



Phantom Lover

By

Anna Leigh Keaton

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Dedication

Thank you to Brandi for constantly telling me how much you love this book.

And thank you to Deanna and Sable for giving my phantom a new home.

Prologue

"Jacques! Jacques where are you?"

Jacques came out of the woods where he'd been sitting and looked toward the cliff path leading down from the Moonlight Cove Bed and Breakfast. Little Lilly came down the narrow, rutted pathway at a speed that made his heart stumble every time he saw her doing it.

"I'm here, *petite amie*," he called, moving down the sandy beach toward their normal meeting area where a large, flat-topped bolder sat with two smaller boulders, which formed chairs. Since Lilly couldn't see him, it was easier to have a designated spot for them to meet.

Lilly dashed through the thick, brightly flowering rhododendron bushes at the base of the cliff and scampered out onto the beach, making a beeline for the table, kicking up sand behind her. "Jacques!" she screeched with the kind of glee only young children possess. Breathing hard, she threw herself against the table and faced him, even though he knew she couldn't see him. "I found you!"

Jacques laughed. The only bright spot in his endless, lonely life was the time he spent with this dark-haired, dark-eyed sprite. "Surely you did, *chérie*."

She waved a book so close to his face, he leaned back to keep it from hitting his nose. "No. I found you in this book Gamma gave me to read. It's all about Moonlight Cove and the people, the Indian Natives that used to live here." She gulped in huge breaths, and he wondered if she'd hyperventilate. "Gamma said we're des...des...desend..."

"Descendants?" he supplied.

"Yeah, that. She said we're a little bit a part of the Coos Tribe that used to be all over here."

Jacques nodded to himself. He'd known from the first that the

Nightsongs were part of the same tribe he'd once known. They had a look about them. An unparalleled beauty. Even Clara Nightsong, Lilly's sixty-year-old grandmother, was still a stunning woman. "That you are, *chérie*."

"Right. But this book talks about you, too. Did you know that?"

"What does it say about me?" he asked, trepidation eking its way into his bones. As far as he knew, his name had been forgotten to history. He'd accomplished nothing in his life that warranted his immortality. Not even his death.

Lilly moved toward him, reaching out to touch him, to locate him. When her hand made contact with his chest, she plopped down on his lap. He cuddled her close and breathed in her warm-child scent, and once again wondered what his life would have been like if...things had worked out differently.

She opened the book on top of the table to a dog-eared page, pointed to words, and bounced happily, her little feet smacking his shins. "See? There you are."

Jacques grabbed her ankles to hold her still and picked out his name in the writing. Even though he couldn't read English, Jacques Lazare Cheever, his Christian name, stood out clearly to him.

"Read it to me, *chérie*."

She settled against his chest, and he held her loosely, enjoying the human contact. She was so open and giving of her attention, it warmed him in ways he'd thought impossible. She was the light of his life, and he dreaded the long, lonely winters when she lived far away with her parents.

Lilly slowly started reading in that stilted, monotone way of children who'd so recently learned to read.

"*Chérie*, have you read this before?"

She nodded.

"All of it?"

Again, she nodded.

"Then just tell me what it says." He smiled to himself, thinking they'd be there until after nightfall if she had to sound out each and every word.

"It says a lady saved you from your sunken ship. She was an Indian princess, and that you loved her very much." Lilly shut the book, rested her head on his shoulder, and settled even more snugly against him. "That you wanted to marry her, but her dad said no. That you didn't belong with the Indians, that you were a stranger and had to go home."

Jacques ground his jaw as anger built within him. The story's facts were anything but accurate.

"It said the princess was so upset about it, she threw herself off a cliff, and that you're the Phantom of Moonlight Cove. That sometimes, during a full moon, people see you walking on the beach, looking for your true love."

Merde! Once, *just once*, he went for a swim during a full moon and someone had seen him, or rather the water sluicing off his body, as he emerged from the ocean, and he became legend. He knew that, had known it for nearly a century. He'd used that legend to his benefit at times, but the story in that book couldn't have been farther from the truth.

"Do not believe everything you read, *chérie*," he said, his voice hoarse, his throat tight with anger and regret.

"No princess killed herself because she loved you?" Lilly asked with the innocence of youth.

He swallowed and fisted his hands at his side. "I am here because I did not love her. I am stuck in this world, this—" He sneered and stopped himself. To Lilly he was just a man, an invisible man to be sure, but still a man. Her friend. He couldn't bring himself to disillusion her childlike imagination. Couldn't tell her that the princess had cursed him to an eternity of loneliness and misery, of endless days and nights that melded into each other until he had no idea how long he'd lived. "What year is this, Lilly?"

"Nineteen seventy-six."

Mon Dieu! He'd been stuck in this bay for *two hundred years*.

Chapter One

"You shall never know peace until you experience the agony of love."

— Curse by Chailali

Jacques reclined on the wide back porch of the abandoned Moonlight Cove Bed and Breakfast. His hands behind his head, his feet propped up on the rickety, paint-chipped railing, he let the sunshine warm his face and the sounds of the sea some hundred and fifty feet below soothe him.

What else was there to do?

He sighed and opened his eyes, staring up at the stunning blue sky, the wispy clouds far out over the ocean, and the haze of sea spray carried on the gentle, salty breeze.

Mon Dieu. I'm going to go out of my mind.

A rough, sarcastic laugh escaped him as he rolled into a sitting position and peered around the overgrown, weed-infested back yard. Once, not so long ago, this place had been beautiful. Clara Nightsong had kept a garden of rhododendrons, roses, and lilies. Wisteria clung from the porch railings and roof, making the B & B into a magical place. The lawn had been so lush and green it looked like a carpet of velvet. But no longer. Clara was gone. The guests were gone. Dandelions and other weeds polluted the lawn. The roses clung to life, but were slowly being

suffocated by trailing, choking, cannibalistic vines of some kind.

A shame, Jacques thought sadly. A shame to lose such a gentle, loving woman as Clara, and a shame her garden and the home in which she'd lived all her life was falling to shambles.

Oh, there'd been people to see it. In the past few months, there'd been more than a few lookers. The *For Sale* sign, which had been posted on the front lawn over a year ago, now said *Sold*. Soon the Moonlight Cove B & B would have new residents, and Jacques' life would once again be altered.

Mayhap there would be a woman. A woman who could finally release him from his curse. A woman who, after two hundred and thirty years, would help him find the final peace of death.

Jacques scrubbed his hand over his face and felt the pain and anger well up inside him. Even after all this time, maybe *because* of all this time, the pity he'd once felt for Princess Chailali had disintegrated into a low burning fury. All because he hadn't been able to profess his love, a love he'd never felt for her, she'd cursed him to an eternity of this...

Nothingness.

The crunch of vehicle tires on the oyster shell driveway at the front of the house caught his attention. More visitors. In the past couple of days there'd been men in and around the house, checking wires and plumbing.

Jacques stood and walked down the stairs. A small blue pickup truck with chipped paint and rust below the door had stopped just a few feet in front of the building. The sun reflected off its window, preventing Jacques from seeing who sat inside. The truck didn't have any of the same markings as the other recent visitors. No signs for Moonlight Cove Plumbing and Heating or Oregon Electrical.

The driver's door slowly opened and a long, shapely woman's leg appeared, followed by a shoulder, and then a head.

Jacques leaned against the side of the house, his heart skipping several beats.

Lilly.

He would know that beautiful oval face anywhere.

She got out of the truck and quietly shut the door, then leaned back

against it and stared at her deceased grandmother's home.

Nineteen years had passed since she'd been here. Up until a year ago, when Clara died, Lilly had sent a letter to her grandmother every week. And every week, Jacques would quietly sneak into the house, find the letters in the box beneath Clara's bed, and read them. This was his only connection to the one person who had ever heard him. Who knew he was real.

Or had known, once upon a time. He'd eventually become silent, even to her.

Lilly pushed away from the truck and turned a slow circle, taking in her surroundings. He wondered what the place looked like to her. Was it still beautiful, or did it look as... *abandoned*, as it did to him? She'd once loved spending her summers here, but all that changed when she turned eighteen, met a man who'd been a guest of her grandmother's, and left with him, never to return. Until now.

She walked toward the front porch, toward him, and he could see the sadness in her deep brown eyes. His heart ached for her. Her gaze went through him, not seeing him, but taking in the sad state of the building. Just a few steps from the porch, she turned right. He moved out of her way as she passed, heading for the path that led down the side of the cliff to the beach below.

Silently he followed her, afraid he might startle her. He didn't know if she'd be able to hear his footsteps or the leaves of the bushes rustling as he passed, but he doubted she could.

A short while later, she pushed through the tall, fully blooming rhododendron bushes and stepped out onto the sandy beach. As she walked toward the surf, her shoulder length black hair blowing in the breeze, he noticed how her body had changed over the years.

When she'd left she'd been so young, with womanhood barely shaping her body. Her straight, thick hair had reached to her waist. Her breasts had been small and high, and her hips hardly flared. Now, clad in white shorts and a bright blue sleeveless top, her curves were pronounced, womanly, soft looking.

Beautiful.

Jacques dragged his gaze from her ass and chided himself for thinking lascivious thoughts about the child for whom he'd once cared.

Except she was a child no more.

Lilly stopped at the edge of the dry sand and kicked off her canvas shoes. Barefoot, she walked down to the water's edge and let the ocean's foamy fingers rush over her toes.

Jacques stopped next to her and studied her profile as she stared out at the ocean. No, she was no longer a child. Her lips had filled out to a sensual curve. Her skin was clear, and looked as soft as silk. Tiny lines fanned out from her eyes as she squinted at the sun, professing her age but never diminishing her beauty.

A single tear slipped from her eye, and his heart broke in two.

He ached to touch her and had to fist his hands at his sides to keep from reaching out. It seemed an eternity since he'd touched a woman. And this one, he knew. He knew her heart, her sorrows. He wished he could share them with her, take them on to himself and ease her burden.

"Petite amie, do not cry," he whispered.

Of course she didn't hear him. She stood there, still as a statue, watching the surf.

Another tear followed, and then another. When she bowed her head and covered her face with her hands, Jacques' own eyes burned with grief. He wanted—*needed*—to comfort her. He reached for her, but pulled back at the last second. He couldn't scare her away. She'd returned, and he couldn't stand the thought of her leaving out of fear.

Turning away, he jogged up the beach to where a jut of rock nearly touched the sea. He scrambled up a rockslide and slipped into the cool interior of a small cave; a place he'd called home for years before he'd begun haunting the B & B.

Against the wall was a low table he'd constructed out of driftwood. On it sat several dozen items he'd pulled from the ocean, everything from glass fishing net floats, to bottles, to shells. Spotting the item he'd come for, he grabbed it and headed back toward Lilly.

She'd moved up the beach to dry sand where she now sat with her knees drawn up to her chest, staring out at the ocean with watery eyes.

Jacques sat down next to her and watched her for a few moments. She swiped at her eyes with the back of her hand. Her skin was a toasted golden brown, as it had been when she was younger, and seemed to glow in the sunshine. Her hand was small, tipped by neatly shaped nails that held no paint, like they once had.

Clutching his fingers around his gift, he dug through the sand with his other hand until he found a small rock. He tossed it over his shoulder. When it rustled in the bushes behind them, Lilly jerked around to see what had made the noise. While she was distracted, Jacques set his gift in front of her, laying it carefully on the sand by her feet.

Lilly turned back toward the ocean, a slight frown creasing her brow, and then her gaze dropped and she spotted his gift. For a long moment she didn't move, but simply stared at it. Then slowly, as if she were afraid it would bite her, she leaned forward and touched it with one long, slender finger. She jerked back and glanced up and down the beach, then behind her. When she saw nothing, she looked at the gift again.

As Jacques watched her with curiosity and pain in his heart, she picked up the piece of coral and studied it carefully, turning it this way and that. Then, as if a dam had broken, she buried her face in the crook of her arm, gripped his gift to her chest, and cried.

"Non. Non, chérie. Do not cry," he begged to no avail.

At a loss, hurting with her, Jacques sat next to her whispering soft words of endearment, wishing she could hear him and hoping she knew she wasn't completely alone.

* * * * *

Lilly sobbed until she was sure there wasn't anything left inside of her. As a teenager when she'd come to the beach, she'd found many such wonderful surprises. Pretty shells, oddly shaped driftwood, even antique bottles with notes stuffed in them written by people from long ago. But nothing had ever been as beautiful as this piece of coral. It seemed as if the sea knew she needed something precious to keep her going.

As her tears abated, she wiped her eyes and nose on her shirttail

and then examined the bumpy, white coral. So beautiful, so perfect, it looked like a feathery rose, yet was as hard and as heavy as stone. This coral wasn't from around here. No, it looked like something from the warmer coral reefs of the South Pacific. Perhaps it'd found its way here by the tide from Hawaii, or even from farther waters, like around Australia.

With a sigh, she mopped the remaining moisture from her cheeks. She was ashamed of herself for having fallen apart—not that she wasn't due for a good cry. Lord knows. Over the past thirteen months, she'd been holding it in as her world slowly crumbled around her. First she'd endured the death of her beloved grandmother and had experienced the final crack in her marriage that had torn it apart. Then two months ago, the technology company where she'd worked for twelve years downsized her right off the payroll. And now, this.

She glanced toward the top of the cliff, at the beautiful gingerbread Victorian she'd always loved so much. Her home away from home when she was a child. The home she'd come to clean out because the new owners would be taking possession in a couple of weeks.

If she could have afforded the property taxes, she would have kept the B & B and run it herself. She had nothing left, nowhere to go, and her only means of survival—bless her dear grandmother—was to sell the B & B and start a new life. Maybe she'd even stay here in Oregon this time. She sure as hell wasn't going back to Silicon Valley. There was nothing left for her there. No home, no husband, no job. Nothing.

When tears welled in her eyes again, she blinked hard and fast to keep them at bay. She wasn't a crier, never had been. Damned if she'd let self pity build up and eat her alive. Once the money came through from the sale of the B & B, she'd be set for a long time. Maybe a vacation would do her good. She'd go somewhere quiet. Then she would buy a small house and take her time looking for a job.

Taking in a deep breath of salty air, she closed her eyes and let the sun's warm rays soak into her bones. Nothing in California could compete with the clean air and cool breezes of Moonlight Cove. God, how she'd missed this place. Why hadn't she ever returned?

Her grandmother had come to San Jose each winter when the cold

dampness of the Oregon Coast became too much for her arthritis, but when Grandma asked Lilly to visit in the summer, she always had a ready excuse. Her job. Her husband, Peter. Or, she just didn't have the time.

Ha! On all accounts, she'd been wrong. Her husband hadn't needed her. He'd found another woman—a buxom, twenty-something cocktail waitress. Her job hadn't needed her, as her severance package had shown. And time?

Guilt washed through her and she curled her arms around her knees. She hadn't taken time to visit Grandma, and now it was too late. Lilly would never see her again. And at the end of the month, when all the boxes were packed and all of Grandma's belongings were stuffed into storage until she could find a place to live, she'd probably never see the Moonlight Cove B & B again. Seeing it, with other people living in it, running it and refurbishing it as the real estate agent said they would, would likely kill her.

Clutching her gift from the sea in her right hand, she stood and brushed the sand off the seat of her shorts. Exhausted from the long drive up from San Jose, she knew she would get no work done today. Already the sun was on its decline, and she guessed the time to be around four-thirty. She'd unload the truck, throw together a salad for an early supper, have a nice cool shower, and then go to sleep early.

Tomorrow was going to be a trying, emotional day as she started going through her grandmother's personal belongings.

* * * * *

Jacques sat on the end of the bed in the room where Lilly had dropped her bag—the room that had been her favorite as a child. Lilly pulled a thick, blue terry cloth robe from her bag, along with a smaller bag he assumed contained her toiletries, then made her way into the bathroom.

Little had changed in the years since she'd been here. The drapes and bed coverings were different, but the antique wrought iron headboard and the solid maple dresser and nightstands were still the

same. The hardwood floors had been refinished to a gleaming shine just a few months before Clara died. Jacques had done his best to keep the house clean, dusting the rooms once a week and airing out the bedspreads and sheets once a month. Just to give himself something to do.

He hadn't attempted the yard work, though, afraid someone would notice and wonder who was keeping it up.

Boredom ruled this past year. When Clara was alive, he'd spent hours sitting with her watching television or sitting in the kitchen while she baked her famous blackberry pies for church socials. Not that she'd ever known he was there with her, but it had kept his mind occupied. And when she had guests, observing them had been his favorite pastime.

The water shut off in the bathroom.

Jacques watched the curtains flutter in the late afternoon breeze while he waited for Lilly's return. He wished he could speak to her and ask her why, after all this time, she'd come back.

He smiled as the hope he normally kept well buried entered his heart. Lilly had finally come home.

She walked through the doorway from the hall, pulling a brush through her shoulder-length hair. A shame, he thought, remembering how long and thick her hair had once been. Her eyelids looked too heavy, her shoulders slumped in what looked like defeat. He wanted to know what was on her mind, in her heart. What weight did she carry with her?

He knew her marriage had not been a happy one, from what she'd written about her husband in letters to her grandmother. He'd treated her no better than a slave, and had never let her visit her grandmother. Jacques would love to get his hands around the bastard's throat.

Lilly set the brush on the nightstand and stared out the window for a long moment. The sun silhouetted her, making her appear ethereal. The tanned skin of her long, lean neck looked soft and inviting, and he longed to place a kiss there. The breeze through the open window ruffled the hair over her forehead, and he wanted so much to reach out and push it behind her ear, to make a connection with her.

With a tired sigh, she turned back toward the bed, undid the belt on the robe, and shrugged it off her shoulders.

Jacques' breath lodged in his throat. *Mon Dieu!* She was beautiful. All rounded curves and shadowy hollows. Ripe, full breasts with large, dark areolas. Her waist pinched in, then a lovely flair of hips led down to long, succulent, lean legs. A dark thatch of hair at the juncture of her thighs hid her most vulnerable of parts. Her nipples puckered from the coolness in the room, and Jacques' cock grew long and thick inside his buckskin pants.

All too soon, she slipped between the sheets and her body disappeared from sight. She let out a tired sigh, snuggled the covers up to her neck and, within seconds, her breathing evened out.

Jacques paced the room in discomfort. He should not be having such thoughts of Lilly. Sweet, innocent Lilly. He glanced at her, at her gorgeous face. *Mon Dieu!* When had she become such a...*woman*?

He remembered the last time he'd seen her. The night of her eighteenth birthday, when she and that bastard she later married had sneaked away from her party to be alone on the beach. She'd lost her innocence that night. He'd thought of her then as a child and had worried over her, wanted to scold her for her foolishness.

Now he wanted to be that man. To touch her, kiss her, and hear her cry his name in passion.

Jacques knew he shouldn't think this way about Lilly, but he couldn't help himself. He wanted her. But he would deny himself. Jacques knew a phantom in her bed was the last thing this sad, tired woman needed.

Yet unable to keep away, he carefully lowered himself to lie beside her and watch her. Her full, pink lips parted slightly as she breathed deeply and evenly. Her brow, even in sleep, puckered into a tiny frown. Reaching out, he gently pushed a lock of silken hair away from her cheek.

She stirred slightly, and he froze. A tiny hiccup of a sound came out of her, and she burrowed even deeper under the covers as if seeking a warmth they couldn't provide.

"*Ma chérie,*" he whispered.

"*Jacques,*" she murmured.

His heartbeat raced in his chest. "*You hear me, chérie?*" Not since

she was a young girl had she heard him, spoken to him.

A tiny smile flitted over her lips.

"Ah, minette. I've missed you."

She moved closer toward him in her sleep, until her head touched his shoulder. Even though his body reacted against his will and his cock throbbed painfully against the confines of his buckskins, he laid one arm over her waist and held her.

Her scent, which was familiar, yet had changed over the years, filled his senses. It was warm, womanly. Sexy.

He snuggled her close against his chest and let her adjust to his body. When she'd settled, he ran his hand lightly up and down her naked back. The feel of her warm, creamy skin ignited a hunger in him he couldn't begin to stifle.

All through the long evening and night, Jacques held her, petted her, snuggled her close and reveled in her warmth. He watched her sleep, marveling in her peacefulness, wishing he could join her in the silent darkness of slumber. So relaxed, so tranquil.

Near dawn he moved away from her, and in her sleep she tried to follow. He needed to be out of her bed before she awoke. No telling what panic would ensue if she woke up in the arms of a man she couldn't see. He'd allowed himself that pleasure with another woman once before. Only once. The woman had run screaming, bare-ass naked, from the room. After that, he made sure he was far away before the women awoke.

Only this time, he couldn't bring himself to leave the room. Instead he settled in the cushioned wingback chair in the corner and watched Lilly, waiting to see her eyes open, wanting another glimpse of those perfect, rounded breasts.

The hard-on he'd been battling all night returned with a vengeance. He undid the ties of his pants and wrapped his hand around his engorged cock. Slowly pumping himself, he groaned and his eyes slid closed as he imagined Lilly's hands on him. Her mouth. Her hot, wet depths taking him inside her, her muscles milking him.

He came with surprising speed and a stifled shout of release.

Lilly shot up in bed, gripped the quilt to her chest, and searched the

room with wide eyes.

Merde. Had she heard him?

"Lilly?" he said softly.

Breathing hard, she reached over the side of the bed and grabbed her robe, slipping it on before she stood. She looked around the room again, then gave a nervous little laugh.

"Silly," she said. "There's no one here."

Jacques' spirits sank. She wouldn't hear him. She couldn't. No one could.

Chapter Two

With a strange feeling of unease, as if she were being watched, Lilly rummaged through her suitcase for clean shorts and a top, underwear, and socks. She knew she was being silly. The house was empty, had been for a year. What had startled her awake then? She'd heard something, she was sure of it. She glanced up at the ceiling, wondering if there were mice in the attic, or perhaps a family of raccoons had taken up residence somewhere in the house.

She should have had an exterminator inspect the place when the water and electricity had been turned back on. She wasn't squeamish, but she didn't want to run across any little beasties sharing her quarters.

After a quick shower and a breakfast of toast and hot coffee, Lilly headed outside for boxes. They were all the same size, flattened, and in the back of her truck covered with a waterproof tarp. She frowned at her little rust-bucket. Maybe she'd purchase a new vehicle after she got settled somewhere. She'd been driving this thing, limping it in and out of mechanic shops, for fifteen years.

Her husband had always told her there was no extra money for frivolities like a new car for her. Of course, he had a new one on lease every two years. He claimed it was because he had to entertain clients. Truth was, she found out a few months ago when he filed for divorce, there wasn't any money. He'd gambled away every cent they had. The bank had foreclosed on the house they'd shared for years.

Deciding to get the hardest part done first, Lilly stowed a stack of

boxes under one arm and a thick roll of strapping tape beneath the other and headed to the back of the house, to her grandmother's bedroom.

The room still smelled like her grandma. A combination of pomanders and Chanel No. 5. She set the boxes on the bed and made a slow circuit of the room. Spotting a few familiar items on top of the dresser, set on a mirrored tray, Lilly picked up a bottle of the favored perfume and sniffed the spritzer. Tears stung her eyes. Her heart ached with missing her grandma. She'd never felt so empty and alone in her life. The assumption that "someday" would eventually come, that she could visit her grandmother anytime, had been a huge mistake.

She shook off the melancholy and opened the closet door to find it crammed with boxes of papers, ledgers, and receipts. Probably most of it was garbage and she would tackle it later. She pulled open the dresser drawers. All of them contained clothing, except for the top one. In there she found Grandma's jewelry box and a leather-bound diary. She knew the jewelry box contained several pretty pieces, some antique, but they held little monetary value. Not that she would ever sell her grandmother's jewelry. She'd spent many fun-filled, rainy days playing dress-up as a child, putting on the sparkly brooches, clip-on earrings, and chokers her grandma had worn as a young woman. They would one day be passed on to....

She swallowed back the pain clogging her throat. At thirty-seven, childless, and with absolutely no prospect of ever being with another man, she doubted she'd have anyone to pass on her grandmother's things to except perhaps the Historical Society.

Pulling the diary from the drawer, she sat on the edge of the bed and opened its cover. On the very first page, where a person would normally write in their name, in her grandmother's flourished handwriting, it said: *Accountings of the mysterious Phantom of Moonlight Cove Bed and Breakfast, as told by my guests.*

Some memory buried deep inside Lilly tried to make its way forward, but she couldn't quite grasp it. "The Phantom of Moonlight Cove," she said softly. She'd read or heard about it somewhere before.

She flipped through the pages. Each one was dated. Some of the

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writing was in her grandmother's hand, other pages were not. She stopped at a page that had been written by someone else. At the bottom, in her grandmother's hand, was a footnote. *Guest uncomfortable with relating story to me, but wanted it recorded. August 15, 1960.*

Her grandparents had purchased the house in 1949, just as tourism was picking up in the area, and opened the B & B as a honeymoon getaway.

She flipped back to the beginning of the book and began reading.

May 31, 1951

A very strange occurrence happened here last night. One of our guests, Ms. Smithe, a beautiful young woman on her way south to visit her parents in San Francisco from Seattle, came to me after breakfast and asked if anything out of the ordinary had ever happened in her room before.

Confused, I asked what she meant.

She pulled me out to the back porch, away from my husband and the other guest, and told me she thought she had a ghost in her bedroom.

Now, I'm a good Christian woman and that concerned me. I mean, I did have the house blessed when we moved in, and ghosts wandering about could surely put a damper on business. Not to mention the poor soul searching for their way home.

But then Ms. Smithe, in a hushed tone and with wide eyes, continued her story. It seems that the ghost lay in bed with her and touched her in very inappropriate ways. I asked her why she didn't get out of the room right away, and to my surprise the fair-haired woman blushed to the shade of one of my roses. Well, I may be an old married woman, but I know what that look meant. Whatever the ghost had done hadn't scared her, but had pleased her very much.

Ms. Smithe asked me to reserve that same room for her in three weeks' time when she planned to return to Seattle.

I'm going to call Father Devon to re-bless the room.

Lilly laughed aloud at her grandmother's words. A good Christian woman she was, and always had been. Hearing stories of a frisky ghost must have given her heart palpitations.

Lilly skimmed the next few entries and found all the stories similar, most with little detail other than that the women—always the women, and all of them single, some the adult daughters of older guests, some traveling alone—claimed they *felt* a presence in the room with them. The ghost, or *phantom* as her grandmother started calling him, didn't seem to have a preference for which room he invaded. One account took place on the back lawn, where a woman said she'd been kissed "like I've never been kissed before. It was shocking, really. And oh my—I wish my fiancé kissed like that!"

Lilly flipped the page and read another entry by another woman, with her grandmother's footnote at the end.

August 14, 1960

Thank you, Mrs. Nightsong, for helping me find myself again. I've been so alone these past two years since my husband died. I came to Moonlight Cove because I needed a vacation, and to get away from my teenaged children for just a few days. Never had I expected to experience the joy of loving again. I'm far past my prime and simply don't have the time or energy to seek companionship.

The past two nights, lying in bed, I was visited by an ethereal being. At first I thought perhaps it was the spirit of my late husband, but I soon realized that was not the case. This man, this being, was much larger and stronger than my dear departed William. He held me in his arms, and even though I couldn't see him, I knew he thought me beautiful. So tender and kind in every touch, he healed my soul.

Lilly blinked back tears. She felt this woman's pain, knew her longings, because she had them, too. She'd been fighting loneliness for

Phantom Lover by Anna Leigh Keaton

years. Long before her husband betrayed her with another woman, she'd been alone in her marriage.

