



Jeanine Berry

Supernatural
Love



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Chapter One

"If it's a haunted house, where's the ghost?" Seven-year-old Andrea Buberry wore a nasty look on her precious, precocious face.

Megan Crain resisted the urge to grab the child by the collar of her designer leather jacket and hoist her out the door. Maybe she should have gone through a real estate agent after all to sell the house. So far prospective buyers had been both scarce and obnoxious.

"Hush, baby." Melody Buberry, Andrea's mother, turned from her inspection of the dining room's built-in buffet. She was a slim woman in her thirties and her jacket matched her daughter's. "There is no such thing as a ghost." She rolled her eyes at Megan. "Tell me, dear, do these draperies come with the house?"

"Yes, they do." Megan watched in dismay as Andrea spat out her chewing gum and slapped it on the underside of Uncle Sebastian's antique Louis XV dining room set. The awful child tugged on her mother's skirt. "If there isn't any ghost, I want to go home. Survivor Tibet is starting tonight."

Mrs. Buberry frowned. "There's no TV until you clean your room, young lady."

"Then let's get going!" Andrea's voice rose to a yell.

For the first time, Megan regretted that there wasn't a ghost in Hartford House. She wished Caroline Hartford really did haunt the place—so she could appear and scare the bejesus out of this spoiled brat.

Mrs. Buberry turned to Megan. "I'm afraid we do have to leave. The house is lovely but far too big for the three of us."

Megan sighed as she showed them out the door. She'd had the open house sign out in the yard since ten that morning. It was almost five, and so far Mrs. Buberry and her horrid offspring were two of only a handful of prospective buyers who had shown up.

Strange. The good citizens of St. George should have come trooping through the door, glad for the chance to see the haunted house at last, now that her reclusive Uncle Sebastian was dead and the residence was for sale. True, St. George was a conservative suburb. People moved to St. George to get away from the hectic life of Chicago and

disliked anything that threatened to disrupt their quiet lifestyle. Still, you'd think they'd be curious.

Megan wandered back into the dining room and got a knife from the buffet, then pried the gum off the underside of the table. After dropping the disgusting wad in the garbage can in the kitchen, she made her way to the living room. Maybe she'd set the price too high. David had said so. But there were all those debts she felt honor bound to pay.

The slam of a car door interrupted her despondent thoughts. Megan pushed aside the heavy velvet curtain at the living room window and spotted a man and a woman getting out of the car in the front drive. Her eyes narrowed. The man stood with his back to her, but he looked familiar.

As she watched, he stepped around the car with lithe grace and joined the woman. Megan admired his long-legged stride. The wind ruffled his dark hair and billowed out the sides of his jacket, which hung open, defying the nip in the air on this damp October day.

Meagan blinked, not believing her eyes. It was Jake! Jake Pendleton. He was older, certainly, and tanned almost a nut brown, but it was him.

She grabbed the curtain with one hand and twisted the cloth. She'd never wanted to see him again. Never.

And now she recognized the woman, too. His mother, Elizabeth. Mrs. Pendleton had to be in her late fifties by now. She looked elegant in a long leather coat and fancy heels. Diamond rings flashed on her hands. Megan remembered reading that Jake's mother had made a fortune as a best-selling romance author.

Her heart started to pound as Jake and his mother began walking toward the door. She'd know him anywhere by his walk alone, a proud saunter that belied his casual attire. He'd always moved through the corridors of their high school like he owned them.

But what had happened to the casual elegance he'd once preferred? He wore scuffed work boots that matched faded jeans, with a torn back pocket. As he got closer, she saw that the dirt-streaked t-shirt stretched across his broad chest.

She straightened the cuffs of her jacket, and tried to get a grip on her emotions. It was ridiculous to let the sight of Jake upset her. True, she'd gone off to college in another state and then moved to different suburb after graduation, all the while glad these changes in her life kept her from running into him on a regular basis. But that had been ten years ago. Their breakup was ancient history. She had David in her life, dear sweet David who would never doubt her as Jake had.

Taking a calming breath, she rubbed her hands over her skirt and resolved to treat Jake politely, which was more than he deserved after the way he'd treated her. She'd be civil and that would be that.

Her mind made up, Megan watched as Jake paused to stare at

the Open House sign on the front lawn, his lips twisted with scorn. She sniffed with distaste. He looked as cynical as ever. She remembered how her friends had once told her their breakup would work out for the best. They'd been right. She was far better off with David.

But why were Jake and his mother here? Jake was a coldhearted realist, not the kind of man who'd want to live in Hartford House. Mrs. Pendleton, on the other hand, was gazing up at the pillared entrance with rapture on her face. She looked ready to make the purchase.

Megan let the curtain drop and stepped back from the window, fighting to control the unanticipated turmoil of old emotions. Talk about ghosts. Jake was a ghost from her past. So far this house had brought her nothing but trouble, but the money from its sale would pay off the debts from her mother's final illness.

Maybe then she could get on with life. David wanted to marry her. He wanted to bring some light and laughter into her life after the tragic year she'd just endured. It was time.

She could hear voices on the porch. His voice, familiar still. Unexpectedly, her hand shook as she lifted it to pat her hair, making sure the fine, silky strands hadn't fallen out of the upswept style she'd chosen to give her a more mature look. Normally, she let her hair hang in loose, auburn curls around her shoulders. She wiped her sweaty palms against the soft folds of her navy blue skirt, straightened the matching jacket with its red piping, and took a deep breath.

Crossing her fingers, she whispered a brief prayer that Mrs. Pendleton would want to buy the house despite its reputation. Maybe she wouldn't even *know* its reputation.

The melodious chimes of the doorbell interrupted her inner pep talk. Swallowing hard, she walked from the living room to the foyer and pulled open the heavy oak door that guarded the front entrance.

"Good afternoon!" Mrs. Pendleton stood on the doorstep, a bright smile on her face. She didn't look a day older than Megan remembered her. She was petite and slender, with sky-blue eyes and soft dark hair, cut in a short, smooth style. Behind her, Jake avoided Megan's eyes. Instead, he scowled at the roof that covered the front porch, as if expecting to find a leak.

"Good afternoon." Megan looked from one to the other, determined to stay calm and in control. "Mrs. Pendleton, Jake. What a surprise. Have you come to see the house?" Stupid question. She tucked a stray strand of hair behind one ear, embarrassed.

Jake finally glanced at her. His eyes looked cold, as if he too thought it was a stupid question. Wine-colored eyes, she'd always called them, deep and dark with a hint of brownish red. She used to drown in those eyes.

She gave herself a mental shake, meeting his stare. She'd done nothing wrong ten years ago, despite what he might think, and she wasn't going to act as if she had. In fact, better to act as if she barely

remembered him. That would put him in his place.

As she met his gaze, she couldn't help but notice deep lines around his eyes. Laugh lines? Impossible. He towered over his mother, and his face and hands looked tanned even though November was only a few weeks away. Maybe he worked outdoors and the lines came from squinting into the sun. That would explain the dirt streaks on his shirt. But that was silly. Jake had always planned to be a high falutin corporate lawyer.

"Megan!" Elizabeth Pendleton broke into her thoughts with a radiant smile. "How lovely to see you again, although I regret the sad circumstances. I hope we're not too late for the open house."

"You're not. And it's lovely to see *you* again, too." She gave the slightest emphasis to the word *you* and was pleased to see a flicker of discomfort in Jake's eyes. Her old flame must still feel something about their relationship, too. "I guess you've heard I inherited the house last month following the death of my uncle."

"Yes. I was sorry to hear of your double loss. Your uncle's passing so soon after your mother's death must have been especially difficult."

With a start, Megan realized they were still standing at the front door and the cold October air was spilling into the house. She stepped back and gestured them into the warmth inside. "Please come in and look around."

"How lovely!" Mrs. Pendleton exclaimed as she stepped into the foyer.

Megan flushed with gratification. The visitor's delighted cry was a reward for all the hard work she'd put into the house the past three weeks. She'd cleaned and polished until her back ached, but she managed to make the old house shine once more. Poor Uncle Sebastian had been so sick he'd neglected the upkeep of his beloved home in his last few months. Not that she blamed him. The terrible cancer had sapped all his strength and defeated him in the end, just as it had killed her mother.

The memories brought tears to her eyes but she blinked them away and lifted her chin. Sell the house and move on to the future. That was her mantra these days.

Both visitors stood in the center of the foyer, and stared up at the sweeping staircase with its intricately carved banister. Above them, a domed ceiling with a cut-crystal chandelier completed the stunning entranceway.

Megan squared her shoulders as she watched Jake survey the staircase. He was taller than she remembered and his wind-tangled chestnut hair, streaked with amber strands, curled ever so slightly where it touched the collar of his shirt. She had a sudden memory of making out in his car and running her hands through that thick hair.

He half-turned and his wine-dark eyes locked with hers, sending

a jolt of electricity down her spine. So far he hadn't spoken, but she dreaded what he might say. Without thinking, she launched into her rehearsed speech. "The house is six thousand, two hundred square feet. It has three floors, four bedrooms, five bathrooms and four fireplaces. The living room is to the right and the dining room is to the left."

Jake stepped in front of her and peered into the cavernous living room. She caught a whiff of his aftershave, a crisp, woody scent.

"Do you think this will be big enough for you, Mother?" His voice was a deep masculine rumble, but sarcasm dripped from every word.

Megan ignored him and smiled at his mother. "Will you be living here alone, Mrs. Pendleton?"

"Call me Liz. We're all adults now. And I will be living here by myself." Liz shot her son a sharp glance. "I understand the previous owner lived alone, too."

"Uncle Sebastian? Yes, he never married."

"And the house wasn't too big for him?"

"Gosh, he would have bought this house no matter how big it—" Megan stopped in mid-sentence. If they didn't know why Uncle Sebastian had bought the Hartford House, she wasn't going to be the one to tell them. The big, white elephant with its acres of grounds was going to be hard enough to sell as it was.

"He loved this house," she finished. Smiling to cover her awkward pause, she touched Liz's arm and guided her into the living room where a bright fire blazed its welcome. "Look at that fireplace. It's Italian marble. Isn't it a marvelous focal point?"

"What's the average heating bill in the winter?" Jake took up a position in front of the couch, folded his arms across his chest, and planted his feet in a wide stance. His suspicious gaze settled on the bookshelves that lined one wall. A frown marred his forehead.

Was the man still angry with her after all these years? Did he still blame her? As if she would have ever hurt him like that. How could he have believed it, even for a moment? She'd loved him—then.

Megan sucked in a breath, amazed at how all the emotions, all the thoughts of that terrible breakup had come rushing back. Yet, he seemed unmoved. He hadn't said a word to acknowledge they'd once known each other. He was being downright rude. What had she ever seen in him? Thank God, she had David.

"Look, built-in bookshelves!" Liz exclaimed in delight. "I have a huge collection of books."

Megan forced a smile and ignored Jake's question. His defiant posture suggested he wanted to start an argument about the heating bills, but she had no intention of obliging him. She'd pretend she barely remembered him. Served him right.

"Uncle Sebastian loved to read," she told Liz. "You must, too."

Liz laughed. "I'm a writer, my dear. I can't live if I'm not surrounded

by books."

"A writer who bought an expensive and lovely condominium in the Lake Towers in Chicago just two years ago." Jake tightened his lips. "Why you've suddenly gotten this harebrained idea to move back out to the suburbs is beyond me."

As he spoke, he slid a glance Megan's way. Again she saw a momentary flicker in his eyes. Something was bothering Jake, but what?

Stop it. Ten years later, and she was still more worried about Jake's feelings than her own.

Liz made a face at her son. "Maybe I want to be closer to you."

"Do you live in St. George, Jake?" Megan kept her tone cool and polite. It was obvious his mother loved the house. Why couldn't he have stayed home?

"I have a landscaping business in Parksburg."

"You do?" She blinked in surprise. So he only lived two suburbs away from her. What had happened to the law career? But it did explain the dirty shirt and scuffed boots. It also explained those brawny shoulders. Megan's gaze wandered from his broad shoulders down to his muscular legs. She swallowed and forced her mind back to her most urgent task: selling Hartford House. "If you're a landscaper, you'll be interested in the grounds. The house has extensive gardens."

"I know. Far too much for a single woman to take care of."

"Then you'll have something to do on weekends," Liz snapped. "Especially since you're not seeing anyone."

And no wonder, Megan thought, watching him scowl at his mother. What had happened to the Jake she'd once loved, the young man with the infectious smile? Maybe their breakup, on top of the other tragedies he'd suffered, had turned him bitter. Thank goodness, his mother was the exact opposite. Mrs. Pendleton had always treated her well while she'd dated her son.

"Let's go on to the dining room," she suggested. She led them back across the foyer, thankful she'd lit the fire in the second room as well. "As you can see, this room also has a fireplace, perfect for warm, cozy entertaining. The wainscoting is genuine oak."

"What a lovely dining room set." Liz dropped one manicured hand on the curved, high back of a chair. "Does the house come furnished?"

Megan smiled. Her mind jumped into high gear, trying to calculate the value of Uncle Sebastian's possessions. "I hadn't really thought about that. I'd planned to sell this stuff to a secondhand store."

Liz laughed and winked at her. "Well, as my son just pointed out, I only have a small condo at present, and I would need lots of furniture to fill this big house. Maybe we can work something out."

"Mother!" Jake looked startled. "You aren't serious about buying this place, are you? I thought you only wanted to see it because of the rumors—"

Megan blinked. So they did know. Her heart sank for a moment,

then she decided that maybe it was best if they did know the truth. She'd have nothing to hide. And Liz appeared to be falling in love with the house. Straightening her shoulders, she reminded herself that selling a house was business. She needed to keep her emotions out of it. She tried for her most professional tone. "From the dining room, we can go through the butler's pantry and into the kitchen."

Jake stood in the doorway from the dining room to the pantry, his arms once again folded across his chest. With his height and broad shoulders, he made an imposing barrier. His eyes turned a shade darker. "Mother, I think we've taken enough of Megan's time."

Angered by his presumption, Megan strode up to him. He refused to back down, and she stopped, the toes of her navy pumps almost touching the tips of his well-worn boots. Her narrowed eyes stared at his once-white shirt. She could see the firm outline of muscle underneath the thin cotton. Lifting her chin, she braced herself for his glare. He looked down at her. To her surprise, his lips twitched with amusement. For a brief instant, two dimples appeared on his cheeks. She gasped, remembering how those dimples had always charmed her. She could see memories in his eyes too. Good memories. He'd always teased her about the habit she had of lifting her chin when challenged.

Then his frown returned.

Megan curled both hands into fists and planted them on her hips. "If your mother wants to see the house, I am more than happy to show it to her."

His voice took on a formal tone. "I appreciate your zeal to sell this house, Miss Crain. It is Miss Crain, isn't it?" He glanced at her left hand, which was bare of rings. Megan hiked her chin another notch. She should have accepted David's last proposal so she'd have a big diamond to flash at this opinionated hunk.

Hunk! Startled by the thought, she dropped her glance to the polished wood floor. Where had that idea come from? Jake was a relic from the past...and so unlike David, who always considered her opinions and catered to her whims.

She looked up in time to catch Jake's satisfied smirk. Lifting one eyebrow, he turned and peered into the butler's pantry. "This pantry's practically as big as your whole condo," he called back to his mother as he went on into the kitchen.

Without warning, cold air brushed against Megan's cheek. She shivered. She glanced at the fire blazing in the fireplace, puzzled by the chill. In fact, she could see her breath billowing out in front of her. Outside, the October skies had darkened. Inside, shadows hovered in the air.

Her scalp tingled, then crawled. She blinked hard as the shadows thickened. Her head started to ache, a sharp pain centered above her eyes. She lifted a hand to rub her forehead, and the shadows

moved.

Megan stepped back. A surge of fear raced up her spine. It wasn't possible. She'd never for a moment believed—

"Oh, my god!" The cry came from Liz.

Megan whirled around. The older woman backed up against the china cabinet and stared wide-eyed at the space between them.

A gray mist hovered in the air. Moment by moment it thickened and formed itself into a shape.

As Megan watched with stunned, unbelieving eyes, the mist grew arms and legs, and the slender body of a beautiful young woman appeared between her and Liz. The apparition's long, black hair curled down to slim shoulders. Smoky gray eyes stared out at Megan through the silvery light. Pale white lips parted as if about to speak.

"Mom! What!"

The phantom image vanished an instant before Jake burst out of the pantry.

"It—it was her!" Liz pointed toward Megan.

"What did you do?" Jake rounded on Megan, his words a lash. His big hand gripped her shoulder with bone-crushing strength.

"Nothing!" Megan struggled to regain her composure. Her legs were trembling, and she wasn't sure she could remain standing. Despite all of Uncle Sebastian's stories, she'd never believed in the ghost of Hartford House—until this moment.

Jerking free of Jake's grip, she stumbled to the table, pulled out a chair and collapsed. Her hands shook and a cold sweat broke out on her forehead.

Liz stood her ground, blinking in surprise at her son. "We saw the ghost! It appeared here, almost where you're standing."

Jake's gaze searched the room. Megan looked, too, afraid of what she might see. But everything was back to normal. It was only a dining room on a gray fall day, with a crackling fire at one end and a big bay window at the other.

Doubt showed in Jake's narrowed eyes. "I don't see a thing."

"I saw her, a beautiful young girl with tragic eyes. Caroline Hartford! It's true. This house is haunted."

"Please." Megan drew some badly needed air into her lungs and struggled to her feet. Her heart hammered against her ribs, but she had to regain her composure and take control of this situation—fast! The last thing she needed was a fresh new rumor about Caroline's ghost setting tongues abuzz. St. George was a small town. One word to anyone and the ghost would be the main topic of conversation in every household by nightfall.

"More likely it's a trick, a way to gain some free publicity." Jake glared at Megan. "You've sunk to a new low. Now you're going around scaring old ladies."

"I beg your pardon!" Liz walked over to her son and jabbed an

elbow in his side. "Watch who you are calling an old lady, young man. I'm still young enough to handle my own affairs. And I know what I saw."

"I-I saw it, too," Megan admitted.

"I know you did, dear. Anyone can see you've had a fright. You're white as a sheet. Why don't you make yourself useful, Jake, and go see if you can find a glass and some water in that kitchen?"

Jake snorted but disappeared into the kitchen nevertheless. Liz took one of Megan's ice-cold hands in her own warm grasp. "Take a few deep breaths and you'll get some color back into those pretty cheeks of yours. You're awfully young to be trying to sell a house on your own, dear. What are you anyway, twenty-four?"

"Twenty-six," Megan said, drawing herself up straighter. "And I can't afford the real estate agent's commission."

"On a house this size?"

"It's complicated." Megan pulled her hand away, not wanting to explain the family tragedy in front of Jake. Her mother's brain tumor and the surgeries and therapies that had followed—all in vain—had taken every last penny her mother possessed. She'd been a widow without health insurance, living on a small pension. Since her death, Megan felt responsible for those debts. Sure, David and her friends told her she wasn't legally responsible, but that wasn't the point. She'd promised her mother she'd take care of them. She had to make enough from the sale of Uncle Sebastian's house to pay them off. Then she could put this horrible year behind her.

"Well, you're doing a fine job, ghost or no ghost."

Megan managed a weak smile. The older woman's concern was touching.

"There, the roses are coming back to those cheeks. I thought for a moment you were going to faint."

"No, I'm fine." With an effort, she widened her smile. If only she could stop thinking about that ghostly face. Caroline Hartford was dead, had been dead before any of them standing in this room were born.

"You've got the sparkle back in your eyes anyway. I do love green eyes."

"They're hazel, actually. They only look green in certain lighting."

"Hazel, green, gold-flecked." Suddenly, Jake stood in front of her reciting a catalogue of her eye colors as he handed her a glass of water.

The heat rising in her cheeks told her she was blushing. Once, he'd adored her eyes.

"Goes well with the genuine oak wainscoting," he added.

She sputtered and almost choked on a swallow of water. How could one man find so many ways to be obnoxious?

"Listen, about this ghost," he continued in a no-nonsense voice. "It's a silly trick to play on visitors. Likely to scare away more people

than it attracts.”

She squared her shoulders and shot a drop-dead look his way. “I agree. That’s why I would never consider doing such a thing. I don’t believe in ghosts any more than you do. Uncle Sebastian belonged to what my mother and I fondly call the kooky side of the family.”

“I would stop your tricks, if I were you.” He ignored her protest. “Mother and I will keep quiet about it.”

“Please do!” At least they agreed on that. The last thing she wanted was another rumor about the ghost.

“The ghost doesn’t worry me. On the contrary, a house with a ghost is absolutely perfect for me,” Liz told her. “I write Gothic romances with a touch of the paranormal. Caroline is a harmless ghost, isn’t she?”

“As far as I know,” Megan said, but she felt a knife-edge of fear even as she spoke. Uncle Sebastian had lived here for years without any problems, but then Uncle Sebastian had believed in Caroline Hartford’s ghost and longed to see it.

Megan, on the other hand, had no desire at all to repeat the terrifying experience. She didn’t believe in ghosts in the first place, not at all. And it was ridiculous to think that the ghost had spent years avoiding Uncle Sebastian only to appear in front of two strangers today.

“She’s haunted the house for a good many years, or so I understand.” Liz eyed the ceiling as if hoping for another appearance.

“You seem to know a great deal about Hartford House already.”

“I’ve been thinking of moving to St. George for some time, and when this estate became available, I was thrilled. I love the thought of living in a haunted house exactly like the ones I write about.”

Megan shuddered. “You’ll want to see the rest of it, then.”

“Must we?” Jake set his jaw in a stubborn line.

Megan wanted to be angry with him for interfering again, but she was ready to call it quits herself. Autumn days were short, and the thought of staying in the house as the gloomy gray skies grew darker made goose bumps stand up on her arms.

“We must.” Ignoring them both, Liz set off toward the kitchen.

Choking back a sigh, Megan followed and showed her through the kitchen and then the family room, the library and the two bathrooms that made up the downstairs. Leading them up the wide, sweeping staircase, she took them first to the imposing master suite with its own sitting room, fireplace, and a bathroom the size of Megan’s apartment, and then on to the other bedrooms. Liz greeted each room with cries of pleasure. She was soon chattering away about her plans for the house.

“There’s enough room here for ten people,” Jake said. “You can invite your writer’s group over to spend the winter. Most of them will fit in this closet.” His voice grew muffled as he strode into the huge walk-in closet at the end of the upstairs hall.

"Maybe I will." Liz's amused tone told Megan that she was used to dealing with her son. The older woman took a last peek into the hall bathroom and started for the head of the stairs. As she did, a rumble of thunder sounded outside.

"Oh, dear! Rain." Megan bit her lip. No one else was likely to show up today if it started to rain. And she couldn't afford to leave the house on the market forever. The taxes alone...

A gust of cold wind swirled through the stairwell and ruffled her hair. It took her a minute to realize there shouldn't be a wind—not with the front door closed.

A soft, feminine laugh sounded in her ear; a cool breeze plucked at her hair with invisible fingers. Shrieking, she jumped back.

The light seemed to fade as a silver mist materialized near the top of the stairs in front of Liz, who was about to descend. The older woman cried out and staggered to one side. The mist bellowed in the breeze as if about to take shape.

Liz stumbled, and half fell against the stair rail, grabbing hold to keep her balance.

"Are you all right?" Her fear for the older woman propelled Megan to Liz's side. The small hairs on her arms stood on end, and she shook with fear as she drew close to the silver mist. But as she approached and grabbed Liz's arm to help her back to her feet, the mist dissolved once more.

"Now what?" Jake emerged from the closet as Liz straightened. He stared from one woman to the other and lifted a skeptical eyebrow. "Don't tell me. The ghost again?"

"Yes!" Megan stared at Liz, while a new fear replaced the ancient terror the ghost had brought. If the banister hadn't been within reach, Liz might have fallen down the stairs.

The awareness of the near miss caused her heart to skip a beat. Her mind flashed to an image of her mother, confined to her wheelchair by the brain tumor. Fate could strike you down at any moment, and change your life forever. No sale of a house—however much she might need the money—was worth risking someone else's life.

She reached a decision. "I must ask you to leave the house. It's too dangerous to stay here."

Chapter Two

Jake lifted his eyebrows in surprise and looked at Megan with newfound appreciation. At last, some common sense. He remembered Megan as a levelheaded girl, and her blathering about a ghost had irritated him. But this last remark sounded like the Megan he'd known—and once loved.

He sighed and pushed that thought away. A high school romance, the worse kind of all to revisit, and especially after so many changes in his life. He hadn't wanted to see Megan Crain again, hadn't wanted to come here today. But he had to protect his mother from her own foolishness, and she had insisted on seeing this house.

And now look what had happened. Two fake apparitions in the course of one brief visit, and a near disaster. Whatever was going on in Hartford House—and he wasn't some gullible fool who believed in ghosts, not for a minute—his mother could have suffered serious injuries in a fall down those stairs.

Megan had to be faking the ghostly appearances somehow. Maybe her finances had left her desperate to sell and she thought the ghost was an attraction. And she could be deceptive. He remembered that part of their relationship all too well. But at least she had enough of a conscience left to worry about what might happen.

"You heard Megan." He held out his hand to his mother. "Time to go."

He frowned and braced for a fight when she shot him an obstinate look. That damned stubborn streak had seen her through fifty-four rejections before her first book sold. His mother's fierce determination to have things her way might be an advantage for a writer, but it was tough on a son. He was determined to thwart his mother's plan to move into this haunted house. It was bad enough that she wrote paranormal romances. She made a lot of money writing about the "spooky and the kooky" as he described her books, but it was a mistake to bring any of that into her well-ordered life. She belonged in a modern condo in the heart of a bustling city, not out here in an old house on the edge of town.

"Please, let's go." Megan tugged at Liz's arm when she refused to

budge. She gestured at the stairs.

"This is nonsense!" Liz looked unshaken. "I'm fine."

Fine, indeed. Jake almost hooted with laughter, then sobered. He needed to provide these women with a dose of reality. "No, your belief in ghosts is nonsense. Whatever you saw was a clever trick, but it wasn't real. We should go."

Jake caught the angry glance Megan shot at him. A red flush stained her cheeks and her hazel-green eyes flashed at his implication that she'd faked the ghostly apparition. She looked the picture of offended innocence, but that had to be a ploy. This was not the time to be distracted by old memories. Megan had opened the door, and he was going to drag his mother through it. His former girlfriend would just have to sell Hartford House to someone else.

He stepped up to his mother and took her elbow. Megan turned away from his accusing stare, and led the way down the stairs.

"This house might be a little too haunted for its own good." He addressed the remark to his mother but was pleased to see Megan's back stiffen. "How about a nice, quiet condo with a million-dollar view of Lake Michigan? Oh, that's right, you already have one."

"How about I buy the house I want," his mother snapped with a determined gleam in her eye.

They reached the foyer. Megan pulled the front door open, a plastic smile plastered on her face. Her skin, which had glowed with peaches-and-cream health when they first arrived, looked pale, and her soft, pink and altogether luscious lips were pressed together in a tight line. Her wide eyes were full of bewilderment and fear.

An uneasy feeling nagged at Jake. Megan looked like a young woman who'd just seen a ghost. But that was ridiculous. The ghost couldn't be real, so whatever his mother had seen—and certainly she'd seen something—must have been staged.

If it was part of a plan to create interest in the house, it had backfired when his mother nearly fell down the steps. Maybe the look in those lovely hazel-green eyes was guilt, not fear. Well, she should feel guilty.

Megan stood stiff and solemn, holding the door open. "I'm glad you both stopped by. I'm sorry the house wasn't what you expected."

"Oh, no, it was everything I expected, and more." His mother beamed as she looked around the foyer. "I want to make an offer."

"Mother!" Jake jerked with surprise. Until now, he'd thought this whole trip was a lark, a way for his mother to pull his chain about moving to the suburbs—a perennial threat—and at the same time get a tour of St. George's haunted house. But he knew that serious note in her voice all too well. She meant every word.

"Yes, darling." His mother turned to him with a sweet smile. "It's not like I'm moving to Parksburg. I'll be two suburbs away. But it will give you a good reason to take a twenty-minute drive to St. George

once in a while." Her gaze drifted from her son's face to Megan's. Jake recognized that appraising look. She'd directed it at every girlfriend he'd ever brought home. Only once had he seen approval. Years ago, when he'd brought Megan home to meet her for the first time. Now that glowing approval was back.

He stifled an inward groan. It couldn't be. He was far too old for a matchmaking mother. She'd been reading too many of her own romance novels. Besides, he'd had a damned good reason for breaking up with Megan Crain. Nothing had changed about that.

"An offer?" Megan shook her head in disbelief. "After what happened?"

"The ghost?" Liz laughed. "I get the impression she only wants to tell her story, and I'm a writer, after all."

"I'm not sure the house is safe." Megan licked her lips, her face pale from the fright they'd received at the top of the stairs.

Jake took half a step forward, then stopped. For a second he'd felt an overpowering urge to take Megan in his arms and hug her until the color came back to her cheeks. She looked so small and lost, standing in the open doorway with the gathering twilight behind her. She wasn't that much taller than his mother. He could pick her up with ease. Her hazel eyes were wide with apprehension, the green-gold flecks muted. A soft curl of auburn hair had fallen free of her upswept hairdo.

"That will be my concern, won't it?" His mother's brisk voice interrupted his thoughts.

Megan stared at the sweeping staircase where the ghost had appeared. "No, it's my concern, too. I never believed Uncle Sebastian when he talked about the ghost, but what I saw today convinced me. I'm shocked and no longer sure I can sell the house in good conscience."

"I assure you, I'm not afraid of a ghost. I write about them all the time. Why, if I need to, I'll just call ghost busters." Liz smiled at the joke, but Jake saw the change in Megan's face.

"You've given me an idea. I'll tell you what, let's leave the question of buying the house open, and I'll see if anything can be done about the ghost. I'll give you a call as soon as I know."

"Sounds like a plan to me," Jake put in before his mother could voice her reluctance to go one more time. Once he got her out of this place, he'd talk some sense into her. "You'll just have to be a little patient, Mom."

His mother snorted. "Patience isn't my strong suit—or yours either! But if it will make you feel better to think it over, Megan, I'll have to wait. Here's my card." She fished a small white square out of her purse. "I'm prepared to offer more than the asking price if need be. Give me a call tomorrow."

As she shut the door behind them, Megan leaned against the wood

with relief. What a bizarre day this had turned out to be! She had two ghosts on her hands now, as if the ghost of Caroline Hartford wasn't bad enough. She licked dry lips and tried to believe that Jake Pendleton was a ghost from an almost forgotten past, but the butterflies churning in her stomach told her different.

Lordy, but she'd loved him once. And in return, he'd broken her heart. That was the part she had to remember, not everything else. What she needed was an exorcism.



Megan looked askance at the sign nailed to her cousin's front door. The symbol carved on it was one she'd never seen before. Maybe it was only some Chinese symbol for good luck, or maybe it was intended as a charm to ward off evil spirits. You could never tell with cousin Adelaide.

Keeping her hand well away from the sign, she made a fist and knocked.

"Come in!" Adelaide's cheery voice sounded from inside. "I left it open for you."

Megan entered the front hall and then turned into the living room, which always looked to her more like a new age bookstore than a living room. There were books everywhere, lining the walls, piled up on top of the television, stacked on the side tables next to the couch. The spaces that weren't covered with books contained other paraphernalia from the New Age—violet amethyst crystals, aromatherapy candles of every color and scent, Tibetan bells, delicately carved wooden boxes that held tarot cards, and a velvet pouch that contained rune stones. The sound of ocean waves crashing on the shore played softly on the stereo in the background.

Adelaide appeared in the doorway that led to the kitchen. She held a cup in each hand and Megan caught the scent of some spice-infused brew. Herbal tea, she suspected. What else. Megan suppressed a smile. Cousin Adelaide wouldn't be caught dead drinking something as ordinary as coffee. Megan knew her cousin was in her late forties. She'd been a fairly ordinary housewife until her divorce five years ago—as normal as anyone could be on the kooky side of the family.

Loony. That's how Megan always thought of her father's family. There was Uncle Sebastian and his haunted house, as eccentric as they came, and Aunt Jennifer, the astrologer, and Uncle Thomas, Adelaide's father, who belonged to some obscure mystical order. Even her own father had had his eccentric side with his life-long interest in proving that UFOs were real. How her mother had hated that! Any interest Megan might have had in the unusual or paranormal was squashed by her mother in no uncertain terms.

But cousin Adelaide had no such restraints. After her divorce, she'd embraced the New Age movement with a vengeance.

"I've got ginger tea, dear. It'll help boost your immune system now that the cold weather is here." Adelaide crossed to the front of the couch and set the cups down on the coffee table. She collapsed into the plump cushions and pushed her long bangs out of her eyes. She wore a midnight-blue dress spangled with silver stars. Megan noted that the dress brought out the vivid blue of her eyes but clashed rather badly with her purplish-red hair. Adelaide's gaudy hair colors had become a family joke. Five years ago, her hair had been a sedate ash brown, but the various shades of red she favored nowadays did suit her more flamboyant temperament.

Megan slid onto the couch and picked up one of the steaming cups. She sniffed at the ginger tea, surprised at the pleasant aroma, then set it back down. "It needs to cool a little bit," she said. "Thanks for letting me come over on such short notice."

"No problem. We're family. I don't let age differences matter to me. It's the meeting of the spirits that counts. And I sense a kindred spirit in you, my dear."

Megan tried to hide her surprise. She had no interest at all in the New Age, or in ghosts for that matter. All she wanted was to get rid of one.

She'd always avoided discussing the issue with the loony branch of the family. Even when Uncle Thomas patted her on the head at a family picnic and asked, "How's the young psychic today?" Her mother had turned pale at that remark and hurried her away from her uncle.

Adelaide leaned forward, and the silver pendant around her neck gleamed, catching the light. It was a strange, intricately intertwined star. Some mystical symbol, no doubt. "So feel free to speak to me. I know you're trying to sell Uncle Sebastian's house. Have you met Caroline's ghost yet?"

Megan cleared her throat. "That's the problem. Caroline's ghost. Despite Uncle Sebastian's stories, I never actually believed in her. Until today. She appeared to us—me and the people I was showing the house to—twice."

"Twice?" Adelaide lifted an eyebrow. "Most unusual. She's hardly appeared to anyone for years. She seems to be taking an interest in you. I wonder why."

"I don't know why, but I want her to go away!" Megan stopped, surprised by the vehemence of her outburst. Had the ghost frightened her that much? She lifted the teacup and took a sip before continuing. "She materialized in front of us while we were standing on the second floor landing and the woman—a Mrs. Pendleton—was so startled she nearly fell down the steps. I don't feel it's safe to have buyers coming into the house while the ghost is there."

Adelaide leaned back on the soft cushions. "You have a problem then, my dear. Caroline Hartford is not about to leave Hartford House."

"Why not? Can't ghosts be told to go into the light, or something

like that?"

Adelaide's mouth curved upward. "Didn't you listen to any of the stories Uncle Sebastian used to tell? Caroline can't leave Hartford House. She's under a curse."

"A curse?" Only respect for Adelaide's feelings stopped Megan from rolling her eyes. "A ghost. A curse. What next? The mummy's return?"

"Dear, dear. Maybe I should have made chamomile tea instead. You seem upset."

"I saw a ghost today. Twice." Megan said each word with emphasis. "I don't want to see a ghost ever again. Can't we lift the curse somehow?"

Adelaide looked sad. "Only Caroline can lift the curse, and I'm not sure she wants to. Do you remember the story?"

Megan sighed and took a big gulp of the hot tea before replying. She needed to get her nerves under control. Seeing the ghost must have upset her more than she realized if she was snapping at Adelaide. Her cousin was only trying to help her, after all. "Uncle Sebastian told me years ago. But I was young, and I'm afraid I didn't listen. Maybe you'd better tell me again."

"Let me light a candle first, for protection. It's best to be cautious when speaking of the spirit world." Adelaide bustled over to the bookcase, where a number of candles stood, and selected a tall white one. She brought it back to the coffee table and lit it with a match, murmuring softly to herself.

Megan shivered. Was her cousin casting some kind of spell? She didn't want to know.

"There. We should be safe with our psychic shields up." Adelaide rubbed her hands together. The candle flame flickered and bent over, although the air in the room was still.

"Caroline was the daughter of Richard Hartford, a rich newspaper magnate. He built Hartford House in the 1880s, and she was born there just before the turn of the century in 1899. She was the child of his old age, so he quite doted on her and spoiled her. She grew to be a beautiful young woman, petite and slim, with long, black hair and smoky gray eyes."

"Yes!" A chill snaked down Megan's back. She remembered those smoky eyes materializing out of the mist.

"As a rich heiress, she had half the young men in Chicago after her. They used to come out to Hartford House—which was in the country in those days—in the summertime for balls and parties."

Megan nodded. She could picture the spacious old house decorated for a party, filled with laughing young people. The huge attic on the third floor had once been the grand ballroom.

"Caroline enjoyed being pursued by several young men at once; she encouraged them all. One of her suitors was named Arthur Groves.

Over the summer of 1917, Caroline fell in love with him, but even so, she kept flirting with the other young men who attended her parties and sought her hand. It drove Arthur wild with jealousy, or so Uncle Sebastian used to say."

"How did he know?" Megan wondered.

"He was fascinated by Caroline's ghost. It's why he bought that house in the first place. He wanted to be close to her. Over time, he ferreted out every detail of her story."

"Maybe she told him herself. "She must have appeared to him hundreds of times, if she managed me twice in one day."

Adelaide looked thoughtful. "That's the strange part. She never appeared to Uncle Sebastian, not once. He told me so. It was a huge disappointment to him, the biggest disappointment in his life. He would be thrilled to hear you've had better success."

