



Christmas Spirit

A NOVEL

Rebecca
Anderson

CHRISTMAS SPIRIT

...Something Diana saw during a lightning flash made her jump. Her breath caught in her throat. Her gaze flew to the reflection in the glass.

Someone was behind her!

A man!

In that split-second she'd been able to see the image of a man standing across the room, just in front of the wardrobe mirror.

Fear and a terrifying validation paralyzed her. Someone was there! She was no longer half-asleep or unsure, as she'd been with the shadow in the car mirror. This time she was positive she had seen someone.

Another flash of light, and, once again, the man was behind her. Now her eyes knew where to look and he became more distinct. He was tall with wide shoulders and short, light hair. The distance made it impossible to distinguish the color of his eyes, but his penetrating gaze was unmistakable.

He had looked at her with a mixture of sadness and longing.

With slow movements, shaking from head to foot and unable to breathe, she turned around. Just then another flash illuminated the room.

Nothing.

Even though Diana couldn't see anyone in the shadows, she knew, with every fiber of her being, that someone was in the room with her.

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CHRISTMAS SPIRIT

BY

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CHRISTMAS SPIRIT
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who inspire me with their strength and limitless capacity to love:
My mother, Colleen; my cousin and best friend, Virginia;
my daughters, Jaimie, Aubrey & Libra;
my sisters Susan & Elaine, Vicky, Debby & Candace;
and my Aunt Marie and Aunt Ginny.*

CHAPTER 1

“Alex White.”

Hearing the name stopped Diana Christmas’ slow progress, her stunned mind on auto pilot. Did she know the name? From which of the emergency room cubicles had the voice come? All she heard was the tight squeaking of shoes against the buffed hospital linoleum, sounding more like a basketball court than an emergency room.

She heard the voice again. “Alex White?”

And another said, “That’s correct, doctor, one in the same. Super rich. Racecar driving is his hobby.”

Distraught over her grandfather’s death, Diana had become lost in the maze of hospital corridors and, following the exit signs, was dismayed to find herself smack dab in the middle of Santa Rosa’s General’s busy emergency room. From an open doorway she watched, for long moments unable to pull her gaze from the horrific scene before her.

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Then a thread of reality shook her from her daze. She'd thought she knew the name, Alex White, but she was mistaken. This man belonged to someone else, was someone else's family, not hers. Her family was...gone. She stumbled on down the corridor.

* * *

"Get his clothes off," the doctor ordered.

A nurse clipped the hem of the man's charcoal gray pants and ripped. The pants had cost two hundred dollars. Now they were worth nothing. Not that the slashes mattered. Volumes of blood had ruined them. The shredded black turtleneck came next, giving the male nurse fits as he peeled it away.'

"He's bleeding out," the doctor barked. "Hurry with that IV."

"Doctor, his BP's down to...he's in defib." The male nurse brought the crash cart to within working distance.

"Paddles!" The doctor stepped back. He and the redheaded nurse considered the man on the table while they waited the few seconds it would take to charge the machine's paddles.

"He looks like a young Robert Redford." The redhead sighed.

"Weird his face isn't as mangled as the rest of him." The male nurse tilted his head sideways to get a better look, his eyes opening wide in recognition.

The redhead said, "Airbag must've saved his face."

The defibrillator buzzed its readiness, bringing their attention back to the doctor.

"Leg's in bad shape," the doctor said as he held the paddles out toward Martha for an application of lubricating gel. "It'll be a miracle if he walks again...if he lives."

With quick, efficient movements, the redhead squirted lubricant on the reflective discs. "I'd take this dreamboat walking or crawling."

The male nurse snorted. "You and every other woman in America!"

Positioning the paddles on the man's chest, the doctor yelled,

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“Clear!” A jolt of amps, a deep hum. Then silence.

“No change, doctor.” The redhead looked at the other nurse, then back to the patient. “I’ve never seen him before. Who is he?”

The doctor said, “Epi, three milligrams. Atropine, one milligram.”

A needle went into the IV line. “Man, this is Alex White.”

Everyone looked back at the man’s face as the doctor once again positioned the paddles over the man’s chest. “Clear!”

The redhead stepped back. “Never heard of him.”

Voltage shot though the man’s body again. His chest heaved.

“Guy’s in the paper all the time. Kind of a cross between Donald Trump and Andretti. Wonder what he’s doing here? The closest speedway is just outside of San Francisco.”

* * *

Alex heard the hum of the defibrillator and braced himself for the shock. He heard the machine work, but felt nothing. Nothing more than a dizzying, floating sensation. Then he realized he was floating...out of his body! Panic seized his chest like a vise grip.

He tried to stay on the gurney, but a sudden weightlessness turned him into an unwilling astronaut, leaving him unable to control his actions in zero gravity. Part of Alex—his spirit, he guessed—had become detached from his physical body.

But wait, he could feel his heartbeat. He stilled to focus on it. No, it was more of a drumming life force than an actual heartbeat. *Shit!* He wanted back the strong, sure physical heartbeat of being alive. He didn’t want to die. Nevertheless, he knew with a crushing certainty that death was overtaking him.

Concentrate, he thought to himself. He’d always had a strong will. He would will himself back into his body. He had to get back. Go back into your body. He focused all his energy on the thought. So close. Keep going. But some sort of barrier held him back.

His fluid movements couldn’t take him any closer than a few inches

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above the people surrounding the table. The floating sensation was disorienting. I have to do something—stop what’s happening. But he was helpless to control any part of the scenario before him.

A sense of anger joined his panic, urging him into an agitated kind of floating back and forth as his shouted commands fell on unhearing ears.

“You, you’re not helping! Get out of the way!”

God, the blood! His blood. So much. “Do something!” Frustration, compounded by the second, tightened into an iron fist within him.

All the medical personnel were moving with slow, nonchalant motions, as if they were playing a game of cards. His rational mind told him their movements were quick and competent. But reason had stayed with his earthly body, leaving an urgent instinct to survive.

A thin metal instrument fell to the floor, the tinkling sound a hollow echo in the room, further fraying his nerves. Disconnected from the others in the room, his frustration had no outlet.

In futile desperation Alex shouted to the people who could no longer hear him. “Hurry! You, with the blood-shot eyes...do something! The bone...my leg!” He managed to edge closer to the heavy man in white, who had one knee on the gurney. A man, who, it appeared, was determined to break Alex’s ribs as he administered CPR.

Alex yelled in his ear, “You oaf! Are you trying to save me or kill me?”

The doctor turned his head toward Alex, and Alex thought for a startled moment that the man was going to answer him.

Instead, the doctor said, “Paddles re-charged?” It was as casual a comment as one of Alex’s mechanics saying, “Pass me the wrench.”

Alex felt sick. He didn’t want to watch. Once again, the reflective discs were positioned on his chest. He turned away. Could they revive him? Would this be the moment he would re-enter his body?

Please, God, I don’t want to die!

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The doctor shouted, “Clear!”

Alex sensed the jolt of amps, heard the deep hum.

He felt nothing.

The hands he held in front of him were transparent, shaking.

A screeching whine from the machine drilled into Alex as the screen showed a green line, straight and unbroken.

No! Alex couldn’t bring himself to watch his body’s last moments. He forced his spirit body to move away from the scene, to move into the corridor outside his room.

Over the next few stunned moments, the feelings of rage and denial began dimming into shock. He stood next to Emergency Room Three and waited, feeling helpless. Just what in the hell was he waiting for?

What was he supposed to do now? Wait around for angels? Friends from the other side? Well, when “they” came, he wasn’t going easy. It wasn’t his time to die.

The lack of reaction from people walking down the corridor convinced Alex he was invisible. The image, the celebrity status he’d worked a lifetime to polish, in an instant, meant nothing. He forced a laugh. Death—the great equalizer.

Funny, Alex thought. Right now he couldn’t figure out just what he’d been busting his butt for all those years. What did he end up with? Alex shook his head, snorting with the realization of how senseless his life had been. The image of a hamster on a wheel pretty much summed up his life. Up at the break of dawn to get on the wheel, do everything and nothing all day. What for? Money? Fame? And now, what did he have? Nothing.

Nothing at all.

He searched for something funny about this whole bizarre situation. Then it occurred to him, as he looked down at his spirit body, that he’d doubtless have to go through eternity wearing what he’d died in—a black turtleneck and gray pants. He laughed as he remembered the

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expression, I wouldn't be caught dead in that. People might be more careful about how they dressed if they knew they'd have to wear it forever.

He moved down the hallway. What kind of stir had his accident caused? Was anyone waiting in the lobby for news of his condition? Not to be expected since he hadn't told anyone when he'd jumped in his car and headed north. "Drive-about" his Australian pit-boss, Mike, liked to call the long, lone drives Alex sometimes felt compelled to take after a race. Often he'd be gone days, although he never had a destination in mind, he just knew he had to get away.

Away from what?

He wandered off in search of the waiting room to check out the possibility anyone had been notified and might be there.

Last he heard his mother was in Spain, so she didn't even know about this twist of fate. How would she react? He drew a blank.

As he floated down the hallway, he marveled at how different life looked from his looking-down perspective. Did that short guy scurrying toward the exit know his toupee was crooked? And from this angle, one woman with a scoop-neck blouse looked like a magnitude eight-point-five as her breasts quivered with every pounding step she took.

Before long, the corridors emptied enough for Alex to feel free to experiment with his new capabilities. The reactive feeling of having a physical body, of occupying space, still lingered, though.

He wasn't ready to let go.

* * *

Diana Christmas stood in the hospital's noisy hallway, her eyes refusing to focus, her senses only willing to take in the chatter at the nurse's station, and even that sounded far away. Even the ever-present antiseptic tang was dulled.

Her beloved grandfather, Sparky—Raymond Sparks Christmas—was dead. She still couldn't believe the man she'd always thought of as

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forever young and indestructible had been taken by a heart attack. The stark suddenness of it made the truth hard to grasp. Diana couldn't remember him having a sick day in his life.

She found herself pressing two fingers against her lips, fighting to control the painful sob lodged in her throat.

People hurried home after evening visiting hours and busy staff brushed past, but Diana couldn't seem to stir, to move toward the doors. She didn't want to leave the man who had been her lifeline for the past year. He'd welcomed her back to her childhood home, Christmas House, and was helping her to rebuild her life after her five-year old daughter, Emma's, illness. But now he was gone.

Diana's heart pounded hard against her ribs, telling her she was still alive and should be able to feel more than this stunned numbness. But that same heart captured her anguish in a tight ball, which it held, unwilling to release the pain.

The scratchy echo of the PA system broke through her grief. "Code Blue. Dr. Smith to Emergency-Three, STAT."

The words jarred the daze, but no more than a tiny earthquake might ripple across a calm lake. Then the tiny waves dissipated, leaving her becalmed again, with no more than a vague stirring just below the surface.

Her eyes began to take note of the life going on around her; she just didn't seem to be a part of it. Diana willed her feet to move. With some effort, a small spark of energy returned to her leaden legs.

Diana looked toward the glass exit doors. They were miles away. She told herself to move toward them, then waited for her body to respond.

A shiver ran through her as the hair on the back of her neck prickled with forewarning. Then, for several breathless moments, the hallway became a soundless, airless vacuum.

The feeling passed, but now Diana had a disorienting sense of

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having had her entire being touched by someone, as if another person had been inside her head. Sparky? No, for some unknown reason, she knew whatever had touched her wasn't Sparky. Her grandfather was all mellow warmth.

What she felt a few moments before, what still tingled through her body, was vibrant and strong...and young. Jeez, I'm losing it. No, it had been a trick of her overtired mind. Nothing more than her reaction to fatigue and grief. A sudden violent shudder overtook her, and she shook her head in an effort to toss off the bizarre feeling.

She heard an awed whisper from behind her. "Diana. Diana Christmas."

"Yes?" she said with a swift turn. No one stood there. At least no one she could see. Still she felt the sensation of a distinct presence. Someone was close, so close she almost took a step back to regain her personal space. Exhaustion, she told herself, had taken over rational thought.

Diana forced her eyes to focus on the clock at the nursing station. Time. A foreign concept for a moment, but she willed herself to concentrate, to comprehend the digital numbers. She needed to regain a sense of reality.

Nine-fifteen. Had the cold, heavy October Monday kept its promise of rain? Sparky loved nothing better than to watch a storm raging out over the ocean. It was a fitting night for him to leave.

Her eyes stung with unshed tears. Emma needs me. I've got to go home.

* * *

Alex was still reeling from what had just happened to him. The experience of dying now took second place on the emotional wallop scale. He stared at the beautiful woman as she stood so still in the hospital hallway. He was still trying to take in all of her; all he'd felt just a few moments before.

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He'd been testing his new maneuverability. Lean left; go left. Lean right; go right. Point feet down; go down. Pretty easy, except...stopping!

"Move!" he had shouted to the young woman in his path, but she'd just stood there staring, as if in a trance. He had tried to will himself to stop, but found the best he could do was to slow his progress. It wasn't enough to avoid colliding—sort of—with her.

He could still feel the sensation of static electricity that ran through him as the air emitted a soft crackling sound when he merged with her. His gut had tightened in a stark, tingling chill of premonition. Then his entire being became infused with...her.

Shaken to his core, Alex came away from her with a personal knowledge of what it would feel like to take a direct hit from a stun gun, or what those defibrillator paddles might feel like, if he'd been alive and awake.

He couldn't move. He couldn't breathe. All he could do was stare in awe at the beautiful woman. In that moment of eternity when Alex had passed through her—Diana, he knew with sudden certainty—he'd discovered more about her than he had ever known about another human being in his entire life. More, he guessed, than she knew about herself.

Diana's very soul had revealed itself to him as they'd become one. The poignancy of her emotional pain stabbed through him, and it became his pain. His mind acknowledged an innate strength of spirit, which left him breathless. And he'd felt the core of his own essence illuminated and captured by a purity of love he'd never known existed.

He didn't know who Diana's people were, or where she lived. He only knew she was what had been missing, what he had been blindly searching for his entire life. But...it was too late.

Were the fates showing what he could have had if he hadn't tempted them? Had he traded a life of short adrenaline rushes for what

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he had just experienced through her? If he'd just known.

Alex now moved to within inches of this incredible woman's face. "Are you as beautiful as I think you are?"

Or was his reason distorted by the emotional overload of all he'd undergone over the past hour? He studied the creamy texture of her pale skin, the brilliance of her auburn hair, the violet-blue eyes, and he experienced an, until now uncharted, protectiveness.

Did she need protection? Or help of some kind? Maybe he was still earthbound because he had to do a good deed. It was a silly thought. Yeah, right, like doing a good deed would redeem his unworthy soul. But, since dying obviously didn't come with a manual, how would he know?

Give me a sign. It was the closest Alex had ever come to praying. And, there, right above the woman's head, glowed the indication he needed. A cross! Well—he looked harder—it appeared to be a cross. Okay, maybe it was actually the "t" from a faulty exit sign. As far as Alex was concerned, it was as close as a person like him could come to receiving a prophetic omen.

He watched the woman who had, in the matter of a few moments, become his sole purpose for existing. Her eyes brimmed with unshed tears as she turned and walked away. An emotional tug of war pulled at Alex. Something told him to go back to his body. He was still curious about who might be in the waiting room.

But the irresistible force of the woman drew him like a moth to flame. And he followed.

* * *

As Diana walked toward the hospital exit, she knew she had to pull herself together. But she couldn't seem to form a cohesive thought. The loss of her grandfather, still too new, too painful to examine, mingled with scattered mental images of her hearing-impaired five-year old daughter, and of the old cliff house, which was now her burden as well

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as her home.

She pushed open the hospital's double glass exit doors and walked into the night, hesitating at the top step a moment as the nagging sensation of having forgotten or lost something held her back.

Her eyes scanned the wet, deserted parking lot and the leaden night sky as she checked for the car keys in her coat pocket. Still there. She fingered her shoulder for the purse strap. Still there. Then it hit her. Her throat ached and she felt her face crumple as she realized what was missing. Sparky.

With resolute steps, she forced herself to walk toward the dependable, old Honda and the long drive home to Christmas House.

When Diana turned the ignition key for the second time and heard the car's indignant, grinding protest, she knew she had to snap out of her mental haze to drive the winding mountain road home in safety. While Highway 128, from Santa Rosa to Elk, was an enchanting scenic drive during the day, alternating between rolling vineyards and stands of ancient forest pines, it could become a treacherous, foggy roller coaster at night.

She switched on the stereo and pushed in a tape of Celine Dion, adjusting the volume as "The Power of Love" began. Maybe the music would help clear her mind, keep her alert enough to drive home. She needed to be close to her daughter, Emma, to reaffirm that another living, breathing human being on this planet loved her, belonged to her.

Just before backing out of the parking space, Diana reached up to adjust the rear-view mirror. The hard surface felt cold against her already chilled hand.

She looked into the mirror and saw something move. Her entire body tensed in stark terror.

Someone was in her car! The shock of cold her hands just experienced was nothing compared to the icicle of fear now embedded in her chest. Her heart pounded as she swung around to face the

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intruder.

Nothing! She scanned the seat. The benign litter of one of Emma's dolls and a sketchpad were all she saw in an otherwise empty space.

"Oh God, I'm hallucinating." Her heart raced as she remembered the image that had flashed across the mirror's reflection. She was certain she'd seen a man.

Diana rubbed her gritty eyes. What was wrong with her? She'd never been skittish in her life. Even the creaky, old cliff house she'd shared with her grandparents since she was a child hadn't scared her. She could walk into any darkened room in the place and not feel a twinge of fear. Now here she was, seeing goblins! She shook off the feeling, shouting over the music, as if whatever might have been there could hear her, "I don't believe in ghosts."

Her chuckle felt weak, strained, as the words of the Cowardly Lion in the *Wizard of Oz* echoed in her head. "I do believe in spooks. I do, I do."

* * *

Alex hovered in a sitting position in the back seat of Diana's car. Although he still had the lingering impression of his six-foot-three frame taking up space, and he still had a foolish tendency to duck his head every now and again, he was growing a bit more comfortable with his new form.

He'd been dead, as far as he could calculate, about an hour, and already he'd learned how to fly and, at last, how to stop. Above all, he had found her. His mission. He knew he could be way off with this mission stuff, but so what? The single thing he knew for certain was that he wanted to be near her.

He watched her reach toward the dash, her slim hand pale in the yellowish light of the parking lot. She turned up the music. Alex wondered at the incredibility that music could still move him even though he was dead. In fact, a lot of things still moved him.

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God, why hadn't he met her when he was still alive? For some reason he'd been under the assumption that, if there was a life after death, that the dead would be beyond all emotion—like Mr. Spock in Star Trek. But he found he was far from emotionless. In fact, he was able to sense her feelings. They emanated from her like perfume, causing his own emotions to react.

The woman's sharp intake of breath a few moments ago as she had whirled around to look directly at him had startled him out of his music-induced reflections. He had thought she could see him. The shock in her eyes indicated she might indeed be seeing him in some sort of ghost incarnation. He had moved from side to side, but her terror-filled eyes had looked straight through him. More than anything, he'd wanted to reach out and touch her hand, to comfort her. But that was crazy. Chances were she couldn't even feel his presence, let alone a touch from his ghost body.

Or could she?

He thought back. Had she felt anything in the hospital when he'd gone through her? He thought maybe, if he put his mind to it, gave every ounce of concentrated effort as he touched her, she would be able to feel him in some way. He was about to try, but her shouted words, "I'm not afraid of ghosts!" and then her nervous laughter changed his mind.

He was sure his mission wasn't to scare her to death. She already looked ready to jump out of her skin. No...he settled himself as best he could in the back seat of her car. He would just wait and watch, and try to figure out why he was a dead man with very human feelings.

* * *

Diana's nervousness and concern over her mental health kept her alert most of the ninety-minute drive. The car wound its way safely past the sleeping wineries and the darkened town of Navarro. Then a drug-like drowsiness took hold.

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“Stay awake, Diana,” she warned herself aloud as the repetitive switchbacks and the never-ending succession of pines became hypnotic dancers before her eyes. No more than a few miles to go. But sleep closed in.

A thready mist turned into patches of dense fog, limiting her view to no more than a few yards. For a moment she wasn't sure whether she was awake or dreaming...or somewhere in between. Claw-like branches reached out for her through the white night.

She shook her head and opened the window. A blast of frigid air whipped at her cheeks and hair, and soon her fingers felt like Popsicles. She secured her grip on the steering wheel. Better to freeze to death than end up wrapped around one of the massive tree trunks.

Twice in the past few minutes she'd almost skidded out on the sharp curves. Her body felt so heavy. Why was she driving so fast? She eased up on the accelerator. Have to slow down. Stay alert. Have to get home. It was more and more difficult to see through the fog, and without anything concrete to focus on, her eyes became leaden. When had the tape switched off?

Have to...get home...

“Wake up!” A deep voice shouted from behind her.

A jolt of adrenalin brought her to attention. The road had disappeared! Frantic, she braked, jerking the wheel hard to avoid the monstrous tree in her path. Gravel crunched, spraying from beneath her tires as she regained the pavement.

Thank God she'd gone off the road at a turnout instead of over a cliff. She shuddered.

Who had shouted at her? Had she heard an actual voice? Thoughts of guardian angels had her thinking, Yeah right. The unfamiliar, very masculine voice had been in her head and all around her at the same time. She must have fallen asleep and begun dreaming. What did it matter? She was safe now, and at the rate her heart was pounding, she

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knew she would be wide-awake for the rest of the drive. Even the fog began to clear.

When, at long last, she reached the cliff house, she felt like she'd been away for months. The weathered copper porch light stood as a lone sentinel to her arrival. Diana stepped out of the car, inhaled the salty ocean tang and listened to the pulse of the thunderous waves on the rocks below. It always heartened her to come home.

The air hung heavy and still, as if the impending storm held its breath, waiting for her to reach the safety of the house.

She hurried up the steps as the first large drops splattered around her. The sky coughed once, lightning illuminating the interior of the house, then a low, mournful wail began, turning into an all-out gale as she stepped inside.

She gave silent thanks that either Helen or Emma had turned on the many delicate bisque nightlights to illuminate her way. She loved the whimsical fairy reliefs on the nightlights, and now they gave her a sense of being watched over as she navigated the turns of the staircase.

She walked past the guest room, where her friend Helen slept, and on to her daughter's bedroom.

Thanks to Sparky, Emma's bedroom looked like something a Disney Imagineer might conjure. With love Sparky had hand-carved the bed to resemble one of the dwarf's beds from Snow White, complete with the name "Sleepy" surrounded by several bunnies chiseled into the thick wood. Forest scenes covered the walls, and woodland creatures peeked out from behind trees to keep watch over her daughter.

The little girl slept in peace, unable to hear the thunder. Diana wondered if Emma's dreams had voices.

Caressing aside the child's tussled golden hair, she kissed her warm forehead and tucked the Sleeping Beauty comforter more snugly around her. Her slumber threatened, Emma ran her fingertips across the

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satin edge of the blanket, soothing herself deeper to sleep. “Ticklies,” Emma used to say.

Diana had done the same thing as a child, and now indulged herself in a few comforting strokes of satin before she left her daughter’s side.

Her own bedroom, a large gallery just across from Emma’s room, welcomed her with its comforting familiarity. As she undressed in the unlit room, Diana stood at the rounded, mullioned windows, which had such a magnificent view of the ocean during the day. She put on thermals and socks, and watched the bright flicker of lightning made blurry by water streaming down the glass.

Then something she saw during a lightning flash made her jump. Her breath caught in her throat. Her gaze flew to the reflection in the glass.

Someone was behind her!

A man!

In that split-second she’d been able to see the image of a man standing across the room, just in front of the wardrobe mirror.

Fear and a terrifying validation paralyzed her. Someone was there! She was no longer half-asleep or unsure, as she’d been with the shadow in the car mirror. This time she was positive she had seen someone.

Another flash of light, and, once again, the man was behind her. Now her eyes knew where to look and he became more distinct. He was tall with wide shoulders and short, light hair. The distance made it impossible to distinguish the color of his eyes, but his penetrating gaze was unmistakable.

He had looked at her with a mixture of sadness and longing.

With slow movements, shaking from head to foot and unable to breathe, she turned around. Just then another flash illuminated the room.

Nothing.

Even though Diana couldn’t see anyone in the shadows, she knew,

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with ever fiber of her being, that someone was in the room with her.

CHAPTER 2

Alex froze, feeling like a deer caught in the headlights of a speeding car. It was obvious Diana saw him during the lightning flashes. He was torn between leaving the terrified woman and somehow letting her know she had nothing to fear.

Her breath came in broken gasps and her hand shook as she reached out to turn on the fluted table lamp, almost knocking it over in her haste. The clink of resettling glass sounded like resounding church bells in the anxious silence. Her wide, pale gaze darted around the room as she held the front of her nightshirt in a death grip. She leaned forward to peer around the over-stuffed chair, then ventured a cautious peek under the bed.

When she let out the breath she'd been holding, unclenched her hand from her chest, and shook her head as if to clear it, he knew for certain he was no longer visible.

What an amazing experience! Her stark terror had pelted him from

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clear across the room. The energy generated by the powerful emotion still stung like hundreds of tiny, biting electric eels. He had to stop scaring her like this. What he needed to do first was to give serious thought to this whole ghost thing and all its ramifications. Otherwise, he was liable to do more harm than good.

Maybe it wasn't such a great idea following her up here. He hadn't thought it out. He'd just kind of floated along behind her, caught in her magnetic pull.

When she'd lingered at her daughter's bedside, the touching scene had mesmerized him. Closing his eyes, he remembered the enveloping peace and warmth emanating from her, suffusing the room—and him. What would it feel like to be the object of that love? He was certain it would be a thousand times better than absorbing it as a kind of emotional fallout. He'd never thought of himself as an addictive personality, but this was potent stuff.

And when she'd started undressing, he hadn't been able to tear his gaze from the graceful movements of her alluring body. Part of him said, This is wrong, voyeuristic. But another part said, You're dead, what harm could it do?

Besides, she was facing the window, away from him. And the room was so dark, she seemed no more than a shadow. Other than a glint of enticing white curves illuminated during the lightning flashes, he saw so little it was easy enough to rationalize that his view was harmless.

What he did see as she peeled off her clothing layer—coat, shoes—by layer—sweater, jeans—by layer—lacy bra, panties—was her incredible grace and beauty.

Even now, in her baggy nightclothes and oversized socks, she was the sexiest woman he'd ever laid eyes on. The words soft and caressable came to mind and he wanted nothing more than to experience the essence of her again, as he had in the hospital.

No. He sighed as he watched her flick off the lamp and dart to the

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security of her four poster bed. What he wanted more than anything on earth was to share the experience with her.

Alex watched Diana, her eyes clamped shut as in desperation she tried to go to sleep. He could hear her frantic thoughts. She was trying to explain him away as some kind of stress hallucination.

How could he calm her fears and let her know he was real? Alex realized there was more to it than just wanting to calm Diana's fears. Hell, this was just as confusing for him. The fact of the matter was he didn't want to be alone in his strange new life form. He wanted someone to see him, to acknowledge him. If she saw him during the lightning flashes, maybe she could somehow see him again.

He stayed across the room as he tried speaking to her. "Diana, I won't hurt you."

She shot up in bed, her eyes now wide with panic as she searched the darkened room. "Who's there?"

Well, that answered one question—she could hear him. But why could she when no one at the hospital could? Maybe because of their intimate contact in the hospital corridor? It had granted him a singular knowledge of her. Had it created for her a special connection to him, too, opening Diana up to his world?

"My name is Alex." He didn't know where to go from there.

She whispered a breathless, "Alex—"

* * *

Diana's heart felt like it was pounding its way up her throat. This was no dream, no questionable vision of a man during a lightning strike. This was the warm, real voice of a man talking to her. She managed, "Who are you? Wh-what do you want?" Her thoughts flew to Emma and Helen. Were they in danger?

"No, they're not in danger," came the voice again. "You work on calming down, and I'll try and explain."

The voice was reassuring and sounded so normal, she began to

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relax a little. What did he—or it—want from her? A sudden thought occurred to her. “How do you know my name?”

“I...well, I just do. Diana, can you see me? I’m standing in front of the windows.”

She squinted and, for a moment, thought she saw a shadow, but then it was gone. She remembered what he’d looked like when the lightning flashed. Gorgeous. But now she didn’t see anyone standing by the windows. “No, I can’t see you.” Her heart began to slow a little, but her mind felt like the Fourth of July with her questions and fears exploding. “What do you want?”

His reply was a long time coming. “I want to help.”

Well, that was it. She’d gone off the deep end. If Sparky could no longer help her, she’d evidently just make up a ghost who could. And while she was at it, she might as well make her ghost a hunk. She needed help. Psychological help.

She heard a deep chuckle. “I guess the only help you need right now is sleep, Diana. I’ll go, for now.”

Within the intake of a breath, Diana felt Alex disappear. The room regained the peaceful comfort she’d always felt before tonight, and she knew she was once again alone. Thank God!

She couldn’t let herself give in to the strange urge to go along with the voice, to believe he was there to help her in some way. Diana knew Alex wasn’t real. She didn’t believe in ghosts. The one logical explanation was that he was the product of her over-active, over-stressed, sleep-deprived imagination. But now that she’d created him, could she get rid of him?

* * *

Diana stretched awake, achy from the stupor-like oblivion of last night’s sleep. She couldn’t believe how fast she’d dozed off after what happened, or rather what her over-tired mind imagined had happened in her room last night.

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Peeking over the ruffled comforter, she watched the seagulls outside her window, adrift on the morning breeze that buffeted the cliffs. Screeching cries mingled with the muffled boom of the surf on the shore below. She looked around the room. The dawn had broken, crystal clear, and blessedly ghost-free.

After showering and putting on jeans and a cable-knit sweater, Diana wound her way down the back staircase to the sunny, expansive kitchen, sweeping her mass of hair into a ponytail as she went.

She grabbed a copper pot from the ceiling rack, remembering Sparky's proud smile when he'd given the beautiful set to her the day she graduated from the California Culinary Academy. The early morning sun glanced off the shiny surfaces, adding sparkle to the room, and the butcher-block island beckoned with its wide expanse of cooking space.

The kitchen had always been her refuge, and cooking, her meditation. The complexity of the dishes most times corresponded to the amount of thinking she had to do. And right now she needed to figure out how she was going to tell a five-year-old with limited communication abilities that the great-grandfather she'd come to know and love was dead.

By the time Emma and Helen came downstairs she'd have a breakfast fit for a queen whipped up.

She put water and butter for a puff pastry into a saucepan to boil, her thoughts a million miles away. Last night was one for the record books.

Diana wondered why her hallucination had taken on the disturbing likeness of this particular hunky guy. Had she seen a picture of some stranger in the newspaper and mentally catalogued his image, then conjured a fantasy man as a release for her troubled mind?

She added the flour, stirring with a vengeance. If a man at all, why not Sparky, the man she'd just lost? Why someone with a vague

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resemblance to Brad Pitt? Diana snorted at the obvious. Maybe Helen was right, and Diana should start dating. Conjuring up an apparition of Pitt in her bedroom at night had a disquieting, Freudian ring to it.

“Ouch!” She shook her burned finger, readjusted the oven mitt, careful as she removed the pan from the heat.

“Morning, Diana.” Helen Wright, Diana’s best friend since the fourth grade, looked like a softly rounded angel as she stood in the arched doorway, dressed in a loose white t-shirt and long cotton skirt. She scrunched at her shower-dampened burgundy curls, her warm brown eyes asking an anxious question.

All Diana had to do was hold her arms out to her friend and Helen understood. Diana hadn’t, until that moment, even realized she was desperate for human contact, and that she was already missing Sparky’s habitual bear hugs and pats on the cheek. Helen’s solid comfort eased the feeling of emptiness.

“Sparky’s heart gave out at about seven last night.”

“I’m so sorry.”

Diana took one last hug, then busied herself stirring eggs into the flour mixture. She brushed a tear from her cheek before it could fall into the batter. “Thanks for staying with Emma. I don’t know what I’d have done without you.”

“No prob, she’s a doll. What an imagination that kid has. Don’t expect her up too soon. I fudged on bedtime so she could watch her Sleeping Beauty DVD for the gazillionth time. She doesn’t seem to mind that she can’t hear it.”

“No, she doesn’t seem to mind, does she? I see her bouncing to some kind of rhythm going on inside that little head of hers. She must remember some of the songs from...before.”

Helen started the coffee, as she then went on. “So, what now? You just let me know what I can do. Arrangements, babysitting, anything.”

“Thanks. Sparky told me a long time ago that when he...went, he

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wanted his ashes scattered over...over the ocean.” She felt her chin quiver as she slipped the puffs into the oven.

Taking a ragged breath, she walked over to stand arm-in-arm with Helen at the window. Together they looked out at the glistening blue-green waves crashing against the jagged offshore rock formations.

Diana found herself telling Helen everything about yesterday’s ordeal. She knew she could share with Helen what had happened last night, too. “Helen, have you ever had hallucinations, or thought you saw something that couldn’t possible be there?”

“Once, I thought I smelled my mother’s perfume when I went to her grave. But I’m sure it was wishful thinking. Why? You have the feeling Sparky is still around?”

“I wish. I’d love to have Sparky haunt Christmas House.” Diana hoisted herself up to sit on the counter. “No. I haven’t seen Sparky. It’s someone else.”

“Anyone I know?” Helen got two mugs and poured coffee.

“No. I only saw this person, this man, this image, when the room was dark and the lightning flashed. But I guess I...well, sort of felt him with me from the time I left the hospital.”

Diana realized that, while she was talking, Helen had put her hand on Diana’s knee. The look on her friend’s face was a mixture of alarm and concern. “My God, weren’t you scared out of your mind?”

“Bingo! Out of my mind is right.” Diana sipped her coffee. “Helen, I think I must be having a nervous breakdown or something. I know Alex couldn’t—”

Helen interrupted. “Alex? He has a name? He talked to you?”

Diana nodded.

“What does he look like? You said you saw him, right?”

