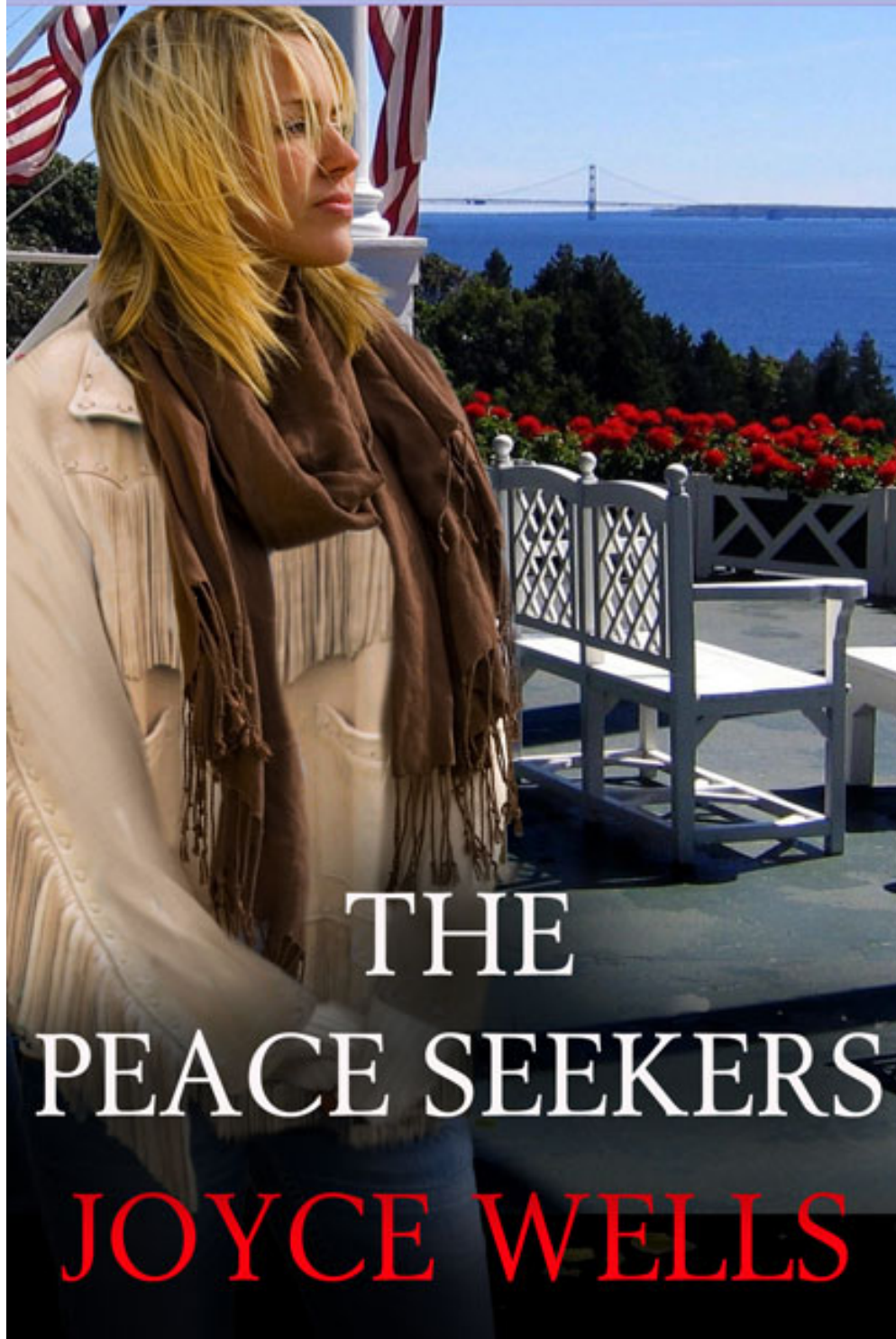


The LOTUS CIRCLE



THE  
PEACE SEEKERS

JOYCE WELLS

A The Lotus Circle Publication



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The Peace Seekers

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# *THE PEACE SEEKERS*

Joyce Wells

*Dedication*

To my angel, Ben, who watches each tentative step  
Checks my aura for signs of distress  
Guides with touch or nudge.  
His presence betrayed by the feel on my cheek  
Of warmth of his breath, stubble of beard  
By white feather floating on the wind.

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*Trademarks Acknowledgment*

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Caterpillar: Caterpillar Tractor Company

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Library Journal: Reed Elsevier Properties, Inc.

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Thermos: American Thermos Bottle Company

## Prologue

The pungent smoke burned Eudora's throat and made her want to cough but she held back. Charles had said silence was necessary. She doubted if anyone could hear them on this dirt trail in these god-forsaken Northern woods but her husband was adamant about being quiet. Now he seemed to be leading them straight into a forest fire.

If she weren't so angry she'd be afraid. But her resentment had chased all the anxiety from her mind and she trudged along behind him with her emotions wrapped in a red cloud of rage. She hadn't expected this sort of life when she married Charles. She knew he had "duties", as he called them. She hadn't foreseen that those duties would consume their entire lives. Perhaps those obligations wouldn't seem so all-important if she had conceived a child of her own to love, a child to give her life focus.

This morning Charles had been irritable and worried. When he noticed the smoke billowing into the sky he insisted they abandon the pickup truck and continue on foot—

"Uh!" She crashed into his back and clutched his shoulders to keep herself from falling.

"Eudora, watch where you're going," Charles whispered.

"I didn't see you stop," she whispered back. She held on to him and her anger faded as he turned and took her in his arms.

He gave her a look that showed he was sorry for his outburst and then signaled her to follow him off the path and into the woods.

As her anger melted she felt the undertone of fear that had been with her since she first smelled the smoke. With that apprehension, her bladder contracted. She bit her lip, hoping they would reach the settlement soon. All this trekking through the woods was tiring. She wished she had stayed at their horse farm downstate in Metamora and let Charles come on this trip alone, but then she remembered she'd wanted to see little Cassie again. She was such a sweet child, and with her own childlessness...

She pulled up short when Charles stopped again. He shook his head at her daydreaming then smiled and motioned her to crouch behind some low bushes while he went on ahead. As soon as Charles had crawled a few yards, Eudora started after him on her hands and knees. Bears were thick in these woods, and she hated having a man control every single detail of her life.

The smoke grew thicker as she followed Charles. She took the scarf that was tied around her neck and held it over her nose. Then she heard the fire crackling, heard wood falling just beyond the next rise.

When she crawled to the top of the rise and lay down beside Charles she felt the fire's heat on her face. She cried out, "Oh God, it can't be." Not the people under Charles' care. Not the Peace Seekers! Not their homestead.

Her breath caught in a gasp followed by a spasm of harsh coughing. With the roar of the fire, silence no longer mattered.

Two young couples had come to this remote part of the state to establish a new colony. Their hopes had been high then, but now the homestead that had housed them was burning to its foundation. Only the beams of its roof and its stout corner supports remained standing. As she watched, one split in the middle and fell into the fire with a fountain of sparks that rose high into the air.

Through the smoke at the far side of the clearing, several men wearing camouflage and carrying automatic rifles systematically entered the outbuildings that ringed the homestead. One of them splashed liquid from a can on a shed and ignited it. The small outbuilding burst into flames.

Eudora moaned and pushed her head against Charles' shoulder. He wrapped his arms around her and held her close and comforted her. Minutes later, when she raised her head and once more looked out across the clearing, the men had disappeared.

Charles moved his lips against her ear. "We need to hide."

Scared and shaking, she followed him into thicker brush. The woods that had seemed so threatening a few moments earlier now provided a sense of security. Charles went back a few yards to check their trail and Eudora hid beneath a thick stand of spreading sumac.

When Charles rejoined her she whispered, "Is everyone gone?"

The tortured look on his face made a lie of his indifferent shrug.

"What do we do now?" she asked.

"We wait."

She sank to the ground and covered her face with her hands. Even in the after-heat of the fire she shivered with a cold that filled her body to its center. Her hands and feet were like ice and she couldn't even cry. She could only sit and wait and shiver.

After what seemed like an interminable wait Charles motioned for her to follow him and they started down the hill toward the blackened buildings.

"I'm scared," she gasped, trying to match his quick pace. "I'm afraid of what we'll find."

The smell of burning wood and other unidentified harsh scents strengthened as they neared the cabins.

"Careful," Charles said. "It's still hot here."

"I can't believe this. How could people do this?" Her legs gave way, sending her to the ground beside a young apple tree whose leaves were scorched by fire. Dazed, she sank in a heap against the tree trunk while Charles went off to examine the disaster.

"We'll need shovels to bury the dead," he said on returning.

"Is everyone gone, killed?" She whispered the question.

He nodded.

Pain tightened her chest. "Not little Cassie."

He shook his head. "I don't know. I couldn't tell. She was so small that..." His voice trailed off.

Charles hadn't finished the thought but Eudora's anguished mind filled in the gaps. *Her little body was too small to find without a painstaking search.*

She grimaced at the hurt she felt. Cassie. The precious child who had helped ease the loss of not having children of their own.

"Charles, we can't bury them without calling the authorities." She had never before seen her husband at a loss. He seemed stunned, more shocked than she. "They'll want to investigate the fire, the deaths."

"You're right." He sat down on the ground beside her and buried his face in his arms. "I need to think."

She sat back on her haunches. As she waited the extent of the tragedy overwhelmed her and she moaned with the pain.

"Eudora. Shh. Eudora." Charles awkwardly tried to comfort her.

She gripped her hands tightly over her mouth and concentrated on controlling the sobs that shook her.

From far off she heard a faint wailing that sounded like a baby animal. She lifted her head and gave the cry her complete attention. Her gaze locked with Charles' as they tried to understand what they were hearing.

Finally, with a shriek, she stumbled to her feet and ran toward the stream that lay beyond the clearing. "Cassie! Cassie!"

## Chapter One

Twenty-nine years later in a bedroom in a farmhouse in central Ohio, Cassie sat with a spiral notebook for a journal and grief for a companion and wrote down an account of the events of the past few months. *It was important, she had been told, to keep her mind occupied. Do not dwell on the past.* Yet how else but from the past could she learn from her mistakes?

She owed her friends and co-workers an explanation for her disappearance from their lives. Nonetheless Cassie wrote her story with no thought of anyone reading it. The writing helped maintain her sanity. She hardly knew where to begin. Until that day last June when Nathan Chambray entered her life she had followed a routine of rising early and exercising for half an hour before getting ready for work as a reference librarian at Northfield Public Library.

Until last June she hadn't missed a day due to sickness in the five years she worked at the library. Then she had taken a few personal days to spend a long weekend on Mackinac Island with Aunt Eudora, really her adoptive mother, but that story would wait until later. She had never returned to the library.

On that day in June, when she parked her red sports car at the Mackinac Island ferry dock, she'd had no idea that her life would change irrevocably. She *was* aware of a recurring premonition that something dreadful was going to happen.

That premonition was part of the troubling psychic ability that had kept her emotions on edge most of her life. This same psychic *talent*, if one chose to call it that, kept her watchful, guarded and isolated in her attempt to hide the upsetting things she felt and saw in visions. She remembered times as a child when Aunt Eudora had admonished her for seeing and hearing things that weren't there.

"That is forbidden, Cassie. Stop your dreaming and pay attention to reality," Eudora would say. Cassie recalled the disappointment she'd felt as a young child that this new game she had discovered, the calling of friends and visions to her without effort, was not permitted. Often the memories of these times felt so vague she wondered if she had dreamed they had happened. At those times she would gather her powers and concentrate until she viewed a lovely garden or heard her birth mother's melodic voice. Then with a smug yet excited feeling, she convinced herself that she still possessed those extraordinary powers.

And the other instances she experienced of remembering the past or seeing the future, those too had happened, although reluctance or fear kept her from experimenting too often. Aunt Eudora had been extremely anxious over Cassie's attempts at clairvoyance and clairaudience, but when she made small attempts at telekinesis, well, Eudora had been thoroughly traumatized. And after everything was



considered, acting as sane and normal as the rest of the people around her seemed the safest and, no doubt, the best way for Cassie to live.

However on that day in June on the dock waiting for the ferry to Mackinac Island, Cassie experienced the same repeating premonition of danger again.

*Reality faded and she was once again among the throng of guests enjoying Aunt Eudora's garden party. When Eudora screamed Cassie, along with guests and catering staff, rushed toward the windblown bluff that overlooked the cold waters of the Straits of Mackinac.*

*A man waited at the bluff's edge. "She's fallen," he said with a look of concern. "Help is coming."*

*He reached out a hand toward her and then his gaze captured Cassie's. In that moment she knew he was in some way connected to Aunt Eudora's fall.*

On the ferry pier a gust of cool wind blew across her face and the premonition vanished. The garden party vanished. Eudora hadn't screamed. No one had been injured. A stranger had not beckoned. Only the exposed concrete pier existed. The dream was gone.

Cassie shivered and gathered her fringed suede jacket close around her, guarding against the sharp Northern wind that blew off the water. Would she ever get used to these flashes, these glimpses of other realities? Did anyone ever become accustomed to seeing things before they happened?

To ease her thoughts she drew a deep breath and glanced across the pier. A single shaft of light pierced the overcast sky and captured in its brilliance a man standing apart from a group of people awaiting the ferry. Sunlight illuminated his face and something about him, aside from his spare frame and his clean-cut features, sent her pulse racing.

And then she understood her reaction. His resemblance to the man in her premonition was so strong she found herself wanting to run away. As if he could read Cassie's thoughts the man looked her way, reached out a hand and took a hesitant step toward her.

Panic ran through her. She crossed her arms protectively over her breasts, feeling the jacket's smooth suede beneath her trembling fingers. The attraction between them was so strong she could do nothing but stare back at him. For some reason, perhaps from the look on his face, she thought he might have something important to say to her and she *wanted* to speak to him despite her fears.

He resembled the man from the premonition but she knew that wasn't possible. Her brief daydream, or light trance, had produced a fantasy not reality.

Then how did she know him? She lived quietly and didn't socialize much except for a few friends, colleagues and people who used the library. Aside from lecturing at book groups and attending booksellers' conferences, she simply did not go out very often.

As a child in school she had been set apart by her psychic abilities. The other children at first made fun of her talents but then shunned her when they became frightened by the strange things she did and saw. Uncle Charles and Aunt Eudora told

her to ignore her classmates and find enjoyment in things she could do alone, such as reading, writing, swimming and doing crafts.

Now, at twenty-nine, she faced the man of her premonition, a man staring steadily into her soul. A group of vacationers moved toward the ferry and broke the connection between them. Relieved, Cassie shook her head to clear her mind then grabbed her luggage and hurried toward the comparative safety of the waiting catamaran. It would take her to Mackinac Island where she would spend a busy weekend helping her aunt entertain Michigan's political bigwigs.

As she stood in line to board the ferry, she tasted the engine's diesel exhaust on her tongue and frowned at its oily scent. She handed the man her ticket and her large duffel bag and then climbed the catamaran's metal steps to the enclosed second deck. Once inside she sank into a plum-colored upholstered seat at the front of the cabin, close to the captain who stood at the boat's controls.

She thought of the man on the pier and the unspoken connection that had passed between them then closed her eyes and took a deep breath as she tried to calm herself. Conquering the urge to run away from him had taken all her willpower. That disturbed her. She had trained herself to be a controlled professional woman and she had let her emotions overcome her good judgment.

By the ripple of excitement that ran through the people seated in the cabin and the rising of the small hairs on her arms she sensed the precise moment he entered. Any calm she had been feeling vanished when she saw that the man of the premonition was traveling with Seth Hawthorne, the candidate for Michigan's vacant United States Senate seat.

Spellbound, she watched the men and their entourage make their way toward a row of empty seats across the aisle. Hawthorne campaigned his way through the cabin. He stopped at each person and introduced himself, flashed his famous smile and shook hands with anyone he could reach. The man of her premonition followed closely behind.

In a matter of seconds they would reach her row. As it had on the pier her heart rate accelerated. She closed her eyes and relaxed, trying to meditate but dismissing the task as impossible.

She dug a *Library Journal* from the backpack that served as her purse and held the magazine in her lap. At least she had something to hold. She leafed through the magazine, stopping to glance at an article about Mark Twain's life while ignoring the approaching men.

Her mind worked hard, trying to place the man with Hawthorne, the man who had caught her attention. She knew him from *somewhere*, was certain of it, but how and why did he have this effect on her?

She was turning the thought over in her mind, trying to make sense of it, when a man's voice asked, "Is this seat taken?"

She gave an involuntary jump then smiled. "It's empty."

"Thanks." The mysterious man slid into the seat next to hers. He gave no sign of being aware of their prolonged eye contact on the pier, gave no sign of being affected by it in any way.

She on the other hand tingled from head to toe and felt a strong tug in the pit of her stomach near her bellybutton. Perplexed by this strange reaction to a stranger, she lowered her glance and flipped a magazine page then flipped another. By sheer self-discipline she forced herself to read two paragraphs before glancing his way again, hoping for a chance to study him.

With a sideways glance she could see his eyes were deep blue. His hair, blown every which way by the wind, was sun-touched to a streaked blond. His distinctive, gritty voice sounded cultured yet his words were casual as he kept up a conversation with those of his group who sat opposite him.

She listened while he discussed plans for the evening with the people he sat near. His nose and cheeks were touched with the beginning of a summer's tan and a tiny scar lay beside the sweep of dark lashes. The small hint of a wound kept him from perfection.

He turned and caught her staring then smiled. Overwhelmed, she looked away.

"Is this your first trip to the island?" he asked. He spoke as if to a shy child he didn't want to scare.

She swallowed and found her voice. "No, I come here often." Even to herself she sounded breathless.

Summers growing up on the island had taught her it was a gathering place for the political crowd. As a member of Seth Hawthorne's group this man was must be familiar with the area, but she wanted to hear his voice again.

"Are you staying long?" she asked.

"I'm Seth Hawthorne's campaign manager. We're here for the political conference at the Grand Hotel." His friendly smile didn't quite hide his piercing look. A question lay just beneath its surface.

"I noticed the candidate." She glanced at the group surrounding the politician.

"Can't miss him, can you?" He didn't wait for an answer. "I'd forgotten how cold Northern Michigan could be in June." He rubbed his arms as if he missed his jacket. He was dressed for warmer weather in a knit yellow golf shirt and khaki pants.

As he talked her heartbeat slowed and her muscles relaxed their tight grip.

He continued warming himself. "That's a sharp north wind out there."

"It'll be nicer on the island." She felt a desire to please him, an odd feeling that increased her wariness. After several failed relationships she had given up wanting to please any man.

"The high bluffs keep the wind from town," she added, sticking to the safe topic of weather. She was dying to ask, *who are you?*

"We've been at a pig roast," he said.

"Pigs?" She couldn't help smiling.

"We were campaigning. Us, I mean, not the pigs."

"Sounds like fun."

He grinned. "We do what's necessary to get elected."

"I guess that's politics." Two blasts of the ferry's whistle drowned her words. The ship swayed as it left the dock and fought the current before entering the channel. The wind had roughened the gray water but the twin-hulled catamaran gained speed and Cassie smiled as the boat raced easily across the choppy straits, sending towers of spray splashing against the windshield.

"I saw you on the pier," he said.

"Yes." One word was all she could manage. The memory of the forewarning had returned with another small tug at the pit of her stomach.

His eyes narrowed as if he sensed a change in her attitude. "Are you staying overnight?"

She nodded, knowing what he meant. Most of the catamaran passengers would be day visitors. "I'm here for a long weekend, four days."

"Our group is at the Grand Hotel tonight."

And from what Eudora had said on the phone, tomorrow night he and Seth Hawthorne, as special guests, would stay at her house. She knew she should introduce herself as Cassandra West, niece of his hostess at Saturday's reception. But she didn't, and the corners of her mouth turned up thinking about his surprise when they met again at tomorrow's garden party.

"The Grand Hotel is a lovely old resort," she said, forgetting about introducing herself. She wanted to fill the silence that had fallen between them.

Even from this distance the white wooden hotel, a millionaires' retreat for over a hundred years, dominated the island's west bluff. West Cottage, the lovely old Victorian cottage where Aunt Eudora summered, was one of many homes built in the nineteenth century for the Midwest's emerging upper class.

"And where are you staying?" His voice softened with interest.

He wasn't going to discuss the island's attractions. She should tell him her name.

Without giving her time to answer, he said, "I'm curious, that's all." He leaned toward her as though they were conspirators in a plot.

If it were a plot, it might be interesting to see how long it would take him to guess her identity. She couldn't keep her imagination from running wild. Even the most staid librarian had one or two excesses, and a runaway imagination was one of hers.

"I'm at my aunt's cottage on the west bluff. It's a big old house—" She started to explain who she was but he interrupted before she could continue.

"You're lucky." He leaned toward her and his face was so close to hers she could feel his breath warm on her ear.

She pulled back. "I am? I'm lucky?"

"Yes, and so is she."

"My aunt?"

"Take my word for it. She's lucky to have you."

He looked straight at her and she stared at him with surprise. It had never occurred to her that she might be an asset in any way, but she did help Eudora at times. A pulse started beating in her neck. Pinned by the force of his gaze, her world slipped sideways. She felt as if she was falling, and in the process her thoughts were communicating directly with his.

"Nate," someone called from across the aisle.

Cassie blinked her eyes and straightened. She needed to control her imagination.

The man, Nate—at least now she knew his name—looked at her with an expression that suggested he wanted to say more. Instead he shook his head as if he also had felt the connection between them and turned his attention across the aisle to the woman who had called out his name.

Disappointed, Cassie glanced down at the magazine in her lap. The print ran together. Certainly this mist couldn't be tears.

Near the opposite windows sat a happy couple, honeymooners, she guessed. They whispered and laughed, probably at things only lovers find amusing. Cassie had discouraged romance in her own life for so long she didn't even envy their closeness. Her heart and feelings were locked in a cold protective void. A safe void.

At the edge of her consciousness she was aware of Nate's conversation about a campaign dinner. She gazed out the catamaran's tinted windows at the five-mile suspension bridge that connected Michigan's Lower Peninsula with its upper half.

The bridge had enough legends of adventure and misfortune to occupy anyone's mind but her rebellious thoughts returned time and time again to the man beside her. She glanced his way, met his eyes once and then broke the contact when his campaign conversation resumed.

She vowed to ignore him at least until the boat docked. The honeymooning couple were a distraction. Perhaps her parents had taken this same ferry ride when they were newlyweds. She would never know. She felt keenly the loss of not knowing her biological parents. According to Uncle Charles and Aunt Eudora, when Cassie was a baby her parents had died in a cabin fire in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. They might have been as much in love as these honeymooners.

She wondered for at least the ten thousandth time if she resembled her birth mother. Had her mother had the same unruly silver-blond hair that set Cassie apart from the rest of the ferry's passengers? Or the same psychic talents?

In the past, when pressed for answers about Cassie's natural parents, Eudora had taken on a shuttered look. She would say, "Charles and I were hiking in the woods

when we came upon a burned-out cabin. We heard your cries and found you hidden in a box near a stream. That was how you came to live with us.”

Although the story had all the makings of a fairy tale, Eudora stuck to it. Reluctant to upset her aunt, who was more a grandmother’s age than a mother’s, Cassie still longed to know the source of these special powers and why she possessed them. This weekend might appear to be an ordinary trip, a repetition of many others, but it concealed a hidden motive.

This weekend she planned to have the truth from the woman who had brought her up as her own. She wouldn’t leave the island without learning where and how Aunt Eudora and Uncle Charles, who had died fifteen years ago, had adopted her.

Cassie knew she was headstrong and independent. Eudora had labeled her that from childhood. Yet until now she had been far too careless in seeking out the truth of her identity. Frustrated by the absence of adoption records and the dead ends she had run into on the Internet, she had let the mystery go on for too long. Eudora knew the truth, Cassie was certain, and she would have it before this weekend was over.

Dramatic. Eudora called Cassie that also. She drew a deep breath and thought about what preparations were necessary for the coming weekend. The mental activity along with the ferry’s gentle rocking soothed her and she nearly forgot the man at her side. When they pulled into the harbor after the sixteen-minute ride she stretched, ready to disembark, ready for the island’s slower pace.

“I’d like to see you again,” he said.

Nate. Just thinking his name brought a ripple of pleasure, a ridiculous sense of intimacy. “I’m sure we’ll meet someplace,” she lifted her eyebrows, “somewhere in time.” Dramatic, Eudora would surely have said.

“A movie by that name was filmed on the island.”

She laughed. “Christopher Reeve, wasn’t it?”

She could see his mind churning behind his questioning frown. She stuck out her hand. “I’m sorry. I need to introduce myself. I’m Cassandra West, Eudora’s daughter. And we *will* meet again, tomorrow at the garden reception at West Cottage.”

His eyes widened for the briefest moment. “But you said you were visiting your aunt.”

“It’s a long story. I was adopted and...” She shrugged. “It’s really not important.”

“I had wondered when Seth said Eudora had a daughter, I thought perhaps I would meet you.” He folded her hand in his larger one and held it captive. “I’m Nathan Chambray.” He smiled. “As you probably know since Seth and I will be your guests tomorrow.”

His gaze held hers again. She shivered. If this war between attraction and anxiety continued she would be a mess by the end of the weekend. Why did such a fascinating man seem so ominous? She shivered again.

"I would have introduced myself sooner," she said, "but you were busy with your friends..." Her voice trailed away into nothing. She eased her hand from his but he gripped her elbow as if he couldn't bear to let it go. Her heart raced in panic or delight or a curious mixture of both, she couldn't tell which.

"I'm glad we're going to get together tomorrow." He squeezed her arm lightly. "We have a lot to talk about."

His possessive touch bothered her and put her on guard. She didn't like to be controlled and her thoughts turned to Uncle Charles who, when she'd been young, had monitored her every move and nearly every thought.

"I wish you'd said who you were, Cassandra. I've been trying to figure you out the entire ride from the mainland."

She managed to pull away. He'd been thinking about her also. All the while he'd been talking with the people he was traveling with and pretending not to notice her, he'd been thinking about her. Their meeting *was* something special. Perhaps Nate was going to be someone special in her life. She stiffened. She had given up daydreaming about relationships. *Don't start this now.*

And there was the premonition. She didn't want to be close to this man, not in any way.

Flushed despite the cool air entering from the open doorway, she grabbed her backpack and turned away from him. She followed the crowd down the metal steps to the rear deck where luggage was stacked in untidy piles. With each step she was aware of Nate following closely, so near she could sense his energy against her back.

"I still can't believe it's you," he said in a hushed tone close to her ear. "We need to talk. If you had said who you —"

"I didn't want to interrupt your conversation." She was edgy, almost angered by his intensity.

"You're more important than a conversation." He bent forward to look into her face. "You're someone I've —"

"Nate." Seth Hawthorne interrupted them.

Nate grasped her arm and turned her around. "You must meet Seth."

And there he was, the Big Man, the one she had fantasized about meeting. The candidate. His charisma hit her with the force of a brick wall.

She stuck out her hand. "Cassandra West." Hawthorne's brilliant campaign smile nearly blinded her.

He gripped her hand professionally, as he had probably been taught. Not too tight, not too limp. "A pleasure," he said in a husky voice.

She gave him a bright smile. "We'll meet tomorrow at the reception. I'm looking forward to it."

Another smile, then he turned. "Let's catch the hotel's carriage, Nate."

"We'll talk tomorrow, Cassandra," Nate said.

“Yes.” She nodded. “We’ll all talk then, all of us. Fine. I’ll look forward to it.” She was doing some serious babbling.

The intent expression on Nate’s face bothered her. Why had learning her identity affected him this strongly? His manner had an intensity that spoke of strong feelings beneath his unruffled surface.

She turned away. The pier was crowded with tourists, luggage and horse-drawn drays, a necessity on the automobile-free island. She was aware of Nate following, crowding next to her, his arm and shoulder brushing hers, shadowing her as if he didn’t want to let her go. Apprehension filled her.

As she had done since childhood when overwhelmed by her senses, she dropped an imaginary curtain over her feelings, much like bringing down the curtain on a stage production. Thus protected, she ignored Nate’s hovering.

She signaled a surrey driver, who stowed her larger duffel bag under his seat. With her gaze held straight ahead, her arms pressed against her sides, hands tightly clasped in her lap, she refused to turn for a last look at the man whose presence had raised the hairs at the back of her neck.



## Chapter Two

“All aboard!” With a slap of the reins and a shrill whistle, the driver urged his team of sturdy horses forward among the bicycles and horse-drawn carriages crowding Main Street. The island’s familiar scents of cooked fudge and heated horseflesh signaled home to Cassie and echoed early childhood memories of Eudora’s horse farm downstate in Metamora.

Exhilarated as she always was when returning to this summer hideaway, she put her doubts aside and enjoyed the swaying carriage ride through the center of town. She couldn’t keep her thoughts from the two men she’d met on the ferry. She had anticipated meeting Seth Hawthorne this weekend, and had actually had romantic fantasies about him.

However, it was Nate who fascinated her. She would have to be careful not to let her feelings run wild. She, at best, would be on a list of available women he met wherever the senate campaign took him.

She contemplated the fate of ending up a political “groupie” if she allowed this Nate Chambray free rein with her feelings. It was a strange thought for her. A one-night stand. Something she had never done. She cringed at her lack of experience. Still, in the absence of any kind of a love life the thought of a short, torrid affair with Nate wasn’t unattractive.

