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ANTONIA PEARCE

*Leap
of Fate*

Leap of Fate

By

Antonia Pearce

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Leap of Fate

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Dedication

For my critique partners, Michelle and Kat, and my writerly buddy, Shira.

Thank you for your input and encouragement. Special thanks also to everyone at RD, RWAO and the Inkers for your support. And for my dear little family—thank you for your patience.

Chapter One

Merryn Porter never saw the blow coming—she was too busy shoving the bride and groom out of the way.

She could have cleared the falling pine tree, too, if she hadn't tangled herself up in the long skirts of her hideous bridesmaid's dress. Risking herself to save her dear old friends Serena and Dave on the happiest day of their lives was nothing compared to the sacrifice of being seen in public in that dress.

The pain, when it came, was crushing. Oh, and the churning, mouth-watering nausea... *Ugh*. As soon as she opened her eyes, she was going to toss her cookies for sure.

The snow should have numbed some of the agony, but no. The icy wetness just soaked her dress and produced a nice case of frostbite to go along with the fractured skull. As her teeth chattered, she thought with longing of nice, dry ski clothes and an Antarctic parka. Maybe a hot toddy and an even hotter ski instructor to go along with it.

She had no intention of ever opening her eyes and dealing with the situation, but the insistent, seductive voice from her past changed her mind.

"Merryn, get *up*. We've got to get going. We can't stay here."

She knew that sexy baritone. She'd heard it often in her dreams, whispering hot, naughty things that could make her go from zero to wet in one point two seconds. There was a reason she should not be hearing it now, but her head hurt so much she couldn't summon the answer.

"My head hurts. I'm sick. I don't want to go anywhere except to a hospital."

"Merryn, open your eyes. Focus. We can't stay here." In her dreams, the voice had been a teensy bit more polite.

Curiosity got the better of her, and she cracked open an eye. "Luke!" Joy suffused her, almost distracting her from the pain. "Where have you been?" It had been so long since she'd seen Serena's older brother. She couldn't remember why she hadn't seen him, but who cared?

"Yes, Merry. It's me." He ground out each word for emphasis. "We've got to leave. Now." She didn't particularly care for his tone. Luke at his autocratic best—some things never changed. He grasped her upper arm in a vise-like grip and hauled her up off the ground.

"Wait a minute, I'm hurt here. What do you think you're doing? You're going to make a scene, too." Oblivious to her own dramatic effect, she gestured animatedly, surprised to discover she still clutched her bridesmaid's bouquet in her hand.

"Trust me. That's the least of our worries."

She tried to turn back to see what Serena and Dave were making of Luke's unexpected appearance. Strange that no one was talking—in fact, there was no noise at all.

"No! Don't look at them." His tone was frantic. Luke never sounded anything but calm, cool and collected. He frog-marched her forward—almost at a run, refusing to let her even look back over her shoulder. Unable to hang on to the pretty little nosegay of lilies and roses, she tossed it to the ground with regret.

"What is your problem? You're acting like a crazy man. Can't you tell how badly I'm injured here?"

"I think I have a pretty good idea, but that's beside the point. We have to get to my house. We're running out of time."

"I think I'm going to throw up. I can't run in this condition."

"You only *think* you're going to throw up," he spat in irritation.

She looked at him as he pulled her along. Handsome as ever in a dark suit and crisp white shirt, grimness replaced his customary jaunty, devil-may-care persona.

She rolled her eyes at his misguided assessment and regretted it at once, the movement triggering a wave of vertigo. "Whatever. I'm a registered nurse. I know these things. Don't say I didn't warn you."

He came to a sudden halt, steadying her when she nearly tottered forward. "Look at me."

"What?"

"I said, look...at...me. Am I speaking Greek all of a sudden?"

"There's no need to be snippy. It's just a little difficult to understand you when you talk with your jaw clenched like that." Wow, those deep blue eyes hadn't changed a bit. She still wanted to drown in them. And that thick, wavy chestnut hair. And that body...Too bad about the unpleasant personality, but one couldn't expect a guy to be perfect.

"We're here."

She tore her gaze away from his and turned to see that they stood on the front porch of his sprawling red brick hilltop home. He'd moved into it right before she and Serena left for college, and she'd only been there twice; once for a birthday party for Serena—the other time didn't bear thinking about. Lingered hurt constricted her chest like a steel band.

Perplexed, she skewered him with her best I-know-you're-hiding-something look. "Wait a minute. Your house is across town from the country club where we had the wedding. How'd we get here?" Maybe she did have a fractured skull—or at least a concussion—to be this out of it.

"We ran, remember? You complained every step of the way." He opened the enormous glass-paneled front door and pulled her inside, shutting it after them.

"You know, you really should keep your doors locked. It's just not safe."

He rolled his eyes this time. "That's not something I've worried too much about lately." Shedding his suit jacket and tossing it over the back of the couch, he took her hand and led the way through the living room, towing her into the master suite.

At first, the sight of his taut butt flexing ahead of her was so distracting she didn't realize where she was. Then it hit her. Oh, great. The scene of the crime. If he wasn't going to mention that humiliating episode,

then neither was she.

Freezing cold, massive headache and hot butts notwithstanding, there was something wrong with this whole situation. Somewhere inside she felt she knew what it was but, every time she tried to concentrate, the thoughts just slipped further away. Along with the bittersweet trace of heartbreak. Of tragedy.

Whatever it was, he knew. She knew he did. "Luke, you can't run from one side of town to the other. Especially not in ten minutes. How...did...we...get...here?"

In typical Luke fashion, he focused on his goal and ignored everything else. "Look, you're soaking wet and freezing. Let's get you comfortable, and then we'll talk."

"Still bossy, I see. Still have to have everything your way."

He just smiled, complacency evident in the curve of his full, sensuous lips. "Come on." He pulled her unresisting and shivering into the master bath.

When he reached up to unzip her gown, she slapped his hand. "I can do that myself, thank you."

"Grrr. I'm just trying to help you."

"Excuse me. Did you just growl at me?"

"You have always been the most frustrating woman I've ever met."

"The feeling's mutual, pal. Well, the frustrating part, not the woman part. No one would confuse you with a woman." She eyed his tall, rangy form with appreciation, suppressing a love-struck sigh. He still got to her, even after all these years with no word from him. No need to further inflate a bloated ego, though. "I have no intention of allowing you to undress me."

"That's not what you said the last time we met." The words slid over her like warm syrup, thick with meaning.

Shit. He'd brought "it" up. He hadn't sounded as arrogant as she might have expected. Was that a fondly reminiscent smile now on those handsome features? Or just her imagination running rampant. Again.

She struggled with the wet zipper. "You are no gentleman to mention a trifling incident that occurred when I was a foolish child of

eighteen. You put me in my place back then. I realized the error of my ways, and I don't want to think about it ever again." Defeated, she presented her back to him so he could undo the clingy, wet dress.

Obliging, he unzipped her. He took the opportunity to run his fingertips lightly down her exposed back, and she started as though he'd zapped her with electricity. "Hey!" She jerked away.