"Success is not the word I would choose."

To Megan's surprise, Adelaide chuckled. "I understand. You're not accustomed to supernatural visitations. You've spent years suppressing your natural psychic abilities."

Megan rolled her eyes at that, but held her tongue. Fortunately, Adelaide was staring into her teacup.

"At any rate, Arthur decided he wanted Caroline to be his alone, and so he proposed to her one beautiful fall night under a full harvest moon. He was heartbroken when she said no."

"No? I thought she loved him."

"She did. But she enjoyed flirting and dancing and generally being the center of everyone's attention. She laughed at his jealous reaction when she dallied with other men. As I said, she was a spoiled young woman and quite selfish."

"Well, she was only eighteen," Megan said with all the maturity of her twenty-six years.

"True. And she had no idea how upset Arthur would be by her refusal. She probably only wanted him to ask a few more times before she said yes. But he was hot-tempered and proud. The next day she got a telegram from him—he'd left to enter the army. Then she heard he was in France, fighting in the First World War. He was killed in May of 1918."

"How sad! Caroline must have been heartbroken. But she was young. Didn't she get over it and fall in love with someone else?"

"Perhaps she would have...in time. Perhaps not. Your Uncle Sebastian believed that she and Arthur were soul mates, so by refusing him, Caroline destroyed her chance for true happiness in that lifetime. Arthur's mother thought the same, for different reasons. She hated Caroline for driving her son into the army where he was killed. When Caroline came to the funeral, she cursed her and told her she would never find love, not ever."

"What a horrible thing to say!"

"She was driven over the edge by her grief. Maybe she would have forgiven Caroline in time. But as fate would have it, Caroline died in the flu epidemic that swept the country that winter. Millions died around the world. It was a horrible tragedy, although it's barely remembered anymore because the war dominated the news."

Megan's eyes grew wide. "So she never did find love again."

"No, she didn't. Uncle Sebastian thought her guilt over causing Arthur's death weakened her, and that's why she died from the flu, despite being young and healthy when it struck. And the same guilt has apparently kept her from going into the light. Her spirit believes it's cursed and has no place in heaven."

"That's terrible." Megan swallowed, feeling sudden sympathy for the shape in the cold mist. To feel that you were barred from heaven—what could be worse? "Can't we help her somehow?"

Adelaide frowned. "Uncle Sebastian wanted so much to help her. He tried again and again to contact her spirit but never had any luck. It could be she relates to you because you are young as she was when she died, and in love, too."

In love? Megan drew her brows together. Nonsense. She didn't love Jake anymore. Then it came to her. David, who else? Adelaide must be referring to David. Although Megan wasn't sure how Caroline could know about her boyfriend. Probably spirits saw a lot more than they should.

"I'm not positive I'm in love with David," she murmured. "But we have talked about getting engaged. Is that important?"

"It seems to have opened a door for communicating with Caroline after years of silence. I'll tell you what I can do. I have a friend named Randolph Riverton who is a wonderful trance medium. If anyone can contact Caroline and convince her to go on into the light, it's him. I'll give him a call and see if he's willing to try."

"I knew I could count on you, Adelaide!" Megan heaved a sigh of relief as a huge weight lifted from her shoulders. "Mrs. Pendleton is eager to buy the house, but I want to get rid of the ghost first."

And she had to do it before Liz's cynical son talked her out of her interest in Hartford House.

"I'll call Randolph tonight."



"Tough luck, sweetheart. Your first potential buyer, and it's some dingbat writer who imagines she's seen a ghost."

"Did you hear what I said? I saw the ghost, too." But a note of uncertainty had crept into Megan's voice. Sitting in the warm comfort of their favorite restaurant, looking into David's skeptical blue eyes, she was less sure of what she'd seen. The whole afternoon was beginning to seem more and more like something she'd imagined—or read in a book.

"The power of suggestion." David sounded certain. But then David usually sounded certain. Once Megan had admired his ability to know exactly what he believed. He was a man who knew his own mind, as surely as he knew that he wanted people to call him David, not Dave. She'd envied the way he had mapped out his future for the next several years in meticulous detail. But lately, she'd begun to feel stifled by his certainty about everything.

It was one of the reasons she'd turned down his proposals, twice. But David's certainty seemed to extend to eventually convincing her to marry him. He remained calm about her continued indecision.

David would never run off to war in a fit of masculine pride like Arthur Groves. He wouldn't allow a broken heart to shake his master plan. Nor would he leap to conclusions, make terrible accusations and then refuse to ever see the truth like Jake. He was reliable, logical, a good man.

"Anyway," she continued, "I went to see cousin Adelaide and she's agreed to get a trance medium, who will get rid of the ghost for me."

David frowned down at the plate of pasta in front of him. They were at Lorenzo's, a restaurant renowned for its Italian cuisine, where the mouthwatering fragrance of hot bread, fresh from the oven, hung in the air. The warm light from amber sconces washed over the terra cotta walls and turned Dave's blond hair almost golden. "What does that mean? Will you have to hold a séance in the house?"

"Good heavens, a séance!" Megan's mouth dropped open in surprise. She hadn't thought that far ahead. But of course it would have to be in the house. Caroline was there. Her cheeks grew warm, and she squirmed in her seat, embarrassed. What would the neighbors say if they found out?

But that was unlikely. Hartford House sat in the center of its own expansive grounds, an island to itself. She was just skittish—and no wonder, with all this talk of ghosts and mediums and séances.

"Heaven help you, indeed." David's eyes flashed with scorn. She could imagine him pinning some errant never-do-well in the witness chair with just such a look. He was a lawyer, working in a small downtown office in St. George to gain experience. His long-range plan called for him to join a first-rate firm once he'd built up a reputation. Eventually, he wanted to run for a judgeship, then for congressman or senator.

Megan shuddered to think what a liability the kooky side of her family would become to his career if they ever did marry. Why, she'd probably have to disown half her relatives.

"What if the conservative citizens of this fair town get wind of the séance?" David demanded. He lifted his eyebrows. "I thought you wanted to downplay the house's reputation."

"I do. It's hard enough selling a big barn of a house like that without having a resident ghost to contend with."

David toyed with his fork, a thoughtful look on his face. "That's the problem. The house is too big. There are a limited number of people who could afford to buy it, and they're not the kind of people who want to invest in a house that's alleged to be haunted."

"I know, but what can I do about it?"

"Forget about selling the house."

Megan looked at him, surprised.

"No, I mean it. Forget the house and concentrate on the property. It's a good location. You should get enough just for the land to cover the debts."

"I can't do that." Megan chuckled, picturing Uncle Sebastian's face. "If someone bought the place just for the land, they'd tear down the house, wouldn't they?"

"Not necessarily. Maybe they'd turn it into a bed and breakfast or something. I know of one client who might be interested."

"Because I couldn't let anything happen to the house," Megan continued. "My uncle would come back from the dead to haunt me if I let any harm come to Hartford House."

David shrugged. "It was a suggestion. You have to sell, one way or another. You could never afford the taxes. And if you insist on paying your mom's debts, you need the money. Maybe you'd better think twice about this séance."

Megan gazed at David, weighing his words. She wanted to agree with him. But she had seen the ghost. No matter what he thought, she knew Caroline wasn't a figment of her imagination. Still, she didn't want to get into an argument, and especially not over such a pleasant dinner. She took a sip of chardonnay before replying. "How will the neighbors ever know? The house is set way back from the nearest road and surrounded by trees. It's as private as a house can be. And Adelaide will keep quiet. I explained to her that I want to keep it secret."

David shook his head. "She has a good heart, but she's way too scatterbrained. I wouldn't trust her not to let something slip. This sale is too important."

"It's my problem."

"I worry, too." David reached across the table to take her hand in his. "I know one of the reasons you keep putting me off is that you're worried about these debts."

"It's a moral obligation," she whispered as she had whispered a hundred times before.

"If you insist. I can't wait until that house is sold, so we can think about our future together."

Megan nodded. Legally, she might not be obligated to pay off the bills, but her mother had begged her to do it. And she suspected that was the reason Uncle Sebastian had left her the house. Megan loved her job as the executive secretary for the president of a magazine pub-

lishing company, but her salary wouldn't go very far in paying off what her mother owed her doctors.

David gave her a pleading look. "Remember, my offer stands whenever you want to consider it. Anytime." He squeezed her hand.

Megan squeezed back and forced a smile to her face. But the overwhelming happiness she wanted to feel at his words refused to come. What was wrong with her? David was good looking, thoughtful and considerate. He had a fine job and a future planned for both of them. Most of all, he loved her.

She cared for him, too. She was certain of that. But was it love she felt, or the warm regard of good friends? She felt comfortable with David, but a part of her craved that sudden spark, the overwhelming joy that had sung through her heart whenever Jake had walked into the room.

She swirled her pasta around on her plate, remembering the jolt of unexpected emotion that had churned through her stomach when Jake had climbed out of that car today. It hadn't been particularly pleasant. She'd felt like she'd been about to be sick. So much for delicate butterflies. Maybe she'd watched too many romantic movies. Maybe calm contentment was the secret to a happy lifetime together.

Maybe. But a stubborn corner of her heart resisted.

"I know, David. But I'm not ready to think about marriage, not yet."

"How about tomorrow?" The twinkle in his eyes told her he was joking. He was a good guy.

A soft smile curved Megan's lips. "Maybe tomorrow," she agreed, wondering where all these new doubts were coming from. It wasn't like there was anyone else—she certainly wasn't any Caroline Hartford with hordes of suitors. Why, the only other eligible man she'd even seen lately was Jake. Not that he'd bothered to acknowledge that they'd once dated.

She gave her fork an angry shove, scattering linguini onto the tablecloth. "Sorry," she muttered, picking it up.

"So when is the séance?" David asked.

Adelaide had been as good as her word. She'd gotten hold of Randolph and then called Megan to set a time. Her call had come minutes before David's arrival to pick Megan up for their date.

"Tomorrow night."

David let out a low whistle. "You're not wasting any time. Do you want me to be there?"

Megan smiled with gratitude. "That's so nice of you, David. But no. I think Adelaide wants it to be just us three. It will be okay. It's only a séance. I'm sure Mr. Riverton knows what he's doing."

But did he, really? She knew nothing about the man except that Adelaide recommended him. And the thought of facing the ghost of Caroline Hartford again sent a cold chill through her heart. Did the

ghost envy her because she was young and alive and had a chance at love?

Megan played with her pasta, her appetite suddenly gone. She found herself wishing the séance was already over.

Chapter Three

Randolf Riverton walked into the middle of the living room and stood with his arms out, palms up, and his eyes closed.

Megan started to say something, but Adelaide shook her head and held a finger to her lips.

"Ah..." Randolph murmured after a long moment of silence. "I feel her vibrations in this room. They're quite strong. We will hold the séance here."

He opened his eyes. Megan stared in fascination at the irises, which were a pale, almost transparent blue. They blended into the white, so that the entire eye seemed to shine. This gave him a look of luminous spirituality that was enhanced by his lean, aesthetic face and long, silver-gray hair. His tall, thin figure was clad all in brown, and he wore sandals despite the autumn chill outside. He reminded Megan of a monk returning from a solitary sojourn in the desert, filled with mystic revelations.

With his hands stretched out in front of him palms up, Randolph began circling the living room. His shining eyes were half closed and his face took on a faraway look, as if he listened for distant voices.

"He's checking the room for psychic hot spots," Adelaide whispered in Megan's ear. Her voice held a kind of awed rapture as she followed Randolph's movements. "He's in constant contact with the spiritual dimension. He's a very advanced soul."

His survey complete, Randolph gestured toward the couch set facing the fireplace. "Let's sit there and begin our communion."

Megan was glad she had come in earlier to pull the drapes and light the gas fire. The leaping flames added a note of warmth. That was a welcome contrast to the chill of fear that raced through her body whenever she thought of what they were about to do. Outside, it was a dreary night. A cold wind rattled the branches of the trees. Gray clouds had hidden the setting sun, and now a sleety rain threatened to turn to snow.

"Don't we need to sit in a circle?" she asked.

"Heavens, no!" Adelaide laughed. "You've watched too many horror movies, my dear. We're only going to talk to Caroline and persuade

her to release her attachment to the Earth plane and go on. It's merely a matter of raising our vibrational level to the astral plane where she resides. Once we do that, it's as simple as any chat with a friend."

"Sorry, I didn't realize that." Megan chewed on her lip to stop a smile. She hadn't the faintest idea how to raise her vibrational level.

Randolf lifted his eerie blue gaze toward the ceiling. "Do not let your lack of experience worry you," he pronounced in a deep bass voice, as if reading her mind. "I will serve as the bridge that will allow us to reach this lost spirit. I sense her approach already."

Adelaide beamed with delight at this bit of news, but Megan shuddered. Cold fingers of apprehension ran down her spine. She had no desire to see Caroline again—the other day had been quite enough contact, thank you—but if this séance was necessary to set the ghost free and end the haunting, then she would endure it.

Randolf sat down in the center of the pale chenille-covered couch and patted the seat cushions on each side of him. Adelaide took the place to the right and Megan sat on his left, as near to the arm of the couch as she could get without seeming rude. Something about his stiff posture and the fierce gaze he was directing into the empty space between them and the fireplace frightened her. What had she been thinking, asking for a séance?

His eyes drifted shut again. His hand lifted to stroke the smooth crystal pendant that hung on a silver chain around his neck. "Caroline...are you here? Come to us."

In the silence that followed, Megan heard the wind blowing around the eaves and the rattle of tree branches against the wall. She concentrated on the pleasant warmth of the fire on her face and tried to forget the shadows in the corners of the vast room.

Icy fingertips brushed across her cheek. With a small cry, she pressed back into the cushions of the couch.

"Peace!" Randolph's voice rang out, full of confidence. "No one will harm you, Caroline. We come to help. Please show yourself to us."

Megan's eyes widened as a soft gray fog formed out of nowhere and began to coalesce between them and the fireplace. The firelight, shining through it, lit up the beautiful, misty face of a young woman.

Megan saw the pale mouth move. The words were a whisper of sound, so soft they might have been imagined.

"No one can help me."

A pang seized Megan's heart. Caroline looked so young, so lost.

Randolf leaned forward and directed his piercing silver-blue gaze into the mist. He spoke with conviction. "It is time for you to let go of your earthly life, time to go into the light. You're frightening people."

"Who have I frightened? Who?" Caroline glanced from one to the other and her gaze rested on Megan. "You? I appeared to you yesterday."

"Yes." Megan leaned forward. "Why?"

"I don't know." The voice was a sad sigh. "Something drew me to you. The way you looked at that man reminded me of the days of when I was alive and young and so very much in love."

What man? Jake? If she'd looked at Jake, it'd only been to glare. Caroline was one confused ghost. "I'm sorry you're not alive anymore," Megan said. "But when you materialized for the second time yesterday you frightened the woman I was with and almost caused an accident."

"The second time?" A puzzled look crossed Caroline's face. She glanced toward the dining room, tendrils of misty hair curling around her face. "I only appeared to you once. You and the other woman were downstairs—"

"We can't let you endanger the living," Randolph interrupted. "It's our duty to help you advance to a higher plane."

"Not until my penance is done." The ghost-gray eyes filled with sorrow.

Megan's skin shivered as the air around them grew heavy. Something was happening, something that was not normal, even for a séance. She wanted to get up off the couch and bolt from the room, but she was afraid to move.

"What penance?" Randolph stretched out a hand toward Caroline, his face gentle and filled with compassion. "The souls in the light are ready to forgive you, Caroline."

"I cannot forgive myself. I spurned my soul mate and drove him from my side to his death." The mist shimmered and sparkled as if it held a lifetime of teardrops. "I must remain here until I earn my redemption."

"How?" Caught up in the tale of tragedy, Megan hardly dared to breathe.

Ghostly eyes turned to meet hers. Fear twisted Megan's stomach at the profound regret in that gaze. "I must stay bound to this house until the day I bring another pair of soul mates together."

"How will you accomplish that in this house?" Randolph made a sweeping gesture that took in the empty rooms beyond the living room. "An old bachelor lived here for years, and the next buyer is likely to be a widow. I don't see much opportunity there. It's time for you to forgive yourself and move on. Go into the spirit world where you will find your soul mate again. He waits to be reunited with you."

A stricken look settled over the features that danced before the flickering fire. Caroline moaned as if in pain. "I have lost his love. Otherwise, he would come himself to lead me home into the light. I will wait here until he forgives me, or until I redeem my sin...for all eternity if I must."

Adelaide leaned forward, pulling at her purple-red hair in frustration. Compassion lit up her face. "Please listen to us, Caroline. Our spirits cannot stay stagnant in one place. We are constantly changing.

You can't let one mistake lock you here forever."

Caroline's mouth opened as if in pain. An icy breath brushed across Megan's skin and her heart leapt into her throat. This ghost had suffered, for too long. She had to listen to them.

But Caroline's face was losing its form as the mist began to dissipate. "I've made a vow not to leave this house until I redeem my sin. My doom is sealed. Arthur has abandoned me."

Randolf held up a hand. "Stay! Listen to us. Perhaps he can't come. While you wait here, he has moved on. He may have been reborn. You will never find him again unless you choose to go on to the next life and become part of the great cycle of love and rebirth once more."

The mist melted in the firelight, flowing down to the floor like a river of silver tears. Only the translucent outline of a face remained floating in the air. Its voice when it spoke was hollow and empty. "My guilt is too heavy. It holds me here and keeps us apart. And even if I could go into the light, how would I ever find him again? I haven't got the slightest idea whether he is in heaven or on earth. But if I stay here, his spirit knows where to seek for me."

"You poor dear." Adelaide pressed her hand to her mouth. Her face wore a bewildered look. "You do have a problem, don't you? What do you think, Randolph?"

The seer's thin fingers stroked his chin. "A conundrum, surely. Poor Caroline. She's cursed herself. But she is right. Her lover's soul may have journeyed anywhere. It may be that they will have to be reborn apart for many lifetimes before they are reunited."

Megan shuddered. More was at stake than she had ever guessed. Struggling to put aside her fear, she looked at the pale young face fading into the firelight with pity. Caroline Hartford had spurned her true love, and she had paid a terrible price.

The silver mist spread through the room as it dissolved, emanating an unbearable cold that swallowed the warmth of the fireplace. With a chill, Megan realized it was despair made visible.

The last tendrils of mist shivered. A faint voice drifted toward them from a vast distance away. "I cannot ignore the evil that I did when I was alive. I must stay until I make restitution. Only then can I forgive myself."

The whisper of sound blended into the moan of the wind outside. The last of the mist melted into the firelight and vanished.

"My goodness!" Adelaide sat motionless, her blue eyes huge, her mouth open. "There must be some way we can help her."

Randolf reached out and patted her hand absentmindedly. "We'll call upon her spirit guides for help. They can intervene in ways we cannot. With the aid of their power, we'll help her to forgive herself."

Adelaide nodded. "Yes, I'm certain we will. You are so wise in these matters."

Megan gulped and gripped her hands together to keep them from shaking. Having a conversation with a ghost was certainly unnerving. "Does that mean another séance?"

Adelaide glanced at Randolph and smiled. "Randy and I can handle it on our own, I think. Leave it to us, dear."

"Thanks!" Megan let out her anxiety with a whoosh of breath. "I'm afraid I'm not cut out for the ghost-busting business."

Adelaide jumped to her feet and advanced toward the fireplace. Her hand waved through the air where the ghostly figure of Caroline had appeared. "My first ghost! What a thrill." She beamed at her companions, as happy as a young child with an unexpected treat.

Randolf rose to his full height. He was over six feet, Megan guessed. He too walked toward the fireplace, one hand outstretched, as if drawn by some lingering ghostly emanation.

A flicker of movement caught Megan's eye. The edge of the throw rug in front of her on the floor had flipped over. Her eyes widened in horror. No one had touched it.

She opened her mouth in warning, but before she could speak, Randolph's foot caught on the flipped edge. He tripped and stumbled forward. Moving quickly, Adelaide grabbed his arms and steadied him.

"Careful!"

The two of them stood frozen before the fireplace. Randolph stared down at Adelaide as if he'd never seen her before. Her hands left his arms and moved up to rest on his chest. The firelight cascaded over her hair and turned it into a red-gold flame.

Randolf reached out and gathered Adelaide's hands into his. "Sorry. I tripped," he whispered. He seemed to be in a daze.

Megan watched, stupefied, as the edge of the rug fluttered and straightened out. Caroline! It had to be. The matchmaking ghost was hard at work redeeming herself. If she could bring two soul mates together, she would go into the light at last.

Were Randolph and Adelaide soul mates? Megan wasn't sure. She only knew the look they were giving each other suggested romance ahead.

She turned away to hide her smile of pleasure and crossed her fingers.



Jake swung around in his office chair to gaze out his window as he listened to his mother on the speakerphone.

"I'll be coming out to Parksburg for an afternoon book signing on Wednesday next week." Liz Pendleton sounded brisk and business-like. "Why don't we get together for lunch beforehand?"

Jake swiveled to frown at the calendar on the far wall of his office. His mother never called him at work and never did book signings in the suburbs. Something was up, and he suspected it had to do with

that damned house.

"I'm not a part of the lunch crowd. I work for a living," he teased.

"You own the place, for heaven's sake."

He pictured her rolling her eyes. He smiled. He was lucky that his mother's thriving career kept her busy most of the time. She turned into a virtual hermit when she was writing a book, or spent weeks away on book tours. He could hardly accuse her of clinging to him or meddling with his private life.

If anything, he was the one who was trying to interfere with her plans.

Jake was not prone to second thoughts, so the flash of guilt surprised him. He only wanted what was best for his mother. She had a beautiful condo on the lake with a million-dollar view. There was no reason for her to buy a haunted house. Even if Megan Crain did have the loveliest hazel-green eyes he had ever seen.

He gripped the phone harder. What on earth did Megan's eyes have to do with anything? He'd relegated her to his scrapbook of memories long ago, under the heading "My biggest mistake." The last thing he wanted was to get involved with her again, in any way.

This haunted house business was getting to him.

"Jake!" His mother's impatient voice jerked him out of his memories. "You do still own your business, don't you?"

"Yes, I own the place. That's why I spend twice as much time working here as anyone else."

"All the more reason to take a break."

He sighed. He knew that tone. "Okay. On one condition. We do not discuss your purchase of a home during lunch."

His mother laughed. "That's not a problem. There's nothing to discuss. My mind is made up."

"Mom!" Despite his best intentions, Jake knew he was about to start an argument. He couldn't let her make such a huge mistake. His mother was alone in the world except for him. He was responsible for looking out for her.

As always when his mother came up with a harebrained scheme, Jake flashed back to his father lying on the ambulance gurney before they wheeled him away to the hospital where he'd died. His last words to his teenaged son were, "Take care of your mom."

Jake decided to take the offensive. "What would you do with that oversized antique masquerading as a house?"

"Well, for one thing, I'd have plenty of room when my grandchildren come over to play."

Jake sat up straight and stared at the phone. Was his mother losing it? She'd never acted like this before. He raised his voice and spoke with exaggerated patience. "You don't have any grandchildren, Mom."

"I know that." He could hear the laughter in her voice. It occurred

to him that she was the one teasing him. "But I warn you—I've waited long enough. The countdown is on."

He lifted an eyebrow, glad of this lighthearted challenge in place of another duel over the house. "Count away. I've always wondered how high you can count."

"Not very high. You'll have to act fast."

"Don't think so." Jake smiled at the wall. His mother knew full well that he'd broken up with his last girlfriend two months ago. In fact, she'd all but cheered when she'd heard about the split. She'd never cared for Jennifer, a willowy blonde whose only reading consisted of the TV guide.

"You're too picky," his mother announced.

Jake sputtered in disbelief. This was too much—his mother pronouncing him picky. "I thought you had high standards for the mother of your grandchildren," he retorted.

"Touché." Unexpectedly, his mother gave up the battle. Her voice brimmed with cheerfulness. "I'll see you at lunch on Wednesday then."

They discussed time and place, and she hung up. Jake set the phone back in its cradle and stared at it while he replayed the conversation in his mind.

His mother was up to something. He had a feeling he'd find out what on Wednesday.

Chapter Four

Megan pulled into the parking lot of Atwater's, a posh eatery on the river in downtown St. George. She'd had to ask her boss for the afternoon off so she could keep her luncheon date with Liz, but it was worth it for a chance to dine at such an exclusive—and expensive—restaurant.

Delicious aromas filled the air as Megan pushed open double doors of etched and frosted glass. Inside, oak floors gleamed under the mellow light from crystal chandeliers. A poised young woman in a pale blue suit asked her if she had a reservation.

"I'm here to meet a Mrs. Liz Pendleton," Megan told her.

"Ah, Mrs. Pendleton." The woman's face lit with pleasure. "What a wonderful writer. I'm going over to her book signing later today. She's already seated. Let me show you to her table."

The tables in the spacious dining area were set well apart to allow for privacy. Liz was seated near the back of the room next to a window that looked out over the river.

She rose to her feet and pushed back her chair as Megan approached. "What a pleasure to see you again, my dear."

The two women grasped hands. To Megan's amazement, the older woman stepped closer and hugged her.

Megan inhaled the subtle scent of expensive perfume as Liz's cheek brushed against hers. She returned the hug and sat down, a bit flustered by the warmth of this greeting. Maybe it was only a high-society charade. Nevertheless, she'd been surprised by Liz's invitation to an elegant meal, and now she found herself nonplussed by her hug. The older woman must really want to buy Hartford House.

"Don't look so shocked." Liz laughed as she readjusted her napkin on her lap. "I'm a hugger, that's all. Our family has always been a bit physical."

Megan's cheeks grew hot. She remembered Jake's persistent amorous attentions back when they'd dated. They'd come dangerously close to going all the way more than once. She'd held off then, despite her yearnings, certain there were years ahead of them to explore the wonders of physical love. Afterward, no man she'd dated had ever been

able to arouse her in the way Jake had. Or maybe her lack of excitement was because he'd hurt her so deeply. Maybe she didn't want to take a chance on letting some other man do the same thing. She only knew something had gone dead inside. It'd seemed simpler to decide to abstain until marriage—another event she kept resisting for some reason.

She blinked. When had she started with the psychoanalysis? Seeing Jake again had shaken her up more than she'd realized. She pulled her chair closer to the table and tried to concentrate.

"Besides," Liz was saying, "I've always thought of you with a great deal of warmth. I have very fond memories of the days when you were dating Jake."

"But that was years ago," Megan blurted. "He must have gone through a ton of women since then."

Her cheeks grew even hotter as she realized what she'd just said. "I mean—I don't mean—" Embarrassment swept through her. Two minutes into lunch and she was blushing like a schoolgirl. Liz seemed to have the same uncanny ability to rattle her that Jake had always possessed.

Liz beamed with maternal pride. "Don't apologize. Jake does have his way with women. Or did." Her expression grew more serious. "He never would tell me much about his breakup with you. I'm not even sure whose idea it was."

Megan fumbled with her own napkin. This was the last thing on Earth she wanted to discuss. "It was pretty mutual," she mumbled.

To her infinite relief, their waiter chose that moment to appear and hand out menus. He was about to recite the day's specials when Liz held up a hand to stop him.

"There will be one more joining us. We'll wait to order, but perhaps my companion would like a drink while we're waiting."

Megan noticed that Liz already had a glass of white wine. She ordered the same. The way things were going, she was going to need it.

As the waiter retreated, Liz leaned forward and smiled at Megan. "You look delightful today, my dear. The fall air has made the roses bloom in your cheeks."

"Thanks." Megan wondered if it would be considered nosy to ask who else was joining them for lunch. She had a suspicion about the identity of the mystery guest, and she didn't like the idea, not at all. Would it be rude to get up and leave if it turned out to be Jake?

Liz seemed to read her mind. Her smile grew brighter as she waved a jeweled hand in the air. "I've asked my son to lunch with us. I hope you don't object. I'm determined to change his mind about the house once and for all."

"I wish you luck." Megan's vision of a pleasant lunch vanished. She opened her menu and studied the list of entrees, hoping that the

tumultuous emotions she felt hadn't shown on her face.

"He's not so bad. I'll bring him around." Liz laughed. "We have a few minutes of reprieve to enjoy our wine before he arrives. I told him to meet me at twelve-thirty. I wanted to hear all about the séance from you before he got here."

The séance. Megan gulped. Although they had failed to evict the ghost, it had been a rip-roaring success from one viewpoint at least. Adelaide had called Megan the next day, sounding nearly ecstatic with her news. Randolph had asked her out for coffee after they'd left the house, and they'd spent hours "exploring our auras and our past lives together" as Adelaide put it. He'd even asked her to go to a crystal-healing workshop with him next week.

"Everything changed when he tripped and fell into my arms," Adelaide had finished, her voice brimming with happiness. "He said it was as if he saw me in a blinding new light."

Megan adjusted her napkin on her lap. "The séance had mixed results," she told Liz. "The medium was able to reach Caroline's ghost without any problem. But the ghost refuses to depart this earthly realm. She says she can't leave the house until she redeems herself, and she can only do that by bringing two soul mates together."

The waiter reappeared and set a wineglass in front of Megan. Between fortifying sips of wine, she explained the story of Caroline Hartford and Arthur Groves to Liz.

"How sad, yet romantic," Liz sighed when Megan was finished. "It sounds like something I'd write in one of my books."

"Yes, it turns out Hartford House was the scene of a great romantic tragedy, one that could have come straight from one of your novels. It would be the perfect house for you to own."

Liz grinned. "We see eye to eye, Megan. It would be great publicity for me—a paranormal romance writer buying a house with a ghost who is grieving for her lost love."

"She's also a ghost who refuses to leave," Megan reminded her. "It could be awkward if she decided to appear in the middle of a dinner party."

Liz's sky-blue eyes sparkled with mischief. "Maybe you want your parties to be dull and uneventful. But my dinner parties have a reputation for excitement and unusual diversions. If I thought it would work, I'd send Caroline an invitation. I know a couple of magazine writers who'd be thrilled to interview her."

Megan giggled. She could picture the headline—A dinner conversation with a ghost—emblazoned across the top of USA Today.

"I might even put her in one of my books." Liz looked inspired. "I like to base my works on true stories if I can."

"Owning a house with a ghost could be dangerous." Megan wasn't sure why she felt compelled to repeat the warning. She was trying to sell Hartford House, after all, and Liz had made it clear she wanted to

buy. But Liz was so warmhearted and friendly. Megan couldn't help the guilty feeling she got whenever she thought of selling her that ghost-ridden old house.

"Nonsense! If you're referring to the incident at the top of the stairs, I was startled, that's all. It's not like she tried to push me down the steps. In fact, once I move in, I'm sure we'll become close friends."

Megan coughed and nearly choked on her wine. Becoming friends with a ghost! What a bizarre thought that was. Liz Pendleton was as kooky as cousin Adelaide. Although meeting Caroline had done wonders for Adelaide's love life.

Tilting her head to one side, Megan considered the older woman. Her short, dark hair made an attractive frame for a striking face with high cheekbones and soft, well-shaped lips. Long dark lashes accented the clear blue eyes. Jake's hair was lighter and he'd inherited his father's soulful dark eyes, but the clean-cut bone structure was his mother's. There wasn't much doubt where Jake got his good looks. Liz was an attractive woman.

Without thinking, Megan spoke her thoughts aloud. "Maybe Caroline will look for a match for you."

Sorrow darkened Liz's face for a moment, like the shadow of a cloud passing over the sun. Her voice softened with memories when she spoke. "Who me? I'm afraid I'm too old and set in my ways to marry again. Besides, I've already loved my soul mate in this life—and lost him. Jake's father died when he was fifteen. I've been a widow for a long time."

"Yes, I know. I'm sorry." Even though it had happened before they'd started dating, she'd known about Jake's loss. She'd thought he had been incredibly brave and mature in dealing with his father's death. Only later, when they dated, had she learned how the pain of that unexpected tragedy had turned him cynical and destroyed his trust that life would work out somehow.

"That's why Jake is so solicitous about me," Liz continued. "We had to struggle together to survive that terrible time. Nowadays, I enjoy my freedom, but sometimes I think if I had a husband again, Jake would be more willing to get on with his own life."

Megan didn't want to ask the question, didn't want to show any interest in Jake at all. Yet somehow it slipped out. "He isn't serious about anyone?"

"To my regret, no." Liz lifted her glass to her lips and drank the last of her wine. "He spends most of his time wrapped up in his business or working as a volunteer with the Make a Wish foundation. And occasionally, he finds some time to spend with me. He's had relationships over the years, but they never seem to last."

Maybe they would if he'd watch that nasty tongue. Megan pressed her lips together to keep from saying it aloud. This was his mother after all. She toyed with the stem of her glass, feeling slightly

tipsy. She wasn't much of a drinker, and the wine was going to her head. She needed something in her stomach to sop up the alcohol before the liquor overpowered her good judgment, and she said something she'd really regret.

"Speak of the devil." Liz smiled.

Megan glanced up to see Jake appear at the entrance to the restaurant. His eyes scanned the tables, then widened when he found his mother—and spotted Megan at her side.

Megan watched as he squared his shoulders and marched toward them. There was no denying they were broad shoulders, and they looked even broader today. He was wearing a cream-colored sweater with a tailored gray jacket over it. As he walked to their table, she couldn't help noticing that he moved with the fluid grace of a natural athlete.

"Mother. Megan." He bent over to kiss his mother on the cheek, then executed a half-bow of greeting in Megan's direction before taking his seat. Eyeing his stiff smile, Megan deduced that her presence was a surprise to him as well.

He ran a hand through his wind-tousled chestnut hair and gave his mother a quick look that was half-amused, half-angry, before snatching up the menu and disappearing behind its thick pages. Megan wondered if he was using it in the same way she had, to regain his composure.

When he re-emerged, his face had a more relaxed look. He shot an appraising glance at his mother.

"I didn't know Megan was joining us for lunch." He aimed a polite smile in her direction before turning back to his mother. "Your latest book must be selling quite well if you can afford to take the two of us out to eat here."

"An excellent lunch is one of life's sweeter pleasures." Liz straightened her napkin and looked her son in the eye. "If Chef Francine's exquisite cuisine doesn't mellow you out, nothing will."

"And why do I need mellowing, Mother?" Jake raised a challenging eyebrow.

Whatever Liz might have answered was lost when the waiter appeared to take their orders. Liz ordered a Caesar salad with grilled chicken. Megan hardly knew what to choose amid the many intriguing selections but settled on Fettuccine with wild mushrooms and prosciutto. She wasn't surprised when Jake disregarded the more exotic fare to order a simple grilled steak and a baked potato along with a pint of Guinness.

When his beer arrived, Jake settled back in his chair, took a long swallow and sighed. Smacking his lips, he turned his attention back to his mother.

"Since Megan is here, I assume we've gathered once more to discuss the house."

Liz fixed her son with a determined stare. "Megan made contact with the ghost during a séance. She's a tragic young lady, really, and she appears to be harmless. I can't see any reason why I shouldn't go ahead and buy Hartford House." She turned to look straight at Megan. "I am prepared to make another offer today. A very generous offer."

Megan twisted in her chair, uncomfortable with the tension at the table. On the one hand, she wanted to sell the house. She should leap at this offer. On the other hand, she was far from certain it was truly safe to live there. And something in Jake's eyes suggested he would blame her if anything ever happened to his mother.

"I—I—"

"A séance?" Jake scoffed, interrupting her. He glared at his mother. "I can't believe you would give credibility to such a thing even if you do write those ghost romances."

"What I choose to believe is entirely my business," Liz told him in an imperial tone.

"And you!" Jake switched his angry gaze to Megan. "I don't know what you're trying to pull with this whole routine about a haunted house, but you'd better watch out or it will backfire. I guess I should just be grateful you didn't invite my mother to this séance."

Megan sat up and straightened her shoulders. "I only held the séance because I was concerned about what almost happened with your mother on the stairs. I assure you, until the other day I didn't think ghosts really existed either."

"And now you do?" he sneered.

"I can hardly deny what I've seen with my own eyes, more than once."

"So you say."

"Are you accusing me of lying?" Megan tossed her head and shot him an outraged look. Terrible memories of the day she and Jake had broken up came flooding back. Her tears. His harsh, hateful accusations. She crumpled up her napkin in one hand, ready to leap to her feet and charge from the restaurant. He hadn't changed, not a bit!

"Please, you two!" Liz held up her hand. "There is no point to this bickering. Whether or not I make an offer for the house is my decision, and my mind is made up. And it is up to Megan whether she will accept it or not."

A moment of awkward silence fell over the table. Megan toyed with her fork. Jake took another swallow of his Guinness. A waiter glided by, carrying a tray laden with dirty dishes.

The waiter's passage distracted Megan, and Jake took the opportunity to study her profile. Her mouth had its old familiar stubborn set as she lifted her chin a notch higher. How could a mouth be so stubborn and yet so sensual at the same time, lush with full lips ripe for kissing? It didn't seem fair that the past ten years had only added the luster of maturity to the youthful beauty he remembered. He'd

always been a sucker for those thick curls and dancing eyes.

A smile flitted across Megan's face as Liz declared her intention to buy the house. *She's enjoying watching my mother put me in my place*, Jake thought, his eyes narrowing with frustration. But he couldn't blame her for savoring this brief victory over him. Their breakup had been brutal and had left hard feelings on both sides. How many times in all the years since had he thought of calling her up and apologizing? But for what? She'd deserved every word he'd said that day.

Megan's delectable lips parted. Her chin came up a notch, "Certainly I'll accept your offer, Liz," she said in a cool voice.