Would she say yes if he asked? And if she did, what would they be like together? *Oh Cassie, keep your mind on business.* A man showed the least bit of interest in her and she daydreamed about falling into his bed. Daydreams were better than nothing.

The surrey followed a line of carriages pulled by straining horses up the hill toward the Grand Hotel. Soon her journey would be over.

At last the driver swung the surrey, its fringe dancing wildly, into a left turn away from the island golf course and onto the lane past the Grand’s driveway. The hotel’s long wooden porch was lined with rocking chairs where guests lounged as they looked out over the Mackinac Straits.

On the road beyond the hotel stood venerable Victorian cottages, shoulder-to-shoulder on the bluff. One of them was Eudora’s. Cassie was acquainted with many of the owners from her summers spent on the island. Most of them would be at the garden party tomorrow.

She hoped Eudora had made arrangements for the media that was sure to follow Hawthorne to the island. Had she hired extra security? Cassie smiled at her thoughts. She had already slipped into her party assistant mode of thinking.

Eudora, when inviting her, had said the cottage would be filled with guests and Cassie's help would be appreciated. Working with Aunt Eudora wasn't a chore and a weekend on Mackinac Island for the price of the tank of gas needed to get her there was a real bargain.

Satisfied to be near the end of her journey, she settled back and listened to the sound of the matched team clip-clopping up the asphalt lane.

When they stopped at West Cottage's white picket fence, she retrieved her duffel, tipped the driver and headed along the flagstone walk with a rush of anticipation. In this grand old Queen Anne-style house, under its turrets and peaked roof, were the answers to her past.

Cassie would hostess the reception for the senatorial candidate tomorrow. Seth Hawthorne. The name rolled through her mind with sweetness that equaled the richest Mackinac Island fudge. But she reminded herself, meeting celebrities wasn't her reason for visiting the island resort set in the frosty waters at the top of Michigan's mitten-shaped Lower Peninsula.

This weekend she would wrestle once more with Eudora's silence about Cassie's fog-shrouded past and the psychic powers that set her apart from the average person. She wanted, no, she *needed* the truth.

*Eudora was the key to everything.*

She couldn't wait to see Eudora again. She seized her duffel and mentally set her jaw. She loved her adoptive parent but it was time to get tough. If determination counted, this weekend would bring answers.

At the screen door she hesitated. "Eudora, I'm here." She pulled the door open and entered the house that had been her summer residence until she started working in Troy. "Eudora?" Her voice echoed in the shadowy back hall. The sound of the waxed hardwood floor squeaking under her rubber-soled shoes brought a flood of memories.

Here in this cottage Eudora had told a younger Cassie that most people felt special at some time in their lives. Most had something that made them different from others. She said these attributes—whether physical abilities or musical or artistic talents or a facility with numbers—these talents made life's darker moments bearable.

Cassandra's talents, Eudora had said, were different. They needed concealment for fear that they'd be ridiculed or worse. "You're different and not everyone will appreciate your gifts," she'd said. "Choose your friends wisely."

The sound of footsteps interrupted Cassie's memories. A bronze-skinned woman with a wide face, stoic dark eyes and straight black hair pinned back from her face had entered the hallway and stood watching her. A flowered jumpsuit ended below her knees and her worn shoes turned over at the edges.

Startled, Cassie stood stiffly, her fists clenched. "I'm Cassie. I'm here for the weekend."

Surprise left the woman's face. She visibly relaxed but her gaze remained sharp and judgmental while she studied the fringed jacket and unruly hair held back by a

feathered hairband. Cassie touched the feathers of her hairband. Apparently they struck a primal nerve in the woman.

"I'm Sarah Lightfoot. Mrs. West's expecting you." She jerked her thumb toward the front of the house. "She's on the veranda." She shuffled down the hallway.

Suddenly nervous about facing Eudora, who fussed about appearances, Cassie slipped off her jacket and went to work with brush and comb. Looking into a crackled wall mirror hanging in the entrance hall, she plaited wind-tossed hair into a single thick braid. When finished it hung between her shoulders with a reassuring weight.

With hope that she would pass inspection, she headed toward the veranda and then hesitated at the sliding glass doors before stepping out onto the long curved porch. When remodeling the cottage Eudora had installed the glass as a concession to contemporary living. She regretted spoiling the house's authentic Victorian lines but Cassie didn't. The glass allowed a breathtaking view of the Mackinac Straits, a view well worth the loss of authenticity.

Beyond the veranda the lawn was bordered with ferns and mosses, violets and rough grasses leading to a steep bluff that fell to the lakeshore below. Clinging to the bluff's top and side was a tangled mass of wild shrubs and pines. At the horizon, the straits glittered as a sea of brilliant jewels sparkling in the late afternoon sun.

Clad in a pink wrapper, Eudora sat at a round wicker table and stared at a handful of papers. She looked up with a little jump when Cassie stepped onto the veranda then shuffled the papers into a manila folder.

"Cassie!" Eudora's use of the nickname betrayed her honest pleasure.

Affection welled up in Cassie as they embraced. She brushed wispy hair from Eudora's forehead and kissed her tissue-thin skin. "Hi, Auntie," Cassie said, using the fond greeting of her childhood.

"Cassandra, *dear*," Eudora said with more emotion than Cassie expected. Still her adopted mother extended her hand formally.

Taking Eudora's hand, Cassie smiled at the quick change. Under the formality their relationship remained loving. As the years passed, and especially after Uncle Charles died, Eudora had changed from a warm, loving mother figure to a reserved matriarch. Understanding Eudora's need for control, Cassie treated her with the fond respect due a treasured elder.

"I'm glad you're here, Cassandra. There's so much to do with a hundred guests invited to the reception tomorrow and then twenty for dinner on Sunday."

Among those guests would be Nate and Hawthorne. The thought brought a smile to Cassie's face. "That sounds like a busy schedule. I thought Hawthorne was coming to the island for a rest."

A haughty eyebrow rose. "He's coming to rest his *voice*. Candidates must never seem tired. Fatigue is a fatal flaw on the campaign trail. And yes, his group is transferring here from the Grand Hotel tomorrow."

Nate and she would sleep under the same roof. *Stop it!*

Eudora hesitated as if sensing a mystery in the air. Then the moment passed. Her lids lowered as if she were assessing her plans. "Seth's advisers will need several rooms. You can use their suite tonight."

*Nate again.* Tonight she might sleep in the same bed that he would sleep in the following night.

"Then would you mind sleeping on the living room daybed tomorrow night as usual when the house is full?"

"Not at all." She was so pleased to be on the island again she would be comfortable anywhere.

Eudora continued, "The Mackenzies and Burtons arrive tomorrow morning. We'll put them in the rooms at the head of the stairs."

Cassie forced her thoughts from Nate and back to the party but her agitation must have shown in her expression.

Eudora stared as if seeing her for the first time. Their hands touched and with the contact the stiff façade slipped from her lined face. She became the warm mother of childhood.

"I *am* glad you're here, Cassie dear."

On impulse Cassie leaned over and hugged Eudora. Hidden by her wrapper, Eudora's frailty was revealed by Cassie's careful touch. Frightened by its implication, she murmured, "I love you, Auntie."

Eudora relaxed. "Why thank you, dear. You know how much I love you."

Cassie, basking in a warm glow, sat back in the wicker club chair. Their embrace had affirmed their affection. Perhaps it would make what she had to say more palatable.

"We need to have a serious talk this weekend."

Across the table, Eudora sighed and tapped a finger on the tabletop.

"Please make time for me," Cassie continued. "Learning more about my history and myself is way past due."

Eudora sighed. "And you think I can tell you?"

"You know more than you've said."

Eudora's lips formed a thin line. She stared across the choppy blue straits.

Cassie covered the thin gnarled hand with hers. "You know how grateful I am that you adopted me when my parents died."

Eudora shrugged. "We were delighted to have you."

The hint of moisture in Eudora's eyes surprised Cassie. "I have no memory of my birth parents. I need to know more. I really *need* to know."

Eudora leaned forward. "Has something happened?" The catch in her voice brought goose bumps to Cassie's arms.

An image of Nate leapt into her mind and she pushed it away. She had to stay focused, had to give a compelling reason to reopen the old argument.

"I've had a dream."

Eudora's lids flickered.

All the well-planned sentences vanished. She couldn't confess she had foreseen Eudora's death. It was Cassie's highest card, the one that might win the hand, yet it was too cruel.

"You might call it a premonition," she said cautiously. "I'm convinced something terrible is going to happen."

Eudora contemplated the announcement with less emotion than anticipated. "Perhaps you're right." She shook her head. "Perhaps." A blank look settled over her face.

"Don't shut me out, Eudora. Tell me about my past. Let me face whatever it is and deal with it."

Again the watery eyes assessed the request. "Not tonight, Cassandra. Let me think on it."

*Think on it! She'd had a lifetime.* Cassie bit back the rebellious response. "This weekend, Eudora. It's necessary."

"Sunday then, after everyone has left." With an obvious return to good cheer, she patted Cassie's hand affectionately. "Come Sunday we'll have our talk. I can't think about anything else before then except the party."

If the premonition were true Sunday could be too late but it was the best Cassie could do. Eudora had never been this close before to admitting what she knew of the past.

They sat in comfortable silence, two women whose separation sometimes months at a time didn't diminish their closeness, two lives linked by seeming random fate yet each attuned to the other's nuances.

Eudora pushed the manila folder across the table. "Here, you're good at parties. See to the details for me."

Cassie sighed. Her *organizational* magic impressed Eudora to no end.

"You're very efficient, Cassandra."

"Yes, I know. So I'm told. I guess I'm the proverbial family spinster," she answered dryly. *An unpaid, unmarried female relative straight from a gothic novel.* "You know, I'm starting to believe I'm one of those family skeletons kept in the attic and only occasionally brought out to lend a hand."

"Cassandra! What a Victorian thought. You're spending far too much time reading novels."

She smiled. "That's part of my job as a librarian. Truthfully I'm glad to help, as you well know. And we'll have our talk on Sunday but for now I'll take a look at your party plans." She opened the manila folder. "Catering invoices." She flipped through the papers. "Florist bills, musician contracts. You've thought of everything but security."

"Seth travels with his own bodyguard."

*Nate?* No, he hadn't acted as if he were guarding Seth. He had been too casual, too laid-back for a bodyguard. Too interested in her?

"And the state police are sending two men to keep an eye on the crowd," Eudora added.

"I suppose they can send for reinforcements if needed."

Eudora's high laugh floated on the late afternoon breeze. "Reinforcements, Cassandra? It's only a garden party."

"True. What about media coverage?"

"None. The party is very private. For Seth's personal supporters only."

Insiders. She smiled at Eudora's pride. Okay. Everyone needed something to be proud of. Widowed and childless except for Cassie, Eudora loved dabbling in politics. *We all have our vanities.* Cassie thought of her weaknesses, innocent as they were. Memorizing Shakespearean plays for the mental exercise did little to serve the good of mankind.

"All I need to do is oversee the actual event," Cassie said. "The party will be no problem."

Eudora leaned back in her chair. "Have you eaten?"

"No, and my stomach's feeling hollow. In my rush to get here I didn't stop."

"Good. We'll eat together."

Cassie restrained a smile. For a while she had made a dent in Eudora's stance as matriarch. Now Eudora was returning to the more familiar role of gracious benefactor.

"I'll fix something for us." Cassie started to rise.

"Nonsense. It's the girl's job."

"The *girl* must be all of fifty." Cassie lowered her voice. "She's new, isn't she? What happened to the Taylors?"

"They wrote saying they were moving out of state and asked me to mail a check for past services."

"And Sarah? How did you find her?"

"A friend's recommendation." Eudora rose determinedly. "We'll eat now." Once Eudora had her mind on something she rarely deviated from her course.

In the kitchen the woman Cassie had met in the back hall handed her plates of sandwiches and salads to carry out to the veranda table. She followed Cassie with iced tea with wedges of fragrant lemon. Finished with the serving, Sarah stood watching with folded arms, a sullen expression on her face.

Cassie met her dark stare once and then looked away, annoyed at letting the maid's scrutiny bother her. She felt relieved when she heard Sarah's footsteps heading toward the kitchen.

"Did you have a comfortable drive north?"

She started to tell about seeing Hawthorne's group and Nate but something held her back. "The car ran beautifully. Everything went fine except..."

Eudora stopped eating. "What is it, Cassandra?"

"Nothing."

Her reply had been too tentative. Eudora took the bit in her teeth like the thoroughbred she was.

"Something's happened. You could never fool me."

Under her inquisition Cassie felt like a teenager again. "I saw Hawthorne and his party on the ferry, that's all."

Eudora's gaze pinned her to the chair. "What happened?"

"Nothing, except I thought I knew one of them. A man."

Eudora's expressive eyebrows rose. "A man?" Thin lips turned up at the corners, watery eyes twinkled.

"Not a man in *that* way." Affection for Eudora washed over her. "He was just a man I thought I'd met before, but I hadn't." A faint flush warmed her cheeks.

Eudora smiled. "I've waited a long time for you to meet someone. Someone suitable. What did you think of Seth?"

"Hawthorne? Surely you don't think he'd be interested in me?" Cassie shrugged, wishing Eudora would stop pushing marriage. "Still, he seemed nice enough, but you know the problem with men and me."

"It can be worked out if you try. Charles and I had hoped for something like this for you. You are special."

"Please." Cassie drew a breath and held it until she could speak without showing her annoyance. "If Hawthorne is successful at being elected to the senate, he could be headed for the White House. You know I don't have the personality for political life."

"You can do whatever you want, Cassandra. With your education, your intelligence, your aura..." She gave a little laugh. "You would be the perfect partner for Seth."

"Is that why you invited me this weekend?" She didn't want to believe it. She hoped she was wanted for herself.

"Of course not, dear. It's just a mother's scheming. Perhaps a mother's dream." She patted Cassie's hand. "Let it go. Don't give it another thought."

As if she could after that revelation. Nevertheless she made the effort.

"The meal was delicious," Cassie said with genuine pleasure after they'd eaten. "If you don't mind, I'll clear the table and go for a walk for some exercise after the drive."

"As you wish. Please make yourself at home." Eudora stood. "I'm going to turn in early in preparation for the party tomorrow." She disappeared into the house, leaving Cassie at the table.

She leaned back in the wicker chair and stared after Eudora. In updating the house, a first floor master suite had been added. Eudora spent most of her time there, writing letters, reading or just plain resting. Relieved at avoiding a rehash of the lack of her success in finding a suitable husband, Cassie carried the dishes to the kitchen.

When Sarah refused her offer to help with cleanup, Cassie put on sunglasses, useful against the setting sun's glare, and headed across the lawn. Underfoot, the grass gave off its own peculiar odor that became more pervasive as she trod the poorly cleared path through luxuriant ferns and ivy.

At the bluff she ducked under a rotting rail fence meant to keep unwary visitors from harm and then picked her way down some little-used steps. Partly earthen, partly disintegrating wood, the steps wound through scraggly pines and dense undergrowth down the steep bluff toward the water.

Halfway down a low pine bough partly blocked her way. She touched its rough peeling bark, inhaled its piney scent and listened to birds call a warning of her presence. Attuned with nature, she felt relaxed at last.

Far below, the asphalt lane followed the shoreline. She had to hurry to make it down and back before night fell. She imagined herself protected in a glowing cocoon of golden light. The mental imagery helped her step lightly down the rotting steps past the overhanging shrubbery.

Wanting to keep the hidden steps a secret from others, she waited until a lone bicycle rider passed down the lane before moving from behind the underbrush. At the water's edge she experienced a moment of disquiet as though she were being watched, then knelt, cupped her hands and splashed icy water on her face. Its sting dampened her concern.

She suddenly missed the father she had called Uncle Charles. He had acted as her protector in a few incidents with other children in school. That was before she'd learned to conceal her psychic abilities. She often saw things the other children didn't. Charles had warned her of the danger in being too different. He said if her powers were



discovered, someone – he was never specific about who – might not want her to use her talents.

As a child she absorbed what he said without thinking. As she matured she continued questioning him until he said there were forces of darkness, powerful people, and he was vague about them – some foreign governments, certain terrorist groups that hated the U.S., a powerful cartel that wanted higher oil profits, arms dealers and manufacturers – people from all walks of life and from all countries who opposed peace and endangered those who worked to achieve it. Peace was repulsive to these evil forces. She hadn't liked Charles talking that way and turned her back on the idea, burying it deep within her unconscious mind. What did any of that have to do with her life as a teenager?

He had died while she was still in high school so any other questions went unanswered. Eudora had been too shocked by his death, too vulnerable to be questioned. Later she had assumed her façade as matriarch and found excuses to evade questions.

Cassie found most personal relationships difficult but especially those with men. She was tired of living with the worry of not knowing whether they would reject her, as had happened several times when they learned of her psychic abilities, or whether they were interested in her as some sort of bizarre novelty. In high school she had been labeled *weird*. At the university she kept her abilities to herself.

Waves lapped soothingly on the rocky beach. She had always believed the choice for good or evil lay within. She could use the psychic powers as she chose. Although she couldn't tell her own future, she often was troubled by what she foretold for others, so much so that she mentally blocked her visions, except when caught off guard. The premonitions were some of those times.

Eudora had said she should think about marrying Seth Hawthorne. As a psychic she might be a private asset to him, but at the same time she certainly would be a public liability to the man. In Eudora's desire to see her settled she must have overlooked that problem, or maybe she just didn't want to acknowledge Cassie's powers.

Another dilemma was the mystery about Cassie's past. The wife of a U.S. Senator, and especially the president, should have a discernable past that could stand up to intense scrutiny. The media surely would want to do some investigating. Eudora had spoken of Cassie's parents dying in a remote forest fire. Like Moses, she had been found in a box near a stream. Had the fire been set intentionally? Had her mother tried to save her by hiding her?

Frustrated, she picked up a stone and tossed it into the gentle waves. Anxiety tugged at the pit of her stomach with the thought of the premonition of Eudora's death. With Eudora gone Cassie would be truly alone. Perhaps that was why Eudora wanted to find a mate for her.

She picked up another stone, examined it, and this time with energy fueled by pent-up frustration she sent it skipping far across the lapping waves toward the horizon. She

smiled at her childish display of kinetic energy and then looked around, embarrassed that someone might have seen her.

Satisfied she was alone, she studied the sky. The lingering twilight had turned to purple and the moon had not yet risen in the sky. Climbing the mossy steps of the bluff was always more difficult than descending. It would be harder than usual in the dark.

On the way up she stopped once to rest.

Finally at the top of the steps, she ducked under the fence railing and strode toward West Cottage, following the path through the fern banks as best as she could in the dark.

Once she reached the veranda she sank into a wicker chair and listened to the pulse pounding in her ears while facing once more the source of her discontent. For years she had told herself that her purpose in life, her true destiny whatever it was, wife, mother, career librarian, awaited her in the future. At twenty-nine and quickly closing in on thirty, life stretched ahead of her bleakly. She faced empty, unchanging days, weeks even years at the library, her hopes and dreams fading to nothing.

Her few friends and her involvement as a literacy volunteer plus the time she spent working out at the gym no longer filled the void in her life. She needed someone special to confide in. But no one shared her innermost secret. The few friends she'd told had dismissed her as too eccentric.

A door closed nearby. She walked to the corner of the veranda where it wrapped around the house and leaned over the railing to see around the corner. Sarah Lightfoot, holding a bag in each arm, moved out of the shadows at the back deck.

Intrigued, Cassie watched her walk to the lane where two men took the bags. That amount of food, if the bags were filled with food, would feed a good-sized family. As Sarah walked away with the men she cast a look back in Cassie's direction.

Although the night was dark with no moon, she felt exposed. As soon as the trio was out of sight she entered the house and locked it and then checked the elaborate alarm system, which showed all doors securely closed.

The island's residents rarely worried about crime but Eudora always set the alarm. Alone here, with no overnight servants, it probably gave her a sense of security.

The main guest suite was Cassie's for this night only. Uncle Charles' hand in its decorating showed in the dark green and beige and in the heavy oak furniture. A grotesque clay mask had been hung on the wall since her last visit. It resembled pictures she'd seen of a shaman's mask. Sarah Lightfoot's work?

She once more reined in her imagination and carefully lifted the mask off its hook then placed it under a desk that stood in front of a wide window. Out of sight the mask lost its power.

She had brought a Susan Howatch novel from the library. After a shower she would settle into bed with two plump pillows behind her back and have a luxurious read about strong-willed men full of energy with psychic backgrounds. It was still early and she needed less sleep than most people did. If sleep came too soon she would

prowl the house at three or four in the morning. Better to keep to others' schedules. It made for less explaining. Late night hours were for reading, writing letters and old movies.

With the book open, she reminded herself to read at a leisurely *human* speed. *No*. She mustn't think of herself as odd. She was normal. This constant sense of self-doubt had to cease. Sunday evening, after everyone left, she would confront Eudora.

## Chapter Three

Up before anyone else, Cassie shut down the alarm system and set off for a walk in the dim pre-dawn light. On this misty morning she chose the back lane, forsaking the bluff's difficult descent. Halfway down the lane she paused and bent to pick up a sturdy stick, part of a dead branch that lay to one side of the lane. As she walked she swung the stick in rhythm to her step. The weight in her hand bolstered her courage, something she hadn't realized was lacking until she picked it up.

She sensed his approach before she saw him. While walking up a hill in the pale light she felt the hair on her arms rise and she sensed someone approaching from beyond the hill. She heard a peculiar snuffling sound that came from the other side. She knew then why she had picked up the wood.

In the eerie half-light she recognized the man walking over the hill toward her. Her skin tingled with a buzz of excitement and she peered into the mist, wondering why her stomach clamored a warning.

The sight or smell of her must have excited the dog walking beside him. Before its master could restrain it the animal dashed forward. Its enthusiastic welcome marked it as a friendly puppy, regardless of its large size.

"Spot!" the man called.

She would have recognized Nate's gritty voice anywhere. But *Spot*? Grinning, she bent down to greet the puppy.

"Watch yourself, he jumps."

His warning came too late. Spot placed his enormous front paws on her shoulders and bathed her chin and ears with a wet tongue. The dog whined grievously when, having received a brief washing, Cassie set his legs on the ground.

"I see you like dogs."

Still reeling from the brief spell of precognition, she returned Nate's smile while her stomach fell as if in an elevator. Spot raced toward him and, despite admonitions, muddied Nate's pants.

"He's awfully big. What kind is he?"

"He's a spotted Great Dane."

"A Great Dane? With spots?" She shook her head in disbelief.

"I'm sorry he jumped on you," he said, reaching toward her hair. "Hold still. There's a leaf in your hair that I want to..."

In anticipation of Nate's touch, Cassie stood quietly and let him lift the piece of debris from her braid. His scent was earthy, smelling of morning dew and dog. When he touched her she was aware for the first time of a remnant of memory, of some far past time, just a flash of recognition. It was as if she had lived her entire lifetime in anticipation of just such a moment.

To find space to breathe, she bent and rubbed the prancing puppy's head. "Wherever did you find him?"

"He's the governor's. When I couldn't sleep this morning I picked him up for a walk."

"Of course, you would know the governor."

"Well, yes. It's no big thing." He peered down at her.

She was determined not to be taken in by this friend of Seth Hawthorne's. He undoubtedly made a living out of charming people, especially susceptible female voters. She gave him a neutral smile.

She said, "I need to get my walk in before party preparations move into full swing."

"I suppose you do. I thought, maybe, running into you this way, we could walk together a while."

"Uh no, I'm on my way back, you see." In a nervous gesture, she swept a few straggling wisps of hair off her face.

"Sure. Well, I'll see you at the party."

Before she knew it her hand was captured in his warm grasp, and she tingled as if an electrical charge had passed between them. *Cassie, get that wild imagination under control.* Yet she knew something unusual existed between them.

"Dawn's breaking," he said with a nod toward the east.

"My favorite time of day."

"Why did I already know that?"

"You did?" Their eyes met fully for the first time. The impact hit her with such force she was stunned.

"You prowl around half the night too, don't you?"

"Sometimes." Uneasy with her physical reaction, she edged away. This man was a threat to her hard-won self-assurance.

"I saw you on the beach last night."

Her neck hair rose. Here was the threat she had sensed last night, the sense of being watched that she had felt while at the water's edge. In last night's careful scan of the beach she had missed him.

"I watched you skipping stones." He waited for an answer. When none came he asked, "Was that you?"

She wanted to know what he had seen. With her agitation she couldn't sense any of his thoughts. "I was there," she admitted. "Where were you?"

"On a bicycle."

She'd thought the bicycle had passed around a curve before she left the shelter of the brush. Maybe she had the sequence mixed up or maybe he had turned back to watch her. "I saw a bike but it was too dark to see much else."

"You surprised me, standing on the shore in the dusk."

"I'm out most nights. Is that a surprise?" She kicked at a stone with the toe of her walking shoe.

"It was unusual, that's all, running into you after we'd met on the ferry, considering the crowd on the island."

Something about the flat, inoffensive tone of his voice alerted her. He was trying too hard to put her at ease. Her guard came up. "I need to get going. Enjoy your walk." She was anxious to escape his probing eyes and to quiet the fine tremors his presence created in her legs, but she felt as if an invisible cord attached her to him.

He didn't move. He stood studying her.

She drew a breath of relief when Spot scampered up, apparently back from a survey of someone's yard. "You should watch him." Her anxiety changed into irritability. "You might lose him." She disliked her blaming tone but had difficulty controlling her reactions to this man.

"The governor wouldn't like that," he said with a generous smile.

"Of course, the governor, forgot about him for a moment." In the dawn's pink light she realized once more that he was enormously attractive. His sandy hair curled around his face. The stubble of overnight beard gave him a shadowy look. Against its darkness his teeth flashed white in a wide smile.

She met his gaze again. He had probably made a list of her physical attributes while she was busy taking his measure. What did he think of her? Beautiful, he had said yesterday, but then he had been trying to pick her up.

He bent over and ruffled Spot's white ears gently, revealing their pink insides. "Traveling as much as I do, one thing I miss is coming home to a pet."

Man and dog made an attractive, homey pair, which somehow set her teeth on edge. Primal instinct again told her something was out of kilter. Her need to leave grew.

When he straightened he towered over her. "Do you have a pet?" he asked.

"No." She would have been happy to leave it at that but politeness demanded more. "They're not allowed in my condo building."

"Where's home?"

"Downstate." She nodded and turned away. "Enjoy your walk."

She set off up the hill once more with a nagging worry over the day's activities. This weekend she was on a quest with little tolerance for detours. Especially romantic detours. This man, this Nate Chambray with his piercing eyes and persistent questions was a threat to her detachment. She had rejected the idea of romance in her life. The sooner Nate knew that the better.

As she headed over the rise her pulse quickened, whether from the incline or from seeing Nate again she had no way of knowing. She hastened her step.

Half an hour later she sat on the cottage's rear deck and sipped a cup of coffee while waiting for the day's activities to begin.

Around eight o'clock Sarah walked up the lane. "You're up early," the woman said with a short grunt.

Cassie tossed her a smile. "We've a lot to do today."

Sarah edged forward. "Too much," she said as if uttering a secret. "There's way too much work to do." She wrung her hands.

The most Cassie could offer was reassurance. "Don't worry about anything. I'll manage the party."

Sarah stared, black eyes fixed as if she saw Cassie as an intruder in her territory, an interfering relative of Eudora's and a woman who might end up getting in the way of Sarah's work. "We're expecting a hundred people." The awe in Sarah's voice was unmistakable.

"Don't worry, Sarah. It's manageable with the caterer. Just clear the kitchen counters. The caterer will handle everything."

"There are house guests to fix for. The cleaners were here but there are things to set out. Supplies, towels."

"I'll make sure everything is ready." Cassie wished she could quiet Sarah's fears. She had helped Eudora with scores of large parties but seeing was believing and nothing would convince Sarah until she saw the results for herself. "I'll take care of the guests. You get the kitchen ready."

The woman's eyebrows rose but she didn't argue.

Cassie followed Sarah into the kitchen and fixed a light breakfast of strawberries, melon and whole wheat toast, which she ate standing up. Afterward she assembled a decent array of cleaning materials, a plastic pail, a bottle of liquid cleaner, glass and bowl cleaners, a scrub brush and assorted cloths and wipes. Just in case anything needed touching up.

She carried everything up to the guest suite where she had slept. She packed her duffel then stripped the magnificent four-poster bed. As she worked she cleared any thoughts of Nate Chambray from her mind. She concentrated instead on Seth Hawthorne, who would soon occupy this room. The newspapers had labeled him a born leader. For the state's and the country's sake she hoped he had more substance than surface charm and that he wouldn't turn out to be just another man of slogans.

She put aside thoughts of politics and wiped up the bathroom she had used for her morning shower. She dusted and vacuumed the bedroom for Sarah's benefit. It had barely been used enough to raise any dirt. As a last touch she replaced the grotesque mask on the wall.

Things were going faster than she expected thanks to her ability to focus her thoughts and mentally speed up time. She looked at her watch, saw nine o'clock. Things were going well. The inspection of the other guest rooms would take only a few minutes. She straightened pictures and inspected surfaces to make sure they had been cleaned thoroughly by the crew Eudora had hired.

She was ready for Eudora's suite. She picked up her cleaning equipment and carried it down the wide carved staircase to the first floor.

When Cassie knocked on Eudora's bedroom door, Eudora called out, "Come in." She smiled when she saw Cassie. "Cassandra, were you the one vacuuming?"