*Thank you again, Mrs. Nightsong, and I'd also like to
thank your mysterious phantom. He will forever be in my heart.
Mrs. J.*

Lilly set the book aside, wondering about this phantom and why he sounded so familiar. Had her grandmother spoken of him? She doubted it. The stories in this book weren't things her grandmother would ever—even though Lilly had been an adult for many years—reveal to her.

She'd read more later. There were still forty years' worth of stories in there, and she wanted to read each and every one. But right now she needed to start packing boxes or she'd find any excuse to dawdle.

* * * * *

Jacques huffed out a breath of annoyance. She'd found Clara's Phantom journal. He should have hidden the damn thing after Clara died. Or burned it. How embarrassing to have his sexual conquests over the past half century recorded for anyone to read. He was a man, after all. He had needs. Was he to remain celibate forever? He may not be able to ever find the peace that death would bring, but he could experience the peace of a woman's soft, giving body, even if it only for a few moments in time.

He made sure the women were willing, which wasn't hard since most thought he was a ghost or a spirit or simply a pleasant dream. It wasn't like he'd had intercourse with every woman, either. There were many times when he'd brought a woman to her pleasure with only his hands or his mouth. Others he simply held. It all depended on the individual woman and what she needed at the moment.

But leaning over Lilly's shoulder, he knew what she'd read. With the sketchy details, there was no telling what she thought. He knew what was to come in later pages. Over the years, as women's attitudes toward sex changed and became more open and honest, the details bordered on

the scandalous. No way was he going to let her read the rest of the journal.

When Lilly picked up a box and started assembling it, her attention diverted from the book she'd put on the nightstand, Jacques wrapped his hands around it, knowing it would vanish from her sight. He waited to see if she noticed. When she didn't, he quickly left the room, determined to destroy the thing.

* * * * *

Lilly wrapped the last of her grandmother's porcelain figurines in a linen towel and placed it in the box. She taped the box closed, labeled it with a black magic marker, then stood and stretched. Her stomach growled and she glanced out the window, surprised it was so late in the evening. It'd taken her all day to go through the bedroom, to carefully wrap each breakable item and package it to go into the moving truck scheduled to arrive in two weeks.

Picking up a large shoe box she'd found under the bed, one stuffed with all the letters she'd written her grandmother over the years, Lilly went to the nightstand to retrieve the journal, anxious to keep reading accounts of the phantom.

The book wasn't there.

She spun in a circle, her gaze alighting on every surface, searching for the book. "Damn it," she grumbled. She must have inadvertently packed it into one of the boxes.

But she didn't remember doing that. She'd cleaned out the nightstand and carefully wrapped the Tiffany lamp that had sat on it, but she was sure she hadn't touched the book since placing it there this morning. Couldn't remember seeing it while she was cleaning the nightstand. *Where did it go?* She checked behind the nightstand, the maple headboard, and then got down on her hands and knees and looked under the bed in case she'd knocked it there by accident.

It was simply...gone.

Pushing herself up beside the bed, she frowned. "Okay, where'd

you go?" She picked up the stack of unassembled boxes off the bed and looked beneath them. Not there. She hadn't left the room but once, to make a pitcher of iced tea, and she hadn't taken the book with her then.

"Come on," she said aloud. "Don't tell me I'm losing my mind now. I'm too young for that." It wasn't in the room. She was too tired to search through the sealed boxes tonight.

After eating a hearty supper of a hamburger and salad, Lilly made her way up to her room. The sun was just sinking into the ocean. Tomorrow morning she'd take a run along the beach before getting to work. Tonight she wasn't up to anything so strenuous. Peeling off her clothes, she tossed them onto the chair in the corner of the room, and then did a few light stretches, hoping to iron out the kinks in her body she'd made leaning over boxes and sitting on the hardwood floor all day. Her neck popped when she tilted her head to the right, and tension seemed to slowly seep out of her.

With a sigh, she slid beneath the covers on the king-sized bed and once again admired the black wrought iron footboard. Reaching above her head, she gripped the curving latticework of the headboard and smiled. She'd always loved this bed. As a teenager, she'd had wicked fantasies of being tied to it with silk scarves. That was before she'd ever experienced a man. Now that she knew what sex was all about, and hadn't had any in a very long time, the images that invaded her mind were much more vivid and naughty than any she'd had as a young woman.

She laughed at herself and dropped her arms. Such thoughts! It'd been a long, long time since she'd let herself have any fantasies involving a man.

With a sigh, she pulled the fluffy comforter up to her neck and stared at the curtains softly waving in the cool sea breeze. The sun had fully set and a soft pink glow lit the world outside.

Absently she let her hand travel down her body under the covers. What was so wrong with fantasy? she wondered. She'd had a vivid imagination as a girl. She'd even had an imaginary friend who lived on the beach. A Frenchman named Jacques. A smile tugged at her lips as she slowly circled her right nipple with her finger. What had made her think

of him now, after all these years? He'd been so real to her back then, but one summer when she was about twelve, her imaginary friend left her mind forever and she couldn't bring him back. That had been about the time she'd started having big girl dreams.

Bringing her other hand up, she gently tugged on her other nipple and closed her eyes, letting the fingers of arousal slide over her. Big girl dreams, she thought. A tall, dark-haired man with a rakish grin and sparkling, piercing blue eyes. Ah, how she remembered him so clearly now. The man of her dreams, of every fantasy she'd had until she met Peter.

She huffed out an annoyed breath. Her ex-husband was the last person she wanted to think about right now. He'd been short, just an inch or two taller than her own five-foot-six inch height, with thinning mousy-colored hair and a moustache. Her need to feel grown up had made her take him to her bed—or rather the beach—and his insistence that he couldn't live without her led her to accept his proposal. They'd been married within weeks of their meeting.

No, her fantasy man was well over six feet tall and broad shouldered, with a sexy five o'clock shadow on his chin and a deep voice that could curl a woman's toes.

She moaned, thrust her breasts against her palms, and moved her legs restlessly under the covers.

"Where's my phantom lover?" she whispered. "Come to me."

Her cheeks burned with embarrassment at her own words, her fantasies, but her body throbbed with the need for release. It'd been so long she'd almost forgotten how much she enjoyed being aroused. How sweet it could be to slip into her mind and let her imagination take her places she'd never go in real life. Into the arms of an unnamed man.

Sliding her hand down her body, over her belly, she strummed her fingers through her soft thatch of hair. Tingles shot out from the point of contact and she gasped. She longed for her fantasy lover's mouth there. Imagined a strong, experienced tongue flicking over her clit as she gently rubbed her finger over herself.

What would it feel like to have big, manly hands holding her hips

while his mouth ate at her, laved her, tasted her?

She groaned and pressed her finger into her pussy, feeling her wet heat. With her other hand she toyed with her nipple, pinching, tugging, wishing her fingers were a man's mouth sucking her hard.

"Please," she said on a sigh. "Please, Phantom, show me what it's like."

Jacques stood at the side of the bed, his excitement painful and his heart pounding so hard he thought he might choke on it. *Mon Dieu!* How could he ignore her plea?

As she writhed on the bed, he fisted his hands at his sides. This was no ordinary woman to be taken and forgotten. Not one that he would ever forget. And she wasn't asleep. If he touched her, would she be frightened, or would she truly accept him?

She kicked the covers off her body, and his mouth watered at what he saw. One hand cupped her breast, pulling at the nipple. The other rested between her thighs, her fingers moving steadily in and out of her body. He couldn't stand it. He had to touch her.

With an unsteady hand, he reached toward the ignored breast and lightly rubbed the back of his finger over her tightly puckered nipple.

Lilly gasped and her eyes shot open. She stared through the dusky room. Her hands stilled on her body and she tensed.

Merde, what to do now?

Her breathing was ragged, as was his, and even in the quickly darkening room he could see the high color of stimulation on her cheeks. He wanted to give her release. He wanted to pleasure her.

"Do it again," she whispered.

A shot of heat crashed through him, nearly bringing him to his knees. The urge to grab her and slam into her made his body shake. *Be gentle*, he thought past the haze of lust riding high in his mind. Lilly deserved gentleness. Caring. He didn't matter right now. Only she did.

Watching her eyes for any sense of unease, he set one knee on the bed a few inches from her side. She held perfectly still except for her eyelids, which blinked rapidly as if she were trying to see him.

He stretched out next to her, and her head turned. Her mouth was

so close he could feel her breath on his cheeks. She smelled of mint and flowers and stimulated woman.

With utmost care he trailed his finger around her dark, perfect areola and watched her nipple grow even tighter, standing out dark against her golden skin. She shivered, and her eyes drifted closed.

"That's it, my sweet Lilly," he said, wishing she could hear him. "Relax and let me give you what you need."

He touched his lips to her cheek, and she stiffened slightly. Then he trailed soft kisses toward her ear and down the long, sexy column of her throat, and she groaned. When he took her left nipple between his teeth and lightly nipped it, she cried out and arched her back, thrusting her breast into his mouth. He suckled her hard, feeling what she needed in her jerky movements, in her labored breathing, in the warm flush of her skin.

She lifted her hand from her other breast and shoved it into his hair. *Mon Dieu*. In all the years he'd spent here, and all the women he'd been with, not a single one had touched him in return. They always just lay there and let him pleasure them. Having Lilly's hand in his hair made him near blind with need. He wanted to rip off his pants and bury himself deep inside her. Would she hold him? Would she wrap her arms and legs around him as he thrust into her?

He moved down the bed, dropping wet kisses along her belly, dipping his tongue into the sexy shadow of her navel. When his mouth encountered her hand, still pressed firmly against the apex of her thighs, he gently took it in his and brought it to his mouth, licking the warm, fragrant juices from her fingertips.

Lilly moaned again, and the sound cut straight through him. He pressed his hips into the mattress and groaned. She was so...uninhibited. So unafraid. Did she know who he was? Did she remember him in any way?

He laid her hand against his cheek and lightly rubbed his beard stubble against her palm. He watched a hint of a smile flit across her luscious mouth.

"My fantasy man," she said. "I need you. Make me come."

She spread her thighs and placed both her hands on his head,

guiding him down toward her sweetness. He couldn't deny her, or himself, any longer. Spreading her soft lips with his fingers, he licked her.

She cried out and thrust her hips at him. "Again."

He complied. Lifting her hips with his hands and holding her steady, he licked her, suckled her, buried his tongue deep inside her until he felt her muscles tightening, heard her breathing turn to tiny, erotic gasps. Just as her cries grew louder, more intense, he shoved two fingers inside her and suckled her clit between his lips.

Lilly arched her body and cried out long and loud as she came. Her inner muscles milked his fingers and her hot juices flowed over his tongue.

So sweet. So perfect.

He rode her orgasm with her, his own release coming as he pressed his hips against the bed and groaned against her hot, moist flesh.

Her body trembled as he withdrew his fingers from inside her.

She sighed.

He kissed her belly.

Her fingers touched his hair for a moment before her arms went limp at her sides. And then he heard the telltale sound of the deep, even breathing of sleep.

He moved up the bed next to her, admiring her soft skin with the tips of his fingers. Unable to stop touching her, he kissed the incredibly soft spot beneath her breast, nuzzled her neck with his nose and lips. Her mouth was slightly open, as it had been the night before while she slept. He touched his lips to hers, and she moved against him, snuggling against his chest.

Sorrow, deep and sure, cut through Jacques' heart in that instant. If he were a real man and not some half human, half ghost, this was the kind of woman with whom he'd choose to spend his life. One so sweet and pure of heart. He'd known Lilly as a child and had cared for her then. As the woman he'd come to know through the loving letters she'd sent to her grandmother, she was now so much more. He only wished she could know that.

Chapter Three

Jacques sat in a chair across the room watching Lilly. The ticking clock on the bedside table was the only sound in the still room. The sun had risen, but the west facing room stood in shadows. All night he'd lain with her, holding her close, dreading the morning when she would wake up and not know he was there. In her sleep she sought his warmth and with that, his heart had filled to brimming with pleasure.

Over the past few years before Clara died, he'd given up his visits to the single women who stayed at the B & B. The pleasure he took from touching a woman, feeling her skin, listening to her murmur her enjoyment at his touch, had lost its appeal. He'd decided that however long he was left in this half-life, he'd remain celibate. He hadn't expected an attraction as strong as the one he now felt for Lilly. Perhaps it was that he'd known her before, watched her grow up, knew her darkest secrets and the wishes she'd written to her grandmother. But somehow he thought it was more.

There was something about her that stirred his hopes and dreams.

She rolled over, and her eyes slowly fluttered open. She stretched, raising her hands above the warm covers, and gripped the iron headboard. The covers slipped below her breasts and they were as beautiful as they'd been last night.

"Bonjour, ma chérie."

Her eyes widened, color drained from her cheeks, and then she shrieked and scrambled from the bed, pulling the quilt with her, shielding herself with it as she flattened her back against the wall. Her gaze frantically searched the room.

Merde. She'd heard him!

"Lilly," he whispered softly, rising from the chair. "Do not be afraid."

She shrank back, rounding her shoulders in a sign of fear and defense as her gaze bounced around the room.

"It is I, Jacques. Do you remember me?" he asked as he moved across the room toward her.

She shook her head. "Go away." Her voice was sleep-hoarse, little more than a frightened whisper.

"*Chérie*, remember me," he begged softly. "Jacques Cheever. You used to visit me on the beach."

"No. Go away!" She inched toward the open door. "You're a figment of my imagination. You're in my head."

"*Non, petite amie*, I am real. I've always been real." He wanted to touch her, to reassure her, but was stopped by the panic in her eyes.

Her hand gripped the edge of the door and, keeping her back to the wall, she moved into the doorway. "You're not real," she said, her voice fierce with conviction. "You're from a child's imagination." And then she dashed from the room, the blanket trailing behind her, her backside bare.

Jacques sank onto the edge of the bed and buried his face in his hands as sorrow cut a deep swath through his soul. She could hear him now, but denied his existence.

How could she hear him? What had happened? No one besides her had ever heard him, and not since she was a child. Somewhere in her mind she *must* remember him.

Raising his head, he squinted his eyes, trying to remember the story she'd read to him so long ago. The one about him and the Indian Princess. A fairy tale perpetuated by the tourist industry, no doubt, but still, as a child, she'd known who he was.

If he could just find that book....

* * * * *

Lilly slammed and locked the bathroom door, her body shaking so hard she could barely walk across the small space to sink down on the edge of the tub. This couldn't be happening. It couldn't be! She was too old to hear the voices of long-ago imaginary friends.

She was losing it. There was no other explanation. Gripping the bed covers tight against her chest, she fought the fright welling up inside her.

As a child, when she had told her grandmother about Jacques, Grandma had simply smiled and said, "That's nice, sweetheart," obviously believing, as Lilly did now, that he was only her imaginary friend.

He had been her imaginary friend! That's all. He wasn't real. No one had been in that room with her.

What had transpired the night before flooded her mind, bringing with it a twinge of nausea and a tingle between her thighs. Her imagination had taken over. She'd felt someone in bed with her, but there couldn't have been. Just her imagination. That's all.

"Oh, God," she groaned, and buried her face in the blanket. Could the Phantom be real? Could her imaginary friend from childhood be the being discussed in her grandmother's journal? A ghost who performed sexual acts with guests? "Eww," she said, pushing the blanket back down. "How sick is that? A horny ghost?"

A knock on the bathroom door made her yelp and nearly fall backward into the tub.

"Lilly."

"No," she whispered. What should she do? Believe the stories she'd read yesterday that said there was a phantom in the house? Or go in search of the nearest psychologist and find out if she was schizophrenic or something? Surely no sane person would hear voices in an empty house.

Oh. My. *God!* Her pulse jumped a beat. No sane person would have sex with a ghost, either! And now that she thought about it, she knew—*knew*—she hadn't been alone last night. Her imagination wasn't *that* good.

"Lilly, please," came the deep, French-accented voice from the other side of the door. "I will not hurt you. Do not be afraid. We are friends. Do you not remember?"

Silently shaking her head in denial, she hunched over and waited for him to come through the door, right through the wood, like a movie ghost.

"I once gave you a piece of driftwood that looked like the face of an old man. Your grandmother thought it was beautiful, and it still sits in the China hutch in the dining room."

Lilly stilled. She'd seen the driftwood yesterday when she walked through the house. *No*. Surely she'd simply found the piece of wood on the beach and just *told* her grandma that Jacques had given it to her.

"You used to sit on my lap at our little rock table and read to me. You taught me to read English, *chérie*. Do you not remember?"

She did remember. She remembered it so clearly it could have happened yesterday, not thirty years ago. Jacques had sounded out words along with her as she read to him. "I don't believe this," she whispered. Jacques had been her *imaginary* friend. She'd made him up because when she was little and staying with her grandmother in the summers, she'd had no friends her age. She'd spent hours upon hours on the beach with Jacques. Her *imaginary* friend.

"You must believe. You are the only person to ever hear my voice. Please do not be afraid. I have been so alone since Clara died."

Something in his voice struck a chord deep within her. Lonely. Alone.

"Why can't I see you, if I can hear you?" she asked. "Why couldn't I see you when I was little?" *This is ridiculous*, she thought, even as she spoke the words.

"It is my curse."

She frowned. Phantom. Curse. A book her grandmother had given her to read about Moonlight Cove. "The Indian Princess?"

At the silence on the other side of the door, she wondered if he'd gone. Or if she was finally waking up from a very strange dream.

Couldn't be a dream. Her butt was cold from the porcelain tub.

Goose bumps rose on her arms in the chill morning air streaming in through the open window above her. She couldn't remember ever having goose bumps in a dream. Then again, she'd thought she was dreaming last night when she'd had the most amazing orgasm of her life.

"Oui. Princess Chailali cursed me."

Lilly searched her mind for the story, but couldn't remember much of it. Something about a lost love, and how he was now cursed to wander Moonlight Cove searching for her forever?

She shook her head. Curses weren't real. If they were, her ex-husband would be rotting in hell by now, because she'd cursed him so much during the past year.

"I will go," the man said from the other side of the door. "I will not bother you again."

"No!" she cried, and lunged for the door, yanking it open before she thought better of it.

No? Why no? It would be good if her imaginary friend went back to wherever he'd been hiding for the past thirty years. She didn't need this now. She had too many other things to deal with. A mental breakdown was not on her To Do list.

Staring into the empty hall, Lilly swallowed hard. "Are you still here?"

"I am here," he said, in that deep, gentle, accented voice. He sounded so near, as if she could reach out... She yelped and pulled her hand back after it encountered something.

"Do not be afraid," he said again.

And then she felt warm, rough fingers close around hers, and slowly lift her hand. Her heart pattered so fast she thought she might pass out and die right there in the hallway, bare-ass naked except for the blanket she clutched to her chest. Oh, God, how long would it be until someone found her dead body?

She watched her hand rise up, up, as if it weren't attached to her body any longer, and then the invisible fingers pressed her palm against...a whiskery cheek?

"I don't believe this," she said, her tongue thick.

"*Chérie*, tell me you remember me."

Even through her lightheaded panic, she heard the yearning in his voice. *His voice*. Jeezus, she was starting to *believe* he was real.

"You taught me to speak French." As the words tumbled off her tongue, she flexed her fingers against the face she couldn't see, and a sigh of breath brushed across her wrist. She shivered. "In return for your teaching me to read English." She could have sworn the face she couldn't see just smiled.

Pulling her hand from beneath his, because he was still holding it against his cheek, she brought her fingers over his jaw, felt his neck and Adam's apple, some crinkly, curly chest hair, and then clothing. Dear God, he was *real*. Unless she'd completely gone off the deep end. Or maybe she'd gone over the edge a long time ago and now she was sitting in a rubber room somewhere just imagining all this.

"I wish to take the fear from your eyes, Lilly. I do not want you afraid of me. I've thought about you, missed you so much over the years. And now you are here, and you can hear me."

Lilly leaned back against the wall and ran her hand over her eyes, careful to keep the blanket tight against her chest with the other hand. "Okay. Let's say you're real. Let's say I'm not totally crazy. What the hell are you doing sneaking around this house? You're supposed to be down on the beach."

He chuckled, and the sound rolled through her like a warm caress. "That is where I would meet with you when you were a child so your grandmother and her guests wouldn't see you talking to...yourself."

Made sense, she supposed.

No, none of this made sense.

"Last night..." She couldn't say it. She'd had sex with her imaginary friend?

"*Oui*."

"Great."

"Did I not please you?" he asked, sounding surprised, maybe even annoyed.

A *typical male*, she thought and made a face. They always thought

they were God's gift to women. Then again, last night had been...amazing. "I *thought* you were just in my head. I didn't know anyone—anything—*anyone*—what the hell are you?"

After a long pause, Jacques' low voice sounded pained when he answered, "I am a man, but not a man."

She hated puzzles. She hated people who talked in cryptic phrases. Folding her arms over her chest, she glared at the spot where she thought his head might be. "Explain that, please."

"I breathe and I have a body, even though no one can see it, but I do not sleep or eat. I can feel the heat of your flesh, yet the outside elements do not disturb me. To me, I look the same as I did the day I was cursed."

"And when was that?"

"The twenty-first day of October, in the year of our Lord, seventeen hundred and seventy-eight."

"You're two hundred and thirty years old?"

He gave a small sound of disagreement. "I was nearing my fortieth year before the curse, so I suppose I am closer to two-hundred-seventy."

She couldn't grasp it. Her brain was ready to burst with the information zooming around inside of it. She pushed the hair off her face with one hand, securing the sheet to her breasts with the other, and stared at the empty hallway, knowing that if she stretched out her arm, she'd touch him again.

"I need a shower," she blurted out. "And a cup of coffee. I can't think right now."

When he didn't respond, she made a shooing motion with her hand. "Alone." Then a thought occurred to her. "Have you been here since I arrived two days ago?"

"I have been."

She groaned. "Watching me?"

When he said nothing, it was as good as if he'd answered in the affirmative.

"I don't believe this. A voyeuristic ghost. Just what I need."

"I am not a ghost. I never died." His sigh sounded so sad. "I cannot

die.”

“How—no, wait, hold that thought. Go away for half an hour, so I can shower and get dressed. Then I want to hear it all.”

She felt the gentle touch of a palm on her cheek, and her eyes automatically slid shut at the sweet caress.

“I will wait downstairs for you, *chérie*.”

She nodded when he moved his hand away and the connection ended, leaving her feeling slightly off kilter. And then, to her amazement, she heard soft footsteps moving away from her, down the hallway, then down the steps at the end of the hall. Why hadn’t she heard footsteps yesterday? Why could she hear him now, yet hadn’t until this morning?

She went into her bedroom and drew out clothes for the day, then headed back to the bathroom, dropping the blanket on the floor in the hallway. As she stepped under the shower, she wondered once again if she was simply losing her mind.

* * * * *

Jacques set a cup of steaming coffee on the table, and then buttered two slices of toast. He’d never actually made coffee or toasted bread before, but he’d seen Clara do it so many times it came easy.

He sat down at the small oak table in the kitchen to wait for Lilly, but he couldn’t keep from fidgeting. He didn’t understand what was happening. The fact that she could hear him stumped him, but even more disturbing were the feelings that coursed through him when she touched him.

Hearing her footsteps on the stairs, he turned to look at her. *Mon Dieu, she is beautiful*. She had a perfectly oval face, a small, straight nose, and those big, deep brown doe eyes, which were almost the color of the coffee he’d made for her.

His body tightened, and his cock grew hard as he remembered how she tasted.

She paused on the bottom step and peered into the kitchen. “Are you here? I smell coffee.” Her voice was quiet, as if she doubted herself.

She still didn't believe, he realized, even though she'd felt the proof of his existence.

"I am here," he responded. "At the table. I made you breakfast."

Her eyes widened as she approached the table. "You cook?"

He chuckled. "Only for you, *chérie*. Please, sit."

Carefully, keeping her gaze trained at his chest, she slipped into the chair opposite him and picked up the mug of coffee. She sipped, and then made a face.

"I made it wrong?" he asked.

She shook her head and sipped again. "It's a little strong, but I think I need it that way today." Setting the cup aside, she looked away, and then back at his chest. He realized she was staring at the back of the chair, not his body. "Okay," she said. "Do I just start asking questions?"

"If you wish."

"You said you can't die. How do you know that?"

Jacques clenched his teeth and sucked in a slow breath. "Because all of my attempts to kill myself have failed."

Her mouth opened and her brow wrinkled. "Suicide?"

He shrugged, even though she couldn't see it, and settled more comfortably into the chair. "I am stuck in Moonlight Cove. Or rather, on this property."

Shaking her head, she tore apart a slice of toast but didn't taste it. "Tell me the story. How did you get cursed?"

Jacques folded his hands on top of the table and gazed at her. He'd never spoken the tale aloud before, and suddenly he wanted someone to hear it. He needed to tell it.

"The American Revolution had just gotten under way and King Louis XVI sent troops to help the Americans after The French Alliance."

"You were a soldier?" Her eyes brightened as she leaned her elbows on the table and regarded his chest. He wished she would look him in the eye.

Stifling a growl of frustration, he shook his head, then realized she couldn't see it. "*Non*. I was a sailor, an explorer. What the Americans didn't know is that France still wanted part of America for itself. I, along

with three other captains, sailed around the horn. Months and months we were at sea, stopping infrequently for supplies. Finally we reached our destination and moored off the coast." He pointed out the small window over the sink. "Right out there. The next morning we were going to come inland and meet with the natives, hoping to trade with them, to ingratiate ourselves with them."

His shoulders drooped. "God had other plans for us."

Lilly's eyebrows rose. "What happened?"

"A storm like nothing we'd ever seen before blew in. Our ships were thrown against the rocks and disintegrated. Only a few of us survived that night, maybe a dozen or so."

"Oh my gosh. How horrible." She sipped her coffee.

He agreed. He'd been devastated by the loss. Friends he'd had since childhood were gone. His ships were gone. He thought he'd lost everything...then. Little did he know how much more he had left to lose.

"The local Indian tribe took us in and cared for us. I had a broken leg and a lot of bruises and cuts. I was one of the lucky ones. By the end of the week there were only three of us still alive. The others had died from their injuries." He swallowed, remembering his sorrow, his guilt. He shouldn't have lived. He'd never understood why he'd been spared and none of the others had survived.

"I was out of my head with grief," he admitted softly. "When the chief's daughter offered...comfort, I accepted it willingly."

Lilly's mouth formed a little O, and her gaze dropped to the table.

Forging on, needing to get this over with, Jacques said, "I was intent on healing myself and trying to figure out how to get back to France. Or at least send word to the king about what had happened. I did not realize that Princess Chailali was falling in love with me. I did not know she was planning our wedding."

He scraped his hand over his eyes, then through his hair. "When I realized what was happening, I tried to put a stop to it. I had been here eight, maybe nine weeks, and Chailali and I had started learning each other's language. She caught on to French much faster than I learned hers. I tried to tell her I couldn't marry her. I had to get back to France. When

she insisted she would come with me, I told her I did not love her and would not marry her."

"So she cursed you," Lilly finished.

"*Oui*. The instant before she killed herself by throwing herself from the cliff."

Lilly turned to look out the window. "That cliff?" she asked, her voice pitching higher than normal.

"*Oui*. That one right there."

"Oh my God. Oh my God. Come here." She jumped up from the table and walked out of the room.

