would have any luck getting to the dog anyway, she decided stepping out of her room with no thought as to where she was headed. Paul just might have left the Collie resting comfortably in his room while he sought out the lovely hotel clerk.

She chuckled as she walked down the hallway to the elevator, remembering the satisfied way the clerk had smiled as she'd handed

Christine the key to her room. It hadn't taken her long to discover why. The woman had placed her and Paul in rooms on opposite sides of the hotel. And on different floors. Hell, Christine's room was on the highest floor.

She didn't pass many people as she continued down the hall and didn't have company on the elevator. Once she stepped out on the first floor, she found it teeming with people. She smiled. The clerk had isolated her on the top floor like she had an infectious disease.

Just outside the lobby, she found a crowded restaurant. Decorated in antique white and brass with big pots of greenery, the restaurant was alive with muted conversation and the smell of warm food. By the time the hostess seated her at a small booth off to one side of the room, her stomach growled as fiercely as any animal she had treated.

Unlike the front desk clerk, the young woman who waited her table seemed cheerful and friendly. "Would you care for an appetizer or something from our bar to get you started?"

Christine nodded. "I'll have a Tom Collins."

"Somehow," a familiar voice began, "I would have guessed that you were a daiquiri lady."

The waitress bestowed a dazzling smile on Paul. Was no woman—except her—immune to him? "Will you be joining the lady?"

Returning the waitress' smile he seated himself across from Christine. "Yes, thanks. I'll take a beer."

As the waitress dashed off to get their drinks, Paul snatched up one of the menus that she'd left at their table. He scanned the laminated menu. "Looks like bland fare."

Struggling to keep her composure, she looked at her own menu. She'd only have to deal with him until tomorrow when they reached Maine. "How's Rufus?"

"He's fine. You checked him out earlier," Paul reminded her as he continued reading over the menu. When his gaze lifted to her, his sensual mouth curved up in a lazy half-smile. "You changed clothes."

Christine wasn't certain if she been complimented or insulted. She glanced down at the crocheted sweater and soft slacks that she wore. It was the first time she'd worn the sweater she realized. The soft yarn felt nice against her skin. Skin that grew warm as his deep blue stare moved over her admiringly. Their earlier conversation ran through her mind again. Damn it.

"Here you are."

The waitress arrived with their drinks in time to end the awkward moment. At least it had seemed uncomfortable to Christine. Paul

poured beer into his frosted mug and took a long sip before relaxing against the seat across from her. He looked as if he hadn't a care in the world.

"What are you thinking?" he asked after their waitress walked away giving them more time to make their dinner selections.

"About what you said earlier."

"Which part?"

Really uneasy now, Christine picked up her menu and tried to hide behind it. "The part about me not being plain."

Grinning, Paul straightened so he could look over the menu at her face. Deep color flushed her cheeks and it pleased him, for some reason, to know that he put it there.

At least he had distracted her. He decided it wasn't such a bad thing for that busy mind to be on him. Although he'd had no intention of becoming involved in the whole mess with her and Brian, he realized he was quickly becoming involved. Wasn't he traveling with her? Hadn't he played a small part in this drama?

Hell, part of him *wanted* to be involved. With her.

Damned if he wasn't starting to want a piece of the woman who'd saved his dog, wrecked his car and commandeered his life for the last few days. She didn't belong to his cousin, he reasoned. Not at the moment.

Watching her take a generous gulp of her drink and then another, he decided to test the waters. "I wasn't teasing you or trying to feed your ego, Christine. You're a lovely woman."

Christine placed her half-empty glass on the table before her with an unsteady hand. "There's that. You also started me thinking that someone might get the wrong idea because we're traveling together." She'd been more curious than worried about why he'd brought it up. But she reminded him of his words hoping it would steer the conversation in a direction that didn't cause butterflies to riot in her stomach. Butterflies that shouldn't be in her stomach, much less rioting. "Brian might not like it."

"He might not like you traveling alone with any man, but he'll probably be really upset that you're with me."

"Why?"

"Let's just say that there is some history when it comes to women and me and my cousin."

"Anyone in particular?"

He shrugged. "A girl we grew up with. Megan Crawford." With a wide grin, he added, "A girl I won by the way."

No doubt, she thought traitorously as that dazzling smile worked on her insides. “So you both liked her?”

“Everybody liked her.” Tipping the bottle to pour more beer into his glass, he angled his head. “She was built like—” he stopped, making her wonder what he’d been about to say. “She was attractive. We both pursued her but she went for me. There were other girls we both went after but Megan was special.”

She didn’t like the small pang of jealousy she felt. “What happened?”

“As I said, she went for me. Brian was crazy about her. We both were. But he wasn’t about to give up even after she’d made her choice. He’d show up wherever she and I went just to goad me. I loved a good fight back then. It wasn’t hard for me to fall into his trap and give him what he was after. Finally, she got sick of the both of us and dumped me. She left for college not too long after she broke up with me. By then we were done with each other.”

“You and Megan?”

“Me and Brian. I lost Megan. Then my parents died in a car accident.”

“I’m sorry about your parents,” she said and meant it. Taking another sip of the tart drink, she considered how terrible it must have been for him to lose his parents at such a young age.

“I moved in with Aunt Felicia for a while, but a few months later I ended up moving to New Orleans.”

“What did you do there?”

“Worked in restaurants.” He downed more of his beer. “Started out as a waiter. I worked my way to the kitchen and ended up helping out in there quite a bit. I liked working with food and I knew how to cook from Aunt Felicia. I went to school and became a chef.”

That did drop her jaw. “You’re a chef?”

He chuckled at what must have been an expression of total shock on her face. His rumbling laugh caused warmth to spread through her. “Yeah. Gives me an edge with women. Cooking an elegant meal for a woman at her place...”

Christine found herself imagining that scenario. A big handsome man in her kitchen preparing mouth-watering food. “I’ll bet,” she managed.

“I could cook for you once we reach Maine.”

Paul enjoyed the way those green flecks in her eyes sparkled at him as she frowned. “Now you’re making fun of me.”

“I wouldn’t do that.” He was all innocence.

"Besides, I would be with Brian," she stammered. "Will be with Brian," she corrected.

"I see." Paul grinned, enjoying her discomfort.

Holding up her left hand, she gave him a good view of the diamond engagement ring circling her finger. "I am engaged," she reminded him.

"You *were* engaged."

"I. Am. Engaged." Raising her glass she downed the rest of her drink with a healthy gulp, enjoying the way it burned into her stomach. "Brian might be over the whole thing at the church by now."

"You're probably right about that," Paul muttered.

He'd meant it in a less favorable light she realized. "Maybe you're right," she admitted. Staring at her empty glass, she groaned. "I have no idea what I am going to do. I thought I would have this great plan mapped out by now."

There was a strange intensity in his eyes as he studied her from across the table.

"What have you got so far?"

The waitress returned for their order. It impressed Christine how smoothly Paul ordered for them both, giving careful instructions to the waitress who cheerfully scribbled on the pad in her hand.

She lifted her empty glass. "Waitress, I'll have another of these, please."

Paul folded his hands on the table in front of him. Nice strong hands with long fingers. His gaze moved over her face as gently as a caress.

"Well?" he prompted.

Grateful to have a willing ear, albeit one attached to a very attractive man, Christine started talking.

PAUL TUGGED CHRISTINE into the elevator. Her high lilting laughter echoed in the quiet hotel lobby. The restaurant had closed. It was late and Paul was tired.

"Time to go back to isolation," she sang, breaking into peals of laughter.

With no idea what that remark meant, he watched her try to select her floor. The drinks she'd downed had affected her aim. It took her three attempts to hit the button for her floor and God only knew if she remembered the correct one.

When the elevator began to move, she lost her balance. She clutched his arm tightly. "Whoa!"

For hours she had talked to him about the four years she'd spent with Brian. And despite his warnings she'd managed to get drunk in the process. Paul had only nursed a couple of beers while he listened. He wasn't certain just how many drinks she'd downed. He just knew she'd had too many.

It hadn't been hard to read between the lines. Christine had done anything but paint Brian as the selfish bastard he was, but she easily forgot that Paul knew him.

Some things didn't change, he supposed. Brian still expected the world to revolve around him. He always had. Christine's world hadn't revolved around Brian enough and his ego had suffered. That was the crux of the matter he decided, as he watched her face pale as the elevator halted.

A soft bell tone announced their arrival on the tenth floor and Christine bounced out of the elevator when the door slid open. A surge of lust swept through him as he watched the provocative way her hips swayed as she practically danced down the hall. He tried to remind himself that she was just riding high on the alcohol. It didn't help much.

Turning back she flashed him a smile that made him harden more. "You coming?"

Paul groaned. Yeah, he would come to make sure she made it to her room and into bed. That was all. Though he'd never taken advantage of a drunken woman, and wouldn't start now, he wouldn't put himself in a sorrier state than he already was by staying with her a minute longer than necessary. He had a little buzz going himself. Besides, she needed to sleep it off. Unless he missed his guess, she would be in bad shape tomorrow.

When they reached the door to what he hoped was her room, she fumbled through her pocket to find the key. Paul couldn't keep his gaze from wandering over the shapely breasts that filled out her sweater. Slim hips and long legs were shown to an advantage by the smooth slacks that she wore.

He wanted her at that moment, no doubt about that. Wanted to strip off those conservative clothes and feel her skin under his hands.

Unaware that he stood behind her with his clenched hands stuffed in his pockets, she fished the key out of her pocket. "Finally!" she exclaimed before pushing open the door and bouncing in.

Against his better judgment, he followed her in and closed the door. Helplessly he watched as she threw herself across the king-sized bed in the middle of the room and beamed at him in a way that made

him want to run.

Or pounce on her.

"I am so drunk!"

He couldn't argue that fact. "Yes, you are."

Christine bolted up on the bed. "I'm hot. Is it hot in here to you?"

Paul swallowed hard as she began to pull her sweater over her head. Afraid he would lose the fragile control he had left, he grabbed her hands before she could manage it and pulled them in front of her. "Stop."

She just gazed up at him for a moment, dazed. Slowly her hands relaxed in his. Hazel eyes moved over his face and she smiled. A stupid, drunk, but beautiful smile.

"I'd better be going," Paul managed.

"Kiss me goodnight."

The ache became unbearable. God, but she was tempting. He bent and brushed her forehead with a kiss, the gesture meant to be friendly, chaste. All thoughts of chastity and friendship went by the boards as her sweet, floral scent assaulted him. He had to taste that full sexy mouth and he did. The taste of liquor on her lips, the taste of her, made his blood boil.

Crushing her against him, he lowered her to the bed. He would leave in a moment, he promised himself. He ravaged her mouth with his own and felt a paralyzing jolt of desire searing through him when her lips parted. He deepened the kiss, drinking in her sweet taste, exploring her mouth in raw need.

Christine pressed herself against him, her hips grinding against his, and nearly tore through the last shred of resistance he could offer. It took superhuman effort to cease rubbing his lips against the fragile skin of her throat. The hand he lifted from her breast trembled as he fought for control.

Cursing under his breath, he eased away from her. "Christine," he whispered, pulling back to look at her. Her pretty face was flushed, her full lips swollen from his kisses. "I have to leave now."

Slender white arms reached for him. "No, stay with me."

His heart pounded, his body ached unbearably. "Christine, I—"

"Stay with me, Brian."

Paul froze. His desire died a quick death as he climbed off the bed. He stared down at her for a moment, shaking.

"What's wrong, sweetheart?"

The endearment wasn't meant for him. The desire that clouded those beautiful eyes wasn't either. Taking a step backwards, he felt

disgust for himself, anger at them both. What the hell had he been thinking? He knew it was unreasonable to be angry with her. She was drunk after all.

And in love with his cousin. A fact he should have remembered.

Nearly moved to violence, he turned his back on her. "Go to sleep, Christine," he muttered harshly.

Marching from the room, he slammed the door hard and headed for the elevator. He wasn't looking forward to the rest of the night.

Chapter Six

CHRISTINE HAULED HER suitcase towards elevator the next morning, her head pounding with each step. The hallway seemed longer this morning and incredibly bright. Wincing, she reached the elevator and lowered her bag as she punched the button that would take her to the lobby.

The elevator lurched in its descent and Christine's stomach heaved in protest. Her hand flew to her mouth and stayed there until the elevator reached its destination. It had been a close call. Thank goodness she had been alone.

Breathing deeply, she stood there with her hand clamped over her mouth when the door slid open.

"Interesting shade of green."

Christine glanced down at the pea green slacks she'd picked out to wear with her cream-colored blouse. "I didn't think it looked bad," she croaked.

"I meant your face." Snatching up her suitcase, Paul marched out into the lobby, leading her. "I was on my way to help you with this."

She had to struggle to keep up with him as he strode out the front hotel doors toward her car. Even though her eyes hurt and her vision blurred, she couldn't help but notice the steel rod that seemed to run up his spine. His movements were quick, stiff.

He was already loading her bag into the trunk of her car when she reached him. Grateful that the sky was overcast and not sunny, she glanced up at the hard lines of his face. He didn't even look at her. Gone was the warmth, the humor he'd treated her to the evening before. What she could remember of it. It puzzled her.

She did, however, remember the lovely dream about kissing Brian. But in the strange way of dreams she sensed that the man she'd kissed in her dream had not been Brian at all—but someone else wearing Brian's face. And even though she awoke with a headache and a sensitive stomach, her resolve had deepened. She was meant for Brian. And he was meant for her.

"Where's Rufus?"

"Still in the room," Paul said. He hadn't shaved and there were dark circles under his eyes. "After breakfast, I'll get him loaded in the

car and we'll check out."

Her stomach rumbled in rebellion. "Breakfast?"

"Yeah, breakfast," his grin held a touch of evil. "A big breakfast with eggs over easy, nice, big juicy sausages—"

"Stop—" Her hand slapped over her mouth.

"—and maybe some oatmeal with ketchup—"

She didn't hear the rest of it. As fast as her legs would carry her, she ran to the edge of the parking lot and heaved up the watery contents of her stomach in the high grass. Sweating, shaking, she went down on her knees. Holding herself still, she miserably waited for the waves of nausea to pass.

Paul waited for the satisfaction that didn't come. He'd wanted her to pay for the fact that he'd tossed and turned all night. Wanted to pay her back for the humiliation he felt when she moaned his cousin's name last night in his arms.

Instead he felt more guilty by the second, watching her as she coughed and gagged. Yeah, she probably shouldn't have gotten drunk, but it wasn't entirely her fault. He had to admit he had no business following her into her room, knowing she was three sheets to the wind. Knowing he wanted her.

Christine started when she felt Paul crouch beside her. Embarrassed, she tried to wave him away but his strong hands steadied her, smoothed her hair back from her face.

"Feel better now?" His voice was gentle.

Groaning, she rose on trembling legs. No one had ever seen her throw up before. And while that sort of thing never bothered her, whether animal or human, it bothered her greatly that someone would see her get sick.

But he wouldn't let her go. A strong arm wrapped about her shoulders and guided her to the car. He pushed her gently back so that she leaned against the driver side door, his hands gripping her arms lightly.

"Paul, go—"

"Shh." A large hand brushed the hair back from her face. "I'm sorry," he muttered.

"Were you angry with me?" she managed.

"Yeah, I guess I was. It doesn't matter now. How do you feel?"

Temper forced color into a face that looked far too pale to Paul. "It doesn't matter?" she demanded, her small nostrils flaring in that sassy way he enjoyed. A weak hand swung toward him, but he dodged it easily.

Swearing at the failed attempt, she cursed under her breath. "That was a rotten thing to do."

Fighting back a laugh, Paul grinned. He couldn't help it. She was cute when she was angry. "I know. I'm sorry."

He took pity on her. She needed a few minutes to relax. And something to settle her stomach.

"Let's get you back inside." When she swatted at him, he tugged her toward him. "Come on. You can wash your face and we'll get something for that hangover."

Burying her head against his shoulder, she tried to stop him. "I can't go back in there. If someone saw—"

"Hush," he soothed. "Nobody saw anything."

She took a long time in the bathroom and it worried him. Just as he was about to go into the ladies' room after her, she made her way out. With unsteady steps she walked to where he waited before the restaurant. Her little nose wrinkled as she drew closer to the smells of coffee and breakfast foods.

"I don't think I can go in there."

"Yes, you can," he assured her.

And she did. Within minutes they were seated in the same booth they had occupied the previous night and her face regained a little of its normal color. She'd wanted nothing to eat. Those big hazel eyes stared at the tall glass of water before her, assessing it. He could imagine that same concentration on her face when she treated one of her patients.

"So after the wedding you guys were planning on moving to Maine?" he wanted to know.

"What? Oh, yes." Taking a cautious sip from her glass, she glanced at him over the rim. "I hadn't found a job yet, but there were a couple of good-sized animal clinics in the area. I was hoping I might get a job at one of them."

Shaking his head, he swallowed a forkful of egg. "What if you hadn't been able to find a job right away?"

"That would have made Brian too happy," she muttered. "He could have supported us. If I never worked again, he'd have been thrilled."

"And you?"

That drew her eyes up from the glass. Hazel eyes searched his. "I'd be all right."

"Really?"

She hesitated before she answered, "Yes."

Paul rubbed a hand over his jaw. "From what you told me last

night—”

“Lord only knows what I said last night. I was plowed.”

“You said enough.” More than enough, he mused. “Enough for me to understand that Brian was jealous of your career. It seems to me that you like what you do, being a vet. Why would you want to be with someone who doesn’t support you? Brian’s a stubborn ass. He’d only keep at you until you gave up.”

Her little chin came up. “He wouldn’t make me give up my career.”

Paul’s eyebrows shot up. “Yeah? I think he would.”

Her shoulders slumped and her gaze dropped to the table. He didn’t like that small gesture of defeat. She sighed. “Maybe you’re right.”

After taking another drink, she ran a clumsy hand over her head. He knew it had to ache. Poor thing.

“But he’s always been there, Paul. Even when he didn’t like what I was doing or how I was doing it. Maybe I didn’t always feel like he supported me. But it was nice to have someone there. My mother...” She trailed off shaking her head.

An image of the attractive lady from the wedding entered his mind. “What about your mother?”

“She was always so...into her own things.”

“Self-absorbed?”

Christine nodded. “She was never happy while she was married to my father. I guess she was too wrapped up in her own misery to pay me any mind. She always left me to handle the challenges of growing up on my own. Don’t get me wrong, she gave me any material thing that I wanted. But it wasn’t the same as knowing that she was, you know, there for me. And Dad was never there. He’s a writer and lecturer. He traveled a lot. Still does.”