"Yes. I'm through upstairs. I'll straighten your room now. When are the house guests arriving?"

Her eyes widened. "Oh dear, the Burtons and Mackenzies are taking an early ferry and Seth and his assistant are coming just before the reception starts." She moved nervously from table to chest, picking up porcelain figurines then setting them down.

Cassie put an arm around her. "Have you showered?"

"I've bathed and done my face. I just have to dress."

She trembled under Cassie's hand. Her nervous reaction to the party seemed unusual. She was as accustomed to entertaining as Cassie was in helping her.

"I do hope you like Seth," Eudora said. "You know he is a bachelor. Not a good thing in a politician. He needs a wife." She leaned against the bed. Her strength seemed diminished.

"I'll help you dress." Love washed over her for Eudora who rarely interfered in her life. What had driven her to take this step? She had often voiced her desire to see Cassie settled and with a family. Why push Hawthorne now? Had Eudora also experienced a premonition of sorts?

"What do you want to wear?"

Eudora waved toward her walk-in closet. "The pants outfit in the front of my closet."

There was no need to ask which pants outfit. Billowing trousers, long sleeves and, Cassie noticed belatedly, a matching feathered vest. If the humidity reached an uncomfortable level, Eudora would surely melt in its yards of pale pink silk. The outfit was anything but casual garden party. Luckily her friends were accustomed to her predilection for pink and her habit of dressing as if she were living in an old movie. Anything less would have disappointed them.

Cassie slipped the garments from their pink satin hangers and laid them on the bed. "Do you want help?"

"Of course not!"

Cassie kept a straight face with an effort. Eudora would have her for the weekend to manage the party but she wouldn't tolerate a suggestion that she was in any way incapacitated.



“After you’ve dressed I’ll tidy up your rooms.”

After she finished assisting Eudora and straightening the suite, Cassie went to check the kitchen. Sarah, her face dark with effort, mopped the floor with a string mop.

“The cleaners did that yesterday,” Cassie reminded her.

Sarah shrugged. “Spilled something,” she grunted. When the mop moved Cassie’s way, she wisely retreated toward the veranda.

The morning had developed into a beauty. Leaves rustled overhead in tall oaks, blown by a gentle wind that would chase the humidity away. The sun shone brightly through crystal-clear northern air – wonderfully healthy air.

Cassie thought briefly of Nate Chambray and his sandy curls and darker lashes. What had triggered her physical reaction to him? Sexual attraction, she admitted, hoping her fear of rejection hadn’t warped her personality so much that she no longer recognized attraction between a man and a woman.

Of course it hadn’t. It was just that she was reluctant to play that particular game again. And now Eudora was playing cupid with Hawthorne. He *was* attractive, Cassie had to admit, but it was Nate who set her pulse racing. And considering games, what game was Nate playing with her? She reminded herself to ask Eudora about Nate later that afternoon when she could point him out to her. Meanwhile she would tidy up the first floor rooms.

When everything was ready for the guests Cassie stepped out onto the veranda. Its floor was painted a glossy gray. The handrail and balusters were white. A set of three shallow steps led down to a flagstone walk that circled to the back lane. The veranda itself curved around the side of the house where another door led to the parlor.

The veranda had been swept and the yard tended, but inevitably dead insects and tree debris accumulated. She glanced around and, seeing no one, closed her eyes and wished for a cleansing wind. A whirlwind swept across the yard. She felt it raise her hair from her collar and whip it around her face. When she opened her eyes the veranda and yard were cleared.

She allowed herself a small smirk.

“I saw that.” Sarah stood in the doorway.

“You saw the wind?”

“Wasn’t like no wind I ever saw.”

Cassie tried to cut off the woman’s remarks by stepping inside. Sarah blocked her way. “Look at you,” the woman said with a touch of awe in her voice. “Just look at you.” She reached out to touch Cassie’s hair.

Cassie could feel the difference, she didn’t need to see it. Nonetheless she stepped around Sarah and glanced into the hall mirror. Her cheeks were flushed, eyes glittered. Her hair glowed like spun silver in disarray around her head.

No rational explanation was possible for the odd way she looked, nor did she consider one necessary. In keeping with Eudora’s philosophy of not making excuses for

one's behavior she met Sarah's wide-eyed stare with as much equanimity as she could summon. By tomorrow Cassie bet the entire island would know about the strange woman at West Cottage.

Still Sarah didn't say anything. There was a brief recognition in her eyes, as if she were communicating on a subliminal level, woman to woman. Cassie's stomach clenched and she lowered her eyelids in an effort to pick up any nuances, but then Sarah's look vanished and things seemed normal again.

Troubled, Cassie retreated upstairs out of sight, hoping to regain a sense of peace.

Her duffel sat in the upstairs hall outside the suite Hawthorne would use. In the bag she found a hairbrush and clip. She ducked into the suite's bathroom to tame her unruly hair.

The room's masculine theme reminded her once again of the sunrise walk and the chance meeting with Nate. At the lawn party she would talk with him again. After all, he was no great mystery, merely another member of the Hawthorne team. If it weren't for his eyes and their devastating effect, to say nothing of the strange tingling of her skin and the presentiment that they had met before, she wouldn't give him another thought.

The first guests arrived shortly after Cassie put the finishing touches on her hair and dress. As Eudora had requested earlier, she wore an ankle-length white muslin skirt and matching blouse. Eudora loved the old-fashioned effect for her garden parties.

The Burtons were a couple in their sixties who could be counted on to help with hostess duties. The Mackenzies also were Eudora's friends from the Metamora horse farm community where she spent winters. A retired automotive executive known for his amusing stories, Patrick Mackenzie would keep the guests circulating.

"Welcome to West Cottage." Cassie hugged Ritz Burton as she entered the rear hall.

Ritz kissed the air beside her cheek. "You're a dear to help your aunt."

"I'm glad she asked." She reached for Harold Burton's hand and ended up giving him a hug as well.

"Eudora's done herself proud this time," he said. "I can't wait to meet Seth Hawthorne."

"He's arriving this afternoon with his advisors."

Patrick Mackenzie and his wife Midge stood at the door with their luggage. "Hi, Cassie. Where do you want these bags?" Patrick asked.

"Hi, Patrick. Come in, Midge. Welcome you two." She hugged them both. "You and the Burtons are in adjoining rooms at the top of the stairs. Do you mind sharing a bathroom with them?"

Patrick laughed good-naturedly. "We've stayed in those rooms before. We've all known each other so long we're practically family." He picked up a suitcase and went upstairs.

Cassie ushered Ritz and Midge into the living room. "Would anyone like something to eat or drink?" Her watch showed eleven o'clock.

Ritz, a thin energetic woman, asked, "Is it too early for a Bloody Mary? I could use one after that ferry ride."

"And what about that surrey ride and that poor horse's indigestion?" Midge asked, sending the two women into a flurry of laughter.

"But don't worry about us," Ritz said told Cassie. "You must have a thousand things to do and we'll eat at the party."

In the kitchen, Sarah retreated a foot or two when Cassie entered. She ignored the woman's reaction. "The houseguests want drinks. I'll fix them."

Sarah grunted, a sound that was becoming familiar.

Cassie fixed glasses with ice and tomato juice. A few passes with the vodka and hot sauce bottles and some fresh celery and dill pickles for garnish completed the drinks.

She served them in the living room where the Burtons and Mackenzies were settled comfortably on the yellow floral sofas and chairs while Eudora, a pink cloud in her silk and feathers, reigned over the merriment.

The brief respite provided an opportunity for Cassie to put her duffel in Eudora's room and have a moment of quiet before the party started. Cassie lovingly rearranged each trinket on the dresser, absorbed in memories of Eudora talking to the young Cassie, forbidding the use of her powers. Beneath the admonitions was always her love.

A porcelain figurine of a child reaching toward her mother's neck was a favorite. She could almost feel Eudora's encircling arms around her small frame. She was a wonderful person, her aunt-yet-not-her-aunt who'd had a child thrust upon her in late middle age and had responded with love and enthusiasm. Not everyone would have been equal to the task.

And she had set Cassie free in adulthood.

Until now Eudora had rarely intruded in her life, but had always been there if needed. Her careful manners and formal ways showed she recognized and validated Cassie's adulthood.

The bedroom's colorful pinks and roses warmed her as if Eudora herself were there. Once more Cassie was reminded of the questions she had. Despite Eudora's protests, Cassie could not wait until Sunday. Something told her to press Eudora for answers as soon as possible. They would talk tonight after the house was quiet. Not having a room of her own in which to keep her things, she set her duffel in Eudora's room. Retrieving it would be an excuse to visit her, to climb upon her bed like a child and hear, at long last, the explanation of her birth.

## Chapter Four

Back in the kitchen Cassie fixed herself a plate of appetizers and a glass of iced tea and then settled on the front veranda for a quiet interlude before the rest of the guests arrived. She leaned back and savored her lunch of cold red grapes, tuna salad and a sampling of cheeses and watched the catering staff set up folding tables on the lawn.

Eudora was going all-out for the candidate. This party was probably the largest she had given in years, and she might never entertain such important guests again.

As Cassie watched from the veranda, the bartender moved cases of wine and liquor from the back lane on a two-wheeled handcart and then set up a bar for the guests. The round tables for eight were covered with pink linen cloths that swept the ground. She wished she could spend the rest of the afternoon in her quiet corner overlooking the party but it was after twelve and guests would start arriving soon.

A breeze stirred the pink tablecloths and a trio tuned their stringed instruments in the shade of a large maple tree. Everything seemed peaceful and lovely. Only the chill at the back of her neck foretold of trouble, and she dismissed that uneasy feeling as pre-party jitters rather than any real threat.

Unable to sit still while everyone else seemed so busy, she headed across the lawn, away from the turreted house and the bustling preparations, and let the noonday sun warm her back as she walked. At the far end of the lawn a bed of Shasta daisies turned their faces skyward. Cassie picked one with a long stem and gazed at the yellow center as though it were a mirror.

Her heart rate picked up when she spied Nate strolling across the lawn toward her. "Have you seen Seth around?" he asked.

"No, I haven't."

He looked surprised. "I thought he was headed this way."

"If he was, I haven't seen him." Conscious of her pounding heart, she forced a smile.

"He's most likely campaigning in town among the tourists," Nate said. He took the long-stemmed daisy from her fingers and casually tapped her shoulder with it as though knighting her. "Been working hard helping Eudora, have you, Cassie?"

"Yes."

"Wouldn't know it from the way you look." He handed the flower back to her and their hands touched. "Lovely."

His expression and voice had been neutral. He could mean the daisy but she knew he didn't. "Yes, it is," she said, studying the flower before looking up at him.

He smiled as if they had shared a joke. "Is Eudora around anywhere?"

"I haven't seen her, but I suspect she's greeting the first guests."

He nodded vaguely and looked off into the distance for such a long time that Cassie wondered if he had forgotten she stood next to him. When he finally spoke his expression was serious. "I need to talk with Eudora."

His absentminded manner, so soon after he'd managed to make her feel special, annoyed her. Was he playing with her feelings? Perhaps he was, the same as she was with his. "I'm sure Eudora's busy," she said, looking down her nose at him, "but she may be able to spare you a few moments."

"Eudora will talk with me."

The cool way he said it sent a shiver down her spine. She looked at him sharply, wondering what in the world was going on with this man who had, when she first met him, seemed so interested, so warm, so concerned about her. Now his eyes were hooded, unreadable. In them and in his stiff posture she recognized an echo of her own defensive behavior. Her heart skipped a beat. Something was wrong, something out of the ordinary.

"Most likely she will make time for you," she muttered and started toward the house. Nate could follow if he wished. She wanted some space from him, some distance between them. Something about their brief conversation had heightened her apprehension. Danger hung in the air like a death shroud.

With her mind churning Cassie took what seemed like a leisurely tour of the grounds, stopping to chat with the waitstaff and check on their progress. As the first guests arrived she realized she could use a moment alone to see if she could dispel the undercurrent of anxiety that made her tense. She strolled across the grassy yard and down the sloping lawn until she saw the gazebo's roof at the edge of Eudora's property. Beyond it lay the deep blue water of the straits. A stand of cedar shielded the gazebo from sight except for its roof. Inexplicably, she was drawn to the latticed structure.

She had reached the cedars when she heard her name spoken from the gazebo.

"Cassandra must be protected at all cost," Eudora said.

"There's no question of it." *Nate's voice.* She would recognize it anywhere. "We'll do our best, Eudora. Right, Seth?"

Nate had found Eudora, and Seth Hawthorne as well.

"That's right," Seth said. "Eudora, I hate to sound critical but why did you keep Cassandra's identity a secret from her for all these years?"

She should have stepped forward then. She should have let them know she was there but her surprise was so great she couldn't move. Then it was too late. If she revealed her presence now and interrupted their conversation she might miss the opportunity to learn what she had sought for so long.

"I shouldn't have to defend myself to you, Seth," Eudora said. "Of all people you and Nate should realize how devastated I was when Charles and I went to check on Cassandra's family and found them..." She sounded as if she couldn't go on, then she

finished, "We found their remains in the burned cabin and the baby was nowhere to be seen."

"I understand, Eudora." Nate's voice was filled with sympathy.

"Can you?" Eudora asked with a catch in her throat. "I doubt it. Baby Cassandra was the light of my life."

*Eudora had known her from her birth, had known her parents.* All this time and she had said nothing.

"When I heard her cries and found her hidden in that box near the stream...well," Eudora sniffed softly.

Cassie heard the scruff of shoes against the gazebo's wooden floor.

"We've found Cassie now despite your efforts." Seth raised his husky voice like a man taking command. "It's time we moved ahead with our plans."

"But Cassandra needs protection," Eudora insisted. "The people who torched that cabin would kill her in an instant if they knew that she lived through the fire."

"That was a long time ago, Eudora. We'll take care of her now," Nate said, sounding confident. "She'll go to Ohio with me."

*Go with him?* She wasn't going anywhere with a man she barely knew. Not after being on her own for so long.

"You don't know Cassandra as I do."

"We know Cassie, Eudora." Nate laughed softly. "You may not understand now but be assured, we have known her for a long time."

"Okay," Seth said. Cassie again heard the scrape of feet. "Let's get on with the reception." She could sense his impatience. The hurried candidate. "When the party's over, Nate, you take Cassie to Ohio with you. You can meet up with me later."

"Yes. Eudora and I will tell her tonight. I think that on the ferry yesterday Cassie might have sensed our kinship. At least I did."

*Kinship?* What did he mean? Was she somehow related to Nate?

"Cassandra knows nothing about her past."

"That's your fault, Eudora."

"I thought it was right to protect her." Cassie could almost see Eudora's chin go up.

"We'll tell her together then," Nate said.

"I'm worried about her reaction." Eudora's voice held a plaintive note.

"I'll handle Cassie," Nate said.

He sounded strong, self-assured. So sure of her. Her cheeks burned with anger.

"I feel something's going to happen," Eudora said.

"You're worrying over nothing," Seth answered.

Hidden in the trees, Cassie heard them leave the gazebo, their voices fading as they moved down the path away from her.

“Nate and I will take care of everything,” she heard Seth say.

“Nate?” Eudora’s voice sounded old and weak, as if she were asking for reassurance.

“Don’t worry about Cassie, Eudora. I’ll keep an eye on her this afternoon.”

As they moved away she barely heard Nate’s last words. Her heart was heavy, her stomach sick with what she had heard. Her identity, her past, had been hidden from her all these years. All these years Eudora had kept her ignorant. How could she have been so cruel? She felt worse than cheated, she felt betrayed.

Now Eudora was turning Cassie’s fate over to two men she had never met before—as if she were a child to be passed from one person to another as she apparently had been when she was a baby. And she was expected to travel to another state with Nate, to leave behind everything she had ever known. She took in a deep breath and straightened her shoulders. They were mistaken if they thought she was that easily led.

Yet Nate had mentioned kinship. Did she have family where he wanted to take her? Perhaps by going with him she would find out much more about her true identity. There was too much to think about and far too little time. She quieted her worries. Soon the party would be in full swing. She had things to do.

Even as she greeted guests and refilled their glasses she couldn’t shake off her fear of what was to come. She threw herself into being a hostess and ignored for the time being what she had overheard at the gazebo.

\* \* \* \* \*

An hour later after composing herself as well as she could, she went through the receiving line and shook Hawthorne’s hand while pretending that she had overheard nothing. “It’s nice to see you again, Mr. Hawthorne.”

“Same here, Cassandra.” His face lit up with practiced charm. “I look forward to getting to know you better.”

“I’m sorry I missed your arrival.”

“Eudora and her friends welcomed us. We’re pleased with our rooms and enjoying the party.” His voice was husky and Cassie remembered Eudora had said he had laryngitis.

“I shouldn’t keep you talking.” She wanted to get away from him before her frozen mask slipped and her hostility showed.

“Speechmaking’s forbidden but I can always talk to a beautiful woman.”

He was certainly well schooled in the art of political campaigning. Even knowing in advance that everything he did and said was to further his career, she felt herself softening to his physical appeal. His hand pressed hers with just the right amount of

sincerity and something else as well. A faint tingling passed between their palms. She felt a tug in her stomach at the touch of his hand.

"I'm looking forward to seeing a lot of you this weekend, Cassandra."

She withdrew her hand and laughed nervously. "I'm sure—"

Before she could finish the thought an aide moved her along the reception line. A glance back showed Hawthorne gripping another woman's hand and grinning at her.

At least she had been spared the stupidity of making a fool of herself over a man who had his own plans for her, plans still unknown.

"Hello, so nice to see you," the next person in the receiving line greeted her. Shaking Cassie's hand, the woman introduced her husband, on her right.

"And you are?" he asked.

"Cassandra West," she muttered with as much grace as she could manage.

The man's green eyes were close-set. He had thinning hair combed straight back from his face. He might be the power behind the throne, she thought, standing as he was beside the candidate, or perhaps a close relative of Hawthorne's.

The man gave her a thorough looking over while he made small talk. Cassie felt soiled somehow by his look. When she walked away she cast a glance back at him, a glance that showed his measuring gaze still riveted on her.

Shaking off the ill feelings that possessed her, she drifted from group to group, introducing herself, seeing that the guests had enough to eat and drink and agreeing over and over again how wonderful the candidate was, how good he would be for the state and for the nation. If she never heard the man's name again she would be happy.

Hawthorne saved his strained voice by not making a formal address. He contented himself with strolling through the crowd with his advisors, greeting as many guests personally as possible. The husband-and-wife team Cassie had met in the receiving line walked on either side of him and helped with the conversation.

Watching Hawthorne, Cassie thought he seemed too perfect. There was a glow about him as if he carried his own internal spotlight. He had the look of a robot candidate, if there were such a thing, a man controlled by a panel of blinking lights. Her fascination with him was waning. With men like Hawthorne running for office, what kind of future lay ahead for the country's government?

After several hours the crowd started thinning out. Cassie made her way across the lawn through the ferns at the bluff's edge, lifting her flowing skirt above her knees to save it from stains, and found the little-used path that led to the secret stairway. On the path the party sounds faded to a murmur. Birds called to each other and insects chirped a midday song. Voices floated up from the road below, the words indistinguishable. She ducked under the fence and descended the rough steps, stopping at a landing nearly hidden by low-hanging branches.

A mossy smell pervaded the air and small wildlife rustled in the leaves. But although everything here was the same as before, peace had fled her bower this



afternoon. Perhaps it was what she had overheard at the gazebo. Perhaps it was the noisy day visitors crowding the road below. Whatever the cause, yesterday's serenity had vanished. In its place was a disquieting sense that something had gone wrong.

Her neck prickled. Something *was* wrong. She could almost smell danger in the air. She started concentrating her powers but cowardice won out. If evil or danger lurked nearby she didn't want to know. She had come to the island this weekend outwardly to help Eudora, but secretly to learn about her own past. She wanted no part of danger or intrigue or evil. Because that was what she felt—the presence of evil.

*Oh this was foolishness.* Her imagination was running away with her common sense. She turned to return to the party and her skirt caught on a splinter in the wooden railing, halting her flight and ripping the thin fabric. Dismayed yet driven by a need to escape, she jerked the material free and fled up the stairs.

On the lawn a few lingering guests slowly made their way toward the back lane. She glanced at her watch. It was past five o'clock. The invitations had read two to five. Musicians were putting away instruments, catering employees were collecting stray glasses and plates from vacant tables.

Hawthorne was nowhere to be seen. The Burtons and Mackenzies were easily identified on the veranda. Their laughter drifted down as she approached.

Perhaps Eudora had found refuge inside the house, although it seemed unlike her, with her insistence on social graces, to retire from the reception before the last guest left. Now that Cassie thought about it, she hadn't seen Eudora for some time. The premonition crept along her spine raising shivers that reached upward until they tightened her scalp.

She had been so preoccupied with her own feelings and disappointments this afternoon she had forgotten entirely about her premonition.

*Auntie.*

In a moment of pure panic her hands and feet turned icy cold. She leaned against the back of a folding chair for support while she tried summoning her powers to locate Eudora.

"Is something wrong?"

With a gasp, she turned and saw Nate beside her. She swallowed. "Have you seen Eudora?" Her voice was little more than a whisper.

His eyes narrowed but he looked around as if humoring her. "Isn't she with her friends on the veranda?"

"No."

He covered her hand with his. "You're cold," he said with surprise.

She was too alarmed to be cautious. "I'm worried about Eudora." A sense of falling, of tumbling down a deep shaft, overcame her. *Auntie!* She sank to the chair and, feeling as if she were blacking out, rested her head on her folded arms.

Nate sat next to her. "What's happening, Cassie?"

The falling sensation faded but she could feel her energy draining away. She lifted her head. Maddening tears of frustration filled her eyes and spilled down her cheeks. Upset by her weakness, she tried to explain. "I don't know. Someone's fallen. There's danger."

His expression hardened and he looked around.

"I'll be all right," she said. "It's not me. Find Eudora. You have to hurry!"

"I will. Don't worry. I'm sure she's fine." He bent his head close to hers. "Wait here. I'll bring you a glass of water when I come back."

She was wildly anxious to be rid of him so she could gather her powers. "Yes. Thanks so much."

"You won't try to stand, will you?"

With a concerted effort to appear normal she said, "No, of course not." She forced a tight smile and willed him to leave.

"Good girl." Before he left he patted her as if she were a puppy. Then he was gone.

She instantly thought of Spot. A ripple of uncontrolled laughter ran through her. It started in her abdomen, bubbled through her chest and came out as a sob. Appalled, she covered her mouth with her hand.

In that moment a woman's high-pitched scream split the air.

It took Cassie a few seconds to realize it wasn't her own voice. She watched the remaining guests and the catering staff run across the lawn toward the bluff.

She watched them go, knowing her premonition had come true. Someone had found Eudora.

## Chapter Five

Cassie rejected the idea that Eudora had fallen. It couldn't be true. She would never use the rotting steps. She was too frail, too wise, and she had no reason to leave her guests. Cassie struggled to her feet but her legs refused to move and the sky spun dizzily overhead. Numb with dread, she sank onto the chair once more and sat in a light trance, refusing to accept what she knew was true.

Nate hurried across the lawn toward her. From the look on his face she knew what he would say.

He reached her side. "It's Eudora. They've found her at the bottom of the steps."

"Oh God."

"She's badly hurt."

"Hurt? Is that all? How bad is she?" She fought rising panic. "Is she all right?" She couldn't speak her worst fear.

He put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "There's a doctor with her now. We've sent for an ambulance."

"An ambulance? What good is an ambulance on this island? There's no hospital. We'll have to fly her to the mainland."

"We're seeing to it."

"Of course. I'm sorry. It's just..." Her thoughts tumbled over one another. Eudora was a generous, friendly woman, well liked by most people, yet someone had pushed her down the steps at the bluff. Cassie was certain of that. She should have told Eudora of her premonition.

Guilt flooded her. "Nate, you go to her. I'll be there in a few minutes. There's something I must do." If only she had warned Eudora. Perhaps she still could. Was it possible? She had no idea if her psychic powers would allow her to move back in time but she had to try.

Nate patted Cassie's shoulder. He stared at her as if trying to guess what was in her mind.

"Please." she pleaded. "Be with her."

He nodded and hurried off.

There was something she hadn't tried before, something she thought might be possible but had never had the courage to try. If anyone needed help now it was Eudora. She had to do her best.

After making certain everyone had left the area and gone to join the throng tending to Eudora, Cassie closed her eyes and meditated for a moment to quiet her mind. Then

in an effort to project her mind into the past, she visualized a clock running backward. The onset of vertigo was swift and strong. With her eyes tightly shut she grasped the edge of the table and held on while the world spun around her. Down, down she fell into a deep whirling vortex.

When the spinning stopped she heard the sounds of guests chatting and sipping champagne while waiting in the receiving line to greet the senatorial candidate.

Had she done it? Had she for the first time moved backward in time, or was this a vision, a vision of the past? Either way she'd soon know. She willed herself out of the chair. *Go and find Auntie*, she thought.

With an immense sense of relief, she found her aunt hurrying toward the buffet table. "Auntie." Cassie caught her aunt's arm, her thoughts clouded by the necessity of what to say first. "I need to talk to you."

Halted in mid-step, Eudora bristled with impatience. "Cassandra, what is it? I'm terribly busy."

"I must speak with you."

Eudora scanned the milling crowd. "Later, dear. You won't believe what's happened. The caterer has run out of ice! It's unthinkable in this day and age. I should never have trusted that new woman with the party but she's Shirley Beacon's friend, highly recommended, and now there's no ice—none at all. I've phoned the Grand Hotel. They are sending a man with a cart." She pulled from Cassie's grasp.

Cassie rushed after her and stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. "Please listen!"

"Cassandra, it will have to wait."

She held on, knowing Eudora's life depended on it. "I can't wait. You must listen." Tears spilled down her cheeks.

"Why, Cassandra, you're crying." Eudora's voice softened.

Cassie put her arm around her. Warm from hurrying, Eudora felt vital and full of life. She was so precious. "You must listen." Cassie drew her away from the milling crowd.

"Cassandra, the ice—"

"Forget the ice. It's not important. Something's happened."

Eudora's expression turned wary.

Could she know? Cassie wondered, not for the first time, what powers Eudora possessed. Had she been there, in the future, before Cassie? Was this a circular playback of events that had already occurred? Or was this a vision born of Cassie's overwhelming need to try to change the past? Whatever the explanation, she had to warn Eudora.

"Don't ask me to explain but don't go near the steps this afternoon."

Concern was gone, replaced by giddy impatience. "Cassandra." Pink feathers swirled as Eudora fairly sparked with emotion. "What has gotten into you? What steps do you mean?"

"The ones down the bluff."

Eudora attempted to withdraw her arm but Cassie held on.

"The bluff?" Eudora stared as if Cassie were mad. "Why would I use that old path? If I wanted to visit the beach I'd use the Grand's staircase."

"But you will today." Cassie's voice held a shrill note she couldn't control. "You'll go near the steps today and someone—" She stopped at the look on her aunt's face and could only believe it mirrored her own horror.

"Cassandra..." Eudora's grim reaction told it all. She knew Cassie had foreseen the future.

Cassie pulled her close and whispered in her ear. "I know what will happen."

Her hand lightly touched Cassie's cheek. "My dear child."

"Please believe me." Trembling, Cassie folded Eudora's hand in hers. "Don't go near the steps."

Horror had faded and acceptance had taken its place. "You can't change what will come to pass, Cassandra."

"But I'm here now. I'm warning you. Go to the Grand Hotel. Go anywhere. Leave and don't come back."

She shook her head. "It's no use, child." She pulled away. "There are forces that can't be stopped."

"Forces?" It was too much for Cassie. Her mouth held the taste of fear. Her efforts were for nothing. Time would run on. The party would continue and later they would find Eudora at the bottom of the steps.

"I should have told you everything earlier," Eudora said. Regret was strong in her voice.

"Tell me now." Cassie clutched her desperately. "It's not too late."

Eudora looked around. "There isn't time now."

Cassie glanced at her watch. "We have thirty minutes. Please think of a way to change things." She held Eudora's fragile hand. "Please don't leave me."

Eudora's eyes moistened. "Cassandra, when this party is over we—"

"No!"

Eudora glanced around. "Shh. Stop fussing and listen carefully. There are women who can help you understand who you are, The Lotus Circle. And you've family here in Northern Michigan, in Kalkaska County. Cousins who live at some sort of a commune. Go to them. Tell them I've sent you."

Shocked by the revelation, Cassie could only stare with her mouth open.

Regret returned to Eudora's expression. "I should have told you sooner but I loved you too much. I wanted to keep you out of it, keep you safe from them."

"Them? Who are you talking about?"

"At the village you'll find out what you need to know. Go there quickly, as soon as possible." Her essence withdrew, as if she were anticipating leaving her body.

"Auntie!"

Eudora smiled with a clarity and directness she had never shown before. "Don't forget I love you, Cassandra. Everything I did, I did from love." Then she hurried toward the buffet table. "We need ice, Cassandra," she called over her shoulder. "Direct the ice cart this way."

Cassie watched her go, a pink cloud in brilliant sunshine. She was afraid she would never see Eudora alive again.

Numbed with fear, she made her way back to the table. Two couples lounged on the folding chairs, sipping champagne and nibbling strawberries and cream. Cassie slipped into an empty chair. "May I sit here for a moment?"