Jacques followed her into the parlor and watched her go to the bookshelf. Even knowing the time and place was totally wrong, he couldn't keep himself from admiring her nicely rounded ass as she leaned over and ran her fingers along the book spines. She went through three shelves before pulling out a book with a dark blue cover.

"This is the book Grandma gave me to read about the legends surrounding Moonlight Cove and the Indians who lived here, because we're their descendants. It came to me while you were telling me your story. I remember showing this book to you, excited because I'd found you."

"No. The stories in that book are only fairy tale versions of reality. I am not walking the beach looking for my one true love."

Lilly's shoulders drooped and she frowned. "So what are you doing here? What was the curse?"

He knew it as well as he knew his own name. For two hundred and some odd years the curse had been floating in his mind, never far from his consciousness.

"Vous ne saurez jamais la paix jusqu'à ce que vous éprouvez l'agonie d'amour."

Lilly shook her head in confusion. "I don't remember much of the French you taught me."

"You shall never know peace until you experience the agony of love,"
Jacques translated into English

"Then it does sound like you're haunting this place looking for

your one true love, doesn't it?"

Unfortunately, he had to agree. Only, Chailali hadn't been his one true love. He'd always known that.

Lilly placed the book back on the shelf and then walked past him, heading back to the kitchen. He followed, watching her straight black hair wave against her shoulders. She picked up the cup of coffee from the table and dumped it down the sink, then poured herself another cup from the carafe, adding a touch of water to it from the tap.

Going back to the table, she sat, waiting. "Where are you?" she asked.

He tipped his chair back on two legs. She gasped and nearly dropped her coffee.

"Sorry," he said around a chuckle.

"You are not. You're so quiet."

"I had to learn to be quiet or I scared people. It wasn't so bad the first hundred or so years, before the white man settled in the area. The Indians believed spirits surrounded them. If I inadvertently moved something, they didn't think anything of it. But the whites," he shook his head, awash with guilt for his childish behavior at having antagonized them so long ago. "They are much different."

"Hmm." She sipped her coffee and glanced at the cold toast. "So, back to your story. What happened to the two other guys who survived?"

"Each of them found women within the tribe and eventually married. As far as I know, neither of them ever had any contact with France. Once the tribe moved from the area and became integrated with the whites, I don't know what happened to their descendants. You could be one of them, for all I know."

Lilly's smile was just a hint of a movement of her lips. "Or I could be a descendant of Chailali's family. Couldn't I?"

For some reason, that wasn't a pleasant thought. Jacques ground his back teeth together. "I suppose anything is possible."

"Sorry," she said, obviously picking up on the strain in his voice. "Anyway." She took another sip of coffee. "Do you have any idea how to break the curse? If you can't kill yourself, and you're not waiting around

for Chailali to return, are you stuck like this for...all eternity?"

He hadn't been sick in two centuries, but his stomach rolled and nausea swamped him. Eternity. *Forever*. He closed his eyes and dropped his head to the cool wood of the tabletop.

"Jacques?"

"Hmm?"

"What do you look like?"

Chapter Four

"I look like a *man*."

Lilly couldn't mistake the strain in that one word. She wished she could see him, to look into his eyes, to see what his face could tell her. She'd never realized before how much a person's features told of their emotions. And why would asking him what he looked like upset him?

"Seriously. What do you look like?"

After a long pause, he heaved a heavy sigh. "Do you know how, after many years, the memories of people from your past fade until you're not sure what is real and what is simply imagination?"

She nodded. Sometimes she thought the memory of what her parents looked like was fading from her mind. They'd been gone for nearly ten years, and she often took out the thick photo album she had of them, just to remember.

"That is how it is. Imagine spending two centuries without seeing your reflection. Do you think you would remember?"

Lilly nibbled on her bottom lip as she held the mug of lukewarm coffee in her hands. How sad, she thought, and set the cup down.

She stood up and moved around the table toward his chair. Her knee bumped his leg when she got too close, but she didn't move away, and neither did he. "I once worked with a woman who was blind," she said, reaching out her hand, looking for an arm. When her fingers touched

his cloth-covered flesh, she laid her hand flat and flexed her fingers around his well-muscled bicep. He must have been in good shape if he was a ship's captain in the eighteenth century. Moving her hand upward, she felt the collar of his shirt, then the warm, tender skin of his neck.

"Once she got to know someone, she would ask if she could 'see' them. She would touch them," Lilly said, bringing up her other hand and touching his whiskered cheek. "And learn the contours of their face. She said she could tell a lot about a person that way."

Closing her eyes, she imagined what her hands were telling her. Her fingers tingled as she felt the resiliency of Jacques' skin, the prickles of his short beard. "Close your eyes," she said softly as she moved her fingers up to his cheekbones and over his forehead. Smoothing her thumbs over his shapely eyebrows, she let her fingers wander into the thick, soft hair at his temples.

"What color is your hair?"

"Brown." His voice was low, raspy. She felt his breath against the inside of her forearm. Shivers raced over her skin and her nipples puckered tight as an onslaught of memories of the previous night invaded her mind. She hadn't heard him then, but she'd felt his breath, his fingers, his lips, his tongue.

Trying to regulate her breathing and to keep him from knowing how her body responded to him, she trailed her fingertips over his high cheekbones, his straight nose, the slight cleft in his chin, his full lips. Jeezus, if he looked anything like she was imagining, he was gorgeous.

She traced his lips again with her thumbs. Succulent. Smooth. Symmetrical.

"Lilly." His tone was a warning. She heard it, felt it when his lips pressed tightly together beneath her fingers.

She didn't heed the warning. Once again she trailed her thumb over his lips. Lips that had done things to her she had never experienced. Things her husband had never even attempted.

When his big, hard hands closed around her wrists, she shook her head. "Don't make me stop."

He pulled her hands from his face, but instead of pushing her

away, he wrapped them around his neck. Thrown off balance she fell against him, her breasts pressed against his hard, muscled chest. Her legs straddled one of his and before she could change positions, his hands cupped her butt, settling her snugly and enticingly over his hard, thick thigh.

"By all means," he said, his breath tickling her ear. "Do not stop. I have not been touched by a woman in over two centuries."

Her eyelids popped open and the whole situation threw her off center. She let out a whimper, instinctively tightening her arms around his neck. It looked as if she was sitting inches above the chair, but she knew there was a solid body beneath her.

"Close your eyes, *chérie*," he whispered against her cheek. "I am here."

She clapped her eyes shut and drew in a series of deep breaths, trying to still her churning mind. This couldn't be real. It couldn't be happening. She dropped her cheek to his shoulder and clung on. He felt so good, so solid, so real. How could he exist only in her imagination?

No, she couldn't fool herself any longer. He was real. Jacques Cheever, a man she'd known only as her imaginary friend, was real. And oh, God—he lit her body on fire. Even now, with her heart thudding too hard inside her chest, she felt the telltale throb of arousal deep within her belly.

"Are you frightened?" he asked, his voice so low and tender it made her heart clench.

She shook her head against his shoulder. "Not really. More like confused."

He chuckled, his chest rubbing hers with the motion, his coarse linen shirt meeting her soft cotton tank top, which in turn rasped against her already sensitized nipples.

"Imagine my confusion when I tried telling the chief that his daughter had just killed herself, and he didn't see me or hear me. My friends, the sailors, didn't either. No one did."

"Oh, Jacques." She turned her head and touched her lips to his neck. "How awful for you. You must have felt so alone."

His hands slid up her sides, over her back, and then he simply wrapped his arms around her and held her safe and snug against him. "Yes. I know what it is to be alone."

"Is that why..." She swallowed. She didn't feel right asking him about his...liaisons...while she sat on his lap, wanting to rub her throbbing pussy against his thigh, but she needed to know, to understand. "Is that why you seduced those women?"

She felt his lips on her forehead, warm, gentle, soft. "I was looking for the woman who would show me the agony of love. It took me a very long time to realize that what a man and woman share in bed has little or nothing to do with whatever love I am supposed to experience."

I could love you.

The thought jumped into her head from nowhere. Jeez, she was losing it. So he'd given her an awesome orgasm last night, and the touch of his hands today was making her blood zing through her veins at an alarming rate, but what did that have to do with love? Love sucked! She'd loved Peter, and look where that had gotten her. Nineteen years of her life down the drain with absolutely *nothing* to show for it except an old pickup truck and a lot of lost time.

"I am still a man with needs." His hands had begun roving over her back again, trailing down over her ass and then onto her bare thighs, all the way to her knees. She shivered. "Does that make me evil?"

She jerked and opened her eyes to scold him, but when she didn't see anything she squeezed them shut. This was going to take a lot of getting used to. "No, Jacques. I don't think you are evil. From what I read in Grandma's journal, you treated those women very well." She slowly forked her fingers through his thick, shoulder length hair. "By the way, did you take that book out of Grandma's room yesterday?"

"Oui."

"Why?"

She felt the play of his muscles as he leaned toward her. His breath whispered over her lips when he said, "I did not want you reading anything more about me. I am not proud of what I have done."

"What do you mean?" She frowned. "They all seemed pretty happy

with you.”

His hands trailed up her sides, over her shoulders, and then he cupped her face. “Every one of those women thought I was a ghost, a spirit, a dream. I waited until they were asleep to come into their beds.”

“You had sex with those women while they slept?” she asked, her voice rising. That was scandalous, and illegal, she thought.

“No. I always made sure they awakened before...before I went too far. But if I’d come to them while they were awake, they would have been frightened. I did not want to scare them, I just wanted to...”

“Get your rocks off.”

After a two long heartbeats, Jacques laughed. “*Oui*. That.”

“I wasn’t asleep last night,” she reminded him.

“No, you were not.” His thumbs lightly stroked her jaw as his fingers played along her neck. “You were touching yourself and asking for the phantom to make you come. Then again, you are the only person besides your grandmother and me to know what was written in that journal. The other women had no warning I would crawl into their beds with them.”

Without thinking, Lilly adjusted herself, throwing her leg over his other thigh until she fully straddled him. She felt the long, hard bulge of his penis against her. Her body responded to it and she moaned, rolling her hips forward to repeat the action.

“Lilly, please. I cannot take much more,” he growled, his hands tightening just a bit on her neck. “I am still a man in most ways. And I want you.”

The words made her even hotter. “Then do it,” she challenged.

Without warning, his mouth crashed against hers, his hot tongue slipping through her slightly parted lips. He grabbed her ass and held her tight against him as he thrust his hips against her, rubbing his cock against her aching pussy. Even through layers of clothes, he felt huge.

She released his neck and found the opening of his shirt at his throat. Ties, she thought absently, then grabbed the fabric at his waist and jerked it out of his pants. When her hand met hot skin and a solid six-pack abdomen, she groaned into his mouth.

Holy shit. She'd only been with Peter. One man her whole life. And he certainly hadn't been built like a Greek god. She wanted Jacques now, more than ever. Running her hands up his chest, she felt the sprinkle of curly hair and his heavily muscled pecs.

"Please do it," she said on a moan when his mouth broke away from hers and his breath panted over her cheeks. "Do me now."

With a quick, smooth motion, Jacques scooped her up into his arms and before she knew it, they were bounding up the steps to the second floor as she clung to his shoulders.

* * * * *

Jacques shook like a virgin boy in a whorehouse. No, wrong analogy. Lilly could never be compared to a whore. She was pure. And he was going to have her. The first woman he'd been with since his curse who was an equal participant in sex.

Dropping her unceremoniously onto the bed, he came down on top of her, pinning her legs with his, lacing his fingers through hers, and stretching her arms over her head. She was all soft curves and cradled his body like no woman ever had.

"I do not wish to hurt you," he rasped, his mouth just scant inches from hers. She tasted of coffee and woman. Her skin smelled of flowers and sunshine. A heady combination, in his opinion.

"You won't," she said, her eyes still closed.

Mon Dieu, he wished he could look into her eyes as he took her, but that would be too disturbing for her. If she opened her eyes she would see nothing, only air.

"I've never wanted a woman like I want you, *chérie*." He brushed his lips over hers and felt her quiver beneath him.

"Please," she begged, raising her head from the pillow, seeking his mouth.

He obliged, capturing her lips with his. She moaned when he speared his tongue into her mouth. Then he pressed his throbbing cock against her softness, and Lilly bucked her hips.

She yanked her hands from beneath his and tugged at the back of his shirt. He moved away just long enough to pull it over his head and toss it on the floor, then did the same with her top. When he came back down on top of her, flesh on flesh, a wildness stole over him.

He nipped and licked at her throat, her chest, her shoulders, unable to get enough of her taste, her scent. He wanted to take her inside himself, to keep her there forever and never let her go.

She writhed beneath him and buried her hands in his hair, her head pressed deep into the soft pillows, her black hair haloing her precious face. When he captured one tautly pebbled nipple between his lips, she rose off the bed with a small cry.

He tugged at her shorts and heard material rip. She didn't seem to notice as she struggled with the ties of his buckskins. When she was naked, he brushed her hands aside and quickly shucked them.

Unable to wait another second to feel her, he came down over her, took her mouth with his, and sank into her hot, tight depths. "*Mon Dieu*," he said between gritted teeth, totally unprepared for the feelings threading through him. Fire, lust, yet something warm and gentle he couldn't define. Something he'd never felt before.

Her cries were soft and sensual as she raised her hips to meet each of his thrusts. He couldn't tear his gaze away from her. He'd never seen anything more beautiful, more thrilling than his Lilly in the throes of passion.

Her hands clung to his shoulders and her legs wrapped around his hips. A sheen of perspiration made her skin glow like satin.

When he leaned down and drew her succulent nipple into his mouth, her inner muscles tightened around his cock and her cry turned into one long, deep moan of release. As her body milked his, he could hold back no longer.

With a shout, he slammed into her body again and again until his climax exploded and he saw stars behind his eyelids.

* * * * *

Lilly tightened her arms around Jacques' neck when he would have pulled away. "No. Don't move."

"I'm too heavy for you." He rose up on his forearms, but stayed connected with her.

Her arms felt too heavy but she ran her hands down his bare back, reveling in the feel of his corded muscles and how they played under his smooth skin when he moved. "No, you're not. You feel so good." She smiled to herself, thinking how good *she* felt at the moment. Languid. Sated. *Complete*.

Even though the sex had been fast and hard, something she'd never enjoyed before, her orgasm had nearly shattered her.

"Vous êtes une belle femme."

She grinned. "You think I'm beautiful?"

"How could you possibly doubt that you are?" He grazed his lips over hers. Her body gave off more sporadic pulses of pleasure, and she heard him draw in a quick breath. Still seated within her, his penis began to grow hard once again.

"Mmm," she said. "Insatiable, are you?"

He chuckled, and nuzzled her neck with open-mouthed kisses.

As a moan escaped her throat, she adjusted her legs, lowering them slightly and entwining them with his. His body was long; he had to be well over six feet tall, and thickly muscled everywhere. His shoulders, his back, his thighs...even his ass, she determined, as she reached down and ran her hands over his firm, round buttocks.

"It is you who cannot get enough, I think," he murmured.

She laughed, and it felt so good. Had she laughed within the past year? She couldn't honestly remember. But lying here in this man's arms she finally felt safe, as if all that time was merely a bad dream and she'd finally come home.

At that thought, she tensed, opened her eyes, and glanced around the room. A man lay atop her, inside her, yet to the naked eye it looked as if she held nothing but air. How could she be safe when he wasn't real? No, he was real. She'd established that, but there was nothing more than this between them. There never could be. He couldn't leave Moonlight

Cove, and she couldn't stay.

Hot tears stung her eyes and she closed them, buried her face against his shoulder, and clung to him like a vine. If she could just stay here, in his arms, and never let in the outside world...

But that couldn't happen. She had to leave here in two week's time—less than two weeks, now. She needed to find a place to live, get a job, and think about her future. And that future didn't include a phantom, no matter how sexy and virile he might be.

"What is it?" he asked, raising his head. "You tensed." He rolled to his side, taking her with him. "What's wrong?"

"I was thinking."

His fingers brushed the locks of hair from her cheek and tucked them behind her ear. His touch sent a wave of sad pleasure through her. Had anyone ever been so tender with her? Had Peter ever held her after sex, talking with her, worrying over her, noticing when she was upset?

The answer to that was simple. No.

"What are you thinking, *chérie*?"

"You speak much better English than you did when I was younger. You used to mix your phrases."

He chuckled and tucked her close against his chest. "I spent the last few years watching American television with Clara. It helped me learn a lot of things. Now tell me what you were thinking."

She didn't want to do that. At this point, if she just took each day as it happened and enjoyed his company, which wasn't difficult to do, at the end of her stay she'd have some wonderful memories to take with her.

"Oh, no. You watched Grandma's soaps with her?" She grinned at him, hoping he'd go along with her subject change.

"*Oui*. And situation comedies, and...what were they called? Oh, yes, reality shows. She especially liked one about people stuck on an island."

"*Survivor*?" Lilly couldn't believe her grandmother had watched reality shows and sitcoms. When she was little, Grandma never had the television on for anything besides *Days of Our Lives* and *The Young and the Restless*. Those she watched on a five-inch portable television in the

kitchen while she baked bread and pies for her guests.

"Yes, *Survivor*."

She shook her head. "Amazing. I never would have guessed."

"Your grandmother was a very interesting lady." She heard the softness in his voice when he spoke of Grandma, and it warmed her heart. Then again, most everyone who had met Clara had loved her. She was that kind of woman. Sweet, tender, almost always happy, and she loved people in general.

"I miss her," Lilly confided.

"I miss her, too."

Soft lips caressed her shoulder, and she snuggled even tighter against Jacques. He wound his arms around her, and she couldn't help her sigh of contentment.

"She was not alone," he whispered.

That was something Lilly had worried over for months after receiving the phone call from the county coroner about her grandmother's death. He said she'd died quickly of a severe heart attack, but the thought of her being alone, terrified, even for a few moments had eaten at Lilly's heart.

"You were with her?"

"*Oui*. I held her hand, and it seemed to calm her."

"Thank you." Again tears threatened, and again Lilly squeezed her eyes tight to prevent them from falling.

Jacques rubbed his big, callused hand up and down the center of her back, foraying once in a while to her hip or shoulder. The motion was smooth and slow, and it lulled her into relaxation.

"I would do anything for you or Clara. You are the closest thing I've had to family for as long as I can remember."

Her mind already drowsing in post-coital bliss, the word *family* sent a shock through her. "Oh, fuck!" She pushed away from him and sat up, finally opening her eyes. She glared at the spot where she knew he lay, at the wrinkled sheet and slight dip in the mattress. "We didn't use any protection."

"I hurt you?"

She felt the bed shift, and saw the sheet's pattern change. He'd sat up, too.

"No, you didn't hurt me. Protection, contraception, birth control. I can't give birth to a phantom's baby."

Chapter Five

"There will be no baby," Jacques said, his voice confident. Then the pillow moved, and she knew he'd lain back down.

"How can you be sure?" Scrubbing her fingers over her eyes, Lilly cursed herself for being a fool. She'd stopped taking the pill not long after Peter had walked out.

"No fluids were released. I cannot father a child."

"What?" She knew he'd orgasmed. There was no faking his reaction. Not that men ever faked it. That was the woman's job. But she was one hundred percent positive Jacques had come.

"I told you, I am only half a man." He reached out, took her hand, and placed it against his forehead. "See? I do not sweat." He lowered her hand to his soft, semi-aroused penis. It was dry and...clean? How could this be? "No ejaculation."

"But...your mouth is wet when we kiss."

He tugged her hand until she reclined next to him. "Lilly, *chérie*, I do not know the ways of this curse. I only know what is and what isn't."

"What else?" she asked, stretching out on her side of the bed.

"What else don't you do?"

"As I said before, I do not eat. I do not sleep."

"Don't, or *can't*?"

"I cannot sleep. Trust me, I've tried. I can eat, but have no need to. I

do not feel hunger. Although, I must confess to stealing slices of your Grandmother's pies."

She heard the fondness in his voice, which made her smile in return.

"You have the most beautiful smile," he whispered. Then his lips found hers. His kiss was slow and sweet, renewing the fiery glowing flames licking at her insides.

When he pulled back, she sighed and rested her head on his shoulder once again. "What else?"

He chuckled. Then, as he slowly ran his fingers through her hair, massaging her scalp and relaxing her, he said, "No matter what clothing I put on, at exactly three twenty-two each afternoon, the clothes I was wearing the day of the curse return to my body. I have thrown them into the ocean, burned them in a fire, buried them on the beach. It does not matter. At the exact moment Chailali cursed me, I return to the state I was in then."

"I do not feel pain. I do not bleed. My bones do not break."

"You know this because you've tried harming yourself," she stated, hurting for him, wondering what it would be like to be so...trapped.

"Oui."

As her fingers splayed over his well-formed abs, tears stung her eyes. "Has there been no one besides me who's...heard you?"

"Only you, *chérie*."

There was so much sadness in his voice, her tears welled up and overflowed.

"Do not cry, Lilly. It hurts me to see you sad." He closed his arms around her, and she felt his warm breath on her hair. "When you sat on the beach and cried the other day, I wanted to hold you, to let you know you weren't alone."

She sniffled and swiped her hand over her eyes. "The coral," she said in surprise. She rolled to the side and picked up the white, rose-shaped piece of coral from the nightstand. It had seemed to materialize out of nowhere while she sat on the beach. She held it up, once again admiring it. "You put it there for me, didn't you?"

"Mm hmm. Do you not remember the things you would find on the beach after you stopped hearing me? There were shells and pretty stones."

"And an old bottle with a love letter inside," she added. Then she smiled. "It was always you. I thought I was just lucky."

She felt his fingers close over hers, and the coral slipped from her fingers and disappeared. She gasped. "Hey, give it back."

With a laugh that shook his chest, he moved and the coral reappeared, floating in the air in front of her.

"So you're a magician, too?" She snatched the coral from him and closed her hand around it, holding it to her breast.

"Non." His fingers found their way to her hair again and she closed her eyes, reveling in having so much attention. She couldn't remember anything like this in her life. Peter had never held her and talked to her after sex. Instead, he went to sleep. Then again, maybe if Jacques were able, he'd sleep too.

"If I close my hand around something, it becomes invisible."

She frowned. "So, if you're holding me, no one can see me?"

She felt his head shake, and his chin lightly bumped her temple. "It doesn't work with living beings. Only...inanimate objects."

She yawned and stretched, purposely moving her breasts against his skin. He was so solid and warm. "I'm not getting any work done."

"What work?" he asked, rolling toward her. His chest hair tickled her skin and made her nipples grow taut. Heat blossomed between her thighs when she felt the nudge of his hardening erection against her belly.

"Work," she reminded herself, extracting her body from his comforting embrace. "I'm packing up Grandma's stuff. I have to be out of the house in two weeks."

The bed covers moved and she couldn't stop her startled gasp. It would take a lot for her to get used to that kind of thing.

"You are leaving? You cannot leave. Not now."

The distress was evident in his tone, and she hurt for him. "I cannot stay here, Jacques. The house is sold. The moving truck will be here in two weeks to take Grandma's things to storage until I can find a place to live."

The new tenants take occupancy the first of next month."

"Why did you sell it? You did not want to live here? I thought you loved this place as much as Clara." His hand closed over hers and he laced their fingers together.

Lilly reminded herself that Jacques wasn't her responsibility. She couldn't take on the burden of his happiness, or the lack thereof. She had her own life to worry about. "I couldn't afford the property taxes. My husband put us in debt before he left me. I can't afford to keep the B & B."

"That bastard!" Jacques' hand jerked from hers and she imagined the fury in his eyes, which, she realized, she couldn't describe. His voice had gone cold, hard as steel. "I knew he was going to hurt you. I knew it since the night you two—"

"You were there?" she screeched. "You were on the beach? You saw us?" Feeling violated and appalled, she jumped from the bed and tugged on the sheet. He was obviously sitting on it, but she jerked it from beneath him.

"I did not watch you," he said with disgust. "I was at your party. When you two slipped away I followed to make sure the ass wasn't going to hurt you. But when you came on to him, I—"

"You what?"

"I wanted to kill him."

She stared at the spot where she thought he was, thanks to the slight depression in the mattress. "Why?"

"You were too young and innocent, and he didn't care." The bed shifted, and she heard him moving around the room. "He wanted only to claim you, to own you."

Lilly stood still and when his hands closed over her shoulders, she didn't startle. His words hit home, and she realized he'd brought out what she'd been thinking ever since her separation from Peter. She'd been a possession, and once she got too old he'd traded her in for a newer model.

"I wish I could have found some way to warn you. I wish I could have spared you so many years of misery."

"How do you know about my years of misery, as you put it?"

He was silent for so long she thought he wouldn't answer. Then he

said, "I read the letters you sent to Clara."

Lilly took a deep breath. She wasn't sure what she felt about that revelation. She'd told her Grandmother her deepest, darkest secrets. As her one and only living relative and someone who'd supported her throughout her entire life, Grandma was the only person to whom she could unload her burdens. Her grandmother was a good Christian woman and had urged Lilly to remain strong throughout her marriage. She'd said her vows in church, in front of God and most of Moonlight Cove, and realized Grandma valued commitment above all else. Not wanting to disappoint her, Lilly had tried to remain strong. She just wished Peter had found his little tart sooner, set her free sooner, so she could have had more time with her grandmother.

"I am sorry, *chérie*, if you feel that I have violated your privacy. Your letters were one of the few things in this life of mine that I could count on."

How could she berate him? She couldn't begin to imagine how lonely his life had been for so long. "I'm not mad," she said softly. Closing her eyes, she moved into his hard strength and heard his sigh of relief when he wrapped his arms around her.

He rested his chin on the top of her head. She let the sheet fall from her fingers and wound her arms around his waist. God, she wished she could see him.

A memory came to her of a movie she'd seen when she was young. *Memoirs of an Invisible Man*. Hadn't the guy in the movie put on makeup to make himself visible? She thought about the foundation in her make-up bag, which she almost never used. "What would happen if I put something on your skin? Would I be able to see you?"

"Non." He sighed heavily. "Whatever touches my skin disappears the way my clothes do. Water is the only thing that does not disappear, the only thing that makes my shape appear to... mortals, though I'm not sure why. Perpetuating the myth of the Phantom of Moonlight Cove, I have been seen exiting the ocean after a swim.

"Water?" she asked, excitement shooting through her. "Let's go take a shower."

* * * * *

Jacques stood to the side and let Lilly adjust the water temperature. Bent over as she was, turning on the taps, he had the perfect view to admire her luscious ass. His fingers itched to touch her. Even though they'd just had amazing, life altering sex—at least, it had altered him—he wanted her again. And again. And again.

He only had two weeks with her. Two short weeks. For someone who had been around for two *centuries*, two weeks was no more than a blink of an eye.

His heart did a double stutter, and he let out a slow breath. He didn't want her to leave. He didn't want to go back to being a...*nothing*.

Lilly stepped into the tub and held out her hand. "Come on. Water's warm." She smiled such a beguiling smile that he wanted to grab her up, haul her down to his little cave on the beach, and tie her up so she could never leave him. Instead, he took her hand and stepped into the bathtub. Warm water hit his back and he gasped in surprise.

"What?" Lilly asked, her gaze roving over his now wet chest and abdomen. She laid her hands against his skin as water flowed over his shoulders and down his chest and stomach, and gently pushed him backwards.

Taking a small step back and letting the water beat down on his head, he laughed. "I've never had a warm shower before. Only cold ones, in the small waterfall on the other side of the jetty after a hard rain."