When he didn’t speak, she continued.

“They got a divorce while I was in vet school. I was lucky I had some really good friends to help me through it. Not long after that I met Brian. I fit into his world nicely and I was no longer on the outside looking in at love. I had love. And I can’t give up on it.”

Paul felt a tightening in his chest at the forlorn expression she wore. What she had only eluded to the night before she clearly stated this morning. The love that had been denied to the child had been given to the woman—conditionally. Damn Brian. Couldn’t his cousin see that the fragility she worked so hard to hide? Why couldn’t Brian appreciate the strength it had taken to make so much of her life, and not try to

mold her into the person he thought she should be? His heart went out to the woman who felt she had to work hard to gain acceptance and love, but didn't feel that she truly deserved it.

And Christine deserved to be loved for who she was. Brian didn't deserve *her*.

"He has to give me a chance to explain. Doesn't he?"

Not wanting to give her false hope he said nothing. Once Brian made up his mind he rarely changed it. Paul would be very surprised if his cousin forgave Christine, particularly after the fury he'd been in at the wedding.

No, Brian wasn't likely to understand her point of view. For selfish reasons, the thought pleased him.

"Why were you mad at me, Paul?"

"I wasn't really mad at you." He had been mad at himself. "You were a handful last night." And that was as close to the truth as he would get.

"I'm sorry," she said softly. He didn't care at all for the shame he read in her eyes. "Thanks so much for listening to me last night. Especially when I've been nothing but trouble for you."

"You're worth it," he said with a wink. Shaken, by how easily that had come out, he threw in, "If I'd been through what you had, I might have gotten loaded myself."

There was a rough road ahead. And as he watched her big eyes staring off into space, he knew he dreaded it. He couldn't prevent her from being hurt. Only she could stop that. But he could be there to comfort her when Brian broke her heart again.

WHEN CHRISTINE AWOKE some time later, the pounding in her head had lessened. Her mouth and throat felt as dry as the desert after all the drinks she'd had the night before. Thirst prompted her to slowly open her heavy eyes.

The light smell of spicy cologne was the first thing she noticed. A nice musk. Her cheek rubbed against soft flannel. She brought a hand up to the fabric that cushioned her head.

"It's my shirt." Paul's voice was low.

She barely heard the hum of the engine over the soft music playing on the radio. Good jazz with a soulful, sweet saxophone. Relaxed as she hadn't been in days, she stretched her legs as much as she could in the passenger seat and lifted her head from the shirt wedged between her shoulder and the window.

"How do you feel?"

She forgot to speak as she stared at the man in the driver's seat next to her.

Paul looked relaxed as he drove with one hand atop the steering wheel and the other resting on his thigh. But the heavily muscled arms attached to those hands were stunningly naked and tanned, revealed by the tank-style undershirt that he wore. Long legs and firm thighs were encased in very snug jeans. The thick waves of his dark hair were rumpled, utterly sexy.

Curious blue eyes met hers before returning to the road. "You okay?"

Not a single word would form. No man should look that good.

"You need to go to the bathroom? Need something to drink?"

"Thirsty," she managed.

She was still staring at him, albeit unwillingly. Paul threw her his little half-smile, taking his eyes off the road a bit longer than she was comfortable with.

"The road," she prompted, fighting to keep her voice calm.

He returned his gaze ahead. "The next exit is only ten miles up the road. We need gas and Rufus could use a break."

Concern for Rufus had her swinging around in the seat. She winced as the quick movement shot pain into her temple. Pressing a hand to the side of her head, she looked over her patient sleeping soundly in the back seat. He appeared comfortable. And he had certainly posed no problems during the last two days. Of course, Collies were typically well-behaved dogs. But this particular Collie was exceptional.

"He look all right?"

Christine twisted back around at the question, again paying for her effort. "Yes, he looks fine. The sleep is good for him. Sleep heals."

"It didn't completely heal you," he observed as she ran a hand over her sore forehead.

"Doesn't look that way." Squinting she looked out the window at the flat stretches of green that they passed. "Where are we?"

"New Hampshire. We should be in Searsport by late this evening."

The clock on the car stereo told her it was three already. She'd been out for a while. And having slept for so long in the car, she could well imagine what she looked like. Now that she was fully awake she felt even worse.

"I'll have to wait until tomorrow to find Brian," she said more to herself than to Paul.

"You wouldn't be up to it tonight anyway."

"You're right about that." She sighed. "I'll need to find a place to stay."

"You can stay with us at the bed and breakfast," he offered. "Even if all the guest rooms are taken at my aunt's place, there are a couple of bedrooms on her end of the house that no one ever uses."

"Oh, I couldn't." After everything she'd put him through, he was offering her a place to stay. At the bed and breakfast where he would be working right now if not for her. "Thank you, but—"

"Yeah, you can." Swearing under his breath at something he saw in the rearview mirror, he slowed the car. Her eyes flew to the panel of gauges. "No, I'm not speeding. Tailgater."

"Oh."

"Yeah, oh," he repeated with a touch of sarcasm. "Anyway, you'll stay with us. By the time we get there and get some seafood in you, it will be late."

"Seafood?" The thought held little appeal.

"Yeah, real seafood. Not the frozen, breaded junk you get at fast-food joints."

"I'm not a big seafood fan," she said. "I like a lobster tail now and again."

Paul snorted. "Ever had any real seafood? Smoked cod or blackened redfish?"

"No."

"You're in for a treat then. Maine is full of seafood restaurants. I'll take you to one of the good ones. You'll love it."

Not sharing his enthusiasm, she nodded and stared out the window.

Now that they were nearing their destination, she began to feel anxiety and dread. Soon she would face Brian. And she'd been eager to talk to him, desperate to convince him that he'd made a mistake. Yesterday. Today apprehension had set in bringing doubts with it. And she still had no idea what she'd do when she found him.

Paul was partly to blame for the shift in her emotions, she reasoned. Hadn't he been suggesting that she was wasting her time pursuing Brian? Squeezing in little comments that made her doubt, that shook her determination? But then, Paul knew Brian. Or had once. They were cousins after all.

"Paul?"

"Hmm?"

"How long has it been since you and Brian had your falling out?"

The question earned her a quizzical glance. One of his dark brows lifted. "Why?"

She shrugged. "Just curious."

When Paul shook his head, she wondered if she were that easy to read.

"You just want to know how well I remember him. You're hoping to get a feel for how he might react to you showing up."

What could she say to that? It was the truth.

"It's been eleven, twelve years maybe," he muttered. "But I remember him damned well."

Anger had seeped into his tone and she wondered at it. Thinking that maybe he was simply tired of listening to her moan over Brian, she tried to end the line of conversation.

"People change."

The car jerked, slinging her toward him, as he steered it down the exit ramp. He hit the brakes hard when he reached the stop sign. "People don't change that much."

She started at the squeal of the tires as he sped toward the nearest gas station. He pulled up next to a row of fuel pumps, slammed the car into park and abruptly shut off the engine. Before she knew what was happening, he had unfastened his seat belt and was about to jump out of the car.

Christine stayed him by laying her hand on his arm. The glare he turned on her made her pause, those blue eyes seared her.

"Paul, I'm sorry," she began. "I'll stop talking about it. I know you've got to be sick of—"

"I'm sick of your damned naivete!" he shouted. "You think people change? They don't."

"Yes, they can," she said in a small voice. "I can."

The blue flames of his eyes burned into her. "And you're prepared to do that, aren't you? Be whatever he wants as long as he still loves you."

When she said nothing to that accusation, he went on. "From what you've been telling me, Brian hasn't changed. Count on that. He wants everything his way and keeps pushing until he gets it. Or until he loses it."

"Like Megan Crawford?"

"Like you. You let him push you. Sure, he told you that you could look for another job once you moved to Maine. Did it ever occur to you that he might have had every intention of keeping that from happening? Are you really willing to give up your career to make him happy?"

She swallowed hard as he leaned toward her until his handsome face was only inches from hers.

“And maybe you could pull it off,” his voice softened. “For a while. But one day you’ll wake up, Christine. You’ll wake up and you’ll hate what you’ve let yourself become. You’ll have lost yourself. And you’ll wish to God that you hadn’t. Is that what you want?”

His gaze bored into hers as tears blurred her vision. Paul had struck a raw nerve in her, a hidden fear. Oh, God, what if he was right? Even if she won Brian back, would she be willing to be the wife he wanted? The doubts scrambled, preyed on her resolve.

Cupping her face with a large hand, Paul brushed away a tear with a rough thumb. Confused, torn, she almost cringed away from the gentle touch. His mesmerizing blue eyes wouldn’t let her.

“You deserve so much more than what Brian can give you,” he whispered.

Then he lowered his head and took her mouth with a devastating kiss that wiped her mind clean.

Chapter Seven

WHEN SHE DIDN'T resist, Paul deepened the kiss. The sweet taste of her, the feel of her soft, silky lips beneath his sent him soaring. Using all the skill he possessed, he coaxed and teased until he heard her soft moan. When he felt her small hands smooth over his chest, his blood raced, his heart thundered in his chest.

Christine surrendered to the gentle assault. She could do nothing else. A large hand had slid into her hair, holding her in place for his skillful exploration. She could have pulled away from that confident embrace. But she became lost in his heat, in the oddly familiar taste of him. She enjoyed the melting warmth that spread through her body, the feel of hard muscle beneath her fingers.

When Paul pulled away to look at her, he wanted to shout in triumph. Her eyes remained closed, her full lips parted. No, she wasn't indifferent to him. It encouraged him, had his libido growing fangs.

Finally her eyes opened, all those colors blending dark as a witch's brew as she gazed at him. He savored the desire that flashed in those eyes for only a moment before wariness took over.

"W-why did you do that?" she stammered. Slowly her hands slid from his chest. She raised trembling fingers to her lips, rubbing her full lower lip. "You kissed me."

Paul grinned. "I believe so."

"Why?"

Careful now. He kept his fingers in her hair, gently massaged her scalp to soothe her. "I wanted to."

"But I'm—"

"You're not engaged," he said more for himself than for her.

"In m-my heart I'm engaged to Brian."

Paul slid a finger over her trembling lower lip, delighted that she let him. "If that were true, you wouldn't have let me kiss you."

"You caught me off guard."

"Maybe the first couple of seconds," he allowed. "But you didn't have to kiss me back. You didn't have to touch me."

The angry green blazed in her eyes and her nostrils flared as she yanked herself away from him. "Is this your idea of being competitive?"

She threw off her seat belt and bolted out the car door. Calmly he came out of his side of the car, taking a minute to pet Rufus who stood at attention as best he could in the back seat. After helping his dog hobble from the car, he walked to where she paced by the gas pumps.

"I'm not trying to compete with Brian."

That brought her to a halt. She threw up her hands. "Why then?"

"Why not?"

She stared at him incredulously. "Why would you want to kiss me? I am engaged to—*was* engaged," she broke off, muttering a curse, "*—whatever*, to your cousin. And anyway, I am responsible for Rufus being hurt. I wrecked your car—"

Rufus made his way over to her and she dropped to her knees beside him, smoothing his fur. She checked the healing wound at his ribs, his leg, never breaking her stride. "I don't understand you."

"But I am beginning to understand you," he countered.

She stopped. "What do you think you understand about me?"

"You're not in love with Brian," he said flatly.

Her mouth dropped open. Under different circumstances he might have laughed.

"Of course I am!"

"You think you love him," he said calmly, staring her down. "You think you need him. He allows you into his little world. He gives you a sense of security. But that's not love."

"So you're an expert on the subject?"

"No," he kept his voice low even as hers rose. "But at least I know enough not to chase after someone who won't have me unless I jump through their hoops."

The barb hit its mark. She might have worn the same expression of surprised hurt if he'd slapped her. She jumped to her feet. "How dare you say that to me!"

It took some effort to hold his frustration and anger in check. "I'm sorry. I went too far."

"Yes, you did!"

Turning on her heel, she marched away from him into the gas station. Rufus watched her departure as Paul did. With a low whine, he ducked his head and made his way toward his master.

Sighing, Paul reached down to rub the top of his Collie's head. He'd lost his mind. That was the only explanation for this whole crazy mess. Nothing else would explain the fact that he wanted like hell to pull Christine from the wreckage of her doomed relationship with his cousin. Wanted to have a chance with her himself.

A chance at what? He just didn't know right now. That thought would hold for later.

He'd have to do better than this, he decided. Granted, he hadn't planned to let her get to him any more than he had planned that kiss, but there it was. The kiss had been everything he could have hoped for and more. She felt the pull the same as he did. He felt it, tasted it.

And after making progress what had he done? He'd bashed her over the head with his opinion of her situation. No consideration for how she felt, no finesse.

He was a total idiot, *king* idiot. He stalked over to the car and angrily yanked open the door covering the gas cap. As much as he meant every word he'd said, she didn't want to hear it. He couldn't expect her to listen to him. The sooner he resigned himself to the fact that he had to let this thing between her and Brian play out, the better off he'd be. Once they reached Maine and she found Brian, she'd wake up.

She had to.

As he pumped gas into the tank, he shook his head. He'd push her away if he weren't careful. A more understanding approach would serve him better. He wouldn't encourage her by any means in her quest to win back Brian. But he could befriend her, try to cushion the fall.

It was going to be damned hard.

PACING IN THE SMALL dim bathroom at the back of the gas station, Christine trembled. What had just happened? One minute they had been talking, riding along. The next, Paul had stopped the car and kissed her.

Dear God, no man had ever kissed her like that before. Like he needed to, like kissing her was vital. It was startling but she realized that she reeled as much from the raw need of that kiss as the surprise. Her lips still felt hot, her heart pounded in her chest.

And then the guilt set in. Paul was right. She had let him kiss her. She'd done nothing to stop it. She hadn't wanted to stop it.

Scolding herself, she paced faster. She had no business kissing Paul when she wanted someone else. Loved someone else. It was merely the novelty of having a gorgeous man kiss her that caused that fluttering in her stomach. Nothing more. It simply couldn't be more.

And the things Paul had said to her. Ridiculous, all of it. How could he think that she didn't love Brian when she'd come all this way to find him? What made him think he knew so much about her relationship with Brian? That he understood *her*?

She'd spilled her guts to him in the hotel restaurant last night for

one thing. Then she stopped in her tracks. No, she hadn't told him *that* much. True, she didn't exactly remember every word she'd said after a few drinks. She didn't remember returning to her room at all. But she knew herself. She knew that she would never tell anyone, even Miranda who was her closest friend, the fears that haunted her heart.

But somehow Paul knew them. He had known that she worried that Brian would make her give up practicing veterinary medicine. He even knew that she feared ultimately losing herself to make someone else happy. She'd never told anyone those fears. An involuntary shudder ran through her. The man she traveled with saw a lot. Far too much.

The loud rap on the bathroom door made her squeak in alarm. Dragging a hand through her hair, she released a ragged exhale.

"Go away, Paul."

"Excuse me?" a feminine voice called from the other side of the locked door followed by a child's laughter.

Christine swore under her breath. She wasn't ready to face him, not with so many conflicting emotions assaulting her. But what choice did she have? They would reach Maine in only a few hours. Surely she could make it that long. Then she could put some distance between them. In fact, she didn't have to see Paul again if she didn't want to. She'd simply turn down his offer to let her stay at his aunt's bed and breakfast once they got there. There'd be a hotel.

Warmth flooded her face as she reached to unlock the door.

Why did you kiss me?

I wanted to.

Taking a deep, calming breath, she forced herself to walk out of the gas station. She found him and Rufus waiting at her car, Paul leaning against the passenger door. She had no choice but to face him, he'd made certain of that. He watched her as she approached with those strong bare arms folded across the impressive expanse of his chest. The lightest sheen of perspiration glistened on his skin.

Her mouth went dry just looking at him. Oh, God, what was the matter with her?

"Christine, I'm sorry."

His words stopped her. Blue eyes the color of a summer sky pinned her as he stepped closer.

Warily, she stepped back.

His jaw was locked. A tiny muscle twitched at that strong jaw as she heard the hiss of his exhale. "Look, that was out of line and I'm sorry."

“For all of it?”

To her surprise, he grinned. “I’m not apologizing for kissing you if that’s what you are fishing for. I’m not a bit sorry about that.”

“I see.” Her heart began to race again. “Paul—”

“I had no right to speak to you that way,” he cut in, edging closer. “I’m sorry.”

His apology sounded sincere. She twisted her hands before her. The determined expression he wore told her that it hadn’t been easy for him either. She imagined it wasn’t. She couldn’t picture him as a man who made a habit of apologizing to women for anything. Certainly not for kissing them.

But then he hadn’t apologized for that particular action.

“I don’t know what to say to you now,” she admitted. “I have no idea where to go from here.”

Paul didn’t know how to proceed either. He knew what he wanted to do. He wanted to kiss her again, until she was breathless. More than anything he wanted to wipe away that wary expression she wore.

He’d shaken her trust and it wouldn’t be easy to regain. And he didn’t have a lot of time. They would reach Maine by dark and once there she would have an easier time avoiding him. She wouldn’t avoid him, he mused. He’d see to that.

“Let’s just forget about it,” he said. Oh, he wished it were that easy. “I’ve apologized. If you can accept it then we’ll get going.”

But she said nothing, damn her. Just stood watching him with big hazel eyes while her hands tied themselves into knots.

Christine wondered how she could just forget that kiss. And she found she didn’t like the idea that he could. While she struggled for a sane response, any response, a flash of silver caught her eye. The sun setting behind them reflected off the silver keys held loosely in his hand. The keys to her car.

Following her line of vision, he sighed. “You want these now?”

“What?”

He extended the hand holding the keys in her direction. “The keys. You want them? I think I can get Rufus and myself to Maine from here.”

Christine only thought of taking them for a second. But when her eyes met his, she knew she wouldn’t. The honesty in his eyes, in his voice tugged at her heart. He was giving her a chance to be rid of him. But as uncomfortable as the remainder of the trip might be, she couldn’t put him and Rufus out. Not when she’d been the reason he’d needed a ride. And Rufus...

But there was something else besides her guilt. A fear of being alone right now. Her life had been turned upside down. She needed Paul, she realized. He was a constant for her at the moment. Someone dependable.

She closed his fingers around the keys, the casual contact of their hands messing up her insides. "No, I don't want them."

His calm expression never faltered, but she sensed his relief. "You ready to get back on the road?"

"Yes, I think so."