Jake's anger vanished, replaced by a sudden chill of fear. He couldn't really say why he was so opposed to seeing his mother purchase Hartford House. He only knew his gut told him something wasn't quite right with the situation. And until he knew what that something was, he was going to do his utmost to protect his mother.

"Please, Mom." He leaned forward and threw her a pleading glance, something he seldom did. "I have a strange feeling about this. You don't belong in that house. Something terrible could happen."

"Really, Jake." Liz sounded exasperated. "How can you have it both ways? First you say there is no such thing as ghosts and Megan is trying to deceive me, then you try to convince me that if I do buy it, I'll be in danger from the very ghost you don't believe in. Where is the logic in that?"

Jake's shoulders slumped forward. If only he had something concrete to base his suspicions on. After his father's interest in the occult had cost him his life, Jake had backed away from anything that smacked of the supernatural. He couldn't very well claim a psychic warning now.

Sighing, he picked up his beer and downed the rest of the glass in three deep gulps. At that moment, the waiter arrived with their meals. They fell silent as plates heaped with food were set in front of them and their water glasses were refilled.

Jake eyed his steak, his appetite gone.

"I'm waiting for my answer," his mother prodded, cutting a grilled strip of chicken in two.

"I know it doesn't make sense," he muttered at last. His gaze lifted to Megan. Did she even know about what had happened to his father? He'd started dating her a year after the death, and it'd all been too fresh, too terrible, to discuss. He could barely endure thinking about it, much less talking about it. He doubted he'd ever told her the full story. No, he couldn't blame Megan for treating ghosts in such an off-hand manner. But his mother should know how messing with the paranormal could backfire.

"You know how I feel about this kind of nonsense," he snapped. "It killed Dad, and it killed Uncle Ray. Why you insist on writing about

it is more than I can understand.”

His mother paled, as if his words had pierced her heart. “Maybe I write about it to try and understand it,” she whispered.

He glanced again at Megan, who was staring down at her food, obviously wishing she were anywhere else but sitting at the table with them. He wondered if it would help to offer her some kind of explanation. He could take her aside and tell her that the sale of Hartford House with its accompanying ghost had brought up an old family conflict, one she didn’t begin to understand. Once he would have spilled his heart out to her—but that was before the day she betrayed him.

He settled back in his chair, his steak untouched. “Sorry,” he muttered to his mother. “I’ll never understand it.”

She picked up her fork and aimed a bright smile at him. “Megan doesn’t want to hear about our family disagreements, dear. Besides, it’s a crime to squabble over such a lovely meal. Let’s drop the subject.”

Jake drummed his fingers on the table. He knew his mother all too well in this charming mode. She’d smile at one and all, and then proceed to do whatever she pleased. Well, he didn’t have to make it easy for her. “On one condition,” he growled. “Promise me you won’t sign any papers without talking to me first.”

Liz sighed, capitulating. “Fine. Although it seems evident that both of our minds are made up.”

“Our minds are.” He looked over at Megan and saw from the look on her face that she understood his intentions well enough. Hazel-green eyes flashed with anger under her thick lashes. He decided to talk to her as soon as he could get her alone.

He’d stop this sale somehow. He knew a few tricks when it came to handling his mother. Megan would have to sell her uncle’s house to someone else.

Chapter Five

“Goodbye, dear! I’ll have a formal offer to you as soon as I finish talking to my lawyer.”

“Great. I look forward to it.” Megan stood in the parking lot of the restaurant and waved goodbye. Liz backed out of her space and turned onto the street to begin her drive back to the city.

A shadow fell over Megan. She looked up to see that Jake had appeared at her side. His dark eyes held a challenge. “So, you plan to accept her offer?”

She took in a steadying breath, willing her nerve endings to stop tingling just because he was near. But her obstinate body ignored her mental commands. Her belly tightened with desire and her skin shivered as if anticipating his exquisite touch. Her mind had struggled to forget, but her flesh still remembered the sensation of his fingers exploring her body, his mouth on hers, his arms encircling her.

The bright autumn sunlight lit the amber highlights in his thick chestnut hair. As he bent toward her, she caught a whiff of the spicy masculine scent he was wearing. Jake had always smelled great. The smell brought back hot August nights, making out in his Mustang, snuggled in his strong arms, surrounded by his scent.

Warmth stirred to life between her thighs and her legs grew weak. What was she, some weak-kneed ninny to start swooning over a guy who’d jilted her ten years ago? She made a mental vow never again to have a glass of wine with lunch. Her judgment was obviously impaired. All she could think about was how kissable his mouth looked.

Even as the thought swirled through her brain, Jake pressed his lips together in a thin line to convey his anger, shattering her brief romantic mood.

He left you with never a backward glance, remember? Get a grip. She’d had enough of his bad temper to last a lifetime. No more alcohol, period, she decided.

His dark eyes watched her, waiting for the answer to his question. “I’ll accept her offer if it’s high enough,” she said, arching a challenging eyebrow at him. “A girl has to think about the future.”

A sneer of contempt curled Jake’s lips. “Well, I see you haven’t

changed much. Still lying whenever it's convenient for you."

Megan drew herself up to her full height, trying to ignore the fact that the top of her head barely reached the level of Jake's chin. "I have no idea what you mean by that, Jake Pendleton."

"I mean that you've obviously concocted this whole ghost story simply to get my mother interested in Hartford House. You must have known she's a famous author of paranormal romances."

Disgust turned Megan's stomach sour. She forced out a bitter laugh. "Aren't you the self-centered one? How on Earth was I to know your mother was even going to come and look at Hartford House? And if you knew anything about the history of St. George, you'd know that Hartford House has been known as a haunted house for longer than either of us has been alive. Why, the rumors about the ghost were the reason my Uncle Sebastian bought this particular house to begin with."

"Rumors are one thing. Claiming it's all true is another. Do you expect me to believe that you sat on a couch, with a roaring fire in the fireplace, and had a pleasant little chat with a ghost who's been dead for close to a century?"

Megan stifled a gasp of outrage and fought to hide the pain that sliced through her at his words. "Believe whatever you want, Jake. You always have." Ten years and he still had the power to hurt her. Once, she'd thought they were in love, but she'd been mistaken. It must have been nothing but teenage lust on his part. He'd proven that with his total lack of trust.

She tossed her head, turned her back on him and started across the asphalt toward her car.

Jake stepped in front of her, barring her path. She stopped short, planted her feet and lifted her head, determined to stare him down. His wide shoulders seemed to block out half the sky. His eyes held a cold look. "I don't like the idea that you're trying to cheat my mother with some scam."

Anger surged through her, clean and pure. "This is no scam." She glanced around the parking lot. But no other patrons were around. "And you'd better watch what you say and where you say it. This isn't high school anymore. There's such a thing as slander. If you go around accusing me of trying to scam your mother without any proof, you could be the one who ends up in trouble."

He laughed but his eyes stayed cold, almost black, like some ancient wine. "I'm scared."

Megan squared her shoulders. "I'm not some quiet little high school junior. I'm not going to slink away with a broken heart and keep my mouth shut while you sully my good name. So unless you have proof of something, just shut up and leave your mother and me to conduct our business."

He grabbed her arm and pulled her up against his chest, his tall frame towering over her. His words rained down on her in an angry

burst of passion, his hot breath scorching her ear. "I got proof the last time, and I'll get proof this time."

The heat of his hand burned through her clothes, branding her. She stared into the fathomless pools of his dark eyes. The intensity in his gaze woke a rush of memories. The parking lot whirled and the years spun away...



"Megan." Karl Reynolds stood in the doorway of the magazine room with a strange half smile on his face. It was the smile of someone who was up to something.

Megan froze in front of the shelves. She'd tried several times to make it clear to Karl that she wasn't interested in him. What was he? A stalker?

"Karl." She narrowed her eyes at him. The skin on the back of her neck crawled. "What are you doing in here? Only library workers are allowed back in the stacks."

She held up a copy of National Geographic in front of her like a shield. She'd been about to return it to its proper place on the shelves behind her. The St. George High School library didn't keep a lot of magazines on file, just those used often by teachers for special assignments. The magazine room was a small storage room just off the main library.

He gave her a lopsided grin. "I wanted to talk to you. Have you heard the news? There's a rumor going around school about us."

She faced the shelves and shoved the magazine back in place while she regained control of her expression. Then she turned to face him, her hands on her hips. So that was it. Kids were always starting stupid rumors. She was almost positive Karl had started this one himself. For some reason, he had a thing for her. She'd tried to discourage him and gotten nowhere, which was a problem, because Jake was strangely touchy lately. The last thing she needed right now was to be seen with Karl.

"Yeah. What about that rumor? My boyfriend's heard it and he's not too happy."

Karl cocked his head to one side. His eyes held a glint of satisfied amusement. "What? Mr. Bigwig varsity athlete actually believes you'd fool around on him with me?"

Megan frowned. The idea seemed ridiculous to her, too, although it might not be polite to put it in exactly those terms to Karl. Yet Jake had been genuinely upset last night. They'd planned to spend the evening studying together in her parents' den, but they'd barely gotten their books open when he'd blurted out some nonsense about hearing the rumor and wanting to know what was really going on. He claimed that this time it'd come from a reliable source.

When Megan demanded to know what reliable source he was re-

ferring to, he fell silent. For a horrible moment, they'd sat and glared at each other. She was innocent and she wasn't about to defend herself from some anonymous source. She hadn't been anywhere near Karl. Even so, it hurt to see the real pain in Jake's gaze when he demanded to know the truth. His last girlfriend, Lisa Donovan, had cheated on him with one of his teammates, and he'd been the last to know.

"Tell me the truth," he'd shouted at last. As if she'd lie to him.

She'd laughed out loud and demanded again to know who'd told him such nonsense. He'd refused to say, except to claim that someone had told him that they'd seen her and Karl together at a movie last Thursday night. That was the night she'd been at the library alone studying.

She'd challenged him to talk to the librarian if he didn't believe her. He'd looked unhappy and said he had and no one recalled seeing her. Mr. Matthew's English literature class had been in the library researching term papers. The librarians had been swamped.

"Well, you'll just have to take my word for it," she'd snapped and refused to say anything more on the subject. She wasn't going to grovel, especially when she hadn't done anything wrong. They'd spent a strained evening, politely helping each other with their homework. When he'd left, he hadn't even kissed her.

And now this. Karl standing in the doorway where he had no business being, looking at her with amused eyes.

Karl took a step forward. He was a junior, the same as her, with wavy blond hair, a big-toothed grin and a perpetual tan. He wasn't bad looking, certainly not a nerd, but he was no Jake Pendleton either. "Hey! I'm sorry if this crazy rumor has gotten your Jake upset."

Megan shrugged. "He'll get over it. Besides, I'm the one who's mad. Being accused like that, and then he wouldn't even tell me who told him the rumor."

Karl took another step into the room. His intrusion made the narrow space seem even smaller. Shelves lined every wall and formed two aisles. Megan backed up a step but there was nowhere to go, really, except past Karl to get out the door. An itchy feeling between her shoulder blades warned her something was wrong.

"Probably some bitch who's jealous of you," Karl said. "Since you've snagged the best-looking guy in the senior class, and all."

"Sure. You're probably right." Megan plastered a bright smile on her face and took a step along the wall toward the door. She'd heard the last bell of the day ring a while ago. The halls would be empty by now, but there should be students out in the library checking out books for the evening's homework before they headed home.

It's not like it's midnight and we're all alone in the building. There's no reason to get upset. But the anticipatory gleam in Karl's eye made her heart race.

She saw him glance down at his watch. A small smile slid across his mouth, quickly vanishing. "Gosh, Megan," he said, raising his voice slightly, "this room really is a great place to meet. Private. I like it. Glad you thought of it."

"What?" She stared up at him, puzzled. Outside, in the hallway, someone coughed.

Karl's eyes glittered. His expression changed to one of triumph. It was a hateful look and she wanted to slap it off his face, but instead she froze in disbelief as he answered her. "It's so cool to be alone with you again. Jake will never track us down here. And I can collect that kiss you promised me last Thursday at the movies."

"A kiss. At the movies." She'd meant her words to convey her outrage but the look in his eyes scared her, and her voice squeaked out, sounding breathless and excited.

"One kiss. For starters." Without warning he gathered her into his arms. She tried to get her hands up to push him away from her, but he was too fast. He held her arms pinned to her side and pressed his lips against hers. She smelled onions and taco sauce on his breath and nearly gagged. Then his mouth pressed against hers, hot and wet. She shuddered in disgust.

"Megan!" Jake's voice shouted her name in anger.

Karl broke away and whirled to face Jake, who was standing at the entrance to the room, a look of disbelief painted on his features. Allison Martin stood at his side with a smirk on her face "Gosh, Jake," she said in a cloying voice as she placed a possessive hand on his arm, "I guess it is true. I'm so sorry."

Karl looped an arm around Megan's shoulders as if staking out his territory. "Hey, man! Sorry. Guess you caught us this time, fair and square."

Too stunned to resist, Megan dragged one hand across her mouth to wipe away the kiss and gaped at Jake in disbelief. For a moment she even forgot about Karl and what he'd just done. "You! Are you spying on me?"

Jake's jaw muscles worked as he struggled to control his rage. "I'm catching you in a lie."

"I didn't ask him to come. He kissed me without warning!" She blurted out the words, appalled.

"I could see that you liked it. You were trembling, for god's sake!" He looked as if he were about to be sick. "Allison told me I'd find you two here. I didn't believe her. I was going to show her how wrong she was. But it's true. It's all true."

"Jake! You've got to believe me."



"Jake. You've got to believe me."

Jake winced at Megan's words and the memories they brought.

The decade that had passed since that afternoon in the school library might as well have never happened. Once again Megan was standing in front of him, pleading desperately for his trust.

"The ghost is real," she said, eyes flashing. "If your mother wants a haunted house, that's exactly what she's going to get."

He shook his head and released her arm. Disappointment made his voice rough. "I don't know why I even bother to try and talk to you. Funny, I always thought you liked my mother."

"I do," Megan protested. "She's a wonderful woman."

He gazed at her face, that sweet lovable face that haunted his dreams. She looked so young. Hell, she probably still got carded in bars. Her wide-eyed innocent stare demanded that he trust her. But how could he, after what had happened to end their relationship?

He decided to be brutally honest. "I can understand why you might want to hurt me. I lost my temper that day in the library. Our breakup wasn't pretty. But Mom's never done a thing to you."

"Exactly. So why would I lie?" Megan folded her arms across her chest and glared at him. "I'm not trying to cheat your mother into buying a house with a fake ghost. The ghost is real." She tried to move around him to get to her car but he sidestepped and blocked her way again.

He folded his arms across his chest. She sounded so sincere. But she'd sounded sincere that day in the library, too. He should know. He'd replayed every word she'd said in his mind thousands of times, wondering if he'd been right, afraid that he'd been wrong. And too damned young and foolish and proud to speak to her again. Well, what was done was done.

Controlling his frustration, he tried another tack. "So if the ghost is real, why aren't you worried it might hurt her? You seemed concerned about that the other day."

Megan laughed. "I hardly expect you to believe me on this one, but when she—the ghost that is—was in the room, I could sense her essence. She's a good, gentle woman who's refused to forgive herself for a mistake she made decades ago. She'd never hurt anyone."

Jake rolled his eyes skyward. "Now I've heard it all. You know what I think of this psychic flim-flam."

"How would I?" She shot an angry look at him. "You never would tell me what happened with your dad."

His jaw tightened. And a good thing, too. He was glad he'd never revealed his shame and hurt to her, considering how she'd betrayed him. He'd wanted to share it, had been screwing up his courage to tell her, in fact, when he'd caught her in the magazine room with Karl. He'd thought she'd understand. After all, she'd told him plenty of stories about the kooky side of her family, obviously hoping he would open up and discuss some of the family secrets he kept so close to his chest.

"I only tell that story to people I trust," he growled.

Hurt blossomed in her eyes. She took a deep breath. "I used to think the paranormal was flim-flam too. But after what I saw the other night, I've become a believer."

He eyed her with open skepticism. "Sorry. Maybe your exorcist tricked you. Or your greed for the pile of money you're going to make off that house has gotten the best of you and blinded your good judgment."

Megan nibbled for a moment on her lip. It was an old nervous habit. Watching her, his heart constricted with a rush of tender memories. He yearned to taste those lips again.

"I certainly don't owe you any explanations," she snapped, breaking the mood. "You didn't believe me ten years ago when it mattered, and you don't believe me today. So what? I've moved on, and found a wonderful man who loves me and trusts me."

"Congratulations."

She ignored him, and continued her angry outburst. "Furthermore, for your information, I'm not going to make anything off of that house. Every cent of profit will go to pay off my mother's doctor bills and her funeral costs. That's why Uncle Sebastian left it to me. He knew I'd promised Mom I'd pay her bills before she died."

"Whoa!" Jake held up his hands. Her anger seemed genuine. Maybe she was telling the truth this time. "I don't think you have any legal obligation to do that. Your mother was the one who owed the money."

"Maybe not, but it was killing my mom to know she owed money that would never be paid. That had never happened in our family. I promised her I'd see that the debts were settled honorably, and I'm going to keep my promise."

Megan's voice shook with passion as she finished her declaration. Her eyes shone bright with determination.

Jake found himself fighting the urge to sweep her up in his arms. She looked so brave and so small at the same time. His heart swelled with a desire to protect her. "She was sick and maybe not thinking straight. I'm sure she'd want you to take the profit and invest it in your future."

Megan glared at him. "I'm making my own future. And I'll be the judge of what my mother would really want me to do."

Jake bit off an angry response. She had a perfect right to reject his help. "Sure. Sorry." He stuck his hands in the pockets of his jacket and hunched his shoulders against a gust of wind. Autumn leaves rattled across the asphalt. "Listen, there's something I need to say."

"Go ahead." Megan's chin went up another notch as she braced herself, obviously expecting a trade. What he that overbearing?

"Well—" He searched for the right words to express the doubt that had always lingered in his heart. "I thought you lied to me that

day in the library, and I've never had a reason to change my mind, not really. But—"

She laughed and tossed her head, but he saw the shadow of pain in her face. "Forget it! High school stuff."

"I can't forget it." He licked his lips. "I've never been able to forget the look on your face that day. Or the way Allison chased me afterward. Maybe it was just a coincidence. I don't know."

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" Megan pointed a finger at him. "Either you believe in somebody and trust them or you don't. It's as simple as that. You didn't trust me then and you don't now. This conversation is going nowhere fast. If you'd step aside, I'd like to get home and enjoy the rest of the afternoon."

"I-I might have been wrong." He blurted out the confession, his gaze never leaving her face.

Her cheeks turned pink. Was she ashamed or angry? Angry, he thought. She curled her hands into fists and half lifted them, as if she wanted to pound on his chest. He almost wished she would.

"Might have been?" Her voice shook with outrage. "You idiot! Even your apologies are an insult."

"That wasn't an apology," he hurried to say.

"You can say that again. For your information, Karl and Allison set us up. Karl wanted me and Allison wanted you. They thought it was funny. But I'd thought—" To her dismay, her voice broke. "I thought we had something real."

Her words knifed through him, shocking him into action. "We did. That much I do know." He reached out and cupped her face with gentle hands, his gaze intense. Her skin felt like silk beneath his fingertips. "I loved you, Megan. That's why it hurt so much. I've never stopped thinking about that moment or the expression on your face."

"Oh, Jake!" She breathed out his name like a prayer. Tears filled her eyes and caught on her thick lashes.

His heart melting, he bent over her and pressed a kiss against her warm, soft lips. She tasted of wine and honey, mixed in a heady brew.

She gave a little gasp and leaned against him, resting her head on his chest. The weight of her against him felt so good, so right. He lifted a hand and dared to stroke her thick cascade of auburn hair. His lips burned where he'd touched hers. Memories of a sweet, long-lost passion blazed up like a fire that had never died.

"No, Jake." She pulled away from him, blinking back tears. "It's too late. I've got someone else in my life."

"Someone serious?"

She straightened her shoulders. "I'll probably marry him."

Hope flashed through him at her words. "Probably? He hasn't asked you yet?"

She tried to smile. "He's asked me, more than once. I'm the one

who keeps saying no. I want to get my mom's debts paid off first."

Jake stiffened. So she had yet another good reason for wanting to unload that house. "Admirable," he said, his heart growing heavy with a new weight of suspicion. "I can see why you want to sell that house as quickly as possible."

Megan's mouth dropped open. She snapped it shut again. "Believe what you want to believe. You don't believe in ghosts. I do."

"Hauntings have been faked before. It's not that hard to do."

"If you say so. I probably researched it on the Internet, on *www.howtostageahaunting.com*. And then I went to Macy's to get a deal on sheets."

"Hey!" He held up both hands. "I'm only concerned about my mother."

"Then go spill your vile accusations at her."

He shrugged, his spirits sinking. Somehow, they were back to arguing. "She won't listen. She's convinced she saw something in that house. I'd love to get back inside and take a really good look around."

"Forget it!" Megan dodged past him and headed straight for her car. She hit the button on her key chain and the locks clicked open. Ignoring him, she jumped inside and stuck the key in the ignition.

He dodged to one side as she backed recklessly out of the parking slot. She gunned the engine and screeched the tires as she pulled out into the street without a backward glance.



Megan's hands shook with anger as she unlocked her apartment door and charged inside. Liz's phone number was jotted on a pad beside the phone. She punched hard at the keys.

"Hello?" Liz's cultured tones came down the line.

"Mrs. Pendleton, this is Megan. I've decided not to sell the house to you." The words popped out before Megan even realized what she'd intended to say. Immediately, a sense of peace washed over her. Yes, this was the right decision. She needed to get Jake and his mother out of her life.

"What?" Liz sounded shocked. "I thought we'd had an agreement."

"I'm sorry. It's not going to work out."

"Jake said something to you after I left, didn't he? That boy! I swear, if he weren't too old to spank, I'd have at him."

Despite her rage, Megan's lips twisted in a smile at the thought of Jake bent over Liz's knee. She'd love to see that! "He deserves something much worse than a spanking in my opinion."

"I was right. He did say something. Wait until I talk to him. I never should have dragged him along that day. I just ... well, I knew that he'd never quite forgotten you."

Megan blinked. Had Liz tried to revive something that had been dead for years? Fat chance of that. No, her instincts were right. She

didn't need this upset in her life, not after all she'd been through. She'd find someone else to buy the house, pay off her mom's debts, marry David and start a new life.

"I've forgotten him, though," she declared, ignoring the way her lips burned from his kiss. "I'm sorry, but I don't need this hassle. Find another house, Mrs. Pendleton."

"But I want Hartford House. Why, I've already got my next book half plotted. It's going to be set there and I'm going to call it *The Ghost of Love*. It's sure to be a best seller."

"No. I'm not selling to you. I'm sorry, Liz, I can't. And that's final." With a click, Megan hung up the phone.

Chapter Six

Ding dong!

The doorbell startled Megan out of her reverie. She couldn't seem to stop thinking about Jake and his kiss. She should have slapped him. Instead, she kept thinking about the warmth of his lips, and the way every inch of her skin became supersensitive at his touch.

She glanced at the droning TV, unable to recall what program she'd been watching, then switched it off with the remote and got to her feet. She wasn't expecting visitors. It was probably the usual high school kid selling candy for some fundraiser.

Ignoring the peephole, she swung the door open. Jake stood there, hands shoved deep in his pockets and a disgruntled look on his face.

"You!" She started to slam the door shut but he put out a hand and grabbed the edge.

"Wait a minute. Just give me a chance to apologize."

"Apologize?" Despite her earlier anger, her heart actually fluttered. She'd waited ten years for an apology. Night after night, she'd lain in bed and imagined him pleading for her forgiveness for ever doubting her. In her fantasies she'd make him suffer, remaining cold and aloof while he groveled at her feet, before finally softening and allowing him to kiss her.

But that was fantasy. This was reality, and she'd had more than enough of Jake's attitude for one day. "I don't want your apology. Go away."

He kept his hand on the door frame and smiled his slow, sexy smile, the one that always made her heart melt and her toes curl. Two dimples appeared, making him look years younger. Her heart skipped a beat, just as it had all those years ago in high school whenever he'd looked her way. "Please, listen to me. I was way out of line."

"You got that right, buster." She planted both hands on her hips as a sudden suspicion occurred to her. "I suppose your mother ordered you to try and weasel your way back into my good graces."

"My mother?" He looked puzzled. "Why would she care?"

"She didn't call you after I called her?"

"I don't have a clue what you're talking about. Listen, I know I

wasn't fair years ago. I never gave you a chance to explain. Okay, I had trust issues at the time."

"At the time!" Megan rolled her eyes heavenward. "I think you still do."

"Hey, you have to admit most people would doubt this ghost story."

"Maybe. But they'd be polite enough not to call me a liar to my face."

He combed his fingers through his hair. The silky locks tumbled around his face in a charming tangle. Her fingers itched to touch them. She gripped the doorknob so hard she was afraid it might come off in her hand.

He leveled a penetrating look at her. "Okay, I stepped over the line. Truth is, I've never been able to get you out of my head. Call it guilt if you'd like. I'd like to make it right between us."

Megan let go of the doorknob but didn't back away from her stance blocking the doorway. She'd be damned if she was going to invite him in for coffee. "How do you propose to do that?"

He took his hand off the door and smiled. "Now, hear me out before you say no. I think the solution is fairly simple. You and I will go to Hartford House together and search the place for anything that could have been used to fake this haunting."

"What!" She grabbed the doorknob again. "Is this your idea of an apology?"

He spoke quickly. "If we don't find anything, I'll get down on my knees and beg your forgiveness, I swear. For what I've said about the ghost and for making a mistake and failing you when you needed me most."

About to slam the door shut, Megan froze. Jake Pendleton on his knees was a sight she'd dearly like to see. "You'd better not make any promises you can't keep," she warned. "I'm going to hold you to that and enjoy watching you grovel for forgiveness."

His smile faded. He looked deadly serious. "Megan, if I've been wrong all these years, I owe you a heartfelt apology and more."

She rubbed her forehead, fighting off a headache. Getting involved with Jake again in any way, shape or form was a stupid move. She didn't need to prove anything to him. She opened her mouth to tell him so.

"Stay right there," she heard herself say. "I'll get my coat."



Megan unlocked the front door of Hartford House, stepped into the foyer, and switched on the light. It was only late afternoon but already the sunlight was fading and long shadows lay across the tiles in the foyer.

"Where do you want to start?" she asked.

"The attic. That seems the logical place to hide something," Jake

slid a sideways glance at her. "And believe it or not, it's been an eye opener meeting you again after all these years. I hope I'm wrong."

"The attic. I'll take you there." She led the way up the stairs, ignoring his comment. He hadn't apologized yet. Besides, what if he did? Would it matter? She was practically engaged to David, a man she knew was safe and would never hurt her. That was the problem. He was too safe. David didn't make her blood simmer with barely controllable passion every time he got close to her. She didn't want to think about what the future might hold if Jake ever changed his stubborn mind and admitted his past mistake.

The steps to the third floor attic were at the end of the long upstairs hallway. She unlocked the attic door and switched on the light above the stairwell. Plain wood steps angled steeply upward.

"What's up there?" Jake asked.

"To tell you the truth, it's been a long time since I've been on the third floor. I understand it was a ballroom and servants quarters years and years ago when the Hartfords owned the place, but I think Uncle Sebastian just used it for storage." She started to climb the steps, the old wood creaking beneath her feet.

"You've never been up here?"

"I took a quick glance around right after Uncle Sebastian died, but I've had my hands full getting the lower two floors ready for showing."

"It must have been tough dealing with your family losses this past year and working, too."

"I have an understanding boss." She attempted a friendly smile over her shoulder. "Are you lucky enough to be your own boss?"

He laughed. "I don't know how lucky it is some months. The boss gets to pay everyone else first. But, yeah, I own the business."

"What happened to your career in law?"

"Well, my mom hadn't written any best sellers yet when I graduated from high school. I got in a job in landscaping to earn some money for college, and I discovered I liked it. I enjoyed creating things that brought beauty into the world."

"Really?" She lifted her eyebrows in surprise. Jake Pendleton, sensitive soul. Who would have thought it?

The stairs went straight up to a landing surrounded by a railed stairwell. Beyond was another long hallway marked at intervals by doorways.

"The ballroom is to the right," Megan said. "It's pretty big, as you can imagine. There's even a balcony off it, although I'm not sure how safe it is anymore. The right side of this floor was used by the family and all the rooms on the left side belonged to the servants."

Jake moved over to the first door on the right and stuck his head inside. The setting sun sent long golden rays of autumn light through dusty attic windows, revealing what had once been a large open space.

But now piles of cardboard boxes filled the room, along with old, discarded furniture. The air held a musty smell.

"Good grief!" He edged his way between stacks of boxes and ran a finger down the top of a battered steamer trunk that stood by itself in a corner. A line appeared in the dust. "I wouldn't be surprised if some of this stuff didn't date back to the Hartfords."

"Could be. Caroline's brother Ronald owned this place until he died in 1980. He never married and he was the last of the family. I wouldn't be surprised if Uncle Sebastian bought it lock, stock and barrel."

"And ghost, don't forget." Jake's grin flashed in his tanned face, reminding her of old times, happy times. His gaze fell on something leaning against a far wall and his eyes lit up. "Look at that! An antique headboard. The carving is remarkable."

"I didn't know you were interested in antiques."

"Just a hobby." Jake strode over to the headboard and laid a hand on the fine detail work carved into the wood.

Megan stayed where she was, surveying the piles of boxes, the untidy heaps of old clothing, the dressers and overstuffed chairs and couches scattered about. Why, it might take days to search this attic. And even then, would Jake truly be satisfied that he hadn't missed something?

Outside, the sun had sunk to a dim red ball on the horizon. Shadows crawled across the dusty wood floor. A cold breeze caressed her cheek and she shivered. Her temples started to throb with unwelcome pressure. A moment later, her head snapped up, her senses suddenly preternaturally alert. A breeze? In the attic? She glanced at the windows that lined one wall, but they were all shut—probably warped and stuck. Who knew how many years it'd been since they'd been opened. So where had the breeze come from?

"Look at this!" Jake had left the headboard behind and moved on to a floor-length mirror with gold edging. "Some of this stuff is pretty valuable, Megan."

"I'll have to get an appraiser up here then."

Bless Uncle Sebastian's heart. Between the house and the furniture and what this attic might yield, she should be able to pay her mother's debts and have a small inheritance leftover. Not that David had ever expected her to bring money to their relationship. But she knew his plans included a career as a successful lawyer and then an entry into politics. And running for office was an expensive proposition. If she could bring some money to the table to help finance their future, so much the better.

A sparkle in the air startled her out of her thoughts. Her eyes widened. In the space between her and Jake, a shimmering light swirled into the shape of a human form. Jake hadn't noticed yet. His attention was fixed on the mirror.

"Caroline! Go away!" she whispered under her breath. Of all the moments for Caroline to appear, Jake was sure to accuse her of faking this.

I'm not Caroline, my dear. A familiar voice spoke in her mind. She gave a small cry and clapped her hand to her mouth as Uncle Sebastian materialized. He looked much as he always had—a short man with a gray fringe around a balding head, a round, pleasant face, and pale blue eyes. The only difference—although she had to admit it was a big difference—was that his form stayed transparent. She could see Jake through him.

"Dear heaven!" Megan pressed her hands to her cheeks. Part of her wanted to run up to Uncle Sebastian and give him a big hug. The other part recoiled in fear. He was dead. He didn't belong here. The worlds of the living and dead were not meant to mingle like this.

And especially not when Jake might see it and accuse her of faking the whole thing.

"Go away," Megan hissed in desperation. At that movement, Jake turned around.

"What—" Jake froze in midturn, his eyes widening as he took in the ghostly figure.

"It's my Uncle Sebastian," Megan's heart sank.

"Hello, Jake," Uncle Sebastian said, looking calm and business-like. He was dressed for the office in what he called his banker's clothes, and he wore the amiable expression with which he usually greeted customers. "You probably don't remember, but we met years ago when you were dating Megan."

"I've got to give you credit for guts," Jake said to Megan. "Or did you think I'd be so scared I'd run screaming down the steps?" His eyes flashed as he scanned the room, searching for the source of the ghostly apparition.

"What on Earth are you doing here?" Megan demanded, turning to face Uncle Sebastian. "I thought you were dead and gone."

Uncle Sebastian laughed. He had a hearty laugh. "That's a fine welcome for your beloved uncle, young lady."

"Sorry." Megan fought an urge to giggle uncontrollably. "I guess I'm not used to talking to ghosts yet. Are you joining Caroline in haunting the house?"

"Not likely." Uncle Sebastian looked displeased. "She never deigned to appear to me while I was alive and now that I'm dead, she keeps right on avoiding me. I've searched all over the astral for her without any luck."

"That's too bad." Megan watched as Jake prowled around the room, shoving boxes aside in his search for the projector. A smile twitched at the corners of her lips. Would he actually admit he was wrong? The dusty attic floor was the perfect place to force him to kneel.

"My guardians want me to ascend to the next level," Uncle Sebastian added.

"Guardians?" She turned her attention back to her uncle.

"Yes, like guardian angels, sort of."

"You should do what they say, then." Megan shook off a sense of unreality. This was surreal. She was talking to her dead uncle while Jake stalked around the room, searching for some clue that would show how she was tricking him.

"So, you're a ghost." Abruptly, Jake abandoned his search and walked toward the spot where Uncle Sebastian stood. The sun had dipped below the horizon and the attic had turned dark. There was only the dim light from a single dusty bulb to light the vast interior. Uncle Sebastian stood unmoving as Jake approached. His form emitted a gentle golden glow.

"I prefer the term departed spirit," Uncle Sebastian said with a sniff.

"You're pretty good at materializing for someone who just died."

"I've been interested in the occult sciences for years. It's why I bought this house in the first place. That and my interest in the ghost of Caroline Hartford, although a lot of good that did me, since she refused to ever appear to me."

"Strange, as she seems willing enough to appear to everyone else." Jake edged closer to Uncle Sebastian's glittering outline, suspicion plain on his face.

Uncle Sebastian laced his fingers together and rested his hands on his ample stomach, as Megan had so often seen him do in life. "Yes, it was always a major disappointment, but I think I've finally figured out the reason why she avoided me."

"Really?" Megan stared at her uncle, trying to grasp the reality that he was standing in front of her, talking.

"I was never once involved in a romance you see, not in all the years I lived in Hartford House. There was no one I cared for, even remotely. And Caroline wanted to appear to someone who was searching for their soul mate. She wanted to bring separated lovers back together."

"Maybe you should have tried harder to find someone." As he spoke, Jake reached out a hand and shoved it through the space where Uncle Sebastian stood.

"Don't!" Megan cried out, too late. She had no idea what she expected to happen, but in fact, Jake's hand passed right through Uncle Sebastian as if through thin air.

Uncle Sebastian smiled and turned toward Jake, who withdrew his hand and looked down at his fingers, his expression incredulous.

"It's called a cold spot," Uncle Sebastian said.

Jake rubbed his hands together and stared at Megan in amazement. "The air where he's standing—it has to be at least twenty de-

grees colder.”

“The phenomenon is well documented.” Uncle Sebastian’s kind blue eyes twinkled as he surveyed Jake’s nonplussed face. “You could ask your mother if you don’t believe me. I’m sure she’s done a lot of research on ghosts for her various books.”

“Leave my mother out of this!” Jake snapped. He took a step backward and waved his hands in front of Uncle Sebastian, seeking the source of the projection.

Against her will, Megan winced, half expecting Uncle Sebastian to blink out when Jake found the beam of light projecting him. But nothing happened despite Jake’s frantically waving hands.

“Don’t order me about, young man. Show the dead some respect. And the living, too. I think you owe Megan an apology—a long overdue apology, I might add. You two reached an agreement before you came here, remember?”

“How—how does he know about our agreement? You haven’t been out of my sight since we made it.” Jake’s bewildered eyes searched Megan’s. She suspected she looked equally stunned because after a moment he pushed his hair back from his face and exhaled a long sigh. “My God, maybe I’ve been wrong.”

“No maybes about it,” Uncle Sebastian winked in Megan’s direction. “As for your mother, I’d be very pleased to have her buy this house. But I can’t promise her a ghost to go with it. Now that I am on the Other Side, I intend to do everything I can to help Caroline pass over. She’s lingered on the Earth plane for far too long.”

“Great!” Megan grabbed hold of that one thought in the midst of her confusion. She’d be rid of both ghosts if Uncle Sebastian succeeded. “I don’t want to see her suffering any more either.”

“I’ll need your help,” Uncle Sebastian pointed toward the far corner at the old trunk Jake had examined earlier. “I should have come up here and searched for answers years ago. But you see, I’d fallen in love with Caroline and her legend, and I really didn’t want to let her go. I have to make up for that mistake.”

“Don’t worry, uncle. I’ll help. And so will Adelaide and a psychic friend of hers, Randolph Riverton.”

“I must go. It’s incredibly draining to try and talk to you. I’ve stayed too long.” Already Uncle Sebastian’s ghostly image had begun to fade. He pointed to the trunk once more. “There’s something in there my guardians thought you should see. They suggested it would help us all. Please look, Megan.”

A cold breeze lifted her hair, sending shivers down her spine, and then he was gone.

The room seemed emptier. A profound silence descended. Megan stood stock-still, staring at Jake who stared back at her, his mouth half open.

With a gulp, he shut it and struggled to compose himself. As in-

credible as it seemed, Uncle Sebastian had been an actual, real-life ghost. He was sure of it. He held out both hands, relieved to see they weren't shaking, and faced Megan. Her eyes looked huge in the dim light and he saw she was blinking back tears. Undoubtedly, she'd been close to her uncle.