Diana thought back to those penetrating eyes, how formidable, yet compelling his gaze was. “He looks a little like...now, don’t laugh...like Brad Pitt or a young Robert Redford.”

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Helen blew out a breath she'd been holding. It was followed by a nervous laugh. "Well, Diana, better Brad Pitt than Freddy Krueger."

Helen's blithe remark made Diana feel a little better, a little saner. Maybe she should just chalk it up to fatigue and stress, and let it go at that. If only she could.

Helen ran her finger along the edge of the counter in a not-to-convincing bid at nonchalance. "Speaking of Freddy Krueger, Josh-u-a Marley left a message on your machine yesterday afternoon when Emma and I were out for a walk. I didn't know he was back in town."

Diana watched Helen close up as her face went blank. What was that all about? Josh Marley had been a high school friend to both of them. In fact, hadn't Helen dated him once or twice? Diana had heard he'd just returned from several years in France, going to school and learning more about the family wine business. Diana remembered how he'd aced the French classes they'd shared, while Diana had been glad just to get a passing grade. Now he was back to help his mother run the large winery they owned in the nearby Anderson Valley.

"Yes, he came back a couple of weeks ago," Diana said. "He said he was glad to be home, even though he'd fallen in love with France."

Helen bit her lip hard, pausing a moment before she said, "Are you sure he said France? All this time I thought he was in Transylvania."

Diana nudged her friend away. "Helen! What's with you? Something happen I don't know about?"

Helen snorted as she boosted herself onto a tall stool on the opposite side of the butcher-block island. "How would I know? He's been gone almost five years." Crooking her fingers in the air, she said in a snide tone, "Learning the family business."

Diana waited until Helen looked at her. "I think Europe made him a better person." Not that he was all that bad before, just immature. They all had been. "It helped him grow—"

Helen finished for her, "A spine? I'm sure he still doesn't even

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blow his nose without Momma's permission."

"Why do you care?" Diana stirred together a hollandaise sauce for the egg dish. "So, he's considerate of his mother. I'm sure running the family winery has kept them close. Even when we were in high school Josh worked with his mother."

"Wineries, smineries. Weird family dynamic going on there if you ask me. One I'd run from if I were you."

"Come on, Helen. What's up?"

Helen's shoulders sagged as she exhaled. "Just chalk it up to a bad case of PMS. I'll get over it."

"I'm glad. But, to put your mind at ease, we're not talking marriage here, you know. We haven't even gone on an official date. We've just seen each other a couple of time...as friends...like when we were kids. But, as I was going to say, Josh has turned into even more of a charmer than when we were in high school."

"So was Anthony Perkins in Psycho. At first."

"Helen." Diana's wooden spoon stopped mid-stir as she directed a penetrating gaze at her friend. "I hear vitamin therapy works great for those ugly mood swings."

Helen raised her hands in surrender. "Okay, okay. I'll lay off. I guess he has some good points." She squinted and looked up at the ceiling as if trying to search her memory. Then she got a mischievous smile. "I'd rather go back to talking about Alex."

"Nothing much left to say, except will you take care of Emma if I'm crazy?" Diana said it as a joke, but couldn't keep the worry out of her tone.

Helen waved her concerns aside. "If you're so freaked by Alex, I'll give you the number of my shrink."

"You go to a shri—, a psychiatrist?"

"Dr. Veda Marchelle is a psychologist, and yes, I...well, talk things over with her every once in a while. I know you'll like her."

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Diana guessed Helen was going to a psychologist because of the rough life she'd had. It must be something to do with her dad's alcoholism. She decided to let it go. If Helen wanted to tell Diana more, she would.

"I'll take the doctor's number, just in case."

By the time they had plates of eggs in a basket artistically arranged on the table in the breakfast nook, Diana could hear her daughter's slipper-clad feet shuffling across the parquet floor of the living room.

Diana took a deep breath as she gave Helen a pained look, then turned and took her time to sign, "Good morning, love," to Emma.

* * *

Emma sat against the big cushions of the window seat and looked at the waves coming in. She couldn't hear them, but she remembered how they sounded. She remembered what a lot of things sounded like. Her hand moved in half-motioned signing as she sang the alphabet song in her head.

She wondered what it was like in heaven. Mother told her that's where Grandpa Sparky had gone, that he was happy there. Emma decided heaven must be full of big waves and lots of tall ships, or Grandpa Sparky would never go. He must love it. She smiled, picturing him sailing. Maybe he'd come down from heaven and tell her what it was like.

* * *

Alex watched as Diana sat at the computer desk in her grandfather's office comparing a stack of papers against something on the screen, and he wished he could reach out with flesh and blood hands to touch her. Her sadness and nostalgia came to him as a tight, sweet ache in his chest.

He was finding it easier and easier to tune into her emotions. Funny, since he'd never been in touch with his own. Hers felt more vital than

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his for some reason. After she had gone to sleep last night and he was alone with his own emotions, he sensed the dramatic difference. Her feelings were bright, real and crystal clear. His own had been walled up for so long, with him thinking they were a personality flaw, that now they were having trouble adjusting to freedom. They felt like a dull light bulb, flickering unsteadily toward illumination.

The night had given him time to examine his feelings as well as roam the old house. He'd wandered from the antique-filled attic to the myriad jars of preserves lining the basement shelves. A short time after midnight the storm blew itself out, and the remaining night sounds—the creaking of the house, the distant sound of waves, and the ticking of the grandfather clock—all kept him company as he explored.

He liked the old captain's office best. It was an eclectic blend of old and new, with a fax machine sitting alongside an antique Tiffany-style lamp. Classics, as well as modern action thrillers, lined the floor-to-ceiling bookcases. And the ships in bottles gave Alex a feeling of patience and strength about the man whose essence lingered. A copy of works by Tennyson seemed to call out to him and he discovered that books, too, have spirits.

The house was all redwood and glass. Even the ceilings were polished wood, with huge beams, giving Alex the feeling the old place would stand on this cliff forever. He was sure it could withstand any storm nature could dish out.

Each unique piece of furniture—from the antique sleigh bed in one of the eight bedrooms, to the simple elegance of the Amish sideboard in the spacious dining room—spoke of history and character, and the owner's love of beauty.

But the whimsical fairy nightlights throughout the house told him more about the occupants than any piece of furniture ever could. Words like cynicism or despair could never be applied to a person who held a Peter Pan hopefulness that fairies could protect them. No, the

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individual who placed the illuminated sprites to guide and safeguard was someone with eternal optimism and faith.

These symbols of perpetual hope revealed something to Alex about himself, too. He realized he'd spent—no, wasted—his life as a cynic. He'd never found anything much to believe in.

Until now. Until Diana.

Small wonder, he thought as he looked back at his life. From the time he was four and entered his first boarding school, his mother had been no more than a shadowy figure in his life. He had no idea who his father was, other than the name Stan White on his birth certificate.

He remembered the stories he made up to explain why his mother never came to visit. Once she was an actress. Another time, a spy for the government. When he'd been furious with her on his thirteenth birthday, he told everyone his mother was dying. But after too many holidays spent with kind but distant school staff, the once-golden fantasies began to tarnish and corrode. The edges became jagged and dangerous. He'd been forced to face the truth. His mother just didn't care.

After a while it had quit hurting. Then one day he realized nothing hurt any more. He'd come to know that everyone had a self-serving agenda. Neither their words nor deeds could be trusted.

But here, seeing how this woman lived, and knowing, without doubt, that she was honest, caring and had boundless love to give instilled in him a feeling of trust for the first time in his life. At least one person in the world knew how to love, knew what was important in life. He asked again, Why didn't I meet her when I was alive?

Why now, after his death? What good would awareness do him now? What was the point of a soul-jarring experience after he was dead? He'd also decided not to make himself known to Diana again for a while. She needed time to adjust to him as much as he needed time to adjust to his new existence.

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His thoughts and eyes turned again to Diana as her forehead creased in a confused frown. She pushed a handful of dark hair from her face to better concentrate on the documents in front of her. Looking at her, Alex wanted more than anything on earth to be alive.

* * *

The boat lurched and rocked beneath Diana's feet, making her glad she'd insisted Emma wear rubber-soled shoes and a life jacket. A turbulent wind caught at the glistening whitecaps, spraying salt water into her already-stinging eyes. She and Emma had come to honor Sparky's wish.

She smiled as she realized how difficult depositing his ashes in the ocean was going to be. Sparky would have roared with laughter if he knew how much his memorial would echo his life of challenging the wind and reveling in the elements.

Standing at the railing with Emma, Diana knew she should have something to say, or to read, as a tribute to Sparky, but she had racked her brain and hadn't found anything appropriate. In the end she had decided she wouldn't say anything. Now she was sorry about her decision.

Remembering back to when her parents and aunt died seventeen years ago, she once again heard Sparky's gentle words, words that had helped her say good-bye. "It's okay to hurt, Diana. It's okay to cry. In time you'll feel better. But letting go, saying good-bye, is all a part of life. You just have to remember...they're in a better place."

Then he and Grandma Clara had helped her to put roses on the three coffins. Sparky stood close beside her, showing her with his strength and faith that he felt her mom and dad, and even her troubled aunt, were at peace. Seven years later Sparky stood strong again when Grandma Clara died.

"But who's going to help me say good-bye to you, Sparky?" she asked into the wind.

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The words of Sparky's favorite Tennyson poem, "Sea Fairies," came to Diana from just behind her, the deep resonant voice soft, close to her ear, yet strong enough to penetrate the crash of the waves.

There, just to the right extreme of her peripheral vision, she could almost see him. Alex! She didn't look around, afraid he would disappear again. Instead, she held Emma's hand and stared out over the gray-green sea as the soothing voice continued.

*"Ye will not find so happy a shore,
Weary mariners! all the world o'er;
Oh! fly no more!
Hearken ye, hearken ye,
sorrow shall darken ye,
Danger and trouble and toil no more;
Whither away?
Drop the oar;
Hither away, Leap ashore..."*

With the words, Diana felt the pain of loss release itself, and with it, the tears held in check since Sparky's death.

Memories of Sparky, who had raised her since she was ten, came back to her like photos in a picture album. He had taken a young girl, devastated by her parents' death, disillusioned by life, and made her feel safe and loved again.

Sparky had taught her to ride a horse, his voice often firm, but always gentle. She could count on his encouraging smile through the crowd at every school event. He even helped pick out her prom dress, looking like a bull in a china shop, his huge, barrel-chested frame seated on a dainty pink ottoman, surrounded by satin and lace.

Her weeping was as salty and healing as the ocean.

"Thank you," she whispered to Sparky, to Tennyson...and to Alex,

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whose caressing undertone gave voice to the poem.

CHAPTER 3

“Jeez, Helen, what am I going to do?”

Alex could hear Diana’s frustration as well as feel her anxiety, even though he knew she was downstairs seated next to her friend at the old desk, and he was in the attic.

In the past week, since following Diana home, he’d come to realize he could create a psychic connection with the living and read their minds by just thinking about them. He’d tried it with both women, and the little girl.

Diana was the easiest. He could merge with her thoughts and feelings the moment he pictured her beautiful face. Emma and Helen were more difficult; he had to maintain focused concentration to link with them, although the child was getting easier.

For the time being he abandoned his exploration of the Christmas family’s eclectic cache of treasures hibernating in the dark corners beneath the pitched roof. Diana’s voice, always a magnetic force, drew

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him downstairs.

He positioned himself in the shadows just inside the office door to watch the two women, his focus on Diana. Perfect white teeth chewed on her lower lip and she had her toes curled under, against the hard wood floor, like an errant ballet dancer as she leaned forward in the squeaky captain's chair. Her long, rose-print skirt flowed across her slim thighs to dip between her knees, and her pink, cropped sweater played a game of peek-a-boo to reveal a flash of creamy skin at her waist.

"I've gone over everything in Sparky's office," Diana said, "and talked with his attorney, and I just don't see how I can keep the house."

Helen pulled her feet up and crossed them where she was sitting in the over-stuffed chair. "Oh, Diana, you can't give up Christmas House. You can't. Re-opening it as a bed and breakfast was a great idea. You and Sparky worked so hard, you just can give it up. I'll help. I know you can do it."

Diana chewed on a pencil eraser. "I've got an appointment with the loan officer tomorrow. We'll see where I stand then. It just seems overwhelming for one person. This was Sparky's project. I was just his helper. I'm not even sure where to start."

Diana's shoulders sagged a moment. Then she straightened and took a deep breath, and Alex could feel her reject the threatening despondency and replace it with resolve and determination. She tapped her head with the heel of her hand. "Come on, brain, I know you can do it. Think! Quit being so uncooperative."

Alex watched in amazement as a warm glow radiated from Helen. It came from Helen's solar plexus, passed through her violet shirt, seemed to suffuse her entire body, then reached toward Diana and enveloped her with the pulsing light. He'd heard the word "aura" before, but thought it was all a bunch of new-age nonsense. What he was now seeing must be what he'd heard about. He wondered if Helen

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was aware of what she was doing.

Helen squeezed Diana arm. "Let's have a glass of wine and watch the sunset. You don't have to figure out anything right this minute. As our mentor-fairy-godmother, Scarlett, would say, 'Tomorrow is another day.'"

Even though he could sense Helen's projection as a slight warmth, he was curious to see if touching the energy would feel any different. He had to find out. Neither women seemed to notice him as he made his way toward them.

The moment his fingers made contact with the multi-colored rays emanating from Helen, he felt a surge of power bathe his hand, and he had immediate realization of what she was doing. She was giving Diana some of her own life force. And, chances were, she just thought she was comforting a friend. Pretty damned generous, he thought, and he pulled back so he wouldn't diffuse the effect to Diana.

If Helen could, without knowing, give Diana some of her own healing energy, then what could he do in this spirit-state if he gave the effort his entire focus?

This could be powerful stuff.

* * *

Diana's visit with the loan officer wasn't going well. Not only was the ferret of a man giving her a difficult time, but she realized she'd also brought her imaginary friend along for the ride. She'd felt his presence from the moment she sat down in the chair across from the loan officer.

"I don't understand, Mr. Small. Why can't you extend my grandfather's business loan to me? My house isn't mortgaged. Isn't that sufficient collateral?"

She heard Alex. *::This is bogus. Something's going on with this guy. Just look at that body language. He should be suggesting a home equity line of credit. You've got equity.::*

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Diana looked, but couldn't read anything into the man's mannerisms, except that he didn't seem to like her for some reason.

"I'm sorry, Miss Christmas." The man's thin eyebrows rose. "I'm just passing along the message from the higher-ups." He rubbed his eye and looked away, taking sudden interest in the floor tiles. His smile was tight-lipped. "We just can't transfer the loan."

"There's no way you'll let me reapply on my own? A new loan? A home equity line of credit?"

"Sorry, your credit has a couple of...smudges on it, and you have no job."

Her husband had been a big spender, but Diana had long ago paid all the debts he'd run up during their marriage, and she'd gone to great lengths to clear her credit. "But that was my husband, not me. We're no longer married. My credit has been clean for a long time."

This time she had no trouble reading the man's body language. He might as well have said, "Yeah, right," aloud. He rolled his eyes, his chin down.

Alex spoke. *::Let's get out of here. We'll get you another loan. There are plenty of banks in Santa Rosa. Something's going on here. You don't want to deal with this local yokel.::*

What else could she do? She got up to leave, thanking Mr. Small. Right away she realized how idiotic it was to thank a man, who, in all likelihood, had just crushed any hope she might have been harboring of keeping Christmas House.

"Don't worry," she heard Alex whisper deliciously close to her ear. "We'll find another way." A warm tingle radiated down her neck.

When she was in the car and on her way home, at last she had a chance to speak with her apparition. "So, that's that. No loan."

"You sound like you're giving up. Do you still want to re-open Christmas House?"

"Yes." She thought about Sparky, her voice turning husky. "I

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always thought of it as Sparky's dream. But I realize now I've always shared his vision. When I was training as a chef, I'd daydream about cooking gourmet meals for guests at Christmas House." She braked. In this section, the road began to wind back and forth as it hugged the coastal cliffs. "Sparky would never have urged me to come back and help him to open the inn, but when Emma got sick and I needed to be with her full-time, he offered me a partnership."

She laughed. "Of course, all he got in the partnership were my skills as a chef and a boatload of my emotional baggage." She wiped a tear from her cheek. "Sparky never made me feel like I was taking advantage of him. I was, of course."

Alex said, "Oh, I'm sure your grandfather knew what he was doing. He must've needed you as much as you needed him."

She kept glancing toward the voice, hoping Alex might materialize, but each time she was disappointed.

"I don't want to let Sparky or myself down."

His statement was matter-of-fact. "Then, like I said, we'll find a way."

The "we" sounded so good to Diana. But she knew in her heart she should stick to using the word "me." She was on her own. Alex was a figment of her imagination.

* * *

Diana leaned forward on the living room sofa to get Emma's attention, then signed, "Time for bed." Her little girl put the colorful Noah's Ark toy in the built-in cupboard next to the stone fireplace and climbed into her lap.

"Well, it's just you and me now, kid." Diana spoke over Emma's head as they "sang" their goodnight song with their hands. "Sparky always said, 'Rough seas sort out the sissy landlubbers from the sailors.' So, which are we?"

Diana inhaled the light, flowery scent of Emma's clean hair and

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pulled the warm body closer. Her daughter ignored her and began playing a finger game she must have made up herself.

Emma's exquisite, small fingers wrapped around an imaginary object and set it on her other palm. She watched it for a moment, nodded, and then released it into the air.

Diana sighed, turning her daughter's shoulders around so she could make eye contact. "What are you doing?" she signed.

With halting gestures Emma signed back. "Play with friends."

"Friends?"

"I'm tired." Emma yawned and wrapped her arms around Diana's neck.

As Diana carried Emma up the spiral staircase she thought about her daughter's pretend friends. Pretend friends. The hair on the back of her neck rose, sending a prickling chill down her spine. They were both imagining things.

Emma was asleep before Diana even turned out the light. "Sleep well," she said aloud. "Dream of happy things." She hummed the lullaby she used to sing to Emma.

Tomorrow she would have to make some plans for their future. But tonight all she wanted was the oblivion of a good book. As she made her way downstairs she hugged Sparky's bulky sweater closer around her, bunching the ends of the long sleeves in her hands. She inhaled his lingering scent, the salty sea and spicy cologne, craving the comfort.

A glass of wine and a good book were just what she needed to get her mind off the real world. She had never cared for television, much preferring to be caught up in a good mystery novel or a thriller. She'd take Mary Higgins Clark or Elizabeth George to a sit-com any day. And since Emma couldn't hear the television and was too young to read the closed captions, they seldom used it.

She poured herself a generous amount of the Marley family's best cabernet and headed to her favorite reading spot, the spacious,

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cushioned window seat, sampling the wine on her way. The mellow, woodsy taste warmed her stomach, reminding her she hadn't eaten much for dinner. She knew she'd be tipsy before long, but what the hell. She wasn't driving anywhere.

An hour later, and well into her second glass of wine, thoughts of Josh Marley kept intruding on what should have been a gripping part of the mystery she was reading. She brushed aside the notion that Josh resembled the handsome killer described in her book.

Despite Helen's derogatory teasing about Josh's character, Diana considered him to be good company. She had to admit she'd liked the attention from him over the past few days. She knew Helen dated him once in high school, but she couldn't come up with a reason for bad blood between the two. If some slight had occurred all those years ago, Diana imagined Helen should be over it by now. After all they had just been kids, and kids do stupid things that, once they're adults, they tend to laugh off.

Diana got along with Josh just fine. More than fine. He was the first man since her divorce to whom she'd felt the slightest attraction. Imaginary phantoms aside.

The light from the crackling fire sent shadows about the room to dance along the walls. Diana closed her eyes; this time hoping her ghost would be there when she opened them. Maybe she shouldn't have had that second glass of wine. She was getting fanciful and lightheaded.

Her heart began racing as, through half-opened lids, she got a glimpse of a stationary, dark figure to her left. Alex? It could have been the alcohol, but for whatever reason, Diana felt a sensation of peace—that she had nothing to fear—envelop her and her heart slowed just a little.

Moving her head a fraction, she noticed the form become more distinct at a specific angle, recognizable as a man, then he disappeared when she moved her field of vision closer. She had to stay unfocused to

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see him.

If Alex was in her mind and she could hear him with no problem, why was she having so much trouble seeing him? He was her fantasy, wasn't he? One would think he should be anything she wanted him to be. She remembered back to that day on the boat, the beautiful way Alex had quoted Tennyson.

She wondered how her subconscious had summoned that poem in its entirety when she'd heard it no more than a couple times. The mind could do amazing, and scary, things. She didn't want to think about the alternative—the far-fetched possibility she hadn't conjured up either the poem or her phantom after all. That would mean Alex was a ghost. And she didn't believe in ghosts. But then she hadn't believed she would ever be hearing voices no one else could either.

She needed to know.

"Alex?" A tightness in her chest made taking a deep breath difficult.

The silhouette moved closer, becoming more distinct. She felt calming warmth radiate from him. Then she heard the familiar deep, resonant voice—almost a whisper. "I'm here, Diana. I heard you call me."

She forced herself to stay calm. "Alex." She tested the name, wondering where she'd come up with it. Her voice sounded breathy. "Alex what?"

He seemed to hesitate, then stated a flat, "Just Alex."

"Well, 'just Alex,' why do you suppose I've conjured you up?" She leaned further into the comfort of the cushions, her head feeling light from the wine.

It...he...Alex was becoming clearer. She could see him as one would see a far-off reflection in a mirror. Now she could see his facial features whenever he changed expression, but not clear enough to be certain what he was thinking.

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“You’re not imagining me, Diana. I am here.” He smiled. “At least, what’s left of me.”

“Yeeeeeah....” She knew the wine was making her giddy. But she couldn’t resist the urge to do the theme music from the Twilight Zone. “Da-da, da-da. Da-da, da-da. And why, Alex-from-another-dimension, have you decided to beam down to my house?” So I’m talking to myself. Who’s gonna know?

“I’m not sure why I’m here. Like I said before, I think I’m here to help.” His mouth curved up at one corner.

“Help me what? Over the edge?”

“Maybe just to be your friend,” he said.

His form became more distinct as her eyes adjusted and reversed their focus. It reminded her of those optical illusion pictures, which used to be a staple at the malls. People crowded around a cart displaying various prints of minute designs, staring. Focusing. Unfocusing. Trying to see a hidden graphic. Once your brain figured out how to focus on the inner picture, the process became almost automatic.

Now the rest of the room grew fuzzy, and Alex became defined. Her breath quickened. He became crystal clear for the first time.

He was tall, his hair a sun-streaked sandy color and trimmed short on top. And his eyes! Caribbean blue eyes that shot a surging jolt right to her soul.

Up close, she could see that, although he had Robert Redford’s boyish good looks and the same jaw line, Alex had more of a roguish look about him. Boy, when I conjure up a man, I don’t mess around. She was impressed with her own imagination. And he was her imagination. Wasn’t he?

“You’re gorgeous.” What the hell, you’re not real. She couldn’t contain a nervous giggle.

He laughed, his eyes showing tiny sun-lines at the corners. “Thank

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you.”

“So, tell me, Alex...I wonder where I got that name? How does a ‘ghost’ get that tanned, outdoorsy look? Guess you don’t have to worry about sunscreen.”

“Minus the broken bones and blood, this was what I looked like when I died.”

Diana’s heart skipped a beat. He sounded sincere, his grief genuine.

His eyes narrowed, and she could see he was clenching his jaw. After a few moments he spoke again, his voice steady. “I lost it on a damned curve in the highway. Funny thing is, my hobby is—was—race car driving, and I was pretty good at it. I’m still not sure how the accident happened.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” was all she could manage. She felt her disturbed mind take over reason. Why was she apologizing to something that didn’t even exist? All at once he seemed too real.

Alex smiled, starting to fade. “Good-night, Diana. I can feel that I’m starting to scare you again. We’ll talk later.” His image grew stronger. “Do you want me to come back?”

She wasn’t sure why she nodded.

“Please don’t be afraid of me, Diana. I can’t, and wouldn’t, hurt you.”

He vanished.

The room seemed to be in a vacuum for a few moments as Diana’s ears strained to hear. She squinted, trying to see something, anything to let her know he had been there.

She hugged one of the pillows. She wasn’t sure if Helen’s psychologist, a psychiatrist, or AA handle this kind of delusion.

The next morning Diana’s mind felt as clear and earthbound as the windswept shore. However, she was afraid that, like last time, the reality respite wouldn’t last. She made an appointment with Dr.

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Marcelle, the psychologist Helen had recommended.

She dressed with care in cream-colored slacks and a soft rust cashmere sweater, accenting it all with a string of pearls. Maybe looking like a sane person would make it so. A French braid held back her hair. She checked it one last time. Casual, but...reasonable. That's me—reasonable. Except when it came to a phantom named Alex.

"Get your coat and coloring book," she signed to Emma who sat in the window seat. She tried to decide between a light and heavy jacket, then checked, for the third time, the address she'd written down, and looked for the keys she'd had in her hand moments ago.

The psychologist had agreed to see Diana right away, which did nothing to bolster Diana's hope that she might be sane. The office was in Santa Rosa, and Helen was going along for moral support, as well as to watch Emma while Diana was with the psychologist.

Diana looked up and began to fidget with the hem of her sweater as her friend came through the living room's French doors. "Hi, Helen. Thanks for coming along. I know you think this is crazy—crazy being the operative word here. In relation to me, that is, I guess, or I wouldn't be going to a shrink. Only, you think seeing the shrink is crazy. And I think I—"

"Whoa, girl!" Helen laughed. "Take a deep breath."

Diana did as she was told. It didn't help. "What if she tells me I need to be committed or something?"

Helen scrunched up her face. "Give me a break, Diana. The most she'll do is give you drugs."

"Drugs?" Diana felt sick.

"Or maybe shock therapy." Helen sounded serious. "I hear it's all the rage again."

Then Diana caught the twinkle in Helen's eyes and forced a laugh, feeling some of the tension evaporate. "Guess I was getting kind of worked up, huh?"

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Helen kept Diana's mind off her appointment the entire drive to Santa Rosa by making up outrageous gossip about people in their sleepy dot of a town. "It's been reported that Old Widow Maken is giving Timmy the paperboy more than piano lessons. Did you know that the minister and his wife use the church as a front for the largest devil-worship coven in Northern California? And rumor has it, most of the townspeople have been taken over by alien pod-people. Don't you think Mrs. Sanders has been acting particularly weird of late?"

"I think even Rod Serling would be put off by Mrs. Sanders," Diana negotiated the freeway off-ramp. "Okay, navigator, left or right?"

"Turn right. Then an immediate left. Yeah, I guess we should've invited Mrs. Sanders along today. She could use a couple of hits off that defibrillator machine. That is what they use for shock treatments, isn't it? Or is it jumper cables?" Helen pointed. "There it is, that cute little renovated bungalow."

After parking the car, Diana helped Emma out and tried to gather her wits, along with her daughter's art supplies. She took a deep breath to brace herself for the unpleasant task ahead.

In silence, the three of them marched up the steps and into the empty waiting room.

"Thank God, there are no other patients. I'd hate to have a bunch of people sitting staring at me, thinking I'm crazy."

"Why do you think they'd be here, Diana? An oil change? And I told you before, you're the sanest person I know. In a few minutes Veda will tell you that herself. Sign in." Helen busied herself getting Emma settled with her crayons and coloring book.

Diana had just decided to make a run for it when a woman came through the inner door.

The attractive, dark haired woman looked to be about fifty, wore sand-colored designer slacks and a white silk blouse.

Very professional, Diana thought.

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The woman nodded toward Helen. "Hello, Helen. Good to see you." Her slim hand extended toward Diana, and an easy, welcoming smile encouraging Diana to relax. "Hello...Diana? I'm Veda. I'm sorry my receptionist wasn't here to greet you, but Tuesday isn't a regular office day. But after talking to you, I didn't want to make you wait."

She must think I'm in real trouble.

Veda ushered her into a comfortable room with an overstuffed chair and a small couch. Soft lighting and interesting, free-flowing objects d'art gave the room a quiet feeling. Several impressive diplomas held court in an unobtrusive spot on the wall behind Diana's head. They made her feel better about being there.

The first half-hour of the appointment was easy enough, with Veda asking general questions about her life and non-threatening questions about recent events. Diana felt encouraged by the keen intelligence she sensed in the woman.

"And when did you begin seeing Alex?"

Diana's heart thumped against her chest as she started at the beginning, and it didn't slow until she finished, ending with the scenario of last night's visit.

"Can you feel Alex's presence even when you can't see him?" Veda asked.

"Sometimes I get the feeling someone is in the room with me, but when I look around, I don't see anyone." Diana remembered all the recent times when she'd felt an almost calming presence when she was alone in a room.

"Is he here now?"

"I don't feel him."

"Can you summon him at will?" Veda spoke as if Diana's delusions were an everyday occurrence and quite normal.

"I haven't tried." Interesting idea. Before she could stop herself, she'd blurted out, "I'm crazy, aren't I?"

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Veda smiled a quiet, reassuring smile. “No, you’re not crazy, Diana. I believe what you’re experiencing is stress related. I assure you, things of this nature are not uncommon after we’ve lost someone so important in our lives.”

“So, what do I do?” Diana wanted a quick fix, wanted this woman to explain everything away. Instead Veda was telling her this was “normal.” Well, she didn’t feel normal. Her chin began to quiver and she felt her breath catch.

“I’m not one to hand out pills for conditions I feel will correct themselves. From what you’ve told me, you’re under considerable stress. Your grandfather’s death compounded that stress.” She leaned toward Diana. “Your grandfather’s death is still new. You need time to adjust. Give it a few weeks—”

Diana’s frustration burst through. “A few weeks?” What was she going to do? If this doctor couldn’t help her, who could? Trying another doctor seemed futile. This woman seemed so professional, so normal. Diana began to question what normal was.

“Diana, please try and give it some time. As long as you don’t feel threatened by what’s happening—by Alex—then try and just go with it for a little while. I think you’ll see that, as you regain your emotional balance and go through the grieving process, you’ll see less and less of Alex.”

Diana took a deep breath, disheartened. She’d thought psychological help would be her salvation. Now she was on her own to deal with her hallucinations. Gathering up her purse and jacket, she rose to leave. “Thank you for seeing me on such short notice, Veda.”

“Diana, please give it a little time.” Veda took her hand, giving it a strong squeeze. Her voice was gentle. “If things don’t get better in a few weeks, call me and we’ll take another look at it. Either way, I’d like to know how you’re doing with this, okay?”

“Okay, Veda.” What else could she do?

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All along she'd thought Alex was a result of her stressed-out life. And she'd just had that confirmed by Veda. She would just have to deal with Alex—if he should appear again—on those terms. At least her visit with Veda had done one thing. She was no longer afraid of Alex. Veda had confirmed he was just a part of Diana's mind and would, at some point, go away.

Did she want him to go? Part of her had to admit, she felt more alive when her phantom, Alex, was around.

* * *

That evening Diana sat in the cliff house's quiet kitchen, the yeasty smell of tomorrow's cinnamon buns a comfort to her taxed mind. If she didn't solve her problems pretty soon, she was going to weigh more than a sumo wrestler. She slid her hand down to check her waist, relieved to still find slim curves. What she needed was to cook for more people. Josh. Maybe she'd invite Josh to dinner.

Just then she caught a movement in her peripheral vision.

Alex.

She nixed the Josh idea.

Good thing Emma is in bed, she thought. Because tonight I intend to find out the extent of my delusion.

"Hungry?" she asked, then turned around to face Alex. This time she had no trouble refocusing her vision to see him.

"No. But I remember what cinnamon rolls smell like. I can sense a sort of corresponding energy. Right now I'm getting a feeling of serenity from the bread, a little like listening to Kenny-G."

She smiled to herself. *That's just what it's like.*

"I know. And I'm also getting a feeling from you—one of hopelessness."

"You can read my mind?" Her next words were more to herself. "Of course you can. You're a figment of my imagination."

"No, I'm not, Diana." He sighed. "And, yes, I can read your

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thoughts. If it bothers you, I'll stop."

"Don't do it on my account. Since you're part of my warped psyche, you're welcome to it."

His blue eyes held hers, sending a heated thrill to the pit of her stomach. He asked, "Even when you're asleep?"

Her mouth went dry, and she found it difficult to swallow. Is he asking for an invitation? An invitation to what?

She picked up her recipe card and began fanning her flushed face. "I'm having enough trouble with you when I'm awake."

He moved closer, and she realized she didn't want him to stop. She wanted to touch him, to feel him. But that was crazy. He wasn't real.

Diana's heart pounded as his gaze captured hers. A warm, tingling sensation began at her lips and flowed out to touch every part of her body. She closed her eyes, taking in the sensations, knowing he was somehow doing this to her, yet he wasn't even touching her.

When she opened her eyes, it was to look at his sensuous mouth. What would it be like to kiss that mouth? When she looked into his eyes, she saw desire.

She had an immediate need to touch him. She wanted to dispel the sudden, crazy notion that he was real. He only existed in her mind. Didn't he? Hesitant, but driven by the need to know—and the pure, urgent physical need to know him as a flesh and blood man—she reached toward his lips.

Her trembling fingers stopped short of their goal, her heart jamming into overdrive. She jerked her hand back to her chest.

Tears stung her eyes. "You can't be real."

CHAPTER 4

As Diana's hand reached out for Alex, then withdrew, Alex felt an immediate sensation of loss, like the switching off of a heat lamp. They stared at each other for long moments. Alex could tell Diana didn't believe he existed. His desperate need to have a physical connection with her was an empty ache in the center of his chest.

"I know it's hard to believe in me, Diana." Then, forcing a laugh, he realized something. "I'm not sure I do. This could all be some weird dream."

Nothing in his upbringing, nothing he'd ever learned in his lifetime, could incorporate his present condition into his belief system. But here he was, feeling, seeing, existing. For now, he had to accept it as truth.

Diana's look of weary distress along with the waning light surrounding her told him more than words ever could. And her thoughts came to him as confused, scattered impressions. Crazy...Can't let myself slip into...Need someone...Comforting...Real? Josh is real.