"You accept my apology?"

He'd forgiven her, hadn't he?

She nodded.

Blue eyes lingered on her a moment more before he turned and walked around the car. Paul loaded Rufus into the car as she climbed in on the passenger side. His soothing words to the Collie as he situated him in the back seat made her smile. Paul told the Collie that they'd be in Searsport soon, talked to him like an old, trusted friend.

Christine was still smiling when he climbed into the car next to her.

"What?"

"I was just thinking that you are good with him," she said, not meeting his gaze.

"Yeah, he's a good dog."

She heard him start the engine but kept her eyes on the small gas station, not really seeing it. Then the car pulled out onto the highway and they were again on their way. Paul said nothing more, but he smiled.

Chapter Eight

TRAFFIC HAD BEEN slowed by highway construction so they didn't reach Maine until after dark. Neither of them had spoken much since the last stop at the gas station, but the tension in the car was a living thing. Even the moody jazz that Paul had put on the car stereo couldn't soothe her nerves.

Christine straightened in her seat as they passed a sign that welcomed them to Searsport. *They had arrived.* She couldn't make out much in the darkness. It appeared to be the sleepy little community by the sea that Brian had once described to her. There were a couple of billboards advertising attractions at Acadia National Park. A couple of moose crossing signs made her smile as relief flooded her body.

"I'll bet the view of the ocean is beautiful during the day," she said, breaking the silence as she looked out the window at the black waves of the sea.

"You've never been here?"

"No," she admitted. The wonder in his voice made her cringe in guilt. "Brian asked me to come with him several times to visit his family. I never did. I was always too busy. I guess I should have."

Paul slowed the car as they approached a very small town lined with a handful of older buildings and houses. He parked the car before a tall brick building and shut off the engine.

"Welcome to downtown Searsport," he said unfastening his seat belt and reaching for the flannel shirt in the seat next to her. "Not very big, huh?"

She watched as he pulled on the shirt. She couldn't seem to help it. "No, it's not."

Curious, she peered at the brightly lit windows of the building. A restaurant she realized, watching numerous people mill about inside. Painted red lobsters decorated the front window on either side of the fancy red and yellow lettering that read 'Fern's Tavern.'

Behind her she heard Paul open his car door. Rufus scrambled out and scurried toward a small patch of grass next to the building as she climbed out.

Paul chuckled. "He has to go."

"Where is your aunt's bed and breakfast?"

Shoving his hands deep into his pockets, he took a step toward her. "Not far. I thought we'd have dinner first." He gestured toward the restaurant with a thumb. "Fern's is great. You'll like it."

She had no doubt that she would. The scent of the ocean and warm seafood lingered on the chilly night breeze. She was starving. And cold. The restaurant would probably be comfortable and warm. It was tempting.

But she wanted—no, needed—time to sort through everything. To get things straight in her head. She sure as hell couldn't do that with Paul around.

"Paul, I think I'll pass on dinner. I just want to get a room and call it an evening." There, she'd said it.

"You want to go on to Aunt Felicia's?"

"No, I was going to find a hotel," she muttered, quickly adding, "Thanks for your offer, though."

Angling his head, he stepped closer. "Mm-hmm. Bar Harbor isn't far. There are a few hotels there."

"You and Rufus—"

"Can walk to my aunt's place." With that he walked around her toward the trunk of her car. He whistled for Rufus as he pulled out his bags, slinging one over a broad shoulder. Before she knew what he intended, he tossed her key ring at her in a gentle arc. She scrambled to catch it but it landed with a jingle at her feet.

"Thanks for the ride, Christine."

Just like that he strolled away with Rufus tagging along.

Paul knew it was a gamble walking away from her. He realized that he could very well end up walking to his aunt's place as he said. But he didn't think that she was ready to face her situation alone just yet. He was counting on it. Taking leisurely steps, taking his time, he walked down the street.

Instead of the relief she expected to feel as she watched him walk away, uncertainty crept in. She was confident that she could find her way to Bar Harbor and get a place to stay for the night. And it shouldn't be too great a task finding Brian in a town this size, she reasoned. She still didn't know how she would handle that meeting, but she'd jump off that bridge when she got to it.

But by the time Paul reached the end of the little street, she felt a pang of loneliness, a wisp of fear. It was unreasonable, she knew. She was a professional woman, a veterinarian. She could handle being in a strange place at night, securing food and lodging for herself.

She just couldn't handle being left with only herself.

“Paul?” she called.

Coward, she taunted herself, as she watched him slowly turn around in the light of a street lamp.

“Yeah?” he asked with a feigned nonchalance. He knew she’d stop him. Damn him.

She waited until he drew a little closer. “I am a little hungry.”

“ISN’T THIS A great place?”

Christine nodded as she popped another scallop wrapped in bacon into her mouth. Their booth at the back of the cheery restaurant sat just outside of the kitchen. Christine had warmed up quickly. The aroma of delicious food drifted toward them relentlessly as the staff entered and exited the kitchen doors. Her mouth had watered until their appetizer had arrived. Now, with her hunger suppressed just enough so that she could live until their dinner arrived, she felt content.

The warm glow of the small candle between them threw shadows across the hard planes of Paul’s handsome face. He was too sinfully handsome in the light of day. But like this, in the darkened room with the soft flame lighting up his eyes, he looked like a vision from a dark dream. A perfect, imaginary lover a woman might conjure up in the long, lonely hours of the night....

“Do you like your beer?”

She chuckled. The question had dispelled the fantasy. “Yes.” She took a sip from the glass, glancing at him over the rim. “What is it called again?”

“Katahdin. Named for the mountain. As far as local beers go, it’s the best. So’s the seafood. You can’t get better seafood anywhere else in the world than Maine.”

“I liked the appetizers.” Her hazel eyes scanned the room, the walls decorated with antique paintings and old photographs. An old menu from the last century captured in a glass frame graced the wall next to them. When her gaze returned to him it lingered. “Do you know how long this place has been here?”

“Forever,” he replied. “It’s named after a local legend, a woman named Fern Nickolls. She owned the tavern during the War of Eighteen-Twelve.”

History hadn’t been her favorite subject, but she knew enough to be impressed. “A woman owned a tavern back then?”

Paul nodded. “Yep. Her husband died and left it to her.” He shrugged. “It was called The Great Moose Tavern.”

“The Great Moose Tavern?” She laughed. “So there was a great

moose it was named after?”

He laughed with her, watching her with an intensity that forced away her gaze. “I don’t know. I guess there could have been.”

“A lady owning a tavern.” She stared into her beer mug for a moment, to calm herself, before again meeting his eyes. “So is there a story?”

The undisguised longing in his eyes had not diminished. Longing was the only word for it. Had any man ever looked at her that way before? In a way that made her want to fling herself into his arms?

Or run?

“There’s always a story.” Leaning forward he planted his elbows on the table. “During the War of Eighteen-Twelve, the town came under attack. One day the English came ashore and started setting fire to all the buildings.”

Paul took a deep drink before he continued. “Now, Fern was supposedly a big tough woman, a little rough around the edges. Aunt Felicia read someplace that she could spit, arm wrestle and cuss any sailor under the table.”

“Sounds like she was a character.”

“Oh, yeah. And she was ready for them that day. When the English ships were spotted, she filled up tubs and buckets of water and got a ladder ready. When they came on land and tried setting fire to her tavern, she’d swear at them and go douse the flames.” He lifted his half-empty mug of beer in salute. “The tavern was the only building left standing that day.”

“I’m glad.” His seductive gaze moved over her face. She floundered for something to say, but her stomach rumbled, distracting her. “I’m really hungry.”

His eyes darkened and her heart jolted. *Bad choice of words.* She’d only meant to make light conversation. God only knew what he read into her comment. She lifted her mug to her lips with a trembling hand, nearly dropping it in an effort to place it on the table.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

His gaze slid to her mouth. The sensuality of that gaze combined with the gentleness of his voice pushed her over the edge.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she demanded.

Paul was all innocence. “Like what?”

“The way that you are looking at me now,” she managed. The strange fluttering in her chest returned. “Paul, about what happened earlier...”

“About the kiss?” Reaching across the table he captured her hand.

“Did it bother you so much?”

“Yes,” she admitted. Weakly she tried to yank her hand away but he kept it. “Because it shouldn’t have happened.”

Strong fingers caressed hers sending jolts of electricity up her arm. “Maybe not.” His gaze lowered to her mouth again before slowly rising to meet her gaze. “Maybe I shouldn’t have kissed you. But I wanted to. I want to kiss you again.”

“But—”

“When you’re ready.”

A tumble of confused thoughts and feelings assailed her. She couldn’t think right now. Any coherent thought would have been a miracle. It had to be the fatigue. That and the emotional roller coaster ride her life had become since her wedding day.

But when their eyes met across the table, she knew deep down that it was neither fatigue nor emotional exhaustion.

“Paul, there won’t be a time when I am ready,” she explained, as much to herself as to him. “I came here for Brian.”

He lifted her hand to his lips, brushing her fingers with a warm, damp kiss. The intimate gesture caused heat to pool low in her belly. She couldn’t remember ever feeling so desirable with Brian, she thought with no small measure of guilt. The delicate need his touch ignited was new, intoxicating.

“You might change your mind.”

“I won’t.”

With a loud sigh, he lowered their joined hands to the table. *Back off, Paul.* Thinking he’d probably said too much already, he let go of her hand and watched as she primly dropped it to her lap, out of his reach. She watched him with big wary eyes and gnawed on her full lower lip.

Weighing his words carefully, he said, “I understand.”

“You understand,” she repeated.

“Yes, I do.” His mouth curved into a tender smile. “Let me be a friend to you, Christine. That’s all I ask. I want you to know that I’m here if you need me.”

Her heart shifted at those sincerely spoken words. They smoothed over her wounded heart like a healing balm. Then what he’d said to her earlier in the car crossed her mind.

“You expect me to fail.” She couldn’t keep her voice calm now. “You don’t think Brian will take me back. Do you?”

“Take *you* back?” he asked, shaking his head. “Why should you take *him* back? Why—hell!”

Paul's gaze fixed on something behind her. Curious, she looked over her shoulder.

The beautiful blonde woman drew everyone's attention. She looked like she walked right out of a fashion magazine in her short, red slip of a dress and high stiletto heels. Her limbs were long and graceful, her figure curvaceous. Silky, golden hair floated down around her lovely face to swing delicately about her smooth white shoulders.

It didn't really surprise her to find Paul staring at the woman, but it annoyed her. Sparing another glance at her, Christine watched a tall, familiar figure walk up behind the woman. Her heart nearly stopped.

Brian draped a possessive arm across the woman's shoulders. Smiling, he leaned close to whisper something in her ear.

Oh, no. *Oh, God.* How could this be? Brian was supposed to love *her*. Hadn't he badgered her relentlessly because he loved her? All too clearly she could recall the fights they'd had over his possessive nature, about the fact that he didn't like the amount of time her career took away from him.

Only a few days ago, he was going to marry her. The possibility of Brian being with someone else had never entered her mind. Reeling from panic and hurt, she tottered on the edge of the seat and watched Brian and the woman talking to each other as they waited to be seated. Just as the waitress arrived with their meals, Christine lost her balance. She grasped for anything to stop herself from falling and managed to grab the waitress' apron. The lady and the trays she carried went flying.

Christine hit the floor in stunned silence, feeling a plate strike her head. Something warm and wet slid down over her hair. A single linguini noodle fell into her lap.

Chapter Nine

PAUL RUSHED TO Christine's side. Careful to keep his face turned away, he crouched behind her to place himself between her and the entranceway. He knew the loud crash of dishes had Brian and his lady watching along with the rest of the restaurant. The eerie quiet that enveloped them attested to that.

He also knew that Brian would recognize him as easily as he would Christine so he kept his head ducked. He would have enjoyed exchanging a few words with his fool of a cousin. But at the moment Christine needed him. He wouldn't let her suffer this humiliation in front of Brian.

"Oh, no," she murmured, raising a hand to the wet mess that covered her head. "Oh, my God. Brian—"

"Be still." Paul placed his hands on her shoulders to avoid getting clam sauce on himself. Fortunately she was small enough that he could hide her with his body. "Are you all right?"

Christine just sat there with the linguini dish meant for her supper dripping from her head. Her nod sent two noodles sliding from her hair. He fought back a chuckle. Leaning closer so that he could see her profile, his mirth changed to concern. Afraid she'd burst into tears any moment he focused on how to get them out of the restaurant without Brian seeing them.

Paul peered over his shoulder in time to spot Brian speaking quietly with the hostess. The expression his cousin wore was of mild annoyance. *Good*. He was fairly certain he hadn't seen them. Brian cupped the lovely blonde's elbow and steered her back toward the door. Apparently Christine's calamity had caused his cousin to change his mind about dinner at Fern's.

When he was satisfied that they were gone, Paul eased away from Christine and sprang into action. Extending a hand to the waitress she had felled, he helped the woman to her feet. "Are you okay, ma'am?"

The older woman wobbled for a moment before gracing him with a warm smile. "I think so." She smoothed her hands over her apron and slacks. "I seem to be. But the young lady..."

Christine hadn't moved from where she sat on the floor, covered in clam sauce and noodles, surrounded by dishes and utensils. Paul

spotted the blackened redfish he'd ordered laying across her lap. Her small hands hovered about her head as if she weren't sure what she should do. Her lower lip trembled.

"She'll be fine." Grasping her under her arms like a child, Paul hauled Christine up from the floor. Struggling to get a view of the doorway, she nearly knocked him into the generous lap of a lady sitting in the booth next to theirs. He swore under his breath. "Hold still. He's gone."

Christine's eyes scanned the room, taking in all the curious glances aimed in her direction and cringed. If she had sat down and tried really hard, she couldn't have imagined a worse disaster than watching Brian waltz into the restaurant with a beautiful blonde while poor, pathetic Christine sat on the floor covered in food.

She'd never prayed so hard that the floor would open up and swallow her whole.

Paul pointed toward the bathrooms a few feet away. "See what you can do while I help our waitress with the mess."

He hadn't known whether to hoop in delight or throw up his hands when Brian had walked in with the gorgeous woman. That he had hadn't surprised Paul in the least. His cousin had always been quick to burn his bridges. And better still, Christine had seen him with the woman. She would have to realize that her relationship with Brian was over now.

He felt better about things once they were in the car and on their way toward the inn. Rufus stood in the back seat curiously sniffing the noodles and sauce on her head. Christine remained silent in the seat next to him, staring off into the night. He knew she was hurting.

"Rufus!" she swatted at the dog's snout as he began to lick the drying mess on her head.

"He's just trying to help you clean up," Paul threw out hoping to lighten things up.

She sniffled but her voice was steady, even a bit defensive when she said, "I'll take care of it when we get to your aunt's place."

His aunt's place, huh? That was something. Just before they'd went into the restaurant she'd been insisting that she'd find a hotel in Bar Harbor.

Grinning, he said, "At least you got most of the noodles."

"I got all of the noodles," her voice was sharp as she turned to face him.

Glad that they had reached his aunt's bed and breakfast, he brought the car to a stop after he'd pulled into the short driveway. Even

in the dark car he could see her little nostrils flaring and all that dark hair glued to her head by drying clam sauce. He coughed to cover over the laughter threatening to escape.

"Don't you dare," she warned. She folded her arms across her chest and slumped back into her seat. "I've just had the worst day of my life."

While he fought to suppress his amusement, he couldn't help feeling admiration for her. She hadn't fallen apart or broken down. At least not yet. She seemed stronger, almost angry and that was a good sign. He could deal with anger, but not with tears.

He pulled the car into the parking lot and found it nearly full. Parking in the one remaining space, he glanced at the car stereo's clock before shutting off the engine. It was just before eleven.

"There shouldn't be anyone awake at this hour," he said.

"Well, isn't it my lucky night?" she asked bitterly, still not looking at him. "No one else to witness my humiliation. Hooray."

CHRISTINE BARELY NOTICED the lovely interior of the Maple Leaf Inn as she followed Paul through its darkened corridors. The delicate smell of potpourri registered in her dazed mind, as did the shine of the wooden floor beneath her feet. But as she trudged along behind him, her mind was only on settling into a room for the night. She wanted a shower, to climb into bed and sleep for a long time.

He came to a stop toward the back of the house and opened a door. When he flipped on the light, he whistled. The room was filled with boxes of clothes, books, and household items.

Turning back to her he frowned. "This is one of the extra rooms I mentioned."

Snapping off the light, he led her to another room and opened that door. Waving for her to follow, he stepped inside.

It was a large room. There was a king-sized bed in the center of it with a dark green comforter and mounds of ruffled and lacy pillows. Fine patterns in various shades of green enhanced the cream-colored wall covering. A small wooden table with two spindle-backed chairs sat before a beautiful picture window. Next to it a handsome mahogany bookcase filled with old volumes sat in the corner.

"There is a great view of the ocean during the day," Paul gestured toward the window.

"This is fine," she said, spotting the bathroom. "Thank you. I'm going to get cleaned up."

Paul nodded. "I'll get Rufus and our things."

The sight that greeted her in the mirror of the small bathroom was hideous. Not quite the shock it had been when she'd first looked in the mirror at the restaurant, she decided, but hideous just the same. No wonder Paul had found the sight to be so funny.

As she studied her face, she sighed. She was fooling herself if she thought she stood a chance with Brian now. Even when she'd worn her beautiful wedding gown with her hair styled perfectly and her makeup just so, she couldn't hold a candle to the gorgeous creature that had been with Brian tonight.

Pulling the fine-toothed comb from her pocket, she began to absently rake it through the drying gunk in her hair. She was grateful that Brian hadn't seen the results of her foolishness, that she was spared at least that humiliation. She had Paul to thank for that.

And only herself to blame for the emptiness she felt. What the hell had she expected when she found Brian for God's sake? That he would run into her arms? Beg her to stay with him? Anger at Brian, at herself sapped all of her strength. She felt drained, as emotionally empty as she'd felt when her parents' divorced. She had no idea how to proceed from here. And she had even less of an idea of what she now wanted.

She didn't know how long she stood before the mirror. Realizing that she was making no progress with the comb, she slammed it down on the counter by the sink and hung her head. More than anything she wished she could cry, longed for the catharsis it might bring. But the tears wouldn't come. She didn't even feel pain. Just emptiness and the familiar ache of loneliness.

At the jingle of the doorknob she spun around to confront Paul as he stepped into the doorway.

"What do you think you're doing?" she snapped.