"Megan." He spoke her name softly to catch her attention. When she looked up, he sank to his knees. Somehow it wasn't as hard to do as he'd imagined. The prospect of hearing her say she forgave him gave him strength. He licked his lips and spoke again. "I was wrong."

She closed her eyes and red splotches appeared on her cheeks. For a split second he thought she was angry with him still, and then he saw the radiant smile spread across her face. If only he'd said those words ten years ago. If only he'd believed her then. They'd lost so much time together. Yet his simple words had released a logjam of emotion inside him, too. Incredible waves of joy flooded through his body and his heart swelled with hope for the future they could have together.

"Yes, you were," she whispered, but there was no malice in her words.

"I felt the cold. I felt the occult vibration, whatever that is." Jake gave a nervous laugh. "Some things can't be faked. I misjudged you this time, and I have to be open to the possibility I misjudged you that day in the magazine room."

She coughed and lifted an eyebrow. "The possibility?"

He swallowed, and stayed down on his knees. He didn't want to anger her again, but some part of him needed to hear the denial from her lips. "I never did you the courtesy of asking you what had happened. If you tell me now it was some sort of trick concocted by Karl and Allison, I'll believe you."

Her eyes flashed. "Of course it was a trick! I was in—I mean, I cared about you, so much. I'd have never done anything to hurt you." She glanced down at the floor and twisted her hands together.

His heart thudded, overflowing with joy. He was almost certain she'd been about to say that she'd loved him. That she had never stopped loving him. The possibility stunned him.

"I see." He gazed up at her with tears in his eyes. "Megan Crain, I'm sorry. I made a terrible mistake. All I can do is beg you to forgive me."

"Oh, Jake." She clenched her hands into fists. "You can't know how I've dreamed about this moment, how many fantasies I've had about it. You see, I loved you back then, and after you hurt me, I wanted my revenge. I imagined over and over again how I'd tell you to take your plea for forgiveness and stuff it. I'd turn my back on you the way you'd turned yours on me so long ago."

He bowed his head and waited for her next words. Whatever she said, he deserved it. His body stiffened with pain as he imagined her

rushing home, calling her boyfriend, laughing with him about this moment.

Megan's voice broke into his thoughts. "Please get up. I can't hurt you, not ever. I understand. We were both young and foolish. I forgive you."

Jake jumped to his feet in one smooth motion. With two quick steps, he stood in front of her. He grabbed her elbows and pulled her close. His arms went round her, savoring her softness and warmth. The sweet scent of her perfume made his head spin with delight. His embrace tightened as her body relaxed against his. She laid her head on his shoulder with a soft sigh and her eyes fluttered closed.

How many times had he held her like this? It must be a dream, it had to be a dream, but it felt like coming home after a long, lonely journey. He stroked her satiny soft hair with tender fingers and murmured her name like a prayer.

His lips touched hers, a gentle caress at first, but as she leaned forward and responded, his kiss deepened, blossoming with the old hunger that had always burned between them. She moaned as his tongue sought entrance, sliding between her lips and exploring the depths of her mouth. He felt his own body harden in response as his hands moved over her slim waist and the sensual curve of her hips. She buried her hands in his hair and pressed closer to him, her hips doing a slow grind. Desire roared through his bloodstream, spreading fire to every inch of his body with the distant thunder of his heartbeat.

The attic tilted and swirled. The air was thick with ghosts.

"Please, Jake!" Megan broke away and took a step back, a frightened look on her face. "This is all happening so fast."

"We had something good once, Megan." He struggled to breathe. His arms ached with the need to hold her.

"I know." She turned away and he saw that she was shaking. "But a long time has passed since then. Things have changed. I have a boyfriend. His name is David. He wants me to marry him."

"Yes." Jake stepped to her side, his voice urgent. "But do you want to marry him? That's the important question."

Her eyes closed again, as if she wanted to shut out his urgent voice, but not before he saw a tear slide down her cheek. Her lips trembled, trying to shape an answer, but she couldn't speak. Every second she hesitated gave him hope. She might have a boyfriend but her heart was far from committed. He had a chance.

She clasped her hands together, and he couldn't help but eye the bare finger where David's engagement ring might have rested. Her eyes opened again and searched his face. "What are you asking me, Jake?"

His hand caressed her shoulder, his light touch making a gentle claim. "When I kissed you just now, Megan, all the old feelings came flooding back. It's like the ten years since our breakup never hap-

pened. I know we've probably both changed. I've changed, for the better, I hope. But the love is still there. I want a chance. I want to date you again."

More tears welled up in her eyes. Her voice shook with emotion. "I've felt things too, things that have surprised and shocked me. Things I can't deny." She nibbled on her lip, and his heart skipped a beat. "I—I'd have to talk to David before I started dating you. I owe him that much."

"Yes. I'd want you to." He wanted nothing of the sort. He wanted her never to see David again. But reluctantly, he admitted to himself that her request was fair.

She shot him a challenging look. "I don't sneak around. If I'm going to call it quits with David, I owe it to him tell him so to his face. I would have talked to you in the same way if—if I had ever really wanted to break up."

He winced as old regrets knifed through him. "Point taken." He cupped her face with tender hands and pressed a soft kiss on her trembling lips. "I'll wait. You're worth waiting for." His fingers stroked her cheek as he marveled at the satiny softness of her skin.

"So!" She trembled under his touch. Sexual tension pulsed between them like a palatable force. A blush burned over her cheek bones as her gaze traveled up and down the length of his body.

Jake took her in his arms again, inhaling her perfume. His lips ached for another kiss. Her tongue darted over her lips, moistening them, and he knew she felt the same yearning. Hot anticipation ran through him like an electric storm. When they'd dated years ago, they'd both been young and innocent, just awakening to sensuality with stolen kisses in a Mustang. Now he was a man and she was a woman. His body cried out to possess hers.

"The trunk." Megan's words shattered his lustful thoughts. "Uncle Sebastian asked me to look." She pulled free of his embrace and hurried to the shadowed corner where it sat. Bending over, she pulled open the lid.

With a grunt of frustration, he joined her. Papers, scrapbooks, old photo albums all lay piled inside. Megan sat on the floor beside the truck and began to sort through them. Jake crouched down on the other side, his eyes curious as he examined faded pictures.

"Here!" Megan smiled with triumph as she pulled an old book from the bottom of the trunk and flipped open the first page. Words in faded ink were scrawled across the brittle paper, barely visible in the dim light.

"The private diary of Caroline Pendleton," she read. "Keep out."

Chapter Seven

"These lovely flowers are for a lovely lady." With a flourish, David pulled the bouquet from behind his back and presented it to Megan. The fragrance of roses filled the narrow hallway of her apartment building.

"You shouldn't have." Unable to look into David's beaming eyes, Megan took the bouquet and buried her face in the soft petals. Why had he chosen tonight of all nights to make a grand romantic gesture? It wasn't a special occasion. For a moment she questioned her sanity. Was she crazy to even think about breaking up with him so she could date Jake again?

Megan lifted her head and a ghostly wind brushed her lips, bringing with it the memory of Jake's kiss. His mouth had set hers aflame as David's never had.

She forced herself to meet David's gaze. "A dozen perfect red roses. They're gorgeous."

"I hope you have a vase."

"I'll find something." With a sinking heart, Megan stepped back from the doorway and let David inside. He looked so pleased with life, and she was about to crush him. Guilt stabbed at her. But he deserved someone who really loved him. She was doing them both a favor by ending their relationship.

Clutching the roses close, she started toward the kitchen.

"What are you doing?" David asked.

"I'm going to look for a vase."

A hurt expression appeared on his handsome face. He rubbed his cheek and frowned at her. "I was hoping for a thank-you kiss at least."

"How thoughtless of me!" She set the roses down on the hall table and turned to face him as he bent toward her. But as his lips came nearer, she suddenly leaned forward, landed a glancing peck on his mouth, and turned, scooping up the bouquet again and holding it between them like a shield. "I really want to get these in water," she muttered, fleeing toward the kitchen.

As she took down a crystal vase from the top shelf, she pondered

her actions. She'd always considered her physical relationship with David satisfactory. She'd told him when they'd started dating that she intended to save herself for marriage. To her relief, he'd readily agreed that he wanted that kind of committed relationship, too. So naturally, they'd had to avoid becoming too passionate whenever they kissed or caressed each other. At least, that's what she'd told herself for the past two years whenever she'd wondered about the lack of sexual heat in their relationship. After all, you couldn't have fireworks with every man.

Other things were more important. At least, that's what she'd thought until Jake had come back into her life. David was good natured, honest, hardworking and reliable. All those things were vastly more crucial to a happy relationship than hot sex. Ever since Jake had first awoken her sensuality years ago and then turned on her, she'd looked for other qualities in her men, more lasting qualities.

But now her lips ached with longing for Jake's kiss again. She didn't want the taste of any other man in her mouth. Not tonight. Not ever.

"How'd your lunch with Liz Pendleton go?" David asked, coming into the kitchen. His blue eyes watched her as she filled the vase with water. He wore designer jeans and a white wool cable-knit sweater. His blonde hair gleamed where it curled against the neckline.

"She wants the house. I have a feeling she's going to offer full price." Megan began arranging the flowers with deft fingers.

"That's great. Even though it's haunted?"

"It doesn't matter. She considers the ghost an asset."

David snorted. "That not a very wise financial move on her part."

"Maybe not, but it's good news for me. I can pay off my mom's debts. Clear the way for the future." She almost said "our future" but bit back the words in time.

David frowned. "Then it's all set?"

"Not quite. There are some issues I have to settle before I feel right about selling the place. The ghost."

"Right. The dear departed Caroline." David rolled his eyes. Megan had told him about her séance with Adelaide and Randolph. He'd laughed at that, obviously not believing any of it. She straightened her shoulders and carried the vase back into the living room. "I got to know Liz a little better over lunch. She's intrigued by the idea of owning a haunted house, but her son Jake came to lunch, too, and he's a different story. He accused me of faking the haunting. He said he was going to prove it."

David frowned. "Was he making these accusations in public? If so, he needs to watch that big mouth of his. Tell him your boyfriend's a lawyer and likely to take him to court for slander."

"Actually, I agreed to let him search the house for any evidence of fakery."

"You what?" David stared at her, his mouth dropping open in shock.

"He promised if he didn't find anything, he would apologize and let it go." She set the vase down on the coffee table and stood back to admire the effect.

"I hope you weren't serious," David sputtered. "It's not a good idea. Why, I wouldn't put it past him to plant evidence."

"It's already done," she admitted. "We searched the attic and ... well ... Uncle Sebastian appeared to both of us."

"What!"

Megan plucked a single rose from the vase and held it to her nose while she tried to think of a rational way to explain what had happened. David's bewildered stare made it clear that he thought she'd lost it. "We were in the ballroom at the start of our search. Jake saw him too. He tried to stick his hand through Uncle Sebastian's body and felt the cold spot. The air temperature drops dramatically where a ghost appears. I guess it's a well-known occult phenomenon. Anyway, he was convinced."

"Convinced he saw a ghost?" David shook his head in disbelief.

"Yes. We did see a ghost." She avoided David's incredulous gaze. Maybe it was a good thing they were breaking up, since he obviously was beginning to think she was nuts. Not that she blamed him. She could hardly believe it herself, and she'd lived through the experience.

"Uncle Sebastian explained he is staying on this Earth plane until he can convince Caroline to release her earthly ties at last," she added.

David narrowed his eyes at her, his expression dazed. "And you don't want to sell the house until the ghosts are both gone?"

"Well, it's sort of a family matter. I feel responsible for solving it. And Uncle Sebastian asked for my help."

"God in heaven, I don't believe this!" David drew himself up and pointed to the couch. "You sit down and listen to me."

Not wanting to argue, she sat. He stood in front of her, his legs spread like a fighter balancing for a bout, and folded his arms. "You need to sell that house as quickly as you can. This ghost thing could backfire at any time."

"But—"

He held up his hand. "I'm not even going to discuss whether they are real or not. The thing is, if people start hearing that you believe the house is haunted, they're going to think you're a kook, or they're going to think you're faking the haunting. Either way it's not good."

"Maybe they'll just think the house is haunted, which it is. It's had that reputation for years."

"Listen, honey, you don't know people like I do." David sat down beside her and took one of her hands in his. "People might have accepted such nonsense when it was just a matter of an eccentric old man living in a house. But now they're looking at the situation through

a buyer's eyes. No one wants to buy a haunted house."

Liz did, Megan thought, but she kept her mouth shut.

"Furthermore, you're a young, modern woman, and smart to boot. No one expected you to go along with your uncle's beliefs about the house. If they hear now that you think there's a ghost too, chances are they'll believe the worse. They'll be scared off."

"That doesn't matter," Megan said, thinking of Liz. "I'm doing okay."

David patted her hand and bestowed a patronizing smile on her. "I suspect Liz Pendleton is going along with this ghost story just to drive the price down. You watch, she'll try to pull a fast one on you when it comes time to make an offer."

Megan sputtered. "She told me she'll pay me what the house is worth."

"They always say that." David laughed. "I've thought all along you might be over your head trying to sell your uncle's house on your own. So, I've asked around and found a buyer."

"A buyer?" Megan frowned at him. "You've found someone without asking me?"

David smiled, his blue eyes warm in the soft lamplight. "I wasn't sure if they'd be interested. I didn't want to get your hopes up for nothing. But they are. And believe me, I know these people. They have absolutely no belief in ghosts. Even if your apparitions did exist, they wouldn't dare to appear once my buyer owned the house!"

Megan flinched. She could just imagine Caroline wandering the corridors of Hartford House trying to gain the attention of a family that insisted on ignoring her. That was too terrible a fate for anyone, even a ghost.

"I don't think you understand," she protested. "Caroline needs help. And Uncle Sebastian has stayed here to help her."

David squeezed her hand. "Honey, I love you for your kind heart. You really care about anyone or anything that's hurting. And that's why you've suffered so much for these past few months. First you had to watch your mother die, and then you lost your favorite uncle. If you're having a little trouble dealing with all that loss, it's no wonder. Stress does strange things to the mental processes."

Her eyes widened. "You think I'm having delusions or something, don't you?"

"Not at all. I do think you've been under a great deal of pressure. And as for Jake Pendleton, who knows what he's up to. I understand he's got a landscaping business in Parksburg. Has it ever occurred to you that Hartford House and its extensive grounds would make a perfect showcase for a business like that?"

She laughed to hide the prick of unease his words gave her. "Jake isn't the one who wants the house. It's his mother."

"That's what they've told you anyway. Maybe they thought you'd sell the house to his mother for a lower price because she was willing

to accept the ghost.”

“Jake made it clear he didn’t believe in the ghost, not at first.”

“A good way to make you nervous that no one would want the house, so you’d be even more willing to sell it to Mrs. Pendleton as soon as she made an offer.”

Megan stared at the roses. Their lush beauty added a touch of elegance to her otherwise plain living room. David was so sweet, and trustworthy. He was undoubtedly giving her good advice. What did she really know about Liz or Jake?

He leaned closer, his eyes earnest. “Has she made a dollar offer yet?”

“She’s going to talk to her lawyer tomorrow. I—I called off the sale for a while because I was angry with Jake for doubting me, but then he came over here and proposed we check out the house together. So I called her back, after that, and said the deal was back on.”

“I see.” David nodded. “You call off the deal and Jake shows up on your doorstep right away, willing to work things out.”

She shifted uneasily and glanced at his solemn face. “You’re forgetting about Uncle Sebastian’s appearance. That’s what convinced him.”

“Or he said he was convinced, to get back in your good graces. Maybe he’s calling up his mother right now and the two of them are having a hearty laugh about kooky Megan and her ghost stories.”

Megan pressed a hand to her forehead, confused. Could it be? Were Jake and his mother playing her? Should she hold off and see what other offers she got?

“All I’m saying,” David continued, “is that you should wait and see what they offer you for the house and then compare it to the offer my client is willing to make. Uncle Sebastian would want you to do that. He left you his house to provide for your future.”

“Yes, that’s true.” She gave David a tremulous smile. “He’d want me to get the best price I could.”

“Trust me, my client’s offer will be a fair one. And once the sale is made, you can be free of the past and forget these last few terrible months.”

“That would be nice,” she agreed with a heartfelt sigh. This entire year had been an unending nightmare. Her mother’s illness and death, Uncle Sebastian’s passing. Through it all, David had stood by her side offering his steadfast support. Maybe she should listen to his advice in this situation. After all, when had she ever sold a house before? He was a lawyer. He dealt with things like this everyday.

“It’s what Uncle Sebastian would want,” David repeated. “He told me often how much he wanted to see you happy.”

She gripped David’s hand and returned the squeeze he’d given her. Guilt washed through her anew as she thought of all that David had done for her uncle. “You were more than a lawyer to him. You

were a good friend.”

“Believe me, it was mutual. He was one of my favorite clients.” David grinned. “And one of the most eccentric.”

Megan wiped a tear from the corner of her eye and attempted a smile. “You found out my family was a trifle strange the night you met me.”

Two years ago, Uncle Sebastian had hosted a Christmas party at Hartford House for family and friends. Megan had been a bit embarrassed by Uncle Sebastian’s recounting of the legend of Caroline over dinner, especially since she’d been seated next to a handsome young lawyer who looked refreshingly normal. Things had gotten worse when Adelaide had started reading palms over dessert. But the most embarrassing moment of all came when cousin Jim gathered a group around him and went into a trance to channel Romomar from the planet Zitar in the Shaban galaxy.

“Hmm, Zitar,” David had said, coming up and offering her an afterdinner drink. “I hear it’s the new Vegas.”

They’d shared a good laugh and when he’d asked her on a date she’d said yes without a moment’s hesitation.

Now this. She dreaded telling him it was over between them. She’d never wanted to hurt him. The last thing she’d ever expected to happen was for Jake to come back in her life. But Jake was a presence too big to ignore. The old magic remained alive in their hearts, and she couldn’t deny it.

She needed to tell David the truth. But it was hard to start when he was looking at her with a tender smile. “I thought your family was charming,” he said. “After all, meeting you was the best thing that ever happened to me. Now, dry your eyes and let’s go out to dinner. I want to take you someplace special.”

“Dinner?” Megan blinked at him in surprise.

“Well, you asked me over here, but I don’t smell anything cooking in the kitchen. So unless you plan to order a pizza, I’m volunteering to take you out to eat.”

“That’s sweet, but...” She cleared her throat and rubbed the palms of her hands over her thighs. “Actually, I asked you over because we need to talk.”

“That’s what you said on the phone.” His blue eyes darkened with concern. “Maybe I’m being a bit paranoid, but something in your voice had me a little worried. You sounded totally stressed out.”

“I’m okay.” She tugged at a strand of hair, searching for the words to begin.

“You wouldn’t say that if you could see the panicked look in your eyes.” He gripped her hand again, his fingers warm and strong as they curled around hers. “I care about you. I want to watch over you. After all, I plan to make you my wife.”

Without warning, he slid off the couch and sank to his knees

beside her. "I've asked you before, Megan, and I'll ask you again until you say yes. I've got a buyer for the house. There's nothing standing in our way. If you want, I can even wrap up the legalities for you. All you'll have to do is sign a piece of paper. Let me take an interest in your future—as your husband-to-be."

He reached into the pocket of his jeans and drew out a small jewelry box.

"Oh, no!" Megan tore her hand free from his grip and pressed it against her cheek. "You didn't."

David opened the lid and held it out to her. "I love you. I want to marry you. Please say yes."

Tears sprang into her eyes as she stared at the beautiful diamond ring that glittered against the ruby-red fabric inside the box. It was a gorgeous stone, two carats at least. Its many facets caught the light and flanked it back as rainbows. She imagined the weight of it on her finger.

David slipped the ring from the box and held it out to her. His face shone with love. "Let me put it on for you."

"No." She gathered up her courage and tucked both hands in her lap. "I—I can't, David. Not now."

"Is it that damned house?"

"No." Her throat had gone dry. She licked her lips. "Something else has happened. I told you about Jake Pendleton. Well, I used to know him years ago. In fact, we dated. In high school. I was in love with him then."

"A teenage crush, you mean." David forced a chuckle.

"That's what I've told myself all these years. It ended badly, and I never wanted to see him again. But he's come back into my life and—and the old feelings have come alive again, too. It's as if they've never gone away. He feels it, too. We're going to date and see where it goes from there."

"What?" David climbed to his feet and stood staring down at her with an astounded look on his face. "You're breaking up with me?"

Megan stood, too. She lifted her chin and forced herself to look him in the eye. "I never imagined this would happen. I always thought one of these times—when the house was sold—I'd say yes to you. But seeing Jake again has rekindled old feelings."

His stunned look changed to one of anger. His lips twisted in a grimace. "Don't be silly! He's rekindled memories, that's all. You're trying to re-live some teenage dream that went wrong."

"Maybe." She wiped sweaty hands on her pants legs. "I've thought of that. We broke up over a misunderstanding. Maybe I have to live it out and see what might have happened."

"All that would have happened is that you would have graduated and gone on to college, and so would he, and you would have met other people and gotten on with your lives. High school, for God's

sake!"

"I was convinced I loved him then," she said, feeling a spark of the old passion. Sure, she'd been young. But she'd never doubted the truth of the emotion that gripped her each time she'd seen Jake. Heaven knew, he wasn't always lovable with his brooding nature and his arrogant pride. But something in him called to her heart, and she'd given it without reservation.

She'd buried that feeling in the anguish of their breakup. Buried it and thought it dead. But it wasn't. Like a butterfly, it had emerged unexpectedly from the cocoon of her heart and spread its wings in joy. Love, pure and simple, flooded her when she looked on Jake's face. Maybe David was the better man, but when she looked at him she felt only respect and admiration. Good emotions for a warm friendship, but not the stuff of marriage.

"You're trying to re-live the past, to change what went wrong. Believe me, that never works. What's done is done."

"No, it's not," she whispered, touching a fingertip to her lips. They burned every time she thought of Jake's kiss. That had never happened with David. She looked up at him and felt the prick of tears shimmering in her eyes. He'd make the better husband, probably. He'd always be there. Reliable. Jake might tear her heart apart. But her heart wanted Jake.

"I can see you're not listening to what I've got to say!" David snapped the lid shut on the ring and jammed the small box back in his pocket. His face twisted with pain. "So you're breaking up with me?"

"I intend to see Jake. We're going to go on a date, see what happens."

David pressed his lips together, his face white. "Can I call you and find out how this date went? I don't want to lose you."

"I'm so sorry," Megan whispered. "I never wanted to hurt you. But what's happened—it's made me realize—the passion just isn't there between us. I've been telling myself what we had was good enough. But it's not, not for me. I want passion and excitement and someone who claims my whole heart."

"And that's not me?" A muscle twitched in David's jaw.

"Not the passion, no." Sadly, Megan lowered her eyes. "This is all my fault. Hate me if you have to. But it's over, David. One way or another, it's over for good. I'm sorry."

"Okay. I get it. And I have my pride, too." Without another word, David turned and walked to the door. He swung it open and turned to face her from the doorway. "But I can't hate you. I love you too much. When you wake up from this madness, give me a call."

Megan shuddered as the door clicked shut behind him. Madness. Was that what it was? It all seemed like a dream ... Jake, the ghosts.

Would she wake up and find out it was really a nightmare?

Chapter Eight

"Come in." Megan smiled at Jake as she opened the door of Hartford House. A short, middle-aged man with salt-and-pepper hair stood at Jake's side holding a thick notebook.

"Good afternoon." Jake's grin held genuine pleasure. Stepping inside, he gave her cheek a quick kiss.

"More to follow later," he whispered. His lips brushed over her ear, setting her nerve endings tingling. As he stepped back, his eyes sparkled with the promise of what he intended to do later. Still grinning, he nodded at the older man beside him. "This is Simon Lowell. He'll be doing the home inspection."

"Afternoon." Simon held out a hand. Megan grasped it, not surprised at the calluses on his rough palm.

"Glad to meet you, Simon." She turned to Jake. "Where's Liz?"

"She just called me on the cell. Traffic's bad coming out of the city so she's running a little late. She should be here in a few minutes."

"Good." Megan ushered them both into the living room. "Where do we start?"

Simon held out his thick notebook. "Got a long checklist. Doesn't matter. Usually we start at the top or the bottom, either one. Gotta admit, though, this is my first haunted house."

Megan traded a wry look with Jake. "Does the house get a mark against it for having a ghost?"

Simon scratched his head. Megan could tell he was struggling to keep his expression solemn. "Well, I checked my forms, and that's about the only thing not mentioned anywhere. Guess ghosts aren't considered a part of the standard home inspection."

Jake winked at Megan. "Maybe they should be. But my mother seems to consider the ghost an extra added attraction with this house. Since she's the buyer, and she's not complaining, I don't see any reason to worry about it."

"Let's start at the bottom then, and work our way up," Megan said, relaxed by the light, happy chatter. This was a good day, after all. The home inspector would okay the house, and the contract would be signed. As soon as the closing was out of the way, she would pay her

mother's debts and even put some money aside for her future. A flutter stirred in her belly as she eyed Jake's tall form. Maybe she'd need the money for a wedding in the not-too-distant future.

As the home inspector clamored down the basement stairs, Jake reached out and took her hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. He leaned over and planted a second kiss on her lips, this one lingering for a long, heart-stopping moment. She kissed him back, tasting him, wanting more, but he broke away with a nod at the inspector who had reached the bottom of the steps. Megan shivered with frustration and hoped for more delicious moments to come.

Hartford House had an old-fashioned basement, dark and gloomy with narrow slits of windows that barely let in any light. Despite their lighthearted mood, Megan couldn't help notice the nervous glances the home inspector kept casting at the dark and cobwebby corners. He checked the plumbing and the furnace, interrupted only by a call from Liz. She told Jake she was still struggling with traffic and to continue without her.

"I'll go over everything with my mother later," Jake assured Simon. "We don't want to hold you up."

Simon's relief was obvious when they moved back into the light and air of the first floor. Fortunately, Uncle Sebastian had loved Hartford House and had kept everything in meticulous repair up until the final months of his illness. Megan watched with delight as Simon checked off the items on his list one by one, each marked okay. The kitchen, always the source of potential trouble in an older home, passed with flying colors. The plumbing didn't leak, and the dishwasher worked like a charm.

Smiling, she led the way up the sweeping staircase to the second floor.

"Most of the rooms up here were used as bedrooms in the past," she told the inspector. "Uncle Sebastian kept a few as guestrooms, but as you can imagine with one man in such a big house, a couple of the rooms weren't used at all. Except to collect my uncle's miscellaneous junk. I'm afraid he was a bit of a packrat. He's got a collection of tarot cards housed in one room, for instance."

"Tarot cards." Simon looked askance. "Fortune tellers and all that mumbo-jumbo?"

"Tarot cards and ghosts go together," Jake said. He'd already bounded up the stairway and was waiting in the hall. He winked at Megan. "Maybe my mother should arrange to buy his occult collections, too. If you're going to buy a haunted house, you might as well have it all. It gives the place a certain ambiance."

Simon reached the top of the staircase and stopped to scan the hallway. He glanced down at the notebook in his hands and flipped a page. "I need to inspect the windows and doors and check the plumbing. You've got bathrooms up here, I assume."

"Two," Megan answered.

As she spoke, she noticed the light coming in the window at the far end of the hall had dimmed. A cloud must have covered the sun. Cold air moved over her face. She blinked and shivered. A lock of her hair stirred, brushing across her cheek.

A breeze! She whirled and looked around her with sudden alarm. The air was definitely moving. She shivered as goose bumps formed on her skin.

At her side, Simon frowned and held up his hand, his fingers spread to catch the breeze. He turned, too, gazing down the stairwell.

Halfway down, hovering over the treads, a mist started to form.

"No," Megan breathed. "Not now."

"What?" Jake was the last to notice the phenomenon. He started toward them.

The mist grew thicker, light flashing off the edges. A shape began to appear.

"What the!" The home inspector threw up his hands, his notebook falling to the floor. He bolted down the hallway toward the far window.

"Wait!" Megan picked up the notebook and ran after him. "It's okay. It's only Caroline's ghost. She's never hurt anyone."

She grabbed Jake's arm and pulled him with her. "Tell him, Jake. Tell him it's okay."

Simon had halted at the end of the hall. He snatched his notebook from her hands, his face pale. "I'm not going near that thing, lady."

Jake shook off Megan's hand with an angry look. "I'll tell him it's okay when I'm sure that it is." He stomped back to the stairwell and stared down it. "Yep. The ghost is gone."

"See?" Megan turned to Simon, her hands spread. "Nothing happened. It's just Caroline having a bit of fun."

"Funny she would appear in the exact same place twice," Jake said. He stood with his arms folded and his eyes narrowed. A chill ran down Megan's spine as she stared at his face. The good-humored mischief had entirely disappeared, replaced by a somber thoughtfulness.

Simon slowly approached the stairwell and looked down. At his side, Megan smiled with relief. The steps leading down were empty. Caroline had vanished once again.

"Listen, I'm not used to running into ghosts on a home inspection." Simon chewed on his lip, his face a pasty white. "I think I'm going to call it a day, maybe send someone else over from the office to finish it up another day."

"Wait! You can't do that." Megan looked to Jake for support. "Can he? We're almost done."

"Are we?" A muscle in Jake's jaw jumped. The look he gave her held none of its earlier warmth. "Ghosts make me a little nervous,

too, Megan. Especially when they appear twice in the same spot.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” she blustered, although she knew full well what he meant. His suspicions had leapt to life again. Had she been a complete fool to entrust her heart to Jake’s care, even for a moment?

“I mean maybe I need to resume that inspection I was conducting earlier.” His voice held a hard edge, an edge she knew all too well. Damn the man and his stubbornness!

Simon glanced from one to the other. “Looks like you two have something to discuss. I’m going back to the office.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” Jake agreed. “I’ll be in contact later if my mother decides to follow through on purchasing this property.”

If my mother decides to follow through. The words were like a knife in Megan’s heart. She stood frozen by them, unable to move, trying to think of some rebuke nasty enough to put Jake in his place. Yet her mind was uneasy, too. Why had Caroline appeared twice on these steps?

Jake followed Simon down the stairs and showed him out the door. Megan waited where he’d left her, one hand on the railing. She pursed her lips as Jake climbed back up the steps and decided to confront him before he accused her.

“What did you mean by that remark...‘if my mother decides to follow through’?”

Jake paused halfway up. Megan realized he was standing in the spot where the mist had appeared. With a frown, he tilted back his head and stared up at the domed ceiling high above. “Looks like something is up there. You have to look close because the candelabra on the chandelier hide it. Do you see?” He pointed. “The ceiling’s so high here it’s hard to spot.”

Megan leaned back and squinted up at the ceiling, lost in shadows. She saw a tiny dark smudge, next to the chandelier far above her.

“Your eyes are sharper than mine. What do you think that is?”

“Some sort of lens, I think. Maybe a projection device. Judging by the line the image from the device would hit the mist.” Jake climbed to the top of the steps and started scanning the hallway. Opposite the stairwell was a small niche with a statue. Brushing past Megan without a word, he hurried over to the niche and peered behind the statue.

“Well, well. Look at this.” He pulled out a tiny fan.

Her heart sinking, Megan stepped over and looked. A wire led from the fan into the wall.

Jake’s voice was grim. “Someone drilled a hole here and installed the fan. It’s hidden in the niche, but the air would move out into the hallway due to the curvature of the wall. That’s the source of the eerie cold breeze.”

Megan swallowed with a dry mouth. “What about the mist? How do you explain that?”

Jake pointed to another niche set in the stairwell. As often as she'd climbed the stairs, Megan had never really noticed it before. "Maybe someone's piped some smoke down here from upstairs. I've heard of machines that do that."

Megan's stomach twisted. "Who could have done such a thing?"

Jake fixed her with an angry look. "I wonder. Guess I should have checked a few other rooms when we were up in the attic."

Her head whirling with confusion, Megan rubbed her temples. A fan—to make the eerie breeze she'd felt? And a lens? Had someone projected the image onto the mist in the stairwell? But how? A sense of helplessness overwhelmed her. She didn't know anything about technology. How was she going to defend herself against Jake's accusations?

He glared down at her, anger plain on his face. Instantly, she flashed back in time. Ten years before he'd aimed that same look of hurt and anger at her, then turned and marched out the door, refusing to stay and listen to her explanations.

Not that she'd intended to offer him any ... she'd been too angry by then.

"You've got to believe me." She laid an imploring hand on his arm. His muscles were tense, rigid with anger. "This is the first I've known about this fan. Or the lens. I have no idea where they came from."

"Seems like you're always telling me I've got to believe you." Jake's eyes bored into hers. "Granted, your Uncle Sebastian might have installed all these gismos to enhance the legend of Hartford House, but someone obviously turned them on today. For my money, that someone is most likely you."

"I see." She dug her nails into her palms and grimaced in anger. "I've been tried and convicted again by Jake Pendleton. Do I even get a chance to say a word in my defense?"

"If it's something more substantial than 'you've got to believe me.'"

For the second time in her life, Megan realized just how hard it could be to prove that you didn't do something. Particularly when there was evidence pointing the other way. Her stomach churned with old memories.

"Why on Earth would I do such a thing?" she muttered.

"Maybe you thought you'd get a better price for the house if people believed it was haunted."

"Not true! In fact, just the opposite. You saw how Simon couldn't wait to get out of here. No one wants to live in a haunted house."

"My mother does."

"I had no idea your mother would be looking for a house."

"My point is, she's probably not the only one. Hell, your uncle bought the house because he wanted to own a haunted house. The world is full of kooks." The disgusted look he gave her told her he included her in that category.

"Watch who you're calling a kook, Jake." Liz stood at the bottom of the stairs looking up at them. They'd been so engrossed in their quarrel they hadn't heard the front door open.

She climbed the stairs and joined them. "What's going on? I heard shouting and came in. You two having a lovers' spat already?"

His face hard, Jake filled his mother in on what had happened. He pointed out the small fan hidden behind the statue in the niche and the smudge high up on the ceiling that he believed marked a lens.

"Guess we'd better check it out," Liz said at last. She gave Megan a bewildered look.

Megan could only nod. She lifted her chin and struggled to hold back her tears. She knew she was innocent, but she feared they'd find something in the attic. Even she couldn't deny the evidence of tampering. Somehow she'd acquired an enemy, and she had no idea who it was. But whoever it was, he wanted to keep her from selling Hartford House. And his plot had just cost her a second chance at love, shattering the fragile bond she'd re-forged with Jake.

Together, the three of them trooped up into the attic. Without so much as a glance, Jake strode past the ballroom where they'd shared the passionate kiss that had reawakened their love. His whole attention was concentrated on the servants' side of the attic, where he'd never looked. Scowling, he started to throw open the doors that led to the servants' bedrooms.

As he threw open the third door, he drew in a quick breath and pointed. "Here it is. Look."

Megan hurried up to the doorway with Liz. The narrow bed had been shoved to one side and some kind of electronic equipment lay piled in the center of the room. Wires and tubes led from the equipment and sank down into the floor. She could see a small pile of dust. With mounting dismay, she realized someone had drilled holes in the floor. This bedroom must be located above the stairwell.

Jake stood and surveyed the equipment, his face taut with rage. "I suppose you didn't know about any of this?"

Her heart ached. This was a nightmare, a bad dream she'd lived through once already. Where had this equipment come from? Even if she suspected Uncle Sebastian—and she didn't—he'd never been into modern electronic equipment. He'd never even learned how to run a simple VCR. Someone who kept up on the latest in technology had brought this equipment up here.

She lifted her head and sought out Liz's gaze. "I swear to you, I never saw any of it before. I'm as mystified as you are by what's going on. You're going to have to give me some time to get to the bottom of this. I promise I'll find out where it came from."

"I don't like this." Liz's lips thinned. "I'd planned to write a book set around this house, then have the book-launching party here on the grounds. It would have been a brilliant publicity move. But if it

came out that Caroline Hartford's ghost was faked after the book was published, I'd be a laughingstock. My reputation would be ruined."

"Believe me—" Megan protested,

Looking sad, Liz shook her head. "I can't risk it, my dear. A writer's career is a fragile thing. If I lost the trust of my readers, I could be finished. Even if you are telling the truth, I can't take that chance. I'm afraid I must withdraw my offer to purchase Hartford House."

"Now you're talking sense at last," Jake muttered.

Megan glared at him. "No one asked you."

"Please, please. Don't fight." Liz held up her hands. Her eyes shone with regret. "I wish it had turned out differently. I love this house."

Megan stared into Jake's face and saw only a cold anger there. Despair clogged her throat, and she had to struggle to speak. "You think I did this, don't you?"

"Show me another suspect."

"What about believing me when I deny it. What about trust?" She shot the words at him like bullets. "I thought you'd learned a lesson about that."

"I said what I did to you because I thought Uncle Sebastian's apparition was real. Now I see I was wrong."

"Oh, yeah?" She welcomed the anger that swept through her. It numbed the pain of her breaking heart. "He was real."

"Oh, come on. How dumb do you think I am?" Jake gestured at the pile of equipment on the floor. "I'm sure, given a little time, I could find some wires running out into the ballroom too. This is quite a setup you have here."

Megan lifted her head. "I don't have to put up with your accusations any more, Jake. This is my house. Please leave."

"Yes, Jake." Liz put a hand on her son's arm. "We'd best be going before too many words are said."

Jake pointed a challenging finger at Megan. "I have a lot of connections in the real estate business, and I'm going to keep an eye on this house. I'd better not hear that you're trying this trick on any other customers."

"It's no trick." Tears of frustration glinted in Megan's eyes. "If you can't believe me, then get out of my house."

Jake gave a hard laugh as he guided his mother down the steps. They left the attic behind and walked down the upstairs hallway. He leaned over to speak in his mother's ear but his voice was loud enough to carry back to Megan—purposefully, she suspected. "Maybe your next book should be an exposé. Your heroine could expose charlatans who prey on the vulnerable with their occult tricks."