The women smiled pleasantly. "Of course." Then they turned away and continued their conversation.

As inconspicuously as possible, Cassie folded her arms on the pink tablecloth and rested her head on them. Her world began to spin.

Someone shook her shoulder.

She blinked, lifted her head and looked into Nate's concerned gaze. "The ambulance is here," he said. "You'll want to be with Eudora."

The other chairs were empty. The dream, the vision, was over and her aunt had been injured despite Cassie's attempt to warn her.

"I blacked out for a minute." She hoped her light trance had been short enough not to be noticed. For all she knew it could have been a matter of mere seconds.

He touched her arm. "You'd better prepare yourself. They don't hold out much hope."

"No hope?" She set her jaw and started toward the bluff. She had accepted the inevitable when Eudora said things couldn't be changed. But if she could visit the past in visions, why couldn't she change what happened?

She took Nate's offered hand and let him lead her down the path toward the bluff, but continued thinking about what happened when her mind saw the past and the future in visions.

When she worked for Eudora she often sped up or condensed time. Although the tasks were accomplished more quickly she actually did the work—she simply visualized the work being done and hurried up time for the process. Nothing was changed, she realized, only time appeared to speed up. It was her perception that changed.

They reached the top of the steps and pushed through people who had gathered there, guests, musicians, kitchen help and Sarah.

Sarah stepped forward and the woman's accusing eyes found Cassie. "You should have watched her," Sarah said. "You should have done something to stop this." She wrung her hands. "I couldn't do everything alone."

"I don't understand..." Too rushed to bother with Sarah's complaint now, Cassie brushed past her and hurried down the mossy wooden steps. On the landing she saw the scrap of white cotton that had been torn from her dress. She ducked under an outstretched limb and picked her way down the steps as quickly as possible. The pink blur on the ground was barely visible in the crowd.

"Let me through, please. I'm her daughter." Cassie squeezed past a broad-shouldered man who blocked the path and then stopped short when she saw Eudora laid carefully on a stretcher, a surgical collar around her neck, her arms restrained at her waist beneath wide nylon straps.

The paramedic looked up when she approached.

"I'm her daughter."

"We're going to transport her to the airport. Then we'll fly her to the trauma center in Petoskey."

"So far?"

"Yes, ma'am, it's the nearest one for this serious an injury, but it won't take long by helicopter."

"Cassandra." Eudora's faint whisper was a voice from the past.

Cassie knelt next to her.

Eudora's watery gaze flickered across Cassie's face, capturing her attention with a force she might have thought impossible in a seriously injured person if she hadn't known Eudora's underlying strength.

"Kalkaska." She muttered the word for Cassie's ears alone. "Go quickly. Don't trust anyone." Her breath left her with a sigh and her lids closed.

Cassie's heart leapt in fear as the technician pushed her aside. *Go quickly*, Eudora had said, the warning clear. Yet Cassie couldn't abandon her at the moment of her greatest need.

"There isn't room in the medevac for you," the paramedic said. "You'll have to meet her at the hospital."

"Yes, of course."

"She'll need her insurance cards."

She bent over Eudora again. "You'll be all right. I'll be with you soon." She had no idea if Eudora heard but she thought she saw movement under the thin, almost transparent, eyelids.

When she arrived at the hospital she would need the insurance cards and a robe and slippers for Eudora as well as some of her own things. She had to align her thoughts into some rational order.

The Burtons and Mackenzies needed attention, as did the other houseguests, Hawthorne and his aides. She would leave them all to Sarah.

She waited until the ambulance pulled away then started back toward the house.

Nate caught up with her. "Eudora said something to you, didn't she? I saw her lips move."

Startled by the question, Cassie stared at him. Nonetheless, she couldn't bother to lie. "What she said wasn't meant for you." She pulled from his grasp and started making her way through the bystanders.

"I'll judge that for myself. What did she say?"

The anger she felt at Eudora's accident, at the onlookers feeding on her private tragedy, at Nate's pressuring, welled up. "Judge what you want," she said. "Eudora's hurt badly. That's all that matters now."

The adrenaline burst propelled her toward the steps. She raced up them as fast as her thudding heart and long skirt allowed. She had no need for psychic assistance this afternoon. Fear was a strong motivator and emotion had overcome reason. She fled from unknown danger and unseen pursuers as clear and real to her as the moss-covered steps beneath her sandals.

At the top she paused and drew several shuddering breaths. Nate was right behind her. Had the sound of his footsteps thrown her into panic? Or was it the knowledge that Eudora, an indoor creature who ventured only a few steps into the yard and never near the bluff, wouldn't have gone to the steps on her own without being lured there? Someone had tried to kill Eudora and Cassie instinctively felt as if her own life might be at risk.

"We need to talk." Nate was breathing hard from the exertion of racing after her. He pulled at her elbow.

His touch increased her anxiety. She pulled away and headed toward the house. It was standing in shadows now as the afternoon lengthened and the sun dipped behind the trees that encircled the yard.

"Cassie, wait."

"No." She continued her rush toward the house. "I have a lot to do." She flung the words over her shoulder. "And I need to go to the hospital."

Nate again caught up with her. "This is important."

The same words she had used in her futile attempt to convince Eudora of danger. Distressed, she stopped and looked at Nate, trying to read his intention.

He hadn't changed from the handsome stranger walking a dog down a dawn-lit lane. And he had told Eudora in the gazebo that he would watch over her. But her years of independence, of wariness of strangers, took control and she moved away.



"I'm here to help," he called after her.

"That might be true. It might not. I'm too upset to make a rational decision." She started toward the house. "I only want to be alone. I don't want your help."

A group of people had gathered on the veranda. Cassie headed for them.

As Cassie approached, the guests drew her into their buzzing circle. Their questions tumbled out one on top of another until she felt compelled to hold up a hand to quiet them. "We won't know how badly Eudora is hurt until she reaches the hospital. We can only wait. And pray," she added in hope of calming them.

Having stated those platitudes, she found the Burtons in the living room overlooking the veranda. As Harold rose from an easy chair, Cassie noticed a tear in his trouser leg. The tear was the same type and in the same location as the one she had in her skirt. She had torn it going down the steps to the landing.

Harold took her hands in his. "Cassandra, this is terrible."

She nodded mutely.

"Is there anything we can do?" Ritz Burton asked.

She extracted her hands from Harold's grip. "I'm needed at the hospital. Please stay here, Ritz, for Hawthorne's sake. And Ritz, could you hostess dinner tomorrow in Eudora's absence? Sarah will help."

"I'd be glad to, Cassie, unless you think we should cancel it."

"No, it's important to hold the dinner. That's what Eudora would have wanted."

"I understand. I'm so sorry."

Ritz seemed sincere. She was one of Eudora's oldest and dearest friends. But her husband?

"Did you see them take her away?" she asked Harold.

"Er, no." He shot a glance at Ritz.

"I thought maybe you'd gone down to see her."

"No." He spoke with more certainty now, as if Ritz had somehow silently reassured him. "The steps were crowded. It was best to leave her to professionals."

Cassie fought back tears. "They put a neck brace on her and strapped her to a board."

"Did she say anything?"

Again this interest in what Eudora had or hadn't said. And yet it was natural, she told herself in an attempt to put her suspicions aside. Still, she felt alone and at risk, especially after what Nate had said. Was the circle of concerned friends really vultures hovering for a death?

Behind their backs, Sarah's dark stare beckoned from the kitchen. Cassie hurried toward her.

"Is she dying?"

Her blunt question shook Cassie's waning confidence. "I don't think so." She looked around the kitchen. The caterer had finished cleaning up but was lingering near the side door. Cassie headed her way, all the time aware of Sarah's slow shuffle behind her.

"Your poor aunt." The caterer shook her head. "What a terrible accident."

"Yes," Cassie agreed, more comfortable now that the shock was passing. "She would want you to know that your work was excellent and the party a success."

The woman brightened. "It was, wasn't it? Except for the ice." She grimaced. "I'm sorry about the ice."

Tears welled in Cassie's eyes with the reminder of her few stolen moments with Eudora before the accident. She blinked.

"Don't worry. Everything was lovely." She noticed the papers the woman held. "I don't know what arrangements she made for payment."

"Under the circumstances, whenever you can manage will be fine."

But she looked uncomfortable. Cassie could sense Eudora's presence peering over her shoulder, pressing her to pay her debts and uphold her reputation. The simple truth was Cassie didn't have enough in her checking account to pay for the elegant *soirée*.

She took a pencil from the counter and wrote her name and phone number on the back of a card. "Please call me later when things are quieter," she told the caterer as she saw her out the door.

A low sound behind Cassie reminded her of Sarah's presence.

"What about the houseguests?" Sarah asked.

"I asked them to stay. Eudora would want it."

Sarah opened a folder on the kitchen counter and looked through some papers. "The menus for the weekend are in here, and her plans for the activities."

"Unless you hear differently from me," Cassie fought off thoughts of the worst happening, "go on with the dinner for the campaign contributors tomorrow." The group needed entertaining. "Sarah, you're in charge of the house while I'm at the hospital. Ritz will help. I'll call you about Eudora's condition."

Sarah nodded. Cassie had yet to see her display any regret or other emotion, except for the few words of blame. Was the woman an ally or an enemy? Instinctively Cassie chose ignorance as a defense. Whatever scheming, evil or otherwise, that was going on, she didn't want to know, at least for now.

Once off the island she would pull her thoughts together and take whatever action was needed. For now she was taking everyone and everything at face value. If ignorance wasn't bliss, at the very least it offered some peace.

Later she would reassess her future in light of what Eudora had told her. Somewhere she had relatives, cousins, who were like her. And somewhere there was something called The Lotus Circle. It meant she was no longer alone.

Nate and Seth Hawthorne remained to be confronted. But that also would have to wait.

Uppermost in her mind were Eudora's condition and the need to be with her. "Do you know where Eudora kept her insurance cards?" she asked Sarah.

"Her purse, I suppose," Sarah answered sullenly, as if Cassie were stupid. "But the purse is missing."

Sarah must have looked for it already. "I need her insurance cards, her keys, whatever else was in her purse." If her purse had been taken it meant a thief had been in her room.

"Sarah, come with me," she said, heading toward Eudora's room. When Sarah hesitated, Cassie repeated firmly, "Come now."

## Chapter Six

Twenty minutes later Cassie had changed into her jeans and shirt when Ritz interrupted Cassie's search for Eudora's purse. "The carriage is here."

Cassie cast one last exasperated look at Sarah. "I'll go without it." Sarah followed her to the back door. Ritz, eyes wet with unshed tears, hugged Cassie.

She wouldn't bother saying goodbye to the other guests. They would understand. "Sarah, can you sleep at the house tonight??" At the housekeeper's stoic nod, Cassie added, "I'll call as soon as I know anything."

"You shouldn't go alone."

The concern in Sarah's voice surprised Cassie. She felt an unexpected rush of appreciation for the woman and her quiet ways. "I don't know what I would do without you this weekend, Sarah."

The horse-drawn taxi waited in the lane. Walking toward it, Cassie was startled to see Nate standing beside it. He took her bag and placed it in the carriage and then he offered his hand and helped her onto the seat. To her surprise, he climbed up alongside her.

"I'm going with you," he said.

On the flagstone walk, Sarah watched with a satisfied smile. Cassie sent her an annoyed look. With a slap of the reins, a whistle and a few soft words, the driver coaxed the horses into action.

"You're only going as far as the ferry."

Nate shook his head.

She wondered if Sarah's closemouthed style was contagious. "To the ferry," she repeated.

"I'm leaving the island anyway."

Too late she realized he was only catching a ride. "Oh I see." She forced her mind away from him and, in the early evening dusk, looked instead at the familiar houses they passed and listened to the horses clip-clopping along the deserted street. By this time of the evening, the day visitors had left. She and Nate had the village nearly to themselves.

"I've arranged to take Eudora's cabin cruiser across the straits so we won't have to wait for the last ferry to Mackinaw City," Nate said.

Another surprise. She set her mouth in a grim line. She hated having others make her decisions. She had thought of bypassing Mackinaw City and flying directly to Petoskey before realizing that she wanted her car at the hospital. Now she squelched

her annoyance at Nate's interference. Her need to rush to Eudora's side took precedence over her independence.

"I didn't check the ferry schedules," she admitted once her anger had cooled. "I wonder what else I missed. Is someone going with us on the boat?"

Nate shook his head. "We're the crew."

"We are?"

She must have looked surprised because he laughed. "Don't worry," he reassured her. "It's fueled and ready to go. I took it out yesterday."

She grew thoughtful. He had taken out West Cottage's boat the afternoon they had arrived. Had Eudora known? Now that Eudora was incapacitated, Cassie would have to take a more active part in her life. She'd have to manage her affairs, perhaps take a leave of absence from her job. Her mind whirled with thoughts of how much there was to be done. But there was time for that later. For now she had to see Eudora through this crisis.

*Eudora. Auntie. Mother.* Regardless of the name, the truth was Cassie was Eudora West's adopted daughter and entitled to know everything about her affairs, especially now that she lay injured, possibly dying, in a mainland hospital.

"Is her boat used often?" she asked Nate.

"Eudora often let visitors take it out for a ride. She was a generous woman with her time and possessions."

"She *is* generous," she corrected him tersely.

"You're right. I understand."

The horse-drawn carriage slowed for a turn onto Main Street, nearly empty at this late hour. She brushed a tendril of hair from her eyes. "I wish she hadn't fallen," she said half to herself.

"Unfortunately, Cassie, life often deals us some tough hands. Nothing stays the same."

"You're right about that," she agreed forlornly.

Her day had started early and had been filled with excitement and stress. She gave in and let the carriage's gentle sway lull her ragged emotions. They approached the marina at the state park, which was filled with vacationing boaters. Then the rig stopped at a cement driveway beside a yellow clapboard bed-and-breakfast that, she recalled, had been built by a Chicago meat packing family a century before. Its narrow driveway led down to a boat dock.

The unmistakable scent of smoldering charcoal from boaters' grills hung in the air. It set her stomach rumbling despite her worry over Eudora's fate. Nate and she would miss dinner. The vision of what awaited at the hospital drove the thought of food from her mind.

She opened her purse but Nate stepped forward and paid the driver. He picked up her duffel and his lone briefcase.

Resignedly, she followed him down the driveway past a coffee shop then across the quay to a slip where *Incognito* rocked on its mooring ropes.

"You've made this trip before?" he asked, placing her bag in the boat. Nate's lizard skin briefcase raised questions in her mind regarding his return to the Lower Peninsula. Although it was late evening, he was bringing no clothes with him. What was the real reason for his trip to the mainland? Was it, as she'd thought earlier, merely an excuse to help her, and would he return to the island later tonight?

"Yes, I've done this many times," she said after she had climbed aboard. "As a teenager I spent a lot of time on this boat. A group of us summer kids enjoyed the privileges of wealth without thinking about who provided them, or how."

He turned on the blower to clear the fumes from the bilge. "Have you noticed any changes at the house this year?"

Had she noticed any changes? "I've only been here overnight but the main difference is the staff. Sarah Lightfoot is new, and I haven't seen any of the regulars around the house."

"Such as?"

"Well..." She watched him flick off the blower and turn over the port engine. It caught on the second try. She raised her voice over its roar. "Eudora always had help with the heavier work, a houseman, I guess you'd call him."

When both engines were running smoothly at idle, Nate leapt out and undid the bow lines, tying them carefully around a boat cleat. She watched his smooth, practiced movements. He had done this sort of thing many times, she realized.

He maneuvered the cruiser between rows of moored boats, many of them occupied by partying groups. Although the day had been warm, the breeze off the straits picked up as soon as they cleared the harbor. She was glad she had her suede jacket with her. Northern Michigan summers held golden promise but didn't provide much real warmth, especially on the water.

Nate turned the bow into the Lake Huron side of the straits. Immediately a wave's icy spray hit the port boards, wetting her thoroughly. His engaging grin at the unexpected shower lessened its shock. She quickly followed his invitation to join him on the sheltered helm seat.

The front of her blouse that was unprotected by her jacket was wet from the spray. It clung to her breasts, outlining them more clearly than she liked. She self-consciously pulled the clinging fabric from her skin but only succeeded in calling attention to her condition.

His gaze, full of warmth and appreciation, met hers. Something in his eyes softened her restraint. She smiled back at him and the dreadful cloud that had fallen over her since Eudora's accident lightened. As they headed away from the island toward an unknown future, she felt a surprising lift of her spirits.

The small spurt of joy was an echo of the emotion she had felt this morning when she had seen Nate on the lane at dawn. Grief over Eudora's accident—if it was an

accident—had smothered every other emotion. Now the attraction between them returned full force. She sensed a kinship with this man. Admitting its existence eased the trepidation that had dogged her the past few hours. The island lay behind them, and Michigan's Lower Peninsula lay ahead. Time seemed suspended, problems nearly forgotten.

For this short respite there were only the two of them amid the waning sun's glistening reflection off the water. She was comforted, for whatever reason, by the boat's familiar motion as it bore into waves kicked up by the straits' churning currents. She thought of those teenage summers on the island, the soul-deep pleasure of unfettered freedom.

As if sensing her reaction, or perhaps in response to his own feelings, Nate reached out and covered her hand with his.

"I'm going to take care of you, Cassie."

She stiffened. "I'm not sure I want to be taken care of, and yet," she paused and smiled, "perhaps that's what I need to hear most at this moment." She looked at their hands clasped on the weatherworn teak, hands that looked as if they belonged together, a matched pair, his broad hand, larger and stronger but with the same trim nails, the same blunt fingers as hers.

"Let's just say I'm here if you need me."

"That sounds better."

A sense of pervading contentment chased the last of her caution. For the first time in years she was at ease when alone with an attractive man. His strong arm drew her close and she rested her head against his shoulder as naturally as if she'd known him for a lifetime.

He bent his head to hers. "I've been looking for you for a long time." His mouth was so close that his warm breath ruffled the loose strands of hair that grazed her neck.

She thought back over what she'd overheard in the gazebo, but in his arms she felt incapable of sorting one thought from another with any accuracy. She merely rested against him, a swarm of questions buzzing in her head. She ignored their clamor. Instead she lifted her chin.

"And I've been looking for you." She didn't care what meaning he gave her words or whether she would feel strange later or whether this man brought good fortune or trouble. For once she dropped her defenses and responded from pure instinct.

A particularly high wave tossed the bow and the boat lurched. She tightened her grip on Nate and tucked her face into the curve of his neck.

When he had steadied the boat he kissed her brow gently. She closed her eyes, allowing her feelings to wash over her.

"You don't remember me at all, do you?" he asked.

"Should I?" She stared at him, trying to jog some scrap of memory loose, some scent or some sense of Nate's involvement in her life. Instead all she saw was his strong

mouth, his determined chin and his clean-shaven face. He was a well-groomed man, one who took care of himself, and he seemed at ease with what he was.

"I thought you might have remembered something since last night."

"No. I tried, but nothing came to me. On the ferry I thought perhaps I knew you, but no, nothing." Her attraction to him when they met had been strong. Now she was experiencing an even stronger urge to feel his lips on hers, to taste him, to explore the strength of this attraction. The impulse kept her clinging to him when she knew she should move away. Even as she wished for it, she realized his kiss wouldn't bring peace. It would unleash a hunger, an insatiable hunger that she had held in check for many years.

Lately that hunger had simmered just beneath her well-controlled surface and had grown in urgency with each passing day. Its momentum fed her desire to learn more about her origins.

"If I've met you before, Nate, I can't recall," she whispered, saddened by the admission.

"I recognized you immediately."

The skin at the nape of her neck prickled, but she willed the warning away.

"I recognized you, Cassie, the moment I saw you on the pier, and this morning I sensed you over the rise of the hill before I saw you."

*As she had sensed his approach.* She held her breath and wished he would be quiet and not ruin this peaceful moment with unsettling thoughts.

"Eudora has kept you carefully hidden."

She knew that much from overhearing the conversation in the gazebo. Strangely, she feared what this man had to say. Whatever it was, and however long she had searched for it, she was certain the knowledge would destroy her peace and nothing would ever be the same. It would set her firmly in the real world—the world where elderly women were pushed down mossy steps to their death, where every stranger was suspect.

She stared at Nate's lips. With a kiss she could silence him and remain as ignorant as ever. But that would be the way of a coward.

She lifted her chin. "What do you know about me, Nate?"

"You..." Then, instead of finishing his thought, his gaze wandered to her lips and he lowered his face to hers. His beard-roughened cheek brushed her mouth and left the taste of his skin, its dampness, the taste of him, on her lips.

Her heart beat unevenly against her ribs, against his chest. He whispered, "I shouldn't." Then with a sigh he covered her mouth with his own. His lips were warm, full, gently reassuring. Their kiss unlocked tears she had kept under control for too many hours. They spilled down her cheeks and closed her throat.

He lifted his head and whispered, "Don't cry, Cassie." He held her against his chest. His fingers caressed her hair. "Please don't cry."



His plea only strengthened her tears. They fell unchecked while she clung to him, sobbing softly. She listened to the drone of the twin engines powering the boat through the choppy waves and wished that time would stop.

But she *could* manipulate time, she thought, recalling her experiment in envisioning the past that afternoon. Her life was, after all, in her control. She didn't have to depend upon anyone. She loosened her grip on Nate and backed away until she stood alone, cheeks wet, firmly balanced on the tossing cockpit deck. After the warmth of his arms a cold loneliness filled her. Still, she recognized and accepted loneliness as an old friend.

"I'm sorry." She dried her face with her fingers the best she could.

"Don't apologize. It's natural to cry."

On the horizon, the lights of the Mackinaw City ferry dock grew larger. Her car would be waiting there. "We're almost on shore," she said with a gesture toward the approaching landfall. "Almost back to reality, but you haven't told yet me what you know about me."

"Reality is what you make of it, Cassie, the same as identity. It all depends upon one's perception."

The intimacy between them had vanished. In its absence her suspicion returned. "I'm in no mood for philosophy. If you're aware of anything I should know please tell me."

"What do you remember about your past?"

Annoyance over his answering her questions with questions of his own brought a feeling of warmth to her cheeks. She smoothed her windblown hair nervously. Talking about herself wasn't easy. It would take courage to put aside the protective behavior she had acquired and talk about her inner thoughts, her inner space and her psychic talents.

The thought evoked memories of a book she'd read at a library patron's suggestion. The author had talked about one's inner space being as important as the outer world. The author, Joseph Campbell, would urge her to talk about her feelings with all the courage she possessed. What did she remember about her past? What was locked away in her mind that she could access and share with Nate if she tried hard enough?

"I don't remember much about my early years. I only know what Eudora told me—which wasn't much."

She wanted to open up to Nate but she needed to be careful. He had kissed her with an evocative tenderness that could mean anything. Eudora had been attacked and Cassie knew she could not afford to be naïve. She wet her lips. She would temper her courage with caution.

He leaned forward, his intense gaze searching out some response in hers. "And what was that?"

A magnetic sensation drew her toward him, along with that familiar feeling of being attached to him by a cord, but she resisted its attraction. Was Nate a friend or an

enemy? Nate Chambray could be the answer to her dreams or a threat to her existence. Whichever, telling him the little she knew about her background couldn't hurt anything.

"My parents were botanists studying local species in the Upper Peninsula. During a storm a lightning bolt started a forest fire. When it was over I was the only survivor, found near a stream in a wooden box. Much like Moses in the Old Testament." She ended on a ragged note, torn between laughing or crying at the unlikely story that was all she had of her past.

"That's it?"

"Somehow Eudora and Charles found me and took me in." She'd told him what was common knowledge but she wouldn't offer information that he didn't already know.

"How did they find you?"

"They never said exactly, just that they were hiking in the woods when they saw the fire."

His gaze darkened. "And you never asked for more?"

"Yes, I asked for more. What do you take me for? I'm not stupid. I'm a research librarian. I know how to look for records. When I checked court adoption records I was told they were lost. I found nothing further on the online websites."

He looked at her steadily but didn't answer.

She was left with her own thoughts and suspicions. What he knew of her parents or about her special powers she had no idea. His gentleness and his concern, while seeming genuine, could be part of a scheme to gain her confidence.

She would take her time in deciding to trust him. After all, her secrets had been buried for nearly thirty years. A few more days or weeks would have no bearing on anything.

Ahead, the boat dock lights were closer. "My car's at the ferry dock. You can drop me there," she said coolly.

"Mine's at the marina." He glanced behind them then ahead as he located the channel buoys that led to the harbor. "We'll use my car for the ride to the Petoskey hospital. We can pick yours up later."

There was a strength in his voice that she thought to challenge but didn't. Like it or not, it said, he was the captain of the ship and she would do his bidding. All right. She would let him have his way.

*Temporarily*, she assured herself, he could call the shots. Until she knew more about him she would cooperate. She took heart in the knowledge that she possessed her powers – powers that might be a surprise to Nate Chambray.

## Chapter Seven

Cassie and Nate reached the Petoskey hospital and headed for the emergency room. The security guard passed them through its glass doors where, inside the entrance, an admitting clerk sat behind a counter.

Cassie hurried over. "I'm Cassandra West. My mother, Eudora West, was brought in by medevac from Mackinac Island."

The woman tapped a computer keyboard then studied the screen. "She's in intensive care. Take the lobby elevator to the third floor and follow the signs. And Miss West..."

Her call brought Cassie to a halt.

"Please check back here after you've seen her. We need your signature on her admittance forms."

"I don't know if it matters but I couldn't find her insurance cards."

"We have her information on file."

She nodded. Eudora must have had tests at the hospital without telling her. What else didn't she know? Had she been neglectful of Eudora? Was she so caught up in her own life and problems that she hadn't realized Eudora had been sick?

The elevator, long and wide enough to hold two gurneys, slowly made its way to the third floor. Nate and Cassie rode in silence, her attention focused on what lay ahead.

Behind its automatic doors the ICU unit was filled with banks of machines endlessly hissing and beeping. They waited in the corridor until a nurse asked who they wanted to see.

"Mrs. West is in number seven," the nurse said, pointing out a cubicle. "I don't know how alert she is." The doubt in her eyes told Cassie more than words could say.

Nate placed a supportive hand on her arm and walked over with her. She was glad she wasn't alone. Before Uncle Charles had finally succumbed he'd had several incidents with his heart. She had been prepared then for his passing. This incident with Eudora was different.

This time the patient was Eudora, Cassie's emotional support and the person who knew her best in the world. Eudora lay tiny and frail, IVs in her arms and tubes taped to her chest and throat. Wires trailed over the bed rails and a facemask helped send oxygen into her lungs.

Nate stood at the end of Eudora's bed while Cassie bent low over her. "Auntie." She touched the pale cheek. "What have they done to you?"

"We're doing all we can," the nurse said from the doorway.

Startled, Cassie turned. "I know you're helping her. It's just hard to think of losing her."

Eudora's eyelids rose slightly. She flicked a glance at the nurse and then looked at Cassie.

She was sure Eudora recognized her. "I'm here, Auntie."

Her lips moved. Cassie moved closer to hear over the hum and click of the equipment. "Ka-Ka..."

"She can't talk much," the nurse said. "When she's stabilized we'll give her a pad and pencil."

Eudora's eyes showed her distress. She looked at Nate then at Cassie. With what seemed an extreme effort she lifted her finger a few inches and pointed toward the door. *Go*, the gesture said.

Cassie's heart sank. In Eudora's hour of worst need she was sending her away.

Then Eudora grimaced. Cassie saw tears and understood. She hadn't been trying to say her name. Cassie leaned closer and whispered, "What are you saying?"

With an extreme effort, Eudora whispered out the syllables, "Kal...kas...ka."

"Are you saying Kalkaska?"

Recognition registered in Eudora's eyes and a faint smile curved her mouth. She pointed her finger at the door again.

"You want me to go there?"

The nod was nearly imperceptible. She was sending Cassie to find answers or to safety or both. Eudora's hand wavered toward the door before it fell to the bed.

The nurse studied the monitor. "It's best if you say good night now. She seems agitated."

"You're going to be fine, Auntie," Cassie said, bending over her still form. "Don't worry. I'll do as you wish."

Eudora's eyes opened but she seemed dazed, drifting into unconsciousness after her exertion.

Cassie felt a stab of guilt, hoping her visit hadn't harmed her in any way. Yet she knew better. There was a special bond between them and sometimes each knew what the other was thinking. This was one of those times.

She knew Eudora cared little about her own physical condition. This afternoon when Cassie had that vision of the past and tried to warn Eudora of danger she had accepted the future fatalistically. Cassie knew even more strongly that her agitation now was for Cassie's safety. Eudora was upset about some danger she anticipated in the future and she wanted Cassie out of it.

She placed her mouth closer to Eudora's ear. "I'm on my way to Kalkaska." She touched Eudora's fingers. "Even if I'm not by your side, please know I love you."

Her hand curled around Cassie's then the lines around her eyes softened and her mouth relinquished its strain. Only the hiss of air and the artificial rise and fall of her chest spoke of life.

Eudora was at peace. Cassie could ask for nothing more. Choked with emotion, she walked past Nate without speaking. Still, the sound of his steps behind her, the sense of his supportive presence gave her comfort.

He stopped at the floor nurses' station. "Is the cafeteria open?" he asked.

The nurse's reply was too low for Cassie to hear and she was too intent on summoning the elevator to care. She had a plan incubating in her mind but all she knew for certain was Eudora wanted her to leave the hospital immediately.

When they reached the main floor Nate steered her away from the entrance. "The cafeteria's this way."