Before she could blast him about manners, he raised a hand to cut her off. His blue eyes studied her intently. "Let me help you."

A half an hour later, Christine sat in one of the spindle-backed chairs with her back to the sink. Paul had wedged a small hand towel behind her neck and stood shampooing her hair as expertly as a beautician. His strong fingers soothed her as they massaged her scalp.

"Paul?"

"Hmm?"

"Did you know that woman?"

"I've seen her before. Couldn't tell you her name."

Closing her eyes, she sighed. "Did you see how perfect she was?"

Paul shrugged, never ceasing his task. "She wasn't bad."

"Wasn't bad? She looked like a model."

"So she looks good on the outside." Paul poured more of her lavender scented shampoo into his palm and massaged it in. "Looks aren't everything."

"They help." She opened her eyes and laughed bitterly. "I looked like the Creature from the Black Lagoon tonight."

"You didn't look quite that bad."

The warmth of those blue eyes when they met hers lifted the heavy weight from her chest for a moment. Paul hadn't mocked her or tried to say I-told-you-so, she realized. And he could have. He'd warned her that she'd been wasting her time and just maybe he'd been right. She wouldn't have blamed him if he had thrown the night's disaster right in her face after all she'd put him through.

But he hadn't. Instead he treated her to the novel experience of having a beautiful man shampoo her hair. The intimacy of the gesture surprised her. His touch relaxed and calmed her while he stared at her in a way that shook her up inside.

"Thank you," she said, meaning it.

His dark brows knitted as he stopped. He lightly brushed his hand across her cheek and she could feel the soft froth of the shampoo where he touched. "For what?"

For not gloating. For understanding about your dog and the car. For being here so I am not alone.

"Just thank you."

He ran the water until it warmed and filled the plastic tumbler he'd found. Closing her eyes, she enjoyed the way the water flowed over her head, rinsing out the shampoo. She focused on that small pleasure, felt as if she were melting. He filled cup after cup of rinsing water until none of the soap remained.

Softly he squeezed the excess water from her hair and wrapped a fluffy, white towel about her head. Then he gently helped her to sit up, his strong hand lightly stroking her back.

Paul kneeled before her. The intensity of his gaze burned its way through her numbed senses. Before she could think of anything to say, he leaned forward brushing a feathery soft kiss across her lips.

"Go ahead and take a shower." His mouth nearly touched hers. "I'll find us something to eat."

After she watched Paul walk from the bathroom, she stood on wobbly legs and made her way to the shower. The warm water eased the last of the day's tension from her limbs. By the time she'd wrapped herself in her burgundy robe and walked back into the room, she felt drowsy.

Wondering when Paul would return, she spotted Rufus waiting for her by the bed in the quiet room. The Collie lifted his chin from his paws, wagged his tail as she approached him. Smoothing his fur, she knelt by him to do her nightly inspection of his leg and ribs.

“Good boy,” she soothed as she encouraged him to rise to his feet and turn so she could get to the injured leg. Looked good. She checked the stitches at his ribs and frowned. The incision line looked red and puffy. Possibly the beginning of an infection.

Coaxing him to follow her into the bathroom, Christine washed the area with warm soapy water. She searched the bathroom cabinet for anything she could use as an antiseptic. When she found nothing, she decided she would seek out Paul.

Chapter Ten

THE SOFT LIGHT from the kitchen made Paul easy to find. Just like her room, the kitchen was simple and neat. Tiny touches like small plants in the windowsills, herbs she guessed, and the cookie jar shaped like a teddy bear added charm and warmth. Two long counters were situated on either side of the large oven and a wealth of cabinets surrounded it all.

Rufus followed on her heels as she walked in, then hobbled to his master who stood at one of the smooth marble counter tops busily chopping green pepper on a cutting board. He spoke quietly to his pet, not noticing her at first. His hands wielded the small knife expertly as he cut the pepper into precise little pieces.

“Hello,” she said softly, trying not to give him a start.

The knife came to a halt. His gaze traveled over her face and searched her eyes. “Feeling better?” he asked.

“I don’t know what to feel,” she answered honestly. “I came to see if you had anything I could use as an antiseptic. The incision at Rufus’ ribs looks a little swollen.”

Paul put down the onion he’d been about to chop and reached into a cabinet by the huge refrigerator. Pulling out a half-empty bottle of rubbing alcohol, he frowned.

“Is he all right?”

She nodded, accepting the bottle and a soft napkin he pulled from a drawer. “He’s been laying on that side most of the trip. The friction of the ride could naturally cause an irritation—”

“I get it,” he cut her off, smiling. “You don’t have to give me your detailed medical analysis tonight. I doubt you’re up to it.”

He went back to chopping the onion as she knelt by Rufus’ side and soaked the tip of the napkin in the alcohol. Bitterly, she said, “You know that’s about how much interest Brian had in my work.” Gently she dabbed at the infected area at the dog’s side. “I’d want to tell him about a case I was particularly excited about and he’d just interrupt, change the subject.”

The sound of the knife hitting the board didn’t cease. “There’s a difference.”

Rufus whined as she probed at the stitches. Finishing, she rubbed

the top of his head and straightened. Placing the bottle of alcohol on the counter near where Paul worked, she folded her arms across her chest. "What difference?"

"Brian has no interest in your career." He didn't look up, didn't break his stride as he chopped. "I do."

"You do? That's why you cut me off like he would, huh? Because you are so *interested*?"

The sarcasm of her tone brought his head up and she instantly regretted her words. She didn't want to vent her anger or hurt on Paul. She started to apologize but his eyes flashed a warning.

"No," anger edged his voice. "I cut you off because half the terms and jargon that you throw at me I am not familiar with. It's Greek to me."

"Oh."

"Yeah, oh." His chopping completed; he reached into another cabinet for a small iron skillet. "I'm impressed as hell with what you do. And how you do it. You're an intelligent woman, Christine. But don't lump me into the same category as him."

"You're right," she said. "I'm sorry. You've been great. You didn't deserve that."

Since she didn't know what else to do she began to pace. "You were right." She could feel the shock, the numbness slowly wearing off. "You and Miranda were right about everything. This whole trip was a stupid thing to do. But did I listen? No, I just—"

Paul gripped her arms in his strong hands and stopped her. "I can't cook with you pacing like this," there was only a trace of annoyance in his voice. He released her long enough to pull a small stool from a shadowed corner of the room and place it nearby. Then, as if she were a child, he pushed her toward it, helped her ease onto it.

His hands rested firmly on her shoulders as he pressed his forehead to hers. "I'm sorry about what happened tonight. I wish like hell that I could have prevented it, but I couldn't."

"I did this to myself," she muttered.

"Maybe you did."

"I can't believe I was so stupid," she whispered.

Lightly his fingertips brushed away the single tear that spilled over her cheek. He had to do something. He wouldn't let her fall apart on him now. She had done so well.

He found just the thing in the refrigerator. A nice white Chardonnay. He filled a glass and pressed it into her hand. "Drink this."

She fell silent as he warmed the skillet on the stove, melting the

margarine he'd dropped onto its center. He kept an eye on her as he beat the eggs for an omelet, watching her stare at the floor as she drank her wine. He remembered that despondent expression. She'd worn it the day after Brian had left her at the altar. He wanted more than anything to take it away now.

"You like Western omelets?"

"Hmm?"

"I'm making you an omelet," he explained. "Do you like them?"

"Yes. I guess."

"I told you I'd cook for you once we got here," he reminded her.

He could feel her gaze on him as he poured the eggs into the skillet.

"You also said that you found cooking for women useful for getting them into bed."

She'd taken the bait. He grinned. "I didn't say that exactly."

"Don't tell me that's what you are up to." Her laugh was a dry huff. "To seduce the Creature from the Black Lagoon?"

"Don't sound so surprised." He swirled the eggs in the pan until they began to solidify in a way that pleased him. "I happen to like women who wear clam sauce," he teased.

He turned to face her then, pleased that she no longer looked so defeated. She looked tired, even a little wary of him. He didn't care for that.

"I wouldn't take advantage of you," he assured her. "No matter how much I might want to, I wouldn't."

Something curled inside her at those words. He wanted to take advantage of her. Wanted her. She remembered the way he'd kissed her earlier, the way he'd tasted. The gorgeous man sprinkling chopped vegetables across the omelet wanted her.

"Why?"

She thought he made a choking sound. "Why won't I take advantage of you?" he asked.

Skillfully he slid the perfectly folded omelet onto a plate and pulled a fork from a drawer. "Here you go," he muttered, holding out the plate her. Her stomach growled in anticipation as she sat her wineglass on the counter next to her.

"No, why would you say things like that?"

He broke open three more eggs and faced her as he beat them briskly with a whisk. "Eat," he said nodding toward the plate she held.

Christine took a small bite of the omelet and her eyes nearly crossed. "This is delicious," she managed. Eagerly she took another

bite.

Ignoring her praise, he sighed. "Why do I say what things?"

"That you want to take advantage of me," the wine had made her just numb enough to say it. "That you want to kiss me."

He set aside the bowl and leaned against the counter. "I don't say anything I don't mean, Christine. I do want to kiss you. And, yes, I do want you. And I know by saying that, I'm probably scaring the hell out of you. You don't exactly need that sort of complication in your life right now, I know. But that's how I feel."

If the wine hadn't wrapped her mind in a fog, she might have panicked at his brutal honesty. Instead she wanted to know, "How would that work? You and me?"

Surprised at her questions, he cautiously he played along. "You were planning to move here anyway. You could stay here until you found a job." The words that rolled off his tongue so easily had his insides rioting in alarm. What the hell was he doing? He'd never lived with a woman before, never let things get that far. But for reasons he couldn't put his finger on, he thought he'd be willing to try with Christine. "We could take it from there," he finished lamely.

"No, I meant...I guess I wonder why you would want to," she explained, peering at him intently. "I mean, you're very handsome and I'm, well...I work all the time. And when I'm working I smell like animals when I come home. You could have any woman you wanted." She shook her head. "You're just feeling sorry for me."

He was on her in an instant. The plate and fork were yanked from her hands and his mouth crushed hers in a smoldering kiss that took her breath. She struggled against him for only a moment before her hands slid around his neck. She leaned into that kiss and savored the feel of his strong arms wrapped about her, his hands clutching at her desperately. When his lips coaxed hers apart and his tongue delved into her mouth, a shiver of desire raced through her. For a long moment there was nothing but their kiss, the way his lips became gentle, the way she softened against him.

Her heart pounded in her chest as he lifted his head and pinned her with a heated gaze. "Did that feel like pity to you?" His voice was rough.

She trembled in his arms, only now noticing that she was no longer on the stool, not even touching the floor.

"No," she whispered.

He released her, and placed her gently on her feet. He ran a shaking hand over his face. "Good. Now finish your omelet and we'll

get some sleep.”

THE ROOM WHERE Paul had taken her turned out to be the only one available in the bed and breakfast. Giving her the bed, he’d stretched out in the floor with Rufus, deciding that the hardwood floor would probably work the kinks out of his back. After driving for several days, his back was in sorry shape.

Sleep didn’t come easily to Paul. Christine had fallen asleep almost the instant her head had hit the pillow. He’d sat up to watch her for a while as she slept, curled on her side like a child. She’d been completely exhausted. He’d let her sleep for a while tomorrow, he decided. Sleep healed as she had said.

His mind churned. Wondering what would happen now, he punched his pillow and rolled over onto his back. Had she accepted the fact that her relationship with Brian was over? The lost look she’d worn made him wonder how much time she’d need to get over his idiot cousin.

He frowned into the darkness. Oh, he knew she was attracted to *him*. At least physically. Her passionate response to him in the kitchen earlier was ample proof of that. And that should be enough for him, he mused. A physical relationship with Christine promised to be immensely satisfying if the kisses they’d shared were any indication.

But as he lay there, before sleep claimed him, he couldn’t help but wonder if it would be enough.

IN THE EARLY hours before dawn, desperate sobs in the bed above him pulled him from light sleep. He climbed onto the huge bed searching in the dark for her. He found her struggling under the comforter in the center of the huge bed, crying in her sleep.

“Don’t leave me,” she cried in a broken voice.

As easily as he could, he pulled her trembling body to his and held her. Whispering nonsense, whispering anything to make her stop crying, he stroked his hands over her hair. “I’m here,” he crooned. “I’m here.”

He knew the moment she awakened. Her body tensed in his arms and she was silent. Slowly a small hand rose to touch his cheek.

“Paul?”

His breath whooshed out at the sound of his name. She knew it was he. An emotion he’d never known tightened his chest. “I’m here, baby.”

Gasping, she snuggled closer to him. “It was only a dream.”

"That's right." He could feel her uneven breathing against his bare chest as he held her. "Was it about what happened tonight?"

"No," she whispered. "No, it was about my parents."

Exhaling loudly, she clutched him tighter and his body went on red alert.

"I haven't had that dream in a long time," she explained in a thin voice. "I dream that my parents and I are boarding a great ship, going on vacation. The first time I had the dream I was so excited because I knew the three of us would be sailing on that ship together. We'd be happy."

"But it always ends the same way. They disappear. And then as the ship pulls away from the dock, I see them on the shore waving to me on the deck. And I am alone sailing away from them."

Tamping down on his anger at her parents, he brushed a kiss on her hair. She needed his gentleness now. "You are not alone now. You're with me."

For a long moments he held her while the tension eased from her body. His own body ached in growing arousal. The thin tee shirt that she slept in had ridden up to her waist and the feel of her soft female flesh and thin cotton panties tortured him. He smelled the lavender shampoo that he'd used to wash her hair earlier. He caught her own sweet scent and it enflamed him, made him want to crush her beneath him.

Thinking her breathing had leveled out into the cadence of sleep, he tried to ease away from her. Returning to his spot on the floor would be the only way he'd get any sleep.

But her arms tightened around him.

"Paul, stay with me."

"I don't think that's a good idea," he muttered, then groaned as the smooth skin of her thigh grazed him as she draped her leg across him.

She stilled. "Oh."

"Yeah, oh," he managed, aching.

He pulled away intending to return to the floor before he ripped the tee shirt off and pounced on her. Her small hand on his arm stayed him. The light touch burned his skin like flame.

"Okay," she simply said.

He knew what she offered as she pressed a hesitant kiss to his shoulder. His eyes closed at the wave of pure desire that swept through him. God, he wanted to. Nothing would please him more than to make her moan in pleasure for him, to bury himself inside her warm little

body.

But he wanted her to desire him as well. To crave him as he craved her. He didn't want her to offer herself so that he would stay with her and hold her through the night.

"I don't want to be alone," she pleaded.

With full knowledge of the hell he was putting himself through, he eased back down beside her. His breath hissed out when she timidly smoothed her hand over his chest, then he stopped breathing as it trailed downward.

Grabbing her hand as it reached his stomach, he sighed. "No."

She pulled her hand out of his. "You don't want...t-to?" she stammered.

Swearing under his breath, he reached out in the darkness and found her hand again. It was a hell of a predicament. He knew he couldn't take her. Not while she was vulnerable, helpless. His conscience wouldn't allow it.

But if he said no, he feared the rejection would tear her down. She wouldn't recognize it as patience but as further proof that she was, in her mind, undesirable.

Well, damn. He had to think of something. It came to him pretty quickly as he pressed her hand to his heart and rolled them over so that she lay on her back with him above her.

"No, I want to Christine," his voice was rough with the need he fought to suppress. "You know I want you. But I don't think you are ready yet." He brushed kisses over her brow, her temple. "When I make love with you, Christine, you will want me and no one else."

Christine was beyond caring that Paul was in bed with her, that she had begged him to stay there. His words seduced her even as he drugged her with kisses. It just didn't matter. Nothing mattered but the feel of him next to her, the warmth of his hard body. Incredible heat began to spread through her. She gasped as his large hand smoothed over her shoulder then seductively slid down to cup her breast.

Paul moaned as the tiny nipple hardened under his palm. Lowering his head, he tasted the silky sweetness of her mouth. She parted her lips for him, yielding to the slow sliding and stroking of his tongue, driving him crazy. Clamping down on his own need, he dazzled her with soft, deep kisses until her tiny moans reached his ears, until she began to writhe in pleasure.

Christine clutched at the hard muscles of his back as his mouth restlessly roamed over her throat, down her chest. His lips opened over the aching tip of her breast, wetting it through the thin fabric of her

shirt. She buried her hands in his thick hair as his tongue laved her, sent electricity shooting all through her body.

His hand skimmed down her stomach, clutching at the hem of her shirt and yanking it up. "You're so lovely." His voice was rough. "So sweet."

A cry ripped from her throat as his wet mouth settled over her breast. With every gentle tug and pull she felt more heat gather low in her belly, between her thighs. She drew up her knees blindly trying to relieve the building ache.

"Yes," she moaned as his hand drifted lower and cupped her. Strong fingers began to stroke where she wanted them, needed them most. Instead of relieving the ache, his touch provoked the sensation until it was unbearable. Helplessly she writhed beneath him as he fed on her lips, taking her moans into his mouth. The heat devastated her, made her feel as if she were flying too close to the sun. Paul's fingers changed rhythm delved deeper. And then all at once the pleasure overpowered her, shattered her.

He reveled in the feel of her thighs closing around his hand as she reached her climax, her nails scraping his back. Desperately her body strained against him and he groaned in frustration. More than anything he wanted to come inside her, feel her convulse around him.

But he couldn't. Not yet.

Smoothing her damp hair from her brow, he dropped gentle kisses over her face until her breathing slowed. Within minutes the shudders wracking her body faded and she relaxed. Ignoring his own sorry state, he grinned smugly when he felt her twitch in deep sleep and spooned up behind her.

Chapter Eleven

“PAULIE!”

The breath whooshed out of him as his aunt grabbed him up in a bear hug that compressed his ribs. Her cane fell noisily to the shiny linoleum as she laughed in delight, swinging him back and forth for several seconds before finally letting him go.

“I am so happy to see you!” Felicia exclaimed as he knelt to retrieve her cane. “You must tell me all about your trip.”

Paul had always thought his aunt to be a pretty lady and she never changed. Her sunny smile flashed brighter than the colorful blooms printed on her flowing dress. Felicia barely stood a plump five feet tall with dark hair that just reached her shoulder and big eyes the color of cornflowers. There was a quality about her face that made her appear youthful in spite of the tiny lines around her eyes.

“My goodness,” she accepted the cane from him and used it to edge closer to the stove. Her gaze swept over the food-laden counter appreciatively. “You’ve been busy. Look at those waffles. Beautiful. Oh, the guests will be tickled with those.”