"Let me see your face," Lilly said softly, placing her palms on his cheeks and tipping his head back into the water. "Oh, my." Her words were whisper soft and filled with admiration. Her fingers coasted over his cheekbones, across his brow, and down his nose, similar to the way she'd touched him earlier in the kitchen. Only now, his shape was visible as the water flowed over him.

"You approve?"

She laughed and stepped closer until her nipples grazed his chest hairs. "Oh, yeah." She grinned. "What color are your eyes?" she asked.

The water gave only a ghostly outline of his form. She could see the breadth of his chest, the length of his arms, and the shagginess of his hair, but most details were lost, including his olive complexion and bright eyes that women had always *oohed* over.

“Blue,” he said simply.

“Ice blue, sapphire blue, or midnight blue?” Her hands smoothed over his shoulders, down his biceps, and along his abdomen up to his chest. When her fingers curled into his chest hair and lightly tugged, lust shot through him with a fierceness that stole his breath.

“Ahh, midnight.” His cock stood proud and fully engorged, and he rubbed its sensitive tip against her soft belly. Jacques grabbed her hips and pulled her against him, capturing her mouth with his. When she gasped in surprise, he pinned her against the wall and pressed the length of his body to hers, never relenting in his assault on her mouth.

She tasted of sweetness. Purity. Hope. And he had only two short weeks to make an eternity worth of memories with her.

Jacques’ desperate kiss rocked Lilly as she reveled in his touch, in the hard planes of his body pressed so intimately against her. His heat and the warmth of the water offered a direct contrast to the cold, hard tiles at her back. She shivered with delight as his rough hands massaged her ass. The length of his penis pressed against her belly, and she rubbed against it, cherishing the rough sounds of pleasure coming from him in little grunts and growls.

Never had she felt so powerful, yet so weak. Too weak to deny him anything he might ask of her. Yet there was power in making a man so horny.

His mouth broke from hers and traveled down her neck. His teeth nipped at her skin, sensitizing it, sending little shockwaves skittering over her nerve endings. For a few moments all she could do was cling to his wide shoulders and pray her knees wouldn’t give way.

She watched, amazed, as the water rolled over him, turning him into a shimmering ethereal being. A being put here for her pleasure.

One of his hands cupped her right breast, and his hot mouth captured the other and sucked hard. She cried out and thrust her hips

against him. Fire coursed through her veins. She wanted him again. Now.

Before Jacques, sex had been simply *okay* in her book, but other things rated much higher. Like chocolate. BBQ potato chips with sour cream. A good movie. Now she wondered how she'd ever go back to being alone again after experiencing this.

Her body jerked in surprise when his fingers slipped into her pussy, and then skimmed over her hard clit.

"Shh, *chérie*. Did I hurt you?"

Quickly shaking her head to dispel the worry from his tone, she opened her mouth against his chest and bit down on one of his gorgeous pecs. He groaned and his cock jumped against her belly.

Knowing he liked it, she moved down and found his nipple with her teeth. He sucked in a quick breath when she nipped his tender skin, then sighed when she smoothed her tongue over it.

"You are a wicked woman," he said in a low growl. Two of his thick fingers entered her body.

Her laugh was throaty. "Only with you."

Slipping her hand between them, she wrapped her fingers around his impressive erection. He was longer and thicker than any man she'd ever seen. She moved slightly, away from his questing fingers, to see his penis.

"You're not circumcised."

His hand closed over hers, tightening her grip, and he showed her how to stroke him. She glanced up to see his head thrown back in what she hoped was rapture.

"Does it bother you?" His voice was tight, hoarse.

"No," she answered honestly. Nothing about this man seemed wrong. Without thinking, she dropped to her knees and took him into her mouth.

"*Non*," he groaned. His hands burrowed through her hair, and he tried pulling her away. "You needn't do this, Lilly."

"I want to." Keeping the tight stroking motion with her fist, she looked up at him. His head was bowed, and she could no longer see his face because his long hair hung along his cheeks, dripping down on her.

Without waiting for a response, she licked his thick length from tip to base, then nuzzled her mouth against his heavy sac. She felt his springy hair against her lips, and it spurred her on.

“Lilly. *Mon Dieu*. You—Ahhh.”

Power radiated through her at his words and gravelly tone. As she sucked and licked and rolled her tongue around the tip of his cock, her own core throbbed with the need for release. His pleasure spurred her on, and she wondered if she would come simply by causing his orgasm.

His hips moved in small thrusts as her hand pumped him, and his fingers tugged at her hair, the slight pain in her scalp only adding to her heat. Cupping his balls, she gently massaged them. She heard a moan and realized it had come from her. Her body shook, her nipples tingled. She was so close—

“Enough!”

Surprised at his sharp exclamation, she fell back, releasing him, but she had only a second to wonder. He scooped her up to her feet, turned her away from him, and pressed her forward.

“Grab the edge.”

She gripped the edge of the tub at his command, but wasn’t prepared for the hard invasion as he slammed his cock into her. She stumbled, but his hands gripped her hips, holding her still for his onslaught.

Shock immediately gave way to the thrill of his command. Wet skin slapped against wet skin and even the sound added to the excitement coursing through her. Harder and harder he pounded into her, deeper and deeper. She ached with the need for release.

Jacques growled a feral sound, and Lilly’s muscles tightened in response. She couldn’t breathe. Her hands ached from gripping the tub’s porcelain edge. She locked her knees and rocked against him, meeting every thrust with one of her own.

One of his hands slipped around her and spread her pussy lips wide, his finger rough against her throbbing clit. She panted and prayed she’d come soon. How much more of this pleasured torture could she stand before she passed out from the assault? Still he drummed into her,

relentless.

When she felt his other hand on her ass, palming her cheek, she knew she was close. So damn close. "Please!" she begged. Then his thumb skimmed over her anus and she jerked in surprise.

"Now, *chérie*."

As he growled the command, his finger pressed ever so slightly against her asshole, and she screamed as the orgasm ripped through her with the force of a hurricane.

* * * * *

Jacques fell to his knees behind Lilly and scooped her into his arms. Her body shook and small whimpers came from her lips. Her eyes were closed, and she lay limp against his chest.

"Lilly," he whispered, his insides twisted in a hard knot. He'd hurt her. *Cher Dieu*, he'd hurt her. Never had he lost control with a woman. Never had he been so rough, so demanding, so demeaning. "Lilly. Sweet Lilly. Forgive me."

She sighed and turned her cheek against his chest. "Forgive you?" she asked, her words a little slurred. "That was amazing." Slowly she raised her hand and laid it on his shoulder, then raised her lips to meet his. Little spasms shook her body.

Afraid she was lying, he kissed her tenderly. He feared he'd caused her bodily harm. He couldn't believe he'd treated her like that. He'd lost his mind when she made those sweet little sounds, as if having his cock in her mouth was the best thing she'd ever tasted.

Her eyes slowly fluttered open and she blinked away the drops of water from the shower still pouring down over them. His back shielded most of her from the force of the spray, but stray drops splashed over his shoulders onto her face

"Jacques, you didn't hurt me."

"I demeaned you. I treated you no better than a—"

She cut off his words with her fingers over his lips. Then she smiled. A smile so bright her eyes sparkled in the shadowed interior of the

tub. "You know what you did?"

Confused, he shook his head. No woman he'd known in his past life would have stood for such treatment unless he'd paid her. Lilly was no whore. Lilly deserved gentleness, softness. Tenderness.

"You showed me that even though I'm almost forty years old, I can still make a man crazy with lust." And then she threw her arms around his neck and laughed. "You made me feel like a woman again, Jacques. A desired woman."

He would never understand women, he decided as he stood, keeping her tight in his arms. Stepping from the tub, he set her to her feet on the fluffy little rug. Then he pulled a towel from the rack behind her and wrapped it around her shoulders.

After shutting off the shower and taking another towel for himself, he ushered her back to her room, where he proceeded to carefully dry every delectable inch of her body.

He didn't know what to say. He'd used her, yet she didn't look at it that way.

"You're drying off," she said softly, disappointment evident in her tone. As he bent before her and dried her smooth calves, she splayed her hand through his hair. "I liked seeing you in the shower, but I really wish I could see you for real." Her voice was soft, as if she were so relaxed she was having trouble forming words. "I want to look into your eyes."

He scooped her up into his arms and laid her down on the bed, then stretched out beside her. He cupped one smooth breast in his palm and pressed a soft kiss to her temple. "Rest, *chérie*," he whispered, wanting her to stop talking. Hearing his deepest desires from her lips sent a searing pain through his soul.

Chapter Six

Jacques envied Lilly's deep sleep.

He couldn't take his eyes off of her. He'd never seen anything more exquisite. Her golden tanned skin was smooth and warm. Her full, pink lips were soft and sweet. And thick black eye lashes fluttered against her high cheekbones as she slept.

And he was going to lose her in a matter of days.

His heart took a tumble and agony such as he'd never known shot through him. If he hadn't been lying down, he might have fallen.

After so many years of walking inside his small world alone, finally someone was here for him. Someone who wasn't afraid of him, and who touched him in ways other than just physically. She talked with him, filling his soul.

He'd grown up in a boisterous family and had often wished for silence. When he was old enough, he'd joined his father on the trading ships, always surrounded by loud, obnoxious sailors. Then he was given his own ship, his own command, and again, privacy and quiet time was always at a premium.

After accepting his fate of the curse, he grew fond of silence. When he needed to hear human voices, he would seek them out just to listen. But until Lilly, he'd never talked back. The tiny urchin Lilly had been when they met had been constantly curious, asking about everything.

He'd reveled in her attention. And then eventually she'd faded away, sending him back to his silence.

Until now. After spending a year where no voices were ever heard, he didn't know how he'd go back to being unspoken. Now that he'd found a person who could laugh with him, smile at him, make him feel as if he truly mattered to someone, how was he supposed to say goodbye?

The buzzer from the back door sounded, and he jumped in surprise.

Lilly slept on, unperturbed.

A loud knock followed.

"*Chérie*," he said softly, laying his hand on her shoulder to wake her.

She mumbled something in her sleep and rolled toward him, snuggling her body against his. His body's reaction was instantaneous, and he had to fight back his urge to kiss her, to slip inside her and wake her slowly, hearing her small sounds of pleasure.

"Lilly," he said a bit louder. "Someone is here."

Her eyes sprang open, and in that instant before she was fully awake, he saw a moment of fear as she looked through him. Then she blinked and the fear was gone, but the ache inside him remained. He knew that no matter how many times they slept together, or how much they talked, there would always be that bit of trepidation where he was concerned.

"Someone is here," he repeated.

She rolled away from him and glanced at the bedside clock. "Oh, shit! I forgot the real estate lady is coming today."

"Hel-llooo," came a call from downstairs. "Ms. Nightsong? Are you here?"

"I'll be down in a second, Mrs. Darlington!" Lilly flipped open the suitcase that stood next to the wall, pulled out a long flowered sundress, and shimmied it over her head. Rushing around the bed, she tripped over Jacques' pile of clothes on the floor and stopped, as if in shock, to stare at them.

"They are not on my body, therefore you can see them," Jacques

told her as he rolled to a sitting position on the bed.

She grabbed the brush from the nightstand on his side of the bed and began yanking it through her tousled hair, a frown marring her brow. Still she said nothing.

"Lilly?"

"Shh."

He raised an eyebrow and folded his arms over his chest.

When she'd finished torturing her scalp, she picked up his clothes and tossed them in his general direction. His moccasins hit his chest. "Get dressed."

"Yes, ma'am," he said, annoyed at her attitude.

She huffed and glared at him, though her gaze bypassed his head by several inches. In a fierce whisper she said, "How would it look if she came up here and found men's clothing in my room?"

Jacques chuckled.

"It's not funny."

"It is the twenty-first century, *chérie*. I have watched enough television to know that women needn't feel embarrassed about sex any longer."

Her hands went to her hips and her dark eyes practically spit flames at him—or rather, over his right shoulder. "I am not most women!" She lowered her voice to a harsh whisper. "I'll have you know, Mr. Phantom, that I've never been with another man besides my husband."

His humor fled and he pulled his shirt over his head. "And since I am not exactly a man—"

Lilly's fists fell away from her hips and her face softened. She stepped toward him and held out her hand until she touched his cheek. "You *are* a man, Jacques. I'm sorry." She bent and kissed him, just missing his lips. "I didn't mean that." She turned away and went for a pair of panties from the suitcase. "It's just that growing up with Grandma being so strict about premarital sex and all..." She tugged the pink silky panties into place and flounced her skirt. "...maybe I'm just not that sexually liberated."

As she slipped into her sandals, Jacques thought about what they'd

done in the shower this morning. How she'd said it made her feel womanly. Maybe he was the one who wasn't liberated. Other than whores, all the women he'd been with in France had wanted to be cherished, treated like a flower, easily bruised. The women he'd been with as the Phantom had been equally submissive. They lay there, letting him pleasure them before taking his own. But Lilly had been aggressive, treating him to oral stimulation. Because she *wanted* to.

"Ms. Nightsong?" came the woman's voice from downstairs.

"I'm coming," Lilly called. "Don't be mad at me," she said in a whisper as she stood at the door of the room facing him.

"Ah, *chérie*, I am not mad. I could never be mad with you."

A small smile flitted over her sensual lips. Lips that had kissed and sucked his cock, bringing him more pleasure than he'd thought possible. He shuddered as primal need shot through him. Perhaps it was a good thing she couldn't see him, or she'd know that just the sight of her smile made him hard.

"Gotta go," she said, then disappeared into the hall.

* * * * *

Lilly hurried down the stairs and found Mrs. Darlington in the living room, looking at the bookshelf. "Sorry, Mrs. Darlington, I was working upstairs and didn't hear the bell."

The woman turned toward Lilly with a bright smile. She looked professional in a slim peach suit that highlighted her auburn hair. Even though Lilly knew her to be nearly fifty, she didn't look a day over thirty-five.

"Quite all right, my dear. And call me Amy." Before Lilly could respond, Amy moved around her and went into the formal dining room, then the kitchen. Lilly followed, her stomach roiling uneasily.

"I absolutely cannot wait to see this place once the Parkers finish with it. They've already ordered the kitchen appliances." Amy set her thin attaché case on the table and turned a slow circle, taking in the room. "They're going to knock out that wall," she said, pointing to the wall

separating the kitchen from the dining room," and put in a breakfast bar and buffet. The stove will be a six burner with a small grill, and the new refrigerator is one of those obnoxiously large stainless steel side-by-sides. And a dishwasher, of course."

Tears stung Lilly's eyes as she looked at Grandma's 1960's Frigidaire. Her grandma had always said she didn't need anything newer. "They don't make 'em like they used to," she'd always said. And Grandma had loved the privacy of her kitchen. She'd never open it up to the dining room. And as for a dishwasher? Ha. Grandma wouldn't have touched one with a ten-foot pole.

"Oh, I'm so sorry dear," Amy said with sympathy in her voice, but her eyes still sparkled with glee. Of course she was happy, ecstatic probably, because of the commission she was making off the sale.

"It's okay," Lilly said, keeping her voice even and cool. She motioned for Amy to take a seat at the table and then sat down opposite her. "I told you I would come into Coos Bay to sign the papers."

"Nonsense, darling," Amy said as she opened her attaché and pulled out a thick sheaf of papers. "Gives me an excuse to get out of the office. Besides, I love this place. Would have bought it myself if my husband would've allowed it," she added with a conspiratorial wink.

Lilly didn't want to contemplate what Amy would have done to the place. Probably turn it into a real estate office. At least the Parkers were keeping it as a B & B.

Amy placed part of the papers in front of her, and then handed her a silver pen. "This is for the bank transfer of the funds. As you can see, all of your account information is already there."

After double-checking that the account numbers were accurate, Lilly signed.

"And this one," Amy said, laying down the thickest packet of papers in front of Lilly, "is for the final sale. Sign here..." She flipped some pages to a red tab sticking from the side. "And here..." She flipped more pages. "Initial here and here." Then she flipped to the final page. "And I need your full signature there."

Lilly's hand shook as she scanned the papers. She'd read them all

before, knew what she was signing, but this time, sitting here in Grandma's beloved kitchen, it all became too real. The words on the page blurred as tears rushed into her eyes.

"Ms. Nightsong? Is everything all right?" Amy asked, her voice gentle.

Lilly shook her head and tried to blink back the tears. This was it. This was her last tie in the world. She'd lost her parents, her grandmother, her husband, and now the house that had been the best part of her childhood.

"Ah, *chérie*," she heard whispered from behind her an instant before a pair of big, warm hands settled on her shoulders, offering comfort. "My sweet Lilly," he whispered in her ear. "Do not cry."

She gave a quick nod and wanted so much to turn and bury her face against Jacques. He understood her and her need for reassurance. But just as she'd lost everything else, with the sale of the house, she'd lose him, too.

"Ms. Nightsong?" Amy prompted. "You will sign them, won't you?"

Lilly nodded. What other choice did she have? Without selling the house, she couldn't afford the property taxes and upkeep. Selling meant financial security for her for a very, very long time. But what was financial security when one had *nothing* else?

She pressed her shaky fingers to her lips to stifle a sob. Not looking up at Amy, she whispered an apology.

"It's all right, Ms. Nightsong. I do understand how difficult this must be for you. Take your time." Amy stood and moved through the doorway into the dining room, to give her some privacy to gather herself back together, Lilly assumed.

"*Chérie*," Jacques whispered in her ear, and she realized he was kneeling next to her, his arms around her. "I wish I could take your pain from you."

Nodding in understanding, she laid her head against his and sucked in a deep, quivery breath. "I'm okay," she whispered. "Thank you."

"I am here for you. Remember that."

For some reason that gentle promise squeezed more tears from her eyes. She dropped the pen and touched Jacques' face. "Thank you," she said again.

And then she picked up the pen and signed at all the little red arrows, initialed here and there, and then closed the packet of papers and sucked in a deep breath. There was nothing else she could do but push on.

* * * * *

After Amy left, Lilly fixed herself a sandwich and sat at the kitchen table to eat it. Jacques sat across from her, but thankfully he wasn't talkative. She feared if she opened her mouth to say anything, the tears would come. Tired of crying and feeling sorry for herself, she fought them back with determination. She wasn't some weak woman. Since returning to Moonlight Cove, she'd already shed more than her fair share of tears. More than she ever had.

"I'm going to start on the guest rooms," she announced as she set her empty plate in the sink.

"May I be of help?" Jacques asked. His chair moved, and it startled her. Would she ever get used to that? She didn't think so.

"No. Thank you. I'd like to be alone for a while, if you don't mind." He made a rough sound she couldn't decipher.

"Are you sure, *chérie*? If we work together, it may go faster."

And then she'd be out of there sooner. "No, thank you." She wanted every last second in this house she could steal.

"As you wish." Jacques sounded hurt, but what was she to do? On top of wanting to pack things her way, by herself, she didn't like the thought of seeing things move through the air, or altogether disappear when he touched them. It was kind of creepy.

"Perhaps this evening we could go for a walk on the beach?" He'd moved closer to her, and she gripped the edge of the sink. His invisibility seemed especially unnerving this afternoon, probably because of her own mental instability. And she did want to be alone in case she couldn't keep

from crying.

"Yeah. That sounds good. Around sunset?" She should have her wits gathered back together by then. She hoped.

She felt his fingers brush her neck, and then his warm breath caressed her other cheek before his soft lips pressed against her skin. "I will leave you for now, then. Just call from the back porch if you need me. I won't be far."

Sucking in a shuddery breath, she nodded. He was so damned sweet, and his low, gentle voice made her tingle all over. Part of her was tempted to grab his hand and drag him back upstairs to bed. She could use the oblivion of another mind-shattering orgasm to make her forget...everything.

But no, she had work to do. Lots of work, she thought as she glanced around the kitchen. Two weeks in which to pack up sixty years of memories.

Lilly felt the air shift as Jacques moved away from her, and then the back door opened and closed. Releasing a breath she hadn't even known she was holding, she rinsed her hands under the tap and then headed out to her truck to bring in more empty boxes.

* * * * *

The sun was almost at the horizon by the time Lilly finished packing up the last of the three guest rooms. She looked around at the stripped bed, the dressers minus Grandma's crocheted doilies. Even the antique lamps were gone from the nightstands. Only bare furniture remained. As part of the sale, the Parkers were keeping the antique furnishings for these rooms. The only furniture Lilly would take with her would be the stuff in the bedroom she occupied, the beautiful wrought iron bed frame, and the dovetail-designed dresser with the matching nightstands her grandfather had constructed.

Sadness washed over her as she looked at the room, which was lit only by the overhead light. Once she'd been old enough, she'd helped her grandmother change sheets and dust after the guests left. Her grandma

was always meticulous in wanting everything just so.

Turning toward the door, she flipped off the light and headed to her room to change into her swimsuit and shorts. The temperature had topped eighty during the heart of the day, and she felt a little sticky. A refreshing swim in the cove would cool her off.

Carrying her lightweight jacket, she stepped onto the back porch. "Jacques," she called quietly. The sun had set and darkness quickly fell. No moon tonight.

"Here," he said softly, and she saw the swing at the end of the porch sway slightly. "Ready for our walk?" he asked as he came toward her.

She nodded and tried to push away the melancholy that plagued her.

He took her hand in his and raised it, kissed her knuckles. "Are you all right?"

She nodded again, afraid the lump in her throat prevented her from speaking clearly. She tried to see him. Tried to find some semblance that she wasn't completely nuts and making him up in her head. What if she'd totally lost her mind and he wasn't real?

"I do not care for the look in your eyes, *chérie*. What are you thinking?"

A nervous laugh escaped her lips, and she clamped her free hand over her mouth. "Wondering what a psychiatrist would prescribe for someone who talked to a phantom."

He let go of her hand and she heard him take a step back.

Had she offended him? "I didn't mean—"

"If you would like me to leave, just tell me so. I do not wish to make your stay here any more difficult."

Her heart nearly stopped, and tears filled her eyes. "No." She didn't want to be alone. She turned away and leaned against the porch railing. "I don't want you to leave, Jacques. I'm sorry. I'm just so—" A sob came up from her soul, and she couldn't stifle it. God, she hated crying. She hated feeling like this. So...*unsettled*.

"I wish I could take your sorrow from you, *chérie*," he whispered.

She felt his breath on her neck, and then his arm wound around her waist. She settled back against him and closed her eyes. If only he were real. Why this? she thought, angered by the whole situation. She'd done her time, lived through a horrible marriage, lost everything she'd once held dear. And now, when she'd finally found a man who made her feel...cherished...he was either a figment of her demented imagination, created because she read her grandmother's diary, or he really was a two hundred-seventy year old sailor stuck in some kind of spiritual limbo.

"Come, *chérie*. Let's walk." He pulled away, then took her hand in his and led her down the steps to the lawn. Just as they were about to enter the trees where the path led to the beach, a beam of light flared to life and, startled, Lilly jerked to a stop.

Jacques chuckled. "Flashlight from the utility room. It's been too many years since you were here to know the paths well. I do not want you tripping and breaking that sexy neck of yours."

She let out a little laugh. "Thanks." She slipped on her jacket as they entered the cool, damp forest. She followed the beam of light and soon they were out on the sandy beach. Jacques turned off the light and they stood in silence.

Lilly looked up to the sky to see a zillion stars. The sound of waves rushing to shore soothed away her tension, and she inhaled deeply to draw in the tangy, salty air. "I've missed this," she said, her voice low. She'd always felt that nights like these deserved a kind of reverence. Like walking into a deserted church.

Jacques' hand held hers in a warm, firm grip. His callused fingers squeezed hers. "Are you going for a swim?"

"Yeah. Will you come with me?"

She felt his touch on her shoulder, then his fingers trailed down her collarbone and he pushed her jacket off her shoulders. "I wouldn't miss it for the world. But you have a bathing suit on."

She grinned. "What am I supposed to have on?"

His hot, moist mouth opened on her neck, just below her ear, and she moaned. "Nothing."

A thrill shot through her. She hadn't skinny dipped since she was a

teenager. Right here. On nights like this, in fact. She'd had a group of friends from the area who would come down to the beach, build big bonfires, and skinny dip.

"Hey! Were you playing peeping Tom? Did you see us—?"

His chuckle was a warm breath against her ear, and she shivered in response. His questing fingers found the straps to her swimsuit and slid them off her shoulders, baring her breasts to the warm night air. "I made sure none of the children drowned. If any of their parents had known what you were up to—"

His big, hard palms cupped her breasts, and she moaned. "I thought we were going swimming."

"We will." He took one already hard nipple into his mouth and suckled lightly.

"Jacques," she said, not knowing if it was a plea or a warning.

"I have never seen anything more beautiful in all my life," he said reverently, slowly trailing kisses down her belly as he peeled away her suit.

A shiver, not produced by the slight breeze, ran down her arms. Once again she wondered, *why*? Deep inside she knew she'd never find another man like this one. Tender, sweet, and loving. One who rocked her world.

His nimble fingers undid the button on her shorts and pushed them down her legs; the swimsuit quickly followed the shorts. She stepped out of them, and then kicked off her sandals. Standing naked on the beach, she should have been self-conscious. A little embarrassed. But she wasn't. To anyone watching, she was alone.

Then his hot tongue stroked her inner thigh, and she quivered. His hands roamed up the backs of her thighs with a tickle-light touch, and she laughed even as she leaned into his mouth, so close to—

She pulled back, embarrassed. She'd been working and sweating all afternoon. "Let's swim," she said, and headed for the water's edge.

"Spoil sport," Jacques said, and then she heard him running toward her. He scooped her up just as her feet touched the water and she had only a split second to wrap her arms around his neck and to hold her

Phantom Lover by Anna Leigh Keaton

breath before he plunged them into the cold, frothy water.

Chapter Seven

"Do you remember when we met?" Jacques asked.

He sat with his arm around Lilly, their bodies spooned together as they watched the softly crackling campfire he'd built. For the first time in as long as he could remember, he was content just to *be*.

"I don't think so." She turned her head and kissed his jaw, then returned her head to its position against his bicep. "Do you?"

After their swim, she'd grabbed his shirt from the sand and slipped it on. The flouncy shirt, its sleeves hanging below her fingertips and the hem halfway down her thighs, looked incredibly sexy on her. The rest of their clothes lay in a heap a few feet away.

"*Oui*. Of course I remember. You nearly drowned."

"I did not. I'm a great swimmer."

He grinned into her hair and pulled her body tighter against his. "Not when you were four."

"Tell me."

Resting his hand on her belly, loving the feel of her softness, he kissed the rim of her ear. "Your parents brought you down to the beach. You were playing at the edge of the surf, and I was watching you because it'd had been so long since I'd seen a child. As you know, most of the guests to your grandmother's B & B were either couples or single. Not many had kids."

Lilly nodded.

"Your mother and father were...playing also."

"Ewww. I don't want to hear about *that!*"

Jacques laughed and nuzzled her neck. "All of a sudden, from sitting there making little mounds in the sand with a plastic shovel, you got up and walked straight into the water."

"And you saved me?"

"I think so. I ran into the water and scooped you up. You were pretty mad and kicked me a few times." He chuckled. "I don't think you liked the taste of ocean water."

"How did you keep my parents from seeing you? If you were wet, I mean."

"When they heard you scream they came running. By then I'd set you back on the sand and got the hell out of there."

"Wow." She laced her fingers through his. "I guess I should say thanks."

He laughed and squeezed her fingers. "My pleasure, *chérie*."

"So when did we start talking to each other?"