"I'm not hungry." She fought to keep her voice even but tension tightened it.

"I'm hungry and you need to eat."

Recognizing the wisdom behind his argument and the concern hidden by his brusque tone, Cassie dampened her anxiety and followed his lead. The cafeteria was closed except for beverages and snacks. Under Nate's watchful insistence she chose an apple, a donut and a cup of coffee, an unlikely combination, but she barely tasted them. She couldn't lose Eudora. She was the only person who really knew her. Eudora was her entire family. Except for the cousins she had mentioned earlier.

Nate interrupted her thoughts. "We need a motel."

Startled, she stared at him. "Why?"

Compassion softened his blunt features. "To rest, of course." He consulted his watch. "It's close to midnight. I'm bushed and so are you."

She shook her head at the thought of staying at a motel with him, remembering his effect on her when they'd first met on the ferry less than forty-eight hours ago. She recalled that he had suggested that they shared the same active metabolism that made prolonged rest unnecessary.

"I thought you didn't need much sleep," she challenged him with a glimmer of humor at the memory.

His smile eased the fatigue lines in his face and she felt an unexpected rush of affection for this man who had come so far with her tonight.

"Everyone needs rest. Aren't you tired?"

"I slept an hour in the car on the drive to Petoskey from Mackinaw City, remember?"

"That's not very much," he said.

"I had enough."

"Well I haven't." He yawned and stretched. His day's growth of beard gave him a different, harder look. "I need a few hours' sleep no matter what's ahead."

"Fair enough, you need to rest. I don't." She was on her way to Kalkaska and wouldn't sleep until she got there. "Where do you suppose I can rent a car?"

He checked his watch. "At this hour? In Petoskey? This isn't Las Vegas." His eyes narrowed and his face became a suspicious mask. "Why not wait until tomorrow?"

She controlled her sudden rise of impatience by drawing a deep breath. Some kind of explanation should be made for her strong-willed behavior. She had learned that early in life. In forbidding her to use her talents Eudora taught her the art of concealment. Not lying exactly, but keeping her own counsel, keeping her business to herself, as Eudora would have said.

"You've been good to me, Nate, and I appreciate what you've done." She smiled hesitantly. "But I can't impose upon you like this. I need to be on my own."

His guarded smile looked as polite and as distant as hers felt. "You're no bother."

"That's nice of you to say but now it's time to thank you and say goodbye."

He leaned close. "What are your plans?"

He seemed sincerely interested, not prying in the least, she thought, but she knew as a political aide or whatever he was to Hawthorne he would be as schooled in deception as she was.

"You want to be with Eudora," he suggested when she didn't come up with a plan of action.

"Yes, of course, I do." What she wanted and what she planned were, unfortunately, two different things. Eudora would die of frustration if Cassie hung around the hospital after the dramatic, although limited, instructions to the opposite. "I'll have to sign her admittance form before I leave. Then I'll look up some relatives I have in the area. They're only an hour's drive from here."

He shook his head. "It's an hour's drive on a winding country road in the dark. I don't think you should go alone. And what's this about relatives?" His voice held ill-concealed interest.

"I want to look them up."

"Eudora never spoke of family."

He sounded as if he knew Eudora well but Cassie smiled, thinking of her aunt's streak of secrecy.

"It's true," she said, "Eudora rarely spoke of family, but I think she would want me to see them now. She'd want them to know about her accident." Cassie drank the last of her coffee.

"In that case I'll drive you to their house." Nate pushed away from the table.

"No thanks. It wouldn't be right to put you to more trouble." She picked up her tray and left him at the table.

He followed her to the trash bin. "It's no trouble at all, and since it's late I think you're stuck with me, one way or another."

Annoyed by his self-satisfied expression and knowing that he had probably out-manuevered her, she strode ahead of him down the wide hallway that led to the main lobby. On the other side of the lobby was the emergency room where the clerk at the computer waited for Cassie's signature.

She had to get rid of Nate somehow. She couldn't spend the night with him in his car or in a motel. And she surely didn't want to drive with him to Kalkaska in search of lost relatives.

Everything seemed too complicated. Her thoughts swirled. Perhaps she did need rest. Perhaps she was tired.

At the emergency room door, Nate halted her. "Wait."

Surprised, she asked, "What's wrong?"

He looked through the door's window. "The men talking to the woman at the desk... I know them."

She took a look. Two men in ordinary business clothes stood at the desk.

Nate tugged on her arm. "Get down." He knelt on the floor.

Startled by his intensity, she crouched beside him.

"She must have told them you're here. They're coming this way." He grabbed her wrist in an iron grip and pulled her across the lobby then out into the dark night.

Bent low in imitation of Nate's posture, she followed him as he pushed through the hospital's shrubbery, placing her feet in his footsteps as carefully as if they were crossing a minefield. After the first headlong dash from the lobby they picked their way toward his car, keeping close to the hospital wall for cover. Its sun-baked bricks still emitted leftover warmth from the hot summer day.

At the emergency driveway, they waited in the shadow of a pillar until a car passed. Before stepping off the curb Nate checked behind them for pursuers. "It'll take them a while to discover we've left the ICU, *if* they didn't see us back there in the lobby."

Alarmed by his urgency, she acknowledged his comment with a silent nod.

"Let's go now. Walk quickly but don't run." In a no-nonsense manner, he gripped her elbow and urged her along.

She walked beside him briskly, swinging her arms in an effort to loosen her tense muscles.

"Can you still smile?" he asked.

She smiled in what she was certain was an eerie grin.

He laughed softly. "Okay, that'll do." He placed an arm around her and pulled her along in what amounted to a near run. "Here we are." As they neared the car he

released the door locks with the remote opener. She tumbled in, painfully bumping her ankle in her haste.

After a look around he drove out of the lot, headlights off, and guided the car down a dark side street. He turned at the first corner and drove several blocks down the unlit street before using his lights.

"There's a place not far from here where we can spend the night," he said, as if anticipating her next question.

"Okay." She wanted to hear more about the men they had run from.

She knew from experience that Petoskey wasn't a large city. At this time of night the streets were almost empty. If someone were looking for them they wouldn't be hard to find. The adrenaline that had carried her through their escape was waning. Doubts were starting to crowd into her consciousness.

As Nate guided the car down the deserted streets, she asked, "Who were those men?"

He turned down yet another residential street before answering. "Old friends who I recognized just in time."

She smiled doubtfully. "Not *good* friends, are they?"

"Hardly. I realized they were keeping track of me on the island but I didn't think they'd followed us to Petoskey. I underestimated how interested they were."

At the edge of town the street came to a dead end. The car's headlights revealed a field with rows of high cornstalks. Nate swung the car into a sharp left turn and then powered it down a narrow asphalt road.

"Who were they, Nate?"

He must have recognized the determination in her voice for he answered without hesitation. "Fanatics. Members of the Army of Darkness."

"Army of Darkness? Are they like militia?" She knew of an organized group of underground militia in Michigan. One member had been somehow involved in a Federal building bombing.

"No, not militia. They're fanatics trying to disrupt our peaceful elections."

"We're running from *fanatics*?" She didn't even try to hide her disbelief. "Why are they following us, or rather, *you*? I don't understand."

"You will soon enough." He reached over and found her clenched fist on her thigh.

The brief squeeze he gave her hand was meant to be comforting but it wasn't. Were these so-called fanatics really police investigators? Was Nate abducting her? Suddenly this seemed a more realistic assessment of his actions. She sat, pondering the thought while ice formed in her veins. He was kidnapping her. She trembled then looked furtively at him to see if he had noticed her shudder.

With growing concern she realized she had been more or less under his control from the moment they had climbed aboard the carriage on Mackinac Island. She had



sensed it then and she knew it now for a certainty. Her freedom was an illusion. By accepting his help in reaching the hospital she had put herself in his power.

She needed to take back control, not only for her safety but for her self-respect as well, if it wasn't already too late.

The city's lights had long ago vanished. The road they were on came to an abrupt end. Nate negotiated a sharp right turn and drove deeper into the remote countryside. She hadn't seen the lights of a farmhouse for some time. She took a deep breath to still the painful queasiness pushing up in her throat. As long as possible, she wanted to hide her anxiety from him.

When she had her emotions under control she said, "I thought you knew of a place to stay."

"I do."

"I don't know where we are but you're not going to find a motel on this deserted road."

"I'm not going to hurt you, Cassie."

Her breath caught in her throat. He had sensed her apprehension. She said, "Then turn around and head back to Petoskey where we can find something on the main highway."

"There's a place not far from here."

She had her doubts. "There is?"

"Yes, but Cassie..." He slowed the car, reached over and placed a hand on hers.

His touch was warm and comforting. Her anxiety lessened. She drew a deep breath and her eyelids drooped. No. She couldn't fall asleep. She must remain vigilant. Despite her diminishing fear she knew little of Nate. She knew she didn't trust him.

She sensed the car slowing further. Should she attempt a jump from the moving car? But where would she run to even if she escaped?

She heard him exhale deeply, as if the tension was leaving his body. He gently massaged the back of her neck and then touched the middle of her forehead. She realized he had covered the area between her eyes.

"Relax, Cassie."

To her surprise, she did. Lethargy overcame her. Her breathing slowed.

He caressed the crease between her eyes with a gentle thumb. "You're safe, Cassie. I think you should sleep now."

She felt drugged and wondered if he had put something in her coffee at the hospital. Perhaps he was hypnotizing her. Whichever, it was too late. Sleep overcame her. Feeling a fatigue that was not the least bit threatening, she let go of consciousness and floated. Floated.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Wake up, Cassie. We're here."

Her eyes wouldn't open, and where was *here*?

"Wake up now." Nate shook her arm.

Dazed, she sat up and looked around. She was seated on the ground, propped against a rough-barked tree. Pine, she thought from the heavy scent that assailed her nostrils. The night was so black she could only see dark shapes.

"Where are we?" Her tongue had a mind of its own and her speech was slurred. She felt groggy, as if awakening from a long nap. Not a light showed anywhere in the dark night.

"Where are we?" she asked again.

"At a friend's farm."

A dog barked steadily, the sound muted as though it was inside a house or a barn.

"Friends?" Incredulity chased the last of her sleep. "What time is it?" In the enshrouding darkness she couldn't see her watch.

"It's nearly two."

She made out the darker shapes of tall, *tall* pine trees and a bulky shape that might be a cabin or a farmhouse nestled within the circle of trees. It was impossible to see more.

Nate put his fingers to his mouth and emitted a shrill whistle that sent a sharp pain through her ears. In the oppressive darkness a distant light flickered to life.

He reached down to her. "Can you walk?"

"I think so." She struggled to her feet. "Where's the car? How did you get me out of it without waking me?"

"It's over there behind those trees. You were sleeping so soundly a cannon could have gone off without waking you."

His answer was too pat. He was lying, she thought. It only reinforced her suspicion that she was his captive, that she had been drugged.

He took her hand. "I'm not going to hurt you, Cassie," he said as if aware of her thoughts. "We'll be safe here. In the morning we'll figure out what comes next."

She couldn't see his expression but the sincerity in his voice, the warmth of his hand on hers, eased her fears. What were her alternatives? Run off into these woods alone? *Where in God's name were they?*

"You might think the people who live here are odd," he said as they walked through pines, pines so tall Cassie couldn't see their tops in the darkness. He hesitated. "They seem to live in the past. But don't be startled, they're friends."

"Okay." She didn't know what to expect and would reserve judgment until she met them.

"Is that you, Seth?" a man's voice called from a house nestled in a clearing in the pines.

Seth? It wasn't a common name. "Are they expecting Seth Hawthorne instead of you?" she asked in a hushed voice.

"They're not expecting anyone that I know of." He called out, "It's Nate."

"Nate? Welcome."

He guided Cassie over a track with narrow ruts that might have been made by an old-fashioned farm wagon.

The path was soft under her shoes as if needles covered the ground. Then they hit a patch of harder surface that felt like bare dirt. Ahead she saw a slim beacon of yellow light flickering in a four-pane window.

Nate tightened his grip on her elbow. "There's a step up to the porch."

A man's bulky form filled the doorway, blocking most of the light and putting him in silhouette.

"Nate, we weren't expecting you." He clapped a hand on Nate's back as they moved past him into a rough farmhouse.

"I needed a place to rest, Joseph."

"Rest, eh?" The man chuckled. "You've come to the right place for that." He tucked a hand in an overall strap while he looked Cassie over. A look of recognition lit his face. "This is Cassie, eh?"

How in the world did the old farmer know her name? The thought scared her.

He pushed the planked door shut behind them and let down the cross board that served as a latch. "Ma, here's Cassie."

An eerie feeling stiffened her spine. Somehow these people knew her.

A woman entered from a back room. She put on wire spectacles and examined Cassie, who returned her stare with a thorough inspection of her own. The woman wore a plain dark robe tied at the waist with a rope belt, and under it a flannel nightgown. Her white hair was braided in a single plait down her back—much as Cassie wore hers. The thought brought with it a rising recognition that in some way she was coming home.

The woman was short, not more than five feet. Cassie guessed both of them were smaller than she and she had never thought her five foot six was much above average height.

Finally the woman broke into a welcoming smile and put out her hands in greeting. "Welcome, Cassie."

"I'm sorry to wake you like this," Cassie said. Perplexed, she looked at Nate for a clue. At the least he could explain their late-hour arrival. After all, they were *his* friends.

Nate only watched as the woman hugged Cassie warmly.

"Cassie, dear."

She was overcome with confusion. "I'm sorry. Do I know you? Should I know you?"

The woman's only answer was a pleasant smile.

"It's nice to meet you, anyway," Cassie murmured, with a murderous glance at Nate. He should introduce them, she thought irritably, but he had already turned away with Joseph. She watched the men settle at an oval oak table. An oil lamp at its center flickered from some unfelt draft.

That explained the light from the window. She was pleased it had an everyday explanation. But was an oil lamp an everyday article, even in the deep woods? Didn't they have a generator?

The woman urged her forward. "Sit at the table with the men, child. You must be tired."

"I'm fine. I slept in the car." She would maintain the charade of guest as long as possible.

Nate motioned her to the chair beside him.

Instead she turned away. "Have we met before, Joseph? I don't recall..."

He laughed and she saw his teeth needed care. "You don't remember, eh?"

Feeling more and more as if she were on a trip back in time, she stared at the round-faced farmer who wore overalls over the long underwear he obviously slept in.

Nate took her cold hand and warmed it in his. "This is Joseph, Cassie, and Jane." He nodded at the woman who was stirring up the fire in an antique black cook stove. "They've known me a long time."

Joseph chuckled. "Aye."

And they knew her too, Cassie thought. They acted as if she were an old friend who had come to call in the middle of the night. Strange.

"We're glad to have you here," Joseph said with another smile. His gray hair straggled across his forehead.

Wondering at his plain speech, she felt oddly at ease with him. "Thank you."

"This is a happy occasion," Jane said. She placed stoneware coffee mugs on the table. A sugar bowl sat in the circle of the lamp's glow. Next to it was a mug holding silver spoons. Everything on the table looked as if it belonged to an earlier time.

Nate had warned her that his friends were odd. Was this what he had meant? That they lived as if time had been set back a hundred years?

Except for extremely remote locations, didn't all of Michigan have electric power? And what about these centuries-old pine trees around the house? Hadn't loggers cleared them out long ago? The growth now was all smaller second and third generation. Only in a few state and federal preserves did primal forests still arch this high. That was it. They were probably isolated homesteaders in a Federal forest.

The peaceful, hypnotic state that Nate had induced in the car had calmed her worst fears. Now her peace shattered with the knowledge that she was far from home, far from all she had ever known, sitting with three strangers who knew her while she had no memory of them.

## Chapter Eight

Joseph leaned forward in his chair and folded his calloused hands on the table. "How are things with Seth?"

Cassie anxiously awaited Nate's answer. By listening to what he said she might unravel some of the mystery that surrounded his history and her own as well.

A look of frustration crossed Nate's face. He glanced at Cassie as though he were hesitant about speaking in front of her. To lessen his reluctance she gave him an encouraging smile.

"I was with Seth on Mackinac Island," he finally told Joseph. "He went there for a rest."

Joseph laughed. "Don't tell me Seth needs rest."

"In a way," Nate said. He paused while Jane filled cups with dark steaming coffee from an old-fashioned blueware pot.

"How could it be that Seth needs rest?" Jane asked.

Nate looked at Cassie. Amusement had chased any sign of caution from his face. "His voice gave out."

"His voice?" Joseph laughed heartily. "Ah, yes, that sounds like Seth the politician. Always talking, that one."

Jane joined them at the table. She looked at Cassie. "And how are things between you and Seth, Cassie?"

Puzzled, she was at a loss for an answer.

"She hasn't had time to speak with him," Nate said.

"Hasn't spoken with him?" Joseph sounded surprised. "Do you mean recently or not at all?"

Questions crowded Cassie's mind, questions best answered, perhaps, by remaining silent.

"They haven't spoken at all, in the way you mean."

"What has gone wrong?" Joseph asked.

"There's been a glitch." Nate's voice hinted at more.

Cassie held her breath. Perhaps now she would hear the truth.

"A glitch?" Joseph asked warily. "What is this *glitch*?"

Nate smiled. "Sorry. There's been a problem with Cassie. A mix-up." His expression sobered.

"A mix-up?" Joseph's face grew red in the flickering lamplight and his voice rose. "What mix-up?"

"Shh." Jane put a hand on Joseph's solid arm.

He shook her touch away. "Who's to hear in this godforsaken wilderness? It was planned, Nate. Planned."

"Things happen, Joseph."

Joseph stared at Cassie indignantly. "What happened?"

Bewildered, she was speechless before his anger. "I—"

"She doesn't know," Nate said. "She knows nothing."

Two sets of eyes peered at her across the worn oak table. Curious and dying to know what Nate meant, Cassie stared back at them.

"Nothing?" Joseph asked incredulously.

"Nothing."

Nate's flat tone, the stark disappointment in Joseph's voice, cut through Cassie like a sliver of glass. She wanted to shout that their frustration wasn't her fault. Why should she feel guilty? She had lived her life the best way she'd known how.

Joseph's fist hit the table. "Things do *not* just happen." He stood up suddenly, sending his chair crashing to the floor.

"Joseph!" Jane scrambled to set it right.

Nate stood. "Joseph, not everything can be controlled."

The old man trembled. "You tell me, *you tell me*, things cannot be controlled? Why are we here then?" He glanced at Jane, sitting back at the table with Cassie. "Why did we choose this," he shouted at Nate and waved his arms in a sweeping circle, "this place out here in this wilderness? Wasn't it to provide a haven?"

"Joseph, these problems are challenges, not tragedies. You know that."

"Challenges? Look at me, Nate, look at us." He gestured toward Jane.

She shook her head. "No, Joseph."

He pointed toward the stove. "A wood stove to cook on? Did Jane ask for that?"

"Joseph, I've never complained," she said quietly.

Nate straightened. Watching him, Cassie thought he looked taller, stronger and more dominant than he had before.

"You are free to leave." The deep timbre of his voice echoed off the unfinished wood walls.

Visibly startled, Joseph shrank. "Leave? Give up?"

"You are *free*, Joseph, and you also, Jane."

Jane went to her husband and hugged him to her side. "Leave? No, Nate." Her voice was soothing, placating.

Cassie realized Jane's words were meant for Joseph as much as Nate.

"We're all right here," she went on. "We're pleased with our work. We're tired, Nate, that's all. It's the middle of the night. After all we are human only." She patted Joseph's arm, rubbed his worn, long-sleeved underwear with her work-roughened hand. "Just like Seth we need our rest, eh? Not like you, Nate." She gave him an appeasing smile.

Cassie saw that despite Jane's age her inner beauty shone through her wrinkled face.

"You can go without sleep forever, Nate," Jane said. "For us, we need rest to restore our bodies. It's late. We will talk in the morning."

"We're leaving in the morning."

"Maybe so, maybe not. Whatever, we will rest now. Cassie needs rest too."

She had never felt more awake. The look on Nate's face acknowledged her restlessness.

"You can use the loft." Jane moved toward a ladder and held out her hand. "Up here, Cassie."

Not without answers she wouldn't. She looked at Nate. He nodded as if understanding her need for reassurance. "Go on, Cassie. I'll check out the yard first and then I'll be up. We can talk then."

She moved toward the ladder as if in a dream. Perhaps this *was* a dream. At the bottom of the ladder she stopped, thinking it was time for a reality check. She should pinch herself to make sure she was awake.

"You'll find a washstand and covered pot up there," Jane said.

*Covered pot?* She had realized the farm was primitive but was she really expected to use a covered pot for a toilet? The three of them stared at her. Cassie sighed, remembered she was a hostage even if Jane and Joseph treated her like a guest.

"Good night then," she said as she climbed the homemade ladder toward the loft. At the top she saw a window under the eaves and crawled toward it. Were Nate and she to sleep here? Stimulated by the boiled coffee, her heart turned over, her knees felt suddenly weak. Perhaps it wasn't the caffeine. Perhaps it was remembering Nate's arms around her on the *Incognito* and his lips warm on hers, awakening feelings she thought she had buried forever.

"Did you find the bedrolls, Cassie?" Jane called.

Beneath her, soft quilts cushioned the planked floor. "I've found them."

"Good night, then."

"Good night." She ignored the primitive wash-up facilities and lay on the quilts listening to the men murmuring as they left the house. To check the yard, Nate had said, but she suspected they wanted to talk out of earshot.

She lowered her head to a rolled-up blanket that served as a pillow and pondered the change in her life from this morning when she had lightheartedly prepared West Cottage for its guests. She hadn't realized her premonition would come true so quickly.

Nor had she anticipated that the man who affected her emotions so strongly would offer her a ride to the hospital or that she would end up at a remote cabin with him in an effort to elude mysterious pursuers.

She wondered if her psychic talents might be used to get her out of this situation. She had managed to envision the past earlier. Perhaps she could look into the future but...was that what she wanted? No longer as certain of her future as she once had been, she was in no hurry to hurl herself headlong into a situation she wasn't prepared to handle.

Although she was weary, she doubted if she would be able to sleep, especially if Nate joined her. He was an unsolved, exciting mystery. Still, she had adapted to the stunning physical effect he'd had on her since they first met. At last she could meet his stare without thinking her heart would leap from her chest. She wondered what he was doing outside with Joseph.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nate and Joseph waited until they'd walked some distance from the front door before uttering a word.

"What's gone wrong, Nate?" Joseph asked after they moved into the trees. "We didn't expect you tonight."

"I thought my cover was well-established, Joseph, but today someone tried to eliminate Eudora. It was made to look like an accident. They followed us to Petoskey, to the hospital."

"Why Eudora? Why hit her now after all these years? They've known all along where she was."

"That's what troubles me. I have no idea."

"And Cassie?"

"Eudora raised her separate from us. She has no celestial memory."

"The poor child. Yet she's with you now."

"Under protest. She didn't want to come but for her safety I had to bring her along."

"What now?"

"I need to gain her trust. If I can get her to the Peace Lake community she'll remember what she needs to know."

"Seth must be disappointed."

"Not as much as you might think. We were reconciled to not finding Cassie in this lifetime but he does need a wife for stability, to give his career—his political image—a boost. A helpmate. He's turned out to be somewhat of a playboy."

"Ah yes, that sounds like Seth. He does need a helpmate. Without Jane I would be lost."



“Cassie could be a great help to him. The problem is he shows no inclination for marriage.”

Joseph stopped in his tracks and looked up. “You mean he doesn’t like women?”

Nate laughed. “You misunderstand. He likes them too much, the wrong kind for a public figure.”

“Ah, pleasures of the flesh. It happens. Look at Eudora and Charles, the way he left the movement for her.” The men began their slow walk again.

“If I can restore Cassie’s memory of past lives,” Nate said, “she could help Seth, help settle him down, keep him in line before he does something to jeopardize his chance at the White House. He needs a wife. I’m depending upon Cassie to turn him around.”

They headed back toward the house. “But I still don’t understand why they attacked Eudora at this time. She’s old, like Jane and me.”

“It’s a warning to Seth. His percentages in the polls are improving all the time and Eudora is raising campaign funds for him.”

“Then why not target him?”

“A candidate for national office? These men are cowards at heart. They will kill an old woman but they won’t touch those who can fight back or whose death might cause a real manhunt. If a fanatical group assassinated Seth you can be certain the FBI would be on them before they knew what happened.”

“Why won’t they do the same for Eudora, if you told them the circumstances?”

“The Feds wouldn’t buy it. They’re already tired of our talk of peace and we’d lose credibility trying to prove that a fanatical group pushed an elderly woman down a cliff. No, we’ll have to deal with this problem ourselves. After we leave I’ll call Willie. He can handle things.”

They paused in the darkness at the front door before entering the cabin. “And you, Nate, how do you feel about finding Cassie after so many years? She has turned out to be a nice young woman, eh?”

Nate laughed shortly. “She’s more than that. She’s—”

“Ah, what’s wrong with me? I forgot you were together many times before. Can you stand to let her be with Seth this time? After all that’s gone before between the two of you?”

“I have no choice. It’s what we planned.”

“But it will be hard for you.”

“As hard as anything I’ve ever done but I’ll do whatever is necessary to reach our goal.”

“Ah yes, the presidency. And you, Nate, you are the solid one who never fails, eh?”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

"You're past feeling passion then?" Joseph pushed the door open and trod carefully toward the kerosene lamp. "I don't envy you, Nate. I'm glad I have Jane to warm my bed." He smiled. "Listen to her snore."

Nate laid a hand on Joseph's shoulder and lowered his voice. "Thanks for the sanctuary, friend. I'll see you in the morning."

"You sleep with her, eh?" A grin split his lined face.

"To guard her."

"That's all?"

Nate hesitated. "There are no guarantees in life. I'm only human after all."

"Yes, well, no matter. It's all the same in the end."

"All paths lead to Nirvana." Nate laughed. "That's what I'm told."

\* \* \* \* \*

Cassie heard the door open and close and the men moving around below. They carried on a muted conversation that she couldn't hear and then finally Joseph said plainly, "When you are settled, Nate, I'll douse the lamp."

Nate climbed the ladder and, reaching the loft, crawled toward her. "Cassie."

"Over here." She smiled in the darkness, smiled at thinking she had risen above the uproar Nate caused within her and then realized that the familiar flip of her heart and its uneven thudding beneath her ribs hadn't lessened at all.

Below them the light went out and the loft was pitched into inky blackness. Then he was beside her and his shoulder brushed hers and his breath feathered her ear, sending a rush of sensations streaking through her.

"Dark, isn't it?" His voice held a smile.

"No more than usual." She hesitated, steadying her breathing. "I've been in the dark ever since we met." She sensed his silence meant he had no answer for her.

The air stirred when he moved away from her. He left behind his familiar woodsy scent but she could see only his silhouette.

"I wish we had a lamp," she said.

"We don't need light to sleep. There should be some pillows by the window." He moved again. "I was right. Here, catch."

A feather pillow bounced off her arm. Then his shadow was moving toward her, and his hand was on her, guiding her, not for the first time in this long night.

"Pull your pillow up here under the window, Cassie. I'll open it."

All of a sudden obeying Nate seemed the most natural thing in her life. She realized she was falling deeper under his influence, yet the thought didn't make her unhappy. He acted with an underlying element of suppressed energy, charged with the ability to command. An air of electricity surrounded her, bringing a sense of expectation that

something wonderful could happen to her tonight, something that would change the course of her life forever if she had the courage to seize it.

The window opened with a squeak and a sweet pine-scented aroma swept the dusty stagnant odor from the loft. Nate lowered himself to the blankets beside Cassie with a groan.

He was so close his breath brushed her cheek. She felt his fingers on her hair then her cheek. The sensitivity in his touch, his caring, was unmistakable.

She released a long breath. He removed his hand and she felt bereft. She liked the feel of him close to her, liked his touching her hair. This warmth, this connection with another person – with a man – was missing in her life.

She propped herself on an elbow and looked down into his shadowy face. Memories of their kiss on Eudora's boat rushed through her mind. Regardless of her doubts about him, being with Nate seemed right to her. Her vision had adapted to the dark. She could make out his strong features, familiar now even after a short time.

"I need some answers," she said softly. She wanted to touch him. She clenched her hands into fists to keep them occupied. "Who are these people?"

As if sensing Cassie's agitation, he touched her cheek in a calming gesture. "As I've said, they're friends. Nothing to worry about."

She was nearly carried away with the desire to turn her face into his palm and take comfort from feeling its strength against her mouth. Instead she let him continue brushing her cheek in soft caresses while she pursued her questions. "And who were the men at the hospital?"

"Them?" He shifted his weight so he could better face her. "They were following me. I'm sorry about them. I didn't mean to put you at risk."

"I know you didn't," she said, her voice a whisper. "It's all right."

"Thanks for believing that but it isn't all right." He closed his eyes and turned his face away from her.

She placed her hand on his chest, saw his eyes open and then pushed away from him. "Why are we running from these men?"

His sigh was nearly inaudible. He reached up and kneaded her neck muscles gently, as if he could sweep the tension from her with his touch. "We'll talk, Cassie, but there's so much to tell you and it's late."

Instead of relaxing her, his caressing touch energized her. Was he using the late hour as an excuse to avoid giving answers? She had to try one last time.

"I'm sorry to keep you awake but if you can't tell me anything else at least tell me where we are."

He hesitated as if deciding whether he could trust her. "You might say we've taken a step backward."