He watched her awkward progress, frowning. She’d broken her hip three months before and the break had been so bad that she’d had two surgeries. She’d assured him repeatedly over the phone that she was fine, recovering nicely. After seeing her in person for the first time since the injury, he wasn’t inclined to believe her.

“How are you doing?” he asked.

Felicia shifted her weight, balancing. “Oh, this,” she said with a dismissive wave of her hand. “Fine, fine. I’m getting around a little better every day.”

Her too-optimistic answer didn’t fool Paul. Especially not when she immediately reached for the stool where Christine had sat the night before. She didn’t say anything when he held it steady as she sat down. He didn’t say anything either. His aunt was a proud woman.

“So what happened, Paulie?” she jumped right in, changing the subject. “You promised to explain all when you called the other night from—where was it?”

“Scranton,” Paul muttered. Shaking his head, he turned to the stove and peeked into the oven to check the muffins he had baking.

"You sounded a little put out. Did you run into trouble on the way here?"

He nearly laughed out loud as he leaned against the counter. "You have no idea."

"Rufus!" Delighted to have spotted the Collie peering at her from the doorway, she called him to her. "Hello, boy!" Angling her head, she watched him as he hobbled toward her. "Look at that pink cast. Why, what happened to you? You're moving around like I am."

"He was involved in a little accident."

"I see." She planted the cane on the floor for support as she leaned forward to affectionately pet the Collie. Wagging his tail, Rufus licked at her hand. "Is *that* what happened?"

"That's part of it."

Felicia chuckled. "Going to make me drag it out of you, huh?"

Here we go. "A car hit him in the church parking lot before Brian's wedding."

Her eyes rounded in concern. "Is he all right?"

"Yes, he's fine," Paul replied. "He was in bad shape at first, but he's come along."

"I imagine he was in good hands," Felicia said, straightening. "Brian's new wife is a veterinarian, isn't she?"

"Yes, she is," he explained, "but she isn't Brian's wife."

"Excuse me?"

"The wedding never took place."

Shocked, Felicia clasped a hand to her bosom. "What happened?"

Seeing no hope for it, Paul gave her an edited explanation of the events of the last several days. He didn't mention anything that happened between he and Christine. Unless the fall damaged more than her hip, Felicia would figure that out all by herself and in record time. She didn't miss much. She listened to him with an occasional nod or 'mm-hmm' thrown in nonchalantly, but he knew she considered each word, tried to read between the lines.

He finished by telling her of the scene in the restaurant last night. She laughed heartily at his humorous description of Christine's disastrous tumble from the booth after she'd spotted Brian with the blonde woman.

"Oh, the poor dear," she swiped a bit of moisture from her eye. Once her humor faded, her expression warmed sympathetically. "To see him with another woman just days after they were supposed to be married—and after all she's been through since then!"

Grabbing the oven mitt at his elbow with mock indignance, he

shoved his hand into it and opened the oven door. “What *she’s* been through?” he asked, pulling out three pans of blueberry muffins, one by one.

“Oh, Paulie, I didn’t mean that you haven’t been through the ringer on this trip. You have. But she’s been through it, too.”

Paul glanced at her quizzically and she continued. “Brian left her at the altar,” she pointed out. “That had to have been devastating. And you can imagine how guilty she must have felt about Rufus and your car. I have to hand it her. Not many in that situation would have been brave enough to offer you a ride after all that.” She seemed to consider that, then sighed. “Well, *I* probably would but not many people could have.”

Smiling wryly, Paul nodded his agreement. He couldn’t imagine Felicia being intimidated by much of anything.

“Where is she?” Felicia asked.

His thoughts turned to Christine. He’d left her sleeping this morning in the huge bed despite his urge to wake her with kisses and drive himself inside her until they were both senseless. He’d gotten little sleep with her warm, small body cuddled up next to him and her scent lingering around him. But he’d enjoyed holding her through the night. It had been exquisite torture but he’d loved every minute of it.

“She’s in the green bedroom in the back,” he answered absently as he pulled muffins from the pans.

As he placed them on the racks to cool, he considered his aunt’s words. Sure, he knew better than anyone the hell that Christine had been through the last several days. And yes, he’d known that guilt had been part of her motivation when she’d asked him along on the trip to Maine. But what he hadn’t recognized, until it bashed him over the head last night, was her fear of being alone. And that bothered him because he didn’t want to be merely a source of comfort. He had a suspicion that Brian had been just that—a sense of security for her. No, he wanted to be more than a security blanket for her.

And the idea that he wanted more scared him.

“Paul?”

“What?” he snapped unintentionally. He turned around and in a softer tone asked, “What?”

Felicia’s gaze held a note of curiosity. “Ah, where did you sleep?”

“Same room. On the floor.” At least he had part of the time. “Will you have an extra room today?”

“That won’t be necessary,” a new voice answered. “I don’t want to impose.”

Christine stood in the doorway of the kitchen wearing a practical blouse and slacks. Her gaze met his before settling on his aunt. She still looked tired. Paul didn't like the shadows beneath her eyes. The hopelessness was gone from her expression this morning, he noted. That was something. But it was replaced by something else, something he couldn't put his finger on.

She smiled at his aunt, walking forward to rub Rufus' head before extending a hand. "You must be Brian and Paul's aunt," she began. "I'm Christine Vance."

It shouldn't have bothered him that she'd referred to Brian. But it did.

"Felicia Spurling." His aunt smiled brightly and shook her hand. "Nice to meet you."

Awkward silence filled the kitchen. Paul's mind worked at finding some way to maneuver things so he could speak to Christine privately. He wanted to see where things stood between them after last night. He wanted to kiss that troubled expression from her face.

Before he could speak his aunt said, "Honey, I am sorry as hell about what happened with Brian."

Color warmed Christine's face at his aunt's blunt remark. But she recovered quickly. "It's all right," she said with a nonchalant shrug. "Sometimes things don't work out the way we think they will."

She cast a shy glance at Paul and continued. "Thank you for letting me stay here last night. I'd be glad to pay you for—"

"Absolutely not. You're welcome to stay as long as you like."

Folding his arms across his chest, Paul moved toward her. She wasn't staying? He didn't like where this was going. "So are you heading for Bar Harbor?"

She stepped back. "Yes. Yes I am."

"I see," his voice was sharper than he had intended. It pricked at his anger the way she stood there not moving, unwilling to meet his gaze. "And I thought I'd done a good job at playing host last night."

The furious blush that colored her face pleased him. She chewed on her lower lip as Felicia's speculative gaze moved over them.

Ignoring his comment, she said to his aunt, "It is good to meet you, Ms. Spurling."

He knew the remark was meant to mark her exit. But she wouldn't get away that easily. He took another step toward her, willing her to look at him. But, damn her, she wouldn't. Was she that embarrassed about last night? "Come help me set the table for the guests, Christine. They'll be coming down for breakfast in a few minutes."

Finally her hazel eyes met his. She shook her head. "I would like to," she said, "but I was hoping to take Rufus to the animal clinic. I want to get him a good antibiotic for that infection, check out his leg..."

"Fine," he muttered, frustrated that she was trying to avoid him. She was going to talk to him, damn it. Turning his back to them, he began preparing platters of food for the guests' breakfast while he fought to control his rising anger.

"Which animal clinic?" asked Felicia.

"The Companion Animal Clinic in Camden is closest, isn't it?" Christine asked in an unsteady voice.

"Why, yes, it is," his aunt replied.

"Could you tell me how to get there?"

"I can do better than that. I'll go with you," Felicia offered. "If you wouldn't mind, I need to pick up a prescription at the drug store. It's right on the way."

For a moment nothing was said and he knew that Christine hesitated. He, too, wondered at his aunt's offer.

"Sure would appreciate the ride," Felicia persisted in warm, friendly tone. He heard rustling sounds and the tap of his aunt's cane on the floor. "I'm still not a hundred percent just yet."

"Yes, of course," Christine said. "I'd be happy to have you go with me."

"Excellent!"

If his mood hadn't taken such a foul turn he would've laughed at Felicia's sudden frailty. It was an act. He wondered what she was up to.

"You okay with handling breakfast by yourself, Paulie?" Felicia asked.

Annoyed, he waved her away.

"Okay," she called, cheerful as ever. "We'll see you in a little while."

"I'll talk to you later, Christine," he said in with a thread of warning in his tone as they walked from the room.

She wasn't going anywhere if he had anything to say about it.

CHRISTINE SIGHED IN relief as she waited with Rufus in the small exam room. The familiar surroundings, the familiar smells of the animal hospital comforted her. For a moment she wished she were back in Virginia at her own hospital. But as she waited for the veterinarian she felt some of the tension begin to ease from her body.

She wanted to be annoyed with the lady who waited for her in the lobby, but found it impossible. Felicia Spurling had turned out to be

charming and kind. She'd kept up a steady stream of conversation, interjecting directions here and there, as Christine drove. Thank goodness she hadn't required any more of Christine than a simple nod or an occasional agreement. With so much on her mind she really couldn't have managed more.

Sinking down onto the one small chair in the room, she took advantage of the moment. Enjoying the solitude, she reflected on the events of the last few days. Nothing had turned out the way she had expected. What had she expected? Certainly not finding Brian with a girl who would look at home on a Paris runway. Or having Paul in her bed. Her mind was spinning in bewilderment. Everything was happening way too fast, her world was spinning out of her control.

She closed her eyes and leaned back in the plastic chair until the back of her head touched the wall. A hundred times since she'd awakened this morning, she'd tried to recall seeing Brian the night before with the beautiful woman. By God, she *wanted* to feel the sting of betrayal, the raw hurt of seeing the man she had loved with someone else.

But to her surprise the memory had already lost its sting. Each time she tried to conjure Brian and his date, her mind drifted to what had happened later after she'd left the restaurant with Paul. The memory of Paul's strong fingers in her hair sent a ripple of excitement through her. She could still feel those incredible hands on her body, seeking out her most intimate places. Warmth flooded her as she recalled the way he'd touched her, the exquisite pleasure he'd given her without taking anything for himself.

"Miss Vance?"

Startled, she rapped her head against the hard wall. Her face heated as she rubbed the back of her head and rose from the chair. Rufus leapt to his feet next to her, stretching his back as best he could.

"Are you all right?" asked a tall woman with sandy hair.

Christine nodded as she took in the white coat, stethoscope. Warm brown eyes set in a thin but attractive face moved curiously from her to Rufus and back. The woman's stride was slow and confident as she closed the door behind her. She had a look of quiet competence about her.

Great. She'd just made an idiot out of herself in front of a colleague. At a hospital to which she had forwarded her resume no less. Making a fool of herself was fast becoming a common occurrence these days.

"I'm fine."

"I'm Lillian Andrews."

Christine shook the slender hand she offered. She recognized the name from her search for a job in the area. She was certain that Doctor Andrews owned this particular clinic. Well, hell.

"Who do we have here?" the woman asked as she walked around the metal exam table in the center of the room to where Rufus stood wagging his tail in friendly greeting.

"This is Rufus," Christine explained. "He was struck by a car a few days ago."

The woman affectionately rubbed the Collie's neck. "Hi there, fella. You look good for a dog who got hit by a car."

Pleased at that, Christine went on. "His recovery has been incredible considering he's been traveling for the last two days."

Dr. Andrews nodded. "Let's get him up on the table."

Placing the chart she held in her hand on a nearby counter, the woman crouched on one side of Rufus while Christine crouched on the other. Since Christine was on the side where the ribs had broken, she used extreme care as she helped to hoist him up onto the exam table. Gently she eased him to lie on his side so that the incision line lay exposed. It looked better this morning. But there was still a tinge of red around the wound. With experienced hands she pressed at the dog's ribs trying to gauge the progress of their healing.

"Good-looking stitches, doctor."

"Thank you. I—" Christine's gaze met Dr. Andrew's with a start.

"I thought I recognized the name on your paperwork," the woman said with a smile. "Christine Vance. You sent me a résumé not too long ago, didn't you?"

"That's right." She remembered mailing the resume off only a month ago, hoping to have a job waiting for her after marrying Brian. But she would never have guessed that she would have to meet Lillian Andrews this way. *I'm bringing you a dog whose injury I am responsible for and oh, by the way, my fiancé left me before we could even get to the altar as a result.* She shook her head at the unfairness of it all.

"Dr. Andrews, about Rufus..."

"Yes, tell me about his case."

She walked around the table to stand next to Christine. She couldn't help but be impressed with the woman's height. Christine would guess that she stood close to six feet tall.

Leaning toward Rufus, the other doctor closely inspected the wound. As Christine had done, she lifted thin fingers to press at the

shaved area of the Collie's rib cage.

"Tell me about the injury."

"The trauma to the rib cage resulted in four broken ribs, two of which were forced into the chest cavity. There was heavy internal hemorrhaging and tissue damage to the lung."

"And the leg?"

"Fractured in two places," Christine answered. "Clean breaks."

"Tell me about the surgery."

Christine explained the lengthy surgery that had saved Rufus' life as Dr. Andrews listened. Her colleague's interest pleased her. As she talked, the confidence she hadn't felt in days grew. At least she felt confidence in her professional life. She worked hard to be a good doctor.

It was her private life that was a complete and utter mess at the moment.

"Impressive," Dr. Andrews smiled. "You have good judgment and you are quite skilled."

"Thank you," Christine said idly wondering if she'd be more impressed to know that she had performed the operation in her wedding gown.

She watched as Dr. Andrews moved to Rufus' leg, her quick brown gaze moving over the cast. "Where are the fractures?"

If only she'd thought to make copies of the x-rays to bring with her. "There," Christine pointed to an area close to the dog's foot then moved her finger three inches higher. "And there."

"Good cast," Lillian observed. Straightening, she turned her gaze on Christine. "Is Rufus on an antibiotic?"

Christine shook her head. "No. I had him on Cephalexin the first few days. Probably should have kept him on them for a few days more, but..."

Nodding, Dr. Andrews walked back to the counter on the other side of the table and wrote on the record. She didn't even glance up when she said, "You still interested in a job, Dr. Vance?"

Christine would have sworn that she heard her jaw hit the floor. She knew from experience that openings at veterinary clinics, particularly the smaller ones like this, were few and far between.

Before she could say anything to that, Dr. Andrews set aside her clipboard and pinned her with an intent gaze. "From what I have seen of your résumé and your work here, I think you would make a great addition to my staff. I contacted the doctor you gave as a reference, Dr. Miranda Levy wasn't it?"

"Yes," she answered weakly. "When did you speak with her?"

"Last week."

Thankful that she had spoken with Miranda before her wedding day, she relaxed.

"She really sung your praises," Dr. Andrews went on. "From what I gathered from your letter and your colleague, you have recently married and plan to move to the area?"

"That *was* the plan," Christine's voice dropped as she struggled for words. "But my fiancé and I parted ways not long before the wedding."

"I see. So you probably won't be moving here then, will you?"

The question hit Christine hard. She'd planned to move here with Brian for so many months now that doing otherwise seemed out of the question. But she wasn't with Brian now. The obvious thing for her to do, of course, was to go back to her life in Virginia. It was the logical thing to do. She had friends there and her career at Todd's clinic.

"I'm not certain what I will do," she answered. "There is a chance I might go back to Virginia."

Dr. Andrews nodded her understanding. "You will need time to sort things out."

That was the truth.

"So do you have any family or friends here in the area?"

Brian lived here. How could she deal with him? But Paul was here, too. If she moved to Maine, she would have Paul. But surely moving solely for the reason to be near him was insane. Sure, she was attracted to Paul and knew he wanted her. But that would be any awfully big chance to take. Lust didn't always translate into something more meaningful. But maybe she needed a fresh start, a chance to prove to herself that she was strong enough to make it on her own.

The idea of being on her own made her pause. Not too long ago she would never have considered such a risk. Now she found it challenging, appealing.

"I do have a friend here," Christine replied.

Seeming encouraged by that, Dr. Andrews smiled. "Take a couple of weeks and consider my offer. If you decide to move here after all, I would love to have you come and work for me."

Grateful, Christine nodded. "I'll have an answer for you within a week."

Chapter Twelve

“SO ARE YOU going to take that nice doctor up on her job offer?” Felicia Spurling asked the minute Christine climbed into the car next to her.

Inwardly she groaned, wishing that Dr. Andrews hadn’t reiterated her offer of employment within earshot of Paul’s aunt. Christine had thanked her and accepted her business card while Felicia had stood nearby in the lobby waiting patiently with a benevolent smile on her face. And behind that smile, Christine was quickly coming to realize, was an innately curious nature.

She remained silent hoping that Felicia would take pity on her and share the ride in silence.

“That looks like a very nice clinic,” Felicia went on, dashing her hopes. “Looks all clean and modern. Probably be a nice place to work.”

“I’m sure it would be.”

“This is a great place to live,” the woman continued in a warm tone. “I’ve never lived anywhere else. Friendly people, good schools, lots to do...”

Christine started the engine, put the car in gear, and pulled out of the small parking lot. As she waited for her chance to pull out into traffic, she sighed. “It seems to be a great place, but—”

“Brian?”

“Yes,” Christine replied as she steered the car out onto the highway that would take them back to Searsport.

From the corner of her eye she saw Felicia nod her head in understanding. “So there’s no chance that you two will work things out?”

“I don’t know,” said Christine not yet ready to consider the question of Brian. She clasped the steering wheel firmly with both hands to keep them still.

“But it’s possible,” Felicia pointed out. “You were planning to move here anyway. And if there is a chance that you and Brian can solve your differences then so much the better.”

It was a good point. *Wasn’t it?* While her heart lightened at the thought that moving to Maine after all might help her to win Brian back, it still felt bruised. How could Brian just toss everything they had

aside in a matter of days and strut around town with a leggy blonde? Was it to salvage his ego? He'd told her many times that his hometown was a small one where everyone knew everything. Folks would have expected him to arrive with his new bride. Was the gorgeous woman she'd seen him with meant to fend off any questions?

"Was your misunderstanding that bad?" Felicia urged her.

Well, hell. Maybe it would help to talk it out. Neatly avoiding a pothole in the narrow two-lane road, she sighed. "It was the end result of an argument that he and I have had our entire relationship. He never liked all the time that my job required. It interfered with a lot of our plans to do things together, took away time we could have spent together. But he just blew up at the wedding."

"Because you stopped to help Rufus?"

Christine nodded. "He called me the next day to tell me that he was going to move back here alone and that he'd had enough. So I drive up here to try and change his mind and..."