He laughed softly. "So, are you trying to tell me that you consider sneaking into my house, taking off all your clothes, and crawling into my bed to wait for me and seduce me a 'trifling incident'?"

"You are not a nice man," she said on a huff, pulling away from him.

"No, I was *too* nice when I should have followed my heart." Emotion vibrated in his tone, charging the very air around them. He reached into the glass-enclosed shower and turned the water on. The expression on his face when he turned back to her was dead serious. Regretful.

The bottom dropped out of stomach. "What are you talking about?" No stammering, but she couldn't keep the subtle quaver out of her voice, couldn't quite stifle the irrational hope leaping in her. Delicious steam seeped into the room from the shower, and warmth flooded her body from the suggestive images flashing in her head like an x-rated slideshow she was powerless to stop.

"You know what I'm talking about, Merryn." He reached over and ran his palm down her bare arm. "I made a mistake that night when I sent you away. I thought I was being noble, but it was the worst decision I ever made in my entire life. My intentions were good, but I hurt you and it just...wasn't what I wanted—to send you away. I wasn't meant to do that...or rather, what I'm trying to say is that we were meant to be together."

"Oh, my God. You've gone all New Age. Is that where you've been all this time? Off in some commune somewhere? With a harem, no doubt," she added, her tone acidic. He slid those magic hands up to her shoulders and tried to push her loosened gown down. She slapped at his hands again. One shove and the slippery satin would be a pool on the

floor.

He chuckled again. "Merryn, you always did make me laugh. I'm sorry I didn't appreciate that—among other things. No, no commune—with or without the harem. Let's just say I've been somewhere where I was encouraged to see the error of my ways." He cocked his head, his expression curious. "Are you going to get into the shower wearing your dress?"

"Do you think I'd get into the shower naked with you standing there?"

"One can always hope." He smiled at her, his blue gaze searing hers with desire, compassion, and something else... When he leaned into her, she just stood there like a mesmerized rabbit. Her rational brain told her not to let him get too close to her, but her heart wanted him more than anything. Her eyelids fluttered shut as his lips touched hers. Heaven, until she remembered the things he said the last time she was in his house...

She opened her eyes and backed away, glaring at him. "Oh, no. You're not getting me again. You had your chance, and you blew it. I'm not about to be the next notch on your bedpost, especially after you made it so very clear what an inferior notch I would make."

"Notch on my bedpost—do they even still say that?"

She growled at him. "I thought maybe you'd changed, but I can see you're just as rude and critical as ever."

"Did you just growl at me? I am not rude and critical. Everyone else finds me very amiable and pleasant. It's just that you've always had a habit of using expressions that are...a little obscure."

"Yes, I growled at you. You deserved it, and I thought I would return the favor. Only an arrogant ass would assume that because he was not familiar with an expression that it was obscure." Merryn crossed her arms over her chest, holding her gown in place, and paced the length of the room. "Maybe if you hadn't spent so much time screwing illiterate lingerie models, you'd be more familiar with expressions like that." She swung around, interested to see his reaction to that little jab.

A brilliant smile lit his face. "Ah, now we're getting somewhere. You're jealous! Thank God, because we're running out of time."

Irritated, she asked, “Why do you keep babbling about running out of time?” Her eyes widened as she watched him approach from across the room like some great predatory lion stalking its prey. His eyes locked with hers and the gleam in his was pure sex. She swallowed. “What are you doing?”

She held out one arm to ward him off, still holding her dress up with the other, but he pushed her arm to her side and invaded her space. He overwhelmed her senses with his presence, his unique musky, citrus scent, and the very solid masculinity of him surrounding her—the feel of his rock hard chest beneath her palms...

Oh, my God! How did her hands get on his chest?

She looked down in disbelief. Before she could take evasive action, those strong, warm arms wrapped around her like the tentacles of an octopus, one hand reaching up to cup the back of her head. She couldn’t have moved even if she’d wanted to. Hah! As if any force on earth could have persuaded her to move.

She lifted her face to his. Why fight it? No one could be expected to resist this much temptation. She was ready to grab whatever crumbs he was passing out. She lov — No, she couldn’t think it.

His mouth came down on hers, hungry and demanding. With consummate skill, he tempted her to open for him. When she did, he thrust his tongue inside, and she was lost. She knew he would be a fabulous kisser and boy, was he ever. She returned the kiss with abandon, learning and caressing his mouth as he did hers, her hands roving over his muscular back.

His mouth left hers, and he moved to her jaw line, teasing the sensitive nerves with the tip of his tongue, then the sweet spot below her ear and the side of her neck. He nipped at her skin with exquisite delicacy, and then soothed the little bites with teasing licks. She shuddered and moaned. It was everything she’d ever dreamed. He was everything she’d ever dreamed.

Her headache evaporated as though it had never existed. That was strange—the way her pain came and went. Her love-drugged brain tried for a nanosecond to follow that thought to some conclusion, but then gave

up as he claimed her lips.

She was moments from melting in a puddle on the floor when he pushed her away. Blinking up at him, she struggled to form the words to ask why he'd stopped the magic. He smiled, a wicked gleam in his eyes, and reached up to pull the sleeves of her gown forward and down. That was all it took. The slippery fabric slid straight to the floor.

She squeaked as the cool air hit her, heating up in an instant from the flush of desire that raced over her body. She almost giggled at the stunned expression on his face when he realized she was naked underneath. "Oh, you naughty, naughty girl." His voice was thick with desire. "Are you still cold?"

"Ah, no." She was hot, hot, hot. For him.

"Good." He turned off the water and advanced on her. "We'll get to the shower later. Right now, I think I need to spank you for being so naughty—for starters."

Her jaw dropped. Conservative Luke into spanking? Well, the conservative side must have been reserved for her—he did have a wicked rep with the ladies. For once, he was with the right one. She'd bet he was imaginative in the bedroom. *Hmm*. Her body approved of the idea of doing imaginative things with Luke. Oh, yes.

Her breasts swelled, nipples hardening, and her core creamed and fluttered. She wanted him everywhere. The only problem was that *he* was still wearing clothes.

As if he read her mind, he pulled off his tie and tore at his white dress shirt, half ripping it, his gaze still fixed on her body. "God, you're so beautiful."

"So are you." Mouth watering, she drank in the sight of his exquisite, carved masculine torso—each muscle delineated to perfection by a light tan and a faint dusting of hair. She wanted to taste every inch of that beautiful body. Her gaze dropped to the impressive bulge pressing against the front of his suit pants, and she frowned. "Why aren't you taking those damned clothes off?"

He laughed. "Patience, lover." He undid his belt and pants and let them fall to the floor. Her attention locked on his strong, muscled legs,

and she scanned downward—Holy Moly, even the man’s feet were beautiful—and back upward, but a pair of blue boxer briefs concealed the ultimate prize. She frowned again and met his eyes in time to catch him grinning; the tease.

He slid his pants down his thighs and stepped out of them. Then he took off the briefs.