His answer was disappointing but at least she had him talking. "It *is* primitive here. I didn't know anyone still lived without electricity or running water."

When he didn't answer she continued, "I don't want you to think I'm critical of your friends. I can understand camping out for a vacation but to actually live this way —"

He captured the hand she waved for emphasis. "Can't this wait? So much of what I have to tell you is complicated and we haven't much time."

"We have all night."

He laughed abruptly. "Perhaps it would help if I told you that Jane and Joseph are activists. They keep this cabin as a safe house for others in the movement."

"Activists and movement? That sounds like a cult. Tell me more about them." She paused. "As a beginning, tell me why they seem to know me."

"They knew you before."

"Before?" She searched her memory for some recollection. "Before when? When I was a child?"

Nate unexpectedly put an arm around her and gently rubbed her back. Surprised, she fought an internal battle to keep from leaning into him and letting his warmth and scent envelop her. She reluctantly moved away.

"When did they know me, Nate?" The sound and feel of his name on her lips was delectable. "Why don't I remember them?" She gave in to the desire to rest her head on his shoulder and ended up collapsing against him.

"You will," he murmured. As easily as if she weighed nothing he lifted her onto his chest.

She trembled from the sensations rushing through her. Lord, she couldn't remember ever feeling this good. How long had it been since she had allowed a man to hold her? How long since she'd felt loved and desirable? With an effort she said, "I don't remember meeting them before. I haven't, I'm sure."

Nate's breathing quickened and his breath mingled with hers. "It's all inside you." He kissed the tip of her nose gently then her forehead. "It's all in here." He gently tapped her head with a finger. "You've forgotten."

Forgotten? Beneath her overwhelming desire for him she felt a rush of anxiety. An impression of smoke, people running, fire. *Panic!*

Nate tightened his arms around her. "Don't try to remember now, Cassie. That will come later."

"My parents died in a forest fire," she said through numb lips, still caught up in fear.

"It was deliberately set."

The good sensations had left her. She felt cold, frozen. "How do you know it was set?" But it was coming back to her now — the conversation in the gazebo — Nate saying her parents had been murdered and that Eudora had kept her hidden.

"We have ways of knowing."

His cryptic answer didn't lessen her anxiety. "What about my parents' deaths? Were you there? No, you couldn't have been. You would have been too young."

"Cassie." His caresses soothed her, chased away some of the hurt and brought warmth back to her. "We've talked enough for a while," Nate said. "We leave at dawn. Get some rest now."

"I can't rest. I want to laugh and cry at the same time." She moved away and sat up, eyes fully accustomed to the dark, and looked down at him. "Eudora is hurt." She couldn't admit Eudora was dying, at least not out loud. "I should be with her but you claim I'm in danger. And we're in this cabin and it's like something out of the past. Except it isn't the past. It can't be. Unless..."

She covered her face with her hands. "What's real? What's the truth?"

Nate wrapped his arms around her and cuddled her close to him. He rocked her until she stopped shaking.

"Trust me a little longer." His warmth and the strength of his muscles comforted her. "I promise we'll sort it out later. If I try to explain to you now it won't make any sense." He kissed her cheek. His lips, soft and comforting, dampened a trail across her face. "Please, Cassie, a little longer."

The way he said it, his warmth and his affection, made giving in very enticing. But no matter how attractive he was and no matter how strongly she reacted to him physically, she didn't want her life taken over by a man who'd simply walked out of Mackinac Island's mists one summer morning.

Still, all of her resolve couldn't quench the warm coil of desire Nate aroused deep within her. He knew her from somewhere, she realized, and he was as familiar with her body as he was with the secrets of her life.

The realization hit her. All she had to do was stay with him, stay close to him, and she could learn everything she wanted to know. She could learn who and what she was. Wasn't this what she had wanted all along? Nate held the answers to her quest. Why fight him when what she really wanted was to know him, and herself, better?

She touched his shoulder tentatively then ran curious fingers over the warm skin at the nape of his neck.

"That's nice," he murmured.

"Perhaps my questions can wait for a while," she whispered. Growing bolder, she rubbed the bunched muscles at the base of his neck. A rush of energy passed between them like a flash of heat. Her pulse strengthened and her breathing quickened.

Nate's heart beat steadily beneath hers. "We'll talk later, Cassie. I promise." He held her tightly and stroked her hair with an urgency that seemed unlike him. "Right now there's something more important between us."

His lips met hers in a searching passion that was unlike his deliberate coolness and unlike anything she had expected from him.

On the boat his kiss had been brief, consoling, and she had responded in a similar manner. Now she matched his fire with a primitive need that drove all reason from her mind.

Nate deepened his kiss. His mouth invited her response and urged hers to open beneath his. Her senses heightened. She was lightheaded, almost dazed. It had been so long, so very long, since she had felt a man's passion and she knew that she had never experienced the depth of emotion now surging within her.

"Loosen your hair," he said.

With shaking fingers she released her braid and her hair tumbled over her shoulders.

"Silver and silk," he said. He ran careful fingers through its length, spreading it out on the pillow like a silver cloud around her head. "As soft and sweet as the rest of you."

She lay half-dazed looking up at him, her arms around his neck, feeling his delicious masculine warmth and strength envelop her. She gave in to the feeling of belonging that swept through her. He was a man and she a woman. And it all felt so right.

As if sensing her acquiescence, Nate drew slow coaxing fingers along her chin, down her neck then, slipping his hand under her, along the graceful curve of her spine. At her waist he lingered, rubbing gently with his thumbs before moving on, brushing fingertips lightly, sensuously, across her hips. A rush of heat moved through her and she trembled beneath his hands.

Staring at him, memorizing his face through half-closed eyes, she saw a muscle dance at the corner of his jaw. Their eyes met and his were no longer inscrutable but burned for her in a way she thought she might never see in a man's eyes.

"Cassie. Cassie, my love," he murmured.

Could he love her already, she wondered. No. She knew the difference between love and passion but her senses, so long held in check, were racing wildly out of control. *Stop now before it's too late.*

Yet she remained in his arms, tingling under his touch, trembling with the feel of him against her.

"It's time, love," he said, pulling her under him. "Time."

Was it really time for this? Time for intimacy with a stranger in a dark loft? Could she really give herself to Nate, a man she barely knew? She was aroused and eager for lovemaking but evasion and fear of the unknown were lifelong habits.

"I've only been with a man once. A long time ago," she whispered, wondering if he would care or if it would make any difference.

"Good."

"Good?" Her heart leapt. Pleasure surged through her. What she had long considered a problem had dissolved with one word. Nate was pleased by her inexperience. Perhaps he cared more for her than she thought he did.

“Don’t worry about anything.” His voice was husky, as if every syllable cost him an effort.

Panic overtook her. “What about protection?”

“It’s okay. Don’t worry.” He was over her then, covering her with his muscular body. He felt good. *Ah God, just this once*, she prayed. Just this once let her know and enjoy the love of a man. What, who, could it hurt?

“Just enjoy, Cassie.” As he spoke he trailed kisses down her neck. “I promise you, nothing bad will happen.”

Her heart beat erratically. Her flushed skin burned. She was taut with desire and in no condition to think coherently. *Don’t do this*, common sense told her. *She didn’t know this man. She shouldn’t*. But she could. She believed him and she sighed deeply as he let his weight down on her. She could and she would. She was nearly thirty, not a scared girl. She wanted him as she had never wanted anyone.

She expected him to undress her. At least she expected him to ask her to take off her jeans—something more than this sweet touching and gentle rocking that awakened extraordinary feelings, feelings that increased with each erotic movement.

She moaned with enjoyment. Nate’s mouth covered hers and took the sound from her, mingling it with his own deep groan. Belatedly aware of Joseph and Jane somewhere below, Cassie stifled her outcries after that first quick gasp of pleasure.

She couldn’t stand it any longer. She thought she would surely burst from happiness. She felt Nate hesitate.

“Don’t move,” he said.

Every inch of him was pressed against her in the most intimate of ways and every cell of her being pulsed with pleasure. Surely they would undress now.

Suddenly, when she thought she couldn’t endure any more, an intense glow filled the room and penetrated her mind and body with its clear, crystal essence. Then their world was spinning. Nate and she were turning with it as if they were one entity, one body.

A kaleidoscope of pulsing light rained down and the music of a thousand chords suffused her being. The melodies sang of peace, incomprehensible peace, endless peace. And for an eternity she floated weightless in the light and the music, her fusion with rapture complete. Then quickly, far too quickly, she felt the hard attic floor beneath her back and the press of Nate upon her.

Opening her eyes, she saw that the loft was filled with golden light. In Nate’s dark eyes she could see her own reflection, her hair spread around her head in a halo. She was filled with warmth as if she had used her power.

She sensed that her pleasure had been not so much physical as spiritual. Was this the pleasure of the angels? Was that what she had forgotten? Or had she lost her mind along with her memory?

## Chapter Nine

She woke to a rooster's crowing. Dawn's light revealed Nate lying beside her on the floor of the rough, unfinished loft. She stretched contentedly and then remembered their lovemaking last night.

What had happened between them? What had she committed to, if anything? Had she given her most intimate self in unprotected sex to a man she barely knew? No, she hadn't. Her last thoughts had been of something else, of soaring then falling. She looked down. Her shirt was buttoned, her jeans fastened. Twisted from sleep, they pulled uncomfortably at her waist. She couldn't remember taking off her clothes or putting them back on again. And she knew she hadn't. But then what had happened between them? What sort of sexual experience was this?

The cock crowed again and Nate stirred.

She needed to think things through before he woke. She moved from under his arm. If she could slip away –

"Where are you going?" he asked, his voice husky with sleep.

Anxious to escape, she used the first excuse that came to mind. "To use the bathroom."

"I'll go with you." Yawning, he stretched with a groan.

"No, that's okay, I'll find it myself."

"Cassie." He said her name with authority and his hand shot out and gripped her arm. "It's outside." He rubbed his head. "An outhouse. I've a flashlight somewhere."

"An outhouse? And a flashlight? You didn't mention it last night."

He smiled. "Ah yes, last night." Before she could protest he brought her hand to his lips and kissed her fingertips. "Thanks for last night. It was great."

She pulled her hand away. "I'm not sure." She wanted to talk about the experience, but not now. She needed time to think.

"Don't worry. You're a natural," he said with a laugh.

Dismayed by his lighthearted attitude, she walked toward the ladder.

Nate followed with the flashlight.

"The light from the window will do," she said. Annoyance was strong in her voice. She desperately wanted some time alone but Nate was close behind her.

"I think we might need the flashlight," he said.

She made her way down the ladder and then Nate was beside her, lighting their way through the house. Soft murmuring came from Joseph and Jane's room.



Outside a mist hung close to the ground. It concealed the outbuildings and gave the cabin a supernatural atmosphere. "This way," Nate said. "It's over there." He shone the light on a small shed.

Nate handed her the flashlight. "You'll be all right on your own, won't you?"

"Of course I will," she said and set off into the fog.

Unreasonably annoyed, she completed her visit quickly then nearly ran toward the light now showing in the cabin's windows. Jane must be up. Poor woman, subjected to such primitive living in a country as wealthy as this one. No wonder Joseph had protested so vehemently last night. She was surprised that Nate could stand to see his friends live such a poverty-stricken life. Yet they had seemed happy enough until he mentioned a mix-up.

Inside, Jane fussed with the wood stove. "Ah, Cassie, did you rest well?"

Wondering if Jane had heard sounds of their lovemaking, she felt her cheeks color. "Everything was fine."

"The men are feeding the animals. The oatmeal will be ready when they get back. There's sausage and cornbread too."

"Please don't bother, Jane. I don't need much to eat."

"It's no bother," the woman said cheerfully. "I keep a starter in the cold springhouse." She slid an iron pan into the oven. "It's what we have every morning." She started toward the bedroom.

"Jane, do you and Joseph *have* to live this way?"

Jane stared blankly at her.

"What I mean is I hate seeing you work so hard."

"We don't have to live here. It's our choice. You heard what Nate said last night. We're free to leave if we want."

"Yes, but I thought..." In the awkward silence she sensed she had offended the older woman. "I don't mean there's anything wrong with your life here. It just seems so difficult. So primitive for the twenty-first century."

Jane shrugged. "I suppose. Life is what you make of it."

Cassie sighed. At least she had tried. "I suppose."

She climbed the ladder to the loft and started rolling the quilts into bedrolls. She found her hair clip in them and hastily gathered her hair in a neat ponytail. Then she fluffed the pillows, set them against a wall and closed the window. She realized she had left her purse and duffel in the car last night. She'd been so confused when they arrived she hadn't thought to ask Nate about her belongings.

Nate. Her involvement with him had taken a full turn since they had reached this place. How long had she known him? All of forty-eight hours, she supposed, if she counted from the moment their eyes met on the ferry dock.

Their lovemaking had blanked out all that had happened before. Now she recalled last night's conversation around the oak table. The men had argued over something. It had to do with Seth Hawthorne and Cassie.

She heard Jane greet the returning men. She couldn't stay in the loft. She had to go down and face them, face Nate. Why, after years of accepting her isolation, had she practically thrown herself at a man she hardly knew? She had no answer to that question. There was no denying Nate Chambray held some sort of power over her. The thought troubled her.

"Breakfast, Cassie," Jane called from below.

Down the ladder once more and feeling more embarrassed than angry this time, she joined the others. "May I help?"

"You are our guest," Joseph answered. "Please sit down. I'll give Jane the help she needs."

She sat beside Nate and watched Joseph set the table and fill mugs with coffee. He put a pan of hot cornbread on a cast iron trivet and placed a pot of honey beside it. Jane brought bowls of oatmeal swimming in cream and a side dish of sausage.

They waited, hands folded, while Joseph asked a blessing.

Out of the corner of her eye she slanted a look at Nate, hoping to catch a glimpse of him unaware, and found him watching her. He smiled and winked. She glanced away.

Joseph said, "Amen."

Cassie lifted her spoon and dug into the oatmeal. She cast her gaze down and said nothing. The trouble seemed settled between the men. They ate their fill in good humor.

Afterward, gathering at the door for goodbyes, Jane's eyes filled with tears. "Cassie sweet, we'll meet again." Jane wrapped her arms around Cassie and then stood back to get a better look. "Once lost and now found. I'm so glad you came."

She was reminded of what Nate had said about her being lost and not understanding what he meant at all. And she felt a kinship with this older woman who might look like Cassie's grandmother if she had one. Cassie hugged Jane then released her.

Joseph shook her hand. "Don't be timid, girl. You have time yet to complete your duties on this earth."

Uneasy and puzzled by his comment, she nodded in agreement although she had no idea what he meant.

Nate raised a hand in farewell. "Thanks again."

"We only share what belongs to the world," Joseph answered.

Cassie assumed the car was hidden in the woods. She followed Nate down the rutted path in silence. After a few minutes he halted. "This is the place."

She looked into the woods. All she saw were trees and more trees. There was no sign of a car or a road. No sign of life at all. A chill passed through her. "Where's the car?"

"It's nearby. Let's rest a minute." He indicated a tall pine tree.

"Something's strange here. What's wrong?"

"It's okay, Cassie." Nate made himself comfortable under the tree. He reached out. "Come sit beside me."

Puzzled, she stared at him.

"Give in on this one," he said. "Trust me, you need to sleep for the transition."

Confused, she didn't know what to think. She felt a strong inclination to please him. This man had given her great pleasure last night and had introduced her to an entirely new world. She dropped beside him, warmed by the memory of an experience that had seemed almost angelic.

Then Nate's hand was on her forehead. "Good night, love."

\* \* \* \* \*

A blaring horn jolted her awake. "What?" She was in the passenger seat of Nate's SUV and struggled up from sleep in time to see a red pickup truck speed off in the opposite direction.

"Damn fool was passing on a curve." Nate took his gaze from the road and looked her over. His frown turned into a smile. "Are you okay?"

"I'm as okay as I can be without any idea of where I am." She stretched an aching shoulder and slowly moved other stiff muscles. "Where are we headed?"

"That's for you to say. Where do you want to go now?"

Concern for Eudora crowded everything from her mind. "I'd like to go back to the hospital." To rent a car in Petoskey, she added silently.

"That wouldn't be wise. They'll be watching for us."

She was fully awake now. "Who's watching?" Then she remembered and the frustration of the last few days rose again. "Those men must be watching for you, Nate. No one's ever followed me before. You might not be able to go to the hospital but I can. And you shouldn't try to stop me."

"I told you last night, Cassie. These men are dangerous."

"They're dangerous for you, not for me."

He shook his head. "Cassie—"

"I just want to get back to my normal life." She tried to keep her voice steady but she felt her lower lip tremble.

"Was your life ever normal?"

"Of course it was."

"Cassie?"

From the moment she had learned the meaning of normal, she had known she was different. But how could he know that? "Nate, I don't want to argue with you. I really

don't." And she realized she *really* didn't want to argue with him. Affection for him washed over her. "But I need some answers, and...I need some time alone."

"Okay. Ask me what you want. I'll try my best."

She knew he would but he hadn't finished his thought. Try his best to *what?* Deceive her? "First of all, who are you? And how did Joseph and Jane know me?" Questions tumbled out. "And what's going to happen to Eudora?"

"Eudora, hmm. I know you're worried about her. I'll find a pay phone. You can call the hospital and ask about her."

"Don't you have a cell phone?"

"I do but it's in the trunk. It isn't working."

"I brought mine with me when I left the house." She looked in the backseat. "Where are my purse and my other things?"

"They're in the trunk. I put them there for safekeeping last night."

"Well, we need to stop. I want to get my purse and use my phone."

"I don't think it's working either."

She carefully let out her breath. She didn't suppose he'd let her use it even if it were. "You're not a very good liar."

"No, I guess I'm not but the phones still won't work. There's no cell service in this part of the Northern woods." He squeezed her hand.

His touch warmed her. She suspected he was lying but it no longer seemed as important. She shook her head. "I know I'll feel better when I hear that Eudora's all right."

"She's all right, Cassie. No matter what happens your aunt's future is assured, wherever she is."

"She's not okay if she's..." She couldn't go on. She shook her head with determination. "Not if she's dead," she choked out. There, she had said it. The hurt hadn't lessened but the tightness in her chest had eased.

"You only think you need her now, Cassie. As your memory returns the anxiety will pass. You'll feel safer."

She studied her hands as she tried to make sense of what he said. "You're talking riddles. And I don't believe that I've lost my memory." She had a sudden insight. "That's a story you've made up for your own reasons."

"No, I'm not making it up. I'm speaking metaphysically. All the power you'll ever need and everything you need to know lies within you. All you need to do is recall it."

"At this moment I don't feel at all powerful. I feel confused and trapped. And you haven't answered my other questions."

"What haven't I answered?" he asked with a taunting smile.

Here they went again, around in a circle. Exasperated, she folded her arms and stared at him. In his dark eyes she saw reflected the memory of their lovemaking. Her

irritation faded. Awed by her own personal memories of the experience, she felt wondrously alive. Except for one thing. One nagging worry.

"About last night." Her face grew warm. "This might sound foolish. Promise you won't laugh?"

His affectionate look gave the promise she wanted. She took the chance. "We did make love last night, didn't we?"

He eased back on his speed and contented himself with following the car ahead at a leisurely distance. Then he took her hand and rubbed its palm gently with his thumb. "We made love, that's for sure. The whole ten yards of it."

She felt relieved that he hadn't ridiculed her for asking. "Surely it wasn't a football game."

He smiled reminiscently. "I'd call it soul-shattering, earth-moving love." He grinned. "At least it was for me. I've felt great ever since." He looked smug and self-satisfied.

Cassie's warm glow faded. That wasn't exactly what she had hoped he would say. But then a declaration of undying love was probably too much to expect from a one-night stand.

He went on, "It was a long while since the last time. And I thank you for the gift."

She shrugged hopelessly. He was so casual, so offhand, about their time together. She felt so innocent compared to this political campaign manager. She shook her head at her dilemma. Tears wet her eyes.

"Cassie. I'm sorry. I was only thinking of myself. It was good between us, wasn't it?" He stroked her arm. "You were, ah, pleased."

"Yes, it was good," she admitted. "It was beautiful. I never thought..." Her throat tightened at the memory of her lonely years. "I never thought it would be so good. The thing is," she rushed on before he could change the subject, "I can't remember exactly everything that happened." She waited for his reaction.

He laughed. "I'm not surprised. Your mind was busy with other things."

She drew a deep breath. "I know this sounds foolish, Nate, but I'm worried about birth control." At last the worry was out. "Did you use anything?" She was glad now that she'd asked. "I know you said you didn't need to but I don't understand. It's all muddled together in my mind."

He gave her a fond look. "Birth control wasn't necessary between us. Not unless you wanted a child."

The thought startled her. "I don't want a child. At least not right now but," she paused, a hint of disbelief coloring her voice, "don't you have it wrong? Birth control's for prevention, not pregnancies." She laughed lightly, amused that he had missed her point.

He laughed and then rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Well, just forget I said that. It's no big thing."

“No big thing? Maybe not to you but it’s important to me.” She watched him read the disappointment, the emotion in her voice.

His mouth twisted in regret then he broke into a smile. “I’m sorry. I’m so happy just to be with you I forgot—”

“That’s a change. Now you’re the one forgetting things!”

He laughed. “I forgot you’re like an untutored child in a woman’s body.”

She glared at him in disbelief. “Of all the insulting things to say! Okay, here’s a compliment for you. You’re the most disgusting—”

“Whoa, Cassie, hold it. What I mean is we made love *our* special way. You have nothing to worry about.” He slowed the car. “I see a store ahead. There’s bound to be a phone.”

She turned the idea over in her mind. Her doubts had been correct. Nate hadn’t violated her. But what had happened? She had felt *it*. She’d known perfection.

Nate pulled in front of a country store and stopped at the gas pumps. “I’ll gas up while you call the hospital.”

## Chapter Ten

Nate reached into the glove box and handed Cassie a roll of quarters. "Use these instead of a phone card. I don't want the call traced."

She took the quarters and walked toward the pay phone at the edge of the parking lot, wondering if she should tell Nate about her psychic powers and the energy she had felt pass between them. He had spoken of her loving him. Could she possibly love him after knowing him only a short time? But he had suggested they had met before. *Do you remember me, Cassie?* He had asked her when they first met. What was that about?

She blocked all thoughts from her mind and concentrated solely on the phone call. After she was connected with the hospital she gripped the phone while she was transferred to the ICU unit.

"Mrs. West's condition is unchanged," the nurse said after Cassie identified herself. "Critical but unchanged."

"Thank you." Critical meant alive, even if just barely. She let out a relieved sigh.

"And I've a message for you," the nurse added. "Your aunt's physician wants to talk with you. He wants your phone number."

Nate was sitting in the car studying a map. It wasn't possible for them to wait at this rural gas station, actually a rundown country store, for Eudora's doctor to call.

"I'll call when I'm at a phone where I can be reached."

"And the admissions department needs a signature on your aunt's file."

"I was called away suddenly but I'll return as soon as I can."

"I'll note that on her chart."

Cassie hung up feeling better than before she called. Eudora still clung to life. Nate had said she was all right wherever she was, in whatever condition. Though his philosophy was hard to accept, the thought was comforting. *Hang in there, Auntie. I love you.* Eudora heard her plea. Cassie was certain.

At her approach, Nate climbed out of the car. "How did it go?"

She handed him the remaining coins. "She's critical but I guess I'm getting used to the idea that I might lose her." Her voice broke at the end.

He put an arm around her. "Cassie, whatever happens —"

"I understand." His compassion, his touch, soothed her. "Whatever happens, Eudora's all right."

"And so are you."

"I'm not as certain of that but I hope I am." She thought for a moment. Some feeling, some nuance, troubled her. "Nate, I want to be with Eudora. I feel as if I *need* to be with her."

"They're waiting there, the men I told you about."

"The men again, our mysterious opponents. What makes you think they're waiting for me at the hospital?" She needed to take some action. Riding around the state in Nate's car was too passive. She needed to do something, anything. "I'm sick of worrying about those men. I've had enough of this cat and mouse game." She placed her hands on her hips. "I don't want to run away from something I don't understand. Let's meet with whoever's looking for us. Let's find out what they want."

He was shaking his head even as she spoke. "They don't want to talk. We've tried. It won't work. They want us gone."

She heard the futility in his voice. He was convinced that he was right, or at least, he was certain what he said was the truth. "Did you mean they want us gone as in *gone* or gone as in *dead*?" she asked.

"They're not above killing to get what they want. Remember Eudora's *supposed* accident?"

A chill shook her. "Don't tell me that. It's beyond belief. People don't kill for just any reason at all. Why would anyone push Eudora down the steps? She's harmless."

"I can't say for certain but it could be a warning. There's more involved than you suspect, Cassie. You'll have to trust me on this."

"Are you sure they attacked her?"

"There was no reason for those men to be at the hospital unless they caused her fall."

"You could be wrong. They could have been bystanders like others at the party. Or maybe they're police investigating the accident."

"No way."

She hesitated. "Okay." Clearly she wasn't going to convince him. She would put aside her doubts. Out in the middle of nowhere it made sense to go along with Nate, or at least pretend to understand his viewpoint. "Do you think Eudora's still in danger from them?"

"She's in the safest place possible. I'm worried about *your* life now."

"Me?" Her doubts returned. "Why me?" Her eyes narrowed. "They're probably after you, Nate. That's what you told me. And you recognized them. Common sense says you're their target." She hesitated. If she were right then Nate might be using her as an unwitting shield, as a hostage.

She lifted her gaze. Nate was looking at her with an affectionate expression, almost as if he read her thoughts and was amused by them.

She colored slightly. "I just don't know what to believe." She stammered to a halt.



He spread his arms and, amazing herself, she moved into his embrace easily, accepting the reassurance she found there. She hadn't realized until he hugged her how threatened she felt despite her protest. She *must* be doing the right thing. This simply must be right.

Cassie rested her head against his shoulder and he stroked her hair. Her doubts receded. She didn't feel safe but she no longer felt alone, and that was comforting.

They leaned against the SUV with Nate holding her within the circle of his arms. She breathed his familiar scent and forgot about the outside world. A car stopped, bought gas and moved on. When Nate kissed her brow and released her she had finally found a measure of serenity.

He opened the car door. "We need to leave."

Reassured and warm from his embrace, she slipped into the front seat and watched through the windshield as he walked in front of the car to the driver's side. She liked the way he moved. It signaled confidence and good intention.

It was his intention that heightened his attraction for her. Nate was good-looking in a craggy way but there was nothing that would immediately capture anyone's attention. It was in his eyes, in his gaze, that his difference showed. He turned its power on her as he slid behind the steering wheel.

"Are you ready to move on?"

She nodded, deeply affected by his presence. Still, she didn't entirely trust his influence over her emotions. She realized she hadn't called Sarah as planned yet they were taking off again on some sort of trek that Nate and his friends at the cabin had in mind for her.

Worst of all she had the suspicion that Nate's extraordinary lovemaking last night had been a move to win her loyalty, or even to subordinate her will to his.

Beside him in the powerful SUV, she felt the old suspicion growing with every minute. They shared an affinity but was Nate really what he seemed? From his discussion in the gazebo with Eudora she knew he had plans for her, plans he was keeping to himself. Even on the island he had talked his way into her life, and Jane and Joseph had played their part also, with Jane sending her to the loft knowing Nate would...

She fought against believing their intimacy was part of a plot on Nate's part and turned her thoughts away from that idea. There must be another more rational explanation for his behavior. If he would only tell her more. He was so quiet and self-sufficient. Almost smug. She would have to force answers from him. Reasoning with him had failed and with that failure her determination to know the truth had grown.

She rode, lost in her thoughts, for half an hour before she remembered Sarah. "I wish we hadn't left the store so quickly. I wanted to call Sarah."

"You can call her from another phone."

"Where are we anyway?" She looked for a road sign that would give a clue.

"The last sign said we were entering Antrim County."

She had been preoccupied and had missed the sign. Antrim was a large county in the northwest corner of Michigan's Lower Peninsula. She knew that much. His answer had been purposefully vague, she realized, but she wouldn't call him on it. Not yet.

After the night's sleep and the good farm breakfast she was feeling primed for action. She was determined to find the relatives in Kalkaska that Eudora had mentioned in the hospital.

Clouds gathered overhead and a light rain started falling in a drizzle she recognized as lake effect. Cassie felt sympathy for the residents of a rusting trailer they passed where overalls hung in the rain on a sagging clothesline.

Wrapped in inner musings, she let Nate drive her through the northern hills with no complaint until her conscience again kicked in. She thought of Sarah and the Burtons and the Mackenzies and who knew how many others supposedly eating Sunday brunch on West Cottage's veranda. They must wonder what had become of her and the report on Eudora that she had promised.

"Nate, I have to call Sarah. She'll be frantic."

"She'll know enough to call the hospital and check on Eudora's condition herself."

She gave him a surprised look. "Probably, but they might not give her the information and Eudora's friends might be concerned about me if I don't call."

He met her gaze. Her heart fluttered but she hardened her resolve.

"How well do you know Eudora's friends?" he asked.

"Only through her."

"Then they'll think you're the selfish niece who's gone off on her own after checking on her aunt." He smiled as if he had solved all her problems with a few words.

Nate's lighthearted manner troubled her. She was anxious about how things were going and in no mood for joking. "You're running out of reasons for keeping me away from a phone."

Only his eyes, those expressive eyes with the dark lashes, gave any hint of the humor he felt at besting her.