"And?"

"I saw Brian last night with another woman," Christine explained. "I'm sure Paul told you about it. We were having dinner at Fern's and he just walked right in with a beautiful blonde and—"

"Blonde you say?"

At Christine's nod, Felicia went on. "Tall, skinny?"

Christine nodded again. "And drop-dead gorgeous."

"Sounds like Jennifer Matthews," Felicia said. "She's a local girl. Been friends with Brian for years. She's gorgeous all right but she'd sure not the sharpest crayon in the box."

With a smile Christine realized that she didn't give a flip if the girl had an IQ of 180. It was the word "friend" that Felicia used that gave her a little lift.

"I was so shocked that I made a complete fool of myself." She managed a choking laugh as she continued. "But after it was over...I don't know...I was hurt, but I also felt angry. Angry with him, angry with myself."

"Why angry?"

"I guess it makes me mad that he doesn't realize how important my career is to me. I worked really hard to get through vet school and establish myself as a good doctor and he is completely uninterested in any of it. Not only that, he kept suggesting that once we got married I should think about giving it all up to start a family. And I want children, don't get me wrong."

"It's difficult for women to balance a career and children," Felicia

threw in.

"Yes, but not impossible," Christine said. "One of my best friends is a veterinarian I work with in Virginia. She just had her first baby and *she* plans to continue practicing."

With a nod, her passenger asked, "Okay, why were you angry at yourself?"

That made her pause. "I guess... I'm angry that I've put up with that to this point. Every weekend I was on call or every time there was a serious case at the hospital, I lived in dread of having to cancel plans with Brian or of being late to meet him. And it's hard to enjoy being with someone no matter how much you love him if you live in fear of ticking him off."

"I would think so."

"But you said that he and that woman are friends?" Christine wanted to know as much as she wanted to change the subject.

"Oh, yes," Felicia waved her hand dismissively. "Paul could have told you that."

"According to Paul, *I'm* the dullest crayon in the box, Ms. Spurling, I—"

"Felicia."

"Felicia." She huffed out an exhale "He thinks I'm wasting my time. He even had the nerve to tell me that I don't love Brian. He says that I only want Brian for security, like he's a teddy bear or something."

"Paul's always been opinionated." Felicia patted her shoulder sympathetically. "Paul is also Brian's cousin. They used to be close."

Coming up on a slower car ahead of them, Christine eased off the accelerator to keep a safe distance. "Maybe moving here would be good for me," she said, realizing that the kind lady next to her no doubt thought she was losing her mind "Even if things don't work out the way I want them to. It would be a fresh start."

"You know where to find a job now," Felicia pointed out as if she sounded perfectly sane. "And finding a place to live shouldn't be that difficult." When Christine glanced at the passenger seat she found Felicia frowning. "But then, I am sure you have family back in Virginia. Friends."

"Friends," Christine conceded. "I don't see much of my family, I'm afraid."

"You have friends here, too. Paulie and myself. Brian." Felicia's tone sounded almost persuasive. "I suppose you could live here just as easily as Virginia."

Paul was more than her friend, she mused. And while the implication sent unexpected waves of excitement through her, that little fact could prove to be a huge obstacle in repairing her relationship with Brian if she wasn't careful.

"Yes, you'd do fine here," Felicia concluded. "If that's what you wanted."

Christine didn't miss the friendly way Paul's aunt tried to steer the conversation though she did wonder at her motives. And she didn't mind. She decided that she liked Felicia Spurling. One really didn't have a choice but to like her.

"And you should probably let Brian know that you are here," Felicia stated. She just went on as if Christine had told her that she'd decided to move to Maine. "Just to get it over with."

Feeling a little better, feeling as though she was finding a sense of direction, Christine smiled. "I agree. But that's going to be tricky."

Waving her hand again, Felicia grinned. "Brian's parents go to Fern's Tavern every Friday night for dinner. I'll bet you a dollar to a donut that he'll go, too. He usually does when he's in town."

Christine immediately thought of the beautiful woman she'd seen Brian with. "Oh, I couldn't do that."

"Why not?" Felicia asked, reading her thoughts. "So what if Jennifer goes? You are as pretty as she is."

Christine snorted.

"Sure you are!" Felicia pointed to a billboard advertising a clothing store in Freeport as they passed it. "Hey! I have an idea."

CHRISTINE TOSSED THE shopping bags onto the bed where she'd slept last night with Paul, when she heard the door open. She wasn't surprised when he walked in, as if her thoughts had conjured him, and quietly closed the door behind him. Her pulse quickened as he took a determined step toward her looking more handsome than any man had the right to.

"Where did you two go?" he asked nodding toward the bags on the bed.

"Your aunt and I did a little shopping," she replied.

His eyebrows lifted. "Where's Rufus?"

"He's with Felicia."

"I want to talk to you," he said looking far too serious. Stepping forward, he took her hand in his and led her to the table at the corner of the room. They sat next to each other in the spindle-backed chairs facing the huge picture window. A perfect view of the ocean filled the

shining glass.

Paul held on to her hand, his fingers caressing hers. His knee brushed her thigh under the table. "How are you doing?"

Christine glanced down at their joined hands before meeting his gaze. "Better."

"Why were you trying to avoid me earlier?"

"Avoid you?" His compelling gaze made her senses leap. She took a deep breath and tried to get a hold of herself. With the physical sensations she felt around this man, it wasn't easy. "I wasn't trying to avoid you."

"Yeah, you were." His grip on her hand tightened. "You were going to Bar Harbor. Remember?"

"Yes," she admitted, "I know I was. But I only said that because I wanted some time to think about things. I still do. And I really don't want to impose." She shifted her gaze to the view of the ocean, focusing on the gentle rise and fall of the distant waves to keep calm. "Anyway, it's a moot point. I am staying here."

"So Felicia talked you into it, did she?"

When she glanced back at him she found him grinning at her wolfishly. He raised her captured hand to his lips, pressing a kiss across her knuckles as he had last night. A thrill of excitement raced through her.

"She has a way of asking that makes it hard to refuse," she managed.

His eyes darkened dangerously. "Runs in the family."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

His smile faded and his expression grew serious once again. "About Brian," he began. "You—"

"I'm going to try to see him as soon as I can."

"I see."

Paul's blue eyes searched hers. Warmth spread through her under his searing gaze. She swallowed hard and tried not to think about last night. God, but it was hard not to with him looking at her like that. "I spent four years of my life with Brian. I've spent the last several months planning to marry him and move here to this town. I have this one last chance to save what we had."

"And seeing him with the blonde last night makes no difference?"

"Felicia told me that she's a friend of his," Christine explained that away. "She said that you knew that, too."

"And last night?"

He was being unfair, damn him, and he knew it. She could offer

any number of reasons why Brian had been with Jennifer Matthews and why she needed to confront her former fiancé to save their love.

But there was only one explanation for what had happened last night, she realized with startling clarity. She wanted Paul. She desired him with an intensity that she'd never felt before in her life.

"Paul, you were there for me last night and I—"

Paul released her hand and rose from the chair putting distance between them. Running a hand through his thick hair, he sighed. "There was more to it than that."

"I know that."

He seemed to relax at her words, the lines on his face fading. But the tension was still there in his stiff posture and the slight tilt of his head.

Those blue eyes darkened as he stared at her. Embarrassment warmed her face as his gaze moved from the bed to her. Memories of the night before flooded her mind.

Shoving his hands deep into the pockets of his jeans, he turned to leave. "I have to finish up in the kitchen."

She watched him walk toward the door and knew that she should just let it go. Let him go. She sighed and the quiet sound stopped him in his tracks.

"Paul, I want to thank you," the words were sticking in her throat, "for getting me through last night."

"Glad I could be of service to you."

She didn't like the ugly emphasis he put on the word "service."

"We have to forget about what happened between you and I last night, Paul," Christine managed despite the sinking feeling in her chest. "I belong with Brian."

"You know I don't believe that," he said in a voice edged with control. "And you proved me right last night."

He spun around and snatched her out of the chair in a heartbeat. Startled, she found herself crushed against his long, hard body.

"Tell me you want me!" He crushed her mouth in a rough kiss and then pulled away. His gaze bored into her, his blue eyes nearly darkened to black.

"At least give me that," his voice was rough.

"I do want you." Her words ended in a whisper.

Her breath came in quick rasps. He held her against him, her curves fitted into his hollows, and those delicious sensations that she'd felt the night before were taking over.

His mouth again claimed hers in a greedy kiss that sent her senses

reeling. He kissed her over and over until she was lost in the taste of him. His large hands cupped her bottom making her gasp when he lifted her higher to rub against the hard ridge of his arousal. It barely registered when she felt herself falling backwards onto the bed with Paul coming down over her. Only the exquisite touch of his hands and mouth mattered. With a long arm he swept the shopping bags from the bed before his lips seared her throat.

His hands moved with a ferocity that left her breathless as he yanked at her clothes. He unbuttoned her blouse with lightning speed, pulled her slacks over her hips and down just as fast. Impatiently he stopped working at her bra long enough to pull his shirt over his head when her hands tugged at the hem. The impressive display of smooth, tanned muscle drew her hands and he moaned into her mouth as they roamed over his wide chest and powerful arms.

In a heartbeat, he had her naked except for her blue, cotton panties. He lowered his dark head to her breast with a soft growl and Christine gasped as his clever, hungry mouth nipped and tugged unleashing again the incredible heat she'd felt last night. Only this time there was more. Hot waves swept over her as she felt his strong hands all over her body. She arched her back with a low cry as he teased her aching nipple with gentle lashes of his tongue. Sliding her fingers into Paul's hair, she tried to pull him closer wanting more, craving more.

Paul reveled in seeing her revealed in the brilliant sunshine that filtered in through lacy curtains. Her small body, all long, slender limbs and soft feminine curves, was beautiful. Her flawless skin looked like alabaster under his hands but was much more yielding, softer. He delighted in filling his hands with her full high breasts, stroking the damp, tender flesh behind her knees.

And she wanted him. Paul had never felt so powerful and desired as he did now with her writhing beneath him. Her hands clutched at his back and his hair. Her slim hips grinding against him drove him crazy. While his mouth explored hers he reached down to cup her, taking her moan of pleasure into his mouth. The moisture he felt beneath the cotton made him ache. And there was so much heat.

Christine nearly came off the bed when he ripped away the cotton, pressed her thighs apart and took her with his mouth. The heat became unbearable until the blast wave of her climax ripped through her. Her hands fisted in the rumpled comforter as she shuddered and cried out his name. Her head tossed back and forth on the pillow as she hungered for more, wanted more.

And Paul gave her more. He stripped off his jeans before covering

her, entering her in a single hard thrust. Beneath him Christine went wild, dazzling him with her passion. Her nails raked his back as he began to thrust himself into her in a desperate rhythm. He angled her hips so he could push deeper inside her all the while feeding on her lips. Her breathy little cries were the only things he heard over the roaring in his ears as her hips rose to meet his. He knew the instant that pleasure claimed her again, could feel her convulse around him. Burying his face in her hair, he went with her.

After several moments Paul raised himself on his elbows and gazed down at her with a tender expression. His fingers brushed a lock of hair from her forehead, the light touch making her shiver.

The only thought Christine's mind could form at the moment was that the beautiful man above her had just given her more pleasure than she had ever experienced before.

He cupped her face in his hand, stroking a thumb over her cheek. "I love—" An emotion she couldn't name flickered in his eyes. "I love holding you this way." He exhaled deeply. "I guess I've wanted to since I met you. I could hold you like this for hours."

She would like to be held by him for hours. Then reality slipped back into her mind. She'd just made love with Paul. She hadn't meant for it to happen. Not when she was trying to win Brian back. But her traitorous body basked in the glorious aftermath of his lovemaking as her heart pounded out an anxious rhythm.

How could making love with Paul feel so right if her heart belonged to another man?

There were so many questions, so many things she had to deal with.

"Paul—"

He silenced her by brushing her lips with his own. As always, he seemed to understand her dilemma. "You don't have to say anything."

Chapter Thirteen

CHRISTINE PEERED OUT of the picture window the next morning at the beautiful rose hues of the dawn staining the sky. Paul's cotton shirt was the only warmth against her skin in the otherwise chilly room. She hadn't slept a bit the night before and she felt tired, resigned.

She'd promised herself deep in the night that she would break things off with Paul when the sun came up. Padding back to the bed, she climbed in under the covers next to him so that she could watch him sleep.

Oh, the things he had made her feel. Beautiful. Desirable. Cherished. She delighted in the memory of the way he had loved her until late into the night then held her safe and warm. It had been wrong, she knew, to be with him again, love him again. She knew that she shouldn't have stayed the night with him, but once they'd made love the first time what difference had it made?

One night, she had promised herself. Then it had to end.

Her heart began to race anxiously as his eyes slowly fluttered open.

"Good morning," she whispered, dreading what was to come.

"Yes, it is," he answered in a voice scratchy from sleep, his smile sensual. He lifted a hand to sift through her tousled hair as his drowsy blue eyes moved over her face.

Paul cupped her face in his hands and held it before him. Those big, hazel eyes were filling with tears. His heart shifted in his chest as he took in her pale face, the soft violet shadows under eyes. She looked like a woman who'd been tortured, instead of one well-pleased, in bed. Unease chased the last vestiges of sleep away as she turned her face into one of his palms and planted a kiss in his hand.

It had been so easy during the night to forget everything that kept them apart. But morning had arrived and all of the obstacles they faced returned with it. He would have given anything if they could have stayed there all day in bed, the rest of the world forgotten. He shook his head. No there was much to discuss, things to be decided. It couldn't be put off. As far as he was concerned, the sooner the better.

A quiet rap at the door broke the moment.

"Paulie?" Felicia's voice was a stage whisper on the other side.

“Good morning. I’ll start breakfast. Take your time.”

The drag of his aunt’s tread and the thump of the cane as she moved past their room and down the hallway made him smile. His grin widened when she began to whistle.

With a guilty flush Christine pulled away and again climbed out of bed. Felicia’s antics and the new intimacy she shared with Paul only added to her unhappiness. She had to put distance between herself and the bed. Just enough so that she could collect her thoughts.

Unsure how to begin, she walked to the window and tugged the curtains back so that Paul could see the sunrise. “The sky looks strange.”

“Red sky in the morning, sailors take warning.”

That was just unexpected enough to cause her to glance over her shoulder at him. “What?”

“It’s an old saying,” he explained.

But she wasn’t listening. She couldn’t have moved if he’d said the sky was about to fall. Her gaze remained riveted on him as he climbed from the bed magnificently naked. Her eyes moved over the shadowed planes and angles of his strong body as he stretched and searched the floor for his discarded jeans. By the time he found them and began pulling them on he’d noticed her open-mouthed stare.

With an impish grin he stopped just as he’d pulled the denim over his knees. “Did you, ah, have something else in mind for me to do before I get dressed?”

Oh, she wanted to. There were tiny aches all over her body, some in places she never thought could ache.

But there was also the business that couldn’t be put off.

“Not right now,” she said.

He sighed dramatically, forcing her to smile, as he pulled the jeans over his slim hips but left them unfastened. “It’s probably just as well,” he said as he made his way to the window to stand behind her. His strong arms slid around her, pulling her back against his chest, and she welcomed his warmth. “We need to talk.”

Christine nodded, hooked her hands over his strong forearms.

Paul’s low voice hummed into her ear. “Last night was wonderful.”

“Yes,” she agreed as his arms tightened about her possessively.

“I want you to stay with me, Christine,” he went on. “Here in Maine. You were planning on moving here anyway. We’ll stay here at the inn until we can find a place. You can find a new job.”

The dull ache in Christine’s chest intensified. “You want me to

stay with you?"

He brushed a kiss into her hair. "Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I am in love with you."

Her hands dropped from his arms as she began to tremble.

"You're in love with me?"

The ragged exhale of his breath made her pause. "Yes, I—" Abruptly he turned Christine to face him. His blue eyes searched hers as his hand came up to cradle her cheek. "I know this sounds crazy, but I want to marry you. I'd ask you to marry me now, Christine. But I don't want to rush you. I know you need time."

"You want me to marry you?" she asked, feeling her eyes begin to sting. "Less than a week ago I was supposed to have married your cousin, Paul."

The arm about her waist tightened as if he expected her to bolt. "I know that," he said impatiently.

She took a deep, calming breath. "You don't even know me."

"Yes, I do."

She shook her head at the intent expression on his face. "Paul, I'm still in love with Brian."

He released her then, dragging his hands through his hair. "No, you're not." His eyes turned stormy as he took a step toward her, forcing her back. He stalked her until her back pressed against the glass of the window. His large hands clamped over her arms. "And I'm willing to wait until you realize that. I want you."

Christine laughed incredulously. "Paul, this makes no sense." She yanked away from him and reluctantly he let her go. Walking around the table to put it between them, she fought the urge to pace and just stared at him. "Paul, please don't wait because—"

"Because you want to stay free in case Brian changes his mind?" he asked bitterly.

Understanding that she was hurting him, and knowing that there was nothing she could do about it, she gentled her voice. "Paul, I told you. I'm here to win Brian back. I belong with him."

"Do you feel anything for me at all?"

Christine closed her eyes and lifted her hands to her temples where a dull ache was beginning to grow. It wasn't fair of him to ask that, damn him. Not right now. "I don't know."

"So you don't."

She didn't move. "I didn't say that."

"Look at me!"

She did. And the pain and fury she read in his eyes made her heart skip a beat. She wet her dry lips and said, "I could love you, Paul. That's all I can give you right now."

He lowered his head and she felt as if a weight were crushing her chest. He'd offered himself to her, and deep in her heart, she wondered if she didn't want what he offered. Want him.

But before she could make a decision about anything, she had to face Brian. She needed to prove to herself, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that she still loved him.

Or that she didn't need him after all, her traitorous heart chimed in.

Tonight, she reminded herself. Tonight she would face Brian. Perhaps what she had in mind would solve all of her problems, decide her fate.

"Paul, your aunt told me that Brian and his family have dinner every Friday night at Fern's Tavern," she said weighing each word. "Tonight. I want to go and see Brian."

When Paul didn't say anything, she went on. "He'll figure out soon enough that I am here anyway. I'll have to face him at some point. But I want to choose the time and place."

"No." He shook his head. "It's a damned stupid idea."

Paul stalked to where his shoes lay on the floor by the bed and snatched them up. Swearing under his breath, he marched to the door meaning to leave.

"Wait!"