"Not until the next summer. You came here again with your parents, and once again they weren't paying much attention to you. I was worrying over you, and I sat down next to you." He smiled at the fond memory. "I was teasing you. You were trying to construct a sand castle, and every time you would turn around, I would put something on it. A shell, a stone, a bird feather—items that were sitting on the beach. You were getting frustrated, and finally you told me to 'stop it.'"

"And did you?"

"Yes." He laughed. "And then when you finished, you told me to put them on now."

"So you did?"

"Mm hmm. And then you asked me my name. Until then I hadn't spoken, but it just came out at your request. And then you smiled at me. Such a sweet, innocent smile, and I fell madly in love with you."

Lilly laughed. "Because I was the only person in the world who could hear you."

"No," he said seriously. "Because after that day, you would sneak away and come to the beach. On several occasions your parents came after you, very upset that you'd wandered all the way to the beach from the cliff. I should have told you not to come back, which would have been the right thing to do to keep you out of trouble with your folks, but I just couldn't. You came down here to see me. We built sandcastles and collected shells. You laughed at my accent, and I taught you a few French words."

Lilly returned his hand squeeze and sighed. "I remember getting into trouble for coming down here. That lasted until I was about ten. Everyone thought I'd fall and break my neck or drown. But I knew I wouldn't. I always felt safe here, with you."

"Ah, *chérie*." He raised their joined hands and was bringing them up to kiss her fingers, when she let out a terrified little yelp and jerked away from him. She rolled into a sitting position and sat there, staring at him with huge eyes.

"What is it?" he asked.

She swallowed so hard he could hear it, and then she rubbed her fingers over her eyes. When she opened them again, she looked ready to keel over.

"Lilly? What is wrong?"

She pointed at him with a shaky finger. And that's when he realized...she was looking *at* him. Right into his eyes.

All the blood drained from his face. "You can see me," he said, his throat thick and dry.

She gave a nod, but otherwise didn't move.

Did she find him repulsive? Scary? Why was she staring at him like that? His heart thundered in his chest.

Finally her gaze wavered from his and swept down his body. Her look was like a caress, and he couldn't hide his reaction, especially since he was sitting there completely naked.

"Lilly." His voice sounded like gravel. He fisted his hands and waited. Would she run from him? Tell him that she never wanted him near her again?

"You're so..." She broke off, and he cringed, waiting for her thoughts. "*Beautiful.*"

Lilly couldn't stop staring. *Oh my god, I've been having sex with that body?*

He'd felt delicious, but seeing him in the flesh was something entirely different. He was built better than any man she'd ever seen. In the flickering firelight, his skin was lightly bronzed, and his biceps bulged. A light trail of curly dark hair spread from one well-formed pec to the other then trailed down, narrowing as it reached his belly button. Even that was sexy!

His thighs were the size of tree trunks, slightly paler than his chest and arms, but still a bit golden. And his penis. *Oh, man!* It was huge.

As she raised her gaze to his face, her heart thudded so hard she thought she was surely having heart palpitations. His wavy, shoulder-length hair and whisker-shadowed cheeks made him look like a pirate right out the movies. His jaw was strong and square, with a slight cleft in his chin. And his eyes. *Heaven help me*, she thought. They were a sparkling, stunning midnight blue. He was the man in every fantasy she'd ever allowed herself.

He didn't move from his reclining position, with his legs out in front of him as he leaned on one elbow. As she watched, a slow, sexy grin split his masculine lips, showing off even, white teeth. In her mind flashed all the books she'd read about sailors. About scurvy and the other problems they'd faced. He showed none of that.

"Beautiful?" he asked, arching one dark eyebrow.

She could only nod in response. No other word existed to describe him as a whole. He was stunning. Masculine. Beautiful.

"Come here, *chérie*," he said in that low, accented voice, and her body began to hum.

Her breath grew shallow as she knee-walked toward the blanket on which they'd been lying. The one he was still sprawled on. *Oh. My. God.* She didn't know where to look. His eyes held a sensual, lusty heat. His chest was so massive she wanted to dig her nails into it. And his hands. How had she missed his hands? He had huge, square palms with long,

blunt fingers. And his cock. Heaven help her.

Heat rose in her cheeks, and her thighs quivered. She was damp and ready for him, and he hadn't even touched her yet. When she was just inches away, she sat back on her heels. The heat from his body seared her.

"I am glad you like what you see," he said, a bit of arrogance tingeing his tone.

A smile tugged at her lips. Any man with a body like this could afford to be arrogant. No wonder Princess Chailali had thrown herself off a cliff. Any weak-hearted woman might do just that if he denied them.

His hand reached out to her, and the play of the muscles in his arms mesmerized her. He tugged on the front of the shirt she wore—his shirt—and she tumbled against him. As his arms wound around her, she inhaled his scent. Clean, salty male.

And it dawned on her that she'd never smelled him before. "Jacques," she said, her heart beating so hard it nearly choked her. "Jacques," she repeated when he didn't respond, just raised the hem of the shirt and cupped her ass.

"Hmm?" he murmured against her neck, his hot tongue swirling an intricate pattern against her skin, making her see stars.

"I can smell you."

He stilled, then leaned back to look into her face. "Do I stink?"

A gusty laugh slipped from her chest, and she leaned down and kissed him. She meant it to be only a playful peck on his lips, but once there, really *tasting* him for the first time, she couldn't stop.

Her tongue delved into his mouth, and she couldn't prevent the moan that rode up her throat. His hands slipped down over her ass, and his long, questing fingers sank into her pussy. She slid her hands into his hair to keep herself grounded, but it didn't work. She felt as if she were falling...falling....

She jerked her mouth away from his and, panting, stared down into his eyes. "No. You don't stink," she said, trying to catch her breath. "You smell good. *Very* good. And you taste even better." She swallowed, wondering if she were rambling. "It's just that...until now, you didn't smell at all. Or have...any flavor." She leaned over him, buried her nose

against his throat, and inhaled. "Oh my God, you smell wonderful."

His deep, rumbling chuckle spread fire in her belly, and she clenched her thighs together, afraid she'd come too soon. He still held her butt cheek in one hand, raised the other, and pushed her hair from her face. "I do not know why, or how, *chérie*, but I am glad you can see me." His voice dropped even lower. "And taste me."

She trembled at the sexy way he said that. She rose over him and scooted down his body, kissing and nuzzling his skin as she went, until her cheek brushed the hot, hard length of his cock. Without hesitation, she took it in her hand and closed her mouth over its soft tip.

"*Non*," he groaned, and his hips bucked. She took him deeper into her mouth with each stroke. His breathing grew as ragged, as did hers. His hands fisted in her hair, tugging at her scalp. His washboard stomach heaved with each breath he took.

Her pussy throbbed, but she was too intent on bringing him his release to worry about herself. She could wait. The look in his hooded eyes as he watched her suck him was enough to make any woman's heart pound.

She hummed low in her throat, loving the way he tasted, the way his cock was so hard, yet so smooth against her lips and tongue. She couldn't take her eyes off his.

His fists tightened in her hair, and he gave a long growl as his head fell back, and she felt the violent contractions of his orgasm. Yet, as he'd said, he did not ejaculate. To her surprise, she felt cheated. Until Jacques, blowjobs had been a messy thing, but she wanted all of him.

His hands finally eased their torture on her scalp and fell to his sides. She crawled up his body until her aching pussy settled over his semi-erect cock. Bracing her hands on his chest, she slowly moved over him, her body's heat and slick juices easing the way.

"*Chérie*. You have killed me."

She laughed and picked up his hands, placing them against her hardened nipples. "Dead men don't talk."

His grin was slow and sexy. "Or have sexy women crawling all over them." His cock grew hard and long inside her, and she threw her

head back and moaned as she rode him.

He pinched her nipples a little too hard, and she lost her rhythm, delaying her release. "Jerk," she said between her teeth.

He laughed, and pulled her down over him so he could take her breast into his mouth. His whiskers abraded her skin, sending a quick wave of prickling over her. "Suck hard," she groaned. She braced her hands on either side of his head and slammed down on his cock again and again.

He obliged, taking her nipple between his teeth and sucking her until the pull reached all the way to her toes. One of his hands slipped between her thighs and his fingers rubbed her clit. She screamed in frustration, needing to come, but he kept the pressure too light.

Balancing on one hand, she thrust his fingers out of the way and furiously rubbed herself, seeking release, seeking oblivion. He switched to the other nipple and when he bit her, she came with a long, keening cry.

He caught her and held her against his chest with his thick arms when she fell against him. He wasn't done yet, and rolled with her until he was over her. He grabbed her thighs and spread her wide, raising her legs over his arms, and then pounded into her so hard, she thought the top of her head would surely explode.

And then she did explode. Stars flashed behind her eyelids as wave after wave of excruciating pleasure swept through her, making her groan even after Jacques collapsed on top of her.

When their heartbeats finally slowed, and their breathing became less ragged, Jacques let go of her legs, and they flopped bonelessly to the sandy floor. He rolled off of her, lying on his back, and stared at her.

"What is it?" she asked, suddenly self-conscious. Had she done something wrong? His expression was inscrutable. Hard.

His jaw tensed. Then he pulled her into his arms and kissed her. Long and deep, yet so infinitely tender it shook her more than the mind-blowing sex they had shared.

* * * * *

Fear rocketed through Jacques like nothing he'd ever felt before. Worse than being set upon by pirates. Worse than the night his ship broke to pieces off the coast and he'd lost his crew.

Something was happening to him because of Lilly.

He kissed her with a desperation he couldn't understand.

She could see him now. Smell and taste him. And the orgasm he'd just had while inside her was more explosive than any he'd had in his life. Was he becoming a *real* man again? And if he was, what did it mean?

You shall never know peace until you experience the agony of love.

His heart clenched, and he grasped Lilly to his chest. *Cher Dieu, no. Not now!*

"Jacques!" Lilly cried, and he realized he was squishing her.

He couldn't seem to catch his breath. A cold trail of sweat ran down his spine, and that scared him even more. He didn't sweat. *Ever.*

"What's wrong?" Lilly asked, sounding panicked. "Jacques. Talk to me!" She held his face with her hands and met his eyes. "You're scaring me."

"I'm changing."

Her brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

He lifted one of her hands from his cheek and swiped it across his brow. "I'm sweating."

Her mouth dropped open in surprise. "My God," she whispered. "You're not a phantom any more."

He shook his head. There were things he could feel that were not fully human. Even though the orgasm had been amazing, there'd still been no cum. "Only part of the way."

"What does it mean? What's going to happen?"

He didn't answer, didn't know how to answer her. Lilly must have seen the fear in his eyes for she threw her arms around his neck and hugged him tight. "It's okay, Jacques. It's okay. I'm here with you. Don't be afraid."

She had no idea. She couldn't. He'd waited so long for this to happen, for him to be able to die. *But not now! Two weeks. Please, give me two more weeks,* he silently begged. *Don't make me leave Lilly yet.*

* * * * *

Jacques held Lilly's hand as they made their way back up the cliff to the B & B. She didn't know what to think, or what to say to him. She'd seen fear in his eyes, and she could understand that. He'd been the way he was for so many years. But if he was transforming back to a real live man, wasn't that a good thing?

She replayed the curse over and over in her mind. She knew now that he was real. There was no way he could be a figment of her imagination. He must know the agony of love, she thought, remembering the curse. Was she falling in love with him? Was that why he was changing? Had he needed a woman who saw him for who he was and still loved him?

She didn't know. After the life she'd lived with Peter, she didn't know what real man/woman love felt like. She cared for Jacques, of that she had no doubt. But did she love him? In reality she'd only known him a couple of days. Sure, she remembered bits and pieces of her "imaginary" friend from her childhood, but...

"I need to find a mirror," Jacques said, cutting into her thoughts. "If I have a reflection..." His words trailed off and his grip on her hand became fierce. The man was obviously terrified.

"Okay." She led him in the back door and straight up to her bedroom. She stepped in front of the full-length mirror on the back of the door. "Come on," she said softly, holding out her hand to him.

His jaw tensed as he stepped behind her, then she heard his sharply expelled breath. Turning to look in the mirror, only she stood there. He still didn't have a reflection, which made her wonder whether other people could see him.

Jacques' arms came around her, and he buried his face in her hair. His body was tense, his grip around her waist almost painful.

"Are you okay?" she asked, laying her hands over his arms and leaning into his solid body.

With a sigh, his hold loosened. "*Oui*. I am...okay."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

He shook his head. "I do not know what to say."

"You're afraid."

"Perhaps tomorrow everything will return to as it was before."

Lilly didn't hear hope in his tone at the prospect. She only heard a kind of sadness that made her heart ache. "And if it doesn't?"

He shrugged. "I do not know, *chérie*. I think I am more afraid of the unknown."

She turned in his arms and laid her head against his chest, wrapping her arms around his waist. "Whatever happens, Jacques, I'm here for you."

He kissed her temple, then her ear. "You are...everything a man could ever want."

* * * * *

Jacques held Lilly in his arms. The cool breeze blowing through the window made goose bumps rise on his arms and flanks, which annoyed him. He hadn't felt cold since the curse. Letting go of Lilly with one hand, he pulled the sheet up to his waist.

"You okay?" she asked again, probably for the twentieth time since they came back inside.

They'd showered together, washing away the sea salt and sand that had stuck to them, then climbed into bed. She clung to him now, her arms around him, her head nestled into his shoulder.

"Go to sleep, *chérie*." He brushed a still damp lock of hair from her cheek and kissed her softly.

"I can't."

"Why?"

She raised her head slightly, meeting his gaze. "I'm afraid if I go to sleep, you won't be here in the morning. That I won't be able to see you or...anything."

"I will be here," he said, and tucked her head back against his shoulder. "I promise."

She nodded, and her arm tightened a little around his waist.

Jacques gritted his teeth and tried to figure it out. The curse sounded in his brain loudly, as it had the day Chailali had thrown it at him. *You shall never know peace until you experience the agony of love.*

Merci! He was falling in love with Lilly. His heart had known it from the second he saw her step from her battered little pickup truck. But why, after all this time? Why her? Why now?

Agitated, he slipped from beneath Lilly's arm and paced the room. If he was going to die, he didn't want to do so until she left. He wanted — *needed* — to spend these last few days with her. How could he keep himself alive? Block her from his heart? Too late.

He'd loved women, many women, when he was young and foolish. He'd given his heart easily, usually to the wrong type of woman. When he'd taken command of his ship, he'd left a very special lady behind in France, but he honestly couldn't say he'd loved her either. They'd been intimate, she'd been from an upper-class family, and he'd planned to marry her upon his return. But now he couldn't even remember her name. He knew that if he lived through eternity as the phantom, he'd never forget his Lilly.

As much as he'd tried, with all the women he'd seduced as the phantom, he'd never felt anything for them except...

He really didn't know what he'd felt for them. He'd certainly never loved them, had never been stricken by the fear of losing them. The thought of never seeing or touching Lilly again sent a chill straight through to his bones.

Chapter Eight

Lilly rolled over seeking Jacques' warmth, but found the bed empty. With a start, she sat up and looked around the room, her heart clenching in her chest.

He's gone.

Jumping from the bed, Lilly was halfway down the stairs when she realized the shower was running. She turned around and hurried to the partially closed bathroom door. "Jacques?"

"Good morning, *chérie*. Join me?" He pulled back the shower curtain and grinned at her.

Her heart did a little tumble. *God, I am falling in love with him. If I love him enough, will the curse be broken?*

She shook her head and forced a smile. "I'm okay. I'm going downstairs to make breakfast. Are you...um...hungry?"

"Non. I have not felt hunger. Only heat and cold."

She nodded and backed from the bathroom, returning to her bedroom to dress.

The one thing she couldn't be sure of was what Jacques' curse meant. *He will find peace when he knows the agony of love.* What exactly was the peace he would find? Last night she'd been excited about the prospect of him becoming fully human. It meant there might be a future for them, if that's what they both wanted, but he'd been terrified and the only conclusion she could draw from that is that he might die. He'd talked so openly with her about his inability to die. What if he became human again

only to perish?

Tears prickled her eyes as she headed down the stairs to the kitchen. If her love was changing him, she needed to stop it now. She'd have to harden her heart against him and not let him in any farther than he already was.

She swiped at her eyes and took a carton of eggs from the refrigerator. How the hell was she going to do that? And wouldn't the polite thing be to love him and set him free? How could she leave him like this, in such limbo? How could she walk away and not help him end his curse?

She didn't know what to do. Besides, she seriously doubted she could stop loving him. He'd told her that she was everything a man could want, which was plain bullshit because she'd been married to a man who wanted more. But the fact was, Jacques was everything she could ever dream of in a man. Except maybe for him to be visible to the rest of the world.

* * * * *

A few hours later, Jacques and Lilly worked in companionable silence in the parlor, packing up Clara's belongings. He couldn't keep his gaze from straying from his task to her. With her hair pulled up in a sexy little ponytail and her wearing those skintight denim shorts, he wanted to grab her and take her up against the bookshelf.

But he restrained himself. He had to. It seemed to him that when he let himself feel too much, he changed. The first night he'd wanted so badly for her to hear him, and the next morning she had. Then he'd wanted her to see him, which hadn't happened until they were talking last night. Change seemed to happen whenever feelings besides lust grabbed hold of him. Tender feelings. *Love*.

He swiped the back of his hand over his sticky brow and scowled. He'd forgotten just how miserable being overheated could be. With the buckskin pants and heavy linen shirt he wore, he thought he might melt. Without any hesitation, he drew his shirt over his head, then wiped his

face with it.

Lilly drew in a quick breath.

"What?" he asked, annoyed and out of sorts.

"The scars on your back," she said, furrowing her brow as she came toward him.

He glanced over his shoulder at his bare skin. He'd all but forgotten about the lash marks. "It happened a long time ago." Not wanting to upset Lilly, he went to put the shirt back on.

"No." Her gentle fingers traced the scars, and she made a little pained sound. "What happened?"

His eyes narrowed, and he turned so she couldn't see his back. "Young men do stupid things."

Mon Dieu, her eyes were so big and innocent. She gazed at him, and he'd swear she could take away any pain, even those of his memories.

"When I was twenty, I had an affair with an English earl's daughter. We were caught. I was...punished."

She shook her head, then took a step toward him and wrapped her arms around him. "That's so awful."

His heart, which he'd been valiantly trying to keep closed, melted in his chest. He'd never make it. He was hot and sweaty, and probably didn't smell so great, yet here she was, hugging him, trying to comfort him for something that happened so long ago, he'd all but forgotten it.

He took her by the shoulders and set her away from him. "Lilly, go back to work."

"But—"

"Go back to work."

She nodded but didn't move, even after he released her shoulders. She looked hurt.

He sighed. "I'm hot and irritable. I have not been hot in two hundred years. I don't care for the feeling."

Her eyes changed. The pain vanished from them, and a humored sparkle set in. "So get naked. I won't mind."

He growled, which made her laugh out loud.

She backed away. "Really, it's no hardship on me if you pack boxes

in the buff."

He chuckled and shook his head. How could he stay upset with her when her smile warmed him all the way to his toes? "Go back to work, Lillian."

She giggled. "How about we go into town this evening and find you some shorts and T-shirts? I've got to buy some more groceries."

His smile faded, as did the warmth inside him. "I can't leave the property."

Gesturing toward the front door she said, "Well, maybe that's changing too."

He shrugged and turned back to the stack of trinkets he'd been wrapping in paper and packing in the box. "We can try, I suppose." But he didn't hold much hope that it would work.

* * * * *

Jacques let out a string of curses in French.

Lilly swung around from the Victorian cabinet where she'd almost finished packing Grandma's hundred-year-old Limoges China. Jacques was peeling off his shirt.

When his gaze met hers, he shook his head. "Some things do not change."

She frowned, then glanced at her watch. The time was exactly three twenty-two, just as he'd told her. He returned to the state in which he'd been in at the time of the curse. His hair, which had been mussed and sweat-dampened, looked clean and soft. His shirt had somehow returned to his back. He'd taken off his moccasins, and now they were on his feet again.

Jacques looked frustrated, but Lilly couldn't help but sigh with relief. After last night, she'd worried that everything about him was changing, and much too quickly. She needed more time with him.

At five-thirty, the truck died at the intersection as they left the B & B.

"Damn it. Now what?" Lilly turned off the engine, then tried to

restart it. Nothing happened. It was dead.

"It is me," Jacques said from the passenger seat.

Lilly shook her head and banged her fist against the steering wheel. "No. I've had a lot of problems with this thing the last few months. I need a new car."

"I am telling you, it is because I am here." He opened his door and stepped out of the truck, then bent down to look in through the open passenger window. "Try it now."

She turned the key and it started right up. Lilly's heart sank.

"I cannot leave the property."

Scrambling out from behind the wheel, she rounded the hood and came to stand beside him. Confused and pissed off, she frowned up into his face. "Fine. We'll walk."

He shook his head and touched her cheek with his fingertips. "I cannot. Look." He turned toward the front of the truck and held up his hand. "It is like a wall to me. I cannot see it, but I cannot move past it."

His palms laid flat against something, and Lilly got a funny, sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. Until now, it hadn't seemed possible that he was truly stuck here. She laid her right hand over his left, and tried pushing it forward. It wouldn't budge. She moved in front of him, past the point he couldn't cross, and reached for him. The flesh on his palms turned white as he pressed harder against the barrier.

"Oh, God, Jacques."

He shook his head and stepped back. "Go do your errands, *chérie*. I will wait for you."

He looked so sad; his brow slightly lined with a frown, his mouth turned down.

She stepped into him and wrapped her arms around his waist. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

He brushed his hand over her head and back. "It is nothing I did not know before." He held her shoulders and pushed her slightly away. "Just hurry back to me."

* * * * *

Drained and discouraged, Lilly climbed back into the truck and headed the three miles into the heart of Moonlight Cove. Pretty Victorian gingerbread houses in every color imaginable lined the quiet streets leading down to a sloping, sandy beach. In the heart of town, just five blocks from the waterfront, was Main Street. Lined with gift shops, a small grocery store, and a hundred-year-old red brick building, which held city hall and a small library, it looked like any other small coastal town.

She found a spot along the street in front of the grocery, parked the truck, rolled up the windows, and locked the doors, more out of habit from living in a big city for twenty years than from necessity.

Walking along the flower-lined sidewalk, she passed a few tourists and smiled at them even though she wasn't very happy at the moment. She was worried about Jacques, about how sad he'd looked when she left him. She wished she knew what was going on in his head, how he felt about the changes he seemed to be going through. All day long they'd worked together packing boxes, but he seemed more distant than he'd been just the day earlier.

Something was going on inside his head, and she needed to know what it might be. Was he scared, as he'd been last night? He seemed more resigned today, which led her back to wondering if his death was imminent.

That thought stopped her in her tracks. How would she deal with his death? How could she lose another loved one? And if she did try to block her feelings for him, how fair was that to him?

"Lilly?"

Lilly swung around at the surprised male voice. "Kenny?" she said, staring at the man in the doorway of a gift shop. In the windows hung Moonlight Cove apparel, wind chimes, and whirligigs.

Kenny stepped from the threshold of the shop and swept her up in a big hug. "I thought that was you!"

Lilly laughed and returned his hug. She and Kenny had been best buds during her teenage summers spent in Moonlight Cove. The tall,

muscular man he'd become was a surprise, since he'd always been a short, skinny kid. But his boyish grin and too-long, sandy-blond hair gave him away.

"You still work here?" she asked. He'd worked at this particular gift shop all those years ago.

"I own the place now." He held her away from him, and let his bright blue gaze rove over her. "Damn, you're gorgeous."

Lilly laughed again, and a blush crept up her neck. "I see you finally grew up." He'd once tagged along with her and a small group of friends. They'd referred to him as their mascot. She'd always had a soft spot in her heart for him because he was a bit of an outcast, a little nerdy, and somewhat annoying, but he'd always been so darn sweet.

Now he stood before her wearing a snug white T-shirt that accentuated his well-toned body, and faded Levi's that did marvelous things for his legs.

That grin spread over his face, and his eyes sparkled. "Damn, it's good to see you. What are you doing here?" He took her by the hand and led her into the cool interior of the shop. The smell of brand new clothes and old wood assailed her senses.

"I'm um...cleaning out Grandma's place," she said, her fond memories of eons ago fading as she remembered just where she was and why she was here.

"Oh." He dropped her hand and leaned against the glass-top counter, folding his arms over his chest. "I was really sorry to hear about Clara last year. She's definitely missed around here."

Lilly didn't know how to deal with his condolences, so she nodded. "Thanks." Glancing around the shop, she spotted a rack of men's tank tops. She might as well get Jacques' clothes here. It wasn't like Moonlight Cove had a department store. The next best thing to this would be The Country Store—a small buy-all place on the edge of town.

As she moved toward the rack, Kenny asked, "How long will you be in town? Would you like to have supper?"

If circumstances were different, and if she didn't have Jacques sitting at home waiting for her, she just might have taken the handsome

devil up on the offer. As it was, she shook her head. "Sorry. I've only got about a week left to get all Grandma's stuff packed up and ready for the movers. I just can't take the time."

He shrugged. "Need any help? I could come out and help you pack."

She pulled a white tank top off the rack and moved to a shelving unit filled with shorts and swim trunks. "Thanks, but I think I have it under control."

When she glanced back, he was frowning. "I'm really sorry, Kenny. Things are just..."

"You're still married," he said, his voice filled with disapproval.

She shook her head. "No. The divorce was finalized a few months ago."

"Same guy? That dork from San Jose?"

She couldn't help but smile. None of her friends had approved of Peter. One of her best friends had refused to attend the wedding. And Kenny, she remembered, had even tried to talk her out of marrying her future husband.

"Yeah, Peter Douglass." She pulled a pair of khaki board shorts from the pile and checked the size. She hoped they fit Jacques.

"Can't believe you stayed with him this long." Kenny swiped his hand through his hair, pushing it off his forehead, a motion that had once been so familiar to her. "Are you okay?"

She laid the clothes on the counter next to him and looked up into his eyes. "I'm fine, Kenny. I appreciate your asking. I just..." She wanted to put him off. She recognized the look in his eyes. A look that said that since she was single, she was available. She'd seen the same gleam in other men's eyes ever since she quit wearing her wedding ring. "...it hasn't been that long, and I'm going to try out life on my own for a while."

His lips pressed together, but he nodded. "Okay. We really missed you, though. You come up a lot in conversation." He moved around the counter and began ringing up the clothing.

"We?"

"Me, Carol, Hailey, Jackie...the group."

A startled laugh came out of her mouth. "You still hang out together?"

He grinned again as he folded the tank top. "Yeah. On Friday nights, at Hank's. You should come. The others would love to see you."

She wanted to, badly, but that would mean losing time with Jacques. "I'll think about it."

Kenny stuck the clothes in a bag and told her the total. "Aren't those a little big for you?" he asked as he took the credit card from her.

"They're a gift."

He ran the card through the bank machine and raised an eyebrow. "I thought you said you were single."

She felt a little sick but smiled brightly—maybe a little too brightly. "I do have friends."

She signed the receipt and picked up the bag.

"You really should come. Friday night, about eight o'clock. We're all still here except for Tara. She married a guy a few years back and moved to Portland."

"What about you?" Lilly asked as she stood in the doorway ready to leave. "Have you ever been married?"

He shook his head and a soft blush highlighted his cheeks. "There's only been one woman I ever wanted. And she didn't feel like hanging around."