"Nate," she said when he didn't answer, "I can't in good conscience just disappear and leave Eudora's guests to sit around West Cottage at the mercy of a day servant. I should have called Sarah from that phone back there!"

"I couldn't chance it. They might have traced your call to the hospital."

A chill hit her. "They're that good?" No, they weren't that good. Nate was too quick with the answers. Her trust in him was evaporating the more he talked.

"They're fast, and they have all the equipment they need while we have only our wits."

Something was missing. "You're stressing the threat from these men but I can't feel any sense of danger." She gave him a hard look. "If you're trying to frighten me into staying with you it won't work. I need to be on my own."

She waited for a response but there was none.

She stiffened. "Talk to me, Nate. Tell me what's going on."

"You'll know everything later, my love."

Love? The endearment, too easily tossed out, hit her wrong. A warning, one of Eudora's sayings, leapt to mind. *Nothing worthwhile comes easily.* A man who spoke of love this casually wanted something else.

"Later might be too late," she said. "I need to know now why we're running from these men."

A muscle in his jaw twitched. Indecision or annoyance, she thought, or amusement. "Or I should say *you're* running from them. I've never run from anyone in my life. Never had to before I met you."

Either Nate was thinking it over or he'd decided to ignore her outburst. His silence spoke louder than words. "Nate! I need to know what's going on."

He shook his head almost imperceptibly.

"You're going to keep on acting like a clam then?"

The silence between them was nearly palpable. Okay. Getting what she wanted was going to call for desperate measures. She had to think of something. She wondered if she could bluff him into talking.

"Tell me what's going on," she said. "I mean it. Tell me or I'll jump out of the car."

"You're crazy." But the car slowed.

She wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. She'd never acted this frantically in her entire life. "Maybe I am crazy. So much has happened lately I can't really tell." She put a hand on the door handle and stared at him.

His mouth was set in a thin line. *Please, Nate, she prayed, please be reasonable. Don't make me follow through on my threat.* The car slowed further.

"Are there actually men looking for us?" she asked.

He nodded. "A special group of fanatics," he ground out. "Sometimes they disguise themselves as police."

His answer gave her time to draw a relieved breath. "Good."

"No, it's not good." His look was as hard as granite. "They're set on eliminating us."

"Us? The two of us, or more?"

"Our group, Cassie. People like us."

People like us. The thought brought hope that Nate shared her talents. Her heart thudded against her rib cage.

He continued speaking as if unaware of the commotion roaring through her chest. "We think we have an informer who's revealed our purpose for manifesting at this time."

Informer? Manifesting? What did that mean? Her thoughts spun with more questions but she feared she would get Nate's silent treatment again if she asked too many at one time. A wait-and-see attitude might encourage him to talk.

Instead he lapsed into silence. Shaken by what she had heard, she let him drive without distraction while she thought it over. Nate and she were the same. There were others like them, and a group of men that had orders to kill them. Had he said kill? She couldn't remember. She did remember the excitement she'd felt when he'd said they were alike.

*Nate and she were the same.* In what way? she wondered. Did they possess the same powers? Was that why their lovemaking was unlike anything she had ever experienced or heard about? He had loved her with a thoroughness that... The memory of it heated her cheeks.

Ahead, a traffic light strung across the highway blinked red. Nate slowed the car. Beside the road a green and white sign said "Torch Lake ten miles". Cassie wanted to get Nate talking. His continued silence made her uneasy and she wanted to know where they were going. "Are we heading for Torch Lake?" she asked.

"Hmm."

"Does that mean yes?"

He smiled and nodded.

She wanted to know more about their destination but she would settle for that much. Actually, now that she had Nate's attention, she was thinking about a much more interesting subject and planned to follow it tenaciously to its end.

She cast him a sideways glance, wondering if he could read her thoughts the way she sometimes picked up impressions from other people. If he could he would know her reaction to him. Yet as strong as that attraction was, right now she wanted information more than anything. A lot of questions had been left unanswered. One in particular troubled her. A personal one.

"Nate?"

He looked as if he'd forgotten she was there. "What?" His tone was quiet with no trace of his earlier annoyance.

"I can wait for most answers but one thing troubles me."

He glanced from the road with an inquisitive look.

"I know we talked about our lovemaking last night," she said, "but I'm still not sure what exactly happened."

He caressed her knee with a touch so light she wasn't sure he'd done it except for the sensations streaking upward along her thigh. "You're worrying about it, aren't you?" he asked.

“Worried? No.” Pride stiffened her. “Not at all.” Even as she denied it she knew he was too intuitive not to read her correctly. “I was wondering though, does one of the things about people—as you said, people like us—have to do with our way of—” She broke off, not sure how to continue.

“Making love?” he finished the sentence for her.

“Well?” she said, encouraging his answer.

He gave her an affectionate look but didn’t answer.

“What was unusual about sex between us?”

“You’re not giving up, are you?”

“No,” she said firmly.

He rubbed his chin. She watched his jaws clench and was thoroughly pleased by annoying him. “So?” she prompted.

“So... You probably learned in Psych 101 that sex is an instinctual drive like eating and surviving. If you’re not interested in sex something is wrong.” He slanted a look at her.

She nodded her agreement. She had buried her interest in the opposite sex so deeply for years as a result of a bad experience in college that she had thought it would never be revived. Last night he had proven her wrong.

He continued without any urging. “I would make a solid guess that you don’t have a problem with sex.” He grinned wickedly.

“Was that what you were doing?” She paused. “Were you conducting research on me last night? To see if we are alike?”

He slowed the car and stared at her. “I can see where you might think that. You’re right about one thing, Cassie. We do have special ways of loving.” They came over the crest of yet another hill. “Is that what you wanted to know?”

## Chapter Eleven

Nate spoke in the same low tone as before, sounding almost as if he were running ideas through his mind before speaking. "I want to level with you but I'm not sure you'll understand."

"Try me, Nate." She wanted to keep her voice free of impatience but failed. "I'm not exactly a teenager. I'm twenty-nine and I'm not dumb."

"I didn't mean—"

"I'm a career librarian with two degrees."

"I get the idea." He smiled and his face crinkled into the assortment of lines and ridges she had admired from the beginning. "I didn't mean you weren't capable of understanding. I meant what I have to tell you is somewhat...I guess you could call it *esoteric*."

"Hmm. Secret? For the initiated only?"

"Yeah. It's about energy and how it comes together. You know how Einstein said everything is energy, even things that appear solid? Well, Teilhard de Chardin wrote about all consciousness moving toward oneness. An Omega point."

He glanced at her to see if she were following him. She nodded encouragingly. "Go on."

"Well, if you put those theories together with India's yogic schools' belief that our bodies have physical energy centers called chakras or lotus centers, then you can start to see where I'm coming from."

"I've heard of chakras. The highest is here." She touched the top of her head. "Then here." She pointed to the middle of her forehead, between her eyes, and thought of the night before when he had warmed that area with the palm of his hand before she went into a light trance. She didn't want to think about that. "The next is here." She touched her throat, which seemed suddenly tighter.

"You're familiar with Eastern thought then?"

She smiled. "Only from the writings of Joseph Campbell, the philosopher, and Deepak Chopra's work, of course."

He raised an inquiring eyebrow. The rain had stopped but the sky remained cloudy. Nate hadn't put on sunglasses. His interest in her was clear in his unguarded eyes.

"I've led a quiet life," she explained. "I read a lot. All those years at the library—I'm a voracious reader. Not much of a social life, I guess."

"Why am I not surprised?" He smiled.

His affection seemed almost tangible. It touched her at her deepest level and filled her with warmth.

"But I don't want to talk about myself," she said. "Tell me, does the reason why we're running from these men, the men you keep mentioning, have something to do with energy, with the human energy system?"

She adjusted her seat belt and tucked her knees under her. The SUV was eating up the miles quickly and comfortably exactly as it had been designed to do.

"We're running from them because we're unlike other people, and that difference comes from awareness about cosmic energy that others don't have. Because of our knowledge we're seen as a threat to their power. What happened last night in the loft is an example of what we can do."

She remained silent, listening and waiting.

He tapped the steering wheel, checked the rearview mirror before he continued. "When we were together last night we didn't have to worry about contraception because my group has moved beyond mere physical sexuality. We practice a form of suprasexuality. It's a joining of mind and energy accompanied by physical arousal that results in the merging of vibrating light particles of two energy systems, a blending of two persons."

He looked at her. "Like the two of us experienced. Do you see?"

"I think so." She was more puzzled than she would admit.

"The Eastern philosophy of chakras suggests that these energy centers control the body's vital energy. They control biological urges, the basic urges of survival, sexuality and...conquest."

He covered her hand with his. "Spiritual love, the love we experienced last night, requires awakening of the higher center known as the heart center. Heart-centered love doesn't come from lustful thoughts or reproductive instincts. Spiritual love arises from many sources, one of which is the need we sense in others. The greater the need, the greater our outpouring of love. To fill the void."

Thinking it over, Cassie felt disappointment followed quickly by a flash of anger. "Nate? Last night did you sense a lack in me, a void? Did you feel sorry for me? Obligated to make love to me?"

"No—"

"Was everything we did for *my* neediness, for *my* pleasure? Didn't you feel the same..." She paused, remembering the passion that had passed between them. "Was it merely *kindness* on your part?" In her anger and disappointment she felt like yelling. Instead she looked out the window at the trees and low brush that blurred as the car sped down the rural road.

"Cassie?" She turned and saw him frown.

"I was more than kind," he said. "I was an active partner and," he paused, "I shared your energy and your pleasure."

"Oh you did? I'm so glad for you." Her post-adolescent daydreams about romantic love were shattering into a million angry pieces. Their relationship wasn't a romance, she saw now. It was scientific, a philosophical nightmare.

"I'm sorry you're angry."

His apology helped. His sincerity showed in his eyes. "I wasn't angry last night," she said. "At the time the experience was beautiful. It seemed natural between us, but now..." She paused. "Now I feel..."

"Used?" He finished her thought for her.

She stared at her hands, clenched tightly in her lap. "It's nice to feel you understand but do you have to finish my sentences for me?"

He ignored her anger. "I do understand you, Cassie. Unfortunately, you're confusing loving someone with making love."

"Aren't they the same?"

"Perhaps, but as spiritual awareness grows the physical aspect fades. Love occurs on a more spiritual level."

"Only spiritually?" In his embrace last night, she had been aroused. She could have sworn he had also. He had trembled, and his breathing... But he was right. They hadn't actually joined physically, at least she didn't think — "How do they... How do people like you... How do you have children if you only make love spiritually?"

"We don't make love only in spirit."

His answer only added to her confusion.

"If we wanted a family, Cassie, then there would have been physical joining."

She drew a shaky breath. "I wondered about our clothes." But she had almost been in a stupor from a combination of exhaustion and exhilaration. She'd been only half-conscious of what was happening. "We didn't undress, did we?"

"We didn't undress, but if you're disappointed we can do that too. I'm a man, human in every way." He smiled a smile of good humor, pride and triumph.

"I never doubted that!"

He laughed. "But you doubt it now."

"No."

He took his gaze away from the road long enough to give her an affectionate look. "We can pair physically later, Cassie. Then you'll understand why our group prefers spiritual blending."

*We'll pair physically.* She thought the way he said it sounded clinical, almost as if he were teaching a class. As if she was a child needing instruction. She didn't like the feeling. Not one bit. She resented being ignorant of what he knew.

Nate glanced at her. She turned away so he couldn't see her discomfort.

"You've experienced sexual pleasure before, haven't you, with someone else?"

She shrugged, not as comfortable with discussing her sex life as he might be.



"Compare that experience with what happened between us last night. You'll see what I mean."

She saw. She couldn't put into words what she had felt with Nate. It was too special, too far outside anything she had experienced. She did know that his new role as her teacher left her feeling oddly depressed. Still, since she had come this far she wanted to explore his philosophy further.

"Nate, if there's nothing physical between a man and a woman does that mean you love everyone with the same intensity? Is no one special to you?"

He glanced in the rear mirror then turned to her. "Each person is special and precious."

"But aren't some more than others? Doesn't someone special, some woman, mean more to you than Joseph and Jane?" She held her breath. "Perhaps your mother or your wife?"

He looked troubled. "I don't remember my mother and I don't have a wife."

Her heart gave an excited thud.

"Even if I did, everyone's loved the same," he said.

"Loved the same? You can't mean it."

"Yes, the same."

She shook her head, not certain she could imagine what living with Nate's group would mean. "Do you live in a commune like in the seventies? Is there group sex where everyone makes love with everyone else?"

"You can't make that analogy. Actually there's very little sexual activity. Other things are more important."

She asked herself what could be more important than love between a man and a woman. Then she realized that before she met Nate she might have believed it possible.

"If I understand correctly what you've said, we're pure energy and our physical bodies are not as important. They're something like clothes we put on to hold our spirit?"

"No, not quite. They're more like spacesuits. We need physical bodies to function in this world. Otherwise we would all be like ghosts, mist. We might float away."

"Are you laughing at me again?"

"Sorry."

He didn't look it one bit. She thought for a minute. Something was missing. "Then what about health? Do you get sick like the rest of us?"

"If there's a problem like an accident or an occasional energy disruption we have healers who treat energy fields."

"No doctors?"

"If it's necessary we see a medical doctor. Mostly we have no disease because we're at ease in our bodies."

“But what about Jane and Joseph?” She had him now. “They showed signs of aging.”

“That’s a natural consequence of growing older. Our physical bodies still need proper care. And we still age when we manifest on Earth.”

There was that word again, manifest. She would have to ask about that later. “What about disease? Do you get sick from bacteria, viruses? How about AIDS?”

“We usually aren’t ill in any way and,” he gave her another one of his special looks that said he was humoring her, “in our manner of loving there’s no chance of HIV.”

She drew a deep breath. She could be as matter-of-fact in pretending to agree with him as he was in his explanation. “Of course. It makes sense. There’s no mixing of fluids or cells. I understand.” But something more than a joining of energy had happened between them last night. Something physical.

“Your kiss.” Her voice was a whisper. “Your kiss was very physical. I liked it.”

He threw her a smile. “Nothing wrong with that. I meant to please you.”

He had deliberately intended to arouse her. She saw that now. And how had he felt when he kissed her? She was certain he’d been as involved as she had.

“Let it go, Cassie. You’ve enough to think about.”

He was right. Eudora’s accident, the night at the farm and the morning’s drive had her mind reeling. She let the subject drop.

“Where are we heading?” she asked instead.

## Chapter Twelve

"We're on our way to Traverse City," Nate said.

She knew the thriving resort city on the shore of Grand Traverse Bay on northern Lake Michigan with its nearby Sleeping Bear dunes and cherry orchards. "I've been there," she said, "but it doesn't seem like a good place to hide if that's what we're doing. Why go to a city when we've spent the last twenty-four hours hiding in the boondocks?"

"Sometimes it's easier to get lost in a crowd. I'll get a motel room. You can wait there while I keep an appointment with someone I need to see about Seth's campaign."

Cassie's interest picked up. She wanted to think things through away from Nate and his strange philosophy. She needed to be on her own and free to seek out her family.

As soon as he left she would rent a car and take off. Yet she felt a heavy ache of regret in her chest. She would miss him.

"I'll make some phone calls while you're gone," she said.

Nate looked doubtful. "That's not a good idea."

"When I've called West Cottage, I'll feel better." Her cheeks warmed at her deception.

"I'd like you to wait until later. After we leave the motel we'll find a phone that's safe for you to use."

Her disappointment must have shown for no sooner had she fallen silent than he reached into the backseat and took a Michigan road atlas from the seat pocket. "See if you can find a back road toward Traverse City."

She took the atlas from him. "Why, after hours of secrecy, do you finally trust me with a map?"

"I've always trusted you, Cassie." But his tone was definitely tongue-in-cheek.

"Right." In the atlas she found a map of Antrim County. The map showed roads as narrow as dirt trails crisscrossing public forests, but she didn't think he was interested in those. While she studied the map she memorized the route to Kalkaska. She would take it as soon as she left Nate.

"There's a road to Alden ahead," she said, "then Rapid City and then Barker Creek." They would be eight miles from Kalkaska at that point.

"So what do I do next?" he asked.

The rolling hills were dotted with farmhouses and A-frame vacation homes, cherry orchards and Christmas tree farms. Local traffic had increased. They were rarely out of sight of another car. "Turn left at the next road."

Nate followed her instructions and guided the car up a hill as steep as a roller coaster. On the other side they came to a crossroads. Deep blue and stunning, Torch Lake appeared on the right. In places it was ringed with homes and tall evergreen trees. Cassie lowered the window and breathed in the pine-scented air.

"Feeling better?" Nate asked.

"Much." She was happier knowing where she was and with a plan in her head. Still she wrestled with unsolved mysteries. "Nate, I was thinking. If there's no illness among you what about Eudora's injury? Isn't that illness?"

"That's different. It was an accident or an incident caused by someone else. Those things happen."

"What about her high blood pressure?"

"Well..." He seemed to choose his words carefully. "Eudora's different from us."

"How is she different?"

His unease was obvious. Then he looked as if he'd reached a decision. "She's like us but she isn't."

Cassie stared at him. He was implying they were alike but not Eudora. "She senses things," she said cautiously, not sure where Nate's thoughts were headed.

She had to feel her way carefully. Nate didn't know of her psychic powers. She hadn't told anyone in years. In high school she had been shunned because she was different. She wasn't ready to tell Nate yet, but she wanted him to talk to her. She suspected his powers were similar to hers. He said they were alike. If she kept the conversation going perhaps he'd reveal something important.

"Eudora taught me unusual things when I was young."

"Probably because of Charles," Nate answered. "Most likely he taught her. They fell in love in college and when Eudora wanted children Charles went against custom and married her so she could have a child."

Cassie hesitated. "I didn't know she had a baby."

"She didn't. She never carried a pregnancy full term."

"How terrible. She must have been disappointed." Yet part of the story didn't fit. "If, as you said, there's no disease, why couldn't she carry a child?"

"It wasn't a matter of disease. It just wasn't right."

"Not right to have children?"

"We don't usually, except for reincarnating. Peace Seekers don't. Parenting is distracting. Children interfere with missions."

Finally they had reached the heart of things, she thought. "Nate, you said Peace Seekers. What do you mean?"

His eyes searched hers as if he hoped to find something revealed in them. "Isn't the term familiar, Cassie?"

"No."

"Not at all?" His disappointment was clear.

Frustrated, she shook her head. "No, should I know it?"

"I hoped you would." He grunted softly as if he had received a blow. "The Peace Seekers have a community in Ohio."

Ohio again. According to what she had overheard the day of the party that's where Nate wanted to take her.

"We, uh..." He stopped, stared at Cassie.

She could almost feel his mind working, wondering how much he should say.

"There's a Buddhist belief in people known as peacemakers. Bodhisattvas. People who delay their entry into Nirvana to bring compassion to the world."

Her disappointment increased. Buddhists. So that was it. It sounded so esoteric yet so ordinary. "You're saying Uncle Charles was one of these Bodhisattvas," she said slowly. "He married Eudora, who wasn't, and that caused problems."

"That's about it." He looked away but not before she saw a glimpse of sadness in his eyes. Where was that from? She had a glimmer of an idea. "Did you know anyone else who married outside of this Peace Seekers group?"

His answer, when it came, was one word. "Several."

She thought it over. His sadness must be for someone close to him. Or Nate himself. "Were you ever married?"

He smiled thinly. "Never."

"Not even tempted?" She couldn't resist teasing him, if only to see a smile return to his face.

But he remained solemn. "It's easy to lie. I won't lie to you." He frowned. "I was tempted once."

"Once? Only once?" She had a surge of hope that he might fall again, this time for her. Foolish, she knew. Why keep wishing for what she had already renounced? "You were seduced by a woman, I suppose?"

Nate laughed with the life and energy that made him so special. "Yes, a woman. Did you think I loved a man?"

Cassie shrugged with a silly smile, glad for the return of good feelings between them. "You said you loved everyone equally, even Joseph and Jane. Why not love a man?"

"Cassie, Cassie..." The way Nate said her name sent warmth cascading through her.

“Spiritually speaking,” he said, “it makes no difference, man or woman. Spiritual love embraces everyone. When you love spiritually the physical side isn’t important. The act of mating isn’t spiritual. Instinct and hormones drive it.

“In nature,” he continued, “the male animal wants to possess his mate. He wants dominion and physical union. Man, doubting his own immortality, wants a child to live after him. That child, by its existence, proves his physical dominance over the woman.”

“Yet for Eudora it didn’t happen that way,” she argued. “No child resulted from her marriage to Charles.”

“No.” Nate looked downcast for a moment but then his expression brightened. “A child wasn’t necessary for them. Reproduction’s an instinct that Charles had evolved beyond.” He smiled. “It’s a primitive instinct, the same as the attraction between sexes.” He reached down and feathered his fingers upward along her jeans-covered thigh.

She pretended she felt nothing.

But Nate smiled as if he knew the heat his touch aroused within her. Perhaps he had meant to prove the truth of what he said. Whatever, she felt manipulated.

His ability to sense her every feeling left her nothing of her own. She had to hide her tiniest thought. Did he monitor her mind constantly, she wondered, or only at certain times? She wanted to get him talking again.

“This woman you desired, Nate—”

“Loved.”

“I stand corrected. Was she special to you?”

He retreated into thought. Then he swallowed hard, telling her with a painful catch in her heart that he still cared for this woman.

“She was special.” His tone was carefully neutral.

Was this how he sheltered his feelings? By damping his reactions? In this way, could he keep others from sensing them? “How was she special?” Cassie asked.

His look scalded her with its intensity. *She was special like you*, he answered without speaking.

Startled, Cassie stared at him. She felt off balance. She had read his thoughts. Had he put them into her mind?

His mouth twisted in a wry smile. “I suppose you might say that she was a temptress in the biblical sense.”

“Biblical?” What had she learned of the Bible? Names came into her head. “Like Delilah or Salome?”

“Possibly.”

She lowered her voice. “Did you make love, actual physical love, to her?”

Nate stiffened. “That’s another story. We haven’t time for it now.” The SUV picked up speed and the mood between them was broken.

She noticed the road had widened into four lanes. Chalet-style motels and restaurants were becoming numerous.

"You gave in, didn't you?" she asked when he stopped at a light. Jealousy pushed her on. "You loved a woman and gave her a child." It was a statement, not a question.

"Cassie, don't." He sounded as if he were fighting himself and blaming her for his internal struggle.

"I'm sorry if I offended you," she said irritably.

He touched her hand. "I'm not offended but your questions are a distraction right now." The light turned green and they moved ahead with the flow of traffic.

"Then I'll try not to distract you again." Unreasonably hurt, she stared out the window. She knew she was acting like a spoiled child and hated herself for it.

Nate didn't seem bothered by her moodiness. Instead he appeared to welcome her silence. Embarrassed by her own sullenness, she was glad for the quiet between them.

At the next corner he pulled into a motel parking lot. The building was a crude imitation of a Swiss chalet.

"This is as good a place to stop as any," he said, stopping at the office. "I'll get a room and you can wait there while I keep my appointment."

"Okay." She waited in the car in a state of quiet anticipation. She was excited by the thought of gaining her freedom but troubled by what Nate might think of her disappearance. She knew what she must do. As soon as he left she would leave too, and make her way to Kalkaska alone.

In less than five minutes he returned. "We've a ground floor room."

Ground floor? Who cared, she thought morosely, almost as if she had to fan her resentment into anger in order to accomplish what lay ahead. She noticed their car was the only one in the lot this early in the day.

"Stay here until I open the door," he said, popping the trunk release. "I'll get your things."

He didn't want her seen, she realized. Anxiety knotted her stomach.

She quieted her fear with a quick rationalization. If she was in danger it wasn't from Nate. He'd said they were running from fanatics, as unlikely as that seemed.

Nate gestured from the open door.

The furnishings were dark and worn, at least a decade old. She tossed her purse on the bed with a feeling of relief at being out of the car. "A shower will feel good."

Nate, clearly sharing her feelings, smiled. "After me, if you don't mind." He checked his watch. "I've just enough time to make my appointment."

"Sure. Go ahead." She was glad the constraint between them had passed. She didn't want hard feelings to mar her memory of the time they spent together. Heavy draperies that covered the windows kept out the sun and darkened the room. She tugged on them, pulling them aside.

"Don't do that."

Startled by Nate's command, she pulled her hand away. "I thought I would let the sun in."

His expression was sober. "It's better if you don't show yourself and don't use the phone while I'm in the shower. I don't want anyone tracing us here."

"Okay." While Nate showered, Cassie sat on the bed and checked the contents of her purse. Her wallet appeared intact, credit cards secure in their slots, cell phone. Despite Nate's warning about using credit cards she needed to rent a car. Satisfied that all was in order, she propped herself on pillows and deliberately kept her thoughts focused on the programs while she ran through the TV channels.

Before long Nate, shaved, showered and fully dressed, stepped from the bathroom. "These are yesterday's clothes," he said with a gesture toward the wrinkled pants and shirt he wore. "I should have been better prepared."

Cassie nodded, blanking out thoughts that might alert him to her plans to take off on her own.

He stared. "Are you all right?"

"Sure. I'm just a little..." She searched for the right word. "I'm upset, I guess, over Eudora's accident." She waved a hand. "All this is so unexpected." With growing agitation she picked up her duffel. "I'll be all right."

Taking frequent glances at Cassie, Nate went through his pockets then picked up the briefcase he had brought from the island. "I have to leave, Cassie. I'll be back soon." He fingered the car keys.

"Okay." She waited patiently for him to go.

"Cassie?"

She stopped fumbling with her duffel.

"Don't do anything foolish."

"Foolish?" She looked around the room. "Like what?"

"Don't leave here."

She concentrated on nothing.

"Don't use the motel phone while I'm gone, or your cell phone. I'm as certain as I can be that we weren't followed but if you call anyone or use your credit card we'll be at risk."

"I understand." Risk. She concentrated on the word.

He touched her cheek. "You're unnaturally quiet."

His touch brought peace. She gave in to the feeling and leaned closer to him. "I'm sorry. It's nothing."

"It's not like you. I'm worried."

"Nate." Her voice had an emotional edge. She averted her gaze. "I wish things were different between us."



He gripped her upper arms and pulled her into a hug. "I have to go, Cassie. I'm late."

She rested her head on his shoulder and breathed in the clean scent of soap. Reality faded until there was only Nate.

"I'm late," he repeated.

"Um."

"Cassie." He tilted her chin.

He was going to kiss her. His mouth hovered over hers. She lifted her mouth, welcoming him.

His kiss was filled with urgency and made a mockery of everything he'd said about not wanting her physically. When her breath came in ragged gasps he released her and pushed her away roughly. "Take your shower and get some rest." He grabbed his briefcase. "I'll bring lunch back."

Trembling and thoroughly aroused, she nodded.

"I love you, Cassie." He looked as though he might take her into his arms again.

"I know," she said through tingling lips. Nate loved everyone.

His gaze narrowed.

*She hadn't spoken the thought aloud.*

His mouth opened as if he were going to say something and then he turned away. "Bolt the door behind me."

"Okay." She stood frozen to the floor.

"Do it now."

She moved toward him, watching while he opened the door a few inches. After a look at the parking lot, he stepped out. "Bolt it now, behind me."

"I will," she said, louder than necessary.

A smile creased his face. His thick, dark lashes blinked. "Good girl."

The *good girl* annoyed her. He still spoke to her as if she were a dog being trained to perform. She shut the door firmly in his face, put on the chain and turned the deadbolt. In the bathroom, she stood in front of the sink and covered her face with her hands for a full minute before her emotions calmed.

Nate's words ran through her head. *Don't do anything foolish. We're at risk. I love you.*

How could she be so blind as to believe him? She knew all about Nate's love now. He had told her he loved everyone and everything equally. He loved easily and indiscriminately. For all she knew he loved the dark side of life as well. Perhaps he loved Eudora's being thrown down the bluff. Perhaps he loved her lying unconscious in Petoskey.

Did he also love the men pursuing them? According to his philosophy, he did. She knew his love for her was nothing special. She had his word on it.

She couldn't afford to love him. She wasn't that spiritually advanced. Not that noble. *Get any thought of love out of your head, Cassandra*, she told herself.

Her carefully thought-out plans could wait until she showered. She lingered under the water, not thinking, not worrying, just letting its needles pummel stiffness from her muscles. She ached from lying on the hard planking under the quilts last night, not to mention Nate's ardent lovemaking, or whatever it was. After the arousal, perhaps it was called foreplay, they had blended.

Damn! Was that what they had done? Was *blended* the word for their lovemaking? Or merged? Or fused? How about *confused*? A cynical laugh rose in her throat.

They hadn't fused physically. Their blending had been one of spiritual energy. She couldn't get it off her mind.

She turned off the water and stood thinking behind the wet plastic curtain. Something spectacular had happened with Nate last night. Something outside her experience. She was physically untouched but, as Nate so delicately pointed out, she had experienced satisfaction beyond anything earthly.

Nate had set her skin afire, had set each cell trembling. They *had* fused, after all. That *was* the correct word for what had happened between them.

Shivering, she dried off with the motel's rough towel. She wondered what term Nate used when he talked about sex with his buddies, or comrades, or whatever he called his equals. She shook her head. He was an enigma, obscure and puzzling.