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Want him?

Alex closed his eyes and focused on giving her what she needed most. Comfort. If Helen had done it without even trying, surely he could, too, if he concentrated. So just how in the heck was he supposed to go about it?

Maybe if he envisioned something peaceful, a technique he'd heard people used when they meditated, he might produce those feelings. Then he could try transferring them to Diana. Focusing his mind, he imagined the peace of an open meadow with fragrant wildflowers swaying in a soft, caressing breeze. Like an electrical transformer humming to life, a slow and steady building of positive energy began to grow within him.

He closed his eyes to see a bright blue sky with billowy white clouds. The tips of his fingers began to tingle as the energy sought release. He directed the peace, the power toward Diana.

She felt it! He knew she did. He could sense her relaxation and acceptance. Peace replaced her confusion.

Alex opened his eyes to see her smiling face. It worked!

Diana's mouth curved. "For some reason, all of a sudden I don't seem to care whether you're real or not. I guess I'll just have to accept you for whatever you are, ghost or madness, and not worry about something I can't do anything about."

At last he'd accomplished something positive. The illumination she gave off—her aura, he guessed—now glowed as a mellow light circling around her. Fluttering bands of color were like ribbons throughout the light. He hadn't seen the colors that bright since he'd arrived. Even as he absorbed her feelings, Alex mused over the fact he was beginning to accept this new world of auras and spirits. It was difficult to be a skeptic, surrounded by such certainty.

"So, Alex, one more time, why are you here?" Her slim form moved through the kitchen, turning off lights and locking the door.

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Why am I here? That's a toughie. He followed her into the living room and sat across from her on the luxurious multi-colored rug in front of the flickering hearth. She hadn't turned on the lamp, and the room glowed with the quiet, intimate feeling of friends sitting around a campfire.

Why was he here? Be honest with yourself, old man. You haven't a clue. Maybe the need to be with her, to help her, hadn't been the workings of some mission from above after all.

One thing he knew with certainty—he knew he belonged here with her, and he hadn't felt he belonged anywhere during his entire lifetime. As a child he'd never felt like he belonged at boarding school. And he felt no particular affinity toward the cold, professionally decorated apartment in San Francisco he'd used as a home base. Looking back, his whole life had the feel of hotel living.

This felt like home.

She felt like home.

Was he here to help Diana? Or himself?

She stoked the fire, put her hands close to the warmth, then faced him, one eyebrow raised in a reminder of her unanswered question.

"I'm not sure why I'm here, Diana." He watched her face, rosy from the firelight, as she studied him.

He went on, trying to find an explanation for himself as well as Diana. "All I know is, I died. The next thing I knew I was floating out of my body." It sounded absurd as he said it, but inside he was reliving every horrific second. His heart sped out of control with rekindled panic and despair.

Diana didn't flinch or look away. Her eyes urged him to go on, her fingers pressed to her lips as if holding back her response.

"I...I found myself looking down on the doctors trying to revive me. When I knew they had failed, I went out into the hallway where I found you." He felt his heartbeat mellow with the memory of their first

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encounter.

Diana's eyes sparked in curiosity and sudden excitement, but she had to swallow hard before she spoke. "Did you...well, see others like you? You know...I mean...who had just...died?"

She wanted to know about her grandfather and he hated to disappoint her. "Sorry, Diana, no."

The light in her eyes dimmed and her shoulders slumped. She swallowed back the grief he knew she was experiencing. "Oh."

"Diana, I don't know how or why I'm here. I don't know where your grandfather went. I don't know if I'm stuck between earth and hell, or if everyone who dies wanders the earth. And I don't know why you can see me when no one else seems to."

They didn't say anything for a long time, but Alex read Diana's thoughts as she turned to look into the flames. *Nice to have someone to talk to. Someone who's part of my own mind. No pretense. No expectations. No control dramas. Not fair to always burden Helen with my problems.*

Alex drew her gaze back to his with the focused thought, Look at me. Then he said, "You can tell me anything, Diana." She still thought he was a figment of some mental illness. Who was he to say he wasn't? Maybe that's what madness was—those who were alive connecting with the dead, hearing their voices, even seeing them, like Diana was seeing him now. He didn't care. He just knew he wanted—no needed—to know her, to be with her. "What have you got to lose? Go ahead and unload your problems."

"I forgot you can read my mind," she said.

"Only when I try. I prefer to hear your voice. It's beautiful."

Her thought came to him. *Yours is like a warm caress.*

He couldn't help smiling. Whenever he spoke to Diana he noticed his voice always softened, deepened. It was a voice he never remembered using when he was alive.

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“My problems...” Diana looked toward the open-beamed ceiling. “Where do I start?” Her gaze returned to him and she smiled. “My grandfather Sparky didn’t like the word ‘problems.’ He called them ‘challenges,’ or sometimes ‘tests.’ I don’t think I inherited his optimism.”

Alex leaned toward Diana, her essence coming back to touch him like an electric blanket on a cold night. “‘Challenge’ does sound like it has a better chance at a positive outcome.”

She smiled. “You’re beginning to sound like Sparky. Very wise.”

He laughed, noting that when he did, a rush of energy suffused his body. “In the past, when I’ve been called wise, it had another word attached. But, getting back to your challenges.”

Diana’s emotions turned serious, and she looked back to the fire. “Most of my challenges seem to be connected to one main one—Christmas House, and whether or not I can figure out how to keep it, and hopefully re-open it as an inn. I’m sure the rest will fall into place.”

Fragmented thoughts about her daughter and her financial security came to him.

“I have had an offer on the house, and a pretty decent one at that, from Mrs. Marley, who’s an old family friend.” Diana’s voice became introspective. “Although I don’t know why she’d want to live here when she already has a fabulous house in the valley.”

“Do you want to sell it to her?”

“I don’t want to sell it to anyone. And I told her that.”

“Like I said before, you don’t have to sell. There are other banks. With the house as collateral, you won’t have a problem.” He still couldn’t figure out why the loan had been refused. It didn’t make sense. “So, Diana, things aren’t so bad. You have a business, a child, a home.”

She didn’t respond, but he heard her wonder, *Can I do it alone?*

“Why not?” The business mind that had earned him millions now took over with a building force, ideas forming as if being shot out of a

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laser printer.

Diana looked at him, her palms raised in resignation. “I don’t know the first thing about running a business. My training is as a chef. I was going to run the kitchen, Sparky was going to run most everything else.”

“Then I don’t see the problem, or challenge. I can help you with the business.” Was this why he was here? It seemed absurd the powers that be would want him to help with something as obvious as a bed and breakfast. He thought his mission—if indeed, he had one—would be more esoteric.

Diana’s eyebrow arched, her chin went down.

His fingers tingled with the need to touch that chin.

“Yeah, right,” she said. “You’re going to help me. This I’d like to see. How can a creation of my psychosis, or whatever you are, help me run a business? I’ve never had business training to draw from.”

She was like a dog with a bone on this whole figment of her imagination thing. “I’ll just have to prove myself.” He didn’t add he’d better hurry since he had no way of knowing how long he’d be around. As far as he knew, he might be zapped someplace else—heaven, hell, another dimension, who knew?—without notice.

The grandfather clock bonged twelve times.

Diana said, “Aren’t you supposed to go wherever at the witching hour? Where do you go anyway? Do you sleep?”

Her questions gave her away. She was still wavering on the possibility he might be real. “I don’t have to sleep, but I do go into a kind of, well...a kind of suspended animation for a few hours. It seems to re-energize me. The rest of the time I’m just, well...here. This is all new to me too. I’m still learning the ropes.”

Her finger twirled a lock of hair, the shiny texture giving it a life of its own. “I guess we’re both adapting to a new existence.”

He felt her resistance to believing in him as a separate entity falter.

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Then she chastised herself for believing in ghosts.

She went on, almost as if she talked to herself. “For me, it’s the realization that everyone before me is gone, that I’m the eldest in my family. My parents were killed when I was a child. Grandmother died soon after that. And now, Sparky. No siblings, no cousins, no relatives at all. It’s a strange kind of loneliness. Sad.

“And, I have to admit, it brings out the frail, insecure child in me. A child who has just realized she’s somehow gotten myself up on the circus high wire and there’s no net.

“I always thought of myself as such an independent woman, but I realize now it was a false bravado. I didn’t realize I was taking for granted someone would always be there to catch me if I fell. Having to survive on my own is new.” She hugged herself. “And scary.”

“I think I know what you mean.” Alex understood what she was saying. It didn’t feel so new to him.

He’d had friends, but that wasn’t the same as family. And he’d had the woman who’d called herself his mother. But her desertion had made it even worse. Always he’d felt the vague sadness of it, but he’d never taken the time to give it a name.

He realized now the feelings he’d had in life—emotions he would have called self-pity, and therefore a weakness to be buried—were a painful acknowledgment of something else. Aloneness. He wondered if his mother ever felt it as she traveled. Now he saw her as someone forever searching for a place to belong, but always looking in the wrong places.

“Maybe that’s why I’m here. So you’re not alone right now.”

Diana seemed to be thinking about that as she yawned, stretched her arms in an enticing way over her head, then collapsed back to her sitting position. “I do feel better. I have ever since you quoted that poem on the boat. How on earth did you come up with Tennyson at that exact moment?”

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“He’s always been one of my favorites.”

Alex told her about being raised in boarding schools, how he’d filled the long hours reading anything he could get his hands on, and his particular love of poetry. Then he told her how he’d come upon the Tennyson piece in her grandfather’s study. He shared his surprise in finding that books had spirits too.

They talked until two in the morning, Diana telling him about her concerns for her daughter, the house, and how much she missed Sparky. Alex said as little as possible, knowing she needed to unburden herself.

After a time she unwound, her words becoming slurred, her eyelids dropping to half-mast. During their talk, she’d stretched out on the rug, taking a pillow from the window seat to scrunch beneath her head. She looked as though she could doze off any moment.

“Go to bed, Diana.” He wanted to go with her.

She nodded and got up, a contented, dreamy smile lighting her face. Her hair, backlit by the glowing fire, became a slightly mussed, burnished halo. “We mortals do have needs.”

She secured the fireplace screen and walked upstairs. Just as she met the curve in the staircase she stopped, moved one foot down a step to look back at him, maybe to reassure herself one last time of his existence. Her smile was sweet, almost shy. “Good night, Alex.”

When she was gone, Alex turned back to the smoldering red embers, the memory of her smile like a shot of Wild Turkey on an empty stomach. His belly contracted with feeling as her words, “Mortals have needs,” echoed in his head.

Long after he knew Diana was asleep, Alex sat by the fireplace, by the warmth he could not feel, and fought the urge to go to Diana.

On purpose, he avoided Diana’s bedroom. Alex retreated to the attic to continue his explorations.

Almost half the spacious room was filled with Christmas

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decorations—strings of lights, red velvet bows, and unique ornaments.

Alex realized one of the boxes had fallen on its side. A smaller box lay open, next to the other spilled ornaments. The face of a beautiful antique angel smiled up at him. He drew closer. The angel was meant to top a Christmas tree, her delicate tiffany-glass wings open as if in flight. But one of her wings was broken. Alex felt the disappointment he knew Diana and Emma would feel when they discovered the broken angel. It was a small tragedy, but one he knew Diana would feel to her depths.

Realizing his thoughts couldn't stay away from Diana and that all efforts at distraction were of no use, Alex went down to Diana's bedroom to lie next to her while she slept.

* * *

The morning breeze chilled Diana's face as she sat with Emma on the bluff behind the house. A hint of haze over the ocean blurred the edges of the otherwise clear cobalt sky. She'd spread a quilt on the grass, thinking this would be a nice change for Emma's signing lesson. Wrong.

The little girl's eyes wandered out to the kelp beds. Time and again Diana had to tap Emma's shoulder to regain her attention. The lesson was going nowhere fast.

One last try and she'd retreat inside to continue. "Emma," she signed, "watch me."

Her daughter's eyes narrowed in an uncharacteristic flash of defiance, then she shifted her small shoulders toward Diana, sighing as she did.

Diana pulled Emma into her arms. If her own frustration was so intense, then Emma's must be even worse. What was she doing wrong as a teacher? She'd read all the books about deafness she could get her hands on, but right now she felt woefully inadequate at reaching her daughter. Diana had thought by now Emma would have shown more

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interest in trying to vocalize.

Emma seemed to be retreating more each day into her own world, a world where her imaginary friends knew what she thought, and she didn't have to struggle to express herself. How could she blame her daughter for retreating into that easier world, when hadn't Diana done the very same thing?

Alex was the perfect confidant—an entity to which she could pour out her soul without fear of emotional censure.

She felt Emma snuggle closer into the warmth of her arms and they sat there for long moments, each staring out over the churning ocean. Diana decided to postpone the signing exercise until after lunch. Maybe if she went into Emma's world for a while she'd have an easier time later when she could have the little girl's undivided attention.

Diana indicated a walk on the beach to Emma and the child's head bobbed with excitement. She zipped both their jackets knowing that, although the sheltered beach would be no more than breezy, and they had a mere hint of wind up here, the walk down to the beach could get downright blustery.

Hand in hand they descended the steep wooden steps zigzagging down the cliff face. At one point they were eye level with a soaring gull. Diana once again experienced the exhilaration she always felt being almost suspended in space as the gusts whipped at her hair.

Ever since she was a child and her grandfather had first taken her down these steps, she'd imagined the wind was a living force trying to pluck her off the cliff. But Sparky's strong grip and the sturdy wood railing made it a controlled terror. Now it was her solid hand holding her daughter's, allowing Emma to feel the same invigorating sense of adventure as they watched the waves crashing onto the ribbon of beach below.

Peace, serenity and the power of nature. The world above the cliff melted away as Diana's loafers sank into the yielding sand.

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The beach formed an elongated “S” bookended by massive rocky cliff points. Diana felt Emma’s warm hand slip from hers as they headed toward the far end of the beach, where, during low tide, the water receded to form a large pool just inside the end of the cove. The ocean fed into the pool through a low, wide arch in the cliff.

Emma clapped her hands as she emitted a gurgling laugh. Diana followed her daughter’s gaze toward the cliff opening to see she found a group of seals at play in the waves surging through the rocky archway.

Emma ran up and down the beach mimicking the antics of the seals, while Diana sat on a redwood log, which had long ago washed ashore.

“Good morning, Alex.” She turned to the presence she felt beside her, but saw nothing. She squinted her eyes and moved her head back and forth. *Nothing*. But she sensed he was there. “Why can’t I see you?”

“I’m not sure,” came his deep, soothing voice.

She quit trying to see him and looked down the beach to check on Emma. Her daughter was attempting to communicate with the seals by signing.

“Oh, Alex, how can I ever give up this place? Selling Christmas House would be like giving up all my most wonderful memories. I know that’s childish. At my age I should be a secure adult, and all that. But the one place I’ve ever felt secure and cherished is at Christmas House. Those old feelings are still here, even without Sparky.

She listened for Alex’s response, but heard nothing more than the wind and the booming surf.

She continued, trying to find the words to help a stranger understand what her life had been like here. “The wonderful memories, the traditions, my grandfather’s unconditional love are all connected with this house. I want that for Emma, but I guess it’s all wishful thinking.” She nodded toward her daughter. “Like Emma wanting to be

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part of the family of seals.”

“Diana, I told you, you don’t have to give it up. I’ll help. If you’re ready, we can go up to your office and get started. I promise you’ll get another loan. And believe me, running a small business isn’t all that difficult. Don’t get me wrong, it’s a lot of work, but I know you can do it.”

Inhaling the salty tang of the ocean spray, feeling the cool moisture as the breeze blew it to her face, Diana felt a glimmer of optimism for the first time since Sparky’s death. Alex was right. She could do it.

She stood, dusting the sand and bark from her jeans as she opened her mouth to call for Emma. The ever-present cloud of sadness pressed in. For a moment she forgot Emma couldn’t hear. She waved to get her daughter’s attention.

* * *

When they returned to the house, the ringing of the phone urged Diana to scurry Emma up the last few feet of the path and hurry inside. She wondered if Alex had to walk up the steps, if he could fly, or if he just willed himself to a different place.

“Hello?” she said breathlessly into the receiver.

It was Josh Marley.

“Oh, hi Josh, what’s up?” She juggled the phone to a comfortable position in the crook of her neck and struggled out of her jacket, then helped Emma tug off a sleeve. Emma hopped onto the stepstool at the kitchen sink to wash her hands.

Josh’s tone was confident, flirty, like she remembered him being with the cheerleaders in high school. “How about a quiet, romantic dinner with me tonight, beautiful?”

She stretched the limit of the phone cord as she opened the refrigerator. What should she say? As she poured a glass of juice for Emma, she realized her hand was shaking. Was it from the exertion of dashing up the hill? Or was it the thought of her relationship with Josh,

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which until now she'd considered a casual friendship, suddenly taking on a new dimension?

"Say no." Alex's whisper was so close behind her ear she could have sworn she felt the heat of his breath.

What an imagination she had!

"Gee, I don't know, Josh. I have so much to—"

"Hey," Josh cut her off, "we enjoy each other's company, right? We've been friends long enough. Don't you think it's time to move ahead?"

"Move ahead? Where to?" The thought both thrilled her and scared her to death. "I like England."

Alex almost shouted in her ear this time. "You're flirting!"

Diana covered the mouthpiece. "Shush!"

She looked toward Emma, then realized how pointless her concern was. Her daughter sat as quietly as always, working in her sticker book.

She liked Josh. He was extremely attractive in almost movie star perfection. His dark hair was never out of place, and his cocky, amused smile seemed a permanent fixture. Diana wondered why the sudden shift of gears in their long-standing friendship. She'd convinced herself years ago that she had no chance of romance with him.

Josh went on, "England? Cute, Diana. No, really, think about us for just a minute. We're perfect for each other." He sounded like he was teasing, but only in part. "We have so much in common. We've both lived here most of our lives, we have mutual friends, and"—he effected a British accent—"we are both of keen intelligence and extreme good looks. We're an obvious match. Whaddya say we give it a go, gorgeous?"

Alex mimicked Josh. "'Whaddya say, we give it a go, gorgeous?' He's worse than I was!"

Diana tried to ignore Alex, but that was like trying to ignore the nearby drone of a bee.

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“Oh, Josh, I’m just not up to going out.”

“Yes!” Alex cheered.

She looked around the kitchen to glare at Alex, but she couldn’t see him.

Josh went on, “Okay, okay. I was going to save this for a surprise, but you’re forcing my hand. I was planning on taking you dancing after dinner.”

“Yeah, right. You hate to dance.” Then she realized she had no idea if he still had the same aversion to dancing he did when they were younger.

“I’ve learned to love it. All that body contact, right out there in public. Gives me the chills just thinking about it.” His laugh was wicked.

“You’re probably just coming down with a cold.” Diana couldn’t contain the smile.

Josh’s voice grew serious. “I remember how much you like to dance. I always envied those other guys out on the dance floor with you.”

The realization he remembered send a jolt of excitement through her. No two ways about it, with a few simple words he’d made her feel special. She had to admit she’d seen Josh use that same charm on women dozens of times, but she’d never been the object of it before. And, damn it, it felt great.

Alex groaned. “Give me a break.”

“Okay, Josh, okay.” She found her voice softening. “I’d love to go out with you.” The moment the words were out of her mouth she realized she was looking forward to her first real “date” in six years.

She hung up, suddenly feeling young and pretty, and glad to be alive again. Maybe things were changing for the better.

She looked around for Alex. Nothing. She listened.

“We need to go over the business, Diana.”

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For a few brief moments, she'd forgotten all about Christmas House, all about her daughter's struggles...all about Alex.

"Okay, Alex. Just let me get Emma's lunch ready."

* * *

"Sure." Alex watched as Diana made her way to the sink to wash her hands. Her hair was still mussed from her walk on the beach and her cheeks glowed with the exertion—or from her phone conversation with Josh. But that was a consideration Alex didn't want to think about.

Alex was sure Diana wasn't about to make the normal everyday sandwiches most people would throw together. He'd come to realize that the woman never did anything halfway.

He leaned, arms folded, against the arched doorway, confident neither Diana nor Emma could see him. He'd found that, if he concentrated hard enough, he remained invisible even to Diana. And, as far as he knew, no one else could see him at all.

At first glance, Diana's actions look haphazard as she cut up vegetables, shrimp and fresh herbs, and flung them into a broth-filled saucepan. But nothing about the woman's movements was haphazard. He watched in amazement as she, in a few deft moves, cut a potato, scooped it up with the wide knife and slid it into the pot.

It took her under five minutes to whip up what he was sure would be, given a short time to simmer, a delicious soup. He doubted he could have opened a can with such speed. She made it look effortless, as if she did it without thinking.

In fact, the smile still playing around her mouth told him that Diana's mind was indeed on something—or someone—else. And he didn't have to read her mind to know who that someone else was.

He'd heard the entire phone conversation. A nagging feeling of unease told him he should be glad for Diana. But other feelings, feelings that should have disappeared when he died, made him angry he wasn't alive, wasn't able to give Diana that feeling of exhilarated

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anticipation.

He wondered if any woman he'd dated in his lifetime had felt that way about him. He was certain he'd never felt like that toward any of them. They'd been different from Diana, aloof and absorbed with themselves, but that had been fine with him. It didn't take Einstein to figure out why he'd preferred that type of woman. Looking back, he'd pretty much gotten as much as he'd given...a few laughs, someone to share a meal and good bottle of wine with, and some heavy breathing followed by a bleary-eyed *arrivederci* in the morning.

The thought of how he used to be disgusted him. Had he been that shallow? Just being with Diana this short time had shown him a whole other side of life. It was a side he hadn't even known existed.

His mind jolted back to the present when he realized Emma had gotten up and was now standing less than two feet in front of him.

She was smiling directly into his eyes!

* * *

Emma had looked up from her sticker book to see a tall man standing in the kitchen doorway. She knew right away that he was another friend, come to keep her company. He must be because her mother never even looked up from what she was doing. Emma was sure her mom didn't see him. And, like the others, Emma could hear him inside her head even though he didn't move his mouth. The funny thing was, he was the first *person* to be one of her friends. The rest were all animals and fairies. He was too big to be a fairy.

She'd gotten up to stand in front of him and thought, Hello.

He kind of jumped when he noticed her. He'd been staring at her mother. Then he got a funny look on his face and smiled at her. She could hear him think, Hello, Emma. My name is Alex.

Alex was a thousand times better than her other friends. She didn't have to concentrate at all to see or hear him. He was really easy.

She looked over to where her mother stood slicing bread, but her

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mother never looked around. Emma's stomach jumbled like a hundred butterflies were trying to get out.

Wow! Alex is great.

* * *

As Diana dressed for her date with Josh, she felt like she was seventeen all over again and getting ready for the prom. For the first time in ages she thought, I don't have a thing to wear! She hadn't been shopping for herself in several months and then it had been for basic jeans and sweaters. What was she going to wear? She'd tried on all of her dresses, but each one seemed a little out of date, a little frumpy.

No, it wasn't the clothes. It was she who felt out of date and frumpy.

Emma, sprawled across the bed on her stomach with her chin propped in her hands, must have had enough of Diana's indecision and slid off the bed to leave the room. With a dramatic sigh she signed, "Play."

Diana hoped Emma had been indicating she was going to play in her room. Other meanings for that particular sign were "perform" and "act."

Maybe Emma meant Diana's date with Josh was all a big act. *Well, wasn't it?*

She had to admit she'd always thought the whole dating-mating ritual itself was a kind of performance. The players hid their own flawed personalities, assumed well-rehearsed characters for each scene, and pretended to be the people they wanted to be, all in an effort to get a kind of emotional standing ovation in the form of love.

The clock struck seven, forcing the cynical thoughts from her mind. Josh would be there in a half-hour!

The sound of the doorbell gave Diana a start. Josh was early. She knew it wasn't Helen because this was Helen's second home and she'd never felt the need to even knock, let alone ring the doorbell.

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Diana looked down at her lacy black bra and half-slip, then dashed across the landing and signed to Emma, “Answer the door.”

The little girl rolled her eyes and meandered over to sit down on the top step to take her favorite, unhurried, way down the wooden stairs. She slid down on her bottom, one step at a time.

Diana threw her hands in the air as she hurried back to her wardrobe.

She decided on a double-breasted black dinner suit. The sheer shoulders and sleeves on the shaped jacket gave it just a hint of sexiness, and the slim fitting, short skirt enhanced her figure.

Just as she moved in front of the mirror to pin her grandmother’s antique marcasite brooch onto her lapel Diana felt a presence behind her.

Alex.

She turned around to meet his penetrating gaze.

CHAPTER 5

The look Alex saw in Diana's eyes wasn't one of welcome.

As Alex had watched Diana standing at the wardrobe putting the finishing touches on her lipstick, he knew his thoughts were leaning toward Neanderthal. He didn't want her to go out with Josh Marley, let alone for her to be so distracted by the guy. Her thoughts had been so far away it had taken her several minutes to even notice Alex was in the same room.

Something about Josh threatened to turn Alex into a snarling, territorial animal. Was this cool jerk just too good to be true, or what? On the surface he seemed the total gentleman, the considerate friend, but Alex knew that underneath, old Joshie Boy was looking out for number one. And Alex should know. Restless unease tightened his stomach.

He snorted as he thought about how the phony creep had talked Diana into the date. *Didn't she know he was handing her a line with*

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that, “We were made for each other,” bull?

Alex had never felt jealousy in his entire life, but now it bubbled throughout his chest like a simmering volcano, and he had to make a conscious effort to keep his hands from balling into fists. He had no claim on Diana.

For a while he'd begun to believe that maybe being here with Diana was his own special heaven. But now he began to wonder if God had a perverse sense of justice and Alex was being given glimpses of what he could never have.

Was this existence his private hell for living a meaningless, loveless life? Was this punishment for a life filled with taking instead of giving? Was he to face eternity watching other people find love? The frustration of Diana being beyond his reach, and now, the bitter jealousy had become an open, aching wound.

Maybe he should push his instincts aside—they could be a tad distorted—and try to look at Josh in a different light. There was always the possibility Josh might make Diana happy.

The look on Diana's face as she'd whirled toward him from the mirror tore at his gut. Her eyes flickered in consternation, then darkened with poignant disappointment.

Alex said, “You look beautiful, Diana.”

Her eyes darted around the room and she fidgeted with her purse as she mumbled, “I thought you'd be gone. Silly, I guess.” She shrugged one delicate shoulder, her smooth skin enticing beneath the transparent material. “But I thought—”

“You thought once you started living life again your fantasy world would disappear. Right?” Why hadn't he repeated her entire thought? She had said, “Wonderful fantasy world.”

She turned back to the mirror, her lower lip quivering.

He hadn't meant to read her mind, felt uneasy with his invasion of her privacy, but he couldn't help himself. Other thoughts had come to

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him too. His mind had registered her feelings of being torn, confused, and sad.

But one thought—a thought almost missed, it came and went so fast—made his heart soar. Her true wish was for this date to be with him, not Josh.

Her low spirits came from her belief he wasn't real, that he was no more than a result of her overactive imagination. The ambivalence he felt from her gave him back some measure of peace. At least part of her wanted him instead of Josh. He'd have to settle for that since he could never have any more of her.

She looked into his eyes for a moment, then avoided contact again, as if by not looking at him, not seeing him, she wouldn't have to deal with what she considered an imaginary part of her life.

He wanted to help, not make trouble for her. And that fact alone was the kicker for him. For the first time in his existence, he was putting his own feelings aside for the happiness of someone else—someone he loved.

Love? Absurd how easy, how right, a feeling he'd avoided for so long could be. He did love her. Even though he hadn't recognized it at the time, he knew he'd fallen in love with her the moment he'd gone through her at the hospital. All she was as a person became known to him, loved by him, in that instant. Diana's happiness mattered. Even if what she needed to achieve that happiness didn't include him.

He realized he would do anything in his power to give her what she needed to make her happy. The date with this Josh guy was an enormous, nerve-racking step for her, and Alex did have the presence of mind to know he should be encouraging her to get on with her life. And if Josh—Alex couldn't help an inward cringe just thinking about the man—could make Diana happy, then so be it.

Taking a deep breath and pushing his own feelings aside he smiled. "I'm sorry if I startled you, Diana. I just wanted to tell you to have a

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great time.”

She looked up, her pansy-blue eyes wide in surprise. The tiny, brilliant flecks of gold he usually saw in those eyes dimmed and her smile didn’t quite reach the windows to her soul. “Oh, thanks. Josh is terrific.”

With a supreme effort he forced his smile to look genuine. “You’re going to knock ol’ Joshie Boy right off his chair when he sees you. You look fabulous.” Then he felt his newfound resolve backslide as he whispered, “If I were alive—”

She looked up again, this time to hold his gaze. She was challenging him to finish.

“I was only going to say, if I were alive, I’d give old Joshie Boy a run for his money.” He tried to sound teasing, as if his words were no more than a casual effort to boost her confidence, but he couldn’t seem to stop the pitch of his voice from lowering.

He wondered, as her eyes turned smoky and one eyebrow rose in a seductive movement, if she could read the thoughts he’d been so careful to hold back, the words he wanted to say. *∴If I were alive, Diana, we wouldn’t go out at all. I’d spend the entire night making love to you. Taking my time getting to know every inch of your incredible body and every dream in your beautiful soul.∴*

But her expression changed to a teasing one, and she did a good imitation of Scarlett O’Hara. “Why, thank you, kind sir, but you do go on. It’s enough to turn a poor country girl’s head.” But she couldn’t hold the gaiety and turned in a hasty retreat.

Had he heard in her soft, “Good night, Alex,” a note of disappointment? Or was it wishful thinking?

* * *

Diana stood beside the shiny black Jaguar as Josh opened the passenger door. He leaned against it, grinning down at her with a look of a co-conspirator. It was a glance she remembered well from when

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they were teens. But this time the glance was mingled with obvious admiration, and it sent a thrill through her.

As she slid into the bucket seat and looked up to thank him, her eyes caught a movement in one of the upstairs guest room windows.

Alex gave her a thumbs-up sign, but his face was a mask of stone.

“What are you looking at, Diana?” Josh followed her gaze to the window, but his face registered nothing more than mild curiosity. She was sure he couldn’t see Alex.

She hurried to settle herself into the plush leather and put on her seatbelt. “A light glinting off the window caught my eye. I need to wash the windows.” It was all she could come up with. Alex’s gaze, and the resulting tightness in her chest, had left her thoughts scattered.

Josh’s questioning frown was replaced by a genial smile as he shut her door and went around to the driver’s side. “Do you mind if we stop off at the tasting room? It’s on the way and I have some papers I picked up in the city for my mother today. She said she’d be working in the office late.”

“I don’t mind at all. I haven’t had a chance to thank your mother in person for the kind note she sent after Sparky died.” She wondered if the woman’s pointed features had softened with age. Mrs. Marley had always reminded her of a pretty version of the witch in *The Wizard of Oz*. The dark hair and slight hook to her nose could have something to do with it.

“Josh, did you know your mother offered to buy Christmas House after Sparky died?”

He didn’t answer her until he’d downshifted to take a sharp curve. “Maybe she was just being nice.” He turned on the radio and began punching the stereo buttons. “Maybe she just wanted to give you an easy out after your grandfather died.”

Diana tried to look at Mrs. Marley in a philanthropic light but failed, which made Diana realize she didn’t know the woman very well.

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The cliff-side property alone was a good investment, so maybe Mrs. Marley just saw an opportunity for a good business venture.

Josh reached across the car's console to take hold of Diana's hand, the solid warmth a balm to her spirit. She thought about the importance of touch.

Her soul was drinking in Josh's caress, as though it was cool spring water and she'd been trudging for months through the desert. Although she got lots of hugs and kisses from Emma, and Sparky's hugs had been great, the romantic touch of an attentive man had been absent from her life for a long time. *Definite draught conditions.*

Part of her said that this could be dangerous. Was she too needy? But another part of her said, Nonsense. Who wouldn't feel this way about Josh?

"I'd like for you and my mom to be good friends." Josh gave her hand a squeeze as he headed the car toward the Anderson Valley vineyards.

"To tell you the truth," Diana admitted, "she used to scare the beezes out of me when we were in high school. She was always mad at us. Of course, looking back, we did some pretty dumb things. Like the time we all ditched and went to San Francisco for the day."

They both laughed, remembering.

"Now that I'm older," Diana raised her chin and looked down her nose—"and so much wiser"—she heard Josh snort—"I see her as a strong, dynamic woman. A woman I have to admire for all she's accomplished."

"I know she can come across as a tiger at times," Josh said, "but don't let her fool you. She's a kitten in disguise. Her no-nonsense attitude is just because she had to take over the family winery when she was so young. When she got married, she thought having a man around would help. But three years later she found herself a widow with a baby, as well as the responsibility of running a winery. I don't think she

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ever had time to be young and carefree.”

Diana pushed away the comparison to her own life.

Conversation with Josh was easy. The fact they were on a “date” didn’t change much between them. In fact, it made things easier. And more intimate.

Before Diana knew it they were pulling up the long vineyard road to the impressive stone chateau-esque tasting room which housed the offices for his family’s winery. The bluish glow cast by the full moon gave the rows of dormant grapevines and the rolling hills a shadowed, cryptic quality.

Diana had to ask. “Is your mother working way out here by herself tonight? It seems kind of deserted...kind of lonely.”

He chuckled. “You should talk. You can’t get much more isolated than that creaky, old house you live in. I’m a little surprised you haven’t started seeing ghosts now you’re out there”—he mimicked Bela Lagosi’s Dracula—“all alone.”

Alex’s face came to Diana’s mind. *If you only knew.*

Josh parked and went around to open her door. “Come on, Diana, you can tell me. Haven’t you heard strange, unexplainable noises late at night? Or heard ghostly laughter?” They walked up the path and Josh jumped behind her with a ghoulish chuckle to run his fingers up her spine.

She turned and batted at him, finding herself giggling, enjoying his teasing. “Josh, stop it! Nothing in that house is as scary as you are.”