Pretending she didn't understand, Lilly nodded, forced another smile, and walked out into the early evening sunshine. Her stomach growled as she put the bag of clothes in the truck. Hank's, the only pub in town, had always had awesome burgers and thick milk shakes. Just the thought of it made her mouth water, but she didn't want to risk running into anyone else she knew. As it was, Kenny would likely tell everyone she was in town.

After a quick foray into the grocery store, she jumped back into her truck and headed home to Jacques.

He was waiting for her on the front porch, leaned back in one of the cedar Adirondack chairs her grandmother had cherished.

Her heart swelled with love for him even as confusion swamped her. She didn't know what to do, how to proceed with him. She'd once thought that nothing could hurt as much as losing her parents so suddenly to a car accident, and then her grandmother to a heart attack. Now she knew. Knowing that someone you love is going to die and being unable to do anything about it was worse.

He stood and stretched, something she hadn't seen him do before, and then came down the steps toward her truck. She opened the door and stepped out into his arms. He hugged her hard and kissed her forehead.

"I missed you," he said in that low, accented voice that sent a wave of longing through her. How much more time did they have together?

He stepped away and lifted the plastic grocery sacks from the bed of the truck, while she turned and pulled the clothing she'd bought at Kenny's store from the cab.

"I got you some cooler clothes." She noted he'd pulled his shirt back on, but it hung loose and wasn't neatly tucked in as he usually wore it. "Are you okay?"

Chapter Nine

Jacques headed for the front door. He refused to tell Lilly what was happening inside him. The thought of worrying her or making her even more upset seemed cruel. His muscles ached from the long day of packing, lifting, and moving boxes.

He still couldn't leave the property, and that afternoon he'd returned to his original state of dress at three twenty-two, but the changes inside him were drastic. First he'd started sweating, and now his muscles ached. He was returning to his fully human state, and had not a clue how to deal with it.

How much time did he have left?

Lilly had only been gone an hour or so, but he felt the clock ticking within him, counting down each second, each moment, until his death.

"Jacques?" she said softly as she followed him into the kitchen where he began putting away the food she'd purchased.

"Yes, Lilly?"

"What's wrong?"

He shook his head. "Nothing is wrong. Let's get this food put away so we can..." Every time he had sex with her he felt her in his heart, and he knew he should keep his distance if he wanted to make it through the next week before leaving her.

Lilly came up behind him, wrapped her arms around his waist, and hugged him. "So we can...what?"

Her cheek was warm against his shoulder blade as her hands

crossed over his abdomen. Lust shot through him, and his cock grew hard. How could he deny her? Or himself? The answer to that was simple.

He couldn't.

Turning, he lifted her and crushed her lips beneath his. She wound her legs around his waist and clung to him as he devoured her mouth. She moaned when he nibbled at her neck, then tossed her head back and pressed her hot center against his throbbing hard-on.

"Lilly," he groaned.

"Yes, Jacques." Her voice was soft and sweet as she panted his name.

Turning toward the stairs, he took them two at a time, barely making it into her room and onto the bed as she tore at his clothing. He released the ties on his pants and ripped her panties from her. She let out a little yelp of surprise that made him laugh. *Mon Dieu*, she was so beautiful. And all his. For as long as he lived, she'd be his.

He captured her nipple between his lips and suckled. She arched into him, writhing beneath him. "Please," she cried when his fingers found her hot, slick core. She was always ready for him. She smelled of honey and musk. Woman. Sex.

She tugged at his shoulders, and he did her bidding. With one long, hard stroke, he entered her. She cried out, her eyelids drifting shut, her long, sexy neck exposed as she pressed her head into the pillow.

Seated deep within her body, he held himself still, teasing her as she wiggled beneath him, trying to raise her hips. He grinned, bent his head, and nibbled at her neck.

"Jacques! *Please!*"

He chuckled and nipped her shoulder.

She shuddered and dug her heels into the bed, thrusting against him, but he outweighed her by at least a hundred pounds, and he used that weight to anchor her to the bed.

"Fuck me," she demanded. "Do it now."

The fire of lust shot through him, and he pressed into her. She groaned, and her nails scored his shoulder blades.

He sucked her skin into his mouth and marked her as his with a

hard love bite. And that was enough to push her over the edge. Her inner muscles tightened around his cock. Her breath grew ragged and short, tipped by the most erotic, sensual sounds he'd ever heard.

When her legs tightened around his hips, he pumped into her hard and fast, and rode her orgasm with her, holding back his own release as he watched her. Lips swollen from their kisses, slightly parted. Her eyes squeezed shut. The color high on her cheeks.

When he could take no more, he buried his face in her hair and with one last plunge, let himself go with a low groan of ecstasy.

Just barely catching his breath, his body surely crushing Lilly's petite form, he was unprepared when she speared her fingers through his hair and kissed him.

She pulled his lips to hers and thrust her tongue into his mouth. Little mewling sounds came from deep in her throat as he returned her arduous kiss. He tried to rise up off her, but Lilly wouldn't allow it. She kept him pinned to her body with arms and legs, and ate at his mouth.

It wasn't until he tasted tears that he pulled back and looked down at her. Her big dark eyes sparkled with moisture that overflowed and spilled down her cheeks, into her hair.

"*Chérie?*" His stomach curled in distress. Had he hurt her? Had he been too rough this time?

She shook her head and tugged at him, trying to bring him back down on her, but he rolled to the side, bringing her with him so they lay facing each other.

"Why do you cry?"

She curled into him, burying her face against his chest. "I don't want to lose you. I can't."

Jacques' heart stumbled in his chest, and he had to suck in a lungful of air to keep from suffocating.

She loves me.

The situation was worse than he thought. If it were only his own pain at stake, he could deal with it. But how could he leave her if she loved him?

Without a second thought, he rolled from the bed and pulled on his

pants.

"Jacques?"

"Go to sleep, Lilly," he said, his voice colder and harsher than he'd intended.

"It's only seven-thirty. I can't go to sleep yet. What's wrong?" She sat up in the bed and frowned at him, her naked body so glorious and golden in the evening sunshine streaming through the window.

He picked his shirt up off the floor and glanced at her, catching her in the process of swiping the tears from her eyes. "This is a mistake. I do not want to see you again." He pulled his shirt over his head and strode for the door, his stomach roiling with what he was doing. Walking away from the only woman he'd ever loved.

With one last glance at her stricken face, he walked out the door. Until this very moment, he'd never understood the meaning of "the agony of love." Now he knew what Chailali had been talking about. Nothing had ever hurt so much as loving Lilly.

Stunned, Lilly sat there like a lump as Jacques strode out the door. Then it dawned on her. He'd just realized her feelings for him. She'd all but crawled inside him and told him how much she loved him. No wonder he ran away. She probably would have too, if it were an option. He didn't want to die, and he must have realized what she'd figured out the night before. Her love was killing him.

A fresh wave of tears overtook her as she fell back on the bed and hugged a pillow to her chest. "I'm so sorry," she whispered, even though he wasn't there to hear her. "I'm so sorry."

* * * * *

Jacques ran down the path to the beach and then kept running, straight into the water, where he dove deep, his arm strokes strong and sure as he swam deeper and deeper into the ocean. His lungs tightened in need of air. His eyes stung from the salt water. His muscles burned with the exertion.

Let me go! Let me go now! I can't hurt Lilly any more.

But no matter how his lungs cried for air, nor how long he stayed below the water, the darkness wouldn't come. His mind wouldn't go blank.

Slowly he floated to the surface and gulped in air. "What do you want from me?" he shouted to the heavens. "What do I need to do?" His voice failed him as he choked on the emotion overwhelming him.

Love her.

The two words circulated in his mind.

Floating on his back, he stared up at the fluffy white clouds and the evening sun, still an hour from setting.

"Why must she suffer with me?"

No answer came.

The soft waves lulled him, calmed him, as they moved him toward shore.

He had two choices, as far as he could see. Stay away from Lilly and maintain the state of being he held now, or go back to her and beg her to put him out of his misery.

Either way, Lilly would be hurt. She'd probably feel betrayed by his distance if he ignored her. After the horrible life she'd lived with that bastard of a man she'd married, betrayal was the last thing the woman needed. He didn't want to hurt her so much she'd never trust again. She deserved to have a man who loved her, who would take care of her as she deserved. Since he couldn't provide that for her, he hoped she would find it somewhere, even if the thought of her in another man's arms ripped him in two.

If he went back to her and let love continue to grow between them, she'd be hurt. He had nothing to offer her *but* his love. He couldn't even give her time. And he couldn't block her from his heart like he'd thought he could. Not while knowing she loved him in return.

The waves pushed him against the shore and he laid there in the soggy sand, unsure of what to do.

Love her.

* * * * *

The following afternoon Lilly finished packing the last of her grandmother's China and knick-knacks from the front parlor and kitchen. Only the attic was left to go through. She'd loaded a dozen boxes into the truck to go to Goodwill. Grandma's clothes and most of the sheets, pillowcases, and blankets she figured the new tenants wouldn't want.

Time had flown, and she realized it had to do with all the work Jacques had done to help her. What would have taken several days to accomplish on her own had only taken three.

Jacques.

God, how she missed him.

Several times during the night she'd awakened and reached for him. She'd become so used to having him near. This morning she'd thought about going down to the beach, sure that was where he was hiding out, but she stopped herself. She couldn't force herself on him. She couldn't take the chance of... The knowledge that her love could kill him ripped her apart.

Dusting off her hands, she headed for the stairs to attack the attic. She had nothing better to do with her time. Again Jacques invaded her mind, and snippets of their conversations played in her head. Visions of the things he'd done to her body made her skin tingle. The feel of his big, hard hands on her flesh. His thick, long penis buried deep within her.

She leaned against the wall in the narrow stairwell and sucked in a breath. Just the thought of him turned her insides to jelly. Made her hot and needy. She squeezed her thighs together, prolonging the tingling that shot through her.

The doorbell buzzed.

"Damn." She swiped her forearm over her sweaty forehead and headed back downstairs.

The buzzer rang again and again.

"I'm coming!" she called as she moved around stacks of boxes strewn across the living room. Opening the front door, she wanted to scream. She didn't need this now.

"Kenny."

"Hey there, beautiful." He grinned that boyish grin at her, and she sighed. Holding up a bottle of wine, he said, "Thought you could use a break."

She didn't want a break. Every time she stopped working, stopped thinking about all the things that needed to be done, she thought of Jacques. Kenny's appearance on her doorstep did nothing but annoy her. But she felt a little guilty about that. He'd been a good friend to her when they were younger.

She stepped aside to let him in. "The place is a mess," she warned.

He moved into the room, and she shut the door against the late afternoon heat.

"Looks like you've been busy. My offer still stands." He turned toward her and smiled. "If you need any help..."

Shaking her head, she pointed toward the kitchen, which was still fairly tidy. As he led the way down the hall, she said, "I'm almost done. Just the attic and the kitchen are left to pack, and I prefer to do it alone." Or with Jacques who didn't need direction. He always seemed to know what to do without her having to micromanage.

Kenny went right to the cupboard where the wine glasses were stored. He'd spent a lot of time in this house during the summers she'd stayed here. Then he pulled the bottle opener from a drawer near the sink. "How long will you be in town?"

She crossed her arms over her chest and wanted to tap her foot. One glass of wine, and then she'd get rid of him. She couldn't be totally rude, she decided. It wasn't Kenny's fault she was feeling out of sorts. Sad, mad, and *lonely*. Then again, no matter how lonely she felt without Jacques, she didn't welcome Kenny's intrusion into her life. He was part of the past she'd all but forgotten. She wasn't staying in Moonlight Cove, so there wasn't much sense in rekindling any of her old friendships with people she hadn't seen or spoken to in almost two decades.

"Wednesday, the movers come. I'll be leaving that afternoon."

He poured two rather full glasses of dark red wine and handed her one, then motioned to the back door. "Let's go sit on the porch."

The back porch was shaded and faced the ocean. The sea breeze felt

heavenly on her overheated skin. She'd been working like a madwoman all day and didn't realize just how tired she was until she sat down on the porch swing. Kenny sat down next to her and pushed the swing into a slow rocking motion.

He wore an expensive cologne that Lilly was positive wasn't sold in any of the little shops in the cove. She recognized it because her ex-husband had worn it. The overly spicy scent overpowered the smell of the salty air and the roses struggling to survive in the backyard.

She moved as far away from him as she could, but his wide shoulders took up too much space. He'd sure changed from the scrawny kid he used to be.

"So," she said, then took a tiny sip of the wine. "What have you been up to these past years besides taking over your aunt's gift shop?"

He turned on the seat to face her, jolting the swing and sloshing wine over the back of her hand. Irritated, she wiped it off on her shorts and tried not to scowl at him. Why in hell was he here?

"I went to college at Portland State, got a degree in business administration, and worked for a couple of big firms there." He shrugged and then took a long drink of his wine, draining half the glass. "I missed this place. So I came home about five years ago. Aunt Jen wasn't doing well, so I bought her out. She retired down in San Diego."

Lilly nodded. Never big on small talk, she didn't know what else to say. She'd never had that problem with Jacques. If they weren't making love, they'd been talking. About everything. Or not talking, just enjoying each other and a comfortable silence.

"I've thought about you a lot over the years."

Lilly's mind snapped back to the present, and she stared at Kenny. "You did?" She'd been so caught up in her life, her job, and in trying to make her marriage work that she hadn't thought about much else, let alone people she'd hung out with as a kid.

Kenny's hand, lying on the back of the swing, lightly touched her shoulder. She tried not to flinch, but his touch unnerved her. For all intents and purposes, Kenny was a stranger. He certainly wasn't the same child she'd known.

"I wondered where you were, what you were doing. If you were single or still with that guy."

"His name is Peter," she said with more heat than she intended. He might have been an asshole of the first order, but he'd been her asshole.

Kenny raised an eyebrow. "Are you still in love with him?"

She shook her head. It'd been a very long time since she'd been in love with Peter. Probably not since the first few years after their wedding.

"When I got back to town, I came to see your grandmother. She told me you were still married and that you worked for a software company." His fingertips teased the strap of her tank top, and he stared at her shoulder. She tried moving away, but the chains holding the swing to the rafters dug into her side. "I thought about calling you, but I figured if you'd wanted to stay in touch with the gang, you would have. Why didn't you?" His deep blue gaze snagged hers. Then he took a sip of his drink.

"I don't know." She hopped up from the swing, moved across the porch to the railing, and set down her glass. She wasn't a drinker, didn't care for the taste of wine. And she sure as heck didn't want to start getting muzzy-headed with this guy around. She did *not* like the way he was looking at her. As if he wanted to devour her. He wasn't sweet little Kenny anymore.

"I guess I thought that Moonlight Cove and everyone in it, except Grandma, were just part of my past. I'd moved on. I had no idea most of you stayed in the area."

Kenny got off the swing and stalked toward her. She wanted to run inside and lock the door.

"I really have to get back to work." She turned away. "You should go."

He caught her by the wrist and swung her toward him. "Come on, Lilly," he said, his voice low. His smile wasn't so boyish anymore. "Give me a chance. I'm all grown up now."

Shaking her head, she tried to twist her arm out of his grasp. "I'm not interested, Kenny. I just got out of a really long, really bad marriage. I'm leaving in a few days."

"It's Ken now. Kenny was a hundred and twenty pound weakling.

A poor schmuck you wouldn't look at twice. I'm not that kid anymore, Lilly. And I know how to take care of a woman." His hand closed around the back of her neck, pulling her against him. When his mouth came down on hers, she nearly gagged.

With her free hand she slapped his face and twisted out of his grip. "Get out of here!"

"What? You think you're still too good for me?" He came toward her, backing her into the corner of the porch railing, trapping her there with his body. She tried to figure out how to escape, but she'd never been in this situation before. She'd never had an unwanted man get physical with her. She wasn't frightened as much as she was pissed off that he made her feel like a trapped animal.

"You still think I'm that dumb kid from a poor family? I'm not. I own a business, and I'm very successful in this town. I've been asked to run for mayor next term."

His hands came up and closed around her throat, holding her still with light pressure. He was insane, Lilly thought.

"I tried and tried to get your attention, but you thought of me as just one of the gang, didn't you? Just another *friend*. I didn't want to be your friend, Lilly. I wanted to be your lover. But then you went and gave it away to that big city jerk."

"I didn't know. I didn't know you wanted to be anything other than friends." She glanced around, frantically searching for something that would help her get away from him. Hell, something to whack him over the head with, but there was nothing. And unless she disabled him, she wouldn't make it through the door and get it locked before he caught her. "Look," she said, raising her hands to his shoulders. "Why don't we go inside, and I'll make us some supper?"

He leaned in close, his breath hot on her cheek. She forced herself not to wince. "There's only one thing I want to eat right now." His lips brushed her cheek.

She shivered in disgust. He had one thigh between hers, and she couldn't maneuver to get a good shot at his groin with her knee. Fear settled in when she didn't know what to do.

Don't panic! Don't panic! As his hot, wet lips trailed over her face, she racked her brain for the self-defense techniques she'd learned years and years ago. *Pressure points. Where are they?*

Just as his mouth met hers, she jabbed her middle finger knuckle into the bone at the base of his throat. He let out a yelp and jerked back. But instead of releasing her, he sank his hand into her hair and yanked her head back.

"So now you're a tease?" His voice was hard, evil. Lilly formed claws with her fingers and went after him with all she had.

Chapter Ten

Jacques made his way up the cliff path, all the while wondering what to say to Lilly. He shouldn't have walked out on her like he had. An explanation was in order, but he didn't want her to know how scared he was. For the first time since the curse, he didn't want to die. Not because he was afraid of death. He wasn't. He simply didn't want to leave Lilly.

He didn't want to hurt her, even though he realized he already had, most likely, by his words and actions of the night before. She'd already had such a difficult life; he didn't want to add himself to her list of heartaches.

With a resolution to ask her what she wanted, he climbed the last fifty yards to the top of the path and stepped out of the dense forest into the blinding sunshine. He felt winded and stopped for a moment to catch his breath. Having more human traits by the minute, he wasn't sure how to deal with his pending mortality. Last night he'd nearly frozen wearing wet clothes after the sun went down, until he'd gotten a fire going. It had been a long, lonely, cold night in the cave he'd called home for so long. Never had he been so miserable, and thinking about Lilly sleeping alone in that big bed made him yearn to be with her, with her body warming him, and her kisses setting him on fire.

"Stop! Get off me you son of a bitch!"

Jacques' heart sped up at Lilly's scream, and he sprinted toward the

house. When he rounded the corner and leapt up the back porch steps, he didn't hesitate. A man had Lilly pinned to the wooden porch floor, her hands trapped above her head as she kicked and screamed and did her best to throw him off. Without a second thought, Jacques grabbed him by the back of his shirt and pulled him off her. The guy turned to take a swing, but his eyes went wide, as he was obviously unable to see Jacques.

Jacques landed a fist squarely to the guy's jaw, and he fell with a thud against the porch railing, then sank to the floor. Jacques went after him again, ready to kill the bastard who dared to lay hands on his Lilly.

"No!" Lilly yelled, and grabbed the back of Jacques' shirt, pulling him away from the downed man. "Leave him. I'm calling the police."

He turned to see her standing tall, with one hand on her shoulder, keeping her torn shirt from exposing her breast, her chest heaving with exertion.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

Pushing her hair out of her eyes, she nodded and licked her lips. "I need to call the police."

He stepped toward her, but she backed away from his outstretched hand. His heart cried for her. Fury rode him hard. Forget the police, he thought. He could easily make the body disappear forever. How dare anyone hurt her like this!

Taking in her appearance, relief flooded him to see that her shorts were still on and fastened. She hadn't been raped. But her torn shirt, a scratch on her collarbone, and a red splotch on her cheek that might turn into a bruise made him see red.

"Lilly. *Dulcinée*."

With a furious headshake, she backed further away from him. "Don't." Her bottom lip quivered, and he wanted to hold her. She didn't look frightened, but she did seem very upset. Who could blame her? She'd just been attacked.

The guy on the floor moved, and Jacques turned to place his foot against the man's throat. He wasn't going anywhere. "Go call the police, *chérie*. I will see that he does not move."

She nodded and turned, rushing through the door and out of sight.

Jacques had the urge to press his heel into this guy's gullet and end it. No man had a right to hurt a woman. *Ever*. He'd seen too much abuse as a child. He'd been one of the lucky ones, growing up in a loving family, but he knew plenty of kids who'd left home to escape fathers who beat them and their mothers.

The man started struggling against the weight on his neck. Jacques stood still and glared at him, even though the guy couldn't see him. If it were up to him, this attacker of women would never leave.

After only a few minutes, the sound of sirens split the air. A few more minutes passed, and Lilly led a uniformed officer through the door onto the porch. When Jacques released the man and moved away, the guy scrambled to his feet.

"You're not getting away with this," he hissed at Lilly. "You came on to me, you little tease." He glanced around, probably trying to figure out what had held him down, his hand rubbing his throat.

"That's enough," the officer said, and asked the guy to put his hands on the railing, then he handcuffed him and did a search for weapons. Jacques had seen enough episodes of *Cops* with Clara that he approved of the officer's procedures.

Lilly glanced at Jacques, then away, still holding her shirt in place over her breast. He went up behind her, offering his support but not touching her. She looked a little too fragile at the moment, and he knew she wanted to remain strong in front of the police.

"I'll put him in the car, then come back to take your statement," the officer said, leading the handcuffed man down the porch steps and around the side of the house.

"How do I explain knocking him out?" Lilly whispered, not turning to look at him.

"You got in a lucky shot." Jacques laid his hand on her shoulder, but she flinched and stepped away.

"Please don't touch me."

He swallowed back a curse and fisted his hands at his sides. If he hadn't left her alone last night...

* * * * *

Officer Jacobson closed his notebook and handed Lilly a sheet of paper, then placed the lens cap on the camera he'd used to take picture of her bruises and torn shirt. "I think that's all I need, Ms. Nightsong. Mr. Banning will be charged with assault and attempted rape. I'll be in touch." He turned toward the door then looked back at her. "Are you sure you don't need any medical attention?"

Lilly shook her head. "I'm okay."

"You should get some ice on your cheek. It's starting to swell."

"Thank you, Officer."

Lilly shut the door behind the cop and leaned her forehead against the cool wood. Her hands started shaking, and she squeezed her eyes closed to hold back the threatening tears. Now that the adrenaline had drained from her system, she feared she might fall apart.

"Lilly."

She stiffened and blinked rapidly. "It's over now." Turning toward Jacques, she added, "You should go."

"I'm not leaving you alone right now, *chérie*. Why don't you go change your clothes and...whatever you need to do? I'll get you some ice."

"No." God, she needed him to leave or she was going to curl up against him and beg him to stay. She couldn't do that to him. He needed his freedom. "I want you to go."

He came toward her, his big body looking so good, so safe. She fought back tears, her breath growing shallow as she struggled not to cry.

"*Petite amie*, let me take care of you." His big, warm hands settled on her shoulders, and it took all her willpower not to fall against him.

"You should not be alone right now."

"You have to go!" She twisted away and moved out of his reach. "Please! I can't do this." A sob escaped her throat, and she clamped her hand over her mouth. *God, not now*. If she started crying, she wasn't sure she'd be able to stop. Wasn't it bad enough that a boy she'd once cared for had turned into a monster and attacked her? Now the man she loved was standing in front of her offering her his support, and she couldn't accept

it.

"I will not leave."

She turned and ran for the stairs. She couldn't do this. She couldn't. Slamming the door to her room, she dove onto the bed, buried her face in a pillow, and let the tears come. She slammed her fist into the mattress in frustration. Her stomach heaved when she pictured Kenny over her, pinning her to the hard wooden floorboards, his mouth on hers.

Curling into a fetal position, she hugged the pillow to her chest and sobbed into it, rocking, trying to calm herself. If Jacques hadn't shown up when he did, she wouldn't have been able to overpower Kenny. He was too big, too strong. She was too small, too weak. Helpless.

She heard the door open and Jacques cross the room toward the bed. Squeezing her eyes shut she hoped he would just go.

Please, leave. I don't want him here. I can't hurt him. Oh, God, I need him.

The bed dipped as he sat down next to her, and then he brushed her hair away from her face. She winced in pain when an ice-filled towel touched her cheek.

"Ma chérie, je suis désolé. I am sorry," he whispered.

Gripping the pillow tight, she fought the need for his comfort. "You have to go, Jacques. You have to. I can't help my feelings."

He didn't move and was silent for a few long moments. "I do not understand. You hate me? I did not mean to hurt you so."

Her eyes flew open, and she stared up at his beautiful face. "I don't hate you. That's why you have to leave. I can't be responsible for your death."

His brow furrowed as he looked down at her. He was so handsome, so perfect. So hard looking, yet so gentle with her. Tears flooded her eyes again, and she closed them, wishing she could keep from crying in front of him.

"It is not your feelings for me that are causing my changes. It is my feelings for you."

When she opened her eyes, he was leaning toward her. He placed a soft kiss on her forehead.

"I don't understand." She placed her hand over his, which held the icepack to her cheek. "I thought you needed someone to love you. How do you know this?"

Jacques pried the pillow away from her chest and stretched out next to her, urging her to lay her head on his shoulder. He pulled the icepack away from her face and lightly touched the throbbing bruise.

"My sweet Lilly," he said softly, then kissed her forehead again. "I am so sorry you were harmed. I should have never left you last night. I do not think your feelings are causing my transformation because it is when I let myself truly feel for you that my body changes."

"Why did you leave?" She snuggled against his solid body and let his warmth seep into her, feeling calm for the first time in the past twenty-four hours.

"You said that you didn't want to lose me. I realized you have feelings for me, and I couldn't hurt you. I'm dying. I thought, if I left, it would be easier for you."

Lilly bit back more tears. "How long?" she choked out.

"I do not know."

She snaked her arm around his middle and held on to his shirt, afraid he'd leave again, afraid he'd disappear. "It hurt when you walked out, but I thought it was because you were afraid to die. That I was causing your death."

After a long silence in which he trailed his fingertips up and down her arm and kissed the top of her head, he said, "I am not afraid to die, *chérie*. I have waited two centuries for this time to come. I am only afraid of—"

When he didn't finish, she pulled the icepack from her cheek and leaned up on her elbow so she could see his face. "What?"

"I don't want to leave you."

* * * * *

"I should have killed him when I had the chance."

Jacques lightly touched the fading, yellowish bruise on Lilly's

cheek, and his stomach curled in pain at the sight of her marred skin.

Placing her hand over his, she gave him a sweet, soft smile. "No, you shouldn't. This is the twenty-first century. No dueling to the death anymore."

"A shame."

Her smile grew into a grin, and she laid her head on her arm.

"Though I might agree, I'm glad you didn't kill him. I wouldn't want to have to answer that many questions. Li'l ol' me snapping a man's neck." She winked and then laughed. The sound warmed his soul as much as the sun overhead heated his skin.

The tall flowering weeds of the lawn surrounded them as they reclined on an oversized picnic blanket. They'd finished the last of the packing that morning and only had two days left together. Jacques wanted every second of their time to count. And nothing meant more to him than seeing her smile, hearing her laugh. He knew that wherever he was destined to go after his death, the sound of her voice would haunt him for eternity.

"Where will you go when you leave here?" he asked, as she trailed a long, sexy finger over his bare chest.

Her gaze swept up from following her motion to meet his eyes. A small frown puckered her brow. "I thought we agreed not to discuss that."

Unable to help himself, he leaned over and kissed away her frown. "We agreed not to discuss what happens to me. I want to know what you will do, where you will go." He ran his fingers through her hair and spread it over her bare shoulder exposed by the pretty, flowery sundress she wore. "I want to know that you'll be safe."