Riveted by the sight, Merryn licked her lips and sank to her knees before him.

“No,” he groaned, holding her away. “Not yet.” He pulled her to her feet and swung her up into his arms. “This is about you.”

She laughed, frustrated. “Put me down. We have time...”

“No, we don’t, Merry. Just twenty-four hours.”

Gone was the bawdy, teasing playboy. Gone was the bickering, one-liner exchanging partner. As she looked into his intense blue gaze, she saw a new seriousness and...desperation. Swallowing, chest tight with emotion, she brought her palm up to caress the stubbled planes of his beloved face. Call her a fool, but she couldn’t stay mad at him. She adored everything about him—the cleft in his chin, the laugh lines fanning out from those mesmerizing eyes, that bold nose that spoke to his character, his strength. But more than anything, she adored him for trying to be a good man, even if it had devastated her all those years ago.

“Let’s not waste a second then.” She smiled at him and tried not to cry. She didn’t understand what was going on, but she could feel that their time together was finite.

He smiled back as he laid her on the bed. He came over her and threaded his fingers through hers as he settled his big, warm body over her. She gasped at the exquisite thrill of the very first contact of their naked bodies. Her eyes fluttered shut, and she savored the brush of his hair-roughened body against her own smooth flesh. Her nipples tightened almost to the point of pain, and she rubbed them against his chest, seeking relief.

He groaned and settled himself between her legs, his erection pressing into her belly as he bent to nuzzle her neck. He released her hands, and she tangled her fingers in his thick hair to hold him as he

nipped at the sensitive pulse point on the side of her neck. Then his mouth sought hers, teasing, thrilling. He licked and nibbled at her lips, his tongue seeking entry. When she parted her lips, he took full advantage—thrusting inside, caressing the sensitive flesh and the roof of her mouth. He kissed his way down her neck and used his moist tongue to circle her breast, seeming to know each spot to stimulate to increase her arousal and anticipation. She thrashed and moaned underneath him, thrusting her neglected nipple toward his mouth.

He laughed, the sound sweet, yet wicked. He was enjoying his game, but took pity on her and suckled the rosy peak. The sublime sensation shot straight to her womb, and she cried out. He treated her other breast to the same delicious torment, and she turned into a mindless creature of erotic sensation, moaning, helpless in her need, and rubbing herself against his hard cock.

He lifted his head and looked into her eyes. “God, Merry, why was I such an idiot?” His hot gaze scanned her body. “You are so sexy, so wonderful, and I’ve wanted you for so long I can’t even remember when the craving first started.” He lowered his head again, skimming her breasts with a trail of butterfly kisses. “You have the most beautiful breasts—the most beautiful everything—I’ve ever seen.” His voice lowered to a rough whisper. “The first time I saw you naked, I almost went crazy.”

“You seemed more than happy to toss me out of your bed that night.”

“It wasn’t easy. It was damn near impossible.” He paused. “But that’s not the first time I saw you naked.”

“What do you mean?” Breathing hard and disoriented with desire, she was having trouble following him while his fingertips stroked up and down her body.

“You were eighteen, and we had that pool party here for Serena. I happened to walk by the window of the pool house bathroom while you were changing. No one else was around yet. I stood there and watched you, and got rock hard. I should have walked away. Hell, I should have felt like a pervert, but I didn’t. Somehow, it seemed like I was the one who

should be watching you. You took off your tight little orange T-shirt first, then your lacy pink bra. I could smell you through the open window — that light, flowery perfume you always wore. You can't imagine how I wanted to cup your perfect breasts in my hands and suck on your nipples." He bent his head and tongued one.

He started caressing her with the tips of his fingers. "Then you took off your shorts, and you had on a matching pink lace thong. You turned away from the window and bent forward a little as you slid the thong down your legs." His questing fingertips found her wet entrance, and he traced it, his touch delicate and sure.

She sucked in a breath and groaned.

"Shall I go on?"

"Yesss." She wiggled, straining for more contact.

"I was disappointed I didn't catch a glimpse of your pussy, but that smooth, rounded ass of yours thrust toward me like an invitation." He slipped a finger inside her, pulling it away as she jerked her hips up, frantic for more. "I wanted to bust in there, bend you over the counter, and fuck you senseless from behind."

She gasped. "I wish you had." He flicked her sensitive clit with his thumb. "Oh, God, I really wish you had."

"So do I," he groaned. A surge of feminine power rushed over her at the heartfelt regret she heard in his tone. He bent again and applied his gifted tongue to her belly and navel. "Do you like that?"

"Oh, yes," she moaned.

"Do you want more?"

"Yes. You know I do."

"Tell me what you want," he demanded.

"I want you to lick me."

He traced the insides of her thighs and the sensitive crease between her legs and belly. "Here?"

Frustrated, she lifted her pelvis toward his mouth. He blew soft puffs of air on her quivering folds. "Tell me, Merryn. I want you to be naughty with me. I can see how wet you are. I can smell your arousal, and I know that you want to be naughty with me."

"I...can't..."

He started to pull away. Well, maybe she could...

She grabbed for him. "I want you to lick my pussy," she blurted, her face hot with the sting of a blush. The devil knew he was embarrassing her. He was clearly enjoying his sexual control and the truth was, she reveled in submitting to him. It was hot, forbidden, to the inexperienced "good girl" still hidden within her psyche, and therefore even more exciting. And she knew she was safe with him. Safe enough to let go. She had always known that—it was one of the reasons she'd fallen in love with him.

He smiled in approval. "Good girl." He bent his head and complied with long, thorough swipes of his tongue, as if savoring her essence. "God, you taste as good as I always knew you would."

He continued, suckling and nibbling on her clitoris. Relentless, he drove her toward her peak, yet would not allow her to crest. Mindless with need, she shifted on the bed, lifting her hips up and opening her legs wider to him. "Please, Luke. Please."

"Shh," he soothed. "I'm going to take care of you, baby." He slid his broad middle finger all the way up inside her as he bent his head to massage her with his tongue.

She gasped, "Oh, Luke..."

He inserted a second finger and sucked gently on her engorged clit. Within an instant, years of frustrated longing exploded in a climax that slammed through her with the force of a freight train, making her convulse with the power of it.

Her heart hammered in her chest, and her muscles had just begun to settle into the lassitude of her release when he rose up over her, spread her legs, and entered her in one smooth stroke. She gasped at the suddenness and completeness of his penetration. He locked his gaze with hers. They were one. At last. She shuddered at the enormity of the pleasure. It was more than mere pleasure though; it felt like a commitment. It felt like forever...

"Okay?" he asked, concern tingeing his passion-roughened voice.

"Oh, yes. More. I want more."

He smiled, though it looked like the effort cost him. "Thank God."