He stopped, but didn't look at her. And worse, he didn't speak.

Her mind went blank. She had only wanted to prevent him from leaving. Now she didn't know what to say.

"What did that old saying mean?" As a reason to keep him there, it was sorely lacking. "Red sky in the morning?"

"Red sky at morning, sailors take warning," he said dully. "The sailors used to believe that if there was a red sky at sunrise that it would be a rough day at sea. Or that a storm was coming."

And with that said, he left.

Christine stood watching the door for a long time after. When her gaze shifted to the window, she noticed that the lovely rose sky had deepened to a brilliant red-orange color that burst forth from the horizon. An angry color. She wondered if it was a forecast of what was to come.

"OH, GOODNESS." FELICIA smiled as her gaze swept over

Christine. "You look lovely in that dress. Didn't I tell you?"

Christine didn't know about lovely but she felt naked. The plum silk dress scooped low in the front and barely reached her knees. Trying to swallow her nervousness she smoothed the dress over her body as she gazed in the mirror with Felicia. Since the dress had thin straps instead of sleeves and no back to speak of, wearing a bra was out of the question. And she couldn't remember the last time she'd gone without one.

"I'd, ah, forgotten how revealing this was," Christine muttered.

Felicia's laughter filled the room. "You look gorgeous, dear. Simply gorgeous. Now put these on."

Christine took the racy heels they had selected to complete the outfit from her with a wary sigh. They couldn't even be considered shoes. Three-inch spikes would be held to her feet by narrow black straps. Wondering how she would ever walk in them, she bent down to put them on.

"Yes, all done," Felicia announced.

Christine hardly recognized the elegant woman that gazed at her from the mirror. Felicia had styled her hair in shiny, tousled waves that appealingly framed her face. The cosmetics that she'd helped her apply felt heavy since she customarily wore little or none. But it didn't appear overdone. In fact, she liked the exotic slant the make-up lent her eyes and the pouting quality it gave her mouth.

"Let's show Paul," suggested Felicia.

Turning from the mirror, she wobbled on the unfamiliar heels and almost fell. Once she recovered her balance, she shook her head. Paul had avoided her since that morning. He was angry—no, hurt—and she knew she would have to face him. But at the moment she was steeling herself for the confrontation with his cousin, her fiancé. She didn't believe she could handle both in the same evening. Not when she felt so vulnerable. And naked.

"I don't think that's a good idea," she managed.

Felicia's dark brows knitted. "Why ever not?"

"He doesn't think I should confront Brian," Christine explained. Taking another couple of practice steps in the heels and nearly toppling again, she sighed and slumped down onto the edge of the bed. "Maybe he's right."

"What?"

"Confronting Brian with his family present," Christine replied.

"But you have to take advantage of the opportunity."

Christine nodded.

Felicia's warm blue eyes, a shade different from either of her nephews, met hers. Her cheeks heated up as she remembered that Felicia knew she'd spent the night with Paul. And Felicia knew she knew.

"Paul sounds jealous to me," Felicia's said with quiet conviction.

Clutching her arm and hauling her from the bed, Felicia headed for the door. "Come on. Let's show him how you look."

Christine realized indignantly that she was being towed behind the woman like a naughty child caught in her mother's clutches. But Felicia's determination would brook no resistance. Even the cane did not slow her. Christine allowed herself to be pulled along and somehow managed to keep up wearing the slender heels.

They found Paul in a small parlor. He stood there so calmly with his back to them, glancing out the window at a view of the lawn. Christine noticed that he was dressed in an untucked flannel shirt and jeans.

Releasing her hold, Felicia moved behind her and gripped her shoulders to steady her. It was that moment that Paul turned around.

He pinned her with an angry stare. But the anger faded from those blue eyes as his gaze slowly moved down her body and back up to her face. She released the breath she'd been holding since Felicia had pulled her into the room. His expression held neither approval nor disapproval as his eyes locked with hers. But she felt his desire from across the room and it made her insides leap.

"Doesn't she look beautiful, Paulie?" asked Felicia.

Paul's gaze never left her. "Yes."

"She's all ready to go out," his aunt continued.

Ignoring his aunt, he shoved his hands in his pockets and moved closer to her. "What do you hope to accomplish by doing this?" he asked in a low voice.

He moved closer still until she was forced to tilt her head back to meet his gaze.

"I told you, Paul."

Felicia walked around to stand at Paul's shoulder. She winked at Christine knowingly and said, "I'll be in the kitchen if you need anything."

Neither of them watched her departure. The soft thump of the cane fading with her footsteps kept time with Christine's heartbeat. Time stood still as Paul's fingers lightly grazed her cheek.

"Paul," she managed as his light touch skimmed down her throat causing a delicious shudder to heat her body. "I have to try."

His hand fell away but his gaze never faltered. "Why are you dressed like this?" he asked with a thread of suspicion in his tone.

She had expected the question. "To give me confidence, I guess."

"Confidence?" he asked, surprised.

"Yes. From what Felicia told me, Brian's family will be there. And Jennifer—"

Paul shook his head. "Jennifer? Is that what this is about?"

Christine dropped her gaze to the floor. After a moment, she nodded in admission. She started when he cupped her chin and lifted her face until their eyes met.

"Christine, you are more beautiful than ten Jennifers." He pressed his lips to her forehead in a butterfly kiss. "You have warmth, intelligence. You're beautiful inside and out."

Her eyes began to sting as his words washed over her. The raw emotion in his penetrating gaze had her heart thundering in her chest. When his arms closed around her to pull her body against his, she leaned into him unable to do anything else.

"You meant it," she whispered.

He seemed to realize that her knees could buckle any moment and tightened his hold. "Of course I meant it. You look more wonderful to me now than you did on your wedding day."

She shook her head as a tear slid from the corner of her eye. "No, not that."

"What then?"

Emotion tightened her throat but somehow she managed to speak. "You meant it when you said you loved me. No one in my entire life has ever looked at me the way you are now."

Paul didn't want to let her go. The tender honesty in her eyes as they shined up at him gave him hope. As did the fact that she'd completely surrendered to him last night. He brushed a tear from her cheek.

Christine watched Paul's expression turn grim. The corners of his mouth lifted in a half-smile that didn't reach his eyes. "I hope you'll forgive me for not wishing you luck."

Paul cradled her head against his shoulder as he held her. Above her head the sound of his weary sigh reached her ears. He let her go and took a step back.

"You look beautiful," he said, his sad expression shredding her heart. "Brian's a lucky man."

Christine turned and fled as quickly as her ridiculous shoes would let her. If she'd stayed a moment longer, she was afraid she would have

flung herself into Paul's arms and never let him go.

Chapter Fourteen

CHRISTINE WOULD HAVE walked out of Fern's Tavern just after she'd entered if the memory of Paul's handsome face hadn't urged her on, given her a reason to answer the question of Brian once and for all.

She must have been crazy. Only two nights ago she had created quite a scene in this same restaurant. That night she had hurried out the door covered in clam sauce after felling a waitress. Now she was walking back in wearing a slinky dress, no bra, and the most uncomfortable shoes she'd ever worn in her life all to face her ex-fiancé, his girlfriend, and his family.

Christine stood silently waiting for the hostess to seat her, considering what she would say or do when she confronted Brian. Her heart pounded alarmingly the moment she had spotted Brian and his family at a large table near the center of the restaurant. The sight of them glued her to the spot. It was all she could do to force her legs to move when the hostess greeted her and motioned for Christine to follow her.

She spotted the empty booth next to the table occupied by Brian and his family and her heart leapt as she realized that was where the hostess was guiding her. *I can do this*, she told herself as the waitress placed menus on the table. Keeping an eye on her ex-fiancé, she slithered onto the seat, grateful to be off her feet and the ridiculous heels before she fell flat on her face.

She took a deep, calming breath.

Leaving her mind and her heart open to the truth of her emotions, she studied Brian. She had to admit that he looked wonderful with his shining auburn hair combed back in smooth waves and the white shirt he wore opened at the throat. But for some reason, Brian didn't seem as handsome as she remembered. Something was lacking....

He sat facing her at his table, but hadn't noticed her. Christine wasn't surprised. Not with the beautiful Jennifer sitting next to him, purring into his ear. She felt a twinge of envy at how lovely the woman looked with her golden hair swept up into a French twist and her white, strapless dress showing off the pale perfection of her shoulders and cleavage. Her face was a perfect arrangement of delicate features, her hands slim and elegant.

Something Jennifer whispered in Brian's ear amused him and the rich sound of his laughter reached Christine's ears. As she continued to watch them, the searing pain she expected to feel didn't come. Only the slow realization that Brian, at that moment, looked happy. He looked content and relaxed in a way that she'd never seen before. The teasing glance he shot at Jennifer held warmth and desire. Christine wondered when he had last looked at her that way. Had he ever?

Paul looked at her that way.

The sad expression Paul had worn when she left tugged at her heart. The last thing she wanted to do was to hurt him. The wealth of feelings he claimed to have for her had been right there in his eyes for her to see.

But she promised herself that she think the whole thing with Paul through, later. Right now she had to focus on the situation at hand.

"Hello, again," the lady's voice was kind, her expression friendly. "Can I get you started with something to drink?"

"Yes, I—"

"Christine?"

Alarm gripped her at the sound of Brian's voice. Her gaze locked with his as the waitress stepped back. His eyes moved over her with unmistakable surprise as she gained the attention of the three other people seated at his table. She felt rather than saw Jennifer's gaze on her, felt herself wilt self-consciously. She brushed a lock of hair behind her ear as Brian stood and approached her.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he asked loudly, the surprise turning to anger as he frowned down at her.

Their waitress' eyes rounded and Christine managed a weak smile for her. "Please bring me a beer," she said. "Katahdin Gold."

Drawing momentary strength from her exotic new appearance, she turned back to Brian. For once she was able to fight back the panic that Brian's anger always brought on.

"I'm having dinner."

"You think this is funny?" Brian asked. "Pulling a stunt like this in front of my family?"

With all the false bravado she could muster, Christine tossed her head and nodded toward Jennifer. "That would make her your, ah, sister?"

"That's none of your damned business," Brian growled. "Go home. It's over."

"You're right," she returned, her own temper beginning to flare. "It's not my business who she is."

Christine thought she could hear Brian's teeth gnashing.

"I mean it, Christine," he said in a menacing tone. "You had your chance. Leave."

"I'll go where I want," she stated, gaining confidence, "when I want. You have no say in the matter."

"Damn it, you—"

"Brian?" Jennifer's lilting voice came from behind him. "Won't you introduce us to your friend?"

There was just a hint of annoyance in that soft voice. Enough to tell that Jennifer had guessed who Brian's 'friend' was.

Standing back to provide his three dinner companions a better view, he nodded curtly.

"Mom, Dad, Jen, this is Christine Vance. The woman I almost married."

Brian's father nodded. His mother gaped at Christine in confusion. "Christine?" she muttered.

"Yes," Brian replied. "Sorry about the shock, Mom. There was a time that I would have loved for you two to meet. Too bad she never had the time. Or maybe it was because she didn't care."

The mockery in his words had her seeing red. Accusing her of not caring to meet his family or anything pertaining to him was a lie. How many times had she worried herself sick about making it on time to meet him in a restaurant or begging Miranda to help with her weekends on call at the animal hospital when they made plans? Too many to count.

"I cared, Brian. But I am beginning to wonder why I did."

Brian turned mocking blue eyes on her. "I guess that's why you lived at the damn animal hospital, then, right? Because you cared *so* much?"

The conversations of the dinner guests around them dulled to a low murmur as many curious eyes watched their showdown. Even her waitress stood watching in fascination before Christine's small reassuring smile sent her dashing for the kitchen.

She slowly rose from her seat, her angry gaze never leaving her former fiancé. "Maybe I stayed there all the time because it was a lot more pleasant than spending time with you."

"Christine—"

"No!" she cut Brian off. "It's my turn now. I came here tonight to see if there was still something between us."

"You're not telling me that you still plan to move up here?" Brian asked, his voice tinged with disbelief.

“That’s none of your business.”

With a confidence she didn’t know she possessed she stalked around him in a half-circle coming to a stop by Jennifer’s chair.

“You once meant a great deal to me, Brian, but I’m wondering if I ever really loved you. And now that I think about it, I don’t think you loved me. We simply needed each other. I needed someone to keep me from being alone and you needed someone you could mold into your idea of the perfect wife. But we have to grow up some time.”

It’s over. Her heart pounded out the realization that it wasn’t that painful. Her gaze moved over the angry mask of his face and she knew in that moment that her feelings for him had changed over the last several days. She finally understood that she would never be able to please him and didn’t want to any more.

“I need more now, Brian. Maybe we both do. I could never have been what you wanted.”

Brian’s anger seemed to escalate and for a moment Christine felt the old panic rise then fade. She didn’t fear his anger anymore. She didn’t need to make him happy to feel better about herself.

“No, you could never be the woman I need,” Brian bit out.

Christine’s gaze flicked to Jennifer. Fighting back the temporary hurt of his words, she forced a smile. “And you could never be the man that I need.” She nodded at his parents apologetically. “The greatest gift you ever gave me was leaving me at the altar. Thank you.”

Brian’s eyes softened, locked with hers for a long moment.

“Goodbye, Brian” Christine said smoothly before turning and walking toward the door. She only stumbled once on the high heels that she wore, but thank God she’d made it outside the restaurant before she did.

A COUPLE OF hours later, Christine sat wearily on the small padded stool in the inn’s kitchen sipping wine. The heels lay on the shiny linoleum floor where she had tossed them. The first thing she’d done when she arrived was to relieve her aching feet.

Paul had been waiting for her, his joy at her flat statement that her relationship with Brian was over, barely concealed. She had intended to go to her room, alone, and sort things out in her head and heart. And for once in her life she wasn’t afraid of spending time with herself, being on her own.

But she just couldn’t pull herself away from Paul’s company. It wasn’t comfort that she craved, but something more. It had started when he’d offered to massage her feet later, that excitement racing

through her. His offer and easy charm had managed to dispel much of the tension between them. Maybe she'd let him. She was a free woman after all.

She caught him glancing at her over his shoulder while he worked at the counter. It amazed her how utterly masculine he looked standing in the kitchen, traditionally a woman's domain, with his sleeves rolled up doing something as tedious as deveining shrimp.

"How are you doing on wine?" he asked.

She still had better than half a glass. "Fine," she replied. "Why? Are you hoping to get me drunk? I thought you were supposed to be seducing me with your culinary talents."

Paul's grin was decidedly wicked. "That's the plan."

"Well, Mr. Chef," she teased, fueled by the alcohol she used to numb all the emotions she battled, "it's going to take a lot more than a shrimp cocktail to get me into bed."

"Shrimp cocktail?" He snorted. "Try Shrimp Creole."

Christine slid off the stool. She moved closer to watch him work, leaning her hip against the counter. His strong hands deftly carved into one shrimp after another in smooth sweeps as he removed the veins.

"I've never had Shrimp Creole."

"Good." He stopped long enough to steal a quick taste of her mouth. It seemed natural to let him. "After you've tried this you'll be begging me to take you."

She laughed. "That good, huh?"

"You bet." He scooped up the shrimp and dropped them into a colander in the sink. After running the water until he was happy with the temperature, he began to rinse them. "So, how are you doing?"

Christine knew he wanted to talk about the scene in the restaurant. She shrugged. The simple motion sent one of the thin straps of her dress lazily gliding down her shoulder. She hauled it back into place. "Better."

He hooked the strap with a finger and pulled it back down. The open-mouthed kiss he boldly brushed over the smooth skin of her shoulder made her shiver. "How much better?"

"It just wasn't the same," she began, struggling to find a way to explain how she felt. "I expected to feel so much more when I saw him. And then seeing him with her, how he was with her."

"Did that bother you?" Paul asked as he moved closer, clasping her hand in his. "Seeing him with Jennifer?"

She shook her head. "It didn't bother me. But as I watched them, it occurred to me how at ease he was with her." Her fingers tightened

on his, savoring his strength. "When he and I were together, it seemed that he was always angry with me for something. Or annoyed. You know, I can't remember the last time we laughed together. I really can't."

"It's okay," he said quietly, comforting her.

"They were happy together," she went on. "And I can't blame either of them for that."

His deep blue eyes searched hers.

"I was so eager to be in a relationship, to be what he wanted, that I didn't give a thought to what *I* wanted. So I protected a part of me, held it back. As long as I kept that part locked away, it didn't matter what I wanted."

"But it does matter what you want."

"I know that now, Paul." She read the question in his eyes. The tears she didn't want caused her eyes to sting. The only answer she could give him was the truth. "Now, I'm not sure what I want."

With infinite tenderness, Paul pulled her into his arms. She could feel the strong pounding of his heart against her cheek while his body warmed the silk of her dress. She snuggled close to him, would have crawled into him if she could have.

His chin rested on the top of her head. "Do you think you might want to live here?"

That was a question that she could easily answer. "Yes."

He brushed a kiss over her hair. "Do you think you might care about *me* one day?"

The hope in his voice pushed the tears from her eyes. Pulling back, she looked up into his handsome face. "Why do you think you love me?"

"I don't *think* I love you," he replied, brushing a tear from her cheek with his fingertip. "I do love you."

Emotion nearly closed her throat. "Why?"

There was frustration in his eyes, but his expression remained patient. "Christine, I don't need a reason. Love isn't like that."

Feeling torn and confused by too many emotions coming at her too fast, she buried her face in his shirt. She breathed in the scent of him. The light musk of cologne mingled with the earthy scent of man, sent her senses reeling. Her fingers began frantically plucking at the buttons of his shirt. She wanted to forget the future, the decisions, forget everything. She wanted to lose herself in him.

"Love me," she pleaded as she yanked the shirt free from his slacks. Rising to her toes, her mouth found his in an urgent kiss filled

with heat and longing. He hesitated only a moment before his arms tightened around her, pressed her against his hard body.

Paul moaned when she parted her lips, allowing his tongue entrance. He took a good long taste of her, feeding on her urgency and her desire for him. The fact that she was using him to avoid what she was feeling didn't stop him from scooping her up in his arms. Without a thought to the fact that any of the inn's guests could have happened on their passionate display, Paul carried her to the room they shared without breaking the kiss.

The frantic slide of her hands over his body, her mouth on his throat, drove him on as he lowered them to the bed. When he couldn't stand it any more, he yanked sharply on her dress until the straps gave way and whisked it off her body. Capturing her roaming hands in his, he pulled back so that he could just look at her spread beneath him.