“What about the whispers of some long-departed resident? A Lizzie Borden type?” Josh walked around her, pretending to be a bent, old woman whispering, “Now where did I leave my hatchet?” He unlocked the door to the building, allowing her to step into the lighted foyer ahead of him. “The family home must’ve acquired at least one specter over the past ninety-five years.”

Diana laughed. “Only one.” She knew he would think she was just

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being silly.

They were both laughing, more she was sure from the free-spirited fun of being together than because anything they were saying was all that witty. It had been so long since she'd been this lighthearted that everything they said seemed to be bumping her funny bone.

By the time they made their way up the stairs to Mrs. Marley's office, they were both acting like they were back in high school, and Josh was as outrageously wicked as she remembered.

Josh executed a theatrical stumble as they walked through the office door, causing them both to erupt into renewed peals of laughter. But the look Josh's mother sent them stopped Diana in her tracks. The woman almost managed a smile, but not quite. Diana was pretty sure Mrs. Marley had not changed much in the last several years.

Something told Diana now would not be the time to give in to the residual urge to giggle. Instead, she cleared her throat and put her hand out to Mrs. Marley. "I'm so glad to see you again. It's been a long time, hasn't it? I guess the last time was when Josh and I were in high school and got in trouble for dit—"

She felt a gentle poke to her ribs from Josh's elbow, which she was sure was meant to stop her from reminding Josh's mother of the ditching episode. He went around the enormous desk to greet his mother with an unconvincing look of contrition and a kiss to the cheek she offered.

Mrs. Marley at last took Diana's outstretched hand, surprising her with a warm, gracious handshake. Diana figured she must have been mistaken in thinking the initial smile was displeasure. Maybe the woman was just tired.

The realization hit Diana that the last time she'd been in this room she was sixteen. At that time she, Josh, Helen, and two other friends had been given a twenty-minute lecture on the evils of breaking the law. It hadn't mattered to Mrs. Marley that the law broken was a high

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school rule.

Now that Diana was a mother she knew a little bit of what Janice had been dealing with in acting as both mother and father to Josh. She now felt sorry for all the trouble they'd caused her.

"Won't you have a seat, Diana? I know you two have dinner reservations, and I have work to do, so I won't keep you but a moment. I just need to look over these papers before Joshua leaves."

Diana sat at the edge of the leather sofa, feeling awkward and having flashbacks of being sixteen. "Thank you, Mrs. Marley."

"Please, my dear, call me Janice."

Janice? Josh's mother had always been the notorious, aloof Mrs. Marley when they were kids. Even Josh called her "Janice" instead of "Mother." Now the invitation to call her by her given name made Diana feel like a privileged insider.

Josh gave Diana a glance that said he'd be no more than a moment, then he joined his mother to go over the papers. Diana looked around the room.

The office had been redecorated since Diana had been there last. Then functional office furniture had filled the space, but now the room looked like what Diana imagined a Wall Street office might look like with elegant cabinetry, leather and tweed.

The winery must be very successful. She pushed away mercenary thoughts about Josh being able to help her to finance the inn. She wondered if Josh had his own money, or if Mrs. Marley controlled everything.

"Well, shall we go?" Josh came around the desk.

His mother stood, a stiff smile on her face. "I notice you're wearing your Grandmother Clara's pendant, Diana."

Diana ran a finger across marcasite's bumpy texture. "It's one of my favorite pieces of jewelry. It has a lot of sentimental value."

"I knew your grandmother quite well." Janice's eyebrow arched.

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“She never attended a party or went out for an evening with Sparky without that pin. I’m pleased to see your love of family is so strong. It’s important to me, too.” Mrs. Marley gave Josh a pat on the cheek.

Diana noticed Josh had stiffened at his mother’s reference to family. Curious, since he didn’t seem like one of those macho kind of guys who hated to have their mother fawn over them.

Josh said, “We hate to run off, Janice, but we have reservations.”

“Well, what are you waiting for, an engraved invitation to leave? Get out of here. Oh, and Diana, give me a call and we’ll have lunch. I’d like to get re-acquainted, woman to woman.” As they left, Janice’s wave was good-natured.

Diana had little time to ponder her new perception of Mrs. Marley because Josh talked pretty much non-stop all the way to the restaurant, seeming quite comfortable sharing the pride he felt for his family business and his mother. The fact he didn’t once brag about himself moved him up a notch in her opinion.

By the time they had reached the reservation desk at the small, elegant restaurant, their conversation had turned quiet.

Josh looked down at her, announcing, without warning, “You know, I’ve always had a crush on you.”

Since when? She was stunned by his seriousness and confused by his statement, but she had to hold her tongue, since they were now facing a tuxedoed maitre d’.

The beaming man greeted Josh like he was Prince Charles. “Oh, Mr. Marley, so good to see you again so soon. Let me show you and your beautiful young lady to your table.” The man puffed up like a peacock and, with the flare befitting a royal procession, led them through the room filled with subtle lighting.

“Why didn’t you ever ask me out before, Josh?” Diana said over her shoulder as they followed the man to a secluded table.

She had to wait for an answer since Mr. Peacock took what felt like

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hours to go through his practiced ritual of seating, napkins, menus and wine list. At last he strutted away, the echoing tinkle of fine china and crystal seeming to follow in his wake.

“Well, I—” Josh began to answer her question as he took her hand.

“Diana!” A high-pitched male voice split the cocoon atmosphere.

Most of the patrons looked toward the shrill cry, then, seeing who it was, smiled and went back to their own muted conversations. The tall man in the starched white chef’s coat did a kind of skater’s dance around the small tables on his way toward Diana.

She stood up to accept his hug. “David Russell! How are you?”

Josh’s expression was one of delighted curiosity. “You two know each other? Damn, I was trying to impress Diana with my ‘in’ here, and it turns out she knows the head chef.”

“David and I went to the California Culinary School together, then worked at the same restaurant in San Francisco for a short time.” Diana reclaimed her seat as she introduced the two men.

David said, “I have to get back to work, but...” He took a card out of his jacket pocket. “Here, take my number and give me a call. Let’s get together.”

“I will. Soon.” Diana made a mental note to call David and find out if he might be willing to help her out if she re-opened Christmas House.

David headed back the way he came, acknowledging several customers as he went.

For Diana, the rest of the evening maintained the same level of magic. David prepared a special dish of sea bass in cognac and almonds, she and Josh shared a bottle of Josh’s family label Chardonnay, and before they knew it, they had talked and reminisced the evening away.

As Josh finished signing the bill, and the realization that the evening was almost at an end hit Diana, she reached out to touch Josh’s hand. “I had a wonderful time.”

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She'd almost forgotten what fun was. Her life had been so serious, so full of worry over the past few years. No wonder she had invented a dark and brooding fantasy.

Josh squeezed her fingers in return. "I'm glad."

He drew her close as they walked to the car. Feeling the strength of his arms, she leaned into him. *Oh, to be held again.* When they reached the car, Josh didn't open her door right away.

"You're beautiful, you know." He eased her backward so she was resting against the car.

Josh did make her feel beautiful. He reached out and stroked her cheek with the back of his hand and his face moved toward her. God, she hadn't been kissed in years! And now this drop-dead gorgeous guy was letting her know she was desirable. The feeling was intoxicating. She raised her face to accept the kiss, but as her eyes closed and their lips made contact, a different face blocked Josh's image.

Alex.

She realized then that the thought of being intimate with Josh was, although pleasant, not earth-shattering. But the moment she thought about Alex, her pulse quickened and an electric buzz ran through her entire body. That same electricity now transferred itself to her lips, then to Josh's lips, and he responded, pulling her to him.

God, she felt guilty. Her response wasn't to Josh at all! What was she doing to herself? And to Josh. She was slipping back into her perfect fantasy world, not accepting life, or Josh, for what they were—imperfect, but real. So maybe Josh's kisses weren't dynamite. They weren't bad either. So maybe her passion for Josh wasn't what it was for Alex.

Josh was real. Alex wasn't.

She put more feeling into the kiss, slipping her arms around Josh's neck, trying to convince herself that she was living for the moment, for the man whose hard body was pressed against hers, and not for some

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phantom.

They were slow breaking the kiss, Josh still holding her close. His, “Wow,” as he pressed her body to his, and her own feeling of contentment at the closeness made her close her mind to thoughts of Alex and concentrate on Josh.

Josh looked into her eyes, his own reflecting the light from the full moon. “I’d better get you home. I’m very tempted to ravage you right here in the parking lot.”

The drive home was filled with comfortable conversation, as though they’d been dating forever. And when Josh walked her up the steps to the front porch, it felt right for him to follow her inside.

As usual, Helen had left on the fairy nightlights when she’d gone to bed, so the room had a subdued quality to it. The bright glow of the moon through the large living room windows completed the romantic picture. Josh took her in his arms, swaying back and forth.

“I promised you we’d go dancing.” His breath tickled her ear.

Diana closed her eyes and followed Josh’s confident lead as they danced. He sang a few soft bars of “When I Fall In Love,” then hummed the rest of the tune, the deep bass of his voice rumbling against her chest. She’d never known Josh’s voice to be so deep. He sounded alarmingly like—

Suddenly, she was no longer in Josh’s arms.

The tension in the body holding her made a subtle change. The touch that had a few moments before been flirty became reverent, intimate. It was as if the man touching her needed to memorize the feel of her, his fingertips needed to savor every minute sensation.

Alex was holding her! She kept her eyes closed to capture the fantasy. Josh’s voice took on a dreamier quality and the mouth that brushed her ear became Alex’s mouth.

He pressed her closer. “God, you feel”—his breath caught—“wonderful.” The hoarse whisper was Alex’s voice.

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She felt herself melting between two worlds and gave herself up to the dream. Powerful sensations coursed through her body, her skin hot and cold at the same time. An electric current infused her blood, awakening every nerve ending.

“This can’t be happening,” she heard herself whisper.

The warm breath against her neck sent a thrill across her skin. “Diana...”

As they swayed to the silent melody, his arms gained strength, hands caressing their way down her back to pull her hips against a firm, solid body. He took a deep breath and she knew he was taking in the scent of her perfume.

He murmured, “Ummmm...”

They danced around the room, bodies in sync.

Abruptly Josh’s arms went slack and he stepped away from her.

Josh ran his fingers through his hair, a confused frown on his face. “Sorry, Diana. I feel...kinda funny.”

He looked disoriented, stumbling as he backed toward the door. “Sorry. Great time. Call you.” Josh stumbled out the door and headed straight for his car.

Diana stood in the middle of the room, shaking as if she’d just experienced an earthquake and her body was preparing for the next jolt.

What just happened? Her imagination had gone into overdrive, replacing Josh with Alex. She looked around the room.

There, in the shadows of the window seat, sat Alex. His face, eerily illuminated by the moonlight, had the look of a tortured man.

Diana could still feel the tingling imprint of Alex’s touch on her back and his warm breath brush her ear.

CHAPTER 6

It was like he'd ingested poison. Alex's emotionally devastated, physically sick, light-headed anxiety had a sense of euphoria all at the same time. He'd just used Josh to physically connect with Diana.

Diana walked toward him, her movements an echo of their dance, and he became a drunk looking at the world's last shot of whiskey. There should be a twelve-step recovery program for spirits. The litany could be, "Hi, my name is Alex, and I'm ghost in love with a person of body."

She seated herself across from him on the large window seat and kicked off her black heels to tuck her feet beneath her. "What am I going to do? I can't seem to let go of you, Alex." The calm in her voice was deceptive. "Just now I even imagined you when Josh touched me." Her eyes smoldered with the memory.

Alex wanted to know what she was thinking. *To hell with good intentions.* He read her mind. She was reliving their dance, her body

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and spirit remembering the feel of his touch on her spine, her hips, and she was responding once again.

Her mind willed him to follow her upstairs. And like a man drunk beyond rational thought, he did.

What good would it do?

He couldn't touch her.

Her tantalizing backside, accentuated by the black dress, preceded him up the stairs, the slow rocking of her hips as she ascended hypnotizing him, the curve of her slim legs tempting him.

God, he wanted her. But getting inside Josh again was out of the question. He couldn't tolerate the other man's hands touching her, even if it did afford Alex the same pleasure. He didn't want a third party present when he and Diana made love.

By the time they got to the garret bedroom and Diana closed the door, she had unbuttoned her suit jacket. She turned to face him, looking at him eye-to-eye as she slid the top off.

His arms ached to hold her, remembering how wonderful she'd felt as they danced, even with the barrier of Josh diffusing the full effect.

Next came the stockings, then the skirt as she swayed in a slow dance before him. Her eyes never left him, challenging him to do something—anything—to make contact with her again.

A burning heat pulsed through him, a heat he allowed to grow, even knowing there would be no culmination.

"I want you, Alex. Not Josh. I want your arms around me, your lips touching me."

She stood in her scraps of black lace, her aura sending waves of red toward him, begging him to become part of her. "Why can't you be real?"

Alex felt the bands of color diffuse his being and he closed his eyes, drinking in her essence. A few short steps stood between him and ecstasy. If he moved into her at this moment, he would experience

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heaven. But he also knew Diana would feel nothing more than a vague feeling of well being.

Her living body and her earthbound mind were barriers he was powerless to breach.

He willed his form to disappear, knowing they were torturing themselves—and each other. “I love you, Diana.”

It was all he could give her.

Her shoulders slumped, and he saw the evidence of his disappearance in her eyes. But what else could he do?

As he left through the window, to float out over the tumultuous surf, he saw her hands slide up through her hair to grab handfuls of the burnished strands. She pulled. The echo of her thought, *::He isn't real...he isn't real,::* followed Alex into the night.

* * *

Emma tried to tell her mother about Alex during the morning's lesson. But her mom seemed to get mad at her and stopped her from trying to explain about him every time she tried.

Her mom didn't want her to have her special friends. But Alex was different. She was sure if she could just explain about him, her mother would understand. But she never got past saying, “New friend,” before her mother would hold her hands still and shake her head. So Emma just closed her eyes and refused to “hear” her mom. If mom could do it, so could she. Her mother had sent her to her room.

Now she sat on her Snow White bed, holding her stuffed figure of Doc, trying real hard to imagine Alex.

::Hello, Emma,:: said a voice in her head.

She looked up to see Alex sitting at the foot of her bed. She thought he was even more handsome than Snow White's Prince Charming.

He looked unhappy. *::You got in trouble for being difficult during your lesson this morning,::*

::My mom won't listen to me,:: She plucked at Doc's hat.

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::Were you listening to your mom?:: Alex looked like he already knew the answer.

::No. And now she's all mad at me:: She tried hard to keep from crying, but she could feel her chin start to shake and her throat hurt.

::Emma, I have an idea. If you do your lessons with me, and work really hard, we can surprise your mom and make her happy again::

She got up and started jumping on the bed, clapping her hands.
::Yes! Yes!::

Alex laughed, but told her maybe she shouldn't jump on the bed, she might fall.

He sure was a funny kind of special friend.

* * *

Diana handed Helen the basket of cleaning supplies, tucked the feather duster under her own arm, then rolled the vacuum into the living room.

They were both dressed in old clothes, ready for the task at hand. Helen was over for what had become a once-a-week ritual for the two women—to clean the enormous house. They'd decided since there was no gym nearby, they'd get a good physical workout by making Christmas House shine. Of course, the gourmet meal Diana always cooked as Helen's payment probably put on more calories than they burned.

"What's up with the kid?" Helen jerked her chin toward Emma, sitting in the window seat, practicing her signs, while looking at her lesson book.

Diana put her back into rubbing beeswax furniture polish into the cherry wood end table. "Beats me, but whatever it is, she's a new little girl. All morning she's been skipping around the house talking up a storm. Well, maybe for most five-year-olds it would only be a squall, but for a child who just yesterday wouldn't look me in the eye, it's a damned hurricane. Let's hope the barometer keeps dropping."

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Helen climbed up the stepstool and started cleaning the long stretch of living room windows. "Have you decided what you're going to do about the inn idea?"

Her friend craned her neck to look back at Diana, tottering as she squirted window cleaner. "I can give you a little help if you need money. I came into some dough several years ago, and it's still sitting in the bank. You're welcome to it. Maybe then you could hire someone to do the business end of things."

Diana felt her throat ache at her friend's generous offer. She was sure Helen, even working two jobs as a waitress, was finding it tough making ends meet. And where would Helen have come into money? She had no relatives, at least none who weren't forever hitting her up for "loans." No, the windfall money idea had to be Helen's way of making it easier for Diana to accept a loan.

"No way I'm going to take your savings, Helen, but I love you for offering. To answer your question...no, I haven't figured out what I'm going to do. But I've been avoiding the inevitable for too long. Tonight I'll sit down and list my options, if I can think of any, and make a plan."

Looking past Helen to the gardener working in the spacious yard, Diana said, "I can't afford Matthew right now, but I can't afford to let him go either. Gosh, he's been doing the upkeep on the grounds and helping Sparky with the herb garden for as many years as I can remember. But even if I have to sell the place, I need to have it in tip-top condition. I'm no gardener."

Diana thought about Janice Marley's offer to buy Christmas House. The idea gave her an uneasy feeling. Somehow, knowing who was buying the house made it worse than if a stranger did. Knowing Janice and being able to get a mental picture of her in the house made it so real. Trying to imagine strangers was much more abstract, which was more to Diana's liking since she didn't want to think about Christmas

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House and what might be happening to it. No matter what, Diana didn't want the house to become run-down.

Helen stepped down to move the stool to the next window. "This house always looks like a showplace. And I have maid's elbow to prove it." She rubbed her arm in mock pain. "I'll help you get the bungalows ready. Had Sparky started the refurbishing yet?"

Diana didn't want to think about how much work it was going to take to get the four guest cottages in shape. "All the new bedding and the necessary odds and ends were ordered two months ago. In fact they should be here any day. But Sparky hadn't started working on updating the electrical or plumbing. I'm not sure what I should do about that, since Sparky was going to do all the repairs himself."

Alex spoke. "I'll show you how. You can do the work yourself."

Yeah, right, she thought, then looked over to Helen to see if her friend had heard Alex. No such luck. Alex was Diana's delusion alone.

"Well," Helen offered, teasing, "you could get one of those do-it-yourself books from the library."

Diana couldn't help laughing. "Me do wiring? I can just see myself. As it is, I worry I might get shocked every time I plug in a lamp." She attacked the massive wooden mantle with the polishing cloth. "No, I'll just have to use part of the business loan—if I can get another one—for repairs and hope the inn pays for itself sooner than we thought."

"Sounds to me like you've decided to keep the place."

Diana found herself sitting back on her heels, smiling. "I guess I have." She realized she wanted with all her heart to make it work.

"Yes!" Alex shouted so loud, Diana was sure Helen must've heard him. But Helen's gaze was directed at her alone.

Helen's tone became serious. "How do you think Josh will feel about it? You still haven't told me about how your date went."

Diana was struck by the seriousness of her friend's expression. Helen looked down at the bottle of cleaner like it was a crystal ball.

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“Must’ve been pretty good because I made enough noise to wake the dead the next morning, and I didn’t hear a peep outta you. I waited a while, but I had to leave for the breakfast shift at The Garden. I knew Emma would come get you if she needed you.”

“You nut, why didn’t you just come in and wake me up?”

Helen went back to her chore, avoiding Diana’s eyes. “Well, you know...he might’ve been up there.”

Diana almost asked, “Who?” worrying Helen might be referring to Alex, but then she realized her friend had to be talking about Josh. “Good God, Helen, do you really think I’d bring a lover here? With you and Emma not fifty feet away!”

“You and Josh are lovers?” Helen lost her balance, arms flailing for a moment before she jumped nimbly from the stool.

Diana thought her friend’s eyes might pop out in disbelief over her comment, yet her expression held a hint of sadness too.

“No, we’re not lovers!” Diana shouted a reflexive protest. Then she thought about the possibility. She cringed as if to ward off an imaginary blow, quickly saying, “Not yet anyway.”

Diana felt a wadded up paper towel make direct contact with the side of her head. “Good shot,” she said approvingly as she stood up to dust the figurines on the mantle.

“You’re really serious about him, aren’t you?” Helen said.

Diana noted the forced gaiety in Helen’s voice. *But why?* The thought made her weigh her answer. Helen always knew when Diana lied. She looked directly into those familiar brown eyes, seeing caution in their depths.

“Well, Helen, maybe he’s not my dream man, and maybe there are no fireworks when we kiss. But I’m all grown up now. I know I have to be realistic about love. I’ll never have Mr. Perfect, the man I’ve created in my mind. He just doesn’t exist.”

Alex chuckled softly. *::Diana, don’t exaggerate. I’m not perfect.::*

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His voice lowered. ::But I do exist.::

Her gaze darted around the room. *Nothing.*

She ignored the comment, even though her heart began to race. Her next words came out a little breathlessly. “My dream guy didn’t exist in Emma’s father for sure, and I know I won’t find him in Josh, but it’s time to get real. Josh has a lot of good points. He’s fun to be with, he’s considerate, he cares about me, and”—she directed her emphasized words to Alex, as well as Helen—“Josh is real. I need to focus on what’s real.”

Helen sat on the sofa arm looking at her with utter disgust. And when Helen looked disgusted, she put every ounce of her face into it. “What’s so hot about reality? And are we talking about the same man, here? Josh-u-a Marley? And I thought since you hadn’t mentioned it, that you weren’t having problems with”—she crooked her fingers—“‘reality’ any more.”

Diana decided it was time to sidetrack Helen’s train of thought, and besides, she was curious about something. “Why can’t you just say ‘Josh’ like everyone else? You know he hates to be called Joshua. Even more with the derogatory way you say it.”

“I know.” Helen’s giggle was malicious as she snatched the dustcloth out of Diana’s hand. “That’s why I say, Josh-u-a.” She ran a few steps, slid across the parquet floor to the curio cabinet and, using the cleaner nozzle like a gun, pretending to shoot out the individual panes of glass.

“Jeez, Helen, is there going to be a problem between you two?” Diana knew she sounded irritated, but she was feeling a twinge of panic. What if Helen and Josh couldn’t get along? It could put a serious crimp in her relationships with both of them.

Helen waved the rag in the air. “Oh, don’t get your panties in a bunch. I promise to be good. If you love him, then I”—she broke into an unconvincing fit of coughing before she forced out the word—“love

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him.” Her smile was wan. “Must’ve inhaled some dust.”

* * *

Diana sat cross-legged in the middle of Sparky’s office, a profusion of papers around her. The glow from the computer gave the room a bluish tint. Emma had gone to bed hours ago and now the room had an almost too-quiet feel about it, as though her mind was holding the tempting specter of Alex at bay by an invisible force field, and she was in a kind of soundless, motionless bubble. Her ears strained at the silence. She shrugged her tired shoulders, more in the need to have some kind of movement in the room—any kind of movement—than to relieve stress.

Getting up and massaging her stiff legs, she turned on the CD player. A Nat King Cole cd still sat in the disc holder from when Sparky had last played it. She gave in to melancholy.

Alex appeared, seeming comfortable in the overstuffed chair. “Want to talk about it?”

She gulped back the knot in her throat. “I guess I haven’t used this since Sparky died. He listened to Christmas music year round.” Her breath caught. “Silly, huh?”

As the nostalgic strains of “Silent Night” swirled around the room, Diana found herself closing her eyes, indulging in a flashback to last month. “I can almost hear Sparky rocking back in the squeaky, old desk chair.” She inhaled. “I can smell his vanilla-scented tobacco smoke swirling from his pipe, and see his smile as he listened to Christmas music in the middle of September.” She gave Alex a pointed look.

She glanced around the room at Sparky’s things. “He was Christmas.”

“I’ve never much cared for the holiday myself. But it sounds like your grandfather made it special.”

Diana eased back down to a sitting position on the floor, eyeing the papers. “Maybe I should just skip the holiday this year. Well, for the

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most part anyway. I'm not scheduling my first guests until the New Year."

Alex frowned. "I think you're missing a great opportunity. This is Christmas House, for heaven's sake. Make the most of it. Even if you're not a hundred-percent into it."

Her heart didn't want to listen to the music, to relive what she had lost, but she couldn't bring herself to turn the disc off.

Instead, she looked around at the physical proof of her tenuous financial situation and indulged in a little pity party.

She allowed herself only a few moments before straightening her back and taking a deep breath. She faced down the encroaching depression and got back to the task at hand.

She said more to herself than Alex, "If Sparky taught me anything, it was that the sooner you face your challenges, the sooner you'll find a solution." She looked at the jumble of papers. "Jeez, why wasn't I a business major?"

"I was," Alex said.

She ignored him and grabbed the notepad she'd been using to jot down a to-do list. "This afternoon I had myself convinced I could carry this off, but it's just too much for one person."

Her stomach tightened at the thought she'd have to put Emma in childcare. She knew there were wonderful centers and private homes that provided nurturing environments. The problem was Diana was sure Emma wasn't ready to be thrust into the real world just yet. A few more months, maybe a year, would give her time to teach her daughter more skills, then Diana would look at schools for the deaf as an option. But right now, her withdrawn child needed to be with her mother. Diana was sure no one else could understand or help Emma as well as she could.

Alex stood and came to sit beside her. "Enough worry. It's overwhelming if you look at the whole thing. Let's start with one

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problem at a time.”

She was desperate to have her ghost help her. “Let’s?”

He smiled. “I’m going to show you how to run the business.”

Three notebooks later, the need for sleep had taken its toll. She stretched. Somehow everything Alex had told her made sense. He’d reviewed Sparky’s files, explaining as he went. He’d told her what she needed to do to change the business, and how to secure a business loan in her name. He’d shown her so much, too much to absorb in one setting.

“We’ll work on this more tomorrow evening, after Emma goes to bed,” Alex whispered.

She sat up straight. She’d almost forgotten she had a date with Josh tomorrow night. “Damn, I’ll be gone tomorrow night.” She looked at her watch. How did it get so late? “Make that tonight. It’s Josh’s birthday, and he’ll be picking me up at seven for the party at the winery.”

“Call and cancel.” Alex’s direct stare unnerved her.

She wanted so much to do just that. Sometime during the evening she’d realized something unsettling. Alex couldn’t be a figment of her imagination. He knew things he had no earthly way of knowing. Maybe she wasn’t crazy after all. And the knowledge he might be real sent a thrill through her. The thrill was supplanted by a canyon of sadness. Even though it meant she might not be nuts—that for some unexplained reason, this wonderful man was haunting her—she couldn’t ever have a real life with him.

Oh, my God, I love him! I want to spend my life with him.

His gaze softened and she knew he was reading her mind.

“Alex, I feel like I’m caught between two worlds.”

His laugh was bitter. “Tell me about it.”

He faded away.

What was she going to do? Josh had made it clear he was serious

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about their relationship. How could she lead him on when she loved... Loved what? A ghost? A spirit who could never be more than an untouchable shadow in her life?

Josh was flesh and blood, and no matter how she hated it, she was too. She needed to be held in flesh and blood arms. She needed someone who could be part of a family, who Emma could look to as a father.

Her love for Alex was unrealistic, she tried to tell herself. She had to think of Emma, of Christmas House.

* * *

Breathing a deep sigh of relief that Alex hadn't shown up before tonight's date with Josh, Diana headed downstairs, this time ready a full hour before Josh was due to arrive. She'd looked up often while she dressed, sure she'd felt Alex standing there, disappointed every time to find an empty room.

Now, dressed in a new deep green velvet sheath, her marcasite pin in place over her left breast, she was feeling a flutter of confused emotions over the fact Alex hadn't shown up.

Make up your mind, Diana, she told herself. Do you want to live in a dream, or reality?

When she reached the kitchen, Helen and Emma were doing some kind of dance around the island, their hands swaying in the air as their feet did a cha-cha step.

Diana stood in the arched entry trying to hear the imaginary rhythm accompanying their movements. The two were lost in their own world because it took Diana joining in the dance before they even noticed she was in the room.

After a time the three of them collapsed into chairs, laughing and out of breath.

"Good dancing!" Diana signed to Emma before she gathered the thin, little body into her arms for a bear hug. "If you're up to the noise

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sometime, Helen, you can turn on the stereo as loud as you can stand it, with the bass all the way down, and Emma can feel the music vibrate through the floor. She loves it, but I can only take so much before my ears give out.”

Emma stood in front of Diana, and signed, “Pretty.”

“Thank you,” Diana signed back, dipping into a short curtsy. “Hair, okay?” She ran her hand over the French-twist.

Emma nodded her approval. Then she looked askance, signing, “Where?”

Diana explained she was going to Josh’s birthday party, and then watched the child’s eyes cloud as she made a face. Emma went off to play in the living room.

Helen put a forkful of leftover lasagna in her mouth before asking, “What’d ya get ol’ lover boy for his birthday?” She held up her hand. “No, let me guess.”

Diana tapped her foot in mock disapproval as she waited for her friend’s characteristic editorializing.

Helen took another bite of pasta, then pressed the fork against her chin. Her eyes lit up. “Scented massage oil?”

“No.”

“No? Umm, I guess not.” Helen frowned. “That doesn’t seem like something he’d know what to do with anyway.” She scratched her head while she thought, then gave Diana a knowing look. “Oh, I know. After the party, you’re going to go back to his place and present yourself to him, wearing nothing but a big ribbon.”

Diana couldn’t help the pained look. It had never occurred to her to get him a sensual gift. Or to do anything as wickedly romantic as Helen’s ribbon suggestion. Alex came to mind, but she pushed the sexy images away. “No.” She gulped. “I got him a tie tack. I’m hopeless.”

The sympathetic nod she got from Helen was worse than if her friend had laughed in her face. “I thought you ree-lly, ree-lly liked the

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dope.”

Diana jumped at the bong of the doorbell. “He’s early again.”

“Ya know, some people like to do that just to keep others off balance.”

Diana shot Helen a reproachful look as she went to the door. “I’m sure he just overestimated the time it would take to get here.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot,” Helen shouted from the kitchen. “He’s new in town.”

Josh, elegant in a black double-breasted suit, white shirt, and a tie in almost the same shade of green as her dress, beamed at her as she held the door open for him. “Wow, Diana. You look ma-va-les.” He lifted her into his arms to twirl her around.

She pulled at the back of her short dress, which had hiked up. “Josh! Put me down.”

First Helen put a damper on her high spirits. Now she was going to feel all ruffled before she even left the house. Her mood was turning grumpy. Maybe she was just hormonally challenged tonight. She made an effort to lighten her mood.

“Come and say hello to Emma.” She took his hand.

Josh pulled back. “I won’t know what to say to her. I’ve never been especially good with kids, and I’ve never known a deaf person before.”

“She won’t bite. I promise.” Diana put her free hand behind her and crossed her fingers.

Diana could tell Emma was watching their approach out of the corner of her eye. But when they were standing in front of her, Emma wouldn’t look up from her sprawled position in front of the fireplace, and the intensity she applied to her coloring book would have done a brain surgeon proud.

Diana tapped the tip of her velvet pump underneath Emma’s nose. She tapped harder.

At last, the little girl looked up.

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“Can she read lips?” Josh asked.

“Not yet. But in a moment, her backside is going to be reading my hand.”

Josh smiled and crouched down closer to Emma’s eye level. “She just needs a strong male influence in her life. A little discipline.”

The hair on Diana’s nape stood on end and she felt all her senses go on red alert. She was being overly sensitive. Wasn’t that what she wanted for her daughter—a male influence in her life?

Helen, who had just walked into the room, said, “Oh, just like that strong, male discipline you had, Josh-u-a?”

Josh didn’t seem fazed by Helen’s remark. In fact, his smile was pleasant as he stood. “Oh, hello, Helen. How’ve you been?” The two appeared to be having some kind of staring contest.

Diana cleared her throat, making a mental note to press Helen about what was going on.

Josh didn’t acknowledge the fact Helen hadn’t answered him. He just patted Emma’s head, then took Diana’s hand. “Your carriage awaits, Cinderella, to take you into a night of enchantment.”

Diana was grateful for Josh’s tactful way of breaking the tension. She curtsied, kissed the top of Emma’s curls, then stood to take Josh’s outstretched arm. When she looked up, she saw a seductive promise in his eyes. She found herself squeezing his arm, the firm muscle beneath the material warm and real.

She made an impulsive decision she wasn’t sure she could follow through with. By making a physical commitment to Josh, she would also be making a commitment to choosing reality over fantasy.

“If we’re not back by midnight,” Diana whispered to Helen, as Josh hurried her toward the door, “don’t worry about me. I’ll be all tied up.”

CHAPTER 7

Alex distracted himself from what he imagined was going on between Diana and Joshie Boy by trying to levitate the small wooden boat on Sparky's desk. Stopping himself from going along on Diana's date had taken a super-human effort, and now he needed an outlet for the power created by his frustration.

Focusing his will—his energy—into a small, swirling mass of light, he used his mind to directed it toward the boat. The tiny sail began to quiver, as if an invisible finger toyed with it. He shut the rest of the room from his mind until nothing but the vessel existed. The rest of the world disappeared as his eyes and mind drew a concentrated bead on the object. A picture of his hands scooping up the boat and lifting it flashed over and over in his mind, until it became a freeze-frame image.

With slow precision, the boat began to rise.

Then, as Diana's face flashed before him, the boat fell back to the

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desk with a clatter.

He paced the room, his gut like a giant, over-wound clock. No distraction was strong enough to dispel the images of Diana with Josh Marley.

God, why am I still here?

Had he been right thinking he had a lesson to learn? If so, he'd better smarten up soon because he couldn't take much more of the exquisite torture named Diana.

What more was he supposed to be getting out of this? He'd learned a great deal already. He knew there was a spirit side to each person that, in essence, remained untapped by most living people. Death had taken away all the barriers and let him see the power, the beauty of the human soul.

In life, greed, the need for immediate gratification, and most of all fear, had short-circuited his control over—and even his awareness of—his own life force. But, he wondered, What good does knowledge do me now when I'm caught between two worlds?

Alex thought back to his lifetime. He knew he'd never be able to go back to the way he'd lived—taking risks, living for the transient rush of adrenaline, thumbing his nose at death, and thinking the accumulation of millions meant success. Life was too precious. Death had taught him that much.