He withdrew then slid into her again—his hard, sleek skin gliding against her wet, silken flesh. She moaned in delight as he thrust harder, faster, deeper until the movement began to push her up on the bed. She lifted up to meet him each time, grinding her pelvis against his. She couldn't be close enough to this man she loved. She wanted to merge with him—become part of him. He paused to lift her legs up and drape them over his shoulders. With this new angle, she could feel his balls slap against her butt as he slammed into her. It was erotic, naughty...*exciting*. He looked like a Greek god to her. Sweat-sheened, harshly hewn muscles flexed as he loved her. A lock of copper-gilded hair fell across his brow. The scent of Luke and of sex surrounded them.

This was the culmination of her every fantasy. Beautiful Luke. Face tense with passion. Between her legs—deep inside her. The pleasure coiled tighter in her belly. Her breathing roughened, and she licked her dry lips.

"Ahh." Every time he entered her, she cried out from the thrill of the intimate impact. She could feel his hot gaze on her. Watching. Measuring her level of arousal even as he took his own pleasure. As much as she craved his erotic domination, she also wanted to drive him to the point of losing that control...

He leaned forward, bracing himself on one arm, and reached between them to rub her clit. "Do you trust me, sweet Merryn? Will you let me do whatever I want to you?"

"Yes. Yes." She'd promise him anything he wanted if would just rub a little harder, thrust a little deeper—bring her that delicious bliss that only he could.

He brought his mouth close to her ear, "I love every part of you, but I have a special fascination with your perfect ass. Before our time is up, I'm going to fuck that sweet ass of yours, baby. You're mine," he whispered darkly, "and you're going to know it before I'm done."

She shuddered, the naughty words driving her over the edge. The intense pleasure broke loose and washed over her. Wave after wave. She cried out, clutching at him—her nails raking his back.

"Yes," he hissed in satisfaction. He braced himself on his hands, thrusting deep twice more before he came within her, shouting as he did so.

They collapsed in a tangle of sweaty limbs and harsh breathing. After a few moments when their hearts had slowed and he had the energy to move, Luke rolled over, pulling her on top of him.

"I love you, Merry," he whispered in her ear, his arms wrapped tight and sure about her.

"I love you, too, Luke. I always have," she muttered as sleep crept in, softening, yet not erasing the knowledge that soon, he would leave her...

Chapter Two

She had no idea how long they slept, but Merryn awoke rising on a crest of arousal. She was on her back with her knees drawn up, Luke's head between her legs. He worked her the way a virtuoso would a priceless musical instrument—with consummate skill and zealous fervor. With relentless lips, tongue and teeth, he stimulated her. Sliding three fingers into her wet sheath, he massaged her to the point of distraction. She thrashed and moaned, leg muscles quivering as she lifted up, seeking more. He looked up and met her eyes. The dark, satisfied gleam she saw there pushed her over the edge, and she cried out in her ecstasy as he continued to lave her until the last quivers of completion died away.

He rose up on his knees. "Turn over."

She reveled in the edge of command in his voice, thrilled to hear it thick with passion for her, but two could play this game. Slow and sensuous, she complied.

"Up on your hands and knees," he commanded, his voice rough.

She rose up on all fours, and her heart kicked up into high gear as he covered her from behind with his big body, his hair-roughened chest brushing against the sleek skin of her back. He kneed her legs farther apart with slow deliberation.

"Tell me what you're thinking," he demanded as he rubbed his rock-hard cock against her wet, tender flesh. With his free hand, he traced the curves of her ass.

She gasped and pushed back against him, frantic for the exquisite

friction only he could provide. Voice breathy with desire, she answered, "I'm thinking of you watching me that day by the pool. I'm wondering what you would have done to me if you could."

He reached around her and cupped her breasts with his big, warm hands, flicking her distended nipples with his thumbs, and she shivered. "Does that turn you on? Knowing that I was watching—thinking of doing things to you, with you?"

"God, yes. You know it does."

"Do you want me to do those things to you?" He ran the side of one hand down the center of her belly and stroked her in random, lazy patterns that raised goose bumps of delight.

"Ah... Yes."

"Do you remember the night I found you naked in my bed?"

She came back to earth from her sensual nirvana with a jarring thud, and pulled away from his hands. "I could never forget that night. It was the most humiliating, devastating night of my life—to put myself out on a limb like that and then to face the fact that you didn't want me."

Luke reached for her and resumed his caresses. "You know that was all a lie. I wanted you all right, more than I wanted to breathe. And I came so, so close to giving in." He nuzzled her neck before nipping hard at the tender skin.

She bucked in surprise and moaned as he ran his tongue over the magic spot, soothing and stimulating at the same time. Intense, pleasurable sensation shot through her like a lightening bolt straight to her core. He turned her face toward his, gave her a deep, thorough kiss. The taste of her own body, and of Luke, infused her mouth.

"Sweet, sweet Merryn," he murmured, his voice dark and enticing. "If you had known the things I wanted to do to you *that* night, you'd have run screaming." He rubbed the head of his cock back and forth across her clit in slow, sensuous strokes.

Tiring of his teasing, she reached back and fit his cock to her entrance. With a vigorous backward thrust of her hips, she impaled herself on him, groaning with the pleasure. "Try me."

It was his turn to gasp in surprise. He recovered quickly, taking

control of their mating once again. "Put your head down on the bed."

She did as he told her. She was so far gone she'd have agreed to anything he suggested. It was all good.

He penetrated her—going careful and deep, until he was seated fully—pausing to allow her to adjust before withdrawing until only the tip of his hard penis remained within. With a driving thrust of his pelvis, he rammed all the way back into her.

She gave a keening cry of excitement. The suddenness and the depth of his entry thrilling her.

"I love those noises you make. Do you know, I used to fantasize about doing this to you, and doing it without a condom especially. I used to dream about getting you pregnant, Merry."

He repeated the motion, varying the rhythm so he kept her off balance. "In my dreams, I'd fuck you again and again in every position imaginable until you were carrying my baby. I even used to imagine what your beautiful body would look like if you conceived my child. You've always made me feel like some kind of a crazed, possessive caveman wanting to mark my territory. A life with you was everything I ever wanted. You need to know that."

She shuddered at the pleasure of what he was doing to her body and the evocative words that mirrored her own secret fantasies. If only... "But, then why...?"

"I was just stupid. I didn't feel I was good enough for you. I'd played around—done things...I was a few years older..." He trailed off, seemingly out of breath, and she suspected, out of foolish excuses he no longer needed.

He worked her until she was just on the verge of coming, then halted—ignoring her distraught protests. He supported himself on one hand and delved between her ass cheeks, seeking her body's forbidden opening, spreading her own copious moisture about to ease the way for his finger.

The stinging stretch made her restive, and she tried to pull back, but he held her firmly in place. "Shh. Do you trust me, love?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to find out what we would have done that night?"

"Yes," she whispered, nearly mindless with a combination of lust and apprehension.

"Then relax. Let it happen. Let me have my way. I won't do anything I don't think you're ready for or that doesn't bring you pleasure. I'm just going to put another finger inside you, and I want you to push back against it as I do. Can you do that for me?"

"I'd do anything for you, Luke. You know that."

"Good girl." He inched the other finger inside slowly.

She whimpered.