"No." Megan heard Liz sigh as she headed down the steps to the entranceway. "I'd rather write a straight romance, I think. With a happy-ever-after ending."

Megan stood rooted to the spot, frozen with grief. She fought back

tears as the door closed behind Jake and his mother. Her happy-ever-after ending had just walked out the door.

She'd lost him, again.

Chapter Nine

Jake pulled open his mother's car door for her, but she hesitated. Worry was etched on her features.

"I don't like to leave you like this, dear. You're angry. Please try to calm down before you get out on the road."

Jake gave a short bark of a laugh. Road rage would be just his style today. Heaven help any driver who cut him off in traffic. "I'll be fine," he told his mother, although the ache in his gut warned him otherwise. He could almost believe in supernatural influences working their karma—bad karma. It was uncanny the way Megan had reappeared in his life and ravaged his heart once more.

"Don't lie to your mother. It's not nice. I know you too well to think you're okay. You were starting to care about Megan again, weren't you?"

He opened his mouth, about to deny his feelings for the second time, but the look of genuine concern in his mother's eyes stopped him. If anyone would understand how he felt about Megan, she would. And he had to vent on someone or he would explode. "Starting to care?" He turned his head to glare at the house. "I never stopped. God help me, I realized it the first moment I saw her again. Something in me has never stopped loving Megan."

"She's a beautiful girl," Liz murmured. "Intelligent, good-natured, kind." She lifted a finger and pointed it at him. "Maybe you've leaped to the wrong conclusion here, Jake."

She held up her hand as his face darkened. "Oh, the evidence we found is real. Someone has tried to fake a haunting at Hartford House. I believe that. But I really can't believe it's her. It's just not her style."

No, it's not! Jake winced and squashed the inner voice. He threw his mother a grim look. "I judged her and refused to give her a chance to tell her side of the story when we broke up, and I've felt guilty about it ever since. The other day, I honestly thought I'd been wrong, and I apologized for it. Now, I don't know. I'm confused. I only know that whenever Megan is involved, I seem to end up getting hurt."

"Love makes us vulnerable, my dear, but a life without love is barren and gray. A wise man once said that hurt opens us up so we

can hold more joy. The fact that Megan's supposed treachery can hurt you so much only shows how deep your feelings are for her. If there's any chance that you're wrong, you should give her an opportunity to explain."

Jake rubbed a hand over his chin. Sure, his mother had suffered tragedy in her life, but what did she know about the kind of hell he'd experienced? She'd never been betrayed by someone she loved. And he loved Megan. He knew that now. If he went back in that house and looked into her beautiful eyes, her innocent face, his heart might melt. He might believe her and give her another chance, and then—if he were wrong—his heart would be broken again.

No, when Lisa Donovan had hurt him by cheating on him with his friend, he'd taken a vow—never again. Never expose your heart and make it vulnerable. It was why he'd walked away from Megan on that fateful day without giving her a chance to explain. It was behind his anger today. He had to keep feeding that anger or the memory of the pain in Megan's gaze would call him back to her...and he couldn't risk that.

But how to explain all of that to his mother? "I can't go back and talk to her. Not today."

She patted him on the arm. "I understand. You're upset. But think about it. Maybe tomorrow you could give her a call. Hash it all out. If she didn't put that equipment up there, someone did. And that someone is trying to sabotage the sale of Hartford House. Somehow, Megan's made an enemy."

Jake stood silent and watched his mother drive away, her last words ringing in his ears. Was someone trying to frame Megan? But why? She wasn't the kind to make enemies. It had to be something to do with the house. Hartford House. He gave it a long thoughtful stare before he got in his car and drove off.



"Look, dear." Adelaide held out her hand. A small purple quartz crystal lay on her palm. "This crystal is from Atlantis. The ancient seers on that mystical island used it to contact the spirit realm. You can tell by the markings inside it."

"Did they?" Megan peered down at one smooth facet. There did seem to be a flaw inside the crystal that looked like a squiggly line of writing, but how unusual was that? She tried to keep her skepticism from showing on her face as she closed the front door behind Adelaide and Randolph. She'd asked them to come over to Hartford House to help her tonight, after all.

"I don't think the crystal will be necessary, honeybun." Randolph smiled at Adelaide as he slipped her coat off her shoulders. He handed it to Megan, who hung their jackets up in the hall closet. "The psychic portals are wide open. It's a full moon tonight, which makes the tim-

ing most auspicious.”

“I know, my dear.” Adelaide laughed. “I am an astrologer, after all. I’ve looked at the aspects for this evening. The moon will conjunct Neptune and Uranus will oppose Mars. Anything could happen.”

“Good things, good things,” Randolph chanted, his oddly light blue eyes shining with energy. “Positive thoughts. Positive vibrations.”

“Yes, my darling.”

The two of them beamed at each other. Their obvious happiness sent a pang through Megan’s heart. She shook off the depression that threatened to engulf her and forced a smile to her lips. “What’s the plan?” she asked.

“A simple approach is always best.” Adelaide stroked her crystal. “You have no idea where that equipment came from, but I’m sure Caroline will know. After all, she must see everything that goes on in this house. We’ll summon her and ask her.”

“Okay.” Megan folded her arms and decided to let them take the lead. They were the experts, and their plan made a strange kind of sense. Or maybe her kookiness gene was finally emerging. Heaven knew it had had plenty of stimulation lately.

“Caroline might not know,” Randolph cautioned. “She is a spirit after all, and one caught up in her own problems. They oftentimes don’t deign to notice the mundane reality around them.”

“Positive thoughts.” Adelaide shook a finger at him, although her affectionate smile showed she was only teasing. “Let’s get started.”

The three of them headed into the living room. Adelaide and Randolph sat together on the couch, and Megan settled into the overstuffed chair beside it.

“Will we be upsetting Caroline by calling her to appear again?” she asked.

Adelaide placed the crystal on the coffee table and made a face. “That is something to consider. We want Caroline to move on into the light, not to become even more involved in the events that are happening in this house. Perhaps we’d be better off leaving Caroline out of it. We could consult your spiritual guide instead, my dear.”

“My guide?” Megan glanced at her cousin in surprise.

“Yes. Everyone has one. They agree to watch over you when you decide to reincarnate on this plane. Yours will want to help you achieve your soul’s purpose in this incarnation. And if that includes marrying Jake—”

“Forget Jake.” Megan sat up straighter and made a dismissing gesture. “I’ve made the mistake of trusting him twice. I’m not going to go for three times.”

“It could be you’re working out old karma,” Randolph said. “Lovers often reincarnate together lifetime after lifetime. Maybe there was some misunderstanding in the past that must be repaired in this life—a lesson to be learned.” He took Adelaide’s hand and squeezed it.

Megan shuddered. "Right now, that sounds like a sentence to hell for me. What if I don't want to learn this lesson?"

Randolf sighed. "You must learn it so your soul will be prepared to receive the happiness that awaits you in the world beyond. We aren't allowed to stay in one place and stagnate in life, I'm afraid."

"It's what Caroline needs to do, too," Adelaide added. "She needs to find her soul mate again and get back on track with him."

"You think Arthur Groves was her soul mate?"

"She's spent the last eighty-some years grieving over losing him, hasn't she? You only do something like that when your soul mate is involved."

"Okay." Megan leaned forward. "I've got a plan. We contact Arthur Groves and get him to talk to Caroline. Then she can let go at last and ascend, Uncle Sebastian can evolve to the next level, and I can sell this house without feeling like I have to warn people about ghosts. And Jake Pendleton will have no reason to rear his ugly head in my direction again."

"Calm down, dear. You should hear the passion in your voice when you speak about Jake. I'm almost certain you have karma with him," Adelaide started, but Randolph cut her off with a gentle wave of his hand.

"Let's tackle one problem at a time, shall we? Caroline is stuck here, and she needs to get unstuck. Her presence is what has opened the door for all these other troubles. A restless spirit spreads vibrations of discord far and wide. I like Megan's idea. Let's try to summon Arthur and see what happens."

Randolf leaned back on the couch and folded his long, thin hands together on his lap. His pale eyes shone in the dim light as he surveyed the room. "The psychic energy in this house is strong again tonight," he murmured. "The spirit realm is near, all around us."

Megan nodded and bit down on her lip. Personally, she preferred it when the spirit realm kept its distance, but they needed to make this contact and help Caroline. Until she could certify Hartford House ghost free, she was in danger of being labeled a kook, or a liar, by anyone who came to look at it.

Especially since she now knew she had an unknown adversary, an adversary who was busy faking ghostly appearances. Unfortunately, the whole thing made no sense at all. Why would anyone want to fake a ghostly apparition in a house that had a real ghost? Her head ached from trying to figure that one out.

Randolf's eyes drifted closed. He lifted his hands, murmuring strange-sounding words. Megan strained to hear. Among the mumbo-jumbo, she made out a name, repeated again and again: "Arthur, Arthur."

She shivered, not sure if it was the chill in the room or the thrill of anticipation. The air seemed to thicken. A tingling sensation ran

over her skin, like a thousand tiny pinpricks of electricity. The first traces of a silver mist appeared between them and the fireplace.

"Ah!" Megan held her breath as the mist gathered together into a human shape. She half expected to see Caroline's slender form emerge, or the shape of Arthur Groves, but instead her Uncle Sebastian materialized in front of them.

"Uncle." Megan lifted an eyebrow. "I'm glad to see you. I hope you know that. But we were calling someone else."

"Yes, yes." Uncle Sebastian tugged at the lapels of his suit and looked around in bewilderment. "I'm not sure what I'm doing here myself. My guide wants me to let go of the Earth plane. Why, hello, Adelaide. How have you been?"

"I'm fine, Uncle." Adelaide blew him a kiss, as if she had conversations with ghostly relatives every day of the week. "I miss you, but I envy your adventures in the spiritual realm, too. I thought you'd be teaching in some temple of light in the higher dimensions by now."

"It seems I'm not as spiritually advanced as I thought." Uncle Sebastian scratched at his fringe of gray hair. "Every time I feel the call to go higher, I think about Caroline and can't bring myself to go through the light gate."

Randolf opened his eyes and gave Uncle Sebastian a piercing stare. "We're trying to help her by summoning the spirit of her soul mate to our aid. It's strange that you should appear. I used a powerful invocation."

"Humph!" Uncle Sebastian folded his arms across his chest. "It is my house, after all. I'll appear if I feel like it. And who are you, if I may ask?"

"This is Randolph Riverton, Uncle." Adelaide beamed at the man seated beside her. "He's a world-famous trance medium. Surely you've heard of him."

"Name does sound familiar. But his work needs a bit of fine-tuning."

Randolf frowned. "I wonder. The vibrations in this room are growing stronger by the moment."

"They are, indeed." Adelaide batted her eyelashes and glanced at her watch. "Uranus must be moving into its exact opposition to Mars. That means wild and unpredictable energies are filling the air. We could experience an explosion!"

"An explosion?" Megan glanced around but saw only the quiet living room, peaceful and serene with its blazing fireplace and book-filled shelves.

"I don't mean a literal explosion, dear. But Uranus and Mars are both powerful planets, and when they come together in astrological aspect, unexpected things are bound to happen."

Even as Adelaide spoke, the chill in the room deepened despite the fireplace. A dark shadow swept across the ceiling and then a pillar

of smoke appeared to the right of Uncle Sebastian. As they all watched, Caroline materialized in front of them.

For a ghost who had supposedly shuffled off the mortal coil, and its attendant worries, she looked decidedly upset. Her long black hair swung around her shoulders as she glared in turn at each one of them. "What do you think you're doing?" she demanded.

"Trying to help you," Randolph said in his most soothing tones.

"I heard your incantation." Her smoky gray eyes flashed. "You were summoning Arthur from his rest."

"I thought you wanted to be reunited with Arthur," Megan said.

Her mist-pale features twisted in pain. "I don't deserve Arthur. Not until I make amends for my mistake. Besides, Arthur's dead. He's gone on. You've no right to call him back."

"He won't come unless he really wants to," Randolph assured her. "He may have been waiting for years for an opportunity to help you, my dear."

"I hurt him and he went on without me." Caroline sniffed.

Megan repressed a smile. Apparently, even ghosts had their moments of pride.

"You mustn't cry. You can follow him into the light anytime you want." Uncle Sebastian's lower body dissolved into mist again as he reached a hand toward Caroline.

"I'm not crying. Ghosts don't cry." Caroline jerked her chin upward and glared. "Besides, you have no right to interfere in my business. Just because you bought my house, it doesn't mean you're entitled to try and meddle in my affairs."

"I bought the house because I loved it, and then I fell in love with its ghostly inhabitant." Uncle Sebastian flashed his courtly smile at his fellow spirit.

She half turned away. "Don't talk to me. You're a stubborn old man. Half the widows in this town were chasing you, and you wouldn't even give them a glance. And all the time you knew how much it would have cheered me up to see someone fall in love. Now it's too late. You're dead. Go on into the light yourself."

A cold breeze blew over Megan's shoulder as Caroline spoke. Goose bumps formed on her arms. *Gosh, a literal cold shoulder.* Megan wanted to get up and give Uncle Sebastian a hug, but she suspected her arms would close on empty air. He'd had no luck with Caroline in life, and things hadn't gotten any better in death.

Uncle Sebastian drew himself up. His chest literally swelled to twice the size it had been in real life. "For your information, I could be lounging in the higher realms enjoying communication with exalted spirits, but I chose to stay behind to help you out."

Icy fingers ruffled Megan's hair as the cold breeze in the room grew stronger. Adelaide snatched up her crystal and began stroking it.

Caroline tapped a transparent foot. "Too bad a ghost doesn't have

the right to veto a sale. I'd never have let you get a foot past the front door, you pompous windbag. You try getting a good rest when someone's always wandering about murmuring magical incantations."

"How about having the courtesy to answer when someone calls. I was only trying to establish contact so I could help you."

"Help! Help! When did I ever ask for your help? Go on! Vanish. Vamoose. Start climbing Jacob's Ladder. Take the highway to heaven. Have I made myself clear yet?"

Wrapping her arms around her for warmth, Megan huddled deeper into the chair. She could see her breath, a frosty vapor that hung in the air. A vase on a nearby bookshelf rocked and fell to the carpet with a loud thud.

"I think you two need to calm down," Randolph said, his eyes widening in alarm.

"What's happening?" Megan asked, curling into a protective ball. The small hairs on the back of her neck stood up in alarm. A book popped out of the bookcase and flew across the room, banging against the opposite wall.

"The psychic vibrations are escalating out of control." Adelaide clutched her hand around her crystal and waved it in the air. "Uncle Sebastian, please calm down. You're more spiritually advanced. You need to regain your calm center."

"More spiritually advanced, my foot!" Caroline's smoky gaze flashed fire at them. "I'm tired of people putting me down because I've chosen to stay here. I'm making a sacrifice, for heaven's sake. I'm trying to help people for once in my selfish life. Don't you get it? I certainly hope the new owners are smarter than you."

More books started to rattle on the shelves as Caroline's tirade continued. Uncle Sebastian moved toward her. His short, gray hair stood up around his head like a halo and his eyes shone with zeal. He reached out a ghostly hand. "Enough of this nonsense. You're coming with me into the light."

Megan cringed down into the chair and threw up an arm to protect her face as a bolt of literal energy shot through her. A side table toppled over, the lamp hitting the floor with a crash. Terrified, she glanced up to see books flying through the air like missiles.

"Look out!" Adelaide screamed, grabbing Randolph's arm and pulling him down on the couch. A book crashed into the seer's head with a dull thud.

Megan dared a look at the ghosts. Uncle Sebastian reached out to grab Caroline. But as he neared her ghostly form a wall of light appeared in front of her, and he bounced off it.

Caroline placed her hands on her hips and gloated. "I've got a pretty strong aura for someone who's not as spiritually advanced as you, don't you think? Keep away from me, I'm warning you. I always liked you, Sebastian. I tried for years to bring someone into your life.

And this is the thanks I get."

Uncle Sebastian spread his hands, his pale features twisted in sorrow. "But Caroline, I don't want anyone else. It's you I've wanted."

Books fell to the floor as the psychic turmoil in the room faded. Megan heard soft sobbing and saw Adelaide wrap her arms around Randolph and hug him to her bosom. Caroline stared at Uncle Sebastian. "Is that why you kept summoning me? Because you were interested in me?"

"Yes."

"Heck, I thought you just wanted to get rid of me like everyone else."

"Not at all. I thought you were beautiful, and lonely. I wanted to talk to you, to try and ease your pain."

Caroline laughed, her smoky gray eyes dancing with humor. "Yeah. But you were alive and I was dead. Face it, it would never have worked."

"What about now?" Uncle Sebastian asked. "We could start anew. Go into the light together." He held out a shimmering hand.

Caroline bowed her head with a sad look. "Thanks. It's tempting. But I owe a debt to Arthur. I can't leave until I accomplish what I've promised to do. I have to bring some lovers together to make up for what I did to him."

"He's knocked out!" Adelaide raised a tear-streaked face. "You've hurt him!"

Both ghosts turned to face her with looks of surprise.

"You're dangerous. I'm sending you back." Adelaide lifted her crystal and began waving it through the air. It glittered in the light from the fireplace. "Creature of the astral plane, long hast thou dwelt in Darkness, quit the Night and seek the Day," she chanted. "By all the Names, powers, and rites, I command thee thus to depart."

"Stop, Adelaide." Megan struggled to sit up. "They're calming down. They're talking to each other."

But Adelaide didn't hear her. Sobs shook her frame as she waved the crystal. She continued chanting in a loud voice.

"Nooo!" Caroline clapped her hands to her ears. Her ghostly form wavered in the firelight. Megan watched in horror as her face dissolved into mist and vanished.

"Good!" Adelaide lowered the crystal. "That ought to keep her away from this plane for a while." She bent over Randolph, cooing softly.

"Umm, Adelaide," Megan whispered. "We still have one ghost."

Uncle Sebastian stood leaning against the fireplace mantle. Megan saw his mouth working but no words came out.

Randolf groaned. He shuddered and lifted a hand to rub his head. His light blue eyes opened.

"Darling! Are you all right?" Adelaide's hands stroked his face.

He sat up and looked around with a puzzled stare. "What happened?"

"You got whacked on the head with a book. It knocked you out. I had to send Caroline back. She was totally out of control."

Randolf winced as his fingers explored his skull. He made a face at Uncle Sebastian's ghost. "Usually, I enjoy a book collection as much as anyone, but I think you did too much heavy reading when you were alive."

Uncle Sebastian stomped a foot in frustration. His mouth continued to move, but no sound emerged.

"Hmmm!" Randolph raised both eyebrows. "Seems your exorcism sent Uncle Sebastian partially back, too. We can see him, but he can't communicate with us."

"What a mess!" Adelaide stared at the crystal in her hand. "These Atlantean crystals do tend to be unstable. All those years under the sea probably. Not to mention the Mars and Uranus energy bursting all around us. What do you think, Randolph? Can you fix things?"

"Not with this damnable headache." Randolph waved a hand at Uncle Sebastian, who was once again swelling up, this time with frustration. "Sorry. Whatever you're trying to tell us, it's going to have to wait until the energy of the spell Adelaide cast fades away."

Uncle Sebastian shook a fist at the ceiling. His face contorted with emotion. He gestured wildly heavenward.

His frustration pulsed in the room like a palatable force. Megan half rose from her chair. "We have to do something so he can speak again. Whatever he wants to tell us, it must be important."

Adelaide shrugged. "There's nothing we can do at the moment. And poor Randolph has suffered terribly. Can I drive you home, darling?"

"That would be so sweet of you, honeybun." Randolph smiled.

"You've done so much for my family." Adelaide choked back tears. "I don't know how we can ever thank you." Blushing to the roots of her shocking red hair, she leaned forward and kissed Randolph gently on the lips.

"Forgive me," she whispered. "I do try to rise above the physical realm, but I find you so attractive."

Randolf touched her cheek. "The physical realm has its place. We're here to learn about bodies, after all. So we need to use them." He wrapped his arms around her and gathered her close.

Megan looked away as they joined in a passionate kiss. Apparently, Caroline had at last succeeded in getting two lovers together. It was a shame she wasn't here to witness the event.

Uncle Sebastian still stood near the fireplace, his expression grim. He pointed at himself, then upward.

"Yes, please go back into the light," Megan told him. "I don't want you to worry about what's happening here. There's nothing you can do, anyway. I'll sell the house somehow, to someone."

Uncle Sebastian shook his head, his frustration plain. With a last

glance at her, he faded away.

Megan sighed. Randolph and Adelaide were locked in each other's arms, oblivious to what was happening around them. She got to her feet and tiptoed from the room. At the bottom of the staircase, she paused and stared upward. Someone had placed equipment up there to fake a ghost. Who? She was no closer to an answer, Caroline had refused to leave, and Jake thought she was a liar.

Maybe Uncle Sebastian had been pointing at the attic. Maybe he'd wanted to tell her something about who'd rigged the place.

Megan turned away. She'd had enough of séances and asking the dead. If there were answers to be found, she'd find them on her own.

Chapter Ten

Megan turned off her car lights as she pulled into the driveway of Hartford House and coasted to a stop. The house looked dark and deserted beneath the golden light of the autumn moon that hung high in the sky.

She leaned back in the car seat and sighed, gathering her energy to face the empty house. After a demanding day at work, she only wanted to go home and veg in front of the TV. But an antique dealer had contacted her with a generous offer for Uncle Sebastian's collection of daguerreotypes. She supposed her uncle's interest in antique photographs matched his interest in ghosts. It was a small collection, but valuable, and she could use some immediate cash while the house remained unsold. The bill collectors kept calling.

Getting out, she opened the trunk of her car and gathered up a pile of flattened cardboard boxes, a roll of tape and a stack of newspapers. She'd get the daguerreotypes packed up tonight and drag them down to the post office over her lunch hour tomorrow.

She turned her key in the lock, opened the front door and switched on the foyer light. Propping the cardboard boxes against the side table in the foyer, she dropped the heavy pile of newspapers on the floor and then went into the library and groped her way over to the desk. She pulled the cord on the antique lamp and blinked in the pale glow it cast. The light barely illuminated Uncle Sebastian's collection on one wall. Megan stood for a minute, examining a faded picture of a woman in a white dress. It was lovely in its way, but hardly worth the enormous sum offered by the collector. But then, what did she know about daguerreotypes? This was one of a kind. And it was his money.

Another photograph caught her eye. This one was titled "The new Mr. and Mrs. Kendall." The portrait had faded to shades of gray, but she could clearly see a young woman seated on a step. Her voluminous skirts were spread out around her and one hand rested on her lap, clutching a delicate lace handkerchief. A young man sat on the step above her. One of his arms wrapped around her neck and held her upraised wrist. His other hand tenderly grasped her fingers. He stared down at the ring on her right hand.

A couple on their wedding day, no doubt. Their happiness was apparent, even in the faded image before her.

She touched the edge of the photo with a fingertip. They were both long gone by now, gone into the light, hopefully. She wondered if they'd been happy. For a brief moment, when Jake had kissed her in the attic, she'd known happiness again, too. The kind of happiness David could never give her.

David. Even his name should have been a clue. He was so obviously not her type, now that she looked back at it. She chalked it up to experience with a rueful smile. Even if it hadn't worked out, she was glad Jake had come into her life once more. He'd reminded her of what love felt like. She'd numbed her heart after their breakup and forgotten the way that he'd made fire roar through her veins. She'd been about to settle.

A soft smile touched her lips as she gazed at the couple in the daguerreotype. Someday, she too would know the kind of love that glowed on their happy faces. Whether he'd intended to or not, Jake had saved her from a loveless marriage, and she was grateful for that.

Megan had half turned to go back out into the hallway to fetch her boxes when the distant sound of a door slamming somewhere above froze her in mid-stride.

She listened as the echo died away, her blood pounding in her veins. The house was empty. Was it Caroline's ghost? Hardly likely. Caroline had never gone around slamming doors. Besides, last night Adelaide had told her it might be weeks before Caroline gathered enough strength to manifest again.

Maybe it was Uncle Sebastian. He'd made it plain that there was something he wanted to communicate.

Frowning, she walked out into the hallway. The library door swung shut behind her as she stared up the steps. The upstairs lay shrouded in darkness.

She narrowed her eyes and looked for the silver mist that announced the presence of a ghost. There was none of that, none of the eerie electric current that shivered over her skin whenever a ghost was near. A tremor of fear ran through her instead as she considered the possibility that the intruder was human.

Thankfully, she'd been quiet coming into the house. Whoever was up there probably hadn't heard her.

The light! The foyer light was a dead giveaway to her presence. Reaching out, she switched it off. Darkness engulfed her. She stood without moving for several minutes letting her eyes adjust to the dark. Her heart pounded at the thought of going up those stairs alone, but if she didn't, she'd never know who was up there, maybe never clear her name. Not that she cared what Jake thought of her. Not a bit. But someone was trying to sabotage her sale of the house. She meant to find out who it was.

Shapes appeared out of the darkness as her eyes adjusted. Glad she'd taken the time to change to jeans and sneakers after work, Megan slipped up the stairway. Moonlight spilled through the window at the end of the hallway, providing a dim radiance as she edged her way down the second floor, her ears alert for any sound.

She nearly jumped out of her skin as footsteps creaked across the ceiling above her. Her throat clogged with fear. Floors didn't creak under the weight of ghosts. Someone was up in the attic. The footsteps sounded heavy. Probably a man, a man who was up to no good.

She whirled and stifled a scream as the hallway behind her filled with unexpected light. Her heart jumped up into her throat but no one was there. It was only the projector running. In the darkness, she could clearly see the light streaming from the small lens Jake had spotted in the ceiling of the stairwell. A ghostly image formed in the usual place above the steps, a womanly shape. But it looked nothing like Caroline, and as Megan watched, the face changed into that of a hideous monster!

She drew in a sharp breath. Whoever was up there, apparently he didn't yet know that Jake had found his equipment. And he intended to terrorize whoever she brought into the house next. If anyone saw this monstrous image, they'd tell the world that Hartford House was haunted by demons. She'd never sell the place.

The light winked out again. The intruder had completed his tests. Megan straightened her shoulders. She had to act, had to do something before he vanished into the night.

She whispered a prayer of gratitude to her guardian angel that she hadn't touched the equipment. She'd been too mad to go near it after Jake had made his wild accusations. And then, the night before, she'd had her hands full with the séance. Her mysterious adversary had no reason to suspect that she was on to him.

Reaching out, she touched the doorframe of the attic door and was surprised to discover that it was open a crack. The intruder had come this way. How had he reached the second floor? The hall window was closed and the front door had been locked.

She set that mystery aside for a later time and started up the attic stairs, carefully placing her weight on each tread. These old steps creaked like a broken violin, and she'd already discovered how far noise carried in a silent house.

She gained the top of the steps without making a sound and paused, listening. The blood pounded in her ears to the quick, erratic rhythm of her heart as she stood outside the ballroom, and gave her eyes a chance to adjust even more to the deeper blackness of the attic. The light from the ballroom windows barely penetrated the hallway. She remembered that the room with the equipment in it was the third door down on the left.

Backing up against the right side of the wall, she began edging

forward. As she drew closer, she saw that the door to the third room was closed. A thin pencil of light showed through the crack at the bottom.

Whoever was doing this to her, he was in there!

She slid past the doorway and tiptoed across the hall to press against the opposite wall. She eyed the knob and licked her lips. Did she dare throw the door open and charge into the room, demanding an explanation? Or should she sneak down the stairs and call the cops?

No! If I do that, he might get away before the cops can get here. She pictured the police arriving to an empty house and her feeble protests that there had been someone up in the attic. They might not believe her, but they would see the equipment. She knew what would happen then. St. George was a small town, and people loved to gossip. The fact that she had equipment that could be used to fake a ghostly appearance would become common knowledge. Hell, she'd be lucky if the whole thing weren't written up in the newspaper. She'd be the laughingstock of St. George.

She wiped her trembling hands against her jeans and reached out for the doorknob.

The light beneath the door jam vanished.

Megan's heart leapt upward into her throat. He'd turned out the light. She froze as the door swung open with a long, low squeak. Already accustomed to the dark, she could just discern the shape of a shadowy form stepping into the hallway. His head was turned toward the attic stairs. He didn't see her where she stood pressed against the wall on the far side of the door.

For a dizzying moment, she longed for Jake at her side. He'd make quick work of this intruder, whoever he was. But Jake was out of her life. She was on her own, and by god, she was tired of being pushed around.

Willing herself into action, she stepped away from the safety of the wall and reached for the shadowy form in front of her. But the mysterious figure was already moving, slipping down the hall, and her reaching hand missed.

"Stop!" she yelled, abandoning stealth. "Stop right now!"

A grim chuckle was her only answer. The figure kept moving, headed for the attic stairwell.

With a shout, she launched herself after him, her sneakers thudding on the wooden floor of the hallway as she ran. But he had a head start. He darted down the stairs, his steps thundering in the darkness, and slammed the attic door behind him.

She lost a few precious seconds fumbling for the door handle in the pitch dark of the stairwell. When she emerged on the second floor, he was already down the hallway and poised at the top of the second stairwell.

Too late, Megan wished that she'd left the foyer light on. Then she might have caught a glimpse of his face as he looked over his shoulder to check on her progress. But the faint light of the moon didn't reach that far and the shadowy night obscured his features.

Clenching her teeth together in frustration, she pelted down the hallway and took the stairs two at a time. The intruder had reached the front entrance. As he passed the side table, his foot caught on the edge of the pile of newspapers she'd dropped there, and he stumbled for a moment.

Triumph blazed through Megan. She reached out and caught hold of the back of his jacket.

"Stop!" she gasped. "You're not going to get away with this!"

An elbow jammed backward into her stomach, knocking the wind out of her. She staggered but held grimly on to the jacket.

"Let go before I have to hurt you!" The words were a low snarl, almost inhuman in their rage.

"No!" She forced the single word out. The world whirled around her like a crazy top, and it hurt to breathe, but anger gave her a strength beyond any she'd ever possessed before. She grabbed at his arm and tried to force him to turn. She had no illusions that she'd be able to hold him, but if she could only get a momentary look at his face, it would be enough.

He surprised her, then, turning even as she pulled on his arm, whirling like a dancer. She tried to see his face but he was moving with dazzling speed and everything was happening too quickly. All she could see was a black shadow looming over her and then a flash of moonlight on flesh as a fist came hurling toward her head.

His fist struck her cheekbone and pain lanced through her. The blow sent her staggering backward. She was falling! She threw up her arms to protect her head and the world exploded in crimson fire.



Megan moaned. She was lying on something hard, her left cheek pressed against cold tile. Yet it was the right side of her face that throbbed with pain.

"Megan! Wake up!" A woman's voice, high and excited, came from somewhere above her.

Cold water splashed over her face, sending a shock through her body. Uttering a sharp cry, she sat up and forced her eyes open. The floor tilted, dropped away under her, then steadied. No, it wasn't the floor. It was her, dizzy from the blow. She blinked drops of water out of her eyes and stared up at the frightened face of Liz Pendleton.

"Are you all right?" Liz asked, her eyes huge with fright. She clutched an empty glass in her right hand.

"I'm fine," Megan said automatically, trying to ignore the throbbing in her head. Water dripped from her hair and ran down her cheeks.

The slightest movement sent daggers of pain slashing through her brain. And her cheekbone throbbed like an ancient war drum. She touched her skin with tentative fingers and almost cried out as her nerve endings screamed their agony. The skin felt puffy, bruised.

She remembered the fist coming toward her out of the blackness.

The foyer was no longer dark. Liz had switched on the light. She stood before the open front door, holding the empty glass in one hand and her purse in the other.

"Should I call the police?" she asked.

Megan shook her head and was immediately sorry. The ground dropped out from under her and the world turned upside down, then right side up again. It was like riding the tilt-a-whirl at the county fair. She rocked back and forth, fighting nausea.

"Take deep breaths," Liz urged. Her voice came from far away.

Megan blinked back the darkness that threatened to overwhelm her and drew in a long breath. She held perfectly still, careful not to move her head. Slowly, the world came into focus again.

Liz crouched down beside her, her face frightened. "You were stretched out on the tile unconscious when I walked in. What happened? Did someone hit you? Your cheek looks swollen."

Megan licked dry lips. "Someone knocked me down, and I hit my head on the floor, I think."

"You need a doctor."

"No! No doctor. No police. I don't want people asking questions—not until I find out more about what's going on here."

Liz rocked back on her heels. She was dressed in jeans, a heavy wool sweater, and a short leather jacket. The scent of some expensive perfume hung around her. "Please reconsider. You might have a concussion."

"No. I'm okay." Megan struggled up to a kneeling position. The flat cardboard boxes she'd dragged in from her car lay scattered over the tile. She remembered—the intruder had stumbled and she'd almost caught him. She grabbed hold of the edge of the side table and pulled herself to her feet. Her heart hammered in her chest, and the floor lurched under her.

"Take it easy!" Liz jumped up and grabbed hold of her elbow. Megan leaned on the older woman with gratitude as Liz led the way into the living room.

"Sit down, at least." Liz stopped as they reached the couch. With a sigh, Megan collapsed onto the soft cushions.

"Thanks," she whispered. "What are you doing here anyway?"

"I can't stop thinking about this house. I didn't think you were faking the haunting, and I'd really love to live here. So I came to take another look and ask myself how much I wanted it."

"You just decided to drop by?" Megan probed her cheek with tentative fingers and winced.

"Let me get you some ice for that." Liz hurried away, disappearing into the kitchen. Megan heard the distant sound of ice cubes falling out of the dispenser and then Liz was back. She held a glass full of ice in one hand and a dish towel in the other. She wrapped several cubes in the towel and handed it to Megan. "This will help keep the swelling down."

Megan bit off an exclamation as the towel pressed against her cheek, but as the cold spread over her skin, the pain subsided.

"To answer your question," Liz was saying, "I was out in the suburbs anyway, visiting some friends. I called your apartment and got your answering machine, so I took a chance that you might be here. When I got to the house, I saw your car parked in the drive and the front door wide open. I poked my head inside to see what was going on, and I'm glad I did."

Megan rubbed her forehead. "You want the house after all?"

"I know." Liz held up her hands as she sat down in the chair next to the couch. "I'm just a crazy old lady who can't make up her mind. But I got to know you pretty well back when you were dating Jake, and I'd stake my life you wouldn't try to pull the wool over anyone's eyes. If there's trickery going on here, you're not the one who's doing it."

"Too bad your son doesn't feel the same way," Megan muttered.

Liz laughed. "You know what they say. There's no fool like a fool in love. Jake's been crazy about you since the day he first laid eyes on you."

"He has a strange way of showing it."

"Yes, he does. I'm sure there were Neanderthals with more finesse. I won't even try to justify his behavior."

To her surprise, Megan found herself coming to Jake's defense. Sure, she would have preferred his wholehearted support, but how would she have felt if she'd walked in on him kissing Allison? Or found suspicious equipment stored in his attic? "It was extreme, but then he did find me in some pretty compromising situations."

"So who socked you?" Liz asked as she passed over another ice cube. "Keep holding the ice there. It will help stop the bruising on your cheek."

Megan collapsed against the back of the couch, feeling weak. Now that it was over, it was hard to believe she'd acted so rashly. Her hands started to shake as she thought about what might have happened. "I came over to pack up some of Uncle Sebastian's old photographs that I've sold, and I heard a sound upstairs."

"Up in the attic? Where Jake found the equipment?"

Megan nodded. "I snuck up there. The door was closed, but I could see a light under the doorsill. Someone was inside doing something with the equipment. He turned out the light and left just as I was getting into position to rush into the room. Unfortunately, the hallway was so dark that I couldn't see his face."

"But you're sure it was a man?"

"Certain." Megan had never even questioned that. "He was big and—well—man-shaped."

Liz's eyes gleamed with excitement. "This is better than one of my books. What happened then?"

"I yelled at him to stop and chased him down two flights of stairs. I almost caught him at the front door. That's when he turned around and hit me. I must have fallen and struck my head."

Liz leaned forward. "But did you see his face?"

"No." Megan tasted disappointment. "The last thing I remember seeing is a big fist, headed straight at me."

Liz drummed her fingers on the arm of her chair in frustration. "At least you're okay. That's the important thing. But are you sure he left?"

"No, I was knocked unconscious. But why would he stay?"

"Who knows. Who knows why he's doing this in the first place. As long as there's the slightest chance he might have stayed here in the house, we need some more help. I'm calling Jake."

Megan opened her mouth to protest, but Liz had already pulled her cell phone out of her pocket and punched a button. The older woman pressed the phone to her ear.

"Hello, Jake? I'm at Hartford House, and I need you to come over at once."

Megan thought about searching the house on her own and knew she couldn't do it. Her hands were shaking from her close call. She wasn't sure she could stand. The thought of Jake's presence was comforting, even if it did mean another argument. She sat back and rubbed the sore spot on her head while Liz explained the situation to her son.

"He'll be right over," she told Megan as she flipped the phone off.

Megan laid down the impromptu ice pack and glanced around the living room in search of a mirror. She hoped she didn't look like a casualty of war. "I don't want Jake to see me like this," she muttered.

"Don't be silly, dear. You told me not to call a doctor and not to call the police. I can't just go off and leave you here alone, can I? You might be young and foolhardy, but I have no intention of searching this house without a big strong man at my side."

"I'm sure whoever the intruder was, he's long gone."

"You're probably right, but it will do Jake good to search the place before you lock up. It will give him plenty of time to eat crow."

Megan smiled, although the movement made her cheek throb. "If he doesn't decide that I've staged this whole thing just to convince him I'm innocent."