He'd also come to know that the spirit side of him had been ignored when he was alive. He'd lived with blinders on, his focus on his physical needs, and his alone. Had he really been so selfish? So greedy? The thought that his lifestyle could be reeking havoc on his soul had never occurred to him. The problem wasn't so much his profession—other men seemed to keep a more balanced outlook on life. They had families, people they loved and who loved them. They were faithful to their wives and knew when to stop partying.

He'd always thought they were dopes.

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If he had it to do again, would anything be different? His mother's face came to mind. If he had the chance, he'd let her know he no longer hated her. He smiled as he realized it was the truth. Whatever her reasons had been for deserting him—her own private tortures, mental illness, whatever—he now saw her as a human being with human frailties. Although he'd like to put an end to the issue by finding out the reasons his mother hadn't been able to care for him, he was ready to let her off the hook. Maybe he should try to find her and somehow let her know. Alex felt peace with the forgiving.

But solving the issues with his mother didn't help with the one at hand. What was he going to do about Diana?

When he'd gone into Josh's body and danced with Diana, the ability to touch her wasn't the only thing he experienced. He also got a glimpse into the man whose body he inhabited. Alex knew Josh wasn't the guy for Diana. The man's spirit was as weak as a kitten. To the radiance of Diana's soul, Josh's was no more than a flickering candle. They didn't belong together. Josh would drain her very life force, since the man had none to give.

Now Alex had changed his mind about Josh being good for Diana, he became determined to convince her to get rid of the guy.

He headed toward the door. Tonight Diana would have two escorts.

* * *

"Oh, Josh, this is like a fairy tale." Diana couldn't contain her delight as the car wound its way up the vineyard drive to the illuminated winery.

She ignored the snorted response she alone heard from behind them. Go home, Alex! she thought as hard as she could.

Silence.

Had she been successful? No matter. She wasn't about to let Alex spoil her night out.

The spacious tasting room and patio had been transformed for

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Josh's birthday party. Thousands of tiny lights twinkled from the trees surrounding the building, and a crowd of gaily-dressed people danced to dreamy music provided by a live band. The tinkle of laughter drifted to Diana as Josh helped her out of the car.

"Are we late, Josh?"

"Oh, no. I just wanted to make a grand entrance with you on my arm."

Josh made her feel like it was her birthday by the proud way he ushered her into the guest-filled tasting room. As everyone greeted them and introductions were made, Josh kept a possessive arm around her shoulders.

"Diana, you look lovely." Janice kissed the air at Diana's cheek, a fond look softening the woman's otherwise sharp features.

"Thank you, Janice, so do you. And how beautiful the party is."

"Well, this is a very special birthday for Josh."

Diana looked at Josh, thinking twenty-seven was an odd age for special importance.

"If you cooperate"—Josh's eyebrows ricocheted up and down—"this could be the most important night of my life."

Diana was more confused than ever. "Cooperate with what?" For the life of her, she couldn't figure what Josh and Janice were up to. Janice swatted at Josh's sleeve. "Oh, don't tease the girl." Then she did the most amazing thing. She winked at Diana. "I think tonight is going to be important to you, too, Diana."

Before Diana could recover, Janice walked off, sporting a secretive smile.

A whisper close to her ear made her jump. It was Alex. "Diana, don't fall for it." A thrill of goose bumps ran over her shoulders and neck.

She turned from Alex to look up at Josh as he commandeered two flutes of champagne from a passing attendant. He handed her one.

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“Here’s to us, babe. With my mother’s blessing, our marriage can’t go wrong.”

Marriage? Marriage! She couldn’t have heard him correctly. Diana felt the air around her prickle with sharp electricity and wondered if it was Alex’s reaction or her own.

She found herself downing the entire glass of effervescent liquid in an effort to ease her dry throat. She hiccupped.

Josh smiled as if to say he was game and drank his champagne in one long swig, then clinked his glass against hers.

She stared down at the tilted glass in her hand, then up to Josh’s questioning look. All she could do was shake her head to try and clear away the confused feeling that she’d just been plopped into the middle of a foreign film and there were no subtitles. She blurted out, “Josh, what, exactly do you mean by ‘our marriage’? Did I miss something?”

Josh looked pleased with himself. “Come with me, my beauty,” he said, as he pulled her through the crowd toward the spacious patio.

He raised his hand in a signal to the band, and the tempo of the music changed as the strains of “When I Fall In Love” filled the night. The tall heaters lining the patio kept away the October chill, but the shock of what she suspected was happening had her trembling.

Diana found herself in Josh’s arms in the middle of the patio, where moments ago several couples had been dancing. Everyone had cleared the floor as Josh led her out.

A dark figure in one of the shadowed recesses of the patio leaned against the low wall, arms folded, his challenging gaze following their every move. At least she knew the arms holding her were Josh’s this time.

She turned her attention back to Josh, his warm smile teasing.

Pull yourself together, Diana, she told herself. Despite what you thought you heard, it’s not possible Josh is asking you to marry him. Not yet anyway.

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She had to admit she'd hoped their relationship was headed toward something serious. But this was too soon.

At long last, gaining some measure of composure as Josh led her around the dance floor, Diana braved a smile. "Josh, what's going on?"

"Just hold your horses. First, we dance to our song." He pulled her closer, humming the tune they were dancing to, until she relaxed in his arms.

When had it become their song?

She rested her head against his shoulder, enjoying the rhythm and movement. Josh's solid body against hers and the way he held her with tenderness gave her a sense of security, of being cherished. And she lost herself in the moment, all shadows vanishing.

Other couples joined them on the dance floor and, by the time the music ended, the party atmosphere had turned quiet and romantic. Josh tucked her hand into the crook of his arm and led her to the edge of the terraced patio. His hands circled her waist and helped her up to sit on the masonry balustrade. The clear night sky was a magnificent ceiling of a million twinkling stars.

"Diana..."

Her heart raced as he reached into his coat pocket to retrieve a small silver box. She was afraid she already knew what was in it.

"I would like you to do me the honor of becoming my wife."

Alex's voice came to her with an urgent, *::Don't do it!::*

Oh, God! Diana's thoughts took off in ten directions as her eyes became mesmerized by the slow motion of Josh opening the box.

This was all happening too fast! *What about Emma?* Did Diana really, truly, honestly know Josh well enough to marry him? Heck, she'd known him her whole life. But was she a good judge of character? And what about Christmas House? Surely she couldn't say yes. Could she? Her financial worries would be over. There went that unbidden mercenary thought again. Josh was more to her than a bank

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account.

What about Alex? Would Alex still be part of her life if she married Josh? There was no rational reason to believe Alex would go away just because she had a husband, but for some reason, she felt he would.

"I've loved you for most of my life, Diana." Josh's gaze riveted hers. "Years ago I waited because I thought the time wasn't right, and I lost you. I'm not about to make the same mistake twice."

What was he talking about? She had no idea he'd felt that way about her back then. Right now she felt like she was in someone else's body and he was talking to—and about—someone else.

He went on. "I don't want to take the chance you'll fall for some jerk again while I'm looking the other way."

The look of anticipation, of anxiety in his eyes moved her to smile at him in reassurance, then bite her lip as she realized she didn't feel sure at all. She looked down at the diamond solitaire resting in velvet.

"My father gave this ring to my mother when they were engaged. I give it to you now...with as much love as my parents shared almost thirty years ago." He paused to take a deep breath. "Will you marry me?"

Diana knew she had to say something. Yes. No. Maybe. Any one would be appropriate. But her mind couldn't seem to hold on to one of them. They flitted back and forth, a moth caught inside a lantern. The big question was did she love him?

Alex's whispered, "He doesn't know what love is," threw her into deeper confusion. Alex was a spirit. Josh was flesh and blood. Alex wasn't a part of her real world. Josh was.

She felt the sting of tears as she took a deep, steady breath, not taking the time to analyze if they were tears of joy, sadness, or resignation. A jumble of feelings drummed against her chest with every heartbeat. She reached one hand out to close the box, her other going to Josh's cheek as she said, in what she hoped was a composed voice, "I

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hate to sound like an old cliché, but this is so sudden.”

He rolled his eyes, “Sudden? It isn’t for me.”

“I care a great deal for you, Josh, and knowing you want to spend your life with me makes me very happy—”

Josh put his hand over the one she had resting at his face. “But?”

“But I don’t think you know me well enough.”

His laugh teased. “What? You’re really a man? A serial killer?” He looked into her eyes. “Diana, we’ve known each other all our lives. You know I’m a reckless scoundrel, and I know you’re the woman of my dreams.”

“But, Josh, I have a problem—”

She was cut off by a form bustling toward them. *Janice*.

“So when’s the date?” The woman looked back and forth, and when neither of them said anything, she put a protective arm around Diana. “Joshua, darling, I told you not to spring it on her like this. Oh, men! They think they’re being romantic, and they’re just being obtuse.

“Darling, you don’t have to answer the big moose tonight. Marriage is a giant step, and marrying into this family is a huge responsibility with all the baggage we have with the winery and all.” She took the jewelry box from Josh and reopened it. She set it in Diana’s hand so the huge diamond was facing Diana. “You two go and enjoy the party, and leave the marriage stuff to simmer a bit. I’m sure then, Diana, you won’t feel so overwhelmed.” She gave her son’s hair a tug and Diana’s cheek a powder-scented kiss, then she hurried off, waving to friends.

Diana looked up into Josh’s eyes. It was evident Josh and his mother had already discussed the proposal. They both sounded like it was a done deal. What made them assume she’d marry Josh? And what else about her life had they discussed without her? “Josh, I’d very much love to think about marrying you. How’s that for now?”

“While you’re at it, think about this.” He leaned down to place his lips on hers. It was a kiss that left her wanting more. But at the same

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time she realized she wasn't ready to offer herself tied up in ribbon just yet.

* * *

Alex watched Diana say good night to Joshie Boy at the door, and he was tempted to do what he'd promised himself he would never do again. As much as he wanted to, he would not get inside the man, would not receive the kiss Diana was at this moment bestowing, would not feel the soft touch to Josh's chest.

Alex knew with every ounce of his being that he should be the man at the door saying goodnight, knowing tomorrow and all following tomorrows would be spent with Diana.

Tonight Diana didn't invite Josh in. As she closed the door, Alex rushed forward to face her, and to face his own fears about the man.

One look into the steady gaze of Diana's blue eyes and he knew, with sickening clarity, what she was thinking. "You can't be serious about saying yes to that guy."

Diana's hand went into her purse and extracted the small jeweler's box. She opened it and held it toward him for inspection. "I said I'd think about it. And I've done nothing but think about it all the way home."

She moved passed him and walked up the spiral staircase, her spirit closed.

Alex felt his own energy pale in response to her withdrawal, and a moment of panic seized him. Could it be possible he would disappear if she rejected him? He wondered where his spirit would go. Maybe he was overreacting and he was just feeling an empathetic response to Diana's weakened energy.

He followed her to Emma's room, where she kissed the sleeping child.

They were in Diana's bedroom before he spoke. "Diana, you have to listen to me."

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“Yes, I guess I do. I don’t have much choice.” She flung her small purse into the chair, kicked off her shoes, and began unzipping her dress.

“Ah, do you want me to leave?” He was astounded and disturbed by her lack of modesty. Before she had teased and invited him to watch as she undressed. But this was different. Now her sexy movements were inadvertent, making him feel like a Peeping Tom.

“Why?” She sounded resigned. Tired. “You’re not real. You’re not even substantial enough a fantasy to...to act on anything you profess to feel. So...” The dress fell to the floor with a soft swish. She reached around to undo her filmy bra.

Alex acknowledged the challenge, but he needed to talk to her, and she was distracting him from what he had to say. He looked away and walked around the room, but he caught a vision of her bared form as she slid beneath the sheets. God, she wasn’t wearing anything to bed tonight! Talking to her was going to be next to impossible.

“Diana...” To keep from diving into her right that minute, he looked out the window into the night. He fixed his gaze on the intermittent, distant flashes of the lighthouse beacon down the coast. “I have a solution for you.”

“Solution?”

Alex could see her in his mind’s eye as she gathered the covers around her and sat up, hugging her knees to her chest. He refocused on the flashing light.

“You don’t have to marry ol’ Joshie Boy, you know. You could—”

Her sharp words cut him off. “I know I don’t have to marry Josh, and don’t call him Joshie Boy. He’s every inch a flesh and blood man.”

Alex had to clench his jaw to hold back the sexual slur he wanted to blurt out referring to Joshie Boy’s inches. It wasn’t his style. It was petty. And it was raw, naked, male insecurity—a new experience for him.

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“Okay, okay. So you think Joshie Boy is Adonis in worsted wool. Forget about him for a moment and think about you. Think about you and Emma.

“Instead of caving in to the bum’s rush to get married, why not do what you really want, what I know in your heart of hearts you want? Become an independent, grown-up woman who’s able to take care of herself and her daughter, all alone, without anyone else. Then you can be objective about Joshie’s proposal.”

He turned. The lure of her beautiful upturned face was too hard to resist.

She slid two fingers absently across the satin border of the blanket; her eyes focused on the bedpost, unseeing as she considered his words. Then, with a sigh, she brought her gaze to him. “And just how am I supposed to do that?”

The minimal glow from the nightlight illuminating her smooth shoulders was a complete distraction. His eyes took in the curve of her slim neck, a neck he was sure smelled of musky rose, then his gaze slid down to the delicate, sculptured grace of her collarbone. His gut tightened as he watched the quickening rise and fall of her breasts, the tops of their round fullness teasing from beneath the blanket. Her aura was beginning to pulse red again.

She asked, in a breathless voice, “You were going to tell me how I can be all that I can be. And please don’t say, ‘in the army.’”

Her attempt at joking wasn’t enough to break the spell she’d already cast, since she was still sitting there, warm and inviting. He looked away. And, though he cleared his tight throat, his voice insisted on coming out strangled and a little agitated. “Stick to your plan to re-open Christmas House. I’ve shown you how to run the business, but if you still need help, I’ll be here for you.”

Her chuckle was deep, sensual. “Kinda gives a new meaning to the term silent partner.” She cocked her head to one side. “What makes you

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think I'll give up Christmas House if I marry Josh?"

Alex said. "I can't see ol' Joshie Boy catering to B & B guests."

A smile turned up the corners of her mouth. Then it faded as creases etched themselves across her forehead. "I guess I can't either. But if I do marry him, we'll work it out."

Alex could feel her spirit coming back to him, coming away from the thought of marrying Josh, but her confusion wouldn't allow her to come all the way. "I don't know what to do.

"I do." He couldn't keep the note of sarcasm out of his voice. "Next time he's here, tell him you want to show him the sunset on the cliff, then push him off."

"Alex—"

"The whole idea, Diana...what I'm talking about is to do this without Josh. Give him back the ring and tell him to get lost. Stay here, in the home you love. Here, with your daughter. Here, with...me."

She looked into his eyes. He could tell she wanted to believe it could work. But he knew, too, what stood in the way of her acceptance. "Guess I'd have to list Christmas House as a haunted B & B."

"You alone need know I'm here."

"Alex, you're already too real to me, but you're only here in spirit. I'm alive. Turning my back on the chance of a normal life with a real man, in favor of...of this half-life with you isn't fair to me, or to Emma. Or to Josh." She turned from him and lay down. "He's still very much in the picture, Alex, and I can't throw away what could be my lifeline to normalcy."

What could he do to convince her? "Diana, he isn't your lifeline. And I know he doesn't make you feel the way I do." He drew closer, surrounding her with his radiant energy, his hands reaching out in a futile attempt to touch her.

She rolled onto her back and Alex moved to within inches of her face, his body now hovering just above hers. It took every ounce of

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willpower to hold himself back from the magnetic pull of her spirit. Red and gold bands of color, of pure energy, wound out from every part of her body like silken, electrified fingers to surround him, to draw him to her.

Keeping those fingers at bay, he sent his own energy to her. He concentrated on giving her a sensation of touch as his hand reached down to her face.

Her eyes closed as her head turned toward his hand, and he knew she was feeling tingling warmth where he made ethereal contact.

But what more could he give her? The reality and restrictions of her earthbound body and of his spirit body separated them. He knew the touch she felt right now was as much as her her flesh-and-blood body could perceive.

It was as if a giant mirror separated their worlds, allowing them faraway glimpses of the beauty on the other side. In their attempt to touch that reflected world, they'd come up against the cold, hard reality of the glass.

As limited as he was by his spirit existence, unable to feel the texture of her skin, the silkiness of her hair, or to taste her lips, he knew she was just as restricted by her flesh and blood. Her knowledge of his essence was no more than a vague echo of the true sensations.

Alex changed the sparking fire of his feelings for Diana—feelings with no outlet—into a soothing murmur, willing her to fall asleep.

He concentrated past her closed eyes to her mind, imagining the gentle rush of the sea to the shore, the distant cry of a seagull. He felt her mind pick up his message as her own.

He felt her mind drift away.

Alex wanted to go with her to her place of dreams.

He wondered...

CHAPTER 8

Emma had just visited with Alex and was now trying to decide whether to wear her Little Mermaid outfit or her red sweater and jeans when she went to visit to Aunt Helen today.

Alex taught her to sing “When You Wish Upon a Star,” with her hands and she couldn’t wait to teach it to Aunt Helen. Mommy was going into town to get money, or something, from a bank. Then she was going to the library. Emma couldn’t understand all the words. Her mother had signed so fast. Mommy must have been in a hurry.

Smiling, she thought to herself, I feel like red today.

* * *

“Damn!” Diana turned the ignition key again. Nothing. “Well, that’s just great.” She grabbed her purse and signed for Emma to get out of the car.

They’d just have to walk the half-mile into Elk so Emma could visit

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Helen. She wasn't about to disappoint her daughter just because her stupid car decided to die. And she'd just have to put off her trip to Fort Bragg. The loan would have to wait, and so would the books she wanted to get at the library. Sparky's truck was still at the garage at Fort Bragg where he'd left it for repairs before he died. She made a mental note to call the garage and see if someone could deliver it.

Diana and Emma headed, on foot, toward town. Emma walked beside Diana, oblivious to anything but the diligence with which she worked on the loose front tooth.

As Diana walked the short span of Highway 1 back toward the house after she dropped Emma off, she appreciated the excuse to take a walk. It was something she used to do with Sparky all the time, but since his death she had neither the time nor the heart for it.

She slowed her pace, breathing in the crisp, salty tang of the autumn morning, the fresh scent of pine, and she took a moment to look around at this place she called home.

Across the highway from Christmas House a slanting meadow ran away from the road, stopped in the distance by a thick bank of pine trees at the slope of the hills. The morning haze muted the portrait, and she could almost see herself as she'd been as a child, sitting on the split-rail fence bordering the road, trying to spot the elk as they came into the meadow to graze.

The honk of a horn brought her back to the present. A long-time friend of her grandfather's waved as he drove past in his battered old truck. She guessed he was on his way home after delivering his fresh produce to the local restaurants. He would be her supplier of organically grown hothouse specialties, if she ever got the inn up and running.

The thought about making a living brought back last night and what had begun as a discussion with Alex about the bed and breakfast, but had right away turned to something else.

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If she was going to have a dream man, why couldn't she just accept him as that? She knew the answer. It was because he wasn't in her dreams. He existed during her waking hours, and her rational mind told her this wasn't supposed to be happening.

Her feet left the paved road and met with the crunch of the gravel in front of Christmas House. She didn't hurry up the steps to make the phone call, even though she was anxious to get her car fixed and make the trip into Fort Bragg.

Instead, she stopped to watch a large yellow spider at work repairing water damage to an elaborate web between two oleander bushes. Dewdrops clung to the sticky threads. As she watched, the sun broke through the haze to place a tiny star inside each glistening ball of water, turning the web into spun glass.

Thoughts of Josh—the winery, his mother, his reluctant attitude about Emma and Christmas house—all came to her as she looked at the fragile, transient beauty before her. But she brushed the worries aside.

She raced up the stairs to call Josh. He'd know what to do about the car.

With warm feelings of advanced gratitude, she dialed Josh's number.

* * *

An hour later Diana was dressed in an old flannel shirt and torn jeans, her head under the hood of her car. And she was fuming. First off, she was angry with Josh for not being the knight in shining armor she'd imagined. He'd told her call a tow truck. Like she had money to throw away. And she was mad at the car for breaking down in the first place. But most of all, she was furious with herself for not knowing more about cars, and expecting Josh to come to her rescue.

Her mind kept saying, Grow up Diana. Grow up Diana.

She wiggled wires, then opened the oil cap and peered into the black hole. Then she did a good job of tapping all the metal parts with

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the heavy wrench she was having trouble holding. What she succeeded in doing was making herself and the side of the car a greasy mess.

“Can I be of help?” Alex materialized beside her.

“Sure.” She started to hand him the wrench, then realized how dense she was being. “Oh, no, I guess you can’t.”

Alex started laughing. But Diana wasn’t in a laughing mood, and she hoped her look told him so.

He cleared his throat, but Diana could still see the mirth in his eyes as he held his hands up in surrender. “Sorry.” Then he looked askance at the heavy implement she held. “Is the only tool you have that plumber’s wrench?”

Even though he already knew she had it, she put the wrench behind her. “No. There’s a whole box of tools on the other side of the car.” She tilted her chin.

His eyes twinkled, and this time she couldn’t help laughing.

His mirth was replaced by a look of determination. “Come on, Diana.” He walked around the Honda. “You’re going to fix your car.”

Diana didn’t know how long she had been under the hood, following Alex’s patient, detailed instructions, but when she heard car tires access the gravel driveway, she was just getting ready to test her handiwork.

A flash of light diverted her attention as the sun hit the windshield of the approaching car. She squinted toward the Jaguar. When Josh eased the car into the shade of a tree and she could see his face, she saw his look was one of stuffy disapproval.

The nerve, she thought as she plunked herself behind the wheel of the Honda and put the key in the ignition. The car roared to life. She had to admit it sounded even better than before. The pinging noise she’d thought of as an inevitable quirk of the car was now gone.

Josh’s chiseled nose wrinkled as he sauntered up to drape his arm over the open door and stare down at her. “You’re a mess.”

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She was about to say, “No thanks to you,” but resisted the temptation. It wasn’t fair. She knew Josh prided himself on never having a hair out of place and her present condition couldn’t be a delight to him. But try as she might to sound calm, her voice still came out clipped. “Yes, I am a mess, Josh. I’ve been working on my car. I’ve fixed my car. I’m now going in to take a hot bath.” She shut off the engine and got out of the car, slamming the door harder than she’d intended.

“Why are you here, Josh?” She headed toward the soothing bubbles she’d just promised herself.

Josh just stood with his hands in his pockets, not moving. “I thought you might have made up your mind.”

“Made up my mind?” *The proposal. Bad timing, Josh.* “I have not. I’ll let you know when I do.” She stomped into the house, not looking back, then regretted her childish behavior when she heard the roar of Josh’s engine as he left.

“Atta girl.” The voice behind her on the stairs didn’t make her feel any better.

She whirled around to face Alex. “While I’m it, you, Mr. Poltergeist, don’t belong here either. You belong in my nightmares.”

Her anger built as she took a step toward him. He retreated a step. “Not in my kitchen.” Another step, counter step. “Not in my living room.” Another step, counter step. “And not under the hood of my car.” She realized she was shaking, and her hands were white-knuckling the wooden railing. Her chin began to quiver and she had to shout to keep control. “Understand?”

Diana watched Alex disappear, then she crumpled in a heap on the step, rocking back and forth. The sob she’d felt lodged in her chest wrenched itself free and she buried her face in her hands, hot tears spilling between her fingers.

Why had she blown up at Alex when she was mad at Josh? She

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wiped the tears from her cheeks, forcing herself to face the truth. She was mad at Alex; she just hadn't realized it. She was mad as hell at Alex for not being alive. Were her harsh words enough to make him leave for good?

* * *

The ringing of phone brought Diana out of the book on running a small business she'd been reading. A book on wineries sat on the office table next to her, too, still unread.

"Hello?" Diana straightened the desk as she listened. Pencils back in their holder. Upright the toy boat. She grabbed a tissue to wipe down the computer screen. "Oh, Mr. Landon."

It was the man she'd talked to at the bank. She'd made it into Fort Bragg yesterday, where she'd applied for a new loan and went to the library to check out books on both running a winery and running a B & B. She crossed her fingers, hoping Mr. Landon was calling with good news.

She scrunched up a couple of outdated notes and threw them into the wastebasket.

He told her the bank couldn't give her as big a loan as she'd applied for, but that they'd be happy to extend her a smaller one.

Her stomach tightened and stayed in an uncomfortable knot as she listened to the man's pleasant voice. She re-stacked a disheveled pile of letters and bills. An incongruous, "Thank you," was all she could manage before she hung up the phone.

She picked up the stack of statements, feeling their weight.

"I heard." Alex stood beside her, his hands in his pockets.

She wasn't surprised Alex hadn't taken her at her word, and left. "Any bright ideas on how I'm going to manage now? The loan is for about half of what I need." The desk chair squeaked as she leaned back. "Sparky's life insurance might get me through the first couple of months running the inn, if we have a full house." She flipped through

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the envelopes in her hand. “How am I going to pay for all these supplies Sparky ordered? Then there’s a little matter of the repairs to the cabins. And hiring a staff.

“I don’t know, Alex. Letting Christmas House get run down because I couldn’t afford the upkeep would be worse than losing it.”

She looked around Sparky’s office, then wandered out into the living room, Alex following in silence. She tapped her fingernail on the glass covering one of the old black-and-white pictures of Christmas House when it was first built.

“I should be able to get a good price. Mrs. Marley might still be interested. The house has historical value. Just look at these old photos.”

Alex came to stand beside her. “Wow, what’s all this? The place is barely recognizable.”

Diana remembered the first time she’d seen the photos and how fascinated she’d been. “Christmas House was built by a lumber company in 1918 as an executive residence and guest house. In this picture you can see the old port and buildings.”

She studied the pictures she’d studied a hundred times before, always impressed by how such a huge port, busy with lumber schooners had morphed over the years into what it was today—a quiet cove, the craggy offshore rock formations giving no indication of their colorful past. “Neat, huh?” A prophetic sadness took up residence in her chest.

Alex vanished, his somber, “Yeah, neat,” becoming a haunting whisper.

She realized Alex knew just what she was feeling.

She watched Helen and Emma come up the steps and into the living room, their faces wearing the goofy grins they almost always sported when together.

Diana was in grateful awe of Helen’s willingness, even

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anxiousness, to entertain Emma. *Would I be that generous with someone else's child?*

Emma threw herself into Diana's arms, making a low, rumbling noise in her throat. After a quick hug, Emma pulled Diana to the couch to sit down. Emma signed, "Watch."

"What's up?" Diana looked at Helen.

Helen looked like a little girl, too, as she motioned Diana to keep quiet. Emma ran to stand next to Helen, then nodded for her to begin.

Helen began to sing "When You Wish Upon a Star" at the top of her considerable lungs. She was outside her range so she squeaked on the high notes, but Diana had never known a couple of ear-splitting squeaks to stop Helen before.

Emma watched Helen's lips and signed the words, keeping a nodding beat with her head.

At the end of the song Diana clapped, laughing. "You two have been productive today." She signed to Emma, "Beautiful," and her daughter's eyes lit up.

"Helen, thank you so much for teaching Emma the song." She signed as well as spoke aloud, so Emma would know what she was saying.

Her friend looked blank, then she nodded toward Emma as she signed, "She taught me."

They both looked at Emma, who smiled like a cat who'd just swallowed a mouse. Diana knelt down in front of Emma to look into her eyes, signing, "Who taught you the song?"

Emma started to sign, then shook her head, looking like she was trying to remember the correct hand motions for what she wanted to say. She started over, stopped, and stomped her foot in frustration. Then she smiled as if she had figured it out, and she signed, "Prince Charming."

Helen looked at Diana and laughed. But Diana wasn't laughing.

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Emma couldn't mean Alex. Or could she?

* * *

Later that night as Diana and Helen sat by the fire with a glass of wine, Diana told her friend about Josh's sudden proposal.

Helen held her glass by the stem, looking at it as she swirled the golden liquid up the sides. "You're going to accept, aren't you?" The accusation was gentle.

Diana took a deep breath. "I don't have much choice." She couldn't believe she said that. By doing so, she had put an end to the self-delusion she might be in love with him. She was in like with him, and to her mind like carried more weight and lasted a hell of a lot longer than love. What she'd thought was love before had ended in disaster. And what she felt for Alex didn't count because he was beyond her reach.

"What I mean is," she started again, not missing the fact that Helen chose to take a sip of wine instead of calling her on her last statement. "I think Josh and I could make a marriage work."

She watched Helen's deliberate movements as her friend put her glass on the coffee table and turned to face her with the determined focus of a chess player. "Diana, I have something I want to confess to you."

Diana was confused. "What?" A queasy knot formed in her stomach.

Helen's brown eyes darkened. "I know you're my best friend, Diana, and, except for the years you were away, we've always told each other everything."

"Yes?" The queasiness turned into downright nausea.

"Well, I haven't told you everything. To tell you the truth, I'm not sure I would have ever told you this if Josh hadn't proposed, if you weren't seriously considering marriage."

Diana could see this was difficult for Helen. "Are you sure you

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want to tell me now?”

“Well, before you marry Josh, there’s something you need to know. I haven’t told you before because it’s something I’ve done everything in my power to put to rest. And until recently, I thought I had. But I’ve found it’s always going to be painful for me. I know Josh hasn’t told you because you’d have said something before now. But I can’t have you go into this marriage blind. If you want to marry Josh, my blessings to you. I just don’t want this to come between us somewhere down the road.”

Diana’s mind raced with all sorts of explanations, none of which seemed plausible. He murdered someone? He’s a drug dealer? Helen must be serious because her habitual use of “Josh-u-a” had been dropped.

“What? What is it!” Diana blurted.

“When you left for San Francisco, Josh and I began dating again.” Helen looked away. “Oh, I knew Josh was dating me out of boredom at first, but after we’d been dating a couple months, I began to think he cared for me.” Her gaze was direct. “He told me he loved me, and I chose to believe him.”

Helen looked away, brushing her hand through the air. “Well, anyway, I was head-over-heels so I bought it, hook, line and sinker.”

Diana realized a lot must have happened in the four years of her absence. It was the only time they’d been out of touch with each other since they were kids. Diana realized she hadn’t been there when her friend needed her. Diana had been so preoccupied with school, her failed marriage and her daughter that she’d pushed old friends and family to the back of her mind. And since she hadn’t heard from Helen, she’d assumed everything was okay.

Helen got up to pace in front of the fireplace. “Well, lovesick idiot that I was...I got pregnant.”

Josh and Helen?

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Diana felt tears prick the corners of her eyes. Tears for the pain in her friend's voice. She waited for Helen to continue.

Helen looked into the distance. "Oh, I was elated at first, before reality smacked me in the face. We'd talked—well, joked really, I guess—about getting married, about all the kids we'd have. I saw it as a wonderful, exciting adventure. An adventure Josh and I would experience together." She added in a dead voice, "Dreams."

Diana tried to be unobtrusive as she wiped the tears from her cheeks. She just couldn't bring herself to ask what happened to the baby.

"To make a long and very painful story short, Janice wouldn't hear of it. You know she always hated the fact I lived in a trailer and my dad was a lush."

"God, Helen...Janice?" What did Janice have to do with anything? "What about Josh?" Diana was having trouble taking it all in.

"When Janice found out"—she snapped her fingers—"that's all she wrote. The woman took over. She made arrangements for me to have—" Helen's voice caught,—"the pregnancy terminated."

Diana held her breath, knowing how much Helen loved kids. She thought about the special bond Helen had with Emma—Helen's child would have been the same age—and Diana's heart felt the loss as her own.

Diana asked again, "What about Josh?"

"Josh was out of the picture the day after he told Janice. I got a call from him, can you believe it, from France, saying I'd made a horrible mistake thinking he'd marry me. He even had the nerve to ask if I was positive it was his." Helen shook her head in wonder.

"He said Janice would take care of everything, so 'not to worry.' That was the last I heard from or about him until he came home a few weeks ago. Then, when he saw me here, he acted like we were old friends, like it never happened."

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Diana couldn't stop the words she knew would hurt. "An abortion."

Helen nodded, sitting up straighter. "I know, but it's something I've come to terms with. Believe me, I've had many tearful therapy sessions over it." Her gaze was now direct. "I was in shock over Josh abandoning me, Diana. I had no one to turn to. And there was Janice, acting the loving mother I never had.

"Before I knew it, the whole thing was over. She convinced me I had no choice. Abortion was the only way. And I was stupid enough and confused enough to believe her. Oh, she was the perfect, supportive mother figure every step of the way. But the moment it was over..." Helen swallowed with some difficulty. "I mean, the moment I woke up from the anesthetic, there was a note from Janice telling me not to make any more trouble for their family."

Diana got up from the couch, rushing to embrace her friend. Helen's eyes stayed dry, though Diana had to bite her lip to hold back a sob, her breath short, convulsive gasps. They rocked back and forth together for long moments.

Helen broke the hug to hold Diana away, her gaze unflinching. "It was a lifetime ago, Diana. I can't place all the blame on Josh. I went in with my eyes open. Deep inside I knew he didn't love me. It's different for you. I've seen the way he looks at you. Then there's Janice. She's already accepted you, so your situation is different. But, well, I had to tell you."

Diana had to know. "Helen, do you still have feelings for him? Because if you do—"

Helen recoiled. "No! If you're asking if I mind you dating him, or even marrying him, he's all yours. The good, the bad and the, well, he'll never be ugly."

They chuckled, the tension broken.

Would Josh ever have told her about his relationship with Helen?

What about ghosts? Somehow Alex's past didn't figure into their

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relationship. *Relationship?* Thoughts, that's all they shared. Maybe if she refused to think about him, refused to acknowledge him, he would disappear. One thing she knew with painful certainty was she couldn't go on living in this in-between world. She wanted a real life.