"Deep breath. Push back."

She did, accepting the burning pleasure-pain with a moan.

"That's it, baby. You did it." He slid his cock into her slick opening. With his fingers still in her ass, he resumed thrusting into her pussy with a steady, building rhythm.

The sensation of his dual penetration pushed her to her limits. He was everywhere. All around her. Inside her. Throughout her. It was primitive, raw. It felt strange, but so, so good...

Luke groaned, and she knew his own pleasure approached a crescendo. "You're mine. All mine. Forever."

"Yes, forever," she cried, on the cusp of explosive delight.

They strained together, trying to become one—to hold on to each other, their two souls merging in a lightening bolt of pure, white hot pleasure that burst within them, forging an unbreakable bond.

* * * * *

Luke caressed her sleek brown hair as she lay cuddled on his shoulder. A perfect moment—one of many during the last twenty-two hours—for him to remember through eternity.

"Merry..."

"Don't." He couldn't see her expression, but he could hear the tears.

"I have to tell you. We're almost out of time. Ten years ago when

you came to me...I knew almost immediately that I'd screwed up and that I had to make it right. I decided to drive up to see you at school. You know, to beg your forgiveness. Beg you to marry me. I knew I couldn't live without you."

"No. Stop."

"Merry, not speaking of it is not going to change the reality." Guilt ate at him. He'd never wanted to hurt her, but he never seemed to do anything else.

As she tilted her head up, he saw her squeeze her eyes shut—tears of denial trailing down her face. He knew that in her heart, she knew what was coming. She'd always known, but she didn't want the words spoken. That would make it real. He understood. He tightened his arms about her, but he didn't spare her.

"I didn't make it to you. A drunk driver crossed the centerline headed straight toward me. I could have swerved to the right to avoid him, but there was a minivan with a family in it. I had only seconds. I thought if I swerved to the left I could miss him, end up in the grassy median... Well, it didn't work."

He sighed. "The good news is that the family in the minivan survived without a scratch. The bad news is that you spent the next ten years miserable in every aspect of your life. You couldn't move on in your love life because you never got over me. You burned out on the nursing, trying to fix everything to make up for what you couldn't fix with us. And I...was stuck. I couldn't go on to wherever I'm supposed to go until I made things right with you. It wasn't my time to die, yet, and if I hadn't tried to spare the minivan family, I'd have lived. So, Fate gave me this chance. Twenty-four more hours with you to make it up to you and tell you I love you."

She was sitting up now, staring at him, her eyes wild. She sobbed her heartbreak, "I remember now. You died."

"Yes, love."

"This isn't a dream though, is it?"

"No." He could see her struggle with the alien concept and its implications mirrored on her face.

She looked into his eyes, wiping her tears away. "There's more isn't there? I could always tell when you were hiding something from me — trying to protect me. And this Fate character...why would he do this just because you deserve it? People who deserve good things get screwed all the time. Why are you different? Why us?"

In spite of everything, he laughed at her interpretation of Fate. Trust Merryn to break everything down to its lowest common denominator. "Merry, Fate isn't some guy in a white suit, making deals and bargains. I just knew that was the way it would be. In this realm, there's a completely different type of communication — and there are laws. Knowledge is just in your head, and it's sort of like there's a self-seeking balance within the universe. I can't explain it better than that, because I don't understand it all that well myself. It just is."

"So what happens at the end of the twenty-four hours, Luke? What's the catch? There's always a catch."

Oh, yes, there was a catch. A big one. And when she discovered what it was, she would hate him forever. But by God, he was going to have these last hours before he dealt with that. She did have to know the other though...

"Merry, do you remember what happened after the wedding? Do you remember what happened to you right before I got there?"

Her brows knit together. She looked off across the room and brought a hand up to rub absently at the back of her head. "I remember going outside with Serena and Dave. I thought it would be nice to have a photo of us under those beautiful snowy trees on the grounds of the country club. We were laughing and posing for the photographer — just the three of us. There was a bright flash of light and then a loud boom." She squinted as she tried to recall. "Lightening. It struck the tree we were standing under."

She started to breathe faster, her voice rising in agitation. "I heard a crack. The tree was going to go, so I shoved Serena and Dave as hard as I could. Then..." She trailed off, her eyes widening in horror. "I died, didn't I? That's what you didn't want to tell me. That's why my headache went away so suddenly. I never really had one. I just thought I did. We're both

dead. That's why Fate cut us this deal, because we *both* died trying to save other people."

He knew his silence was answer enough. She was so smart; it was only a matter of time before she figured out the rest.

"Luke, what happens at the end of the twenty-four hours?" Her voice rose with unease. "What was the deal? I've got to know."

"If I could convince you that I love you and get you to admit that you love me—if I could make up for the night I rejected you—then...you got to go back."

"What about you?" Her voice vibrated with anger. That wasn't good.

"I move on. Since I succeeded with my quest, there is always the chance that we will be together some day."

"Yes, I guess you did succeed," she admitted bitterly. "What if you hadn't?"

"Then you would've stayed dead, and Fate would have separated us permanently. Sort of a double or nothing kind of deal. Fate is like that. It isn't kind or fair, but there are some laws even Fate must obey. So, here we are."

"Oh, are you trying to tell me you did all this hoping for some grand reunion in the afterlife?"

"I did all this because it was the right thing to do. Because I love you."

"Ah, the end justifies the means, does it?"

Her tone was sarcastic, but he felt a softening of her anger. He looked at her, and he had no clue what to say. She didn't even know the half of it.

At his silence, she dropped her head into her hands. "I knew this was too good to be true."

"It is true, Merry, for now. Some people never get even that much." He reached for her, but she jerked away. "Please, baby, we don't have much time left. Let's not waste it."

She was motionless for a moment, and then she looked up at him. His words had triggered a mercurial mood change. "It's time for *me* to be

in control, Luke. If this is all I get, I'm taking what I want."

The fierceness of her words and her gaze almost scared him, but when she shoved him back down on the bed, he forgot to think. She attacked him like a woman possessed. Kissing him full on the mouth, plunging her tongue inside and then licking every inch of his flesh she could reach. She bit his neck, his shoulder, his belly and, dear God, it was a good thing he was already dead, because if he weren't, he would have expired when she went to work on his cock.

Taking his length into her hands with a firm grasp, she explored him with her tongue—the delicate, wet little point delving into the slit already leaking his pre-cum. He groaned and thrust his hips upward, wanting more, and she didn't disappoint. She circled the flared head repeatedly before moving on to the sensitive underside of his shaft. She shifted her hands to cradle his balls, squeezing in a gentle rhythm. He could hardly bear to lie still, yet couldn't wait to find out what she would do to him next. He squeezed his eyes shut to concentrate on his breathing and fight for control.

He felt her shift and come up on her knees between his legs, and he opened his eyes in time to see her touch herself, coating her fingers in her own cream. He watched, mesmerized, as she bent her head to him again and took his shaft deep within her mouth. She sucked with delicate finesse at first, then with increasing suction as she flicked his own magic spot with the point of her tongue and alternated clamping carefully down on his dick with her sharp little teeth.