"Jake's stubborn but not stupid," Liz assured her. "He'll cough up another apology." She shot a worried frown at Megan. "But can you find it in your heart to forgive him again?"

Chapter Eleven

Jake swung around his flashlight, shining the narrow beam into the far corners of the basement. So far he'd found a lot of dust and cobwebs, not to mention piles of discarded junk, but no trace of an intruder.

He ran the light over the furnace and then stretched around a corner to shine it into the crawl space behind the laundry room. It paid to be thorough, and he was in no rush. He needed more time to rehearse his apology. He'd screwed up for sure with Megan, a real royal screw up.

Taking the time to check behind a pile of boxes stacked haphazardly in one corner, he berated himself some more. For the past decade, he'd lived with the consequences of making the worst mistake of his life. And been too proud to admit it. A kind universe—and Megan's forgiving heart—had granted him a second chance—a chance he really didn't deserve. Hell, he'd be the first to admit it. He didn't deserve Megan. Okay, maybe you could forgive a foolish and proud young boy, but he was a man now. A man who should have learned a lesson. And what had he done almost before she'd finished uttering her words of forgiveness?

Oh, come on. Anyone would have thought the same seeing that equipment up there, his darker side muttered.

You say you love her. You should have trusted her, his better half scolded.

I'll say. Jake chewed on his lip as he opened the door to the tiny room that had apparently served as a wine cellar. He needed to make the most eloquent apology ever uttered, and even then he'd be damned lucky if she listened.

His heart ached with a weight of heavy guilt as he recalled the stricken look she'd given him when he'd walked in the door. The intruder had hit her, and the pale oval of her delicate face was marked by a darkening bruise. But that was nothing compared to the hurt in her beautiful hazel eyes as she watched him approach.

It never should have happened! he scolded. *If you'd believed her, investigated further, she never would have come back to this*

house alone and put herself in such danger. You're lucky she wasn't killed.

He winced inwardly recalling how she'd braced herself as he'd walked into the living room. Had she expected him to accuse her of staging the whole thing? Well, why not? He'd been just about that stupid in the past. He didn't deserve her, that was for sure, but if she could find it in her heart to forgive him one more time, he'd spend the rest of her life making it up to her.

He slipped his flashlight into the holder on his belt, wiped his dusty hands on his jeans and started up the stairs. Voices drifted down the stairwell. His mother was upstairs, being her usual charming self. Thank God, she'd decided to come over to Hartford House and found Megan.

He emerged from the basement in a small hallway near the kitchen. A tea kettle sat on the stove. He could hear the rumble of water coming to a boil inside. Trust his mother to find a way to make tea. A hot cup of tea was her cure for any of the ills that life brought.

It would take more than a cup of tea to take away the pain he'd inflicted on Megan. Frowning, he passed through the kitchen and dining room and crossed the foyer to stand in the living room door.

Megan sat curled on the couch, her long legs tucked under her. Her head was bent over her teacup, her glorious auburn hair falling loose around her shoulders. It glowed with a copper burnish under the soft lamplight. He drew in a shaky breath, remembering how he'd loved to wrap those silky curls around his fingers.

She raised her head as she lifted the cup to her lips, and he shuddered at the sight of the darkening bruise on her cheek. Whatever bastard had done that, he meant to make him pay.

His mother was sitting in an overstuffed chair beside the couch. She pushed a plate of biscotti cookies across the coffee table toward Megan. "Have a cookie, dear. You need the energy. I'm boiling some more water. I'll get you another cup of tea in a minute."

Jake frowned. Where on Earth had his mother found cookies at this time of night?

"I need to get busy packing up the food in the cupboards I guess." Megan smiled fondly as she reached for a cookie. "Uncle Sebastian loved biscotti. I don't suppose you'd want the house to come complete with leftover food."

His mother laughed. "I don't think so!"

"I've cleaned out the refrigerator at least." Megan set her cup down on the coffee table and sank back against the thick cushions of the couch. "It's hard to tackle a place this size when you work all day. Maybe I'll just donate the canned and packaged food to charity. And I've put most of Uncle Sebastian's collections up for sale on ebay."

"You're doing fine," his mother assured her.

Megan picked up the towel that lay on the table and pressed it to

her cheek again. A small shiver shook her slight frame. Jake felt a matching ache in his own cheek. His heart thumped in his chest as he thought about how close he'd come to losing her. And all because he'd refused to believe her again. She looked so fragile, her skin pale and almost translucent in the firelight, like milky glass. She needed someone who could protect her, who'd stand at her side no matter what.

He squared his shoulders and cleared his throat. Megan looked up with a surprised smile.

"I've searched everywhere," he said, "upstairs and down. Whoever it was, they're gone."

"Good." Relief etched his mother's features. "And you checked the windows and doors?"

"All secure. There's no sign of forced entry anywhere."

Megan drew her eyebrows together. "Then how did this person get in the house? I'm positive the front door was locked when I arrived."

"There must be someone else who has a key. Did you ever change the locks after you inherited the house?"

Her eyes widened. "No, why should I?"

"Because you have no idea who your uncle might have given a key to over the years." Jake scratched his head in exasperation. She was such an innocent. No wonder Karl had duped her years ago—and whoever was tricking her now. She trusted people too much.

And he didn't trust them at all. Maybe between the two of them, they could solve this mystery.

"Well, excuse me!" Megan blinked up at him. An angry flush had appeared on her face. "I guess I need to work on learning to be suspicious of everyone. You can give me lessons."

Jake sighed. For a man who wanted to apologize, he was making a poor start. "I'm sorry," he said hastily. "You shouldn't have had to worry about who might have a key. Whoever did this is a criminal, pure and simple."

"That's right, Jake. You owe Megan an apology or two." His mother smiled to take the edge off her blunt words, but the look she shot him left no doubt that she expected him to make things right with Megan. Well, he didn't need his mother's urging there. He'd been wrong, and he was man enough to admit it.

His mother set her own teacup down, rose to her feet and picked up her jacket. "I should leave you two alone. I'm going to dash into the kitchen and turn off the tea kettle, then get going. Don't forget there's more hot water in there if you want another cup. Jake will be glad to fetch it for you." She lifted an eyebrow at her son.

"I'm fine, thanks." Megan's smile was tired. "Now that I know the house is empty, I'm probably going to lock it up and go home to bed. Not that locking it up will do much good if someone else has a key," she added with a glance at Jake.

"I see you two have got things to discuss. Besides, it's getting late, and it's a long drive back into the city."

Jake nodded. He wanted to be alone with Megan. His whole being ached with the need to ask her for forgiveness again. The flush on her cheeks had faded, but her eyes held a haunted, vulnerable look. He wanted to wrap her in his arms and hold her close, to stroke her silky hair and softly kiss the bruise on her cheek.

His mother slipped on her jacket and bent over to kiss the top of Megan's head. "You take care, dear. Jake, I don't think Megan should try to drive after that blow to the head. Can I ask you to take her home?"

Jake grinned. Now, there was an idea. "Sure, no problem."

Megan looked alarmed as his mother headed across the foyer toward the kitchen. "I can drive."

"Are you kidding? You look like you could barely walk. I either drive you home or take you straight to a hospital, and that's that."

She swallowed, but he thought he saw relief flicker in her eyes. "Okay."

Footsteps tapped across the tile and then his mother paused in the doorway on her way outside. "I definitely want this house," she announced with a last wave at Megan. "Someone is trying to stop you from selling it to me, but it's not going to work. I can be every bit as stubborn as my son."

"I haven't searched the grounds. Let me watch to make sure you get to your car okay," Jake said. He walked his mother to the entranceway and stood in the doorway while she unlocked her car, started the engine and drove off.

As he walked back into the living room, Megan stood to her feet, swaying slightly. Her eyes avoided his. "I appreciate the offer of a ride home."

"It's the least I can do." Jake inhaled and summoned up his courage. "I owe you another apology."

"Forget it." Megan bent over to switch off the light next to the couch. Her auburn hair swung forward, veiling her face just when he needed to see her expression the most. "You had some good reasons for thinking what you did, and I had no way to prove I hadn't put that equipment there. I had nothing except my word."

He ground his teeth together. What a fool he'd been. "Your word should have counted for something with me."

"But it doesn't," she whispered. The living room was plunged into darkness as she turned off the lamp.

He took hold of her elbow, guiding her forward into the foyer. "That's my problem, not yours. I'm the one with trust issues."

She rubbed her head where it'd struck the floor and winced. "Like I said, maybe I'm the one who needs to learn a lesson from you. Trust is a wonderful concept, but sometimes it is misplaced. Someone is

trying to sabotage the sale of this house—probably someone I trust—and I have no idea who.”

He ventured a tentative smile. “Hey, maybe between us we’d make a good team.”

“Maybe. Or maybe you’re the one trying to sabotage this sale.”

Jake stopped dead in his tracks, his heart colliding with his rib cage as shock ran through his body. He released his grip on her elbow and stood looking at her with his mouth half open.

His stunned reaction brought a slight smile to Megan’s lips, but her eyes stayed serious. “You knew your mom was coming to see this house, and you didn’t want her to buy from me. Why should you when we had a bad past history. You had time to come up with a plan to stop her. Maybe you snuck in here weeks ago and planted that equipment up in the attic.”

Jake flinched with each word she spoke. His stomach twisted. Not true! But it all sounded dreadfully possible. How could he ever convince her? He had only his word ...

He drew a desperate breath and then let it out with a gasp as he caught sight of the wicked humor that gleamed in Megan’s eyes. “Of course, if you gave me your word—” She practically purred the words.

“Point taken.” Jake conceded with a sheepish grin. He deserved that, and more. He watched as she locked up the house and led her out to his Ford pickup, parked behind her ten-year-old Taurus. He held her waist to steady her as she climbed up into the front seat, fighting down his arousal at the sight of her adorable behind in tight jeans.

Swallowing hard, he started his pickup and headed toward her apartment. As they drove down the silent streets, she kept her gaze focused out the car window and her chin held high, and he knew her well enough to know she wasn’t ready to talk yet.

At her apartment complex, he pulled into a parking spot and waited, willing her to start a conversation. But when she got out of the pickup and started across the parking lot without a word, he knew he had to say something more. He jumped out after her and touched her arm, stopping her in mid-stride. Sucking in a breath, he fixed her with an intent stare. “You never said if you’d forgive me again, Megan.”

She jammed her hands into the pockets of her jacket and hunched her shoulders against the wind, looking like a lost urchin. He wanted to take her in his arms and hold her close, damn it. His arms ached with the need to protect her.

“I probably shouldn’t,” she whispered, “but right now I feel like I need all the friends I can get.”

“I agree you probably shouldn’t.” He forced out a laugh, watching her closely. She looked so beautiful in the moonlight, her eyes dark and huge, her skin, flawless except for the bruise, glowing with a silver sheen. “But I intend to prove to you that it’s the best decision you

ever made. I'll never doubt you again on anything, I swear."

Her head came up at that. "Never is a long time, Jake. Be careful what you promise."

He threw open his hands. "I'm done being careful. It was being careful and trying not to get hurt again that got me in trouble in the first place." The passionate words boiled up out of him, surprising even him with their intensity. "And what did it get us? Ten years of pain. Ten years of missing each other. At least, I hope you missed me."

She gazed up at him from under thick lashes, suddenly shy. "Yes, I missed you. You've no idea how much. I didn't realize it myself until I saw you again."

Hope swelled up inside of him until he thought his heart might burst with the joy of it. She still cared. She was willing to consider him a friend. He stared into the hazel-green depths of her eyes, and felt as if he were drowning in infinite pools of compassion. This woman's heart was tender, too tender for a cynic like him, but she was tough, too, in her gentle way. He looked at her with awe. If she was willing, he intended to go after the one thing that he wanted—Megan back in his life, for good.

"I know I might be rushing things," he said. "But I want to see you. If nothing else, to prove that I can be a good guy. Do you intend to keep on seeing that boyfriend you mentioned?"

She shook her head. A small smile crossed her lips. "No. I broke up with him."

A huge grin spread across his face. He tried to shut it down, but he couldn't. She was free, available. He had a chance. "Sorry to hear that," he said, trying and failing to subdue the idiotic grin he could feel stretching his lips. "Okay, I'm lying. I'm not sorry, not a bit. That's great news for me. I'd love to take you out to dinner some night soon. What do you say?"

She moved down the sidewalk toward her apartment door without a word. His heart sank, then rose again when she half turned and gave him an almost imperceptible nod.

Megan's hands trembled as she drew out her keys, and she fumbled as she searched for the lock. Feeling concerned, he hurried to her side and covered her hand with his. Her fingers were ice cold. Gently, he took the keys from her and opened the door.

"You seem awfully shaky on your feet. Are you sure you'll be okay?"

"It's just a little dizziness from time to time, mostly when I move too fast."

He looked into the dark interior. "Maybe I should stay with you until you're feeling better. Come to think of it, I should check out your apartment."

He heard her take in her breath in a sudden hiss. "You don't think whoever it was would come here, do you?"

"Doubtful, but it never hurts to be safe."

"Okay. Come in." She led the way inside and switched on the lights. "As you can see, there aren't that many places to hide. It's just a one bedroom."

"Still, I'll feel better knowing I've checked it out." He gave her a reassuring grin as he opened the living room curtains and checked the locks on the windows. A glance into the narrow galley kitchen told him it was windowless. He moved on to the tiny bathroom and then surveyed her bedroom. A big brass bed stood against the far wall, covered with a snowy white comforter. For a moment he dared to imagine the two of them together on that bed, their bodies tangled in the hot sheets, then drove the image from his mind.

First, he had to earn her trust again.

When he finished his search and returned to the living room, he found Megan seated on the couch, her hands clasped together. "I've been thinking," she said. "There's someone who may know who's doing this."

"Who?" Gathering up his courage, he sat down beside her, his thigh brushing against hers. He was gratified when she didn't try to slide away from him.

"Uncle Sebastian. After all, he's haunting the house. He should see something of what's going on there."

"Whoa. You want to talk to a ghost?" A skeptical comment leapt to his lips, but he bit it off. If he wanted Megan, he was going to have to change. And she was definitely worth the effort.

She met his gaze. "Don't tell me you think Uncle Sebastian isn't real. I didn't fake what you saw in the attic that day, and I don't think the intruder did either."

He held up both hands. "Sorry. I'm trying to change my way of thinking, but it's going to take a little work. For now, let's just say, if you think he's real, then I'm willing to accept that he's real."

She smiled and the sight of that smile sent a thrill of joy racing through his body. "I'm glad you're willing to keep an open mind, anyway." She tilted her head back and looked heavenward. "Uncle Sebastian, if you can hear me, I need to talk to you. Immediately!"

Jake cast a nervous glance around the room, but nothing happened.

Megan's face fell. She looked close to tears. "Please, Uncle Sebastian. I need some help here."

"Maybe ghosts are in a different time zone," Jake ventured, trying to keep his tone light. He laid a comforting hand on her knee. The warmth of her flesh scorched his palm through the fabric. Odd, but he felt as thrilled by that simple touch as he had long ago in high school. "Maybe they can only appear when the moon is full or something. Your uncle loved you very much. I'm sure he'd help if he could."

"That's sweet of you to say." Her smile turned tender, melting his heart. He'd been the biggest fool in the universe to miss ten years of

seeing that radiant smile, those glowing eyes.

"I have a friend who owns a detective agency. I could talk to him if you like," he began.

"Why don't you talk to me instead," a voice said out of nowhere.

Jake's head whirled around so fast his neck almost snapped. With a gasp, he saw Uncle Sebastian standing in the middle of the living room. His fringe of gray hair looked ruffled, and his clothes were wrinkled. The TV set on the other side of the room was plainly visible through his body.

"Uncle Sebastian!" Megan clapped her hands together in delight. "I need your help. Someone has been sneaking into Hartford House, trying to make it look as if the hauntings are faked. I've no idea who. Have you seen anything?"

Uncle Sebastian rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. "I wish I could say, my dear. Believe me, I'd love to help. But it seems there are certain rules even ghosts must follow, and I've bent them about as far as I can."

Disappointment washed across Megan's features. "Just a hint would be a big help."

"Not even a teensy one. Sorry. I've had a talk with some of the higher ups." He pointed upward. "They tell me I've stayed on this plane longer than allowed and had way too much interaction with the living already. There's a reason the living and the dead are kept separate, so they tell me. At any rate, I've got to get going. I tried my best to help Caroline, but I seemed to have failed."

"Goodbye, Uncle Sebastian, I'll miss you." Megan reached out and gripped Jake's hand for support.

Delighted at her touch, he gave her hand a squeeze and smiled at her uncle's ghost. "Good luck, sir!"

"Thank you, young man. I'm glad to see the change in your aura."

"My aura?" Jake frowned.

Uncle Sebastian waved a hand. "You know, the light energy around your physical body. It shows what condition your soul is in. Yours had a fairly large dark spot. Made me worried to have someone like you hanging around my niece. Fortunately, it turned out to be an old wound that had never healed. It's gone now."

"A black spot." Megan looked alarmed. "Is it gone for good?"

"Yes, it is. Don't worry about that." Uncle Sebastian appeared amused. "We control our own fate. Jake's made a decision, one that's healed the past and changed his future."

Jake nodded, meeting the old gentleman's eyes. Although he'd never put much credence in New Age thinking, he knew exactly what Uncle Sebastian meant. "I think I've learned my lesson. I'd just sorry the process was so hard on your niece."

"Maybe she agreed to help you learn this lesson before the two of you ever incarnated. Did you think about that?" Uncle Sebastian's

eyes sparkled. "But I'm afraid I'm saying too much again." He turned to Megan and blew her a kiss. "Goodbye, my dear."

"Goodbye!" Megan wiped away a tear as her uncle faded from sight.

"Wow!" Jake watched the last wisps of mist dissipate. "After that, I could use a drink."

"Not a bad idea. It's been quite a day." She leaned back against the couch, looking exhausted, and explored the tender skin of her cheek. "And it might help numb the pain a little. There's a bottle of spiced rum in the first kitchen cabinet on the right and Coke in the fridge."

"Rum and Coke it is." Jake mixed the drinks and handed Megan's to her as he sat down again. "If I may be so bold, here's to a new beginning."

"To new beginnings." She touched her glass to his with a clink.

Jake watched her take a sip of her drink. Her auburn hair fell in shining waves around her face and her hazel-green eyes seemed as full of wonder as a child's. "A penny for your thoughts," he whispered.

"I was just thinking that Hartford House has given me several unusual gifts." She laughed, and he was glad to see some of the tension drain from her face.

"Like what?"

"Well, hopefully, it's going to make me debt-free again."

"I'll drink to that." He raised his glass.

Her mouth curved in a gentle smile. "And it brought you back into my life."

He lifted both brows. "I'm delighted to hear that you consider that a plus."

She tilted her face up to his and met his gaze. "I'm tougher than you think. My viewpoint might surprise you."

"I'd love to hear it."

"Our relationship has been put to two severe tests, something that never happens to most people even once. And here we are, together again. I take that as a good sign."

Jake set down his drink, his heart thumping. He took her drink from her hand and set it beside his. "I'm so glad to hear you say that. You've made my day, my year, possibly my century." He slipped an arm around her shoulders and drew her closer. Her body curled against his, fitting snugly into his chest. Her head dropped naturally to his shoulder. The ten years since they'd last cuddled together on a couch vanished into the air, dissolving away as surely as the ghosts he'd seen. He traced the delicate line of her jaw with trembling fingers, avoiding the bruised skin. Her eyes went liquid with desire, and he knew she wanted him. Sudden passion flooded his body and he lowered his head.

A soft moan escaped him as his lips found hers. Her mouth felt

like warm silk, and tasted of the spiced rum. He slanted his lips over hers, exploring, nibbling, his tongue tracing the sweet, enticing curve. She shivered and pressed closer to him. Her mouth opened and her own tongue darted out to taste him.

He stroked the long waves of her silky hair, his passion mounting. Desire flamed through his body as her warmth burned against his chest. He kissed the throbbing pulse point in her throat, felt her shudder and knew the old desires were rekindling in her as well.

"Megan. Megan." He whispered her name like a holy incantation and kissed down the flawless line of her throat. Moving of their own volition, driven by desire, his hands cupped her breasts. They'd grown bigger in the ten years since the last time he'd explored her body, and the warm, soft flesh filled his hands. Her nipples hardened against his palms as their shared passion mounted.

"Oh, god." His thumbs circled the rigid little nubs that topped her breasts and his breathing quickened to a pant. His body grew hard with desire as he encircled her small waist with his hands and pushed up on the sweater she wore. Silken flesh slid beneath his palms and then he found her bra and tugged upward, freeing her breasts.

Her lashes lowered again and she turned her head away, suddenly shy, as he gazed at her exposed body with hungry eyes. Her hair spilled over her bare shoulders. Her breasts looked like carved ivory, flawless curves of white, tipped in delicate pink. Desire throbbed between his legs. He lowered his head and took a stiff nipple into his mouth. She moaned at his touch and wrapped her arms around his neck. He rejoiced as she clawed at his shoulder with one hand and arched her body into his. Her cry of pleasure sent a bolt of electricity crackling through him.

"Jake!" She buried her hands in his hair and gasped for breath. "Maybe we'd better slow down."

With a sigh he kissed the mound of her breast and then released her with a rueful smile. Too late for him. His pants were already bulging.

"Sorry. I flashed right back to the last time we made out." He'd ached all night that time, and he suspected he'd do the same tonight. But it was worth it. He nuzzled her ear and inhaled deeply to take in her scent.

"So did I. You just about got me into bed as I recall."

"The closest I ever came with you." He grinned wolfishly at her. "But I haven't given up yet."

She cupped his chin with her hand and flashed him a sassy smile. "We're adults now. But you'll have to wine and dine me first."

"My lady, I'll do it and gladly, on one condition."

"What's that?"

"No ghosts can come along."

Chapter Twelve

Megan leaned toward the mirror in her bathroom and applied a fresh coat of Brown Sugar to her lips. The bronze shade of lipstick went well with her auburn hair. She'd swept her unruly curls up into a French twist, but a few strands still hung free around her ears. She wrapped one silky lock around a finger and released it, admiring the little twist she'd produced.

On her first date years ago with Jake she'd agonized for hours in front of the mirror before he'd arrived. Now the same first-date jitters afflicted her. She patted powder over the makeup that covered the fading bruise on her cheek and giggled at the thought of turning into a teenager again. She certainly experienced all the old feelings whenever Jake came near.

She wanted everything to be perfect for their new beginning. She'd fussed with her makeup, fussed with her hair, and fussed most of all with the cocktail dress of black silk. The empire-style dress featured beaded spaghetti straps and white floral embroidery on the bodice and along the hemline. She posed in front of the mirror and admired the way it clung to her curves. Her mother would never have let her wear this dress as a teenager.

She hoped it would be fancy enough. Jake had told her to dress up, that he was taking her someplace special to celebrate their re-kindled romance.

The doorbell rang. She quickly slipped on her black high heels with the cute little bows and went to throw open the door.

Jake stood in the hallway holding a gorgeous bouquet of flame-colored lilies. He looked as dashing as any movie star in a traditional two-button wool blazer in navy blue and a white cashmere sweater. The broad sweep of his shoulders filled the doorway and his white teeth flashed in his tanned face.

"For you, my lady." With a little bow, he presented her with the flowers. "These are called stargazer lilies. I chose them because you are the star I gaze upon."

Megan's cheeks grew hot as she gathered the fragrant bouquet into her arms. The curved petals and long stamens blazed with or-

anges, reds and golds.

"The florist said they had an elegant simplicity," he added, "like you."

She bent her head over the bouquet to hide how flustered she felt. She'd forgotten how charming he could be. "I'll go get a vase," she said. When she returned from the kitchen, she found him in the living room holding Caroline's diary in his hand.

"Have you had a chance to read any of this?" he asked.

"A few pages, but I had to stop. Since I've met Caroline, it felt too much like snooping." She set the vase down on the coffee table and arranged the lilies. "Anyway, I read enough to know that Caroline lived a life of luxury that you and I can only imagine. She died young and rich and spoiled. It's no wonder she won't listen to anyone's advice and go into the light. She pretty much did as she pleased her whole life."

Jake fingered the worn leather cover. "My mother is thinking about writing a book about Hartford House again, with Caroline as the heroine. But she doesn't sound very sympathetic."

"Your mom might want to read this diary before she tries to make Caroline into a heroine. Maybe I'm being too hard on her, though. She was so young when she died. She never really had time to mature. Arthur was young, too."

"I wonder what he looked like."

"She describes him as a handsome, strapping young man with thick chestnut hair and flashing brown eyes. He was twenty when he died, in May of 1918. Caroline died that same winter in the flu epidemic that swept the world."

"It's quite sad really." Jake opened the book and turned a few pages. "Is it okay if I take this with me? I'm going to see Mom tomorrow. She could have it photocopied and give it back to you at the closing."

"If you want."

"Great. And now, I intend to treat you to a very special night on the town."

The sparkle in his dark eyes set her heart to beating faster.

"Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise," Jake teased. "Let me do that," he added as she opened the closet door and reached for her coat. His breath warmed the skin on the back of her neck as he lingered over her for a moment.

"You smell delicious," he murmured, "even better than the lilies. I could stand here and drink you in all night."

She shivered as he slid her coat up her arms, then escorted her outside. His spicy masculine scent, the strength of his fingers wrapped around hers, the touch of his hand on her arm as he guided her, made her tremble with anticipation. Already her body was responding to his presence, and she wondered what previously denied delights the night

might hold.

As they crossed the parking lot, she was relieved to see he'd left the pickup home tonight. Instead, a gleaming white Lexus was parked beside her Taurus.

Inside, she settled into the rich leather seat and watched with pleasure as he maneuvered smoothly out onto the busy street. They headed south toward the edge of the city where the oldest homes had once been country estates. As they chatted, she admired the competent way he drove, with skill and confidence. She watched his hands on the wheel and thought about how they would feel on her body. Indian summer had arrived, and the night was unexpectedly warm for autumn, but her erotic thoughts didn't help either. Fanning her face with one hand, she opened the side window a crack and let the cool air flow over her.

"Here we are!" With a triumphant smile, Jake turned into the long driveway that swept up to the Casa Blanca, a former Georgian mansion that had been converted into an elegant eight-room Mediterranean restaurant.

"I've always dreamed of coming here." Impulsively, Megan turned to him and touched his hand. An electric spark jumped up her arm. His eyes widened slightly and she wondered if he'd felt it too.

"I know." He looked pleased at her reaction. "You mentioned it before the senior prom. You said you wished we could afford to come here for dinner."

"You remembered." A shiver of pleasure ran through her as she gazed into his shining eyes.

"I remember every moment we've ever spent together," he promised, leaning toward her. His voice was husky with emotion, and for a second she thought he was going to kiss her. She leaned forward, too, her body aching with yearning. But he only brushed his lips across her forehead, then got out of the car and walked around to open her door.

Looking up, she saw the sexy glint in his eye. She was certain now he was flirting, making sure she was aroused. Well, two could play at that game. With a smile, she swung her legs out of the car, letting her skirt ride up to reveal a long, smooth expanse of thigh.

She heard the hiss of his breath as he took her hand and helped her stand. His fingers wrapped around hers as if claiming possession. They strolled through the garden, hidden now by autumn leaves, and past a gazebo. Inside the restaurant, porcelain vases brimming with floral bouquets flanked the heavy wooden doors, and colorful murals in the foyer depicted Spanish streets with rustic whitewashed houses.

In the bar, Megan heard the sensual strains of a flamenco guitarist and the quick tap of dancing feet.

The hostess led them into an intimate dining room. A handpainted tile above the doorway proclaimed that its name was the Azafran Room.

"It's named after the rare and famous spice," the hostess explained.

"They specialize in tapas here." Jake helped seat Megan, his hands lingering on her bare shoulders for the briefest second before he moved to his side of the table. "Everything comes in small servings. The idea is to share and try a lot of different things."

"It sounds like fun." His touch made her want to melt in a puddle. Instead, she sat straighter and adjusted her silverware.

Their waiter appeared, immaculate in white formal attire, and handed out menus. Jake asked about wine, and he suggested a bottle of Castillo de Almansa Reserva.

While the waiter went to fetch the wine, Jake stretched his hand across the table and grasped Megan's fingers in his. "I can't believe how lucky I am to get another chance with you. I tried for years to forget you, but it proved to be an impossible task."

Megan lowered her lashes and examined the gleaming silverware. "I've never been able to forget you either, Jake. And believe me, I tried."

She glanced up in time to see deep dimples appear in his cheeks. A hot sensation swept over her skin, warming her whole body.

The waiter reappeared. After Jake approved the wine, he poured the deep red liquid into tall crystal glasses with a flourish, took their order for the first course of tapas and departed.

"To new beginnings," Jake said, lifting his glass.

"And to Caroline," Megan added. "Uncle Sebastian would never have bought Hartford House if not for her ghost, and without the house, we'd never have gotten back together."

"To Caroline," Jake agreed. "I owe her one. But what can you do for a ghost?"

"She needs to leave this earthly plane behind. But she's only going to do that if she believes she's brought two soul mates together."

"Soul mates." Jake took her hand again. His strong fingers caressed her skin with tiny circles, sending tremors deep into her core. "An interesting concept. How do you know if someone is your soul mate?"

Megan's pulse pounded in her throat. She swallowed. "I guess they feel like the other half of you. Like it's meant to be."

"I know that feeling." His fingers traced more circles of fire over the back of her hand. Her breathing quickened, and she wondered what she could do to arouse him. Feeling bold, she slipped off her high heels and brushed his leg with her foot.

His eyelashes flickered but he gave no other sign. "Maybe I should have a talk with Caroline."

"You're welcome to try." Megan licked her lips and leaned forward, glad to see his eyes widen as her breasts came dangerously close to spilling out of the top of her dress.

He shifted in his chair, and for a wild moment she entertained the fantasy that he was about to leap to his feet and sweep her into his

arms in front of the entire restaurant. But whatever his intention, it was interrupted when the waiter returned with their first selection.

"Jamon Serrano," he announced, setting the dish in front of them. The exotic and extensive menu had described it as a traditional presentation of shaved imported Serrano ham with toasted bread, whole garlic cloves, tomato and olive oil.

"It looks delicious!" Megan took a bite. "Umm!"

"I can taste the garlic." Jake winked at her, some of the tension fading from his face. "Garlicky kisses tonight."

"At least we're safe from vampires." Megan giggled. "But seriously, maybe we should try and conjure up Caroline. I think she's tired of haunting Hartford House but too stubborn to leave until she believes she's brought at least one couple together. We could convince her that we're it."

Jake's eyes softened as he drank in her smile. "I won't have to try too hard, Megan. I know the last few weeks haven't been easy for you, but I feel like a lucky man. And I do thank Caroline. I never would have come to Hartford House with my mother if it weren't for the rumor it was haunted, and if I hadn't come, I might never have found you again. You make me feel alive in a way I haven't felt for years."

Tears shimmered in her eyes. The pain she'd carried for a decade melted, leaving her heart light and free. "I feel the same way! Let's tell Caroline we're soul mates. It would be so great if she could find Arthur again. It would make a terrific ending for your mom's book, too."

"Yes, it would." He gazed at her with a hungry expression. "I'm beginning to believe in happy endings. Do you think Arthur's waiting for her in the great beyond?"

Megan's smile faded a little. "I hope so. I asked Adelaide about it, and she seemed to think he's probably been reborn by now. She believes in reincarnation."

Jake stuck a fork in the last piece of ham. "Let's see. He died in 1918, right? If he'd decided to be reborn right away, he'd be quite elderly, maybe even ready for another trip to the beyond. It could work out."

"I wish. Adelaide says most spirits spend a while in the afterlife assimilating their life lessons before they're reborn. So probably he reincarnated several years later."

"Yeah, but if Caroline was his soul mate, his destiny might have drawn him to return to St. George, even to Hartford House."

Megan frowned. She'd never thought about that. The waiter had returned to refill their wine glasses and set their second appetizer in front of them. This was a cold tapa, called Salpicon de Mariscos. It was a chilled medley of rock shrimp, calamari, octopus, and tiger shrimp with peppers, cilantro and onions tossed with a tasty dressing.

"Hope you like cilantro," Jake said, eyeing the colorful dish.

"I love it. And I think you might be on to something with Caroline's soul mate. It makes sense that Arthur might have returned to Hartford House somehow in his next life. That would make Uncle Sebastian the likely candidate for being Arthur."

"How's the timing work?"

Megan struggled to remember. She'd gotten a lot of information together on Uncle Sebastian for his obituary. "He was born in 1947."

"That would have given him quite a few years to rest and recover in the great beyond."

"There's one big hole in your theory, though. If Uncle Sebastian was Arthur in a former life, why didn't Caroline know him?"

"Beats me. Maybe she was too focused on the past and the way he used to be."

"I'll have to ask Adelaide. She might know more about that. She's another success story for Caroline, too. She and Randolph are dating now."

"Are they? To love. Without it, life is empty." Jake raised his glass.

"To love." Megan drank the wine, but she knew it wasn't just the alcohol that filled her with a warm glow. The whole evening was magical. Their conversation flowed as it always had, as if they read each other's minds. And the way he had of reaching out and touching her again and again told her that the old desire had rekindled as well. The ends of her fingertips tingled whenever Jake brushed his hand across hers. She wondered if she was getting a little drunk, or just falling deeply in love again.

Soon the waiter brought their third course. Jake had decided to try the Sopa de Alubias Negras, a spicy black bean soup with chorizo sausage, while Megan chose Ensalada con Carbrales y Nueces, a salad of mesclun greens and Belgium endive with Cabrales blue cheese, marinated beets, tomatoes, walnuts and sherry vinaigrette.

"So many flavors. This is the best meal I've ever had," she said at last, putting her fork down and patting her stomach.

"The best meal and the best company."

By the time their hot tapas arrived, Megan was beginning to feel stuffed. She was glad the portions were small. Jake had selected Montaditos de Solomillo, beef tenderloin tips wrapped in bacon with poached pears and a red wine pear sauce. Her Crepe Rellena, was filled with goat cheese, pine nuts, spinach and golden delicious apples.

Their conversation turned to old times and old friends. She savored the warm, secure feeling she'd always felt in his presence. But some things had changed since their high school days. A new spark of sensual awareness thrilled through her with each touch, each glance. Her body longed for his touch, his caress, for the intimacy she'd denied him in their high school days. They were adults now, and passion simmered like a low flame between them.

Over coffee and a rich dessert of Pan perdido, a Caramel bread

pudding, Jake suggested drinks and dancing at a nearby bar.

"I'd love it. I need to dance off all these calories."

His arm snaked around her waist as they rose from the table. He bent close, his breath a hot breeze in the hollow of her ear. "Honey, you don't need to dance off a thing."

A short drive took them to the Syngery, a nightclub that featured many styles of music. As they entered, Megan saw a poster that proclaimed that this was "Oldies" night. They found a table and seconds later they were on the dance floor as the group on stage launched into the romantic strains of "Can't help falling in love with you," by Elvis Presley.

The lights dimmed as the slow music began. The plaintive voice of the lead singer vibrated through the air, singing of love and desire.

Their bodies came together and began to move in unison, as if they had been molded into one.

"Wow, someone's trying to tell us something," Jake whispered as he enfolded her in his strong arms. His two hands encircled her slender waist. The spotlights on the dance floor turned her auburn hair into a crown of flame. She gazed up at him with the face of an angel—an angel with sexy curves and desire smoldering in her eyes.

"Maybe it's Caroline." Megan leaned against his chest, and her perfume enveloped him in its sweet scent. His hands wandered to the hollow of her back, to the rounded wonder of her hip.

He tightened his jaw, trying to bring his emotions under control. He had to think about something besides her delectable body or he'd be throwing her down and taking her on the dance floor.

"Caroline," he muttered. Could it be true? Did ghosts have powers that mortals didn't begin to suspect? It was a miracle that he and Megan were back together. A short time ago his heart had been dead, and he hadn't even known it.

And what about Megan? She'd been dating another man, seriously dating him from what he gathered. Yet she'd broken it off without hesitation once he'd apologized to her.

Whatever was between them, it was stronger than their pride and foolishness, stronger than the years apart. How had he ever forgotten how wonderful it was to be with her? His blood sang in his veins and his heartbeat stumbled. He wondered if Megan could feel the evidence of his need for her as he pressed against her.

He inhaled her sweet scent and ran a hand up her spine, over the bare skin of her shoulders, up her slender neck. The heat of her body burned through his clothes. Her arms looped around his neck and her fingers twisted through his hair, her teasing touch sending shockwaves rumbling through him.

The music swelled around them, matching the fire that swelled through his body. His flesh ached with need, an ache that could only be satisfied in her arms.

He'd felt the same ache years ago and fought to control it. They were teenagers then, with their futures ahead of them. They weren't ready for a sexual commitment. But they were adults now, and he'd waited way too long to share an intimate relationship with Megan. He looked into her radiant face and traced the line of her spine again with one finger tip. She drew in a sharp breath and her hips arched against him, telegraphing her desires. Her breasts swelled above the edge of her dress, the nipples visibly hardening under the thin fabric. He wondered if she had a bra on. It didn't look like it.

The first song ended and a new singer stepped up to the mike. As he launched into "Only Love Can Break a Heart," by Gene Pitney, Jake bent over Megan, his eyes tender. "My heart is on the mend. How about yours?"

She stood on tiptoe, still dancing, and pressed her warm lips to his ear. "Doing great," she whispered.

It was late when they left the club. Jake welcomed the cooler night air. His muscles burned with the electric heat now shimmering between them. Even the weather seemed in tune to their mood. A breeze had sprung up from the south and the night had a summerlike warmth.