* * *

While Diana and Helen visited, Alex spent the evening flying along the clear, dark coastline just offshore. He followed the jagged rocks, the coves, and the beaches on his journey. The rhythm of the crashing waves and the twinkling stars kept him company. It gave him time to think about something Diana had said that had him wondering.

She'd said he belonged in her dreams. The lighthouse beacon from Point Arena drew him toward it as he thought about his powers, his energies. Would they allow him to go into Diana's mind? He could read her mind, that was certain, but being there with her, recognized by her, in her sleep was a whole other ball game.

One thing was certain—he needed to do everything in his power to convince her not to marry Josh. The security that man was offering wasn't the lasting kind.

If he could just help Diana to gain control of her financial independence. Was there a way to access the money he had accumulated in his lifetime in order to help her? How would he go about finding out what had happened to the funds? He drew a blank. He didn't even know what kind of burial he'd had, or who had arranged it. Diana didn't take a newspaper and didn't watch television, so he hadn't heard the news reports about his death. At the very least, the sports columns would have carried a story. Maybe if he started there he could trace what had happened to his estate.

Alex headed back to the house, determined one way or another to convince Diana not to marry Josh.

The warm lights from the cliff house broke through the night, seeming to call him home. He hesitated no more than a moment before

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he entered Diana's bedroom window to find her just emerging from the bathroom. She was draped in a pink towel and her skin held the rosy blush of having just stepped out of a hot shower.

::Diana, I need your help.::

With unguarded movements she stepped out of the towel and walked past him on her way to the nightgown on the chair.

Being so close to her naked body was torture. Her slim legs and firm bottom were sexy perfection. And his imagination went wild considering the delights of her high, full breasts. His breath quickened and he felt a tightening in his groin.

He made an effort to put carnal thoughts aside. If she only knew the havoc she was wreaking.

"I don't see you," she chanted. "You're not here. Go away."

He couldn't help but chuckle, distracted for the moment from his sensual musings. *::If I'm not here, how can I go away?::* As he watched the slinky blue material slide down to caress her curves, he said, "You're driving me crazy."

It was her turn to chuckle, but it was a mirthless sound. "Ditto."

She opened the armoire, which concealed a compact disc player, and began perusing the discs. But his mind wasn't on music. Her shapely backside had his full attention, and he felt the familiar heat in his belly. He tried to refocus his mind. Why was he here? Oh yes, to enlist her help.

He couldn't take his eyes from her form. "We need to talk about Josh."

Celine Dion's sexy voice singing French lyrics and the tilt of Diana's head as she enjoyed the music made his heart skip a beat. She turned toward him, but wouldn't make eye contact.

His breath became strained as he watched the barely concealed movement of her breasts and the sway of her hips. She flipped her hair back as she walked past him and got into bed.

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Diana began singing along, her voice beautiful, her French studied. For a brief moment she stopped. "I said, you don't exist." Then she resumed the melody, her slender arms wrapped around her knees, her eyes unfocused.

::Talk to me now, Diana...or talk to me in your dreams. Either way, I need to talk to you.::

She closed her eyes and slid down beneath the covers.

CHAPTER 9

Alex moved toward Diana, reading her thoughts. While her body and her waking mind rejected him, her subconscious—a separate entity that stood in the distance like an alluring image in a mirror—held its arms open to him.

It's now or never, he thought, determined to make dream contact. He closed his eyes, visualizing her.

His mind moved past her closed aura, past the woman on the bed who balanced on the precarious fringe of the indefinite dream-state. He felt a soft resistance. Like walking into warm water.

Diana slipped over the edge of wakefulness and Alex felt her spirit relax as her intellect did a kind of slow free-fall into sleep. Alex knew she sensed his presence, that she waited in the quiet place between dreams, for him to join her.

But how? Should he go into the body lying on the bed? When he'd moved through her at the hospital, he had taken in the essence of her,

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gained the knowledge of her spirit. Now that seemed too limiting. What he wanted, what they both wanted, was to touch. The touch they needed wasn't the diffused touch when he'd used Josh to connect with Diana. Their experience of each other needed to be complete.

Diana's mind called out to him.

He opened his eyes, focusing on her sleeping form, concentrating on bringing her spirit toward him. The bands of red warmth he had felt from her once before now spiraled out through her body to wrap around him. Alex drew them in, feeling a sensation of surging electricity.

He blinked as her spirit experienced a flash of light and a loud pop as it separated from her body. He knew she had the power at that moment to go back into her sleeping form, or to venture away. He wanted to pull her to him by those tenuous red threads, but it had to be her choice.

Then it happened.

Her form became blurred for a moment, Diana's earth-body still deep asleep on the bed, her spirit-body beginning to emerge as a separate entity. Then she was free! The ethereal-Diana floated away from the sleeping form, moving to the bed beside him. She glanced back at her sleeping form for a moment, then focused her gaze on Alex.

They stood, looking at each other for breathless moments, each hearing the drumming of the other's heart. Diana touched her face, her neck, then put her arms out in front of her, turning her hands over as if to make sure they were real.

He felt her sense of wonder at realizing her spirit had its own body, its own heartbeat, and its own sense of touch. And more than that, it allowed her access to all the senses and abilities her earth-bound body had denied her. Her smile was radiant as her eyes came back to his.

They both felt suspended in time as they looked at each other, afraid to move, fearful of breaking the spell and awakening the dreamers.

A breathlessness came over Alex as he reached a tentative hand

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toward her extended arm. Was this really happening? "Please, let this be true."

So many times he'd dreamed about touching her. About feeling what he knew would be the satin of her skin. But he hadn't dared to believe it would ever be a possibility.

As his hand made contact with the warmth, with the smooth, peach-like texture of her arm, his breath caught in his throat.

Diana whispered in awe, "Oh, my God. I can feel you!"

They both looked down at the point of contact, each feeling the other's disbelief. But the truth was there before them. Then their gazes reconnected.

Tears sprang into Diana's eyes. Her free hand reached up to touch them. Alex took hold of her hand, reveling in being able to feel its delicate structure, the warm skin. With great tenderness he pulled Diana to him, and their bodies touched at last. He could feel the softness of her breasts through their clothing.

"I can't believe I'm actually holding you, Diana."

Her breath came in sort gasps.

Their arms held tight to what they'd thought they could never have. He knew that every sensation he felt, every thought in his mind was known to her, as were hers to him.

* * *

Diana felt the strength of his hard body as she molded herself to him. The ripple of his muscular back as she ran her hands over his shirt, the curve of his chest as her head lay cradled there, the warmth of him. It was like coming home.

Alex was the lost part of her, just as she was his missing half, separated in another time and place. And she knew no matter what happened in her real life that finding Alex, being with Alex, had always been her destiny. Why had she fought it for so long?

The very moment the question was posed came the answer.

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Centuries of social edicts, of restrictions, said there was no such thing as a spirit world. And Diana's own convictions told her that believing in anything so outlandish was a sure sign of losing touch with reality.

Would her waking mind now accept the truth of this world? Or would the events be remembered as no more than a dream, fading fast into obscurity as did most dreams?

Diana had to know. "How did you—"

Alex put his fingers over her lips. "I need to know you, Diana."

Passion filled his voice, sending a thrill through her. Alex stroked her hair with one hand, feeling its silky texture between his fingers. He breathed in her intoxicating musky scent, his tongue thrilling at the anticipated taste of her. His other hand slid around the small of her back. His arm had been designed just for the purpose of pressing that tiny waist against him.

He grasped a handful of hair and urged her head back so he could look into her eyes. They heard the echo of a distant pounding. Was it their hearts? The surf? Or a pagan drummer beating out an ancient rhythm? Then they realized it was their own raw, primordial power as their bodies and souls reunited.

His lips touched hers, tasting and teasing, their gentleness a contradiction to the firm grip he still had on her hair, and she heard his mind repeat her name. *::Diana. Diana.::* Both the kiss and the thought felt like a solemn vow. Alex's mouth was a combination of satin and steel, and the tingling of Diana's lips and tongue turned into a radiant energy that burned in its intensity.

The sensation fanned out to touch first her chin, then to enflame her cheeks, and at last spread out to touch every part of her body.

She felt his hand release her hair, but his mouth kept firm contact, deepening the kiss as he urged her lips apart. Diana's knees went weak as his hands slid down her side. His fingers began inching up the silken length of her nightgown.

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Soon his hands were against flesh, fevered flesh, and their slow waltz turned into an ancient, frenzied dance. His kiss moved down her neck and she pulled with impatience at his shirt.

Alex moved back a moment and, in one fluid movement, had the restricting garment off over his head.

Their eyes held again as energy vibrated between them. They removed the remainder of their clothes, to stand naked—bodies and souls—before each other.

Her gaze left his eyes and caressed the broad, sinewy shoulders, the flat stomach, slim hips and strong legs. His breathing was quick, impatient. The proud evidence of his arousal pulsed with an eternal life force.

Diana's limbs ached with wanting him and she reached out. At once they were in each other's arms and their need to touch, to taste, to know every part of the other was all that existed.

As his mouth found her breast, they both careened into a swirling vortex of sensations and colors.

Diana heard his thought. *::The beach....::* and in an instant they were embracing on the moonlit beach below the house. But Diana didn't feel the chill of the night air, only the heat of their bodies, their souls.

They lowered themselves to the damp earth at the water's edge and Diana felt the sand beneath her in soft contrast to the intimate press of Alex's hard body.

The surging power each of them felt in the core of their souls, the need to become one, overtook them and Alex entered her in one powerful, unifying thrust.

Her body welcomed him home, the hard fullness of him touching off charged points of infinite sweetness.

Diana and Alex's primitive souls reawakened. The energy surrounding them swirled in red, violet, orange, and yellow.

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That drumbeat from another time, another world, was clear now. It started as a slow, sweet song, and their bodies moved to its cadence. Then the rhythm picked up beating faster, and still faster, until it became a pounding hammer, forging their souls into one, their bodies rising to the peak of exquisite, tortuous pleasure.

* * *

At dawn Diana awoke from the dream, unable to stop crying. It had been an insane dream about Alex, about a man and a world that didn't exist. About feelings, textures and emotions that couldn't exist. Her whole being quaked in turmoil and her skin was on fire. Shaking, she got out of bed and went into the bathroom to splash cold water on her face and take an aspirin.

The wild, flushed image with glassy eyes staring back at her from the mirror looked like her, and yet she seemed to be seeing herself for the first time.

Sensuous flashes of the dream—Alex's hard body, the sweet taste of his mouth—made her touch her fingers to her lips. The woman in the reflection did the same. She clutched at the fabric covering her queasy stomach, the ecstasy of the night's delusion painful in its absence.

"I'm insane." Her numb vocal cords and dry throat turned the words into a hoarse whisper. If she wasn't crazy before, she was now.

Last night's dream had taken her over the edge. She'd had passion dreams before, but what she would call the normal, everyday variety. But never had the dream overtaken reality. Nothing she'd ever experienced in a dream had ever come close to the physical and psychic vividness of last night's fantasy.

And now the certainty her subconscious mind was taking control of her conscious mind had her terrified. How long would it be before all her waking hours were obsessed by the illusive Alex? How could she help Emma out of her fantasy world when Diana was slipping further away into one of her own?

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But it had been so wonderful, so liberating. She'd never felt so free. Was this what madness was? Rejecting the dictates of science, of society, and stepping into a world without boundaries.

She turned the shower on full force, twisting the handle to the cold position. She wanted to shock herself out of preferring a dream life over reality, wanted to shock herself into accepting her life for what it was...the imperfect reality of Josh, the truth of Emma's deafness, the fact her flesh-and-blood body and her mind had limitations.

Diana's breath caught at the stinging force of the cold water on her feverish skin. She pressed her hands against the hard tile of the shower stall to steady herself. For a moment, she thought she might faint as her ears rang, blocking out all other sound. Her senses began to calm, and the water quenched her fever, washing away the memory of sand against her skin.

By the time Diana towed off and slipped into old jeans and a sweatshirt, Emma was awake. The little girl wandered into the garret room with a huge yawn as she rubbed her eyes.

"Thank God for you," Diana said out loud. Her hug must have been a tad tight because Emma let out a loud, "Humph!" as Diana released her.

Emma smiled, and Diana noticed one of her daughter's front teeth was missing. Diana couldn't help but laugh at the normalcy of it, and, all at once, she felt she was in touch with the real world again.

She turned Emma toward the mirrored armoire and indicated Emma should smile, while thinking, *I hope she didn't swallow it.*

Emma grimaced a smile, then noticed the missing tooth. Her eyes rounded in a split second of disbelief as she saw the gaping hole. Then her whole face lit up and Diana watched the little girl's chest puff up with pride. Emma had worked on that tooth non-stop for the past week in an effort to take that major step toward being a big girl.

Diana thought, *That's the kind of fantasy to believe in.* The

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normalcy of losing a tooth could be magic. For Emma, it was as if a fairy godmother had waved a wand and she could step through an invisible barrier, out of the world of babyhood. And every step, from learning to ride a bike, to her first date, would be a giant leap through time and space to a different, exiting and sometimes frightening world.

And all that enchantment went on every day in the real world.

Maybe I should take a lesson from Emma.

The sound of the front door banging shut was a loud punctuation to her lesson. Diana heard Helen shout from the living room, “Hey, where is everyone?”

By the clatter on the stairs, Diana could tell Helen was on her way up.

Helen peeked around the doorframe. “Hey, girlfriend. Those cabins and the dust bunnies of Christmas House’s past are waiting.”

“Morning to you, too, Helen.” She nodded toward Emma, indicating the little girl’s front tooth.

Helen made a big production of being impressed by Emma’s gaping smile.

Diana let them have their moment, then signed to Emma to hurry and get dressed, and Emma shuffled off to her room, signing something to what Diana assumed was one of her imaginary friends.

Helen started making Diana’s bed. “Okay, tell me what the bank guy said on the phone yesterday.”

She plunked down on the rug beside the bed and tied her sneakers. “They’re giving me a loan, but for half of what I need.”

Joining Diana on the floor, Helen began rolling up her shirtsleeves, and spoke with nonchalance. “So I guess you’re ready to take me up on my offer? I tell ya, the dough’s just sitting there.”

“Well—” Diana was tempted. But what if she couldn’t make a go of the inn? Helen’s security would go out the window, along with the business. “I love you for offering, but let me think about it.”

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“Good enough,” Helen said, jumping up. “Let’s get to work on the guest cabins.”

Yesterday they’d made plans to get back to work on the cabins. The refurbishing had come to a grinding halt when Sparky died. Now it was up to Diana—with a little help from her friend—to finish the job.

Thank God for Helen.

Diana got up to follow Helen, but last night’s dream wouldn’t get out of the way. “I’ve got a phone call to make first. Why don’t you go on down to the kitchen and start the coffee?”

“Sure,” Helen said over her shoulder.

Diana went to her nightstand and got the phone book. If Dr. Veda couldn’t help Diana with her delusions, maybe a psychic could tell her how to get rid of a spirit. She dialed the number of a woman who, according to the prefix, lived close by.

She stared out the window at the sea gulls as she waited, feeling like a desperate traitor. After the wonderful, yet horrible, dream last night, she had to know, needed to know. Did she have the power to make him to leave? Where would he go? If he existed in her mind, would she always worry about him appearing, disturbing her life and her sanity again?

A woman’s voice came on the line with a cheerful, “Hello?”

After taking Diana’s credit card number to charge the session, the woman wanted to know what Diana needed.

Diana’s heart started racing. In a way she felt like she’d called a hit man. “Do you know how to get rid of, well, unwanted—” *Unwanted. Was that the truth?* “Ahh...spirits? You know, ghosts.” Diana knew she must sound like a bumbling idiot.

The woman asked a few questions about who her spirit was, how long he’d been there. Then she asked, “Why do you want to get rid of this ghost?”

That was a toughie. Because he interfered with her wish to live a

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normal life? Because he, what? made her feel more alive, more like a woman than she'd ever felt before, even if he wasn't real?

Diana found herself saying in a rush, "I want a normal life. I want to be a normal person, with normal people around me. Isn't that, well, normal?" Who was she fooling? She sounded like a raving lunatic.

The woman's voice was calm, reassuring. "Let's just put 'normal' aside for moment. Does your heart want him to leave?"

"My heart?" She could feel it pounding against her chest. The memory of feeling Alex's heartbeat last night sent chills up her neck. That couldn't have been real, just a dream brought on by the knowledge she could never have her one perfect love. Her heart. Did her heart want Alex to leave? No, she had to admit. But she wanted him to be real, not a transparent, untouchable image. "I don't know."

There was a moment of silence on the other end of the line before the woman asked, "You must be serious about making him go away, or you wouldn't have called. Am I right?"

Diana needed to know. If there was a way to have a normal life, she needed to know, to be able to make that choice. "It doesn't matter what my heart wants right now. My little girl and I need normalcy. If...if I decide I want him to go, can I make him do it?" She fiddled with the lace doily under the phone, looking around the room for Alex. She didn't see or sense his presence.

The psychic said, "The will of the spirit is weaker than that of a person who is alive. If you want him to leave, all you have to do is tell him to go, and mean it."

Diana was incredulous. She felt like she'd just been told the ruby slippers she wore would have taken her home any time she'd said the magic words, There's no place like home.

Diana had had the power all along to make Alex go away. Was she ready to use it?

* * *

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Diana and Helen spent the rest of the morning working on one of the guest cabins. Emma sat on the small deck overlooking the cove, sorting through a box of Diana's old games that had been stored in the cabin's closet.

By eleven-thirty Diana was already bone-weary from stripping old wallpaper and moving heavy furniture. An uncooperative curtain rod was fast becoming the last straw.

Her arms felt like heavy rubber, her muscles quivering as she held them high over her head. She tugged in an effort to dislodge the old rod from its bracket. "Don't you dare give me trouble," she huffed. "I—am—not—in—the—mood."

"Go, girlfriend." Helen's laughter came from the tiny bathroom where she was scrubbing years of dirt from the floor tile, the sharp tang of disinfectant permeating the entire cabin.

Diana directed her comment to the reluctant rod. "I'm going to win, so you might as well give up." One final yank and the bracket, the rod and a large chunk of the plaster came away, sending Diana backward off the stepstool. Fortunately for her the bed and new plastic-covered mattress broke her fall. "Damn! That's gonna bruise." She threw the rod into a pile of trash and rubbed her aching hip.

Diana looked through the glass slider to where Emma now lay asleep on a deck chair. Even though Emma couldn't hear, Diana promised herself she'd stop her recent habit of swearing.

"Come on, Helen, lunch break." She looked at her grubby hands, then at the work-in-progress disaster they'd made of the cabin.

Helen joined Diana, linking arms with her to look at the temporary destruction zone. "What a mess. Think we can get all four cabins ready before the opening?"

Diana remembered Alex's encouragement. "Yes, I think we just might do it." She gave Helen's arm a squeeze. "Thanks to you."

Helen dislodged her arm, heading for the door. "Well, you can

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show your gratitude by feeding me. I'm starving."

Diana balled up a sheet of newspaper. "Go ahead and get washed up. The chimney sweep wanted me to try out the stove. I'll get the fire started and check it out before I head over."

She shoved the paper under the logs in the wood-burning stove. The fire caught and she took inventory of the chimney sweep's checklist. The updraft looked good, so did the fire. Nothing flammable on top or around the stove.

One quick check on the sleeping child and Diana headed across the path to the main house. She'd let Emma nap until lunch was ready.

* * *

Emma woke up. Her arms were cold. She noticed the fire in the stove inside the cabin and she slid the deck door open. She brought the stack of games in with her, setting them on the bricks next to the stove. Mommy and Aunt Helen must be up at the house.

Maybe she would just rest here for a while, inside the warm cabin. Her eyes were so heavy. Remembering what mommy said about locking the doors if she was ever alone, Emma slid the latch on the back door and pushed in the lock on the front door. She crawled up onto the crunchy plastic of the mattress.

* * *

Alex sat on the beach, remembering last night. He watched the waves splinter into mist as they hurled themselves against the jagged offshore rocks. The kelp beds swayed with the surging tide.

This morning he had felt Diana's pain and confusion, and although he ached to be near her, he stayed away. He couldn't blame her for retreating back to the possibility she was insane. It followed that Diana would, under the circumstances of last night, choose to believe he was nothing more than a manifestation of some kind of mental illness. And what he knew to be fact—that they were soul mates—Diana had

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decided was no more than wishful, irrational thinking. She'd convinced herself their night of lovemaking had been a wild, delusional dream.

Now he felt sick as he mentally listened to her speaking to someone on the office phone. She was talking to Josh Marley. And Alex didn't like the way the conversation was going. Diana's voice held an edge of desperation, as if she was afraid Josh might change his mind about marriage.

If only he'd made her listen before they made love. There had to be some way to make sure she could stay at Christmas House without Josh. He had to show her she was better off on her own. And after that problem was solved, he'd have to find a way to convince Diana she wasn't crazy. Even if it meant he had to leave.

Maybe it wasn't too late. Maybe things would work out after all. He rose from the sand, looking up toward the edge of the cliff.

Smoke! Not the gray, wispy smoke of a fireplace fire, but the black smoke of a structure fire! In a split second he was at the source of the smoke. One of the guest cabins was on fire.

Diana and Helen ran toward the cabin, Diana screaming, "Emma! Emma!"

No flames could be seen, but thick, black smoke billowed up through the chimney and around the edges of the roof.

Helen shouted, "I'll call the fire department," and ran back toward the house.

"Alex!" The eyes turned toward him were wild with panic. "I can't find Emma!" She ran to the back of the cabin, already out of breath. The deck chair was empty. "God, where is she?"

They looked through the sliding glass door. Through the smoke and flame they could see Emma curled up on the bed. Frantic, Diana pulled at the locked slider as she pounded her fist against the glass. "She's in there! Emma, wake up."

"Diana, stop!" Alex shouted at her. If she opened a door or window

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there was the strong possibility of a backflash and she could put both herself and Emma in danger. “Diana, stop! She can’t hear you. Let me go in!”

The desperation in Diana’s eyes was nothing to the sharp terror he could feel stabbing her chest. She reached her hand toward him, her feet taking her back and forth in front of the window. “Help her! Help her!” Tears streaked her face.

Alex went into the cabin, shouting at Emma with his mind. *::Wake up! Wake up!::*

The little girl’s eyes opened and then widened in sudden panic as she saw the flames climbing the wall behind the stove. She coughed.

Alex knew he couldn’t take her out either the front or the back doors without danger. *::Emma, listen! You’ve got to come with me.::*

The little girl began to cry.

::Now, Emma!:: he shouted the thought.

She nodded and followed him into the bathroom.

::Close the door, Emma.::

She did as she was told. *::Mommy, mommy.::*

::Now, look at me, Emma.:: When at last she did, he reassured her. *::You’re going to be okay. Climb up on the side of the tub and open the window over the sink. Do it now, Emma. Hurry!::*

The little girl began doing as she was told.

Alex fled outside. “Diana, she’s around at the side window.”

Diana ran to the window and jerked up on the sill, crying out when she felt the warm flesh of Emma’s arm. Diana pulled Emma out of the window, clutching her daughter to her chest. She ran with the coughing child to the house, tears streaming down both of their faces.

Alex didn’t follow. His entire being was shaking from the experience. Sirens wailed in the distance. From within the cabin, he heard glass explode from the heat.

What if he hadn’t been able to get to the sleeping child? What if

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Diana had been able to open the door and he'd lost both of them in a flash of fire?

For some reason, he knew they wouldn't be with him in this in-between world. He'd come to believe he existed alone in this world that was neither life nor death. One thing he knew with certainty—he wouldn't hesitate to give up even this existence if it meant allowing either of them another chance at life.

He wanted them to have what he could never again experience, what he'd never appreciated when he was alive. He wanted with all his heart for Diana and Emma to live long, happy lives and experience all the precious wonders life had to give.

What he wouldn't give to be able to once again smell the pine trees in an ancient forest, to know what it was like to hold a child. There were so many things he would never have the opportunity to experience—marriage, raising a child, living and playing as a family. It was too late for him. But he wanted Diana and her daughter to live and embrace every precious gift life had to offer.

He watched the fire truck pull up to douse the fire that now threatened the next cabin. What would Diana do now?

* * *

Diana stood on the bluff behind Christmas House, looking out at the turbulent afternoon sea, feeling like she had just woken up from a dream. The buffeting breeze, chilled by the ocean, whipped at her hair, her face. Each brisk cuff was a wake-up call.

The morning's near disaster had broken the spell she'd been under since Sparky's death. No more dreams of Prince Charming coming to save her. Alex couldn't put the pieces of her life together. She was responsible for herself, decisions about Josh, about Christmas House, and about her daughter.

No more dreams. No more hiding from the reality of what life had to offer.

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Helen sat in the wooden deck chair, her knees to her chest, her arms hugging her legs. "I still can't believe Emma knew to go out through the bathroom window."

Diana didn't look back at her friend. "It was Alex. He told her what to do. He saved her life."

Helen said nothing. Diana couldn't remember her friend ever being speechless.

Diana went on. Why not clear the air, get back to being up front with her friend, like they used to be? "Yes, I, Diana Christmas, do believe in ghosts. I admit it. Alex is real, and he's living, or existing anyway, at Christmas House."

Helen jumped up from her chair, coming to stand next to Diana. "What's he like?"

Diana couldn't help but laugh. Her friend was so ready to believe. "Well, he's intelligent, he's handsome and he's sexy." She pulled her wind-whipped hair away from her face. "The pits, huh? And kinda sick. I'm in love with a dead man."

"Not sick, sweetie." Helen's arm felt warm as she put it around Diana's shoulders. "Just sad."

"Impossible, is more like it." She turned to Helen. "Do you realize he's made himself known to Emma. My little girl. A child." She felt her voice tighten with frustration. "A child, already too deep into a fantasy world, has now seen a ghost. And she accepted him without question. What does that say about her world?"

Helen spoke up. "That she's a kid. They all have make-believe friends. I'm sure Alex just seemed like another one."

"She saw him." Diana felt her chin quiver, her eyes stinging with hot tears. "I don't want my child to live in a silent world!"

Helen jerked Diana's arm, then pushed her away, her face stiff with anger. "Diana!"

Diana stared at Helen, startled by her friend's sudden vehemence.

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Helen's gaze was unflinching. "What you don't want, Diana, is for Emma to be happy in her silent world. You want her to be sorry for the fact she can't be part of the hearing world. You want her to feel there's something wrong with her world. Well, there isn't.

"It's"—Helen's words broke as her breath caught—"just different than yours. And one more thing. Marrying Josh-u-a Marley isn't going to change that." Helen stormed off, throwing back over her shoulder, "Do us all a favor, will ya, Diana? Deal with it!"

Diana stared at her friend's stiff, retreating form until she rounded the corner of the burned-out cabin and headed home.

It wasn't the first time Helen had been brutal in her honesty, and Diana hoped it wouldn't be the last. And as stinging as Helen's words had been, Diana realized Helen was right.

There was some truth to what she'd said about Diana not being able to accept Emma's silent world. Had Diana been looking at Emma as broken, just because she was different? If she was, she was doing her daughter a horrible injustice.

Maybe by keeping Emma at Christmas House with her instead of letting her go to a school for the deaf, Diana was encouraging her to remain in her fantasy world. Maybe it was time they both woke up.

Diana's mind was made up. After her dream last night, and then this morning when Emma had seen Alex, Diana felt she had no choice. The only way she would ever have peace of mind again was if Alex left.

* * *

Diana was making hurried notes at the desk when Alex joined her the morning after the fire. He held his breath, steeling himself for her reaction to him.

When she swiveled the desk chair around to face him, her calm expression and direct gaze said he was expected. But he could feel her inner turmoil as she fought the images of two nights ago. She was fighting the images of Emma seeing him, too.

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“Alex, I want you out of my life.” Her voice was flat, unemotional. “I’m selling Christmas House and marrying Josh.” She paused a moment, blinking as her chin tilted up a fraction. “I want you out of my mind. I want to reclaim my reality.”

Alex’s heart raced, but he forced an outward calm. In reading her mind, he knew that this time she meant it. She wanted him out of her life. “I’ll leave tonight, Diana.”

He felt the surge of adrenaline that shot through her body, but she kept her face calm, willing her heart to slow to normal.

All she said was, “Good.”

The realization came to him, as he read her mind, that she was rejecting him, pushing him out of her life, out of her mind. No matter the outcome, even if he could find a way for her to stay at Christmas House, the simple truth was she didn’t want a phantom lover.

Most of all, she didn’t want her daughter seeing a ghost. She wanted living, breathing, flesh-and-blood people around the child. It was a crushing blow, but one Alex had to accept.

And Alex’s own delusion—that he was here to help Diana in some way, to somehow redeem his soul—dissipated like mist on the ocean.

He opened his mouth to say he loved her, but thought better of it. Since she didn’t accept him, it wouldn’t mean anything to her.

Instead, he just said, “Good bye, Diana.”

The chair moaned as she turned from him. He could hear her muffled sob.

Alex left the room, heaviness filling his chest as he went to say good-bye to Emma.

He found the little girl in a crouched position in the large, fenced herb garden at the back of the house, no evidence of yesterday’s trauma on her face. With stealth, she followed a winding trail of ants. Her jack-o-lantern smile as she squinted up to look at him caused a tightness in his chest.

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She should be growing up with him as her father, not Josh. But Alex was powerless to do anything about the situation.

::Hey, kid.:: He sent the words to her.

::Hey, Alex.:: She sounded so much older than five.

He sat down on the carved bench, and Emma came to sit beside him. A cool breeze brought the essence of the ocean to the garden.

Emma sat on her hands to keep them warm. *::Why do you look sad, Alex?::* The concern on her face made him smile.

::I'm not sad, Emma,:: he lied. *::I just came to tell you that I'm going away.::*

She looked confused. *::Where to?::*

::I'm not sure yet. But I just wanted to let you know that I love you.::

Emma's scrunched eyebrows leveled out. *::I love you too, Alex. But aren't you coming back? Who will I talk to?::*

He avoided answering her first question. *::You practice your lessons really hard, and in no time at all it will be easy to talk to your mom, to Helen, and to anyone else who knows sign language.::*

Emma wrinkled her nose, but nodded. *::Okay, Alex.::*

::If you ever need me, I mean really, really need me to help you...not just want to talk to me...all you have to do is think about me really hard. Close your eyes and concentrate on seeing me in your mind and think my name. I'll be able to hear your thoughts. And, although it may take some time, I'll do everything in my power to come to you, wherever you are. Same goes, if your mom needs me. Okay?::

Alex knew he was forever connected to Diana, as well as her child. A mental link with them was as simple as thinking about them. If either of them called out to him, he would know.

Emma's dejected wave to Alex as he left made him feel like a deserter. The image of his mother walking away from him at boarding school flashed through his mind. Before, he would have forced it aside,

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but now he was ready to face the pain.

His spirit moved with ease over the mountains on his way back to the only place he could think of going—Santa Rosa General Hospital.

Talk about lost spirits roaming the earth. I guess that's just what I am now, since there's no such thing as a Thomas Guide map book for ghosts.

CHAPTER 10

Alex felt his energy level drop as he moved through the hospital corridors, wondering which way to go. It seemed the further he'd gotten away from Diana, the weaker he'd become.

He stopped at the admissions desk, wishing he could communicate with the scarecrow of a woman sitting there. Leaning across the desk to within inches of her face he said, "Excuse me, miss, but I'm dead. Is there someplace I'm supposed to go to wait for the light? I guess I missed the bus when I was here before."

The woman looked up with an exasperated sigh and, for a moment, Alex thought she might answer him. But her tight, "Your wife can't be admitted without her insurance card," was directed to an agitated young man behind him.

Not knowing where to go or what to do, Alex wandered down the hall, trying to decipher the arrows directing him to ICU. It was the last place he'd been, so he might as well start there. If he could find it. One

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directional arrow pointed heavenward. He decided the sign indicated he should walk straight ahead.

Just what did he hope to find? He had to admit the chances of anyone coming to get him from the great beyond seemed pretty slim. What would happen if his energy level kept fading? Would he disappear altogether? Going back to where it all began, and perhaps would end, made a strange sort of sense to him. *Like coming full circle.* The thought of what might be waiting at that circle's end gave him an odd sense of combined anxiety and relief.

As Alex passed a nursing station, he heard someone say, "Alex White?" and he stopped short, feeling a momentary surge of energy. He looked around. Could someone see him?

A petite blonde dressed in hospital greens, with a clipboard cradled like a baby at her hip, stood talking to a plump, frazzled woman sitting on the opposite side of the station's counter. Neither woman was looking at him.

His heart raced with trepidation as Alex walked toward the woman with the clipboard. What she said next had his heart doing flips.

She had been going over some kind of chart and now held her pen poised mid-air, one eyebrow raised as she questioned the other woman, "Alex White, the coma patient. I scheduled him to be moved into 202 last night. Why is he still in 105?"

Still in 105? Coma patient? What were they talking about? The round woman, chin raised and hands shaking, began straightening the papers on the counter. "If you'd answered your pager last night, doctor, you'd have been informed Mr. White took a turn for the worse. Dr. James, who was on duty, said not to move Mr. White, and said we should call Mr. White's relatives. It took a while, but I got hold of his mother."

The rest of their conversation became indistinct, retreating chatter as Alex rushed down the hall looking for the door marked 105.

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It couldn't be! He had died.

He found rooms 102, 104, 106. Where was 105? Of course, across the hall. *Calm yourself. There are other Alex Whites in the world.*

He turned around to see the open door of 105. A curtain surrounded the bed.

As he entered the cubical, he was overcome with a feeling that the walls were closing in on him. His eyes flashed to the red and green lights on the monitors, the blank television in the corner, the closed blinds on the window.

He tried to take a steadying breath, but anxiety held his lungs in a death-grip.

He moved through the curtain.

Dizzy and trying to focus, he looked down at his earthly body in the bed. *How could this be?*

He wasn't dead.

When he'd followed Diana from the hospital after the accident, the doctors were still working on him. But his spirit had already left his body, so he'd figured he must be dead. The heart monitor had shown a flat line.