"Well," she said, flopping onto her back with her arm over her head and staring up at the cloudless, cerulean sky, "I haven't really decided. I'm thinking about starting a Web design business. That way I can work from home, wherever I decide that will be. I've got the experience, and with the money from the sale of the B & B, even if it takes a while to get the business off the ground, it's not a big deal."

Jacques had learned about computers from watching television

with Clara, though he didn't quite understand the term 'Web design.'

"I think I might buy a new car and take a road trip," she continued.
"I want to travel."

Jacques smiled and settled his hand over her belly. He loved how she felt. So soft and curvy, ultimately feminine. "A Mustang convertible. Red."

Her eyes went wide, and she turned to stare at him. "How'd you know?"

"When you were about fifteen, a guest of your grandmother had one. I remember you telling your friends that one day you'd own one just like it." He placed a kiss on the tip of her lovely little nose. "Now you can."

She shook her head. "I don't even remember that. How could you?"

His hand trailed up over her ribs, then cupped her breast. When he fanned his thumb over the tip, her nipple hardened beneath his touch. "I remember everything about you, *chérie*. The highlight of my...life...was your summer visits. Even after you didn't speak to me or hear me, I..." He didn't know what else to say. They'd said it all except the final words he knew would take him away from her forever.

"I wish—" She bit her trembling lip, obviously trying to keep from crying. It broke his heart to see her tears.

He snuggled her close and rocked her, waiting for the little storm of emotion to pass. Over the past few days there'd been dozens of moments like these. He felt them too, but for her sake, he kept his pain to himself. Never would he add to her burden.

Lilly let out a sigh and relaxed against his chest. A cool breeze kept the sun from seeming too hot, but even so, her skin was warm and dewy. Sexy.

"What would you do if you...didn't have to go?"

"You mean if I became normal?"

Her head bobbed against his chin. "Mm hmm."

"I would fly."

She leaned back and looked up at him with a cute little confused

frown.

"In an airplane, *ma bein aimé*," he said around a chuckle. "I have always wondered what it would be like to fly. And I would like to captain a sailboat. One of those streamlined racing boats. And I would like to learn to drive a car." With a grin he added, "Maybe that red convertible. And I would like to try extreme sports. Skiing, snowboarding, bungee jumping, skydiving."

Lilly's eyes were bright as she laughed. "I think you've watched too much TV."

"And I would ask you to marry me and have my children."

Her smile faded and her eyes grew misty again. "Well, I'm a bit old to start popping out kids." Her bottom lip quivered, and she blinked fast.

"Ah, *chérie*, forgive me." He pulled her tighter against his body and whispered in her ear, "I just want you to know how I feel. If there were any other way..."

She nodded. "I know." But she clung to him, as she had so many times over the past few days, as if through her will alone she could keep him there.

"Why did you not have any children?"

Slowly her grip on his shoulder eased, and she settled into his arms. "The time was never right. First there was college, and then my career." She snorted. "Like that got me anywhere. And then, a few years ago when my biological clock started ticking really loud, I pretty much suspected that the marriage wasn't going to last. I didn't want to bring a child into a bad marriage."

"Very wise choice."

Leaning back, she looked up at him. "What about you? Did you ever have a wife and children? I mean, you said you are almost forty."

"*Non*. No marriage or children, though I was engaged to a woman when I left France the last time. The marriage would have been a merger of our families. My father's family built ships; her family owned a lumber company. You see the convenience."

Lilly nodded, but frowned. "Doesn't sound like much of a marriage to me."

"She was beautiful and sweet tempered, and wanted a family of her own."

"What about love?"

Until Lilly had returned to him as a grown, mature woman, he hadn't known what love truly meant. He would have said that love didn't matter, or that it might grow in time, but now he knew the truth. Never, in the two and a half centuries he'd walked the earth, had there ever been another woman for him.

Brushing his lips lightly over hers, he whispered, "Love hurts."

She gave a tiny nod and wrapped her arms around his neck. "It does."

"How do you feel, *chérie*?"

"Like I need you inside of me." Then she kissed him, and he could feel her need, her fears, and her pain.

He ran his hand under her skirt, up her sleek, bare thigh, and tugged at her panties. Pulling his mouth from hers, breathing heavily, he said, "I need to know you are okay. If you still hurt from that bastard—"

Her fingers covered his mouth, and she gazed into his eyes. "I am fine, Jacques. I've been telling you that for days now, but you've been torturing me by not touching me. I need you. Bad."

He nodded his understanding. The past few days had been torturous for him, as well. He sucked her middle finger into his mouth. She moaned, and her head fell back against his arm. Slipping his fingers into the leg of her panties, he felt her damp heat, and his cock instantly responded. Never had he met a woman so quick to respond, so uninhibited.

Releasing her finger, he tugged on the top buttons of her dress with his teeth, while his fingers skimmed the damp curls between her thighs. Her hips moved against his palm, urging him to go faster, but this time he was determined to take it slow. This time he would give until she couldn't take anymore before he let himself find fulfillment within her.

"Ah, Jacques, please," she whispered, her fingernails lightly scraping over his shoulders, sending need skittering down his spine.

"Impatient little wench." He nipped the round smoothness of her

exposed right breast.

"Wench?" She shoved at his shoulder, and then laughed. "Just make me come and you can call me anything you want."

I call you ma amour. My love. My only one.

He took her lips with his and expressed himself the only way he could, hoping she understood. His finger found its way into her silky warmth. When she sighed into his mouth, clutched her arms around his neck, and her hips rose to meet the gentle thrusts of his hand, he knew she understood.

"Lilly? Lilly, are you here?"

Jacques ripped his mouth from hers and stared down into her dazed eyes. "Someone is here."

"Lilly?" came the woman's voice again.

Her eyes went wide and instantly cleared of their pleased haze. "Who is it?" She scrambled out from beneath him and hastily buttoned her top.

"There you are," the woman said, heading across the overgrown lawn toward them.

Chapter Eleven

Lilly looked up at the woman and instantly recognized her. Hailey Thomason. Her very best friend from Moonlight Cove. She still looked the same. Tall, thin, and platinum blonde. The years had only added beauty to the once coltish girl.

She scrambled to her feet and met Hailey halfway across the yard. The two women laughed and hugged as memories flooded Lilly's mind.

"Why didn't you call to tell me you were here?" Hailey demanded, even as her hug nearly strangled Lilly.

"I'm sorry. Things have been so..." Lilly pulled back.

Hailey let go of her hand and touched the bruise on Lilly's cheek, her smile gone now. "Is this what he did to you?"

Kenny had said that the group still hung out on Friday nights, and Hailey was part of that group. Kenny was Hailey's friend. Would she even believe...?

"That *son of a bitch*." Hailey paced away then turned back. "I hope you're pressing charges. Don't you dare let him get away with it this time."

Lilly frowned. "What do you mean, 'this time'?" Did Hailey even know who they were talking about?

"Come on," Hailey said, and took Lilly by the hand. "You're flushed. You've been sitting out in the sun too long. And we need to talk."

Lilly let Hailey drag her toward the porch. She glanced back to see Jacques pulling on the tank top she'd bought for him. He nodded and winked, and said, "Later."

She grinned, knowing the sun had nothing to do with her flushed appearance. She could still feel the imprint of his lips on hers, and her belly throbbed with the telltale heat of arousal. Man, oh man, how was she ever going to live without him?

They went into the house through the kitchen door, and Hailey wiped the back of her hand over her forehead. "Got any tea?" she asked as she opened the fridge and pulled out a glass pitcher. "Of course you do."

"Here," Lilly said, pulling two plastic cups off a stack. "All the dishes are packed. We're down to the bare bones."

"We?"

Oops. "Me. Guess I'm just still used to speaking in plural."

Hailey poured two cups of iced tea and then motioned Lilly into the living room.

Hailey had come from a broken home, living with her father who was drunk most of the time, and had spent almost as much time at the B & B during the summers as Lilly had. They'd once been as close as sisters. Lilly wondered why in hell she'd ever lost contact with her friend.

Lilly moved a couple of boxes off the sofa, and nodded for Hailey to take the easy chair. Accepting the cup of tea from Hailey, she sat down. "It's good to see you. I'm sorry we lost contact." She looked down into the amber liquid in her cup. "My fault."

"Forget it. Time does weird things to people." Hailey took a long swig of her tea, and then set the cup on one of the nearby boxes. "I can't believe this place is going to be run by someone else." She glanced around the room. "I miss Grandma."

"I do, too."

Hailey had always been outspoken, which once had been annoying but now felt refreshing after living with a man for nineteen years who barely spoke at all.

"Now, back to what I came here to discuss with you. You *are* pressing charges against Ken, aren't you?"

Lilly nodded. "How did you find out?"

Hailey gave her a big grin. "I'm dating the sheriff."

Lilly's eyebrows rose. Hailey had once been a troublemaker.

Usually in trouble with the law, not dating it. Lilly'd had her first drink of beer at age fourteen with Hailey, and they'd smoked their first joints together at sixteen. Then at seventeen, they'd both gotten arrested for joyriding.

"Yeah, I know," Hailey said around a chuckle. "Like I said, time does weird things to people. Would you believe I'm a dental assistant for Doctor Payne?"

Lilly laughed. "No way. You were going to be a movie star, if I remember correctly."

Hailey nodded. "Yep, well, that didn't happen. Dad died the winter after you got married, and I wound up working at the A&P for a couple years. After I took a correspondence course and became a dental assistant, Doc hired me on the spot, because he didn't have one."

"Wow. That's great."

"We keep veering off course here. Jeff, Sheriff Douglass, my boyfriend, told me Kenny got arrested for assault and battery. I was thinking he was in another bar brawl, but then Jeff told me Ken had attacked a woman. He wasn't supposed to tell me who, but I wheedled it out of him—and oh my god, I can't believe he hurt you."

By the time Hailey finished talking, she was frowning at the bruise on Lilly's leg, just inside her knee, which the short summer dress didn't hide. The day after Kenny's attack, she and Jacques had found numerous little bruises, and she felt like she'd been beaten with a tire iron.

Lilly shifted in the seat, crossing her legs to hide the bruise. "You said 'again.' Has he done this to another woman?"

Hailey bobbed her head, tucked her platinum hair behind her ears, and then reached for her drink. "A couple years ago. A tourist. They'd gone out a few times, and then the next thing we know, Ken's behind bars for attempted rape. But the woman dropped the charges and left town." She took a sip of the tea. "Now that it's happened to you, I think he did it to the other woman, too. And he can't get away with that. Did he try to

rape you?"

Never one to curb her words, Hailey said what was on her mind.

Lilly knew that if Jacques hadn't dragged him off of her, Kenny probably would have raped her. He was at least six inches taller than she, and outweighed her by a good fifty pounds—all of it muscle. As valiantly as she'd fought, she knew she'd never have been able to overpower him enough to get away.

"Yeah, he did. But when I went down to the police station to sign the papers the other day, the D.A. said that it would be easier, with the bruises the officer had photographed, to prove assault and battery rather than attempted rape. Especially since there weren't any witnesses."

"I knew I should have killed the bastard when I had the chance."

Lilly jumped at Jacques' voice cutting into the quiet room, but then his big, warm hands closed over her shoulders, and he whispered an apology.

"You okay?" Hailey asked.

Lilly nodded. It was weird knowing Jacques was standing right behind her, touching her, and Hailey couldn't see him.

"Jeff said you knocked Ken out cold? How'd you manage that?"

"Lucky shot, I guess," Lilly said, answering the same way she had when the officer had asked her the question, the answer that Jacques had given her. "And yes, I'm pressing charges."

"Good."

"I thought you were friends with him. He said the gang still hangs out on Friday nights at Hank's."

Hailey pressed her lips together and frowned. "Well, the truth is, we do get together on Friday nights. You know—Carol, Jackie, and me, and Ken does drop by once in a while, but he's really changed."

"How so?"

Jacques' hands left her shoulders, and she heard his quiet footsteps walking away. She felt a little...bereft...without his touch.

"Ever since he returned from Portland a few years ago to stay, he's never quite been the same Kenny we knew. He's...I don't know...hard. He used to be so sweet and kind. Gentle. He's not like that anymore. He's got

this edge to him that's very disconcerting. We try to avoid him when at all possible without being overtly rude. Until now. When I tell the girls what he did to you, they're gonna—"

Lilly held up her hand. "Don't go vigilante on him." Then she laughed, remembering one of Jackie's boyfriends who'd been overly amorous. She, Hailey, Carol, and Tara had hauled him down to the beach and threatened his life if he ever even looked at Jackie again.

Hailey grinned, probably remembering the same episode. "I'd love to beat the snot out of Kenny for bruising you up."

And for scaring me half to death, she silently added. Thank God for Jacques.

"I'm assuming you're single," Hailey said, glancing at Lilly's bare ring finger. "Are you going back to San Jose?"

Shaking her head, Lilly answered, "No. The company I worked with for over twelve years downsized, and I lost my job. Peter put us in debt and ran off with a twenty-two year old. There's nothing left there for me anymore." She shrugged. "I'm not really sure what my plans are now."

Hailey glanced around the room again. "You got a good price for this place, didn't you? I know it was on the market for an awfully long time before it sold. Do you know the new owners?"

"No. I haven't met them. Don't really want to. I can't believe I'll never be able to come back here again. And yes, I got a pretty penny for it. I'm not going to be destitute anytime soon."

"Good. So why don't you hang around the cove for a while and see the rest of the gang?"

Lilly thought about Jacques. How long did he have? Should she stay until...?

"What's wrong? What did I say?" Hailey slipped out of her chair and moved next to Lilly. "I'm so stupid sometimes. Is it Kenny?"

"No. It's not Kenny. I really don't give a damn about him. If he pleads guilty, I don't even have to come back for the trial, the D.A. said." She rubbed her eyes with her fingertips. "It's just hard being here. You know what they say—'You can't go home again.'"

Hailey hugged her. "I'm so sorry, Lilly, for everything you've gone through. If there's anything—*anything*—I can do, you let me know, okay?"

Lilly nodded and returned the hug. "Thank you."

The sound of shattering glass split the air, and both women jumped.

"What was that?"

It had to be Jacques, Lilly thought. "The cat must have pushed something off the counter." She shrugged and forced a smile, hoping Hailey didn't pick up on the lie. "No big deal."

"You have a cat? I thought you were allergic."

"It's a stray. She was living here when I got here."

Hailey narrowed her eyes as if she didn't believe Lilly, but then got to her feet. "I've got to get to work." She pulled a business card from her dress pocket. "Please stay in touch this time."

"I will," Lilly promised, and she meant it. She stood, and they hugged again.

"Take care of yourself, okay?" Hailey said.

Lilly nodded and walked her to the door. "I will. You, too."

As soon as she shut the door behind her friend, she rushed into the kitchen to see Jacques sweeping up broken shards of glass. "What happened?"

Jacques looked up at her, his face tense. "I dropped the tea pitcher."

Lilly noticed a white dishtowel wrapped around his hand. Blood seeped through it. Panic bubbled up inside her. "Oh, no."

"I'm fine," Jacques said, but his jaw was set hard.

She moved toward him, grabbed the broom away from him, and propped it against the counter, then unwrapped the towel to see the cut. A deep gouge in the base of his thumb oozed blood. Lilly got a little lightheaded. Not because blood made her ill, but because Jacques wasn't supposed to bleed.

Jacques caught Lilly as she started to crumple. *Merde!* If there was one thing he never expected, it was for her to swoon. He hoisted her into his arms and carried her out to the sofa where he sat down and cradled her against his chest.

He rewrapped his hand, not wanting to get blood on her. A second later her eyes fluttered open.

"What happened?"

"Brave, little Lilly. You fainted at the sight of blood," he teased.

She didn't smile. In fact, she looked a little panicked, which he understood, because he felt the same way. "You don't bleed."

"Apparently I do now."

She sat up and touched his cheek, her face only inches from his. "What were you doing with the pitcher?"

He swallowed, not wanting to admit anything.

"Tell me."

"I was thirsty."

"Oh, God!" She gripped the front of his shirt in her fists. "You aren't supposed to be thirsty either. What happened? What changed? Why, all of the sudden?"

He'd been wondering the same thing. The only explanation he could come up with was that when his emotions went into high gear, the changes came faster. He'd been so furious to hear about that bastard hurting another woman, and then suddenly he was thirsty. Thirsty to the point that his hands shook when he pulled the pitcher from the refrigerator, and he dropped it.

"Shh, Lilly." He ran his uninjured hand up and down her back, trying to soothe her.

"You won't kill yourself, will you?" She fisted his shirt in her hands and pulled him forward until they were practically nose-to-nose. "Now that you know you bleed? Please say you won't—"

He cut off her words with a hard kiss. "I will not leave you that way, Lilly. I swear to you."

She nodded. Her hands slowly loosened their death grip on his shirt, and then she laid her head on his shoulder. "I'm so scared."

"I know. I am, too."

* * * * *

Jacques bolted upright in bed and sucked in a deep breath, trying to understand why terror coursed through him. Then he realized he'd been dreaming. Dreaming meant sleeping. He'd fallen asleep next to Lilly after they'd made love.

The cut on his hand throbbed, as did his head.

"What's the matter?" Lilly murmured as she sat up next to him, her voice rough.

He didn't want to tell her he'd fallen asleep. "My hand is bothering me." He kissed her sleep-softened lips. "I'll be right back. Go back to sleep."

She lay down and within two heartbeats, she was breathing steadily again.

He climbed from the bed, headed into the bathroom, and removed the bandage Lilly had placed on his hand. The cut was deep, but he could see that the skin had begun stitching itself back together. He wasn't used to pain.

He rinsed his hand and put more ointment on it, though in the back of his mind he wondered why he bothered. He'd be gone in a little over a day.

Dead.

When Lilly left, it would be his time, too.

For so long he'd wished for the end of his life, to finally be released, and now that the time loomed in front of him he didn't want to go. Didn't want to leave Lilly. He was almost afraid of what might await him.

As he dug another bandage from the box, he tried telling himself that this was for the best. If he lived, he'd never be a true, full-fledged man. What kind of life would that be for Lilly? He couldn't ask her to live with him on the beach, in his cave. The new owners of the B & B would be moving in shortly. What would they think of the former owner hanging out on their private beach?

His head fell back, and he stared at the ceiling. So many times over the years he'd asked the heavens *why*. Why had Chailali cursed him? Why had he been doomed to this...this half-life? Was it his fault that his sense of duty had been stronger than his feelings for Chailali? He'd been fond of

her, but he had not loved her. Not enough to give up everything for which he'd worked and join her tribe.

Now he asked why because he had finally found the woman of his heart, and he would have to say goodbye to her after just one more day. She loved him. His death would hurt her. Did Chailali realize she was not only cursing him but also the woman who loved him?

* * * * *

"Are you hungry?" Lilly asked as she turned the steaks in the frying pan.

"*Non*. But I will eat." He hadn't experienced hunger yet, but he couldn't seem to get enough liquids. He took another deep drink of the iced tea Lilly had made, and then settled back into his chair.

"I wish I had something nicer, fancier." She opened the oven and pulled out two baked potatoes with a pair of tongs. He couldn't help but admire her lush ass, outlined by her loose skirt, as she bent down.

The condemned's last meal, Jacques thought. Tomorrow they would have to say goodbye. "It has been a long time since a woman went out of her way to cook a meal for me. I would be happy with anything."

She turned and sent him a sad smile. He could almost hear her thoughts. She would cook for him all the time if she could. "It will be all right, *ma bien aimé*. You are a strong woman."

One hand leaning against the counter, the other holding a meat fork, she shook her head. "I don't feel very strong right now."

Rising from the chair, he went to her and wrapped his arms around her. "Let us not discuss this now. Tomorrow will come soon enough."

During supper they talked about the past and avoided any topic that led toward the future. Jacques dried the few dishes they'd used after Lilly washed them, and then by silent mutual consent, they headed down to the beach.

He wore the clothing Lilly had purchased for him. He wasn't sure if she'd realized that for two days his afternoon renewal hadn't happened. Ever since he cut his hand on the glass, he'd been feeling more and

more...*real*. But he still had no reflection, which he assumed meant he'd still be invisible to others.

Lilly kicked off her sandals in the soft sand and pulled her dress over her head. Surprised, Jacques watched as she shimmied out of her panties and stood there before him, glorious in her nudity. The sun was still high. He took a quick glance around to make sure they were truly alone, but couldn't keep his eyes from her for long. Her skin was softly golden, her hair so black it held hues of blue. Her breasts were full, her hips round, her long legs so sleek and perfect. And in her big, dark eyes, he saw her love for him.

He opened his arms, and she came to him without hesitation. He took her mouth and tasted her. She smelled as fresh and clean as the salty air surrounding them.

She pulled up his shirt, ran her small hands over his stomach, and tugged at his chest hair. Her nails scraped over his flesh, sending heat searing through his veins. He couldn't get enough of her. Never would.

She unbuttoned his shorts and slipped them off his hips, where they landed at his feet. As he stepped out of them, he tore his shirt off over his head. Hot flesh connected with hot flesh. Lilly shivered, but he didn't think it was from cold. She clung to his shoulders, and he held her so tightly he feared he might crush her.

His erection pressed between them. When she rocked her hips against his, he thought he might die of pleasure. She kissed him, nipping at his lips, her tongue flicking against his. All the while tiny, erotic sounds came from the back of her throat.

Cupping her ass, he lifted her. Her legs went around his hips, and she took his cock deep. Her body fit him as if they were made for each other. His hard and demanding, hers so slick and hot and tight.

He braced his feet apart and there they stood, locked together so perfectly, clinging to their last night together, never wanting it to end.

Lilly threw her head back and moaned. The telltale pulsing around his penis marked her first peak. Bringing them down onto the sand, he kept her body locked with his, then bent his head to take her nipple between his lips.

Her breath came in ragged spurts, yet she bowed against him, pressing her breast deeper into his mouth. Her fingers dug into his hair and held him there. He suckled her hard and strained not to come. This night was hers. He'd give her everything he had, and more.

As he moved to her other breast, he slipped a hand between them and found her clit with his fingertips. She bucked against him and cried out, wanting to rush. But tonight he wouldn't be hurried. He planned to love her until she had no energy left. He slowly pumped into her with long, measured strokes, all the while gently rubbing his fingers over her slick, swollen flesh.

Her hands tightened in his hair, and she pulled him up, attacking his mouth with enthusiastic love bites. Her breath was hot on his cheeks as she panted and whimpered. Her hips pressed against his with each stroke of his cock.

Feeling her tighten again, he stopped moving, and she cried out in frustration. Her heels dug into the sand, and she rose into him. He wiggled his fingers against her clit and, with a moan, she threw her head back. The feel of her inner muscles milking his engorged penis as she experienced another orgasm nearly sent him over the edge, but still he held back.

He watched her face as she went from tense to calm. Revelled in the feel of her breasts pressing against his chest with each harsh breath she took. Loved the feel of her slick juices on his hand.

"You are beautiful."

Her eyelashes fluttered open. She smiled up at him with such tenderness, his heart felt as if it'd been torn in two.

"You are the beautiful one," she whispered. "So beautiful." Her palms skimmed over his cheeks, down his neck, over his shoulders. "So perfect. I lov—"

He anchored his mouth against hers and kissed her long and deep. Their tongues dueled. He couldn't let her say the words yet. He couldn't, because he would have to return them. She deserved to hear him say them. He couldn't take the chance that once they came out, he would be gone. He needed this night with her.

Chapter Twelve

Lilly cried out as she came once again under Jacques' expert assault on her senses. How he held himself back, she didn't know. He filled her so completely, so wonderfully.

Sweat dampened his skin, making him slick, and he smelled so wonderfully masculine. She tasted his saltiness as she nipped at his shoulder while he rode her with long, hard thrusts.

She felt boneless, yet so vitally alive.

"Another," he ground out between clenched teeth. "I want to hear you again."

His sexy words sent another wave of pleasure through her. When his hands slipped once again between their bodies and his fingers brushed her hardened clit, she fought back her release, wanting to make it last. But when his teeth closed over her nipple and he tugged, she was lost in wave after wave of ecstasy.

As if at a distance, she heard his roar as he came inside her. He clutched her tight against his chest until she could barely breathe, his face buried against her neck, his damp skin sticking to hers.

"*Non. Non,*" he groaned as he disengaged himself from her. She reached for him, needing him to hold her, but he sat back on his knees and stared down at himself, shaking his head.

"What?" she asked, too boneless to move. "What's wrong?"

"I am sorry, *chérie*. *Cher Dieu*, I am sorry."

Lilly frowned and didn't have a clue what he was apologizing for this time. Before, he'd thought he'd hurt her, but how could he after he'd done so much for her, made her orgasm so many times? "Jacques," she said on a sigh. "I'm fine."

He kept shaking his head, looking distraught. "I cannot leave you with a child." He raised his gaze to her. "I did not know—"

Just then she felt a trickle of liquid run down the crease of her leg. He had ejaculated. Fear spiked through her, removing her languidness in a rush. She sat up and reached for him and, thank God, he didn't pull away. Instead, he wrapped his arms around her and held her tight.

"I did not know," he repeated.

"Shh. Shh, Jacques." If she had his child, she'd always have a piece of him. She'd wanted a baby before, but the timing had never been right. Now she had the time and more than enough love to give. She wasn't afraid of getting pregnant; she was only afraid that this might be the last step before he disappeared from her life forever.

"I'll stay in Moonlight Cove," she blurted out. "If we don't spend too much time together, maybe..." She gulped back the fear battling to clog her throat. "Maybe you won't die. Maybe you'll stay this—" *Oh, God, how can I ask that of him?*

He rocked her back and forth, and she wondered which one of them he was trying to comfort. "My feelings for you will not stop growing, *chérie*. My time has come."

"No!" She clung to him. "You don't know that. You don't know. Maybe you'll become normal. How do you know you'll die? How do you know it's not my feelings for you that hold the key? No one told you the rules. There weren't any rules. The curse is abstract."

He cupped her cheeks and kissed her so tenderly her heart shattered. "No," she whispered against his lips. "Please, no."

He kissed her again, and again.

"It's not fair," she whispered against his lips, even though inside she screamed the sentiment.

"I am sorry. If I had not touched you that first night..."

She shook her head and held his face between her hands. "No. Don't think that. I've never known anyone who made me feel the way you do. Like I'm truly needed."

"Ah, *chérie*. You are needed."

"I don't regret knowing you, Jacques. I hope..." she swallowed hard, "I hope that you will find your peace because of me."

He kissed her again and laid her back on the sand, his hands gently holding her to his chest. "There is no peace like the one I have found in your heart."

* * * * *

"It is time," Jacques said softly.

Lilly nodded, but didn't move. They lay curled together in front a dying campfire in his small cave. Exhaustion permeated every pore of his body, but he'd refused to sleep, unwilling to give up one second of his waning time with her.

The sun was high in the sky, although the cave still seemed dark. Its opening faced west, over the ocean.

Jacques skittered his fingertips over her bare shoulder and delighted in seeing goose bumps rise on her skin. She shivered and snuggled closer to him, her breath warm on his bare chest.

"The movers will be here soon. You must be there to meet them, *non?*"

"Yes." Her body tensed. He knew she was fighting back tears again, which seemed to come more often as the night wore on. She had to be tired. She'd drowsed only briefly during the night, always waking to make love with him.

"Shh," he whispered, hugging her against him.