He slipped his hand into Megan's as they walked, and wondered desperately where he could get her alone. An idea flashed through his mind. "I know I've put your feet to the test tonight, but are you up to a walk in the park?"

"I'm fine." Her smile flashed at him. "I want this night to go on forever."

Her honesty took his breath away. "There's a city park only a block that way." Jake pointed as he slipped his arm around her shoulders. "It should be deserted this time of night. There's a path along the river. I've walked it before when the moon is full. It's beautiful the way the water shimmers in the moonlight. I'd love to share it with you."

They passed an old Victorian house, the lights already off for the night, and strolled through the gate that marked the entrance to the park.

"Are we allowed in after hours?" Megan asked.

"It's a small town. The police might drive by once or twice a night. As long as we keep quiet, no one is going to report us. Heck, most of the people living around the park are probably in bed already."

The sidewalk curved down a hillside. Jake spotted the gleam of water through the dark branches of a tree. He guided her to the right, unto a narrower path that wound alongside the river. Fallen autumn leaves crunched under their feet and a fragrant smell rose to fill the air. "We used to play in the leaves when we were kids," Megan said.

"Me too. We'd make great heaping piles and hide inside, or use them to make mazes or forts."

Megan kicked her way through a pile that lay almost knee-deep across the path. Even in the moonlight, Jake could see the bright red of maples, the gold of ash trees and the rich browns of oaks. Giggling, Megan bent over, picked up a handful of leaves and threw them at him.

In a flash the park echoed with their laughter as they tossed leaves at each other. The wind caught the handfuls and spun them through the air. As they stopped to catch their breath, Jake brushed at the leaves that had caught in Megan's hair.

"Come on." He reclaimed her hand and pulled her off the path under a towering oak tree. He squatted down and began pulling leaves together with his hands. In seconds he'd built a huge pile under the tree. He sat down on it and pulled Megan to his side.

Her warm body touched his as the leaves crunched under her. They gave way beneath her weight, crumbling into a soft warm bed over the hard ground. Jake stretched out on the pile, his grin inviting her to do the same.

Together they half sank into the deep leaves. The sweet smells of autumn enfolded them, woodsy, earthy smells. Jake snuggled up against her, throwing an arm over her hip. He brushed a fragrant blanket of leaves over both of them as she laid her head on the pillow of his arm. High above, a yellow moon peeked at them through the branches of the trees.

His mouth found hers, hungry and searching. His tongue swept over her lips and then slipped inside her mouth. She tilted her pelvis against his hips, and he felt the pounding of her heart against his chest. His hands trembled as he undid the zipper of her coat. The spaghetti straps of her dress slipped off her shoulders. She shrugged her arms free and pulled her hair out of its French twist as his hands slid over the soft fabric of her dress, lifting it away from her breasts. As he'd suspected, she was braless.

Her hair fell in a silky cascade over her shoulders. Jake pressed her back into the leaves and lowered his mouth to the stiff nipples that jutted up into the cool night air. She shuddered with pleasure as his tongue teased her taut flesh. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she twisted her fingers in his thick hair. A breeze shivered the branches over their heads and leaves fell like a soft rain around them.

"Warm enough?" he asked, his blood roaring in his veins. His thigh nudged her legs open.

"Hot and getting hotter." She slipped her hands under his sweater and caressed the muscles of his chest.

Leaves rustled and whispered over her skin as his hands pushed her dress up and over her hips. Exultation soared through him. Years ago she'd always drawn the line here, refusing to let him explore the intimate flesh between her legs. Now she laid her head back in the leaves and arched her hips, inviting him closer. He stopped to savor

the moment and looked up. The stars seemed to spin through the sky.

I'm dizzy with desire, he thought. His fingers stoked the hot flesh of Megan's inner thigh and she giggled.

"You sound like a little girl." He grinned down at her, feeling drunk on love.

"It's like no time has passed since we were together. This whole night has been magical. You make me feel sixteen again."

Sixteen. She'd been sixteen ten years ago when they'd broken up.

He felt her muscles tense as his hands slid up her thighs and between her legs. "What is it?" he asked.

She pressed her legs together again and blinked up at him. "Just a flashback. To the library. You were shouting at me that I was cheap."

He remembered. He took his hands off her legs, suddenly unsure of his welcome.

"Jake." Her eyes looked like dark pools in the moonlight, haunted pools. "This is all happening so fast—maybe too fast."

"What do you mean?" The question came automatically. He knew what she meant. And he didn't have it in him to be angry at her reaction. It was what he deserved.

Megan's hands searched for the hem of her dress and pulled it down. She wiggled deeper into the leafy mound until she was half buried by the pile of leaves.

"Anyone could come along at any moment," she whispered. "Don't the cops patrol the park?"

Leaves drifted down from the tree above them, settling in his hair, fluttering around her. He bit back a growl of frustration. Sitting back on his heels, he summoned patience from his depths. "If you want to wait, that's fine. We've got all the time in the world to get to know each other again."

Her breasts rose, disturbing the leaves. She drew a breath, obviously searching for words. "I'm not a young girl anymore. I'm a grown woman with a life and a career. I still have feelings for you—strong feelings—but maybe we should hold off on the sex until we get to know each other better."

"If that's what you want." Jake forced out a laugh, the sound harsh in the darkness. He rolled off her with a sigh. "Although the problem may be that we know each other almost too well. We're under each other's skin and can't get out." He fixed her with a penetrating stare. "And you know and I know that once we come together, it will be forever. I've spent ten years trying to forget you and done nothing but fail."

Megan sat up and pulled the bodice of her dress back over her breasts, slipping her arms through the spaghetti straps. "I haven't been able to forget you either, Jake. But I'm just a little scared."

"Because I hurt you before." He made his voice gentle. "I can understand that. If you're finding it harder to forgive me than you thought,

I'll have to earn your trust again."

She glanced at him sideways. "It isn't that. It's just that you have a way of sweeping me off my feet, of overpowering me, and I'm not used to that. A week ago I was practically engaged to David, and yet here I am lying on a bed of leaves ready to give myself to you."

Jake reached out and touched her hand. "I don't want to lose you again, Megan. I won't rush if it makes you uncomfortable. Tell me what it will take to win your heart, and I'll do it."

She turned to him, her mouth quivering. "Oh, Jake, I want to believe we can love again as we once did. Just give me some time, a little time."

He grinned at her and stroked her cheek, aware that he would be spending another night alone with an aching body. "Don't worry. You've got the rest of my life."

Chapter Thirteen

Megan closed her apartment door behind her and smiled down at the bouquet of colorful autumn leaves she held in her hand. Bright sunlight poured in through her windows. Outside, it was a perfect fall day. She'd gotten up early to take a walk and collect the leaves.

She smiled as she laid them out on her dining table, admiring their subtle shadings. She saw crimson, scarlet, amber, topaz and lemon. The leaves almost glowed against the pale butcher block. She tilted her head to one side and nibbled at her lower lip, trying to select the best of the best to be pressed into her scrapbook. These would be special pages indeed, for they would preserve her tender memories of their first date after their new beginning. Trust Jake to try and end it on a most unusual bed. Her whole body warmed at the thought of how their night together had almost ended. She shuffled the leaves, discarding a few, while erotic images flashed through her mind. Why had she asked him to wait again? She'd paid for it that night, tossing and turning in her brass bed. The fire that burned in her at his touch was too fierce. By dawn, she'd made up her mind. She'd take him into her bed and find out what she'd been missing for ten years. She'd do it, once the house was sold.

Smiling, she picked up one of the leaves by the stem and twisted it in the air, admiring the twirling colors.

The sharp ring of the phone startled her from her tender reverie. She dropped the leaf and watched it drift down to the table top as she snatched up the phone and pressed it to her ear. "Hello?"

"Hello, Megan. It's David. Can I talk to you?"

She sighed and swallowed her disappointment. Strange to think a call from David could turn into a disappointment overnight, but she'd hoped it was Jake on the line. "If you want to talk about our relationship, it's over. Nothing's changed."

"No." His voice was brisk and businesslike. "Actually, I'm calling about the house. I've been thinking about how much trouble you've had selling it. I happened to be talking to that client I mentioned before and that offer remains open. They continue to be interested in buying Hartford House."

"I appreciate your efforts on my behalf." Megan twisted the phone wire with one hand, searching for the right words to let David down gently. "But I'm afraid their offer comes too late. I already have a buyer for the house. Liz Pendleton is once again interested."

"My client is willing to make a firm offer," David interrupted. "Is she? He's offering four hundred and twenty thousand dollars."

Megan choked back laughter. Four hundred and twenty thousand dollars might sound like a lot of money, especially to someone on her salary, but it wasn't even half of what Hartford House was worth. "Thank your client for me," she said. "But Liz is offering the asking price."

"She is." David sounded surprised. "I thought she was turned off when she found out the hauntings were faked."

"There've been some developments there, David." Megan frowned down at her pile of leaves. "Apparently someone was trying to mess up my chances of closing a sale. Either the fake ghost would scare people off or, if they investigated further, they'd find the evidence of fakery and pull out of the deal. It was a clever plan, but I almost caught them at it the other night."

"You did?" She could picture the stunned expression on David's face.

"Yes. They knocked me down and got away. Luckily, Liz had decided to stop by the house. She found me unconscious and threw water on my head to revive me." Megan chuckled at the memory. "She realizes I was framed. I'm glad to say she believes in me again and knows the ghost of Caroline is indeed real."

"Real?" David's disbelief was plain, even over the phone line. "I'm not trying to give you legal advice, Megan, but perhaps you should be careful. If she's buying the house because she believes it comes complete with ghost, you might be in for a nasty lawsuit somewhere down the line if Caroline doesn't materialize as scheduled."

Megan rolled her eyes heavenward. David just didn't understand. "That's the last thing I need to worry about."

"Really? In my opinion, it would be much better to sell the house in a simple, straightforward business deal. My client assumed you were under a bit of—ah—distress, but I can talk to him and see if he'll raise the offer."

"No, thanks, David. I'm not interested. I've reached an agreement with Liz."

"Don't be hasty. Think about what I said. I'll get back to you with another offer. And most of all, don't sign anything."

Megan picked up a leaf with her free hand and brushed it against her cheek, delighting in the feather-soft tickle. She didn't want to be having this conversation with David. He was part of her past. Jake was the future. "I appreciate your thinking of me," she told him in her best no-nonsense tone, "but I've already given my word to someone else. I'm not interested in another offer. And now I've got to go. I'm

meeting Liz at the house later today for the final walk through before the closing. Goodbye, David.”



Liz’s Lexus was already parked in the driveway when Megan pulled up to Hartford House that afternoon. Liz stood on the wide front porch, her hands resting on the railing, staring out at the sweeping lawn.

“Sorry!” Megan said as she hurried up the steps. “Traffic.”

“Please don’t apologize. I’ve been standing here admiring the vista and feeling like the lady of the manor. I’m going to love living in this house. Besides, my son is late as usual.”

Megan shivered with pleasurable anticipation. “Jake’s coming?”

“I told him it was the final inspection before closing, and he offered to come.” Liz glanced at her with a sparkle in her eye. “He muttered something about watching out for his mother, but I suspect he really just wanted an excuse to see you today. He told me you two have started dating again.”

Megan nodded, her heart brimming with happiness. She too stared at the wide expanse of lawn, the old oak and maple trees brilliant with color against the bright blue sky. In the back, Uncle Sebastian had planted a small country garden. It would turn brown soon after the first autumn frosts. But what a wonderful setting it would make in the spring for a wedding—

Gravel crunched as a car turned into the driveway. The sound snapped her out of her unexpected daydream.

“Here he is now,” Liz said.

Jake grinned at the two of them and bounded up the porch steps in three long strides. “My two best girls,” he said, bending to kiss his mother on the cheek. He slipped an arm around Megan’s waist and gave her a quick but nonetheless thorough kiss. As they parted, his eyes smiled into hers, warm with love. “Ready to get this thing done?”

“More than ready.” Megan fished the key from her jacket pocket and drew a small notebook from her purse. “I’ll make a separate list of the furniture you decide to keep, Liz, and hopefully we can settle on a price quickly, before the closing. I’ve contacted an antique dealer who owns a resale shop here in town and he has agreed to take whatever you don’t want. I’ve hired a cleaning service too. The house should be cleared out and spotless by the time you’re ready to move in.”

“Good.” Liz grinned as she stepped through the front door. “I can’t wait to—”

She stopped in mid-word. “What the—Jake!”

Jake shot a puzzled glance at Megan and hurried past her into the house. “What is it?” Then his voice, too, cut off.

Alarmed, Megan stepped over the threshold and came to an abrupt halt. The normally immaculate living room looked as if a tornado had struck. Books lay strewn over the floor, lamps were overturned and

the overstuffed chair next to the couch was ripped from top to bottom. The stuffing hung down the arms and littered the seat.

But that wasn't the worse. As she scanned the room, Megan's eyes widened and she clapped her hand to her mouth to stifle a cry. On the far wall of the living room, someone—or something—had painted a message in dark red letters several feet high: This is my house! Get out!

Megan's mouth dropped open as she stared in utter disbelief. "Tell me that's not blood," she whispered at last, brushing a shaking hand through her hair. She dared a glance at Jake, afraid he was about to explode once more and drag his mother out of this cursed house.

"It better not be!" To Megan's surprise and relief, Jake wore a look of grim anger but it was clearly not directed at her. He glared at the far wall, then pulled her close and brushed her cheek with tender fingertips. "Someone's messing with you, and I intend to find out who it is."

The damage all around her faded into sudden insignificance. Jake believed in her at last. A wave of happiness washed over Megan. He was on her side. She slumped against him, drawing strength from his lean, hard body. His arms went around her and she didn't care if the whole world exploded in mayhem.

"Ahem."

With a start, Megan remembered. Liz. She straightened and turned to face the other woman.

"I'm so sorry this happened."

Liz waved a hand. "Why should you be sorry? This is none of your doing. Offhand, I'd say someone is determined to stop you from selling this house to me."

"But why?" Megan looked from one to the other in bewilderment. "It's not like it's a hot property. A hundred years ago people could afford homes like this, but not anymore. It's expensive to buy and expensive to maintain."

Liz's lips twitched in an amused smile. "True. I'm going to have to write another best-seller just to pay for it!"

"So why would anyone try to stop me from selling it?"

Jake hugged her and then stepped into the living room. Skirting the scattered books and lamps on the floor, he made his way over to the wall and peered at the foot-high letters. "It's not blood," he declared. "Just paint."

"Thank God." Megan let out a shaky breath. "At least whoever did this isn't a mass murderer, too."

"He's still dangerous," Jake snapped. "Don't forget what almost happened the other night when you surprised the intruder. Someone's broken into this house twice now. You're not spending any more time here alone." He stepped back to her side, and grabbed her hand. "Prom-

ise me you won't come over here again without calling me first."

"I promise." The concern in his eyes warmed her to the tips of her toes.

"What about me, Jake? Will you allow me to live here alone?" Liz chuckled, obviously teasing her son.

Jake turned to his mother. "Whoever is behind this wants to stop Megan from selling the house to you. Once it's sold, you should be okay. But I don't want you alone here either in the meantime. And we have to get to the bottom of this."

"But no one else wants the house," Megan protested. "It's been on the market for weeks without a nibble."

"No one?" Jake examined the painted words with a puzzled frown.

The memory of David's phone call flashed through her mind. "Well, I did get one other offer, but you could hardly call it a serious offer, really. They only wanted to give me half of what the house is worth."

Jake whirled like a hunter about to pounce on his prey. "Who made the offer?"

Megan blushed, praying the mention of David wouldn't trigger Jake's jealous streak. "Actually, I don't know. David called me this morning with the offer. He was only trying to do me a favor," she added hastily, seeing Jake's face darken. "The last he'd heard, Liz had withdrawn her offer, so he'd mentioned the house to a client, and the client was interested."

Jake scowled, clearly unhappy. "I thought you'd broken it off with David."

"I have! I can't stop the man from calling me."

Jake blinked and relaxed. "I know, honey. I'm not accusing you of anything. Just trying to make sure where I stand." His fingers caressed the back of the hand he was still holding.

Hot little electric sparks ran up Megan's arm at his touch. Her anger melted at the sight of the remorse in his dark eyes. She squeezed his fingers. "Like I said, it's over between us. His call was a complete surprise."

"And you turned down the offer?"

"Certainly I did. I'd already promised your mother."

"And besides, I'm offering you twice as much for the house, if I understand correctly." Liz grinned.

Megan let out a little gasp of alarm. What if Liz decided to lower her offer? Why had she even mentioned David's call?

As if she'd read her mind, Liz's smile widened. "Don't worry, dear. The house is worth what you've asked for it, and I can afford it. I'm not about to change my offer now."

Jake frowned as he looked from Megan to the writing on the wall. "I never thought I'd be asking you to talk to David, but could you possibly call him and find out who was behind this offer?"

Megan shrugged. "If you want. But it has to be a coincidence.

From what David said, I gathered his client only made the offer because David mentioned it to them. I assume they didn't have any interest in the property before that."

"They must have some interest," Liz pointed out. "Even at half price, four hundred and twenty thousand dollars is a lot of money. You don't offer that on a whim."

"My mother's right," Jake said. "David may have led someone to believe they could get this house for a song because it's rumored to be haunted. And who knows how long ago he talked to them originally. We need to find out who it is."

"All right." Megan reached into her purse and pulled out her cell phone. "I'll call him right now. There's no reason to stay in suspense."

Jake folded his arms but said nothing as she hit the programmed number on her cell phone and switched on the speakerphone. Megan fought down a twinge of guilt. After all, David had been her boyfriend. That was the reason she'd programmed in his number. Vowing to take it out as soon as she got the chance, she listened to the ringing at the other end.

"Hello?" David answered.

"David, it's Megan. I have a question and I need an answer. You called me earlier with an offer on the house. I need to know who made that offer."

"So you're reconsidering. Great! You won't be making a mistake."

"No, I'm not reconsidering. I just want to know who made the offer."

There was a pause, and when David spoke again he sounded more cautious. "Why do you want to know who my client is, if you're not considering the offer?"

Why did she want to know? Megan searched for an answer, regretting her honesty. If she told David about the break-in, he'd be sure to take her question as some form of accusation, and she didn't mean it that way—although Jake undoubtedly did. She was just exploring every possibility to keep Jake happy.

"There was another incident this afternoon," she said after a pause, hoping he'd assume the ghost had appeared again. "Mrs. Pendleton was upset by it, and I'm afraid she might withdraw her offer. I'd like to be able to tell her there's a counteroffer, but I'm afraid she'll ask me who it's from."

"I see." She could hear the reluctance in David's voice. She lifted both her brows at Jake to signal her puzzlement. Why was David making such a big deal out of giving her the name? "My client would like to keep his identity confidential," David said at last, "until there's a deal firmly on the table. From what you're saying, you're not at that point yet."

"Well, I'm not about to reach an agreement with someone who won't even tell me their name upfront," Megan snapped.

"Please, Megan." David sounded exasperated. "This is perfectly acceptable business procedure. My client doesn't want to give away his intentions to any rivals who might be sniffing around and find out about the deal before an offer is firmly in play. When you're serious about considering the offer, call me again, and we can discuss it some more."

"But this is a house, David, not some highflautin—"

"It's the way he does business, sweetheart."

Megan stiffened, about to rebuke David for calling her sweetheart, then thought better of it. Best to ignore it. "So you refuse to tell me."

"I tell you what, have dinner with me tonight and we can discuss it all you want. Wear that black cocktail dress of yours with the spaghetti straps, and you might even charm me into letting something slip."

She saw a muscle in Jake's jaw jump. That was the dress she'd worn on her date with him last night. But she'd never worn it before. How had David known about it? Was he spying on her? And had he just assumed she'd had the dress for a long time?

The questions took only a minute to flash through her mind. She answered quickly. "No. Nothing's changed since our last discussion. Our relationship is over."

"Then you leave me no choice but to do as my client has instructed me." David's voice turned cold. "His offer remains on the table. Call me when you're seriously interested." There was a click as he hung up.

"That was strange." Megan stared down at the now silent phone in her hand and wondered if David had followed her on her date with Jake. They'd almost been engaged, after all, and he'd probably thought he'd have a big influence on her choice of a final buyer for Hartford House.

"Keeping a client's name confidential is very unusual but not unheard of." Jake looked thoughtful.

"What do you mean?" Megan set aside her worries about the dress, glad Jake had focused on something else.

"I'm thinking whoever this client is, they don't want the house as a house, and that's why they want to keep it quiet."

"They don't want the house as a house," Megan repeated, baffled.

Jake made a wide gesture with one hand. "How much land does Hartford House sit on?"

"It's a twenty-acre plot. It started out as a country estate, long before the city and its suburbs reached out this far."

"That's a lot of land. Prime land, right on the edge of development here in St. George. My guess is someone wants to use the property for a shopping center or office buildings."

"But-but what would they do with the house?" Liz asked. Megan's eyes narrowed as she spoke. She already knew the answer.

"Tear it down."

"No!" Liz gasped.

"That will never happen!" Outrage shot through Megan. "David knows I'd never agree to such a thing. Uncle Sebastian loved this house."

"Maybe that's the reason David is being so secretive. He knows just how unwilling you would be. He doesn't want you to find out why the buyer is interested."

Megan blinked. "It's true that David has known all along how desperate I am. He knew all about the money I owe for my mother's debts, and how I'm planning to pay them off with the proceeds from the house. Maybe he thought he could talk me into this, if no one else wanted the house."

"Debts?" Liz looked confused and Megan quickly explained.

"You poor darling," the older woman said when she'd finished. "You have had such a load on your shoulders."

Jake put an arm around Megan and gave her a hug. "I know I've treated you like a jerk, but those days are over. We're going to see this through together. As for some of the remarks I made in the past about this house, you should have kicked me."

"It's not too late." Liz laughed.

"Please, Mom." Jake shot his mother a look. "Don't be giving her ideas. I'll tell you what. I've made some good friends in the real estate field through my landscaping business. I'm going to put my ear to the ground and see what I can find out. If someone has an interest in this place, one of my buddies may have heard a rumor."

Megan stared at the mess in the living room and shivered. Was David behind the bizarre happenings at Hartford House?

Chapter Fourteen

"Hi, Bill. This is Jake. How ya doing?" Jake sat at the dining room table, head bent, gaze focused inward. Not wasting any time, he'd already pulled out his address book and started calling his contacts in the real estate business.

"Come on," Liz whispered in Megan's ear. "He might be a while. Believe it or not, my son can talk your leg off on the phone. Meanwhile, maybe we'd better check out the rest of the house."

"Good idea." Megan let Liz lead the way. After all, it would be her house before too long—with luck. Crossing her fingers, she trailed behind Liz as the other woman wandered through dining room and the kitchen and then passed through the hallway into the library. Nothing else seemed to be disturbed.

"This is going to be my favorite room!" Liz turned to Megan with a smile. "It's perfect for a writer. Floor to ceiling bookshelves, a bay window with a beautiful view of the garden, and a fireplace with a stuffed chair in front of it. And I love the desk." She stopped in front of Uncle Sebastian's massive oak desk, her fingers caressing the inlaid wood design on the top. "I can see myself spending hours in here, warm and cozy, working on my latest book."

"Warm and cozy sounds wonderful," Megan said. As if cued by Liz's words, a cold draft of air blew over her shoulder, chilling her. She frowned and eyed the bay window, but all the panes were closed.

"Maybe we should try to light the fireplace, make sure it's working properly. It's turned cold in here all of a sudden." Liz rubbed the goose bumps that had appeared on her arms.

"Go ahead. Uncle Sebastian had it retrofitted to gas. No messing around with logs and matches."

Liz stepped closer to the fireplace, but as she did a misty form began to take shape in the air between her and the mantle.

"Caroline!" Megan's heart quickened with anticipation. "She must like you, Liz! She's always materializing when you are here."

Liz smiled. "I was about to say the same. She seems to show up when you are in the room."

"I'm sure it's not me." Megan laughed at the thought. "I came to

this house many times over years, visiting Uncle Sebastian, and I never saw her, not even a glimpse. Until that first incident with you and Jake, I thought she was nothing more than a story.”

As she spoke, she watched Caroline’s face materialize out of the mist.

“Intruder!” the ghost warned and then half dissolved again.

“Intruder? Who?” Megan demanded.

The icy mist swirled as Caroline’s face all but disappeared. The cold in the room deepened. Megan’s temples began to ache as the mist gathered into a column once more. A hand emerged, only to dissolve.

“She’s having trouble manifesting a form for some reason.” Liz looked concerned.

“House empty...too long—” The dim outline of Caroline’s face had appeared in the air again. Her voice whispered, barely audible.

“Don’t worry,” Megan said. “Liz will be moving in soon. You’ll have plenty of company.”

“Megan—” Liz grabbed her arm and tugged her over to one corner. She bent her head close. “I don’t like the looks of her. She’s literally fading away before our eyes.”

“Must be that she needs living people around her. Adelaide has explained to me that we all give off energy. The sooner you move in, the better, probably.”

“I’ve got another idea.” Liz bent her head closer and lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper while keeping one eye on the unstable pillar of mist. “You told me Caroline is a matchmaking ghost. She wants to bring lovers together to make up for what she did to her own lover. Why don’t we give her an energy boost by giving her something to ‘haunt’ for, so to speak.”

“What do you mean?”

“She needs a purpose right now. Why not let her think she’s helping to bring you and Jake together?” Liz beamed at her. “She doesn’t know you’ve gotten back together. I think it’s just what she needs. What do you say?”

With a worried frown, Megan glanced over at the soft mist that marked where Caroline was trying to materialize. Who’d have ever thought she’d be concerned about the wellbeing of a ghost, but she was. “If you think it’ll help.”

It was a relief to know that Liz genuinely cared about the ghost, too, although ultimately Caroline needed to go into the light. Maybe it was past time for her to fade away, and they should let the process proceed. But the gleam in Liz’s eye told Megan that her prospective buyer wanted a chance to interact with her very own ghost. Surely, this little boost to Caroline’s energy couldn’t hurt her.

“I do. I’ve got a plan.” Liz’s mouth twitched with suppressed laughter. “You tell Caroline you’ve fallen in love with Jake, and you need help in winning his love. I’ll bet she perks right up.”

"Okay." Quelling her doubts, Megan stepped toward the fireplace again. All that remained of the ghost was a shimmer of gray fog just above the mantle. Feeling like a fool, Megan addressed the cloud. "I wonder if you could help me, Caroline. I've fallen in love with someone, but I don't know how to win his heart."

With a sudden burst of flame, the fireplace exploded alight. The cheery, leaping flames outlined the translucent form of a young woman. Caroline rubbed her eyes as if waking from a doze and focused her ghostly stare on Megan.

"Did I hear someone speak? Did you say you want someone to love you?" A gentle whisper tickled her ear.

"I want Jake to love me. Um, that's the young man in the dining room," Megan added.

"Jake." The dim outline of a head turned, as if the apparition could see through the wall that lay between the library and the dining room. "A very virile man. I've seen the way he devours you with his eyes when you are not looking."

"What?" Megan blushed, startled by Caroline's words. Curiosity pricked at her. How *did* Jake look at her when she wasn't watching? "What do you mean?"

The flames in the fireplace leapt higher as Caroline materialized into full visibility. "Arthur used to look at me like that," she sighed.

"If you ask me, Jake just needs a little push to make his declaration of love," Liz interrupted, with a sideways glance of amusement at Megan. "It would be wonderful if you could bring them together somehow."

Caroline's smoky eyes widened. "I've wanted to do something like that for so long." Her gaze focused on Megan. "It's been a terrible wait. You have no idea how difficult it can be to bring true soul mates together, when you're confined to one house. But now it's over. I will bring you two together and redeem myself for what I did to Arthur."

Megan exchanged a quick glance with Liz. Their plan was working. Caroline's face shone with joy as she contemplated accomplishing the mission she'd set for her redemption. Maybe it would be enough, and she'd agree go into the light once Megan and Jake assured her they were in love. Surely, Jake would go along with the plan, just to be rid of the ghost.

And maybe because he does love me, Megan thought with a hopeful little shiver.

"What will you do?" Liz asked.

"I have a plan." Caroline floated higher as she spoke. "Trust me." She fixed Megan with her gray stare. "Bring Jake back to the house tonight at seven, and you'll see what a ghost can accomplish."



"Sit down! Sit down!" Adelaide bustled into her living room with Megan in tow and gestured to the couch. She hurried across the room and threw open a window to let in a gust of cold autumn air. Waving her hands to dispel the blue cloud that hung above the coffee table, she started apologizing. "I'm sorry about all this smoke. I was burning some incense and meditating."

"That's all right. I should have called first, but I came on impulse."

"Don't worry about that." Adelaide's blue eyes shone with welcoming warmth. "You're family. You can come over anytime."

"Actually, I have a reason." Megan opened the briefcase she carried and plucked out a small, leatherbound book. "This is Caroline Hartford's diary. I found it up in the attic a few days ago."

Adelaide looked at the diary with unbridled curiosity. "How wonderful! Did the ghost show you where to find it? I wonder if she led you to it for a reason."

"No, it was Uncle Sebastian who led me to the diary."

"Uncle Sebastian!" Adelaide smiled with delight. "The old codger. How's he adjusting to the afterlife?"

Megan blinked. This conversation was rapidly turning bizarre, although no more bizarre than the overpowering smell of incense or the collection of crystals on the coffee table, or the book she could see lying open on the seat of a nearby chair: *Witchcraft for the Twenty-first Century Woman*. "He's doing well."

"Moving on, as he should be, I hope." Adelaide shut the window, cutting off the flow of cold air.

"Yes. But he was worried about Caroline." Megan wrapped her arms around her shoulders and shivered.

"The poor man. He spent most of his life worried about that ghost. Don't tell me he's doing it in the afterlife, too."

"No, I think he's prepared to let her go if he has to. But he did show me where to find the diary. Or rather his guardians did. They suggested he ask me to look in the trunk where I found it."

"That's interesting. It's most unusual for guardians to meddle in Earthly affairs. I wonder why. Must be something in the diary Uncle Sebastian doesn't know about. Have you had a chance to read it yet?"

Megan sat hunched over on the couch, her teeth chattering. "Even better, I found something."

Adelaide frowned. "I'm sorry. I had to let in fresh air and now you're cold. I'll make us some tea."

Before Megan could speak, Adelaide vanished into the kitchen. Megan heard the rattle of teacups, and the sound of water filling the kettle. There was a clicking as the gas burner was lit, and then Adelaide reappeared in the doorway. "The water will be boiling in a minute. You were just telling me that you've found something. What is it?"

Megan opened the diary to the back. "This leather binding forms

a flap. Just the other night I noticed there was a letter tucked inside. Caroline must have put it there before she died.”

“A letter?”

“From Arthur. He wrote her from the front lines about a week before he was killed.”

“How tragic. Oops, there’s the water.” Adelaide disappeared into the kitchen again, but returned a minute later bearing two tea cups. Steam curled into the air from each cup.

“Chai tea,” she declared. “Very invigorating on a chilly autumn day. Now, tell me about this letter.”

“It’s a private letter. I started to read it but then I felt like I was intruding, so I only looked at the first paragraph and the signature.” Megan laid the folded letter in her lap and took the cup of hot tea from Adelaide.

Adelaide plopped on the couch beside her, a puzzled look on her face. “If you haven’t read the danged thing, why have you brought it here?”

“Well—” Megan looked askance at the bookshelves lining the walls, books tumbling out into piles on the floor. “Please don’t take offense at this, but my mother always referred to you and Uncle Sebastian as the kooky side of the family.”

Adelaide laughed. “I knew that, my dear! Your mother, bless her heart, wanted nothing to do with the paranormal. That was her choice and I respected it.”

Megan nodded. “But just listening to you at family gatherings, I managed to get a good idea of some of the paranormal things you can do, and I wondered—that is, I thought—would it be possible for you to pick up Arthur’s vibrations from this letter after all this time?”

Blue eyes searched hers. “Certainly. But why?”

“I—I have a theory. It sounds kind of insane. But if I’m right, you’ll know it right away when you tune in to Arthur’s vibrations. Please ... I don’t want to put ideas in your head, but would you try it?”

“If you want.” Adelaide put her own teacup aside and reached out for the letter. “There’s nothing hard about picking up on vibrations.”

“Even after so long?”

“They permeate the things that have belonged to us; things that we touched when under strong emotion. And I’m sure Arthur’s emotions were very strong when he wrote this letter.”

Megan watched, wide-eyed, as her cousin picked up the letter and held it between her thumb and forefinger. Adelaide’s eyes drifted shut as she concentrated.

A second later they snapped open again like two blue exclamation points in her pale face. “By the goddess, I’d know those vibrations anywhere! But it can’t be. Arthur is—or was—or, I mean, later became—”

“Uncle Sebastian,” Megan said, slumping back on the couch and

letting out the breath she'd been holding. "Arthur and Uncle Sebastian are the same soul."

"How did you know?" Adelaide grinned. "Wait. I already know. I always suspected you were a strong latent psychic."

"I don't know about that, but I guessed it. Uncle Sebastian was always obsessed by Caroline—an obsession that continued even after he died. There had to be some kind of link. And he was born several years after Arthur's death. Suddenly, I realized it was possible that he was Arthur reincarnated. But if that's so, why didn't he know it?"

"A merciful heaven ordains that our memories are wiped clean before we enter a new life so we can make a new beginning," Adelaide explained.

"But Caroline never really left her last life. So why didn't she ever appear to him or recognize him?"

"Poor thing," Adelaide sighed. "She had her own obsession about playing the matchmaker. And by the time Uncle Sebastian bought the house he was already a confirmed old bachelor. I'll wager he never brought a single woman in for a romantic moment. Caroline must have thought he was thwarting her, stopping her from redeeming herself in the only way she knew how. She retreated to wherever ghosts retreat to, and refused to make contact with him. Maybe if she had, she too would have recognized his essential soul-level vibration, which never changes."

"How sad!" Megan touched the faded pages of the diary. "If only they'd talked to each other."

"Isn't that often the way when love goes wrong? So often it's nothing that a good talk over a cup of hot tea couldn't fix."

Megan remembered the years she'd spent apart from Jake, the words never spoken. True, Jake had stormed off in anger, had walked out on her. But later, she'd refused to swallow her pride and go to him with an explanation, had refused to try to talk to him again when he was calmer. She'd had her pride, too, and she'd clutched it to her wounded heart like a band aid. Yet pride was no salve, and the pain of Jake's loss had never really left her.

"It's so easy to lose love," she whispered. "It's almost frightening."

"That's why we must treat love like the treasure it is," Adelaide said. "When it comes our way, we must receive it with an open heart. Caroline's heart was closed to doing things any way but hers—both in life and in death. And now she has lost her love twice."

Unexpected tears filled Megan's eyes. Lost her love twice. The words chilled her to the heart. What would she do if she lost Jake again? She had to lay aside her remaining fears of being hurt once more and take him to her with an open heart, just as Adelaide had said. Otherwise, she'd end her days like Caroline—a ghost in mourning.

"But maybe it's not all hopeless," Adelaide murmured as if to

herself. "After all, Uncle Sebastian's guardians led you to this letter. It appears the higher powers are at work in their usual mysterious ways."

"I hope so. What will happen to Caroline now?"

Adelaide frowned down at the letter in her hand. "If she stays here on the Earth plane, she and her lover are destined to be separated by one more round of rebirths. Uncle Sebastian is moving on. He may spend a while on the higher plane, but eventually he will reincarnate again."

"And what if he doesn't find his way to Hartford House a second time? What if they never make contact again? Will she stay a ghost forever?" The idea seemed too horrible to contemplate.

Adelaide's face softened. "I don't know. Some things are mysteries. But let's trust that it won't come to that. You were led to this diary for a reason."

"But what can I do?"

"You've had the most contact with her. She seems drawn to you."

Megan looked heavenward with a brooding stare. "I don't know why."

Her cousin smiled. "I think the reason is obvious. She senses a fellow soul in love. She'll listen to you. Explain to her that Uncle Sebastian was the reincarnation of her beloved Arthur. Urge her to follow him into the light. Maybe it's not too late for them, after all."

Not too late for them, and not too late for me. As Megan folded the fragile old letter and tucked it back into the diary, she thought of Caroline's wish to bring her and Jake together. She'd call Jake and ask him to meet her at Hartford House that night, as Caroline had asked.

Chapter Fifteen

"I'm almost ready," Megan said, opening her front door to Jake.

"The famous words of women everywhere," Jake joked. He flashed his charming grin at her as he stepped into her apartment.

Megan tried to think of a snappy comeback, but her mind froze, all her senses fully engaged by the sight of the handsome hunk of man standing just inside her doorway. He looked incredibly lean and sexy. Tight jeans encased his muscular legs and a leather jacket gave him a devil-may-care swagger that was matched by the provocative sparkle in his eyes. She caught a whiff of his spicy cologne and memories of the fragrant bed of leaves they'd shared the other night came flooding back. She regretted calling a halt to their lovemaking that night.

Well, tonight was her second chance.

Jake gave a low whistle as he stared at her. "You look plenty ready to me, lady. I thought we were just going over to Hartford House. Is this some special occasion?"

Megan smoothed down the soft blue cashmere sweater she wore. She knew from her inspection in the mirror before his arrival that it hugged her curves and brought out the color in her cheeks. Her short blue skirt ended at mid-thigh, revealing the long length of her legs, and she'd chosen high-heeled sandals despite the chilly night.

"No special occasion," she said. "Except for being with you. That makes any date of ours special."

"I like how you put things." He grinned. "I won't argue with that."

"I just have to apply my lipstick." She dodged into the bathroom but he followed behind her and watched in the mirror as she pressed the brush to her lips.