The evidence before him said otherwise. He stared at the long pink scar along his chin line, the splinted arm and the leg held in traction by a pulley attached to a bar over the bed. And, God, could they find another place to stick a tube or probe? This man—Alex had to remind himself that he and this man were one in the same—was alive. But he looked awful. The woman down the hall had said coma.

He wasn't dead! He wasn't a ghost lost in some cosmic waiting room. But why was his spirit separated from his body? What would happen if he re-entered a body so close to death? Was the body waiting for the spirit part of him to reconnect so it could die?

Alex waited a full hour, giving himself time to rethink his existence during these past weeks, an existence that had changed him forever.

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He thought of how Diana had looked as she'd gazed at the ocean from the cliff's edge, her hair and skirt billowing in the wind. He thought about how much he loved both Diana and Emma, how much he wanted to be with them, how much he wanted them all to be the real family he'd never had.

His thoughts were never far from the night he'd spent with Diana, and now the memories came back to him as a sweet pain deep in his chest.

Could he go back into his body? He knew he had to try. The man on the bed was dying. Alex now understood his weakened energy. If he rejoined his flesh-and-blood self, would he become one strong entity, instead of two fading life forces? Or would he cease to exist?

Determination surged through him, and with it came the charged hum of power. He noticed the line on the heart monitor jump into an agitated rhythm.

Alex said a prayer before he moved toward the bed. "Please, God, give me a second chance."

As he entered his body, he felt a sensation of static electricity and heard a crackling, popping sound.

His last thought, before a black hole of pain swallowed him, was of Diana.

* * *

Diana dressed for her lunch date with Josh. She was going to Fort Bragg's library to return her book on the wine industry and the one titled, *Making Your B & B A Success*, and she'd asked Josh to meet her. It was time to stop playing games with the guy, and with herself. It was time to let him know she wanted to marry him. So why did she feel like she was going to an execution? She pushed the absurd thought aside.

"I'm doing what's best," she said to Helen who sat in the chair by the window, shaking her head.

Diana took a deep breath as she considered her decision. It just had

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to be the right thing to do. She was ready to make a new life, ready to grow up. In the week since Alex had left, her life had begun to feel normal again. Her dreams and fantasies had been relegated to the far corner of yesterday. She was ready to live in the real world of today and tomorrow.

Helen twisted a curl around her finger. “Well, I’m gonna make a last-ditch effort here. If you won’t take my money as a loan, why not make me a business partner?”

When Diana looked over to Helen, the one-carat zirconia earring she’d been struggling to put on dropped to the floor. “Partners?” Diana knelt to search for the earring. *Partners*. Diana didn’t know why she’d never thought of it before. Helen would make a great partner. Heck, she already helped more than any employee would.

Diana craned her neck to look under the armoire. “How much money are you talking about, Helen?”

The amount Helen told her stunned Diana.

“How on earth did you ever save that much?”

Helen’s gaze darkened. “Janice put money in my account all those years ago, a kind of pay-off, I guess, and it’s just been sitting there gaining interest.”

Diana’s stomach fluttered with excitement. By pooling their resources, she and Helen would be able to open Christmas House, and they’d be able to do it without cutting corners.

“But, Helen, Christmas House was my dream. Well, it was Sparky’s first, but you know what I mean. What about you? I can’t let you give up your dreams, just so I can fulfill mine.”

Helen looked out the window. “Christmas House—being part of a family like yours—is my dream. I’ve always wanted to belong here, not just be a favorite visitor.” Her voice thickened. “Truly belong.”

“Oh, Helen, you belong as much as anyone.” Diana bent down to resume her search for the earring. “But I’m still not sure how things are

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going to work here. What about Josh? If I marry him, things would be awkward. I would never want to put you in that position. Da—" She remembered her vow to stop swearing. "Darn, where is that earring?"

Helen's, "Could be," was noncommittal. "Well, I've got to get to work." She headed for the door.

"I'll call soon as we get home."

As Diana searched for the earring, she thought about how tricky love was. You could think you had a good grip on it, think it was yours forever, then, in the blink of an eye, it could be lost to you. Well, she wasn't about to let that happen in her marriage to Josh. She was going to wrap it up in a silver box, polish it every day, and cherish it.

The sound of Emma's giggle brought Diana's head up from where she was peering under the armoire. As she looked toward her daughter, she noticed the clock on the table and gasped. If they didn't hurry, they'd be late, so she abandoned her search and got up to choose another pair of earrings.

Her jewelry box was a disorganized jumble and again she promised herself that sometime soon she'd sort things into their proper place. She searched through the confusion to find a pair that would go with the beige wool pants and cream-colored blouse.

"Wow!" Her heart pounded as her eyes caught the glint of the two diamond studs she'd misplaced ages ago. She thought they'd been lost to her forever. But here they were, hooked to the back of her grandmother's angel pin.

They weren't fancy and they couldn't have weighed more than a quarter carat, but they had been a birthday present from Sparky, and now he was gone, they meant the world to her.

She rolled them between her fingers and the refracted light winked at her, reminding her of her grandfather's laughing eyes. How stupid she'd been not to appreciate them for what they represented—pure, unconditional love. They should have been kept in a special place, a

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place of honor, not lumped in with all the imitation jewelry.

She hugged Emma in her excitement.

* * *

Alex felt like a truck had run over him. Who'd glued his eyes shut? He took a deep breath. *Bad move.* Pain shot across his ribs to wrap around his back.

"Alex?" Someone called his name. It sounded nice and he tried to open his eyes. He felt his eyebrows go up, but his lids were just too heavy.

Then he remembered. Something had gone terribly wrong with his steering column and the next thing he knew he was tasting the concrete wall of the highway barrier.

"Alex, dear, wake up."

That voice again. He tried to reach his fingers up to rub his eyes, but something pinched the back of his hand, restraining it.

"Don't pull your I.V. out, Mr. White," a woman's strong voice insisted. Someone patted his hand down.

Then he felt the blessed cool of a wet cloth was being placed over his eyelids, the water dripping down to refresh gritty eyes that felt they'd been rolled through dirt.

The cloth was removed and he was, at last, able to open his eyes. Blurred at first, his vision began to focus.

When he saw all the paraphernalia attached to him, he couldn't help but gasp, panic throwing his heart into double-time. A tube was down his nose and he felt his throat spasm around it as he tried to swallow. But he couldn't complain because they had his mouth taped shut with what looked like a clear vacuum hose attached to it. He had to get this stuff off of him! The heart monitor beeped a rapid warning.

"It's okay, Mr. White. I'm your doctor," the woman said. "We'll have you more comfortable in just a few minutes."

Alex noticed the doctor was small. She looked more like a high

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school cheerleader than a doctor, but her manner was as professional and tough as they come.

Alex tried to calm himself, looking around at the other two women in the room to distract himself from the urge to gag. One woman, dressed in a white pantsuit, was injecting something into his IV line, so he guessed she was a nurse.

The other woman, seated at a bedside chair was his mother! Was he hallucinating?

As the doctor went about making him more comfortable —Was she kidding? He hurt all over—Alex stared at his mother.

The soft look on her face changed to a closed expression of polite concern. Something told him her emotions weren't too stable at the moment. He started to reach his free hand toward her, then pulled back. *Why am I being so compassionate?* He'd hated the woman ever since he could remember. But right now he couldn't seem to dredge up that hate. The thought she was only human came to his mind.

And, for the first time in memory, he was glad just to be alive. He reached toward her.

For a moment she stared at his outstretched hand, as if she didn't know what to do with it. Then she leaned closer to take it in both of hers. He wondered if he was dreaming as he saw a tear slide down her cheek. "You're going to be fine, son."

* * *

As Diana and Emma waited for Josh outside the restaurant, Diana checked her watch for the hundredth time, a knot of anxiety joining forces with the hunger pangs in her stomach. He was an hour late. Had he been in an accident? Where was he? His norm was to be at least a half-hour early.

They continued walking back and forth on the long sidewalk; Emma balancing on the edge of the curb as Diana held her hand. Diana noticed Emma's occasional glances toward the diners seated inside.

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Diana signed to her daughter, "Sorry, love. We'll eat soon." Then she thought what a great little girl Emma was. Most five-year-olds would be beyond cranky at this point. But Emma just smiled and began walking with one foot on and one off the curb.

Diana let out a deep breath as she heard the familiar drone of the Jaguar's engine and looked up to see Josh pulling into the parking lot. He waved and smiled as though he had all the time in the world, then drove past them to search for an out-of-the-way parking space.

Thank God he's all right, Diana thought. Had she given him the wrong time?

At last he joined them at the restaurant door, greeting them with a kiss for Diana and a pat on the head for Emma. "How are my girls?"

On their way to the table, Diana asked, "What happened, Josh? I thought you'd been in an accident or something."

Josh looked confused. "Why? Am I late?" He looked at his watch. "Oh, sorry. Guess it took longer than I thought to go over a project with Janice."

Diana didn't know whether to be upset with him for being inconsiderate, or to be relieved he was okay. She decided it would be best to let it go. How was Josh supposed to know this was going to be one of the most important days of their lives? He didn't know she was here to accept his marriage proposal.

Diana settled Emma with a sketchpad and crayons, then reached across the table for Josh's hand, smiling into his eyes. "Well, mister, you've got two starving women here, so your tardiness is gonna cost ya."

Josh squeezed her hand, his fingers playing with her bare ring finger. "Thanks for understanding." He signaled the server that they were ready to order. "I guess I tend to get caught up with business, but it *is* my life." His eyes narrowed and he held her hand in a tighter grip. "Diana, have you ever had something in your life that makes each day

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an exciting adventure?”

She nodded at him, thinking about her daughter, being a chef, Christmas House. They all did that to her. She opened her mouth to tell him, but he rushed on, obviously not expecting or wanting an answer, “Well, that’s what the winery is for me. And I have to admit, I get carried away with it sometimes.”

He smiled in apology, then picked up a crayon to join Emma in coloring. The little girl rolled her eyes at Diana, but shared her paper with Josh.

“I do understand that passion, Josh. In fact”—Diana played with the salt and pepper shakers—“it’s why re-opening Christmas House is so important to me. Of course, we’d still live there after we’re married. The top floor would be for our private suite.”

She anticipated Josh would be upset when she brought up her wish to continue living at Christmas House. Instead, Josh had a sharp look of anticipation in his eyes as she brought her gaze up to his.

“Diana, did I hear you correctly? Did you just accept my proposal?”

She smiled. “I guess I did.”

Josh seemed to puff up, his grin bordering on comical.

Diana continued, “So, what do you think about Christmas House? You know, my plans to re-open it as an inn?”

He blew out a big sigh, rubbing his chest, as he seemed to think about it. “Why? We have scads of room up at the house for us to live. You’d have servants instead of being one. An inn seems like such a hassle. Why would you want it?”

“Same reason you want the hassle of running the vineyards and the winery, Josh.”

Emma had been watching their exchange with curiosity, looking back and forth between them. Even when the server brought the food, Emma looked like a spectator at a tennis match. Diana wondered if the child even knew what she was putting into her mouth. She didn’t look

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down, until she stuck her fingers into the catsup instead of grabbing a fry.

Josh smiled with reassurance at Emma when she grimaced at what she had done. Then he looked back to Diana, the same easy smile on his face.

“Oh, sorry. I can’t help but be distracted by your kid. She’s a kick. What is she, five-going-on-forty? Is she always this calm, this good?”

Was he changing the subject on purpose? Was he indifferent to her idea, or just stalling for time? He must have given some consideration to her re-opening Christmas House. He knew how much it meant to her, how she’d been struggling to keep her dream alive. Was there a reason he was avoiding a discussion? She forced herself to stay calm, not jump to conclusions.

“Yes, Josh, Emma is a great kid. I’ve been blessed.”

“I told my mother she was crazy to be looking into boarding schools for the child, that Emma was a kick to have around. But once Janice gets an idea in her head, she’s like a pit bull.”

Diana couldn’t believe what she was hearing. The fillet of sole she’d just eaten threatened a comeback. “Janice has been looking into boarding schools for Emma?”

“Only the finest. She wants the best for Emma.”

Diana felt her hand shake as she reached for her glass of water. She took a sip. “I’m what’s best for Emma right now. I am and will continue teaching her at home.”

He took her hand. “Hey, calm down. The kid won’t go anywhere if you don’t want her to. But you have to admit, your new life will be a busy one. We do a lot of entertaining and Mom was counting on my wife to take over some of the hostess duties.”

“What about Christmas House?”

Josh let go of her hand and leaned back in his chair. “What’s the difference if you entertain strangers at Christmas House, or if you

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entertain business contacts at the winery? It's the same thing, isn't it?"

"I guess it would be like you running someone else's winery, Josh. Not quite the same, is it?"

Josh pushed his hands deep into his pockets, jangling the loose change. "I don't see the correlation, Diana. The winery is a family business, generations old, something you should be proud to be part of. Your little inn would be more like a hobby."

Diana shook her head. He hadn't actually said that, had he? Her "little inn."

Emma held sticky hands out to her and Diana reached into her purse for a pre-moistened towelette packet. The conversation was put on hold while she was busy with Emma and Josh stirred sugar into his coffee.

The more she thought about it, the more determined she became to open Christmas House. She knew she and Helen could make it could work, knew they could be successful. Emma would be with her, and Diana could create wonderful meals. She could keep Christmas House.

She had believed Josh was her lifeline, that he would help and encourage her to live her dream. Had she created in her mind a man who didn't exist? While she was so worried about whether or not she'd imagined Alex, had she been painting an unreal portrait of Josh? She'd believed Josh was her savior.

Everything was beginning to seem very clear. She was starting to see Josh for who he truly was. She'd been so desperate to establish a normal life that she'd been willing to believe everything Josh said. The truth was Josh didn't care about Diana's wants or needs. He only cared about what he—or his mother—wanted. How could marriage based on unreal expectations and false images have a chance?

How unfair she'd been to envision Josh as a means to achieve her dreams. And Josh seemed to be seeing her as...what? She wondered now if Josh loved the real Diana. She got the uncomfortable feeling Janice had, for some unknown reason, picked her as an acceptable bride

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for her son. Maybe Diana wasn't the only one wearing blinders.

Once Emma was settled with her dish of ice cream and Diana's racing heart had slowed to near normal, Diana looked up at Josh. Oh yes, the blinders were off. "Josh, do you think Emma should go to boarding school?"

Diana's mind flashed back to her conversation with Alex and how much he hated boarding school.

Josh looked out the window. "Well, Janice thinks it would be best."

"But what do *you* think, Josh?"

"I trust her judgment."

Diana felt a lump in her throat. Damn it, she wasn't going to cry. "What about *my* judgment, Josh?"

He looked back to her, a seriousness she'd never see in him before shadowing his eyes. "I think you'll come to agree with Janice on most things. She's one smart lady. She's saved me more than once from making a mess of my life." His gaze darted back out the window.

Diana felt like she was in a slow motion dream. She reached in her purse and felt for the silver box. It felt cold and hard as her hand closed around the metal. With utter calm, she placed it on the table, taking Emma's hand as she stood. She looked into Josh's eyes and asked, "Was one of those 'messes' named Helen?"

Diana and Emma left an open-mouthed Josh sitting at the table as they walked out to the bright, cleansing autumn breeze.

Diana felt free. Free from her own indecision. Free from the idea that love was something she could manipulate into happening. Free to follow her dreams.

When they got to the library, Diana rushed to drop off the book on wine making. She intended on checking out every book about running an inn she could get her hands on.

As she slid the wine book across the return counter, her eyes were pulled to a San Francisco newspaper sitting open to the sports page.

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Her breath caught in her throat and her ears began to ring. She had to hold onto the counter to keep from swaying.

It was Alex!

She scanned the headline, "Tycoon Race Car Driver, Alex White Out Of Coma!" The picture below showed him at an earlier time standing next to a car, crash helmet in hand.

Diana grabbed the paper and headed to a chair before her shaky knees collapsed altogether. She read the entire article, her heart racing with joy. He was alive! *Alive!*

The paper confirmed that he had been in a coma for the last month. The entire time he'd been with her! What did it mean? Had he been a figment of her imagination after all? *No. Emma had seen him, too.*

She felt Emma tug at her sleeve. Diana picked up her daughter and hugged her, feeling lighthearted and lightheaded. Alex was alive! Diana felt like she'd been reborn. All at once, the light, the laughter and the magic missing from her life washed through her. She felt five years old again, full of wild and wonderfully crazy thoughts of happily-ever-afters.

Diana took Emma to the toy store so they could pick out the best Halloween costume they could find. When they stopped at a roadside stand for a drink, Diana signed to Emma, "Here's to being crazy," and raised her cup of juice for a toast. Emma repeated the crazy sign, then giggled, her mouth sporting a red mustache.

When they got back to Elk, Diana drove straight to Helen's small rental. She couldn't wait for Helen to answer her knock, so just burst in, pulling Emma along with her. Helen was sorting through some papers on her computer desk and listening to a rock station on her radio.

Diana threw the newspaper down in front of Helen. "It's Alex! He's alive! Can you believe it?"

Helen laughed. "Alive? I don't get it. I thought he was a ghost."

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“So did I.” Diana bit her thumbnail. “I’m still not sure what happened. He was in a coma. Oh, Helen, I’ve got to see him, make sure it’s the same person.”

Helen got up and, with a gentle tug, urged Diana down to sit on the sofa. “Slow down, girlfriend. You can go first thing tomorrow.” She glanced back toward the paper. “What if they won’t let you in to see him? I mean, it says he just came out of a coma. He may not be up to visitors.”

Diana hadn’t thought of that. All at once she felt the high she’d been on deflate and hit the ground like a punctured balloon. She leaned back. “All I know is, I’ve got to see him.”

Helen sat down, pulling Emma into her lap so she could re-tie the little girl’s shoes. “What about Josh? How does he figure into this whole Alex equation?”

It was a question she didn’t want to look at too closely. “This guy might not figure into the equation at all. I won’t know until I see him. But Josh no longer figures into anything in my life.”

She noticed her friend was fighting to subdue a smile.

She took hold of Helen’s hand. “And if you still want to be partners, grab your gear, you’re moving in!”

Helen stood up to swing Emma around, letting out a loud war whoop. “Yahoo!” She lowered Emma to the floor and they began to dance what had become their favorite celebration dance.

Emma stood and followed Helen. Diana joined them.

Emma stopped dancing and looked around the room, as if she’d lost something. Diana and Helen stopped and looked at each other.

“What’s wrong?” Diana signed to her daughter.

Emma’s brow creased in confusion as she signed, “Where’s Alex? I want Alex.”

Diana let out a big breath, answering her daughter. “So do I.” She felt Helen squeeze her hand.

CHAPTER 11

The week since Alex had come out of the coma had been one long stream of doctors, physical therapists, and agonizing tests. The specialists all agreed, if he kept up his excellent progress, he'd be home for Christmas in two months. It sounded like a pain-filled eternity to him. Just the thought of how much work it was going to take to regain his physical strength made him want to escape back into dreamland.

Due to a shortage of beds in the small hospital, he'd been temporarily put in a room with another man. That was just fine with Alex because he preferred not being alone.

Alex looked over to his roommate. The nurse had told him that the man was in the final stages of cancer, and that his young wife, Danielle, had become a fixture at his bedside.

I have nothing to complain about.

"How's Mitch today?" It was a rhetorical question.

Danielle looked at Alex with old eyes, answering the usual,

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“Having a good day.”

The man’s name was Mitch Poinsoot, and he couldn’t have weighed more than ninety pounds. Mitch was a man struggling with the ravages of his illness, drifting in and out so often Alex wondered if he even knew of the pretty brunette’s vigil.

Danielle’s soft voice and heavy French accent soothed her husband and Alex as well. Her words never failed to send his mind to a dreamy place, where half-images and indistinct voices called to him. Alex had become so addicted to the feelings Danielle’s accent evoked that he felt a keen loss whenever she left for the evening. He had the feeling if she just stayed long enough, talked long enough, he might grab hold of and be able to put a name to one of the haunting images his mind was teasing him with.

Alex tried not to show how disappointed he was when Danielle picked up her purse and coat to leave. It wasn’t even noon yet, and not her usual time to go.

“Leaving?” Alex asked.

She stroked her husband’s hand. “Today is my daughter’s fifth birthday. I want to be with her.” She looked down. “I also need to find a job.”

At last, Alex could do something for her. “What kind of work are you looking for?”

She took a deep breath. “I’d been doing housekeeping work. I hope to find a position which will allow me to have my daughter with me.”

Alex was stumped. He couldn’t see this gentle woman scrubbing floors at his corporate headquarters, and she couldn’t keep a five-year-old with her if she did. All he could offer was, “I’ll keep my eyes open.”

She shrugged, almost smiling. “Thank you. And I will keep looking.”

Mitch stirred. Danielle set her things back on the table and once

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again sat beside him. “Are you awake, my darling?”

Mitch moaned.

Danielle hummed a soft song.

Alex looked over at Mitch, hoping the man knew what a devoted wife he had. Many times over the past week Alex had found himself listening as Danielle kept up an almost constant, if one-sided, conversation with her husband.

And whenever she spoke, the far-off memory of a song sung in French would whisper through his mind. But he could never quite get a handle on the words of that other song, only the feeling of sweet sadness it evoked.

Most of what Danielle said was in English, but once in a while she would whisper something in French to her husband. The intimate way she said those words, her lips next to Mitch’s ear, told Alex she was speaking words of love.

Instead of depressing Alex, it made him angry with himself for never having had a love like that. He’d never allowed himself that kind of love. Since the accident, so many things had become clear. His life had been so incredibly asinine. At least he’d made peace with his mother. They would never be best friends, but his anger was gone.

The woman, Candy, who claimed she was “practically engaged” to him was the furthest thing from what he wanted in a woman. She just happened to be the woman he was partying with before his accident, and now she seemed to have some sort of misplaced loyalty. He was certain he’d never mentioned marriage, and he never would. She was too much like his mother, a self-absorbed, materialistic party girl. He wasn’t sure why Candy kept coming to see him since they never had anything to say to each other. On her next visit he would put an end to it.

As he stared up at the perforated ceiling tiles, he vowed he was going to make a better life for himself, just as soon as he was out of the

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hospital.

He'd already lost three whole weeks of his life to the coma. What a strange thing to wake up feeling like you've been asleep for no more than a few minutes when weeks had gone by. What did his mind do during the coma? Dream? The doctors had no explanation. For Alex it seemed like one vast, black emptiness that had left him feeling rested and somehow more at peace with himself, as if he'd been adrift on a cool, dark, soundless cloud.

Danielle turned toward Alex. "Is there anything I can get for you while I'm out, Mr. White?"

He wished he could ease the pain etched around her beautiful brown eyes. "No, thanks. Please, call me Alex."

She sighed as she picked up her purse and rose from the chair. Alex noticed how she only gave into weariness when her husband was asleep. "Well, Alex, I'm going to go see how my little girl is. Poor thing doesn't speak much English yet and feels so cut off by the other children in the day-care center. I'll just have to make it up to her." She paused to smile with affection at her sleeping husband. "Later."

"How old did you say your daughter is?" The mention of her daughter gave Alex a strong sense of déjà vu.

"She's five. And such a good girl."

Alex searched his mind, trying to grasp a thread of some illusive thought so he could pull it to him. But it disappeared like a cloud of warm breath on a winter day.

What was he trying to remember?

* * *

"Do I look okay?" Diana checked her reflection in the beveled glass of the china hutch. The distorted reflection didn't help to relieve the knots in her stomach. She was going to see Alex.

Helen scoffed. "When don't you look good?" She took Emma's hand and headed to the kitchen.

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Why hadn't he called her? By the time she'd read the newspaper article Alex had already been out of the coma for an entire week. She thought he would want to see her. Something was wrong. She could feel it.

By the time she stood outside his hospital room, Diana had worked herself into a frenzy of self-doubt. What if he'd been in her imagination after all? No, he had been real. He'd saved Emma. Her child had seen him. Oh, she didn't know what to think.

Heart pounding, she eased open the door.

Diana walked with uncertain steps into the room. Two women sat beside one of the beds, and a woman and a little girl sat beside the other. No one seemed to notice her presence.

Her eyes searched for Alex. She looked past the woman and child. No, that man had thinning hair. Her gaze sought the occupant of the other bed. Yes, it was Alex! Her heart soared.

The sexy, young blond woman next to him was holding his hand. "Darling, I'm going now." She leaned down and gave him a lingering kiss.

Diana's heart stopped. In all the time she and Alex had talked, she'd never once asked him if he had been involved with someone, or married, just assuming because he didn't volunteer the information that he had no serious romantic attachments. Who was she kidding? She hadn't asked because she didn't want to know. She wanted to believe he lived for her alone.

Diana looked at Alex's mother. The woman's stiff countenance softened as she looked down at her son. "I'm going, too, Alex. I'll call you from...well, I'll call you."

Both women rose to leave before they noticed Diana standing by the door. The blond gave her an appraising look, then seemed to dismiss her. Alex's mother didn't acknowledge her with more than a glance as the two women left in a cloud of expensive perfume.

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Diana turned to Alex.

He stared at her, an eyebrow raised in question. “Can I help you?” His polite question sent Diana’s airy hopes plummeting to earth.

“Alex?” was all she could say, while her heart and soul cried out for him to recognize her.

“Yes, I’m Alex White. Do I know you?” He seemed confused, and rubbed his head as if it ached, or as if he was trying to remember.

She moved closer to the bed, noticing that, even though he was in a weakened condition, his vitality still showed through. She put her hands in her coat pockets to keep from running her fingers over his exposed arm. She ached to touch him. She’d wanted for so long to touch a flesh-and-blood Alex. And here he was—a living, breathing man. This time his emotional distance kept them apart.

“Alex, don’t you know who I am?” Her heart was breaking. Alex was alive. Her dreams had come true. And they were turning into a nightmare.

His smile was polite. “You’ll have to refresh my memory. I’m sorry.” He held his hands up in defeat.

She felt tears threaten. He didn’t know her. He didn’t remember their time together, their night together. “I’m—”

What could she say? How could she explain something she didn’t understand herself? She felt her energy drain, along with the hope that had been building ever since she’d read the newspaper article.

She searched his eyes one last time, willing him to remember her. Frank admiration, along with confusion, were all she saw.

“No, I guess you don’t,” she admitted.

Diana turned from the only man she had ever loved, knowing he had been an impossible dream. He had a family. He had a beautiful girlfriend, fiancée, wife or whatever. He didn’t want or need Diana in his life.

* * *

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As Diana drove into Christmas House's circular drive, she noticed a late model Mercedes in one of the parking spaces. She had company. Janice Marley was sitting—legs crossed, spine ramrod straight—on one of the wicker chairs on the front porch, looking like a queen holding court.

After Diana's disastrous visit with Alex, nothing this woman could say could lower Diana's spirits any further. Diana walked up the porch steps and sat across from the silent woman. "Janice, how are you?"

The rapidly moving toe of Janice's pointed shoe gave away her emotions. "Joshua told me you declined his proposal of marriage. Don't you think your decision was rather hasty?"

Great! Josh has sent in reinforcements. "Can I offer you something to drink, Janice?" Diana would have killed for an iced tea. The trip into Santa Rosa had been long and upsetting, and from the look on Mrs. Marley's face, this little visit wasn't going to be any better.

Janice opened her mouth to speak, then appeared to have second thoughts as her eyes darted toward the house. "Why, yes, Diana, something cool would be nice." She rose and headed toward the entry, her step hesitant as Diana unlocked and opened the front door.

"Please have a seat." Diana indicated the living room sofa. "I'll be right back."

She could see that, for some reason, Mrs. Marley was getting teary-eyed as she looked around the room. And, as Diana headed toward the kitchen, she could have sworn she saw the woman's chin quiver. She was taking the breakup harder than Diana would have imagined.

By the time Diana went back into the living room, Mrs. Marley looked as stiff and unemotional as ever.

"Diana, I'm very upset about you and Joshua."

"I'm sorry. But Josh and I have very different views on some very important issues. I realized Josh and I are too different."

Janice's chin shot up like she'd been slapped. "Are you saying"—

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her voice was dead calm—"that you're too good for my son." Her skinny chest pushed rapidly against the silk blouse and her fingers were gripping her handbag so tightly her knuckles were white.

"No! Mrs. Marley, no! I'm not saying that at all." Diana reviewed what she'd said, but couldn't find a thing that could account for Janice's overreaction. "Why would you even think such a thing?" The woman's accusation felt like a hardball out of left field. A hardball that had made direct, disorienting contact. Diana's breakup with Josh had nothing to do with whether or not Diana felt he was good enough for her.

Janice's eyebrow arched and her nostrils flared. "You people think you're so much better than everyone else. Well, you're not." Her eyes flitted around the room. "This...this Norman Rockwell life you think you're living in is all a façade. A façade that will crumble around you now Sparky is gone."

Diana was alarmed by the redness of Mrs. Marley's face.

Maybe she should call Josh. She reached toward Josh's mother, only to have the woman lean away.

"Don't touch me!" Mrs. Marley took a few deep breaths, her demeanor calming. She continued, "Diana Christmas, I only told Josh to marry you after you refused to sell this house to me when Sparky died. Josh never loved you." She looked around with narrowed eyes. "It was always the house."

Diana couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Why would Josh do such a thing?"

Janice stood up. "Because I asked him to." Her smile was malicious. "I promised Joshua if he married you and I got Christmas House that I'd raze it and put up a hotel. The hotel would be his. It's the one and only reason he asked you to marry him. He was going to divorce you as soon as Christmas House was gone."

Mrs. Marley's words didn't have the emotional punch they should

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have if Diana had been in love with Josh, a fact which only reconfirmed she'd made the right decision. "But I would never let you tear down Christmas House, married to Joshua or not. Why would you want to?"

Janice waved away Diana's comment. "I'm not finished with you yet. I know you got a small loan after I stopped Sparky's original loan. It won't be enough money for you to keep this place. Diana, I'm a very influential woman."

"But why?"

"Did Sparky ever tell you I was once engaged to your father?"

Diana remembered very little about her father, but her image of him didn't fit into the puzzle that was Janice Marley. "No, he didn't." What did ancient history have to do with anything?

"Sparky and Clara didn't approve. Oh, they said we were too young, but I know they didn't think I was good enough for Max."

It felt strange to hear her father's name.

"Not a year later Max married that...that...your mother. It was all your grandparents' doing."

"So *you* want to destroy Christmas House?" It was Diana's turn to be short of breath. She'd never come up against anyone like Janice. The woman was frightening in her obvious hatred of, and her need for revenge against, Diana's family.

"I'll destroy Christmas House and all it represents. I'll make sure you don't get another loan. And when you have to sell, I'll make sure I'm the one to get it."

"But, Janice, I already have all the money I need."

Janice's snort was unladylike. "Impossible. I'd have been told if anyone in the valley lent you the money."

Diana stood up to face Janice. The sooner the evil that was Janice Marley was out of Christmas House the better. "As a matter of fact, in a round about way, the money came from you, Janice."

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Janice huffed in disbelief.

“Helen Wright is now my business partner.”

“Where would a person like Helen....” A light sparked in Janice’s eyes. She sputtered, “Surely she already spent.... She couldn’t have.... How?”

Diana opened the front door. “Good bye, Mrs. Marley.”

With her back ramrod straight Janice marched through the doors. Diana quietly closed the door and turned the lock.

* * *

Diana and Helen had accomplished a lot in just two weeks, but there was so much more to do. Now they sat cross-legged in front of the fireplace, going over their “to do” lists.

Helen flipped her notebook to the list of supplies and added to the number of plates to be ordered.

Diana chewed her pencil. “I’ll put an ad in the paper tomorrow for the housekeeper. Just the local papers? Or do you think we should advertise in San Francisco too?”

“Nah, I don’t think we need to bother with the city. I’m sure there are enough locals needing jobs. I don’t think we need to go farther than Santa Rosa.”

Diana tapped her pencil on the table. “Helen, it’s going to be tough pulling this off by Christmas.”

Helen rolled her eyes. “Don’t get cold feet now. I’ve already put in the date change with the brochure company and the association people. We may not have customers by then, but we *will* be ready.”

Diana thought about what Alex had said about utilizing the Christmas House name and spirit. “I want to do right by Sparky’s Christmas tradition. Even if we might not have guests this year, I still want to do the huge tree, the antique ornaments and all the lights, and most of all, the Christmas spirit. It was a legacy I shouldn’t have even considered letting slip away. Our little family will enjoy it this year and

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next year I'm sure the house will be crawling with guests.

"Emma is five now and part of our tradition is that once the children turn five, they have the honor of putting the antique angel on the tree top—with lots of help, of course. Our little Tiffany angel is hundred-year old tradition. She's always embodied the Christmas spirit for me."

The ringing of the phone brought Diana out of her reminiscing. "Christmas House," she answered, then had to cover the receiver to muffle her laughter. Helen was doing a silent, but boisterous victory dance at Diana's use of their business name.

Diana's heart dropped when she heard Josh's voice on the other end. "Oh, hello, Josh."

She flipped through her notes as she listened. Then when he'd had his say, she calmly said, "No, Josh. I would think that'd be obvious. No, I'm not angry anymore."

She added a note to her list—order a child-size chef's shirt for Emma. She didn't want to listen to Josh any longer so she hung up the phone, turning to Helen. "Can you believe the nerve? He actually asked me out!"

Helen and Diana began roaring with laughter.

* * *

Emma missed Alex. As she swiped the feather duster across the jars of fruit in the basement, she wondered if maybe she was just too old now for special friends. When Alex had left, so had the rest of her playmates.

She could tell her mom was singing while she unpacked the boxes of canned goods and the green bottles of water. Her mom's mouth moved and her head swayed back and forth as she worked. She must be happy because her eyes sparkled just like the bubbles in the bottles of water.

Alex had said to call him only if she really, really needed him. Or if her mother did. Well, her mother looked happy most of the time now.

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And Emma felt pretty happy too. But she still wanted Alex. He would make everything even better.

Mom had explained that they were going to have lots and lots of guests. She and Aunt Helen were going to turn their house into a kind of hotel, and they needed Emma to help. She felt like a big girl. And it was fun working with mom.