He heard raw moans of ecstasy and it took him a minute to realize they were his. He fought to keep from coming. Completion beckoned, but he never wanted the sweet torment to end. It was the shock of his life and nearly his undoing, when that delicate little finger she'd so carefully wet with her own excitement entered his ass, questing, seeking the spot she found and began to massage...

With a roar, he grabbed her and pulled her away from him. "No. Not that way." His lungs working like a bellows, sheer will preventing him from spurting on the sheets, he tossed her back on the bed. She blinked up at him, stunned, but unresisting.

He rolled her onto her stomach and, grabbing two pillows, shoved them under her hips, positioning her ass up in the air. He spread her legs apart and reached between to where she was so wet for him. He gathered the moisture and used it to lubricate her tight, virgin opening. "Do you want me to fuck your ass baby?" He wedged two fingers up inside her with care, preparing her, his body shaking with need and the effort to hold off his own climax.

"Yes." He felt the shudders all through her body as he worked her. She wanted it as much as he did—it was their final sexual frontier and a dark, alluring combination of naughty thrill and ultimate trust. He fit the tip of his cock to her taught entrance and with slow deliberation, forged his way inside.

She gasped at the impossible stretch.

"Shh, baby. It's all right," he soothed, sweat dripping from his forehead. "Just take a deep breath and relax for me, just like you did to take my fingers. You can do it. You *will* do it."

He pushed forward, his motion inexorable and careful. He felt her struggle to take him. He was almost home. Her body shook all around him. "Okay, baby?"

"Yes." Her voice quavered. "Oh, God, don't stop."

A rush of triumph surged through him at the need he heard in her voice, and then he seated himself all the way up her ass. Knowing he couldn't last much longer, he pulled back until the tip of his cock was just within her, then penetrated her again.

At her moans of approval, he began his gentle thrusting. "Play with yourself, baby. I want to see you tease your clit."

She reached up and began to massage the sensitive nub as he increased his pace.

Their groans of delight blended in the silence of the bedroom, punctuated by the sounds of their coupling. Faster and faster he went until the hot rush of pleasure threatened to overwhelm him. He struggled to hold back, determined that this time they would come together. To his intense relief, only moments later he felt the fierce grip of her body signal the onset of her orgasm. With the sound of her keening cries of pleasure

spurring him on he let go, thrusting with frantic intensity and joined her in a perfect simultaneous climax. He collapsed on top of her, both of them too exhausted, too sated, to move for a moment. When he recovered enough, he rolled with her until they rested spoon fashion on their sides.

The dread in his heart supplanted afterglow. There would be no hours cuddled together, sleeping. Their time had drawn to a close. He knew it, and he knew she did, too.

Luke squeezed her tight. "No matter what, promise me you won't forget that I love you." She gave a brief nod, and he knew she was too overcome to speak. He kissed her cheek before getting out of the bed. He had something else to do. Something unpleasant.

Chapter Three

Merryn sniffled, struggling not to cry as Luke left the bed. The whole thing seemed so arbitrary, so unfair. Such a ridiculous chain reaction of mistakes. Where was this balance he'd spoken of? It made no sense. They were the victims of the universe's incompetence, and things were going to remain screwed up. Forever.

The bed dipped, and she lifted her gaze to Luke. He had a letter in his hand. A letter addressed to her—in Serena's hand.

The breath left her lungs in a whoosh. *The balance. Dear God.*

"Take it," he said, infinite sadness limning the beautiful contours of his face.

"No. I won't do it. I won't play this sick game anymore."

"You have to, Merry. You know you do."

She did know. With shaking hands, she reached for the letter, pulling it out of its envelope. The message was short, to the point—typical Serena.

Dear Merryn,

Don't blame Luke. There was nothing he could do, nothing you could have done. Things are as they are meant to be. Dave and I are together, and we are happy. I hope that you will be, too.

All my love,

Serena

Laughter like the tinkle of silver bells filled the room. Serena's laughter. Frantic, Merryn looked about the room but couldn't find the source of the sound. A deep rumble of masculine laughter joined in. *Dave*, thought Merryn.

"Come here, wife," Dave ordered. Then coaxingly, a hint of roguishness coloring the words, "I have something for you..." Merryn could hear Serena's answering giggle, then all was silent.

She looked to Luke for an explanation, but, mute, he just stared at her, sadness reflected in his gaze. She reached for him, but couldn't touch

him. He faded before her eyes, his image evaporating. She cried out, trying to hold onto him, to keep him with her, but he just slipped through her fingers like the mist over a lake at dawn...

* * * * *

The first sensation to penetrate her foggy brain was the cold. Not just a dry, tolerable chill, but a wet, bone-freezing, miserable cold. It seeped from her back, no doubt because she was lying in snow, and crept all throughout her body. She had no idea what she was doing flat on her back on the ground staring up at a canopy of snow-covered trees, but it couldn't be good.

"How many fingers am I holding up, ma'am?" The concerned face of an EMT loomed over her. The digits in question wavered and multiplied, finally settling at three.

"Three," she ventured.

That must have been the correct answer, as it seemed to satisfy him. "Can you tell me your name?"

"Merryn Porter."

Bingo. He nodded in approval. "You were very lucky. According to witnesses, it was just a small branch that struck you, but you're going to have a bad headache for a while, and you've got a few scratches that need treatment. You really need to be transported to the hospital for a full evaluation, just to be on the safe side."

She shuddered at the thought of spending hours in the ER. "Uh, no thanks. I'm an RN. I can handle a little minor wound care. Since I'm sure I don't have a concussion, I think I'll be more comfortable with bed and an ice pack."

"Do you have anyone that can stay with you? If not, we could always transport you to the ER. Our protocol..."

She understood he was doing his job, but she also knew that Fate hadn't sent her back to die of head trauma. She was intact, health wise, at least. No doubt about that. Finally, she snapped, "Look. I understand. I'm refusing treatment. I'll sign whatever you need me to. I just need to be

alone.”

He nodded again and then hesitated, looking at her in sympathy. “Do you remember what happened?”

She squinted, struggling to focus past the headache. “I remember the wedding. We came out here to take a few last pictures in the snow...” She jerked around to face him. “My friends, Serena and Dave, they were with me. There was a loud boom, then a crack and...” She looked at him, horrified.

His sad, dark eyes communicated the tragedy before he spoke. “I’m sorry. Your friends didn’t make it. Lightning struck the pine tree you were standing under. It was top-heavy from the snow, and it came down right on top of them.”

She closed her eyes, the sting of tears forcing them shut. She swallowed, trying to rationalize, rearrange the facts, make them have some different meaning—some different outcome, but it didn’t work.

“If it helps, it looks like they didn’t suffer.” He closed his first aid kit and clasped her arm. “Do you feel like you can stand up? I need to be sure you can get around on your own before I leave.”