No woman had ever captivated him as she did. Her slim body was exquisitely bare except for the black satin panties and lacy stockings that she wore. She writhed against him in need. Paul knew he would never get his fill of her. She was beyond incredible. All of that passion, all of that fire.

He let her go long enough to throw off his shirt and fumble with his slacks. She came up to push his hands aside, her nimble fingers unfastening the slacks in a heartbeat. When her hands found his flesh he knew he would lose it. He pushed her onto the bed and fell on her.

They rolled across the huge bed in a tangle of limbs. Hands desperately sought the most pleasurable places, lips tasted and tormented. The flames of their passion burned out of control and the ache became unbearable. When she took him deep inside, they moaned in unison and the world spun away.

In a frenzied rhythm they moved. He plunged into her mindlessly, possessing her, branding her as his. She rose to meet each thrust, seeming to revel in his impatience to bring them both incredible pleasure. When her arms clutched him tighter and her moans became breathy little cries he drove deep and held. Her climax tore through him, made his heart soar. Unable to wait any longer he joined her, burying his deep moan in her mouth.

Snuggled in his arms, Christine drifted off to sleep in a matter of minutes. He wouldn't let her sleep for long. He still fully intended to feed her the Shrimp Creole he'd begun. And he'd want her again. Actually he already did.

Deciding his desire could wait, he simply enjoyed the luxury of holding her and gazing at her while she dreamed. Yes, she wanted him.

She said she *could* love him. But what if she never did come love him?
He was afraid of what would become of him if she never did.

Chapter Fifteen

CHRISTINE WHISTLED AS she walked out of the inn and into the sunshine the next morning. Rufus dashed out of the handsome blue doghouse a neighbor had built for him and eagerly hobbled to her side, making her smile. Crouching beside him, she ruffled his fur and turned him so that she could take a look at his side. Satisfied that the swelling was practically gone now from the neat row of stitches, she rose and continued toward her car.

She was taking the next step toward her new life today. She was going to take Lillian Andrews up on her job offer.

Of course, her new life had already begun. It had begun exactly one week ago, on her wedding day. So much had changed in that short span of time. And so much had happened.

And Paul, she realized with perfect clarity, had played a large role in her conversion.

She had to stop that. It would be so easy to fall into that mind set, to convince herself that she loved him because he said he loved her and they'd been intimate. To replace Brian with him as her safeguard against loneliness.

No, it was much too soon. People didn't just fall in love in a week like that. They couldn't.

Could they?

Her internal debate came to a halt as she beheld the peaceful scene the tiny seaside town made. Rufus trotted along next to her as she headed for the parking lot and enjoyed the quiet beauty of her surroundings. Who wouldn't enjoy living here? She watched a thin man in red sweats jog down the road past the bed and breakfast. She returned his wave and watched as he continued at a nice steady pace. On the other side of the road a young couple pushing a baby stroller leisurely made their way toward town.

She stopped to watch them just as she reached her car. The sight of the couple walking along arm in arm pushing the stroller brought an unfamiliar pang of yearning to the surface. Deep down, didn't she want that? True love, a family?

Don't you have that within your reach now? a voice inside whispered.

"Hi, Maggie," a familiar voice called from behind her. "Seth."

The couple smiled and waved at him before continuing on their way. Christine closed her eyes and took a deep calming breath before turning to face him.

"Hello, Brian," she said when she turned around. "I'm surprised to see you here after last night."

He nodded. The sun glinted off the auburn waves of his hair. He was wearing the fisherman sweater she'd given him last Christmas. His exhale was a puff of white on the frosty morning air.

"That was quite the scene you created," he accused.

"What are you doing here?" she asked bluntly.

Christine knew her directness took him by surprise. He recovered quickly.

"I wanted to find out what the hell is going on," he replied, taking a step closer. "I wanted to know why you showed up last night dressed like a siren to duke it out with me in front of the whole damned town. I mean, what were you thinking?"

His critical tone sparked her anger. "If you had been listening, if you had *ever* listened to me, you would know the answer to that."

"I'm listening now," he pressed stubbornly.

Christine pulled her jacket more firmly about her. "I wanted to know if I still loved you after the way things ended. Or to know that I could live without you."

"I'll be living here now, Christine," he pointed out. "It makes no difference. You won't see me again."

Her chin lifted a notch as her gaze met his. "It does make a difference. I'll be living here, too."

Brian didn't speak for a long moment. Then one corner of his mouth lifted in a half-smirk. "You're joking, right?"

"No, I'm not."

"Christine," he began in the tone that once let her know he was losing patience. "There is no chance that you and I will get back together."

"I don't want to renew our relationship." Her anger cooled at the realization that he was accusing her of the same thing Paul had—of wanting to live close to Brian in hopes of reconciliation. Of course, why wouldn't they think that?

"Then why would you move here?" he asked, watching her intently.

"To make a fresh start," she said. Brian's eyes narrowed and she felt the old self-consciousness seeping back in under his close scrutiny.

But she'd spoken the truth. Today was the first day of her life as a woman who would take responsibility for her own happiness. She'd work where she wanted and how she wanted. And if she chose to be with someone, she'd be with him because she wanted to. Not because she felt she needed to.

And Paul...she found that the thought of returning to Virginia without him brought a sinking feeling that she didn't care to analyze.

"A fresh start," Brian repeated. He scrubbed a hand over his face. "You'll be back in Virginia by Christmas, Christine."

"That's your opinion," she said flatly. "I've given you every reason to believe that, but things have changed. I've changed."

"People don't change."

"You sound just like Paul," she said without thinking.

"Paul?" Brian's eyes narrowed as his gaze shifted to the inn then back to her. "He's not the type of guy you want to get that serious about."

"Another opinion."

"He's a charmer," he went on. "I'm sure you know that by now. You were a beautiful woman, vulnerable. He was there for you. I can see it. But I can't see it going very far beyond that. How did you two hook up anyway?"

His negative appraisal of her relationship with Paul shoved away any lack of confidence and brought her temper to a boil.

"We hooked up, as you put it, after you left me the altar," she said. "And yes, he is charming and he was there for me. But if you think to protect poor little Christine from your womanizing cousin, think again! I've known more unconditional love and acceptance from him in one week than I knew from all the years that you and I were together."

"You can't tell me you have feelings for him," he said incredulously.

"Yes, I can."

Brian's laugh was a humorless dry huff. "You think you're in love with him, don't you?"

"I am," it came out, startling her. And she meant it, she realized. Before her stood the man she'd thought she'd loved for years. Yet, she couldn't remember a time when he'd completely consumed her thoughts when she wasn't with him or filled her heart with deep joy when she was. Not the way Paul did. Memories of the past week crowded her mind even now. Kissing Paul in her car on the way to Maine. The way he'd shampooed the gooey mess from her hair that

first night. The way he made love to her....

"I *am* in love with him, Brian," she said with conviction. Pressing a hand to her forehead to try and hold back the images flooding her mind, she leaned against her car. "I am so in love with him and I've been too blind to see it. I haven't told him. I should have told him."

She caught the bewildered look on her former fiancé's face and felt the comforting press of his hand on her shoulder.

"Let me talk to him, Chris," he began. "I—"

"No," she said firmly. Gazing up into the face she knew so well, it was easy to guess his thoughts. "I know what you're thinking. But you're wrong. He loves me, too. He wants to marry me. He told me that, Brian. That's the last thing a charmer should say, isn't it?"

"Probably." He sounded skeptical. "But that's a little fast. Don't you think?"

She used to think so. "No. What about your relationship with Jennifer? I could say that that happened a little fast."

His smile held no warmth. "She and I had been an item before I ever met you. Yeah, maybe we hooked up quickly after I, uh, left you. But I am hardly proposing marriage at this point."

Christine studied his face intently. "But you care for her. I could see that."

He cast his gaze downward, nodding. "I care for her. We get along well together. But something's missing. That extra something that makes a man want to spend the rest of his life with a woman? It's not there."

When his eyes again met hers, his expression was grim.

"And you thought it was there with me?"

"I did," he said. "But you were pretending to be something you're not. Weren't you? Just to please me?"

"Yes."

"So it really wasn't there, was it?"

She shook her head as her eyes began to fill with tears. "No, it wasn't. I'm sorry."

Brian pulled her into a loose embrace, cradling her head against his shoulder. "I'm sorry, too," he said gently. "For the way it all came down. I was hurting. I wanted to hurt you, too."

Christine allowed him to hold her for a moment. The apology brought about a peaceful conclusion. The kind she'd never dared to hope for. Finally pulling away, she smiled at him and swiped at the tears with her hands.

"I'd better be going now," he said, not returning her smile. "I

hope you'll be careful around Paul."

"I know what I am doing," she assured him. She did. "Where are you headed?"

"Back to town."

"I'll give you a ride," she offered. "I'm heading to Camden."

Shrugging, he walked around to the passenger side of the car and climbed in when she unlocked the door. "What's in Camden?" he asked as she fastened her seat belt.

With a clear sense of what she wanted, she beamed at him. "A job."

Neither of them noticed Paul staring out of the front salon windows of the inn as they drove away.

"PAUL?" CHRISTINE CALLED as she walked through the inn a couple of hours later.

Waving to a couple of guests that she passed, she continued to glance into room after room until she found him. He stood folding linens in a small laundry room toward the back of the inn. It struck Christine how large he seemed in the small room and she smiled.

He hadn't noticed her. Unable to resist the impulse, she wrapped her arms around him from behind. He didn't start, didn't seem at all surprised. Dropping the linen in his hands, he let his arms drop to his sides.

"Hello," she pressed a kiss to his shoulder before swinging around to peer up into his face. "I got a job today."

Paul didn't smile. He didn't even look at her. "That's great," he said flatly.

"Paul?" Walking around to face him, she frowned. The eyes that met hers were cold, ice blue. "What's wrong?"

He continued to stare at her with a blank, emotionless expression and disappointment set in. She'd been so anxious to return to the inn and tell him that she'd accepted the job from Lillian Andrews. He didn't even know there had been a job offer. She'd been afraid to tell him before; afraid to give him ideas about a future together when she had been uncertain.

But she was no longer uncertain. To prove it she stretched up to press her lips to his. His lips were firm, unyielding.

"Paul?"

"Leave me alone, Christine."

The shock his words brought about held her immobile. "What?"

"Leave me alone," he repeated.

Stung by his unexpected behavior, she ran a nervous hand through her hair, chewed at her lip. "Why?"

Paul wasn't able to hold his emotions in check for long. Fury simmered in his deep blue eyes. But his voice was cold. "I saw you with him."

"You saw me with...Brian," she said carefully.

Mistaking her caution for guilt, he sneered. "That's right. And I'll be damned if I'll let you play me for a fool any longer."

"Paul, no." She laid a hand on his arm. He threw it off. "I haven't been playing you for a fool. When I talked with Brian...it wasn't what you think."

"That's what they all say."

"Paul, please!"

He spun around and headed for the door.

Christine stayed on his heels. "Brian came to talk to me. That's all."

"Yeah?" He didn't stop until he reached the inn's kitchen.

"Yes."

He kept his back to her as his hands gripped the counter. From where she stood she could that his knuckles were turning white. The sleek lines of his body in the tight jeans and tee shirt that he wore were all taut, tense muscles.

"Paul, I'm telling you the truth," she explained, realizing she had everything to lose if she lost him. "He wanted to know what last night was all about. I explained to him, again, that I merely wanted to see if I could face him after the way that we parted. When I told him I planned to move here, he thought what you're thinking now."

His voice was so quiet she almost missed it. "What?"

"That I wanted to move here in the hopes that we would get back together." She wanted so much to touch him. But she didn't dare try again. Not right now. "Would you please turn around and look at me?"

The minutes stretched out painfully. She didn't realize that she'd been holding her breath until he turned around and she breathed a deep sigh of relief. It was something.

"He assured me that there was no chance of us getting back together," she continued. When Paul snorted, she said, "He did. I know that was my intention. I told you that. But last night, I truly realized that my relationship with Brian was over."

Paul folded his arms across the muscled expanse of his chest. "What were you doing in his arms?"

Willing him to believe her, she took a timid step forward. "It was

a parting embrace. Nothing more. I promise.”

“What led up to it?”

“He wanted to know why I was still moving up here if I didn’t hope to reconcile with him.”

The tense lines of his face eased ever so slightly. It gave her hope.

“What did you tell him?” he asked.

Taking another small step toward him, she said, “That I was moving here to make a fresh start...with you.”

He nodded, but she knew he wasn’t convinced. “Where did you go together?”

“I dropped him off in town,” she explained, praying hard now that he could see the truth in her eyes. “I dropped him off on my way to Camden.”

“Camden?” His dark brows knitted.

“Yes. I went to the veterinary hospital where I took Rufus. I sent a résumé to the doctor who owns the hospital when I thought I’d be moving here with... Anyway, she offered me a job. It’s only three-quarter time, but I accepted.”

This time Paul took a step forward. “Three-quarter time?”

Christine nodded, encouraged. “Only thirty hours a week. I’ll be on call for emergencies one night a week and one weekend a month.”

When Paul moved closer still, she smiled up into his face. “I told Dr. Andrews that I wanted to work mornings,” she said slowly. “That will leave my evenings free.”

“For what?” he asked softly.

“To spend with you.”

Paul’s fingertips grazed her cheek. Her heart shifted in her chest at the way that strong hand trembled. “Why do you want to spend your evenings with me?”

“Because I love you, Paul.” Taking his trembling hand in hers, she pressed it to her heart. “I’m not afraid of being alone anymore. Once I saw my relationship with Brian for what it really was, a part of me wanted some time to myself. Away from everyone. That’s why I denied what I felt.”

His deep blue eyes gazed into hers, searching.

“But I realized that I was still afraid of something,” she continued. “I was afraid of losing you. I love you. I want you to be my friend and my lover and—”

He crushed her in his arms and it felt like coming home. Holding him just as tightly, she pressed her cheek against his heart. Its pounding rhythm matched hers. “I want you to be my husband.”

Paul pulled back to stare at her. "What did you say?"

"That I want you to be my husband," she repeated.

His eyes closed for a moment. When they reopened she recognized in them the same happiness that swelled in her heart. "Christine," he kissed her mouth more a gentleness that left her dazed. "I love you so much. But I don't want to rush you. I was being selfish. I can—"

Pressing her fingers to his lips to silence him, she smiled. "You could make this easier for me, you know. I was a jilted bride only a week ago," she chided.

His answering smile sent heat spreading through her body. "I won't leave you at the altar." Paul's lips burned a devastating path past her jaw and over the sensitive skin of her neck.

Christine moaned at the sensation his lips and hands were creating. "Is that a yes?" she whispered.

Sighing in mock resignation, Paul smiled. "I don't know..."

"Oh," she laughed and playfully punched his arm.

He swept her off her feet so quickly that her head swam. When her vision cleared, Paul's handsome face was all that she saw.

"Yes," he said with his lips almost touching hers. "I'll marry you."

Epilogue

SINCE CHRISTINE AND Paul had only had a week's courtship before their betrothal, they decided to wait an entire month before getting married.

As fate would have it, Christine was on call for the veterinary hospital the weekend of her wedding. Again. Lillian Andrews had planned the weekend off for a family function. Christine considered changing the wedding date, but Lillian talked her out of it. She put Christine's mind at ease with the assurance that she would still be in town and available if needed.

Christine's beeper had gone off just as she'd carried the clothing bag containing her new wedding gown into the house that she and Paul were renting. The phone hadn't been connected yet but fortunately, Miranda had brought her cell phone along on the long drive from Virginia. A quick call revealed the emergency case to be an elderly lady's cat about give birth to a litter of kittens.

She had half-expected Felicia to be upset by the fact that the wedding was only three hours away and her plans to help with Christine's hair and makeup were disrupted. Instead Felicia excitedly accompanied her and Miranda to the hospital in Camden where the nervous owner awaited their arrival.

Christine was grateful for the extra hands available to hold newborn kittens as they came into the world. It allowed her to focus on the beautiful, calico mother cat and the safe delivery of all seven kittens. Once the last kitten arrived, Christine brought her delighted client back to the treatment room to visit the new family.

By the time she'd tended to the mother cat, cleaned the kittens, and instructed the owner on everyone's care, she had all of thirty minutes to make it to the small church in Searsport that Paul had attended as a child. It would take fifteen minutes of that to reach the church.

"Gracious, we'd best get you ready," Felicia exclaimed with a broad grin.

With an amused look at the stained lab coat she wore, Christine laughed. At least the slacks and blouse she wore beneath appeared clean, but she'd hardly done anything to her hair that morning and

wasn't wearing a bit of makeup.

"I hope you have a magic wand in that bag," Christine said gesturing toward the large purse that Felicia always carried.

"I have a hairbrush and some lipstick," Felicia mused.

"I have a compact," Miranda offered from behind her, reaching for her own purse.

This time Miranda drove Christine to the church. Christine smiled when she saw Paul, more handsome than ever in his tuxedo, waiting for her in the church parking lot. Then she laughed. He held Rufus, who just had his cast removed the week before, to his side with a leash.

Climbing out of the back seat of Miranda's car, Christine clutched the garment bag and made her way to her soon-to-be husband.

"I just made it," she announced, smiling.

Paul returned her smile with one of his own and her heart turned over. Glancing at his watch, he said, "I would say so."

His eyes gleamed with amusement as they moved over the lab coat that she hadn't bothered to remove. "Nothing serious I hope."

Christine shook her head. "A very nice cat had a healthy litter of kittens."

There was no anger, no impatience in Paul's expression as he nodded. He had easily accepted the demands of her job, enjoyed hearing about some of her cases. As long as she didn't get too technical.

Reaching up to brush his lips with her own. "I'm going to go put on my dress."

"Do you have to?"

Laughing, she looked down at her clothes. "I can't wear this."

His sensual smile made her pulse race. "I was thinking it would be nice to have you wear nothing at all."

"You're terrible." She kissed him again.

"But you love me," Paul pointed out.

And that was the truth. Paul was the one she loved, the one she chose to be with for the rest of her life.

"I do love you," Christine said smiling up into his face.

And with more happiness than she'd ever known filling her heart, she walked arm in arm with Paul up to the small stone church.

Tina Van Zandt

Tina Van Zandt is happily married to the one she loves and together they have two children, three cats and one very large dog. When she isn't spending time with her family, Tina enjoys writing romantic comedies and historical romances, reading romances of all types and listening to her U2 collection.

Visit Tina on the web at <http://tinavanzandt.com>.