But she was going to wish for Alex to come back anyway. Maybe if she wished real hard, from now until Christmas, she would get that for Christmas.

* * *

Alex woke up at dawn, hearing a soft voice from the other side of the room singing what sounded like a French lullaby.

When Danielle finished her song Alex whispered, “You’re here early. Is everything okay?”

She placed her sleeping husband’s hand against her cheek. “Good morning Alex. I’m sorry to have awakened you, but this is the only time I could visit Mitch today. I have several job interviews, and tonight I want to take Renee to a Halloween party.”

“Do you need to start to work right away? I mean before Mitch—” He couldn’t say the rest. Even though Danielle could talk openly about Mitch dying, Alex couldn’t.

“Yes. I want to have a home for myself and my daughter before my husband dies. I feel it would make things easier for our child. And for me. We won’t feel so alone.”

Alex wondered more about the beautiful family that was being torn apart by fate. “You said your daughter only speaks French?”

“Yes, we had just moved here from France—returned to Mitch’s home town to live—when we found out about the cancer. I want to stay and raise my daughter, Renee, in her father’s birthplace. His ancestors are French, but he was born in America. I have no family left in France, so I will stay.”

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“Please let me know if you need any help. I’d like to keep in contact.”

Her smile almost broke through the pain in her eyes. “Thank you, Alex. I would like that.”

Danielle had no sooner left than the breakfast trays came in. Alex didn’t know if he could swallow one more mouthful of hospital food. It all tasted the same—different textures, but all the same bland nothing. He poked his fork at the rubbery scrambled eggs, took a deep breath, then scooped a shovelful into his mouth. They were cold, which added insult to the unpleasant task. He chewed just enough to get the stuff down, and followed it with a gulp of tepid, bitter coffee.

The one thing that got him through the meals and through the prodding and probing was the thought he wanted to get well as quickly as possible. He’d wasted most of his life, and he had a lot of catching up to do.

He had a second chance at life, and different things were important to him now. He was ready to look for love, and he was going to look for it with his eyes and heart open. Maybe he’d already met the love of his life but he’d been too stupid, too self-absorbed to notice.

His thoughts turned to Danielle. No, their relationship was nothing more than friendship. No sparks, no...Sparks. The word hung in the air, his mind trying to recall something. *Someone’s name?* He didn’t think so. *Spark plugs?* Maybe it was just his mind referencing his past as a racecar driver.

The doctors said he’d be out by Christmas if his physical therapy went smoothly. But they couldn’t even start that until the cast came off his leg in two weeks. *What then?* Would he be able to walk? Would he have a limp? They said it was all up to him, and how hard he worked toward a full recovery.

Alex was startled out of his reflections. A child’s voice, far-off in the distance, or maybe in his head, called his name. He felt a bolt of

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energy surge through him, as if his soul had taken a direct hit from a lightning strike.

He closed his eyes and listened. All he could hear was the rattle of Mitch's labored breathing.

The residual adrenaline rush left him feeling anxious and uncomfortable the rest of the day. The sheets felt scratchy and stiff, the food was even more unpalatable than usual, and he kept hearing the echo of the child's voice.

* * *

Diana had spent the entire morning, and a great deal of money, phoning in the supply orders for the inn and now sat on the beach below the house, taking in the calm feeling the ocean always brought her.

She sat in the exact spot where she and Alex had made love that night. A hundred questions with no answers came to her mind. Why had Alex come to Christmas House? Why had he come to her? Why hadn't she trusted her own heart and accepted him as real? Why had she sent him away? She thought back to the painful moment in the hospital when she'd realized he didn't know her.

She closed her eyes and ran her hands over her arms, remembering his touch, remembering what it was like to know another human being's soul. His kisses had set off a fire so deep within her that, even now, all he'd have to do was appear before her, hold out his hand and she'd be his.

She looked up to the sky. Was there a heaven? A high, thin mass of rippled clouds gave her the impression she was beneath the ocean. The perspective made heaven seem even higher, farther away. She blinked and she was back to sitting on the beach with the ocean in front of her, breathing in the cool, salty spray.

Maybe heaven was as transitory as that perspective of the clouds. She leaned back on her hands, feeling the grainy moistness of the sand.

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She had found heaven with Alex, right here on this beach. Not only the perfect joining of their bodies, but the joining of their minds as well.

The next morning had taken her back to another place, a place where she could no longer recognize heaven.

“Mind some company?” Helen and Emma plopped down on each side of her. Emma had her shovel and pail and began making a sandcastle.

Diana smiled at her best friend and her beautiful if somewhat chocolate-smudged child.

“I see you’ve been taste-testing the mousse.”

Helen licked her lips. “With you cooking most of the time, I’m going to have to jog up and down those a couple of times a day.” She pointed to the zigzag steps down the cliff face. “I’m glad I’m not the chef. I’d get tired of cooking all the time. It’s just a necessary chore to me.”

Diana was more excited about cooking gourmet meals than just about anything else about the inn. “I can’t imagine ever getting tired of it. When I cook, I feel like a sorceress at her cauldron. A pinch of this, a morsel of that, and pretty soon you have a magic spell. Only you get to eat my magic spells. For me, it’s relaxing.”

Helen held her face up to the sun. “So mix up a love potion to bring Alex back. We could charge more money if Christmas House was haunted. Oh, I’ve got it. We could do the play, *A Christmas Carol*, and Alex could—”

Diana interrupted, “Okay, enough. I get it. But I don’t have any potions that would bring him back. I had him, I lost him, I’ll”—the pitch of her voice dropped—“get over him.”

“Can you?”

Emma motioned to Diana to come look at what she’d written in the sand. They both stood up and looked over Emma’s shoulder. They hugged each other.

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Emma had spelled out the letters, A-L-I-X, in the sand.

"I think you should go back to the hospital," Helen said, "and shake him until you loosen whatever's stuck in his head, and he remembers."

Diana didn't want to talk about it. The look Alex had given her at the hospital still haunted her. Just a flicker of recognition would have given her hope, but she was a stranger to him.

"No, Helen. He has a life, a busy, full life from what I've read in the newspaper. What does he need with us, or Christmas House, with all he has? Besides, there was a woman with him when I went to visit." And ever since she'd found it impossible to erase the image of Alex kissing another woman. "They looked close."

"You didn't tell me that."

"No, I couldn't at the time. But I'm getting used to it."

"Yeah, right. Just like that."

Diana picked up a handful of sand. "No, not just like that. But I'm glad he's alive and that he has family and friends who love him. He seemed happy."

"What about you?" Helen tilted her head, looking at Diana.

Diana looked back without flinching or hesitating. "I'm happy." A warm glow spread throughout her as she realized she truly was happy.

There was one person who could make her life complete, though. And he was as beyond her reach as he had been as a ghost.

* * *

Diana had been in San Francisco running errands all day and she was feeling a wonderful sense of accomplishment.

Her one disappointment was that she couldn't find anyone who could fix the broken Tiffany angel before Christmas. She'd discovered it was going to take more time than she had to track down the unique glass and find a skilled artisan to repair the angel's beautiful wing. She'd also found out it was going to take a small fortune.

Emma would have to make do with a substitute angel to top the tree

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this year. Maybe next year their family symbol of Christmas spirit could be repaired.

As Diana drove past Santa Rosa, she found herself approaching the off-ramp to the hospital. Was Alex still there? As late as it was, and as tired as she was, Diana couldn't help herself as she flipped on her turn signal and got off the freeway.

She had to see Alex again. Maybe, she rationalized, because their relationship had never had closure. Whatever the reason, she felt compelled to go to him now, even if his indifference might once again break her heart.

The hospital corridors were quiet, and no one stopped her as she made her way to Alex's room. She pushed open the door.

A pretty woman sitting by the bedside of Alex's roommate looked up, whispering, "Hello. You're back." She must have remembered Diana from her last disastrous visit.

The woman followed Diana's gaze to where Alex lay sleeping. "I'm afraid Alex had a bad day. He's under heavy sedation."

Diana moved closer to Alex's bedside. "It's okay. I just wanted to see how he was doing." *Liar.*

Pulling the plastic chair from the corner, Diana sat next to Alex, free to take in all of him, this new flesh and blood Alex. His skin was pale, but real. She reached out to touch him, but pulled back. What if he woke up and, once again, saw a stranger?

"My name's Danielle." The woman smiled.

Diana was drawn to the woman's accent and her gentle manner. "I'm Diana Christmas."

Danielle sat up straighter. "Diana Christmas, of Christmas House?"

Diana's heart raced. Had Alex remembered and told this woman about her, about the inn? "Yes." The word came out in a breathless whisper.

The woman laughed, the sound like the illusive tinkle of faraway

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wind chimes. “As they say, it is a small world. I have an interview with you tomorrow.”

Pushing disappointment aside, Diana’s mind raced through the list of names she had scheduled for interviews. “Danielle Poinso?”

“Yes. How nice you remembered.” Danielle’s eyes entreated. “I’m the one with the five-year-old.”

“Yes, yes, now I remember talking to you.” Diana swallowed back the lump in her throat as she looked at Danielle’s husband. The urge to tell the woman that the job was hers was overwhelming, but Diana held her tongue. “My business partner, Helen, and I are looking forward to talking to you tomorrow.”

Diana noticed how agitated Danielle’s hands had become as she fiddled with the corner of her husband’s blanket. “My little girl will not be a problem?”

Diana thought about Emma, about her having another child to play with and she was tempted to hire Danielle on the spot. “A problem? Not at all. I have a five-year-old daughter, too.”

Danielle’s husband stirred and Danielle returned her attention to him.

Looking down at Alex, Diana prayed for him to awaken too, to look at her and know her again, but his deep breathing told her he was far away. She hesitated a moment, then took his hand in hers.

The warm reality of him took her breath away. She studied his peaceful face and her heart took up the rhythm of the pulse she could see beating strong and true at his throat.

Leaning close to his ear, she whispered, “Come back to us, Alex.”

Then, throwing caution aside, she pressed her lips to his. It was a kiss to last a lifetime and she allowed the sweet warmth of his mouth to burn itself into her memory.

Had she felt a response or was it wishful thinking? She looked at his quiet features. It was her imagination.

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“Good bye, Alex.” Diana knew she would never come back. She had to be content knowing he was alive and recovering his health.

Before she left, she said to Danielle, “I’ll see you tomorrow. Good night.”

“Good night, Diana.”

Diana left, knowing both she and Danielle were saying their good-byes to the men they loved.

CHAPTER 12

The piercing whine of the skill saw-type device the doctor used to remove Alex's cast generated the emotional wallop of a hundred-pound dentist drill.

In an effort to distract himself, Alex searched his memory for stanzas from Tennyson, concentrating on each word, each line. *He travels far from other skies....* But little bits of the present kept intruding. So tight was his grip on the sides of the exam table, his hand felt permanently attached.

A touch, a kiss! the charm was snapped...

If only someone could, with a kiss, awaken him from this torture.

The memory of warm, trembling lips pressing against his pushed the poem aside. Last night he'd dreamed someone had kissed him. *No, not last night. Or was it?*

A woman's face came to him. It was the face of a beautiful woman with auburn hair, a woman whose strength of spirit glimmered through

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violet-blue eyes. He knew her from somewhere. If he could concentrate, he was sure he would be able to remember.

He became aware of the painless but nevertheless threatening instrument traveling from his ankle up to his hip.

Then he remembered where he'd seen the woman. She had come into his hospital room when his mother and Candy had visited for the last time. But the beautiful woman had hurried out again. He had told her he didn't know who she was. *Diana*. He knew with certainty that was her name. *But she hadn't said who she was. Or had she?* An uneasy tension feathered through his chest.

"All done, Alex. You can open your eyes now." The doctor's voice pushed the illusive memory of who Diana was and what she had meant to him further from his grasp. Then it was gone.

The single clear memory of that day was of him telling Candy he no longer wanted to see her. He could tell she'd been relieved. He was glad she wasn't coming back. Her empty visits wore him out.

Alex took a deep breath, looking at the device the doctor had set on the tray. "I'll take pain to that noise any day."

The doctor continued her examination, all business again, and Alex wished he could take back his words. Without the support of the cast, his knee and ankle felt like they had ground glass in them, and every movement caused a burning, stretching sensation down his entire leg.

But the doctor continued her torture, oblivious to his discomfort. Alex had noticed in the time since he'd awakened from his coma that the petite, pretty doctor was one tough cookie. Smiles and tenderness were not in her repertoire.

She prodded his leg and a cold sweat broke out on his forehead. He concentrated on studying her. "So, doctor, what made you want to become a surgeon?"

Her firm but gentle touch traveled up his leg, continuing her bending, twisting torture. "I had some medical problems when I was

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young, so I learned a lot about hospitals and surgery. It always fascinated me. Besides, I thought it would be good money. Ha! Was I in for a shock.”

As her hand reached his upper thigh, she used her most professional attitude to push aside his gown, leaving him just enough cover for dignity.

But as sharp and quick as her touch was, there was something in the smallness of her hands that reminded him of someone else’s soft, caressing touch moving over his skin. *Candy? No, that woman’s hands were large with long, cat-like nails.* All he knew was, if he wasn’t careful the doctor’s examination could become embarrassing as well as painful.

In an effort at distraction he closed his eyes and retreated back to Tennyson.

*Trust me, long ago
I should have died, if it were possible
To die in gazing on that perfectness
Which I do bear within me. I had died,
But from my farthest lapse, my latest ebb,
Thine image, like a charm of light and strength
Upon the waters, push’d me back again
On these deserted sands of barren life.*

Flashes of memory! *Diana.* A sense of urgency overtook him. “Oh, God,” he whispered.

“Sorry, Alex, I know this hurts.”

Hurt? The word didn’t seem adequate for what he was feeling. The memories he was experiencing were as convoluted as his twisted muscles and tendons. What was the rest of that poem?

The doctor helped him move to his side as she examined his hip and

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spine.

With Diana's image, more of the poem came to him.

*A portion of the pleasant yesterday,
Thrust forward on to-day and out of place...*

An image of Diana silhouetted in a doorway jolted his mind. He could see mullioned windows off to the right of her, a darkened room, her naked form. The illusive memories wouldn't stay long enough for him to focus. They would appear in flashes, then evaporate. Like dreams, they were bits and pieces of wild, illogical images.

With the sound of the doctor's voice, the last thready image vanished, leaving him piqued and unsettled. "Alex, the easy part is over now. Your leg looks good, but I'm a little concerned with some of your reflexes."

He knew of one reflex that still worked just fine, and having a pretty woman for a doctor wasn't doing that particular reflex any good.

She blew out a breath as she completed her work. "We won't know your chances of a complete recovery until we see how you respond to therapy, so I want to get you started as soon as possible. We'll talk more about measure of recovery after you've had a few sessions."

She didn't sound too positive. Alex asked, "You mean I might not regain the use of my leg?"

"Let's talk about that next week, okay? We'll know more after a couple of physical therapy sessions. I'm not going to lie to you, Alex. It's going to be painful work to get this leg back in working shape. It's not just a matter of broken bones and weak muscles. You had severe ligament and tendon damage. We just can't say how those are going to work until you try."

Alex looked directly into her eyes. "I'm walking out of here by Christmas."

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"I said you might be discharged by Christmas, not that you'd be able to leave under your own power. If everything goes without complications, you could very well be able to leave with the aid of a wheelchair."

Alex didn't blink. Like hell he'd be in a wheelchair.

The doctor smiled as she finished making notes in the chart. "The attendant will be in shortly to take you to your first treatment. I'll be getting reports from your PT on your progress, and I'll be checking in on you from time to time. Good-bye, Alex." She shook his hand and left.

Once he was alone and playing the hospital waiting game he wondered again about Diana. The bits and pieces of memory seemed so real one moment, then like an unreachable dream the next.

He needed to find out more about the woman who haunted him. But how?

* * *

Wearied, Diana handed Helen a cup of hot tea, plunking herself into the living room sofa's welcoming cushions. The last three hours of interviewing potential housekeepers had been both exhausting and entertaining.

Helen kicked off her loafers and pulled her feet up to sit cross-legged on the sofa opposite Diana. "Maybe Halloween wasn't the best day to see applicants. There was bound to be fallout from doing business on the day of the dead."

Diana laughed as she remembered some of the women they'd interviewed. "Definitely drop-outs from Michael Jackson's *Thriller* video."

Helen slapped her leg, laughing. "That old lady in the vintage lime-green polyester? What a hoot."

"The one who didn't believe in references?"

Helen nodded. "I was terrified when she started to light up a

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cigarette. One spark to those Jack Daniels fumes and we wouldn't have needed fairy dust to fly to Never Land."

Diana sat forward. "What about the vampire with the pierced tongue?" Diana couldn't help asking Helen, "Where, again, did you advertise? The *Freaker's Ball Gazette*?"

"And you thought having a ghost around was bizarre."

Danielle was the next person on their schedule. Diana could see her walking up the front steps. Since Diana hadn't had the heart to replay last night's visit to the hospital, Helen didn't have the inside information on Danielle. Diana decided to let Helen form her own opinion.

"Am I dreaming? A normal person?" Helen said.

Through the expanse of front windows, they watched the woman dressed in conservative clothes walk across the porch and seat a little girl sporting a Snow White costume in one of the front whicker chairs.

Diana jabbed Helen in the ribs when she heard Helen mutter, "We're never going to be able to afford her," just before they opened the glass-paned doors to admit the woman.

Forty-five minutes later, Diana felt like she'd known Danielle her whole life. As far as Diana was concerned, Danielle was perfect for the job. Diana's heart soared when she saw Helen's discreet nod, indicating she thought this was the one.

When they walked her to the door, they noticed two little girls with identical blue-and-yellow costumes sitting on the front porch. They were playing a hand-clap game and laughing.

Danielle looked at Diana, an astonished expression on her face. "My daughter is very shy. She does not speak much English yet and has trouble communicating with other the other children here."

Diana felt a jab of excitement. "My daughter is deaf, but they seem to understand each other just fine."

Helen spoke up. "I think this is going to work out just great. We

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have two more applicants, one of whom is late, then we can let you know, Danielle. Should we call you at home or at the hospital?"

"Renee and I are going to a party. We will be home by nine, if that's not too late to call me."

"After nine then." Diana felt her prayers had been answered as she, Helen and Emma watched the car pull out of the drive.

But she had a disturbing thought. All three women had tragedy associated with men. And Christmas house was going to be a house of all women. It seemed unbalanced somehow and strangely unsettling.

* * *

Alex prayed Mitch Poinsett didn't die on Thanksgiving. The poor guy had suffered enough, but his wife and daughter been through enough. He'd hate to think of Danielle and Renee associating their new American holiday with death.

He looked over to where Danielle held Mitch's hand to her cheek, and thought, Either do it today, pal, or hang on until day after tomorrow. You don't want to ruin all their Thanksgivings to come.

Alex was exhausted from the pain and exertion of his physical therapy session, but he didn't fall into his usual deep sleep. He felt a sense of urgency from the bed next to him.

Mitch was sedated with morphine, but today he thrashed about and his mumbling was incoherent.

Danielle's gentle voice held a note of pleading, of coaxing it hadn't before. Her face looked older and sadder than ever as she bent close to Mitch, much of the time restraining him from sitting up in his delirium.

"*Le reve*. Dream, my love. Don't fight it. You've won your battle and can rest now."

It was agony listening to her, knowing the physical strength and emotional strength it took, and not being able to help. This was her burden, her life, and he was nothing more than a spectator to what he knew was the end to their life together.

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“Do you want me to leave, Danielle?”

She looked up with a panicked look in her eyes. “No! Please, Alex.” Then she looked down, grabbing one of Mitch’s arms as he flung it out. “I am sorry. This is difficult to watch, yes?”

Alex swallowed hard. “If you want me to stay, I’ll stay.”

She whispered, “Please.” She began singing a gentle song in French, crooning and swaying as she held onto Mitch’s hand.

Alex closed his eyes, hearing again another woman’s voice from far away. Flashes of violet-blue, the color of pansies, accompanied the memory, along with the foreign, yet familiar, words of the song. He started to drift. It seemed the closer he got to sleep, the closer he came to remembering. *Remembering what?*

The song stopped.

With a sharp intake of breath, Alex started out of his semi-sleep state, his heart hammering in his chest. He looked over to Danielle. Mitch’s form was now too still. Alex felt the pain of their separation as he heard Danielle’s farewell.

Her smile was one of quiet radiance as she touched the back of her hand to Mitch’s forehead. “You see, Mitch, I told you it would be more beautiful on the other side.”

* * *

“The brochures are fabulous, Helen. Come look.” Diana held one out from the opened shipping box in front of her.

“Wow.” Helen grabbed one, then plopped down on the sofa. The exhaustion they both felt after putting their dream together in just under two months was evident in her weary, but satisfied smile.

Diana picked up her cup of herbal tea from the coffee table and handed Helen hers. Emma sat opposite, looking through a picture book. “Guess all our worries about getting Christmas House ready by Christmas is moot. The mess-up with the listing kinda blew any chance of having guest for Christmas.”

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“So, we’ll have a little break before our official January opening,” Helen said. “I have to admit I’m kinda glad. I need to recharge.”

“At least we’re ready.” Diana looked back over the events of the past two months. “I admit I had my doubts when our business license got lost in the mail.” They laughed now, but it hadn’t been funny then. “But everything’s worked out. I’m glad David Russell was willing to fill in as chef two days a week so I can take Emma to school.” Diana couldn’t believe the change in her daughter since she’d enrolled her in the school for the deaf. Although she only went a couple of mornings a week, Emma’s skills had grown by leaps and bounds.

Helen downed her tea, wiping her hand across her mouth. “Now that you have everything your little heart could desire, what’s your Christmas wish going to be?”

“Not telling. How about you?”

Helen went down a list a mile long.

Diana already had her Christmas wish printed out in gold ink on red paper, rolled into a scroll and tied with a green-and-gold ribbon. It was a tradition Sparky had started that she was now carrying on.

Every Christmas she could remember they would write down their wish on colorful paper, decorate it, then put it in a large red cut crystal candy dish on the mantle. The one rule was the wish couldn’t be for anything material, and it couldn’t be for yourself. Then on Christmas Eve Sparky would read “’Twas the Night Before Christmas,” they would open one gift from under the tree, and drink a champagne and sparkling cider toast.

After that, they’d put their wishes into the fireplace. Sparky said it was the one certain way Santa could get them...that they floated out through the chimney and into the magical Christmas night.

Diana picked up the empty glasses and started toward the kitchen. “I wonder what Emma’s wish is. She won’t let me help her with it, but she seems so excited.”

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“A talk, dark handsome stranger for me, I should think.” Helen laughed. “After all the crayon duty I’ve pulled, it’s the least she could do.”

When Diana came back into the room, Emma was standing in front of Helen, and Helen had an incredulous look on her face. “Diana”—her voice was wavering——“you still want to know Emma’s wish?”

“Did she tell you?” Diana sat down on the on the table next to Emma.

Helen nodded to Emma.

Emma looked into Diana’s eyes. The little girl cleared her throat. She opened her mouth, then closed it again.

Diana held her breath.

Closing her eyes as if concentrating, Emma put her fingers against her throat and opened her mouth. Slowly, and with great precision, Emma said, “Aaaa-lll-eeek-ssss.”

“Alex!” Diana jumped up. “She talked! Helen, she spoke! She said Alex!” She scooped Emma up in a bear hug. Diana looked over to see Helen’s eyes fill with tears, her fingers pressed over her lips, her shoulders shaking.

* * *

The hospital room was empty and too quiet after Mitch died. Alex missed Danielle’s peaceful presence, her soothing voice. He tried to get interested in the movie on the small television screen, but he’d already watched *It’s A Wonderful Life* twice in the past week. He was getting antsy to leave.

At first he wanted, with every fiber of his being, to get strong and get out. He’d had some crazy notion someone was waiting for him. *But who?* The notion had passed, and with it, his sense of urgency. Now he had nothing more than a lifeless apartment waiting for him.

His mother had, in her typical style, accepted an invitation to a gala in England. Well, she had a certain kind of life, and she seemed okay

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with it, so far be it for him to begrudge her whatever happiness she could find. They'd pretty much run out of things to say to each other anyway.

Danielle came through the door just as Jimmy Steward yelled, "Mary! Mary! Don't you know me?"

"Hello, Alex."

"Danielle!" He turned off the TV, and moved his leg over, readjusting the pillow under it. "Sit down. Sit down. How are you? How's Renee?"

"We're doing fine. My new job starts right after the New Year, and it seems the perfect situation for us. We've moved into a little house half a mile from the inn where I'll be working. It is called Christmas House. Isn't that charming?"

Alex felt his stomach contract, a feeling of anticipation crowding his chest. Flashes of a winding staircase and ships in bottles came and went. He tried to keep his voice calm. "Tell me about it."

"Let me show you." She reached into her purse, pulled out a brochure and handed it to him.

"Christmas House," he read out loud. As his eyes took in the artsy black-and-white photos, his heart revved into high gear. The house overlooking the craggy coastline. The dark wood of the rooms. Had he been there before? Even a picture of a wineglass at a dining table sparked something. He had a visceral reaction to the images and his heart began to pound, urging him to action.

It was as if he was balancing at the edge of some great unknown. He couldn't tell if the black nothing before him was a perilous abyss, or if he'd be able to take a step and find solid footing. But his memories weren't substantial enough to let him to take that step. The memories he couldn't put into a concrete time frame held him back.

Danielle's voice sounded far away. "You know the owner, Diana Christmas. Yes? She came to visit you twice. Oh yes, once you were

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asleep.”

Alex’s equilibrium shifted like an off-kilter compass.

He turned the glossy paper over, and his breath caught in his throat. It was a picture of two women and a little girl. They were smiling as they stood in a breezy garden with the ocean to their backs. The black-and-white photo gave a sense of another era, and he felt as though he were being sucked back through time to when those people lived.

He shook his head. But these people lived now. And Danielle had a job with them. They were real.

Licking his dry lips, Alex looked up at Danielle’s quizzical smile. “You said this woman came here, to the hospital?”

“*Oui*,” Danielle said.

Suddenly he remembered!

Diana.

Of course. Memories came flooding back, jelled, then crystallized.

It hadn’t been a dream. Everything came back to him with stunning clarity. Following Diana home...Emma...the windswept cliffs...finding the broken stained-glass angel...Diana and Josh Marley.

Diana and Josh. Were they together now? It had been over two months. He looked back at the brochure, Josh’s absence a relief. “Is Diana married?”

“No. She is alone to raise her daughter.”

He rubbed his head. “When did you say the inn opens?”

“January. Are you feeling well? You look very pale.”

He looked back at the photo. How could he explain the urgency he felt? “I have to go there.” But he wouldn’t be released until next week, and he didn’t want his reunion with Diana to be over the phone. “Are you sure they won’t take guests until after Christmas?”

“Can you leave by then?”

“I’d like to see them try and stop me.”

“Very well.” Danielle looked skeptical as she glanced at his

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elevated leg. “I will call and ask.”

Alex pictured Diana’s face when he heard Danielle’s polite, “Hello, Diana, this is Danielle. I have a friend who wants most urgently to visit your inn for Christmas. Is that possible? *Oui*.. I mean, yes, I can wait.” She shrugged and held the phone away from her ear to indicate she was on hold.

What if his mind was playing tricks on him? What if the impossible dreams he was now remembering were just that, dreams? Dreams to which he’d given Diana’s face?

Alex blurted out, “Tell her my name is...is....” His mind went to Tennyson’s, “Edwin Morris” he’d been reading this evening. “Tell her I’m Ed Morris.”

It seemed like an eternity until she came back on the line.

Danielle pressed the receiver closer to her ear. “Christmas Eve?” She frowned the question toward Alex.

He nodded and whispered an urgent, “Yes! Yes!”

“Mr. Ed Morris would like that very much, Diana.” Danielle looked puzzled. “*Oui*. Good-bye.” Her look was dubious as she hung up and turned to Alex.

“Thank you, Danielle. I’ll explain everything to you in a minute, although I’m not sure you’ll believe me.”

His heart skipped a beat as an idea stole into his mind. “I have one more extremely large favor to ask. And it’s got to be done today. Please don’t say no until you hear me out.”

* * *

Diana, Emma, Helen, Danielle and Renee, decked out in velvet and satin, all waited with eager anticipation for their first guest, a Mr. Morris, who was due to arrive at seven o’clock. The enticing aroma of herb-stuffed roast goose filled the house, and the scent of the giant pine tree brought an outdoor freshness to the evening.

Emma and her new best friend, Renee, sat cross-legged in front of

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the crackling fire with a game of animal dominoes, and every once in a while, one of the girls would roll backwards, laughing at something the other did. Diana noticed the covert looks both girls gave the colorful mountain of wrapped gifts under the tree.

Diana put the finishing touch of holly sprigs on the dining room tables. Her mother's Christmas china brought a sudden pang of nostalgia. She let the feeling envelop her, cherishing the few memories she had of her mother.

"It's time for the toast and our wishes. We'd better do it before Mr. Morris arrives."

Danielle carried a tray with fluted glasses filled with bubbling liquid—champagne for the women and sparkling cider for the girls—into the living room.

Tears came to Diana's eyes as she said unspoken thanks to Sparky for her wonderful life and for Christmas House. But the lump in her throat wouldn't go away. Neither would the feeling she hadn't completely recovered her Christmas spirit. She mouthed a silent, "Sorry, Sparky," as she touched a finger to one of the diamond earrings.

Helen spoke up, signing for Emma, "Here's to Christmas House and our new family. God Bless us, every one." She picked up her glass and they all toasted.

Emma and Renee drank down their cider, each giving the other a conspiratorial smile. Then they raised their glasses to throw them into the fireplace.

There was a collective intake of breath. But the girls lowered their glasses to the table and erupted into peals of laughter.

Diana couldn't believe the change in Emma in the past two months. Both Renee's arrival and Emma's school had been wonderful influences on her. She'd become more outgoing, a little nosier, and a lot happier. Diana was glad to give up her quiet times for the look on

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her daughter's face.

As Diana reached for the red dish filled with all the Christmas wishes, she wondered what kind of mischief those two little girls were going to get into in the next few years.

She let everyone take their wishes out of the bowl, then set it back on the mantle. "Okay. Close your eyes and think really hard about your wish, then throw it into the fire." Helen signed for Emma and Danielle translated for Renee. "Ready?"

Diana looked around to make sure everyone had her eyes closed. Emma's were scrunched tight, as if the harder she tried, the better her chances her wish would be granted.

The scrolled piece of paper in Diana's hand felt heavy. She did as the others and concentrated on her wish. *Please, let Alex find happiness.*

They all threw their notes into the flames, each thinking of her wish. Little bits of paper peeled away as they burned, the draught catching some of them and sending them skyward.

The door chime brought all eyes toward a man standing at the glass entry holding a Christmas gift wrapped in red and gold. He was looking back over his shoulder, and in the dimness of the porch's colored Christmas lights, Diana could tell the man leaned on a cane.

Diana started to take a step toward the door, but Danielle's words, "Oh, it's Alex," turned her legs into rubber and she couldn't move.

"Alex?" Her voice sounded far away.

"Yes, Alex Whi—" Danielle stopped. "Oh!" She covered her mouth with her fingertips, her giggle that of a happy conspirator. "I mean Ed Morris." She hurried toward the door.

Emma edged past Renee, peering toward the man outside. Her eyes lit up and she looked to Diana for confirmation.

The man turned around just as Danielle opened the door, and Diana got a good look at his face.

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It was Alex!

Helen and Danielle held back, the smile on Danielle's face radiant. Tremulous vibrations shot between Diana and Alex.

Diana looked into Alex's eyes, into his soul, and his breath quickened along with hers. Did she see recognition in his eyes?

Emma walked over to Alex to stand next to him, staring up with a quizzical look on her face. He looked down at the child, but Diana couldn't tell if she was reading more into his smile than was there.

He held the gift out to Diana. "Please open it."

She felt like she was caught in a spell, everything moving in surreal, slow motion as she lifted the lid of the box.

Inside, nestled in satin, was... "Our Christmas angel! But how?"

Diana looked back into Alex's eyes and saw him wink at Danielle.

Danielle said, "I stole it from your attic for him. He was very determined to have it fixed."

She couldn't believe he'd gone to so much trouble. She'd thought having the angel fixed before Christmas was impossible.

Alex held his arms open to Diana.

Diana's knees felt weak as she stepped into Alex's warm and wonderfully real embrace. As their faces touched, never had anything felt so marvelous.

"Merry Christmas, Diana."

His heated breath at her ear sent hot vibrations spiraling throughout her body. This was Alex—warm, real, alive, and he was hers, body and soul. This was Alex, the man, not an ethereal ghost who could only exist in Diana's dreams.

They held each other tight, and Diana knew she would never again let go of the love she'd almost lost.

She heard Alex's soft words. "I'm home to stay, Diana."

Finally they pulled apart, Alex saying, "Shall we put the angel where she belongs?"

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Alex took Emma's hand and led her to the tree, lifting her high into the air. Diana handed her the angel, and Emma slid the ornament securely onto the top branch. Refracted light glanced off jewels set into the stained glass wings, sending the angel's radiance around the room.

A cheer went up from the group, and Diana felt like her heart would burst with joy.

Alex set Emma down, but kept hold of her hand as he folded Diana's hand into the crook of his arm, next to his heart. Diana looked into Alex's intense blue eyes, eyes that said he adored her.

She said, "Welcome home, Christmas Spirit."

REBECCA ANDERSON

As a baby boomer/Scorpio, Rebecca has her feet firmly planted in reality while her mind, spirit and soul wander about in various worlds of fantasy. While she wouldn't blink an eye if an alien, a ghost or Merlin appeared at the breakfast table, she wouldn't let the event stop her from taking the clothes out of the dryer before they wrinkled.

She and her Prince Charming of thirty-plus years have raised three children, a dog, a cat and two birds, and are now surprised to discover that "The Empty Nest Syndrome" is a good thing. Who can complain about having more time and energy for romance, the inalienable right to spoil their grandkids, and the freedom to travel?

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