“Yes, I think so,” she said. Her beautiful friends...*gone*. On the happiest day of their lives. How could that be? Memories of the last twenty-four hours filtered in. Luke. This was his fault. And he had made her a party to it. Unreasoning anger simmered in her gut. She held out her hand to the young paramedic. “I’d like to try standing now, please.”

Once she was upright, she fought to stay that way. The landscape spun for a moment like a full speed merry-go-round, then she exerted her considerable will and managed to stand firm. That was the moment it dawned on her. The photos had been her idea. Her chest felt like an elephant sat on it. Her idea.

“Merryn, dear.”

Merryn looked up at the sound of her name. The quavery voice belonged to Luke and Serena’s silver-haired Aunt Ellen. She’d been like a surrogate aunt to Merryn through the years. Tears streaked her parchment-white, wrinkled face, and she held out her arms to Merryn as she approached. She walked into those welcoming arms, clutching at

Aunt Ellen's comforting girth, and sobbed with grief at this first show of empathy. They held each other and cried for some minutes.

"Oh, Aunt Ellen. I'm so sorry. It was all my fault. I should never have suggested we go outside."

"Merryn, dear, is your head quite all right? Are you sure you don't have a concussion? You're not making sense."

"What do you mean?"

"Honey, Serena and Dave were the ones who insisted on those pictures outside. We all tried to talk them out of it. You in particular. You went on and on about a neighbor who always told you how top-heavy pine trees were, and how they tended to snap." She pulled a handkerchief out of the beaded evening bag still looped over her wrist and blotted at her face. "I'm afraid they were so happy and excited they teased you for thinking it might be dangerous."

One less thing on her conscience. This time. Fate's idea of mercy, she supposed. But there was no getting around the fact that she should be the one lying dead in the snow. She'd played right along with Luke and the dirty little deal he'd made with Fate, and this was the cost. He knew that when he made sure she fulfilled her end of the requirements. Everything had a cost. There was a price for everything—one way or another.

"Come with me, child. Why don't you stay with Herbert and me? You shouldn't be alone."

She looked up into the kind eyes of Luke's only relative. "Thank you, Aunt Ellen, but I just want to go to my hotel. I...*need* to be alone."

She nodded, seeming to understand. "Herbert and I will drive you, dear." She took her arm and led her away to find Uncle Herbert.

Chapter Four

Merryn awoke with a start from her recurrent nightmare. Weak sunlight filtered into the hotel room around the lined draperies. The TV droned into the silence—yet another soap opera—and the low whine of the wall heater permeated her groggy brain as the unit struggled to keep the winter chill at bay. She sat up, muscles protesting even two weeks after the accident. Two weeks after her interlude with Luke. Funny, she still imagined a twinge of soreness in places that could only be explained by sexual intimacy. A phantom remembrance of a love affair that never happened. She should have gone home instead of hanging around here—waiting in vain for the unimaginable events to transmute themselves into a more bearable reality.

The whole thing had felt, tasted, smelled, *seemed* so real. *He* had seemed so real. Of course, even if it *had* happened—physical bodies had not been involved. The more she thought about it, the more conflicted she became. She couldn't decide if she wanted the whole thing to be real. If it *had* happened, Luke had tricked her, and she was, at least in part, responsible for what happened to Serena and Dave. It also meant that Fate moved them all about like pieces on a chessboard—free will was an illusion. Scary thought.

If it had *not* happened...well, then she hadn't had that glorious moment with the love of her life, she would never know how he truly felt about her, and she was in need of extensive psychiatric help.

She stared at her anonymous pastel environs. The faint odor of air

freshener hit her nostrils. She couldn't keep holing up in here, ordering room service, and watching bad daytime TV. That wouldn't solve anything, and she was due back to her dreaded hospital job in Atlanta. If nothing else, this had taught her that life is short. She was going to have to make some serious career changes—find a situation where she could realize her potential to help people.

Maybe the frustration and stress of her job contributed to this little “breakdown.” An ugly word, but a spade was a spade. This was more than grief over her friends—though that would have been enough. More even than the continued grief over Luke, and she knew she would never get over that. This was about her own dysfunctional life.

She was going to go into therapy as soon as she got home, but first she had a pilgrimage to make. She had to find a way to say good-bye. A way to apologize to Serena and Dave, and to Luke. She'd blamed him all these years for not loving her, then for leaving her. Now, for lying to her during their glorious imaginary reunion and making her culpable for Serena and Dave's loss. All of which was not fair to him, since the whole thing had been nothing more than a delusion.

To be honest, if she had the chance for more time with him, she would do the same. Do anything. Tell any lie. Anything.

Today was Luke's birthday, an ironic but fitting day to make amends and to say good-bye. She threw back the covers and got out of bed to head to the shower.

* * * * *

Merryn climbed the gentle slope of the small cemetery tucked between the picturesque white-columned church and the lakeside park. It was a beautiful, peaceful place, even in the chill of winter and surrounded by barren trees. Snow yet again dusted the landscape. It hadn't snowed in years and now, twice in two weeks. Funny how it softened the sharp angles and harsh colors of winter, giving the impression of renewal—a clean slate for the world, and yet it was such a painful reminder.

The weak, bluish light of the overcast day illuminated the marble

headstones festooned with floral offerings. The odd plastic poinsettia and miniature Christmas tree marked the holiday just past. She clutched the huge bunch of fragrant roses and lilies to her chest, and her steps slowed with reluctance as she approached reality.

There they all were. Side by side. Dave and Serena together on the left. Luke and his parents sharing a headstone on the right. Perhaps that was some comfort to them. It wasn't to her. It just magnified the enormity of her loss.

She sank to her knees in the brown, snow-dusted Bermuda grass between the plots, shuddering at the sight of the twin, fresh mounds of dirt where the newlyweds now lay. Obscene; that's what it was. She lovingly placed the lilies and all but one of the roses on their graves. The tears came in a slow, steady stream as she cried for them for the first time. Her best friend since childhood and her best bud from college—soul mates. That's what they were. She knew that as sure as she knew her own name.

"Wherever you are, I know you guys are together. Sometimes I think the only thing I did right in my entire life was to bring you together." She wiped the tears away, but they just kept flowing. "I am so sorry if I'm responsible in any way for what happened. You should have had a long, happy life together—kids, the whole thing. If I could trade places with you, I would. I don't seem to have that option though, and I guess, as horrible as it seems to me, this was meant to be. The same way you two were meant to be. I want you to know how much I love you, and to thank you for being such good friends to me." Merryn reached over and traced the names carved into the stone.

"Good-bye dear ones," she whispered and dried her tears with a crumpled tissue scavenged from her coat pocket.

Still on her knees, she pivoted toward the grave Luke shared with his parents. The dates on the headstone reminded her that Luke had been a young man—only eighteen when his parents died, leaving him to raise his younger sister. It couldn't have been easy to be responsible for a pre-teen girl and trying to build a business at such a young age, but he'd done it. Bickering aside, he'd been a good friend to her, too. And so much

more...