"What I wouldn't give to be that brush right now," he murmured.

She kept her gaze fixed on the mirror and saw the rush of blood rising in her cheeks. "Be a good boy and you may get a chance later," she teased.

"A good boy or a bad boy?"

She turned to scold him, but he grabbed her by the elbows and planted a kiss on her lips. His tongue darted out to trace the curve of her mouth, and then slipped inside, probing with undeniable pas-

sion. She tasted his hunger in that searching kiss.

"Jake." She spoke his name against his mouth as he released her. Her voice shook with desire. She melted against him, hungry for his touch. Her lipstick was ruined, seconds after she'd applied it, but who cared? Her lips felt swollen from the pressure of his kiss. She glanced in the mirror and saw that her cheeks glowed. She didn't need makeup when Jake was near.

"Let's forget Hartford House," he whispered into her hair. His hands caressed the small of her back. "Stay here. Cuddle on the couch. What do you say?"

Temptation swept through Megan. One of his hands slipped under her sweater, touching bare skin and she quivered, as if branded. The small bathroom seemed hot. She looked into the mirror again and saw her pupils were dilated, wide with desire.

Assent trembled on her lips. Then, she remembered Caroline. The ghost was waiting. They had to convince Caroline she'd brought two lovers together so she would go into the light at last, before it was too late to join Uncle Sebastian in the afterlife.

Megan pressed her hands to Jake's chest and pushed him back a step. "Sorry. There's something at the house I have to show you."

"What about afterward?" Jake pressed with the stubbornness she knew so well from years ago. "We could pick up something to eat, come back here, and get to know one another better."

"That's the whole idea—to get to know one another again." She slipped past him with a smile.

Jake shook his head. "Okay. I'll put on the brakes if that's what you want. I've got all the time in the world. Besides, we do need to discuss the house."

"What about the house?" Megan paused in front of the hall closet, her hand on the handle.

"I spent most of today making calls to various developers I know. I've done landscaping for quite a few of them over the years. Turns out a couple of them have heard a rumor about the house."

"A rumor? Do you mean the usual haunted house thing?" Megan opened the door and reached for her jacket, but Jake moved quickly past her, grabbing the jacket off the hanger. With a gallant bow, he held it so that she could slip her arms into the sleeves. She loved the way he always paid attention to the smallest niceties. It made her feel cherished.

"This is a different rumor," he explained, leading her outside to where he'd parked his car. "They claim there's an out-of-town developer who wants to move into St. George and put up a mall on that land. A huge new housing development is planned for close by."

"A mall!" Megan looked appalled. "Does that mean they'd tear down the house?"

"Every last historical, haunted brick. If they could put a mall there,

the land would be worth a lot more than the house anyway.”

“Is there enough land?”

“There is for a small, exclusive mall, and that’s what they’re planning, apparently. It’s an upscale area. The whole project has been quite hush-hush from what I can gather.”

Jake put the car in gear and started down the street. Megan frowned as she fastened her seat belt. “But if a developer wants Uncle Sebastian’s land, why haven’t they made me an offer.”

Jake stared straight ahead, his mouth set in a grim line. “Maybe they have. David contacted you about a client of his that was interested.”

“Yes, but that couldn’t have been it. That offer was ridiculously low.”

Jake glanced away from the street for a second to meet her eyes. “Maybe they felt safe in going with a low offer because they knew there was a ghost at Hartford House who would scare away all the other buyers—especially if they’re the ones who made sure a ghost was there by installing that equipment.”

“But—but then—are you saying—David knew about this developer and tried to get me to sell the house for half of what it was worth? That he was in on this plot?”

“That’s what I’m thinking. He was your Uncle Sebastian’s lawyer wasn’t he? Maybe the developers contacted him first, and they cut a deal.”

“I can’t believe it.” Megan turned to stare out the side window, her mind churning as the houses flashed by. “David knew how much I love that house,” she said at last in a small voice. “He knew I’d never sell it to anyone who was planning to tear it down.”

“David also had access to the house, didn’t he?”

Megan swallowed. “Yes. He volunteered to help me clean and move stuff out of there. I gave him a key.”

“So he could have gone up to the attic and installed that equipment?”

“I-I guess so.” They had reached the edge of town and the gate that marked the entrance to Hartford House lay just ahead. Megan blinked hard as the familiar landmark blurred. “I trusted him. I can’t believe he betrayed me.”

“It hurts, I know.” Jake’s voice was warm with compassion. He reached out and took Megan’s hand as he braked to a stop in the driveway.

Megan felt as if all the air had been knocked out of her lungs. She struggled to take a breath. David—good, old, steady reliable David—who had held her hand like this and looked into her eyes and sworn that he loved her—had also plotted with someone else to betray her.

Pain and anger raked at her heart. If someone had taken a knife and stabbed it in her gut, the pain couldn’t have been more intense.

And she didn't even love David. She knew that. No, it was the betrayal of trust, the sense that the world had turned upside down, the knowledge that someone had looked her in the eye and lied to her.

If it hurt this much for her to be betrayed by a man she didn't even love, how had Jake endured it on that terrible day when he'd walked into the magazine room and saw her in the act of cheating on him—or so he thought?

"Come on." Jake squeezed her hand with gentle pressure. "We're here. Let's go in the house and decide what we want to do about this. We'll work it out together."

Megan looked up into his concerned eyes and for the first time understood the terrible, overpowering force of the emotions he'd experienced that day in the library. This same pain, this same unspeakable sense of betrayal, this same mounting anger had coursed through him, obliterating all rational thought. Her body started to shake with rage and she knew if David were here, she'd be screaming at him, saying anything that might hurt him the way she was hurting.

...as Jake had screamed at her ten years ago.

Maybe his anger that day was understandable, given the situation. Maybe she should have swallowed her pride and tried to explain later, when they'd both calmed down.

She climbed out of the car and gazed at the waiting house, as tears flooded her eyes and blurred her vision. Her heart ached, barely able to contain the bewildering mix of pain and anger and relief.

Then, without warning, she started to laugh.

"Honey?" Jake rushed around the car to her side and pulled her into the circle of his arms, his voice worried. "Are you okay?"

She nodded. Relief surged through her as she cried and laughed at the same time. The tears came because a man she'd trusted had betrayed her, yet she laughed with joy because at last she understood what Jake had gone through...and she could forgive him with all her heart.

"It'll be all right, I promise you." Jake put a finger under her chin and lifted her tear-streaked face to his. "We won't let the bastard get away with this."

Megan buried her face in his strong shoulder with a sob that was half sorrow and half relief. "Thank God, you're here."

He kissed her forehead and stroked her hair with tender hands. Then he wrapped his arm around her shoulders and guided her up the steps. At the door, Megan wiped her eyes and fumbled for her key. As she stepped into the foyer and switched on the light, Uncle Sebastian's house lay before her.

Hartford House. It had been her beloved uncle's home, and Caroline's. It held a hundred touches that spoke of the love its owners had poured into it. And it was the place where Caroline and Uncle Sebastian had lost each other and where they might find each other

again. All of this was special. It stunned her to think David would have destroyed it if he could. Her lips tightened and a grim determination seized her.

"I'm going to get the truth out of David," she told Jake, pulling her cell phone out of her purse. Before he could protest, she punched in David's number.

"Hello?" David's voice—so familiar. A sense of disorientation swept over Megan. This was David, solid, sensible David. And all Jake had were some rumors. Didn't David deserve his own chance to explain?

"David? It's Megan." She cleared her throat and was glad she could speak without stuttering in rage. In fact, her words sounded deadly calm to her ears. "I'm at Hartford House. Do you remember that offer you made the other night? Is it still open?"

"You bet it is." David sounded eager. "Why? Has Liz Pendleton backed out again?"

Megan glanced at Jake, who was watching her with a grim intensity. She spoke in a rush, trying to sound anxious. "I think she's going to." She paused, debating about telling David about the latest break in. No, better to come up with another excuse. If he was the guilty party, let him think she was hiding something, too. It would lull his suspicions.

"We came over for a final walk-through and walked straight into Caroline's ghost," she continued, hoping she sounded believable. "The ghost was waiting on the porch, blocking the doorway. She didn't even want Liz to come into the house. It upset Liz a lot. She's afraid Caroline's ghost is turning vicious."

"You won't have to worry about her if you go with my deal," David said. "The buyer I have for you is totally reliable, and he doesn't believe in ghosts, period. He won't be frightened off by any apparition."

"That's what I want to hear," Megan told him. "I just want to get this house sold and get back to my life. Could you come over right away so we can discuss the details?"

"Sure." His excitement carried through the tiny speaker. And then his voice lowered and became more intimate. "You know I'd never pass up a chance to see you, Megan. I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

"He's coming," she told Jake with a triumphant smile as she snapped her cell phone shut again.

To her surprise, Jake only frowned. "I wish you'd talked to me before making that call. What do you plan to confront him with? We don't have any concrete evidence he's involved. Only rumors."

"Rumors and the process of elimination. That equipment was planted by someone with access to the house. Who else could it be? And if I make it clear I'm willing to accept a concrete offer, he'll have to reveal who his client is, won't he?"

"Not necessarily. The client might be acting through another dummy corporation to conceal his true identity—especially if he doesn't

want you to know ahead of time that he's planning to tear down the house and build a mall."

"It doesn't matter. I'm determined to find out what's going on and I will." Megan squared her shoulders and stomped into the dining room, switching on the light. The room was deserted. The fireplace was cold and dark, the mantle empty, and the built-in buffet looked bare without Uncle Sebastian's china. She'd packed it up two days ago. Liz was buying the furniture but not the dishes.

Without the gleaming china and the candles, the dining room had an abandoned look. In fact, the whole house had an empty feeling to it. Where was Caroline? She'd promised Megan a surprise if she brought Jake to the house tonight, but so far there'd been no sign of her.

Some matchmaking ghost, Megan thought. At this rate, she'll be stuck haunting this place forever.

"Okay." Jake had followed her into the room. "Whatever you want to do, I'm behind you one hundred percent. Just tell me how I can help."

Megan raked her hands through her hair, already regretting her spontaneous call to David. She needed a plan, something more than an impulse. "Why don't you go put your car in the garage while I think about this. If David sees it in the driveway, he'll know you're here."

"Whatever you say." Jake disappeared out the front door, and a minute later Megan heard his engine start. She walked to the window and stared out into the dark. When Jake returned, she turned to him with a determined look.

"I want you to stay out of sight in the kitchen when David gets here. You'll be my witness if he admits anything."

Jake looked concerned. "You sure you'll be okay?"

"David might be trying to swindle me, but he would never hurt me."

"Don't be so quick to say that." Jake brushed tender fingers down her jawline, then gently touched the fading bruise on her cheek. "Someone was in this house the other night—and it was probably him. That person attacked you, remember?"

"After I chased him to the door and almost got him. Trust me, I intend to be a bit more subtle tonight. And you'll only be a shout away."

"Fine, but I don't like it." His fingers had stayed resting on her cheek, as if he wanted to claim possession. Now, they brushed across her chin and up to her lips. The pad of his forefinger traced the curve of her mouth. "I don't like the idea of you alone in a room with him."

"Believe me, I don't like it either, especially if he's the one who betrayed me. But not because I'm afraid of him. What I'm really worried about is whether I can control the urge to kick him where it will hurt him the most."

To her surprise, Jake laughed. "That's my girl! Go ahead and have at him if you want. I'll be more than glad to hold him down for

you.” A warm smile lit his mouth as he bent over her. She knew he was going to kiss her. Her heart leapt in anticipation as she raised her face to meet his lips. His kiss was searching, eager, as if he wanted to devour her on the spot. When they broke apart long minutes later, she sucked in a much-needed breath.

“Do that much more, Jake Pendleton, and I’ll forget all about wanting to confront David tonight.”

“That was the idea.” His low, baritone whisper rumbled in her ear. He nibbled gently on her earlobe. Each tiny bite sent sharp bolts of passion throbbing through her body. She arched her back and pressed closer for more. Her heartbeat quickened as his warm tongue traced the curve of her ear.

Then she saw a flash of light through the dining room window that faced the long sloping lawn that led down to the gated entrance. Someone was coming. David.

“Sorry.” With a smile of genuine regret, she looped her arms around Jake’s neck and drew his head down for a lingering kiss. “He’s here,” she said as she reluctantly broke the embrace. “Go hide in the kitchen.”

“Promise me you’ll yell if he so much as looks at you cross-eyed.”

“I will.”

Megan watched Jake disappear through the pantry, then strode into the foyer just as David knocked on the door. *Stay calm*, she warned herself. She forced a smile to her face and threw the door open. “David! It’s so good of you to come.”

“No problem.” He stepped inside and flashed a grin at her. He was dressed in kaki slacks, a dark-red sweater and a full-length overcoat. His blond hair gleamed as it fell in waves around his long, lean face. He lifted one hand to display a briefcase. “I brought some of the necessary papers if we manage to reach an agreement.”

“Great.” Megan plastered what she hoped was an enthusiastic smile across her face. She didn’t offer to take his coat, though. She hoped this meeting would be brief.

She gestured toward the dining room. “Let’s go in here where we can sit and spread things out.”

As they entered, Megan noticed that David headed toward the chair at the head of the table. He pulled it out, sat, and placed his briefcase on the polished surface. Frowning a little, she took the chair to his right.

As he snapped open the latches, he shot her a serious look. “I hope you realize I’ve always had your best interests at heart. I’m speaking as your friend, not as this other party’s lawyer, when I say I’d advise you to take this offer. It’s enough to pay your debts, and it gets the house off your hands. I don’t necessarily believe in ghosts myself, but you’ve already seen how even the perception of a haunting can scare off other buyers. This one doesn’t care. Why not sign and be done with it?”

He reached into the briefcase and pulled out a sheet of paper. "Here's their offer," he said, sliding it across the table to her.

Megan caught the paper and straightened it in front of her. The figure on the bottom was the same one he'd mentioned earlier. "I need more," she said, looking up. "The property is worth more."

David leaned his elbows on the table and steeped his fingers together. "It's time to face reality, Megan. Any property is only worth what you can get for it. Like I said, this will pay off your debt and give you a couple thousand to bank besides. Why be greedy?"

"That's easy to say when it's not your money that's involved." She studied the paper again. "It doesn't say here who the buyer is."

"My client wishes to keep his identity confidential for the moment."

"Why?"

David coughed and sat up straighter. "He's a private businessman with his own company, and he doesn't want it to get out that he's spending so much money for a house—at least until he's certain the house is his. Surely, you can understand that."

Megan studied David's face—the face she'd thought she'd known so well. He looked back at her with nothing but earnest sincerity shining in his clear blue eyes.

"We're not talking a fortune here. Four hundred and twenty thousand dollars is a steal for this property. If anything, his business colleagues will admire him for driving such a hard bargain. And I think Uncle Sebastian would want me to know who's buying his house."

David sighed and laid his palms flat on the table. "It's your decision. But this is no time to be stubborn. This is a bona fide offer. Who knows when you'll have another one." His voice sharpened. "Especially if these incidents continue."

"You mean the vandalism?" Megan snapped.

David leaned forward, intent on making his point. "Yes, the vandalism. No one wants to live in a house with a rampaging ghost—"

"I don't believe I ever mentioned that particular incident to you, David," Megan said, her voice cold.

He looked startled. "You must have. You told me about catching someone trying to fake the hauntings."

"Yes, I told you that, but not about the latest vandalism." She leveled her gaze at him. "How did you know about that?"

A flustered look appeared on his face. "Maybe I heard someone talking about it. Gossip spreads quickly in a small town."

"I doubt that." She glared at him, certain now of his guilt. "Only two other people besides me even know about it. I never reported it to the police."

David's expression changed from flustered to indignant. "I don't know what you're implying. You probably let it slip to someone and then forgot that you had. That's understandable with all the stress

you've been under. Let's just drop it and get back to discussing this offer."

"I'm not dropping anything." Her voice rose a little. "Someone planted that equipment in the attic, and I think it was you. You have a key to the house."

His face changed into a cold mask, and his eyes glittered like icy diamonds. "Megan! I can't believe you'd say such a thing to me. Why would I do something so stupid? I love you. I wanted to marry you."

He stared straight at her, meeting her accusing gaze with a look of bewildered innocence.

Megan's breath caught in her throat. She was certain he was guilty, but he continued to challenge her with a wide-eyed, innocent stare. It wasn't as easy to determine guilt and innocence as she'd thought when she'd been the falsely accused party. Jake had had a right to hear her explanation, an explanation she'd been too proud to give. They'd both been wrong in their own way.

Thank God, they had a chance to start again ... as soon as she cleared up this mess with David.

She decided to try another approach. "I suspect you stand to gain a hefty fee for getting me to sell this house. I know the truth. I know this buyer you represent is a developer who plans to tear down Hartford House and build a shopping mall."

"A m-mall," David sputtered, looking shocked. "Who told you that?"

"Never mind my source. Just spit out the truth."

He shook his head. "What I'm telling you is the truth. This is a generous offer given the haunted condition of the house you're trying to sell. If I were you, I'd take the money and not look back. Hartford House isn't going to stand forever, anyway."

A gust of cold wind blew out of nowhere, chilling Megan's neck. She saw David stiffen. His mouth dropped open.

Megan's temples started to ache. She knew without looking who stood behind her.

"Hartford House is my home and no one talks about my home that way!" The icy whisper echoed through the room.

Megan swiveled in her chair. A thick column of fog had appeared in front of the buffet. Now, without warning, Caroline materialized out of the mist, her smoke gray eyes blazing with anger. Her long dark hair swirled around her shoulders as she raised a finger and pointed it at David. "I know you!"

Startled, David leaped to his feet, knocking over his chair with a crash. "Oh, my god!" he yelled. "It can't be."

"I told you she was real," Megan said with a certain smug sense of vindication. Footsteps pounded on the wooden floor, and Jake appeared at the pantry door, drawn by the sound of the chair toppling over.

"I saw you up in the attic," Caroline hissed, stalking toward David.

“Admit it or pay the price!”

“No, you didn’t. I don’t know what you’re talking about.” David backed away, his face white as Caroline advanced inexorably toward him. The massive dining room table did nothing to block her way. She simply stepped into it, her translucent body passing through the wood as if it didn’t exist.

“Stop!” David screamed. He looked desperately at Megan who’d jumped to her feet. “Okay, I did it, I admit it, only make her stop.”

“Caroline, please.” Megan held up a hand and the ghost halted. The apparition stood now in the middle of the table, visible only from the waist up. An unseen wind stirred her long hair and her face glowed with wrath.

“Leave my house!” she shouted.

“I’m going, I’m going!” David backed away from the table, holding up his palms toward the ghost. As he stepped backward, Jake reached out and grabbed the collar of his sweater.

David screamed at the unexpected touch and twisted around, his face contorted with fear.

“I’ll help you leave,” Jake snarled, giving David a little shake. He released David’s collar and grabbed his shoulder, pushing him toward the doorway.

Megan sat stunned in her seat as Caroline slowly floated above the table, her legs and feet emerging from the wood. The ghost laughed at David’s disappearing back and turned to Megan with a triumphant look on her face.

“Good riddance to him! I can’t believe you were interested in that creep.”

“I can’t believe it either,” Megan murmured.

Jake appeared in the doorway, dusting off his hands. He shot her a happy smile and her heart gladdened at the sight of him.

Caroline saw the exchange and smiled. “And now—it’s time for my surprise!”

Chapter Sixteen

At the ghost's words, the lights in the dining room dimmed. Megan's eyes opened wide as Uncle Sebastian's antique furniture vanished. The whole room seemed to dissolve and re-form around them. She found herself gazing in astonishment at the house as it must have looked in its heyday in the 1900s, the rooms decked as if for a gala ball.

Two lovely Tiffany lamps in purple, green and blue, sat on the polished buffet table, providing subdued light. Between them, a meal waited in gleaming silver serving dishes. Megan caught the rich scent of roast beef and saw the mounds of mashed potatoes.

She turned to examine the rest of the room and gasped at the magnificent floral centerpiece that sat on the dining room table. Roses and orchids mingled with colorful fruit in an ornate carved golden bowl. Tall candlesticks with flickering tapers stood on each side of the arrangement. At the head of the table, two places were set with heavy silver, china and sparkling crystal. A wine bucket stood beside the plates, its silver surface dewed with moisture. It held a bottle of wine, half-buried in ice.

At one end of the room, heavy velvet drapes were thrown open to reveal the lawn and a driveway lined with colorful Chinese lanterns. On the other end, logs blazed in the fireplace. The golden flames of the crackling fire reflected in the polished wood of the dining table.

Somewhere soft strains of music began to play. Megan frowned. It sounded classical, yet light and lively. Mozart perhaps?

Jake stood frozen in the doorway to the dining room and looked around in astonishment. "What on Earth?"

"It's Caroline's idea of a surprise," Megan explained although she too found it hard to believe what her eyes were seeing. She reached out toward the smooth surface of the dining room table. Her fingers touched solid wood. Her gaze fastened on the gleaming silver and delicate china. Candlelight sparkled on every surface. "I think it's a romantic dinner for two."

Jake's gaze swept over her, his eyes smoldering with passion. "Smells delicious, whatever it is." He stepped up to the table and pulled

the wine bottle from its holder. His face took on an astounded look as he eyed the label. "Complete with a French wine. Caroline spares no expense, I see."

Megan looked up, startled, as a ghostly giggle shivered through the air. But Caroline's misty form was nowhere to be seen. "Are you watching?" she wondered aloud., and she knew he heard it too. "I'm leaving you alone. Enjoy the night!"

Somehow Megan knew Caroline was speaking the truth. She wanted them to be alone, to fall in love.

Jake cocked his head to one side, listening to the music. "Well, she's gone anyway. But I wonder where she's stashed the live orchestra."

Megan stifled a nervous laugh. "Are you so sure it's live?"

He gave her a rueful grin. "Guess I don't want to know. Living with a ghost in the house could take some getting used to. Has she transported us back in time, or what?"

"I don't know." Megan walked over to him and took his hand. "I only know it's magical. It's as if we're the inhabitants of our own little world, for just this evening."

His dark eyes swept over her happy face. "Let's make good use of it then." He picked up the bottle opener that lay near the wine cooler. The bottle made a soft popping sound as the cork came out. Smiling, he poured the light red wine into slender crystal glasses and handed her one.

"To a magical evening."

"To a magical evening," she agreed. The wine filled her mouth with sweetness and then warmed her throat.

"Please be seated, my lady." Jake set down his glass and pulled out her chair with a flourish. "I'll serve you your dinner."

"Such service." She smiled into her wine glass. "Maybe I'll keep you."

Dishes rattled behind her on the buffet as Jake prepared her a plate of food. "I'm definitely hoping you will," he said, placing it in front of her. Thin slices of beef lay alongside a pile of mashed potatoes. Fresh peas and a beet salad completed the meal. "Looks like home cooking, early-1900s style."

"I guess Caroline has given us the run of her old home for the evening." Megan picked up her fork and took a tentative bite as Jake prepared his own plate and then sat in the chair across from hers. The beef melted in her mouth.

"How is it?" he asked.

"Delicious."

"There's coffee and apple pie for dessert." Jake took his own bite of the food. "Hmmm." His eyes sparkled in the soft candlelight. "Caroline must believe in the old saying that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach."

Megan laughed, feeling lightheaded and giddy after the tension of confronting David. "I thought that was only if you cooked it yourself. I could never cook like this."

His gaze softened. "You don't need to know how to cook when you look so breathtakingly beautiful by candlelight."

Feeling like a queen, Megan leaned back in her chair. A sense of contentment filled her. The air was sweet with the heavy scent of the roses in the floral centerpiece. The mellow light from the candles flickered over the rich red petals. Somewhere, a violin played a haunting solo as Jake reached across the table and curled his fingers around her hand.

Desire exploded through Megan at his touch. She stared into his face as he ate, barely listening to his words, aware only of a deep gratitude that they'd found each other again before it was too late, before she'd made some terrible mistake—like marrying David.

Hartford House—and Caroline—had brought them together. She had to make sure the guilt-stricken ghost understood that.

But first there was this perfect meal to enjoy. The dinner flew by as they chatted and laughed and drank their bottle of wine. Afterward, Jake poured coffee from a silver urn into tiny, hand-painted china cups and they each ate pieces of apple pie that tasted fresh-baked from the oven.

When they arose from their chairs at the end of the meal, the violin fell silent and the full orchestra resumed, playing a waltz.

Jake flashed a gallant smile and held out his hands. "Care to dance?"

Her feet seemed to float on air as she moved into his welcoming arms. "Love to."

The music swelled. He whirled her into the foyer and waltzed her around the tiled floor. As his arms tightened around her, she thought of the ballroom above them.

"I wonder—" she said aloud.

"The ballroom?" he said at the same moment.

They both laughed. "Caroline must be putting ideas in our heads," Megan said.

"So let's see what she's up to," Jake challenged.

Hand in hand, they climbed the two flights of stairs to the attic, to find it as transformed as the rest of the house. A splendid crystal chandelier hung down from the center of the ballroom and the oak floor glowed under its warm light. Music from some unknown source filled the room—another waltz. Gas sconces lit the walls and bouquets of fresh flowers in silver vases adorned long tables on the opposite ends of the room.

"Shall we dance?" Jake asked, taking her hand and leading her out onto the floor. The room spun around them as they moved, their bodies pressing close together. Megan lifted her gaze and drank in

Jake's handsome face as he guided her through the steps while the music swelled around them. This was magic, pure magic. To be in Jake's arms again, alone together, dancing through an enchanted evening.

The music played for a long time while they danced together. They didn't speak—they were beyond words now, their eyes pledging their undying love.

When the last note finally died away and they stopped, they found a punch bowl on one of the tables.

"What a night!" Jake drank down his glass and looked around at the magical ballroom. Above them the light of the chandelier dimmed. "But I think Caroline is trying to tell us it's time to go."

"I'll remember this forever." Megan took Jake's hand and they descended the stairs to the second floor together.

In the hallway, they both paused, their eyes widening again. The doors to the master bedroom suite were thrown open and twin candelabra burned on side tables on each side of the huge bed. Inside, the fireplace in the far wall was ablaze, spilling golden light out into the dim room. Megan caught her breath as she saw that the heavy velvet coverlet had been turned down and bright red rose petals lay scattered over sheets of embroidered white silk.

"I think there's something else Caroline is trying to tell us," Jake said at last, breaking the silence. He looked down at her, his dark eyes shining. His hand pressed into the small of her back, urging her into the bedroom. Without thinking, she leaned into his body and raised her face for his kiss. As his lips claimed hers, she melted against him. Somewhere in the distance, the music started again, almost inaudible, a soft, haunting melody.

"Megan!" Whispering her name, Jake swept his arms around her and lifted her off her feet. She wrapped her arms around his neck and let the dreamlike magic enfold her as he carried her to the bed. Rose petals scattered as he laid her down, but the air was fragrant with their lingering scent.

Jake stretched out on the bed beside her and drew her close, his eyes filled with love. His hands were tender on her skin as he slipped the cashmere sweater over her head. They kissed, their mouths making promises. Their tongues mingled in an ancient dance, as she fumbled with the buttons of his shirt and he undid her bra. Then his hot, naked flesh touched hers and she gasped with pleasure.

His hands swept under her, cupping her buttocks, lifting her and tugging down the short, blue skirt. She kicked off her high-heeled sandals and helped him remove the delicate lace panties she wore.

The firelight cast a warm glow over her bare skin. She smiled as its flickering light outlined the muscles of his chest. She traced the outline of his muscles with her fingertip and was rewarded with a slow, deep shudder of pleasure that ran through his whole body. She

ran her fingers through his soft mat of hair and sighed as he kissed her mouth, her neck, the curved swell of her breasts. She arched her back with longing, her nipples hard with anticipation. His mouth closed over the taut tip of one breast at last, sucking, teasing, driving her to a frenzy of desire and a wave of fire ran the length of her body.

"Megan." He whispered her name like a prayer. His hands roamed everywhere now, branding her body as his. She gasped in pleasure as they swept over her belly and down between her thighs. He bent low, his tongue tracing the crease where her inner thigh joined the unexplored private flesh she'd never let any man touch, and she writhed in anticipation.

She parted her legs for him without hesitation, all doubts gone, and moaned in delight as his fingers probed her finding her moist and ready for his entrance.

"Make love to me Jake," she commanded. "I've waited so long. Too long."

His features hardened with desire in the firelight as he loomed over her, but his eyes were luminous and tender with love. She wrapped her legs around his hips and opened her body to him. The hard length of him brushed her thigh, and she trembled at its hot, silken touch. Then he was inside of her in one strong thrust, ramming deep into her center.

"Jake!" She cried his name in surrender and clung to him, her hips rising to meet his thrusts, her body shuddering with explosions of pure ecstasy as he drove into her, possessing her. The firelight running over her skin matched the heat that exploded deep in her center as he filled her. With a cry, she let the orgasm carry her away to a place of flame and fire beyond space and time...



Megan started awake and sat up in the bed. Something was missing. Jake's warm body was no longer wrapped around hers. The fire had died down to a pile of glowing embers, and the room was dark. She reached out a hand to the place where he'd lain, but her searching fingers encountered only cool sheets and the silken touch of a few scattered rose pedals.

"Jake?" she whispered into the darkness, but no answer came.

Throwing off the sheet, she got to her feet and groped on the shadowed floor for her cashmere sweater and short skirt. Her hands encountered the soft fabric, and she pulled both garments on, hoping they weren't inside out. Then she padded across the floor in her bare feet and headed down the stairs.

A light spilled out of the library across the first floor hallway. Moving slowly, Megan peeked inside.

Caroline sat in the chair behind Uncle Sebastian's desk, weeping as she stared into the fire.

"Caroline!" Megan stopped in the doorway in surprise. "What's

wrong?" A glance at the grandfather clock in the far corner told her it was four a.m.

The ghostly apparition raised haunted gray eyes to stare at her. "Megan, I'm sorry. Did I wake you up?"

Megan gave her a reassuring smile. "No." She avoided the subject of her missing lover, not wanting to distract the ghost with a new set of worries. "Why are you crying?"

Caroline wiped away a misty tear. "Because I finally achieved what I've been trying to do for so long. I brought two lovers together. And it was wonderful. But it made me realize how alone I am. I've been alone for more years than I want to remember."

Pity welled up in Megan's heart. "You don't have to be alone." She remembered Adelaide's words. "You can go into the light."

"Too late." Caroline gazed down at the floor in sorrow. "My family died a long time ago. They've gone on to other lives. I'll never find them again."

Megan stepped into the room with her hands held out. She forced a confident smile unto her face. "You're wrong about that. There is someone waiting for you on the other side—someone you know."

The ghost looked up, her face puzzled. "Who?"

"My Uncle Sebastian."

Disappointment darkened Caroline's already shadowy features. "Your uncle was a wonderful man, Megan. Charming, intelligent. I always kept my distance when he lived here because I didn't want to get involved with him. My heart belongs to Arthur. I promised it to him long ago, and I must keep that promise no matter what it costs me."

"But that's the wonder of it, you see," Megan said, praying Caroline would believe her. "Uncle Sebastian is—was—Arthur."

Caroline's shape flickered and almost dissolved as she absorbed Megan's shocking words. "Sebastian—Arthur? How can that be?"

"Think about the dates," Megan urged. "Your Arthur died during the war and my uncle was born after the war. So he could easily have been Arthur's spirit reincarnated."

"Him and millions of other people." Caroline solidified again, her face skeptical.

"Uncle Sebastian appeared to me after he died," Megan continued, "and showed me where to find your diary. I found a letter from Arthur to you tucked inside the back flap."

Caroline gave her a shocked look. "You read my diary? My letter?"

"No, I didn't read them. It felt wrong to do that, somehow. But I took them to my cousin Adelaide. You met her."

"Ah, yes." Caroline smiled. "The New Age redhead with the mystical boyfriend."

"They've started dating since their visit here, by the way," Megan added. "You've triggered more than one romance."

The mention of romance only brought a renewed snuffle from Caroline. Megan bit her lip and hurried on. "Anyway, Adelaide held the letter and picked up its psychic vibrations. And she assured me it proves that my uncle and your Arthur are one and the same soul."

Caroline looked heavenward, a faint glimmer of hope appearing on her face. "Is it possible? Oh, how I'd love to believe that was true and go into the light to join him. But I can't. I still have one responsibility I haven't fulfilled here on Earth."

"What's that?"

"I must find a mate for the new owner of Hartford House—for Liz Pendleton—before I go."

"Liz doesn't want to marry again," Megan assured the ghost, hoping she wasn't telling too big a fib. "She's much too busy writing best-selling novels and enjoying her independence."

"Actually, that's the truth." Megan whirled to see Jake standing in the doorway. He wore only his jeans. The firelight outlined the muscles of his bare chest and gleamed off the amber highlights in his tousled brown hair. "My mother found her soul mate years ago in my father, and she's not a woman who settles for less."

"She lost her soul mate, too?" A stricken look crossed Caroline's face.

Jake nodded. "My father believed in ghosts and psychics and all that stuff. He took a psychic's advice about some investments and lost all our money. A month later he had a heart attack and died. I've always believed it was the stress and guilt he felt that killed him."

"My poor darling Jake," Megan whispered. "I didn't know."

His eyes were tender as he gazed down at her. "I never told you. It's why I've hated the paranormal ever since. But my mother has continued to believe like my father did. She said one mistake didn't disprove a whole philosophy. She even made back all the money my father had lost and more by writing about paranormal romance."

Megan laid a hand on his arm. "No wonder you hated the idea of her buying Hartford House."

Jake's gaze softened. "But she was right, don't you see? Her refusal to abandon what she believed in brought us together again."

"The higher powers definitely work in mysterious ways," Megan agreed.

Jake turned to Caroline. "You needn't worry about my mother. Megan and I will watch over her and make sure she's never lonely."

"I promise you we will." Megan aimed a reassuring smile at Caroline. Then, with a glad little cry, she slipped into Jake's arms. "I didn't know where you'd gone."

"Sorry." He bent to kiss her, his lips moving slowly over hers, savoring their reunion. When at last they parted, he took a breath and smiled. "I didn't want to wake you up, but I'd had an idea. I thought we could get married out in the garden. I could build a gazebo there."

"A wedding!" Caroline clapped her hands together.

Jake smiled at the ghost and Megan grinned to herself. Apparently, he'd learned to take ghostly appearances in stride.

"Please excuse me," he said. "You and Megan were having a conversation and I interrupted."

"I was telling Caroline that Uncle Sebastian was really Arthur re-incarnated," Megan explained. She turned to Caroline, her voice earnest. "If you go into the light, you should find him waiting for you."

Caroline rose to her feet. She looked undecided. Megan held her breath and prayed.

"Perhaps it is time to go," the ghost whispered.

"I think that would be best." Jake winked at Megan. "You could try to find a romantic partner for my mother, but it would be hard going. She likes her independence too much."

"Don't even worry about that, Caroline," Megan said, throwing Jake a quelling look. "Liz is an attractive woman. If she wants to marry again, she'll find someone."

"Well, if she's been married once already anyway ..." Caroline's voice trailed off as she drifted out the door. Holding hands, Jake and Megan followed her back through the family room and out the French doors that led to the back gardens.

A full moon hung low in a star-strewn sky. Caroline's ghostly shape seemed to shimmer in the pale light as she walked toward the garden. "Where will you put the gazebo?" she asked, her voice barely audible over the soft sighing of the wind in the trees.

"There." Jake pointed to where a towering willow tree stood. "In the shade, overlooking the roses."

Caroline turned, her ghostly gaze bright in her pale face. "Yes. That's a perfect place for a wedding."

"A perfect place," Megan agreed, holding Jake's hand tight as the ghost began to fade away into the moonlight.

Her eyes blurred with tears, and the moonlight ran together, forming a bridge of light that led upward, into the sky.

Epilogue

Megan stood at Jake's side in the gazebo and gazed out at the garden. Spring had finally arrived in all its splendor, and the daffodils and tulips were in bloom, creating bright spots of color wherever she looked. The trees were beginning to bud and the breeze held a touch of warmth at last.

She laid her hands on the railing and wondered exactly how many chairs they could set up on the grassy space in front of the gazebo. Jake would be able to tell her. He'd measured everything in the garden over the winter before building the gazebo this spring.

She smiled as his arm went round her shoulder and he drew her close. "Just a little over a month to go," he said with a tender smile, "and you'll become my bride."

"I can't wait," she breathed. She grabbed his collar and pulled him down to give her a kiss.

His lips touched hers and her heart sang with joy. He was everything she'd ever wanted, her first love and her only love.

Thank you, Caroline, she thought, breaking free and gazing up into Jake's eyes.

There was a soft flutter of sound, like the whisper of wings, and something white flashed in front of her eyes, then fell on the wooden boards at her feet.

With a small cry of amazement, Megan bent over and picked up the single white rose that lay there.

As she held the perfect rose up for Jake to see, the air around them shimmered and for a moment two ghostly figures stood on the green lawn in front of the gazebo, arm and arm. Caroline smiled and blew a kiss and Uncle Sebastian nodded. And then they vanished again.

Megan lifted the rose and inhaled its sweet scent. The rose was real. What'd she'd just seen must be real, too.

"They found each other," she cried in delight, turning to Jake.

His arms closed around her again. "Soul mates always do," he said.

About the Author

Words are Jeanine Berry's passion. She began her career as a journalist, but that deadline-driven world left her little time for her own writing. Haunted by a desire to put her imagined worlds down on paper in novel form, she pursued her creative writing dreams.

Her first fantasy novel was published in 2000, and several more have followed. She is also the co-author of an SF series. *Dayspring Destiny*, the final book of her Dayspring series, took the 2004 Eppie for best fantasy novel.