"I'm sorry, Jacques. I don't want to cry anymore," she said, then burst into noisy sobs and buried her face against him.

He held her and rocked her, his heart breaking.

"I'm not going to leave," she said when the crying jag had come to an end. "I can't leave with you still here."

Jacques swallowed with difficulty. Placing his finger under her chin, he lifted her head so he could look into her beautiful dark eyes. "When we say our final farewell this afternoon, I do not believe it will be long until the end."

Her jaw clenched and tears flooded her eyes.

"We cannot stop what is happening, Lilly. We must accept it." He ran his thumb along her bottom lip. "I must accept my fate. You must go on living. I wish for you to be happy, Lilly. Please," he said as he leaned down to brush his lips over hers. "Please be happy."

Her kiss was filled with the same desperation that filled him. He held her tightly and prayed she would move on after today, to live a life filled with happiness, and would find a man who'd treat her like he would if he could. Cherish her, as he would.

When they reached the B & B, the moving van was pulling into the driveway. After directing the movers as to what was to be loaded and what stayed inside the house, Lilly went out onto the back porch and sat on the swing with Jacques.

He put his arm around her shoulders, and she snuggled against him. "They said it will take about two hours to load everything, so we'll have the afternoon together once they leave."

"Non."

Lilly leaned back to look up at him. His face looked pale, as if he were ill. "No?"

He met her gaze, and she saw sadness in his red-rimmed eyes. "I am weakening. I feel...very...tired."

Determined not to cry any more, Lilly bit her lip. She couldn't see how she had any tears left after last night. "Is it time?"

He shook his head and pulled her back into his arms. "I will stay until it is time for you to leave."

"What will you do? Where will you go?" She gripped his tank top, right over his heart, willing the organ to keep beating.

Instead of answering her, Jacques ran his hand through her hair. "When you leave here today, Lilly, you must put me out of your mind."

She shook her head, knowing that it would be impossible.

Especially if they'd made a baby last night. She brought his hand to her belly and wished for life to be growing there. A little baby. A part of Jacques.

"You are a strong woman, *dulcinée*. You have been through much in the last year, but you have withstood the strain. I hope you will remember me with fondness, not pain."

She would always remember Jacques with love. Only love and longing for what could never be.

The hours passed quickly as they sat there watching the sun move across the sky, the ocean crash upon the shore, and the wisteria blooms wave in the breeze. The sounds of men moving boxes and furniture from within the house faded into the background as Lilly lost herself in the sensation of Jacques' hands touching her so gently. Running through her hair. Caressing her shoulders, her back, her side.

"We're done."

Lilly sat up and turned to see the oldest of the moving men—she couldn't remember his name—standing in the doorway. "Thank you." She gripped Jacques' hand, afraid he'd vanish. "You'll take everything to the storage locker in Coos Bay?"

He gave a quick nod. "And once we're finished unloading the truck, we'll turn the key over to the office."

Lilly nodded as panic set up inside her, drumming her heart against her ribs. "Thank you," she said again.

The mover gave her another brisk nod. "We'll be going, then."

"Okay." She'd already paid them, so she couldn't think of anything else they might need. Not that her brain was letting in much information other than any about Jacques.

The man disappeared around the side of the house, then she heard the front door shut as the other men exited. She turned to Jacques, wanting to launch herself into his arms and beg him not to go, but she knew she couldn't. She could tell by the hard look on his face he was waging a battle with his own emotions. She couldn't make it any harder on him. God, how difficult it must be for him to face his death.

His hand came up and touched her cheek, then he leaned in and

kissed her softly before standing up. "I will be back in a moment." He walked into the house.

Twisting her hands together, she waited anxiously for him, wondering what he was doing. When he came out wearing his original clothes, the loose shirt with ties, the buckskin pants and moccasins, she had to choke back a cry.

"I will go as I came."

He put the now folded shorts and tank top on the swing next to her. Then he took her hand, pulled her to her feet, and engulfed her in his arms.

His body shook, whether from weakness or fear or...whatever, she didn't know. Her own didn't feel so steady either. She clung to him, her face buried against his neck, and inhaled his musky, masculine scent.

"Je t'aime, Lillian Marie Nightsong. I love you."

"No, don't say that!"

"Shh." He cupped the back of her head, keeping her still. "Tell me, Lilly. Let me hear the words now."

Her fight to hold in her tears was lost, and she sobbed against his shoulder. "I love you, Jacques Lazare Cheever. I'll always love you."

"Be strong, *ma chérie*. Be strong for me." He tipped up her chin and kissed her softly. "I love you." And then he turned away, staggered slightly, then walked down the stairs. Lilly glimpsed his reflection in the window and knew he would never return. He'd become mortal again, and now his mortal life was ending.

He moved through the overgrown lawn. At the edge of the forest he turned back, raised his hand in one last farewell, and then disappeared into the woods.

Lilly collapsed onto the swing and clutched his clothes, burying her face in them, and cried as her heart broke into a million pieces.

Jacques stumbled down the footpath toward the beach. His head throbbed, and his stomach churned. Exhaustion battered him, but he pressed on. He needed to get to his cave. Hide away and die, where no one would find him. He couldn't imagine what it would do to Lilly if he were found. He knew she'd never return here, and that was good. The last

thing he wanted was for her to experience any more pain than he'd already caused her.

The rocks leading to his cave had never seemed so tall or so steep. It took several tries and many missteps for him to finally crawl into the cavern. And then he collapsed facedown on the sandy floor.

As his breath grew shallow and his vision blurred, he spotted something out of the corner of his eye. Turning his head seemed a monumental feat, but he did so, and saw the silken sash to the dress Lilly wore the night before. He reached out and wrapped his fingers around it, his muscles screaming in agony as he dragged the sash closer and closed the material in his fist.

Tears came to his eyes as he stared at the piece of clothing. "I wish I could stay with you," he murmured, his tongue feeling too thick, his mouth excruciatingly dry.

Darkness closed in around him, his chest burned as if it were on fire.

And then...*nothingness*.

* * * * *

Lilly sat on the edge of the cliff overlooking Moonlight Cove as the sky slowly lightened behind her. She hadn't been able to bring herself to leave. All night long she'd sat here, hoping, praying, begging that Jacques would appear and be well and alive.

Her body trembled from the chill air, and her tears had long since dried on her cheeks, but Jacques had not returned.

He was truly gone. She sniffled and rested her forehead on her bent knees. The time had come for her to leave.

As she twisted sideways to stand, a movement caught her attention, and she stopped, staring into the pre-dawn gloom.

A beautiful Native woman stood only a few feet away. She wore a traditional buckskin dress and moccasins, all elegantly beaded. In her long, black, braided hair she wore feathers and more beads.

"You are sad?" The woman asked.

Lilly swiped at her tear-stained cheeks. "Yes."

"May I sit?" The woman motioned to a spot next to Lilly.

She nodded.

The woman sat Indian style next to her and looked over the edge of the precipice. "The beauty of this place sometimes makes me cry."

Lilly swallowed and glanced around, wondering where this woman had come from. She hadn't even heard her approach.

The woman was achingly beautiful. Her skin was a dark golden tone, and her eyes were black as night. When she smiled, her straight white teeth flashed. "You should not be sad." She laid a gentle hand on Lilly's arm. "You are not alone."

"Yes, I am." Lilly shivered, and her scalp tingled. She hugged her knees to her chest. "I've lost everyone."

"You have not lost yourself." The woman looked straight down over the edge. "Losing yourself is the most painful of all losses."

Lilly had been feeling out of place ever since Jacques disappeared into the woods. Disjointed. Not knowing what to do or where to go.

The woman turned to face her. "You love him deeply, do you not?"

Lilly's breath lodged in her throat. She couldn't speak.

"I can see that you do. Jacques is an easy man to love." The woman touched her arm again. "And he loves you."

Lilly jerked away from her touch and scrambled backwards. The woman gave her the creeps.

With a sigh and a small shake of her head, which clinked the beads in her hair, the Native woman stood in one fluid motion. "I am sorry, Lillian, for the pain I have caused you. For the pain I have caused Jacques. I was a selfish woman."

"What are you talking about?" Lilly asked, poised to jump to her feet and run if she needed to. The woman didn't look or sound dangerous, but Lilly's internal alarms clanged like church bells.

"All wrongs will be righted," she said with a serene smile. And then she turned and walked away.

"Hey! Who are you?" Lilly called, afraid she already knew.

The woman turned back, her long beaded braids clinking over her

shoulder. "They once called me a princess." She raised a hand in farewell. "Be well, Lillian Nightsong." Without another word, she faded into the early morning mist.

Lilly glanced around, praying someone was there, but found herself alone. Fear spiked through her and chilled her, even as the summer sun rose high over the surrounding hills. Despite its warmth, cold sweat trickled down her spine.

Lilly jumped up, ran into the house, and locked the door.

"No way," she whispered. "*No way*. It was just a dream. I'd fallen asleep waiting for the sunrise and dreamed about the woman."

No way had Princess Chailali been here.

* * * * *

Jacques awoke with a gasp. His lungs burned as if he'd been holding his breath under water for too long, and his skull ached as if it would split apart from the pressure inside. He rolled to his side, clutched his head, and groaned. What in hell had happened to him?

"Hello, Jacques."

He opened his eyes to see Chailali sitting cross-legged before him. His vision blurred, and he blinked to clear his eyes. "*Non*," he groaned. The last two centuries could not have been a dream. Lilly could not have been a dream.

"You are still in the year two-thousand-and-seven," she said to him. "It was not a dream."

She spoke to him in fluid French, better than she'd ever spoken before. Fear punched him in the gut, and he wanted to move away from the apparition, but his muscles burned with fire.

"The pain will last only a little while longer. Your body is in need of nourishment."

"Why have you come to haunt me?" he asked as the sharp pain in his head subsided to a dull roar.

Her smile was as calm as it had always been, as it had been when she tended to him after the ship broke apart on the rocks. He glanced

around and suddenly realized he was inside his cave.

"I will go soon," she said. "And leave you in peace."

He tried pushing himself to a sitting position, but his arm gave way beneath him, and he fell back to the sandy floor with a groan.

"Rest awhile, Jacques. Rising from the dead is a strenuous ordeal."

"What have you done to me now, *princess*?" Fury flooded him, and his heartbeat thudded in his ears.

Chailali sighed and shook her head. "I was a selfish, hurt young woman, Jacques. You are not the only one cursed to walk this earth. The curse fell upon me, also, although I did die. I walk the path between the living and the dead, unable to reach either side."

"You deserve no less than that for what you've done to me."

She nodded. "I agree. I am here to atone for my selfishness."

"How?" He finally had enough strength to push himself up, but his head spun painfully and his vision blurred again. Gripping his head, he leaned forward. "I am dead. I found the woman of my heart but, because of you, she is gone. I am alone. Dead, yet still here. When will I ever find *peace*?" His question ended in a roar of anger and pain.

Chapter Thirteen

"You are not dead."

Slowly Jacques raised his head to stare at her. "I am not...dead?"

Chailali shook her head, the beads in her hair clicking melodically. He'd once loved how she looked, in her beautiful Native dress, with her long black hair, but now all he wanted to see was Lilly, with her oval face and lighter skin, her shoulder length hair, and her deep brown eyes.

"You completed the curse. You understood the pain of loving someone you could not have. You did pass into the spirit world, but I begged for your return. I could not stand to see the anguish I inflicted not only on you, but also on the lovely woman who gave herself to you."

"Why didn't you break the damn curse sooner? Could you not see the hell you put me through? How much I suffered alone?"

Her gaze fell to her hands demurely folded in her lap. "I could not. It is not the way. A curse must be fulfilled."

"Damn you, Chailali!"

She raised her gaze to his, her eyes wide with fear. "You damn me? But I'm releasing you. You can be with your Lillian. You can have a life with her now. I understand what I did to you, and I...I seek your forgiveness."

Jacques' body shook with rage and pain. Dear God, he hurt all over. "I should forgive you for the half life I've lived for over two hundred

years? I should forgive you for being a selfish, spoiled brat?"

"I did not know!" Her voice was filled with fear, her eyes pleading. "I had no idea what would happen to you. To me. To our loved ones."

"Your father mourned you for the rest of his days. Your mother never spoke another word after you killed yourself."

"I know. I saw." She rose to her feet and looked down on him with sadness in her black eyes. "I understand if you cannot forgive me. I have brought the pain upon myself." She moved toward the mouth of the cave, but turned back. "Go find your Lillian. She misses you."

Chailali walked out of the cave and disappeared.

Jacques tried to make sense of what was happening. Panic infused him to move, but it took all his energy just to stand. Once he caught his breath, he moved toward the driftwood table in the back of the cave and picked up a shard of a mirror he'd once picked up on the beach.

A face stared back at him. *His face.*

* * * * *

Lilly drowsed on the comfortable sofa in the B & B. Too exhausted from her night sitting on the cliff, she couldn't even think of getting into her truck to leave. Besides, she was loath to drive away. She couldn't bring herself to do it. Once she left, she lost every last connection to Jacques.

She snuggled his tank top to her chin and inhaled his musky scent, letting her mind wander back through the last two weeks. They had been the most amazing, most heart wrenching, two weeks of her life.

What should she do now? Where should she go?

Jacques had said he wanted her to be happy, but she doubted she'd ever find happiness again. Not the kind of contentment she felt whenever he was near. When he held her, talked to her, loved her.

More damn tears flooded her eyes, and she wondered how she could possibly have any moisture left inside her. She'd cried all night long.

Tires crunching on the oyster shell driveway outside the open

window brought Lilly to a sitting position. She wiped her wet eyes, got up, and peered out the window. Amy Darlington climbed out of her beige Cadillac, and a green SUV pulled up behind her. A couple, both of them looking to be in their mid-thirties, exited the SUV, grinning like idiots.

Damn. The new owners. She hadn't expected them to show up today.

She tried straightening her dress, which was wrinkled beyond repair from her sitting on the ground all night. Then, tucking her hair behind her ears, she pulled open the front door.

"Oh!" Amy said in surprise, as Lilly walked onto the porch. "I thought you were leaving yesterday." The woman's suit was firecracker red, and her black high-heeled shoes made her walk over the shell driveway look treacherous.

"I had planned to," Lilly said. "I was just too tired to drive. If you'll give me a few minutes, I'll gather up the rest of my things—"

"Nonsense," the other woman said. She laced her fingers with the man's as they came toward her. "We're glad to get to meet you." She was at least five-eleven and well curved beneath her denim shorts and gray T-shirt. The man was about the same height, and dishwater blond. They both smiled and seemed very friendly.

Lilly didn't feel like being friendly. In fact, she felt like hiding in a tiny hole for the next few years.

They came up on the porch, with Amy following behind them. The woman held out her hand. "I'm Martha Parker." Lilly shook her hand. "And this is my husband, Doug."

"We're happy to meet you," Doug said as he pumped Lilly's hand. "This place is exactly what we've been looking for."

Lilly forced a smile, wondering if her face would crack. "I'm glad you like it." She glanced up at the wisteria vines hanging from the porch roof, thinking she'd never stand here again. Never hear the squeak in the third step. Never again sit in the Adirondack chair and watch the sunrise over the hill.

"Are you okay?" Martha asked.

Lilly nodded. "Sorry. I'm tired, and a little emotional." She fought

down the feeling of despair scourging through her and took a fortifying breath. "I really should be going."

Martha's brow wrinkled in a frown. "You don't have to go yet. We're not supposed to be here for a few more days. Amy said you were leaving yesterday, and we were just so anxious—"

"It's okay. Really. I do need to go. Come on inside." She turned to go in the door. "I just need to get my suitcase from upstairs."

The Parkers and Amy followed her in. Lilly picked up Jacques' clothing from the sofa and headed for the stairs. She heard Martha say, "This furniture is beautiful. I can't believe she let us keep it with the house."

"She's a sweetheart," she heard Amy reply. "Giving up this place has been very hard on her. It's been in her family for over sixty years."

Lilly went into her empty room and carefully placed Jacques' clothes inside her suitcase. She got her toiletries from the bathroom, and then there was nothing left to do.

After zipping the bag, she took one last look around, but the house didn't seem the same anymore. With the stripped beds, the empty dresser tops, and the echo of her footsteps on the hardwood floors, Lilly said her final farewell to Grandma, to Jacques, to all the years of happiness she'd known within these walls.

She picked up her purse and suitcase and headed downstairs. She heard the Parkers and Amy in the kitchen. Peering through the doorway, she watched Martha scowl at Grandma's Frigidair.

"I'm going now." She held out the set of house keys to Martha and tried another smile. "Take care of this place, okay?"

Martha took the keys, then gave Lilly a quick hug. "We will. We promise. We're expecting our first child in about six months and hope that this house will stay in our family for as long as it's been in yours."

Lilly bit her lip. They were starting a family. Something she'd never have. Jeezus, she had to get out of here before self-pity completely took over. "Congratulations," she said, knowing her voice didn't sound happy, but really not caring anymore. "Goodbye."

She turned and made for the front door as fast as she could without

actually breaking into a run. By the time she threw her suitcase into the back of the truck with all the boxes for Goodwill, tears tracked down her cheeks, blurring her vision. She rounded the bed of the truck and reached for the door latch, but ran smack into a big, hard body.

"Bonjour, ma amour."

Lilly let out a yelp and nearly landed on her ass, but a pair of big, callused hands grabbed her arms to keep her steady.

She'd lost it. Completely, one hundred percent, lost it. Her mind had gone, and she was in total meltdown mode.

She had to be, because Jacques stood in front of her, holding her arms, grinning at her. She looked up into his sensual blue eyes, and the world began to spin. Darkness closed in on her. Her last conscious thought was that her broken heart had stopped and now she was joining Jacques in the afterlife.

"Merde," Jacques mumbled as he scooped Lilly into his arms. He hadn't expected her to pass out. *Again.*

Relief had flooded him when he made it to the top of the cliff and saw her truck still parked in front of the house. He hadn't had any idea how he was going to find her if she'd left, which is what she was supposed to have done yesterday.

But now what was he supposed to do with her?

"Who are you?" The real estate agent came down the front steps and across the driveway toward him, a disapproving scowl marring her features.

He couldn't hide the shock and worry on his face, and knew it made him look guilty. But having another human being see him—speak to him—was enough to stun him, if only momentarily. Yet his main concern was Lilly, who remained motionless in his arms.

"What did you do to Lillian?"

"Nothing. She fainted."

* * * * *

Lilly heard voices. Too many voices buzzing in her brain. She

recognized Amy Darlington's, but she couldn't place the others.

"Give her a few more minutes. She will be all right."

Jacques.

Her heart began to beat in triple time, thumping within her chest so hard it nearly drowned out the voices.

Am I imaging him again? Figment or real, his big, rough hand cupped her cheek, and she turned into his touch.

"Wake up, *dulcinée*."

She shook her head, terrified that this was a dream—or even worse, a nightmare. If she opened her eyes, would she see him?

"Get her some water," she heard Amy say. "Why did she faint, and who are you?"

"I am a friend. Jacques Cheever. I came to—to talk to Lilly before she left."

Jacques was speaking to Amy? Amy spoke to Jacques! Lilly opened her eyes and stared up into his face. So beautiful. So...*there*.

He grinned. "Fainting is becoming a bad habit of yours."

She glanced from Jacques to Amy, who stood over them. Lilly realized Jacques cradled her on his lap, the way he had the last time she'd passed out.

"Here's a glass of water." A woman's hand thrust a plastic cup between her and Jacques. When she didn't reach for it, Jacques took it. Lilly looked away from him to see Martha Parker standing next to Amy. Over Jacques' shoulder stood Doug.

Lilly looked back at Jacques, into his gorgeous smiling face. "How?"

His smile turned into a full-fledged grin. Leaning forward, he pressed a kiss to her cheek, and whispered, "Chailali...set me free, I think. All that matters is that I am here, and so are you."

A strange feeling, somewhere between panic and elation spiked through her, and she raised her hand to his cheek. Her breathing grew shallow, and she thought she might hyperventilate.

"Calm down, *chérie*." He leaned down and softly touched his lips to hers. A sense of pleasure and peace stole through her. "We are together."

She threaded her fingers through his long, soft hair and returned his kiss with all the longing, all the passion, all the love inside her.

“Looks like you’re more than just a friend,” Amy observed with a chuckle. Stifled laughter accompanied her comment.

Lilly didn’t care. Her phantom lover had just become real, and she would never, ever let him go again.

Epilogue

Two months later.

Her arms around his neck, her legs around his waist, and her ass on the cold tile bathroom counter, Lilly begged for more. "Harder," she growled, biting Jacques' shoulder to spur him on.

He grunted and gripped her hips with his big, hot hands as he drove into her again and again. She ached, she throbbed, she arched into him, rubbing her nipples against his solid, sculptured chest, seeking her release. Finally, he slipped one hand between their bodies and pinched her hardened clit.

She came with a scream, digging her nails into his shoulders.

He captured her lips with his, thrusting his tongue into her mouth as he wrapped his arms around her. And with one last, tremendous plunge, he came with a shout, his cock pulsing inside her.

Breathing hard, both clinging to each other like a lifeline, they didn't move for several long moments, their skin sticky with sweat.

Finally, Lilly leaned back so she could look into his eyes. "I swear that just keeps getting better and better."

A cocky grin tipped up his lips. "*Oui*. The practice is worth the effort."

She burst out laughing and hugged him, laying her head against

his shoulder. "I love you."

With a kiss on her temple, he whispered, "*Je t'aime, ma chérie.*"

She never got tired of hearing his deep, accented voice. And when he spoke to her in French, her whole body went a little mushy.

After a quick shower together, they sprawled out on the king-sized bed in their two-bedroom cottage. The warm September breezes floated in through the open window overlooking a small strip of beach and a tiny dock where Jacques' little sailboat was moored. Their property was small, the cottage was cozy, and Lilly had never been happier in her entire life.

"You will take me out to drive later?" Jacques asked, his fingertips playing along her bare shoulder as she snuggled up against him and threw her leg over his.

"I don't think so. I'll have to replace the transmission if you keep stripping the gears."

She giggled when he pinched her shoulder.

"I am learning."

"I get the car of my dreams, and you're going to ruin it within the first month."

Jacques grunted, but then chuckled. "I let you captain *The Phantom*. It seems only fair that I be allowed to drive the Mustang."

"Ahh." She went up on her elbow and kissed his nose. "But I never almost ran *The Phantom* into a tree. Besides, Hailey and Jeff are coming by in a couple of hours. There's no time today. Jeff has your identification."

He laughed and pulled her down on top of him. She felt the telltale twitch of his penis against her belly and knew he was almost ready for round three. The man was insatiable. But then again, so was she when it came to loving him.

"Do you think Jeff believes my story?"

Lilly shrugged. "If he doesn't, Hailey's talked him into overlooking his doubts. I think it's nice of him to help you out the way he has, helping you secure documentation."

He nodded. "After he fingerprinted me and put my name into his computers."

Laughing, she kissed his chin. "He had to make sure you weren't a

criminal trying to hide out. Besides, now that you have a Social Security number, you can get a job and help pay the bills." Though in all honesty, it wasn't necessary. She'd started Nightingale Design, a Web design business, a month ago, just after she bought the cottage, and she already had more work than she knew what to do with.

He playfully slapped her right butt cheek, then caressed it, making her tingle all over. "*Mégère*."

Lilly gasped in mock outrage. She'd been studying French these past months, and she knew it was a term of endearment, but there were several translations, one of them being *battle-axe*.

Jacques laughed, and before she could formulate a comeback, he kissed her hard. "*Je t'aime*."

"Suck-up."

"*Veux-tu m'épouser ?*"

Lilly went completely still and stared into his dark blue, smiling eyes.

"*Veux-tu m'épouser ?*" he repeated softly.

Afraid she'd misunderstood, she pushed herself up to straddle his hips. "In English, please."

He laced his fingers through hers and kept smiling. "Will you marry me, *dulcinée*?"

Her heart thudded triple time, she gripped his fingers and nodded, afraid the lump in her throat might choke her if she spoke.

"*Oui*?"

"*Oui*," she said, then threw herself down on top of him and hugged him hard. "*Oui, oui, oui*."

With a hearty laugh, Jacques rolled her over, coming down on top of her, and kissed her long and tenderly. "I am a happy man. All because of you, my love."

"And I'm a happy woman," Lilly said. She couldn't stop grinning.

Jacques kissed her again, his tongue tasting and teasing, dueling with hers. When he lifted his head and looked into her eyes, Lilly knew there was no one else in the entire world for her.

Raising her hands, she held his face. "I have to ask you a question,

but I don't want you to think I'm weird or anything."

He kissed the tip of her nose, her cheek. "I already know you are peculiar, *chérie*. You fell in love with a man you could not see."

A gusty laugh slipped out of her, and she returned his teasing kisses. "This is about Chailali."

Jacques' teasing ceased, and he moved to her side. Propping his head on his hand, he frowned at her. "I see no need to discuss her."

Rolling to face him, she laid her hand on his chest, over his heart. "Have you forgiven her?"

His frown turned into a full-fledged scowl. "Forgive her? She sent me into two centuries of—of...*misery*."

"She told me she was sorry for being selfish."

Jacques turned away and sat up on the edge of the bed. "What are you talking about, Lillian? She's been dead for a very long time."

"The morning you came back, I saw her. Talked to her. She said she was sorry."

His shoulders slumped. "I saw her, also." His voice lowered. "She did ask for forgiveness."

"Yet you still can't find it in your heart?"

He turned his head to look at her, and he seemed sad. She hadn't seen him with this kind of expression since the day he'd been returned to the living.

"My father named me correctly, though I doubt he knew what it would mean."

"I don't understand." She scooted to the edge of the bed and wrapped her arms around him.

"My middle name. *Lazare*. After Saint Lazarus. I have arisen from the dead." He shook his head. "I do not know how I feel about Chailali. For longer than I can remember, I hated her and what she did to me." Putting his arm around Lilly's shoulders, he continued, "But if it had not been for her, for the curse, for having to spend two hundred and thirty years trapped in Moonlight Cove, I would never have met you."

Lilly's grip around him tightened. These were her thoughts, exactly. She thanked Chailali every day for giving her Jacques.

"The wait was worth the reward," Jacques said softly. He rested his cheek on top of her head and sighed. "She said that she had asked for me to be given a second chance once the curse was fulfilled. I will, eventually, be able to release my anger."

Looking up into his strong, beautiful face, Lilly smiled. "I'm glad. Because I love you, Jacques Lazare Cheever, and I don't know what I would ever do without you. As horrible as it sounds, I'm glad you were cursed."

A smile tugged at his lips. "Enough of this talk." He scooped her into his arms and brought her back down to the fluffy pillows. "We have only a couple of hours before Jeff and Hailey arrive, and I plan to have you again before then."

Lilly laughed and wound her legs around Jacques' waist. "By all means, my phantom. Take me. Make me come."

As Jacques moved down, igniting her body from smoldering coals to a raging inferno, Lilly once again sent a silent thank you up to Chailali.

Jacques loved her. Had waited for her through two long centuries. And now they would never part.

The End

Author Bio

Anna Leigh has been reading and penning romance for as long as she can remember. After she met and married her very own real-life hero, romance took on a whole new meaning. She now knows married life can sizzle and romance can be erotic—even in her own home. Now her writing has taken on a spicier flavor, and while hubby's off at work, she lets her imagination soar...

Anna loves to hear from her readers. You can reach her at anna@annaleighkeaton.com or visit her website at www.annaleighkeaton.com for all her upcoming and previously published works.