She traced his carved name with a forefinger. "Ah, Luke. Always trying so hard to do the right thing. You were such a good man. Not perfect, but good." She smiled to herself at that thought. "I'm sorry I was angry at you for not telling me about Serena and Dave. You know what? As much as I love you, I think I'd have done the same thing. Anyway, I've come to realize it wouldn't have made any difference. Fate had its own games to play with us, and I know now that you did what you did out of love, as you always have. I love you, Luke." She placed the single red rose on Luke's grave with care and laughed through her tears. "However, I do not apologize for any bitchy comments I made about your other women. I still think they were not anywhere near good enough for you."

She lowered her head, thinking to say a prayer. The prickling down her spine and the short hairs at the nape of her neck standing on end were the first signs she was not alone.

"I couldn't agree more," came the deep, resonant voice from behind her, the syllables edged with warm humor.

She looked back at the marker and felt her world tilt. Little by little, Luke's name was fading from view. She went down on all fours, dropping her head to get past the dizziness.

She should turn around. She wanted to turn around, but she couldn't. It was as though ice encased her—leaving her stuck there on the frozen ground on her knees. The breath came in and out of her lungs painful and shallow, too fast to supply enough oxygen and each inhalation brought the scent of her mourning rose.

"Merryn, turn around and look at me, sweetheart."

"No. I can't." Dear God. How could she face this? Was he still dead—a ghost? How could she go through that again?

"You can."

"Goddamn you. I can't do this again. How many times can I lose you?" Her heart was on the verge of splintering into a thousand shard-like fragments, and she didn't even care. If she got really lucky, it would kill her.

"You're not going to lose me ever again, Merryn. Something about

what you said or did bought me—bought us—a second chance. Well, technically a third chance.” His footsteps crunched on the frosty ground, closing the distance between them. “Come and touch me. You’ll see that I’m real,” he coaxed.

Her sharp bark of bitter laughter rent the stillness. “Touch you? That wouldn’t prove a thing. I did that before, remember? Everything about those hours with you felt real but it was all a lie. We were both dead. We had no bodies, Luke. It was a giant hallucination.”

“No, it was real to us, for us, and that’s all that counts.”

“Is it? I don’t think so. So what if you are real? How do you know Fate won’t decide to make you fade to black again? You don’t. I don’t.” She wept in earnest this time and flinched as his body brushed her back.

“Merry, I love you. I always have loved you, and I always will. Fate plays its games. We can’t stop that, but I swear to you I’m alive.” He grasped her by the arms and raised her to her feet. “Please, look at me.” Gentle entreaty colored his voice.

Her resolve cracked. Sobbing, she turned to face him. He looked beautiful. Different from the last time, his hair a little shaggy and sprinkled with snowflakes, blue eyes so vibrant with emotion. She looked down at his clothes—jeans, a sweater, boots, all topped by a leather jacket. Not the suit. The suit they’d buried him in. She lifted a shaking hand to his rugged face. Hope coursed through her, and the tears stopped. “Luke, I love you, too. I always have, and I always will.”

The tension left his face, and he smiled at her. Bending down, he pressed his lips to hers, sweet and gentle at first, savoring the privilege they’d both thought lost to them forever—then in an ever-increasing passionate fervor. She slid her hands inside the warmth of his jacket, reaching around to his back and drawing him against her with all her strength as if to bodily keep him with her forever.

“Shh. Merry,” he comforted as he kissed away the tears she wasn’t even aware of shedding. “Everything’s going to be all right. We’ve got another chance.” He reached down and clasped her butt, drawing her tight up against him to reassure her with the pressure of his body. She brought her arms up around him and threaded her hands in his hair as he

kissed her eyes, her face, her neck and then the shell of her ear. He teased it with his tongue, and his whispered words shivered on a bolt of pure sensation that shot through her very being. "Marry me, Merryn. Stay with me forever."

What other answer could she give when Fate laid her heart's desire at her feet? "You'd better believe it. You are not getting away from me again. Ever."

He threw back his head, laughing aloud. "That's my Merryn."

"Luke." She clutched his sleeves. "Just promise me we won't ever forget how lucky we were, that there is nothing in this world more important than being together."

He looked into her eyes, the shadows of years of remembered pain still upon his face. "I promise." He sealed it with a loving kiss, lips and tongue possessing, declaring without words his solemn vow. At length, he lifted his head, breaking the kiss. "Let's go home."

Her heart caught, and a little thrill zinged through her belly at the look in his eyes. "Yes," she said as he took her arm and began to lead her down the hill.

She hadn't gone a dozen steps when a strange buzzing filled her head. She stumbled and would have fallen if Luke hadn't caught her.

"You okay?"

"Oh, yeah. Just these new shoes." She didn't want to admit the truth to Luke, but she had totally blanked for a moment. She couldn't remember going to the cemetery. It was his birthday, she was sure of that much, and they'd had a terrible fight at lunch yesterday, beyond that, she was a bit fuzzy. Finally getting the proposal of her dreams from Luke must have scrambled her brains.

"We'll have to take your car."

"Sure, did you get a ride here?" she asked.

His forehead wrinkled in puzzlement. "I guess I must have. I can't remember. I think I've been working too hard these days. I'm feeling so out of it."

"To tell you the truth, I'm a little blurry-brained, too. Probably from shock." She grinned. "And yes, you do work too hard."

Suddenly he came to a dead stop, turning to look back up at his parents' grave.

"What is it?"

"I don't know. I just had a funny feeling. A good funny, like something good has happened. My mom always called that a 'leap of fate,' when you'd done something right—followed the path you were supposed to take to achieve your potential." He laughed and pulled her close. "Must have something to do with you."

She smiled. "Well, I hope so. I've been chasing you long enough." She looked back up at the grave, but couldn't see anything unusual. The flowers she'd put on his parents' grave were as she'd left them just before he arrived.

"Who do you suppose bought that plot next to my parents?" he mused.

"I've no idea. It's weird though. There's a headstone, but there must not be anyone buried there. It's blank and the ground in front of it looks undisturbed. We can always ask at the office if you're concerned."

He shrugged and grinned down at her. "No. I'm sure it's not important. I guess I was just curious. Besides, I want to get you home. I have plans for you, my dear. Lots of plans." He leered playfully at her and tugged her hand, pulling her toward the parking lot.

She laughed, her heart full of love. "I hope so."

The End

Author Bio

Antonia Pearce has been writing for five years and has completed numerous short stories and several romantic novellas. She is currently hard at work on another erotic romantic suspense novella with paranormal elements and a paranormal, medieval-inspired mainstream fiction novel.

She has worked in healthcare and also spent several years in the entertainment industry in Los Angeles. She has been a personal assistant to a jewelry and accessory designer, a sales assistant at a security alarm company and a retail salesperson at a designer shoe boutique—where she discovered that shoes were one of the finer things in life. Her diverse career history has given her plenty of story ideas for her books and the opportunity to meet many interesting real-life characters!

Antonia loves to hear from her readers. Visit her Web site: www.antoniapearceromance.com or email her at: antonia@antoniapearceromance.com