Whatever he was, she felt inferior to him. Sometimes when he spoke to her it seemed as if he were instructing a child. Yet there was no unkindness in his manner or voice, no indulgent tolerance—only acceptance. At times, especially when he seemed impatient with her limited understanding, he reminded her of the elderly Socrates in Dan Millman's *Way of the Peaceful Warrior*. Was she on a journey of self-discovery like Millman's hero?

Of course she was, she told herself, pulling on fresh underclothes and socks and shaking out a blouse from her duffel. She put on the same jeans since she hadn't packed for a journey.

But the journey was developing nevertheless. Not only was it interesting and frightening, it also promised to uncover some of the secrets buried in her past.

Two days ago she had embarked on a trip to visit Eudora. Now she shared a motel room with a man she barely knew. It wasn't exactly a sacred journey like Millman's hero's, yet these were certainly not ordinary days.

Several tasks lay ahead. She had no idea of how long Nate would be gone. She didn't want to make a long distance call from the motel. He had been adamant about the danger of doing so. *Supposed* danger, her rational side reminded. Still, if Nate could be trusted at all it would be better to heed his advice. She would get change from the front desk and call a car rental firm from an off-premises phone.

Once she had a car she would call Sarah to check on how things were going with Eudora's guests, including Seth Hawthorne. It was hard to imagine that the candidate

had filled most of Cassie's thoughts after she had received Eudora's invitation to the island. Now, as far as Cassie was concerned, Hawthorne had faded nearly into oblivion.

The desk clerk supplied her with five dollars in change. She took her things and walked down the highway to a convenience store with a pay phone outside its front door.

She dialed information and asked for the number of a car leasing firm that promised delivery of a car to the customer's door within an hour. She would call Sarah later from another phone. If the tracing equipment was as fast as Nate had indicated calling Sarah, even from a pay phone, would be better left until last.

In less than a minute her credit was okayed and she had ordered a week's rental on a mid-sized Ford. "Something in gray or beige," she told the woman. "Nothing flashy."

It took longer to convince the clerk to deliver the car to the store's parking lot. "I'm the customer," Cassie said breezily, as though she hadn't a care in the world. "You have my credit card number and my permanent address. You'll know where I am if there's a problem."

She finalized delivery instructions and hung up before she started laughing. They'd know where to find her? Very funny. Since she had left Mackinac Island she hadn't known where she was most of the time.

As anxious as she was, an hour seemed an incredibly long time to wait. She bought a soft drink and sipped it, feeling more conspicuous with every passing minute. Behind the store, down a grassy slope dotted with pine trees lay East Grand Traverse Bay. By its shore, picnic tables were set in a small park. From there she would have a view of the parking lot.

A glance at her watch showed thirty minutes longer to wait. Time enough to stroll down to the water and check it out.

Her intuition urged her on toward the water and the picnic tables. *This was right. This was right.* She cast a glance behind her. From this angle both entrances to the parking lot were visible.

Only an occasional glance at her watch and a bird's twittering broke the peace. Set off from the road, nearly hidden by commercial development, the park sat unnoticed. This noon she was its sole occupant except for a red squirrel that chattered and ran across the patch of lawn toward a tall pine.

She watched it disappear into a maze of branches then looked away just in time to see a plain sedan pull into the parking lot. She watched two men climb out of the car. She might have missed their arrival because of the nervous squirrel.

She didn't recognize them but they dressed nearly identically to the men she had seen at the hospital. Frightened, she watched them enter the store. They hadn't seen her, but it wouldn't be long, if they were looking for her, before they widened their search.

She didn't have time to figure anything out. She only had time to move. With her purse slung over her shoulder, she grabbed the duffel, set the iced drink on the grass

and then snatched it back. She couldn't leave anything to give them a clue that she had been there.

She crouched and made her way toward a group of pines on her right. The open patch of grass seemed endless. Her heart thudded a deafening tattoo in her ears. Any minute there might be a shout and they would be after her. For now there was only her racing pulse and her rapid breathing.

At last she reached the grove where mature trees gave more cover. On her knees behind a large fir, she breathed deeply, trying to calm her panic, knowing she didn't have long before they started searching the surrounding area. Nate had been right. They were fast. She had used her credit card no more than an hour ago, if that.

Her intuition had brought her this far. She only hoped it would take her farther. Much farther. Her heartbeat returned nearly to normal. She took a long last pull of the drink through its plastic straw and then poured the syrupy ice mixture on the ground under the pine and watched it sink into the needles. She crushed the plastic cup into a ball and stuck it into her jacket pocket. If she were lucky, or skillful, there'd be no sign that she had passed this way.

With trees between her and the parking lot, she walked at an angle away from the store. When the trees ended she paused and scanned the landscape ahead. To her left a series of commercial buildings fronted on the highway. The bay was on her right. A dirt lane ran along it toward the park. The road was out of the question. It was in clear view of the entire area.

Her best chance was the commercial strip on the highway. It was small consolation, exposed as it was to the road and easily covered by two men in a car. "Toughen up, Cassandra," she whispered. She had put herself into jeopardy. She would get herself out.

She climbed the slope to the series of stores, thankful that none of them were fenced. The last store before the open space of another parking lot was a coin laundry with a back door.

Relieved, Cassie pulled the door open and stepped into a busy shop. It was a typical layout with washing machines placed back-to-back down its center. Dryers lined the side walls. It smelled of humidity, humanity, soap and bleach.

Along a side wall were a drinking fountain and a restroom. Cassie entered the single restroom without locking the door behind her and waited. Sooner than she dared hope, a woman entered. She was twice Cassie's size.

"Sorry," the woman said when she saw Cassie.

"That's okay. Come in, I'm finished." Cassie stepped aside to let her enter. As soon as the woman cleared the door Cassie locked it and stood with her back to it.

"Please, I need your help."

The woman's face closed.

"I'm running from two guys," Cassie said. "I owe them money but my husband's late with child support." The harmless lie tripped easily off her tongue.

The woman grimaced. "What else is new? The bastards."

It was going to be all right.

"What do you want from me?" the woman asked. "I don't have any money."

Cassie shook her head. "Not money. Do you have anything I can wear over my clothes, like a large shirt and something to cover my hair? So they can't recognize me?"

She looked Cassie over. "A man's shirt might do."

"I'll pay you for it."

"Naw. You're welcome to it. Reminds me of my ex." She looked at Cassie's hair. "My son's baseball cap is in my car. You could hide your braid under it."

Cassie drew a deep breath. "Thanks."

"Wait here. I'll be right back."

Cassie nodded.

The woman started out. "Lock the door behind me."

*Just as Nate had said.* Cassie did as she was told. In less than five minutes the woman was back. She handed Cassie the cap and shirt. "Put these on."

Cassie took off her jacket and put the shirt on over her blouse. Then she stuck the cap on her head and shoved her braid under it, pulling the brim down to her eyebrows. Her transformation in the mirror brought a grin to her face.

Proud of herself, the woman laughed grimly. "You'll do if they don't look too close."

From her reflection in the mirror, Cassie thought she had changed her appearance enough. This disguise should fool anyone who didn't know her well.

The woman looked at Cassie's suede jacket. "You could use a sack for that. I think there's one in my basket."

Cassie followed her toward the washing machines where she rummaged around in a laundry basket and came up with a brown grocery bag. She took the jacket from Cassie, folded it and placed it in the bag.

"Put your purse on top and you're all set." She handed the bag to Cassie. "You look like a kid going home from the store."

"I can't thank you enough."

"Don't worry about it. I've been there."

At the squeal of tires in the parking lot, Cassie looked up and saw the brown sedan pull to a stop in front of the plate glass window. A man jumped out.

Cassie's face must have shown her distress.

The woman stared at her in disbelief.

## Chapter Thirteen

After the briefest hesitation the woman in the Laundromat picked up a newspaper from a chair and thrust it at Cassie. "Sit down and look like a guy."

Knees spread, heart hammering, Cassie slouched in the plastic chair the way she had seen hundreds of teenagers slouch in the library at home. She found the comic page and started praying.

As she pretended to read she picked up snatches of conversation. "No," said another woman standing near the door. "Haven't seen her...no..." Cassie pulled her collar higher around her neck and held her breath when the man approached.

The woman helping Cassie started unloading clothes from a washing machine. "I haven't seen her," Cassie heard her say. "That's my kid over there."

Cassie didn't look up. Instead she buried her manicured fingernails under the newspaper and concentrated on a comic strip that featured half-naked beauties. She stopped listening to what went on and tried to look like a teenage boy imagining what the models looked like naked.

She was still slouched when she heard the car leave.

"Sons of bitches," the woman said, sinking into the chair beside her.

Cassie's knees trembled. "Thanks."

"We've got to stick together, eh?"

Half sick inside, Cassie nodded. If Nate was right and the men were fanatics posing as police officers, her life could be in danger. On the other hand, maybe the Burtons had filed a missing persons report. Perhaps the police were searching for her in order to help her. This whole thing could end up being a gigantic misunderstanding and she could be on the wrong side.

"Did he say I was missing?" she asked.

"No." The woman started tossing clothes into a dryer. "He showed me a picture, said they were looking for you and asked if I'd seen you." She looked suspicious. "Are you in trouble?"

Cassie thought it over. "Yes, I'm in trouble, but I haven't done anything wrong."

That seemed to satisfy her. "Where are you headed now?"

"I don't know." Cassie tossed the newspaper on the chair next to hers. "I was staying at a motel down the road and I wanted to get away from there." By now Nate might have returned. He hadn't said how long he would be gone.

"If you want, I'll drop you somewhere when this is done." The woman fed coins into a dryer that rumbled into life.

Cassie was anxious to leave. "I don't want to stay here any longer than I have to. Could I rent your car?"

She shook her head. "Sorry, that baby's the only thing I have that's worth anything."

Worried that the men might return, Cassie glanced at the door. She had to convince the woman. "Can I buy it?"

"Nope."

But a light had gone on in her head and Cassie's mind was clicking. "I'll pay you to drive me." She stopped abruptly. She had almost said *to Kalkaska*. She didn't want anyone to find her through this woman.

Thinking, the woman pulled at an earlobe. "I need to pick up my kid from his summer job."

Desperation pushed Cassie over the limit. "Can't you arrange for someone else to get him?"

"Nope."

Dispirited, she saw she had pushed the woman as far as she would go. Cassie leaned back in her chair and tried to think her way out of the dilemma.

"If you wait for this load to dry I'll drive you into the city," the woman offered.

Was it safe to wait that long? "Well..."

"Half an hour to dry, five minutes for folding and then they're done. It's mostly Rick's baseball uniform."

Half an hour. She could wait for the woman or could chance making her way along the bay, the way she had come.

The woman settled it for Cassie. "If someone's looking for you they might watch to make sure you're my son leaving with me."

It was stretching it a bit but she might have a point, and somehow her presence lent Cassie courage. "Okay," she accepted reluctantly. "I'll be glad to pay you."

"Well, you can't. Like I said, I've been there."

She looked as if she'd had a rough life. How many abusive men had been in her life? Cassie wondered.

"Bye, Rena," a woman called from the door. "See you at the game tomorrow."

"Yeah, honey, take care."

"That your name?" Cassie asked. "Rena?"

"Yeah. Yours?"

"Cassie."

"Okay, Cassie, I'll take you wherever you want."

She meant in Traverse City, Cassie was certain. Kalkaska lay to the east—probably in the other direction from where the woman was headed.

She was feeling more anxious with each passing moment. The longer she waited the more likely it was she would be found.

Finally Rena's clothes were dry and folded. "Where to?" she asked once they were in her rusting car that had seen too many Michigan winters.

"Drive around." Cassie slumped in the front seat, mimicking a teenager's posture. "Take your regular route."

"If you were my kid you'd make me stop at that hot dog joint up the way."

Tension knotted Cassie's stomach. She had no desire to eat but she wanted this woman's goodwill. "That's fine with me. I'll buy."

As they drove down the busy highway toward town, Cassie noticed that the commercial development increased with each block. At a suds and dogs place they bought root beer and mustard-laden hot dogs and ate them in the car.

"Were you alone at that motel?" Rena asked when they had finished the spicy dogs.

The food had relaxed her but Rena's question brought the tension back full force. "Why?"

"I want to know what I'm getting into."

That made sense. "I was traveling with a man. A friend," she added when Rena's eyes narrowed.

"Is he at the motel?"

"I don't know. He was meeting a friend somewhere." She smiled. "He told me to lock the door and stay in the room."

Rena's laugh was little more than a snort but Cassie knew she had pleased her. "You're like that *Thelma and Louise* movie," Rena said.

The analogy pleased Cassie, but she was anxious to get going. "Can we drive while you finish your drink?"

"You're nervous."

"I am."

"Then don't go back to him."

Rena had no idea of Nate's impact on her life and her senses. Cassie thought about Nate and the problem he'd had earlier explaining things to her. Now she understood a little better why he'd lied to her.

"Look, Rena, I'm pleased that you want to help but things are so messed up I can't begin to explain."

"Try me," she insisted.

Cassie was tempted but the less Rena knew the better it was for everyone. "I don't want you involved."

Rena stared at her.

"For your own safety," Cassie added truthfully.



Rena's eyes widened in her fleshy face. "You think he's going to hurt you?"

"Not him. It's the others I'm afraid of."

"I thought the men asking about you were cops."

Cassie didn't know who the men were. "I'm not sure anymore."

Rena placed her cup in the plastic holder and started the engine. "Maybe you're right. I've got a kid. I shouldn't get involved." She backed the car out of its slot. "I'll take you where you want to go but that's it. Where to?"

"I don't know what to do. I should go back to the motel. I felt safer with Nate." She thought about Eudora. And she wanted to call West Cottage. "I need to make a phone call that can't be traced back to me."

Rena considered that possibility. "I've an idea." She eased the transmission into drive and headed into the city.

Traverse City wasn't large but it had its own flavor, Cassie decided. New buildings mixed with old created an air of vitality in its downtown district. She kept her eyes and ears open, listening to the traffic's noise, watching people on the sidewalks—business people, vacationers, retirees, street people.

Rena found a parking space outside the phone company.

"Here?" Cassie asked.

"Why not? Let them trace your call back to their own building."

Cassie laughed appreciatively. "Meeting you was lucky for me."

Rena grinned and lifted herself out of the car that fit her almost like a second skin. "We'll see about that."

A row of pay phones stood outside the door. Cassie punched in the number of the Mackinac Island cottage. Listening to the coins clatter into the box, she waited, dry mouthed, for Sarah to answer.

"West Cottage."

Not Sarah's voice. "Is this Sarah?" she asked anyway.

"She's not here. This is Eudora's friend, Ritz Burton, speaking."

Thank God. "Ritz, it's Cassandra."

"Cassandra! Where are you? Why haven't you called?"

At least Nate was proved wrong about Ritz not missing her. "I'm sorry, Ritz. I've been tied up and I can't talk long now. I wanted you to know that Eudora's condition is still critical but she's holding her own."

"Yes, I know. When we didn't hear from you we called the hospital." Just as Nate had said. He won that one. "They couldn't find you anywhere."

"I was probably in the cafeteria." Another harmless lie. "Is everything all right?"

"No, it isn't. Sarah hasn't shown up today and we're trying to carry on with the fundraiser, which means dinner for twenty guests tonight."

Her heart sank. Sarah had let her down.

"Luckily the caterer is a jewel," Ritz said. "She's taken over completely but," her voice lowered, "Seth Hawthorne has left the island for another appointment and we're here with twenty big-time contributors to meet the candidate at dinner and we've no guest of honor!" She laughed, apparently enjoying the ironic humor of it.

The computerized voice instructed Cassie to insert more coins.

She put in the change then told Ritz she wasn't sure when she would return to the island.

"Cassandra, this is strange. Everyone is deserting this place. Eudora's in the hospital, you've gone, Sarah's left, now Seth. We're supposed to return to Metamora tomorrow. I hate leaving the house open without Sarah."

"She'll be back, I'm certain." If her voice lacked conviction it was for good reason. What had happened to the sullen housekeeper?

"Can't you return as soon as possible? After you're satisfied about Eudora's condition, of course."

Cassie's heart went out to her aunt, lying injured and alone in the hospital. She wished she could be in several places at once yet she remained committed to following Eudora's instructions to seek help from relatives in Kalkaska.

"Cassandra?"

"I need to go, Ritz. Someone wants to use the phone." The falsehood saved several minutes of explanation but bothered her conscience. What had Nate said? It's easy to start lying and hard to stop? She told Ritz, "Lock the doors and windows when you leave. Everything will be all right."

"I would worry about you, Cassandra, but I know you're with that nice friend of Seth's."

Nate, the nice friend. She soothed Ritz's worries the best she could and hung up.

"Let's get out of here," she said to Rena and headed toward the car. West Cottage's phone might be tapped and they could be tracing our location." She had no idea. She only knew she wanted to get away.

She beat the larger woman to the car. Even with the windows open it smelled of stale smoke and perspiration. "Let's go." Cassie slipped down in her seat.

Rena put the car in gear and pulled away from the curb, spinning the wheels on gravel that had accumulated by the curb. "You're really scared, aren't you?"

"I told you I was."

Rena made a few quick turns and headed out of the city. "I think you should go to the police," she said after they were back on the main highway.

"I can't. They might be looking for me. Did those men in the laundry show identification?"

"They flashed a card."

"But you didn't read it?"

"Hell no, I didn't read it. It looked like an official card but I was too busy thinking up lies to read anything." She gave a rough laugh.

Cassie couldn't help grinning. Her conscience was eased by Rena's acceptance of the necessity of lying.

Rena looked at her watch. "I've got an hour before I pick up Rick. What's next?"

"I don't want to tell you where I'm headed. If you don't know you won't have to lie if anyone asks."

"Who's going to ask me?"

"I have no idea but the fewer who know the better."

"Okay, but I'm dying of curiosity."

"I need a car."

Rena thought for a while. "I've got a neighbor who fixes old clunkers. He might rent or sell you one."

If she bought a car from Rena's neighbor there would be no way to trace it, or Cassie. Unless they found Rena. Had the men suspected anything in the laundry? She wondered if she had passed for a teenager.

Traffic was heavy on the way out of town. They rode in silence while Rena negotiated the lights.

"Should I keep on driving?" Rena asked after they had cleared the worst of the commercial district.

Decision time had arrived. Cassie went with her instincts. "Let's see about a car."

"Sure." Rena checked her watch again. "He's probably working on one right now."

They drove for a while and then through the windshield Cassie saw the laundry where she had met Rena. The motel was a short distance down the road. "Slow down at that motel, Rena. I want to see if Nate's car is there."

Rena slowed the car. "You're going back to him?"

"I'm not sure." Nate's hold was strong. And although he had lied to her there was enough truth in what he said that she wanted to talk to him again. "I just want to see if he's there, then I'll decide."

As they cruised past the parking lot she saw Nate's SUV. He was sitting behind the wheel with someone beside him. Then Rena and she were past the motel.

If he was only now returning to the room he wouldn't know yet that she was gone. He wouldn't expect to see her dressed like a boy. "Turn around, Rena. Nate's car is in the parking lot and he's got someone with him."

"Don't waffle, Cassie." But she pulled into the next driveway and turned around.

"I just want to see."

"Sure." Sarcasm was strong in her voice.

They drove by in time to see Nate and another man climb out of the car. Nate glanced at traffic but didn't notice them. In Rena's old car, Cassie was a kid in a baseball cap. The other man turned to look. Seth Hawthorne.

Her heart turned over. Seth had left Mackinac Island and stood up twenty campaign contributors to meet Nate in Traverse City. And Nate had brought him to the motel to see her, she was certain. He had brought the senatorial candidate—surely the two men could be trusted. Seth was a well-known reputable man. He wouldn't be involved in anything crazy. But why would Nate bring him here? Her curiosity took a giant leap.

"Turn in here," she said, "and stop near the office."

Rena swung the car into the motel parking lot. "This could be a big mistake."

"I've got to talk to them." The tingling in her hands and feet spread to her stomach. She felt the same as when she had met Nate on the ferry. She knew, somehow knew instinctively that a connection existed between the three of them. And the other men had followed *her* as Nate had said. They were after her. He'd been right all the time.

Rena's expression hardened but she didn't argue.

Cassie watched Hawthorne and Nate enter the room he had rented. "Do you recognize either of them?" she asked Rena.

She shook her head. "No. Should I?"

Cassie suspected Rena was one of those disenfranchised citizens, a non-voter who paid little attention to politics. "I thought you might. It doesn't matter."

"He must be important if you think I should know him. I can understand your being afraid of this Nate guy. But why go back to him if he beat you?"

"I never said—" The motel door opened and Nate stepped out. He looked toward their car.

"Drive over there, Rena, park behind that SUV."

Rena glanced at her watch. "If you say so." Clearly unhappy, she did as Cassie asked.

Cassie tensed as Nate watched them approach. When Rena stopped behind his car, Nate peered past her into the passenger seat. Rena waved him over.

She nodded toward Cassie. "She wants to talk to you. Get in." She reached behind her and unlocked the back door.

Nate climbed in. "Cassie, what the hell have you done?"

"I tried to rent a car." She paused under his unrelenting glare. "It didn't work."

He rubbed his jaw. "No." Despite his studied acceptance, his annoyance was obvious.

"Is that Hawthorne with you?"

He glanced at the open motel door. "That's Seth."

"Why is he here?"

"We had a campaign strategy meeting and I brought him here to talk with you." His clipped tone rebuked her. He glanced at the back of Rena's head as she stared out the windshield. "Who's this?"

Rena stared at him over her shoulder. "I'm Rena —"

"She's my friend," Cassie said, stopping any further exchange between them. "You don't need to know her name."

Nate looked skeptical.

"She saved my life."

His expression sharpened. "How?"

"I'll tell you later. What does Hawthorne want with me?"

"Come in and find out."

Rena cleared her throat. Nate threw her a look and then turned his attention to Cassie.

"Cassie, sweet." He leaned forward and placed his hand on the top of her baseball cap.

Rena turned and glared at him. Her face was twelve inches from his.

"Cassie..." he murmured.

His fingers stroked her forehead. Her fears vanished. She was home. With Nate. The tension eased. "Nate..." Then she pulled away. "Don't, please."

"Come inside with me." He reached for her.

She backed away. "Don't quiet me that way again, Nate. Don't manipulate my mind. I don't like it. I'll come inside to talk with Hawthorne but don't touch me."

"Cassie." Rena's rough voice startled her out of her semi-trance. "Are you sure you know what you're doing?" The woman's face was twisted in disbelief.

Despite Rena's concern, Cassie felt confident. "I do."

Nate laid a hand on Rena's shoulder.

She brushed it off. "Keep your hands to yourself. Something is wrong here. I don't know what but if you touch me again I'll break your arm."

She would, Cassie realized.

Nate drew back. "You've been a good friend, Rena. Thanks for helping Cassie."

Rena ignored his bid for a truce. "Get out of my car and wait inside for her."

Through the car window, Cassie saw Hawthorne waiting in the shadow of the open door.

Nate leaned forward with a look of concern. "Cassie —"

"Out," Rena said to Nate. "Now." She clamped a large hand over Cassie's forearm, keeping her in her seat. "If Cassie wants to go with you she'll do it on her own."

A quick grin illuminated Nate's face. "You're terrific." He opened the back door and started toward the motel.

"Sure," Rena said after him. She eyed his departing back then gave Cassie a hard look. "Are you in love with him?"

Cassie wondered if love could grow in such a short time. She shook her head. "No."

"Don't lie to me. My kid does it all the time."

"Rena, he hasn't hurt me. That's all I know. I'm attracted to him, but love? I don't think so. It's not possible in such a short time." She rubbed her eyes. "I'm confused. I don't know what's going on."

Rena fumbled in the large shoulder bag on the seat between them. "Here." She wrote on a crumpled piece of paper. "Here's my number in case you need it." She wrote again. "And the number of my neighbor, the mechanic, in case you want a car."

Grateful for Rena's concern, Cassie took the paper and pushed it into her jeans pocket. "Thanks for everything."

"Shoot, I'd do as much for a stray dog. Besides, I didn't save your life to have some miserable jerk ruin it."

Cassie smiled. The *miserable jerk* watched them from the doorway. "I don't know how to thank you."

"Stay alive. Stay well. That's thanks enough."

Despite her show of courage, Cassie hated to leave Rena's protective presence. She opened the door and started out. "Do you want to come in with me?"

Rena shook her head. "I've got to pick up my son. I only hope you know what you're doing."

"I don't, but I have a connection with Nate."

Rena laughed. "A connection? That's a new one."

Smiling, Cassie walked around the front of the car and paused beside the driver's window. "You know what I mean."

Rena peered out the open window. "I sure do, honey, and I've got a kid to prove it."

Cassie watched her drive away. She felt a terrible loneliness and then she turned toward Nate.

He hurried her into the musty room, slammed the door and bolted it. "Dammit, Cassie."

She felt the threat and power of his latent anger. He pulled her to the bed and set her on it and then stared down at her in silent exasperation.

Alone in the room with the two men, she felt a spurt of fear knot her stomach. She stared up at Nate who stood over her, then looked at Hawthorne leaning insolently against the wall. "Am I a prisoner?" she asked defiantly.

Hawthorne smiled the fake politician's smile she had first noticed on the island. "Nate said you were a dramatic one."

He had? She wondered what else he had told Hawthorne about her and their time together. "Well, am I?" she asked again.

"A prisoner?" Nate sat beside her. "No, you're free."

"Then what's going on with the two of you?"

Hawthorne cleared his throat huskily. "I don't think this will work, Nate."

Nate gripped her knee. She felt energy flow from his hand into her thigh. "It'll work," he said.

"She obviously doesn't know anything," Hawthorne said.

That did it. Anger aroused her. "I know more than you think." She started taking mental inventory of her powers then stopped. *Not now*, she told herself. *Blank my thoughts*.

"Can you read her at all?" Hawthorne asked.

Nate rested his hand on her knee. "No." He gave her an encouraging smile. "She's blocking me."

She hated sitting quietly while they discussed her as if she weren't there but she hoped to learn more by listening than by arguing and for some reason she felt increasingly lethargic in the stuffy room.

"If she's blocking you," Hawthorne said, "that should tell you something in itself."

"It tells me she's stubborn." Nate smiled at her.

She felt her lids grow heavy.

"She's intelligent," Nate said. "Sensitive. I'm sure she's the one."

Cassie turned everything they said over in her mind but didn't understand a word of it. "Sure I'm what?" Her tongue felt thick. "What's going on?" she asked with effort. "Don't talk about me as if I'm not here."

Nate motioned her to be quiet with his calm air of command that was the mark of a natural leader.

Dropping her protest, she obeyed him. She had decided earlier that compliance was her best tactic, at least on the surface. Compliance and patience, she reminded herself. She sat back and waited to see what developed.

Hawthorne looked at her. "It's a hell of a long way around when there are others who are willing to join us."

"Cassie's the one. It's predetermined."

Her eyes widened but she said nothing.

"Things change," Hawthorne said. "You were willing to accept another woman before you uncovered Eudora's secret."

"But we found out and now we have Cassie. We won't need an alternate."

Fear once again gripped her stomach. What were they talking about and what had they known about Eudora?

Nate stroked her knee soothingly. "Cassie will be all right once she understands what's going on. She's been on her own for too long, that's all."

On her own? Yes, and she planned to stay that way.

Nate looked at her sharply. She blanked her mind.

"She's the one," Nate insisted. "I'm certain. I went into her and read her the day we met."

He smiled at her and moved his hand to the back of her neck. Enduring his touch, she steeled herself to sit quietly while trying to stay alert. She wanted to see how he brought about the sedative effect on her senses. Despite her concentration, her eyelids drooped and her thoughts seemed filtered through a haze. She willed herself to concentrate on each step. *Okay, that's how it's done. He touches a spot on my neck and I'm dazed.*

"She's very sensitive." Nate's fading voice was filled with caring and something else. Sadness? Doubt?

"How long will it take?" Hawthorne asked.

"I'll bring her along as fast as possible. At any rate, she won't be ready until after the November election. She can work for your campaign until then."

Hawthorne groaned wearily.

"It's perfect. It gives us time to create her history."

"Where the hell was she hidden?"

"In a library."

Hawthorne looked incredulous. "Is Eudora a problem?"

"Eudora's problems are over."

In a light stupor, Cassie caught her breath at the implication before relaxing again under Nate's gentling touch.

"What happened with Eudora?" Hawthorne asked.

Nate's warning was almost imperceptible but Cassie sensed his motion. "I'm not sure," he said. "I plan to find out."

She looked at him sleepily. All her responses were dulled but her mind worked feverishly. Nate didn't know what had happened to Eudora. If he didn't know he wasn't responsible. Or was that what he wanted her to believe?

"That's all then?" Hawthorne stood. "I have a plane waiting to take me back to the island."

He would be at the dinner after all. Ritz would be pleased.

"That's it." Nate stood.

Cassie blinked slowly and watched the two men through drooping lids. Trepidation settled over her.

Hawthorne looked at her. "The wedding will be after the election then, but before the swearing in?"



“That’s right,” Nate answered.

Wedding? With effort, she widened her eyes.

On his way to the door, Hawthorne stopped and squeezed her shoulder. “See you later, Cassie.”

## Chapter Fourteen

"Don't worry about Seth," Nate said after the candidate left. "You'll approve in the end. You helped plan everything."

"I did *what*?"

"Seth, you and I. We're all in this together."

She had thought something like that when she heard they knew her but the fact that she couldn't remember meeting either of them before heightened her anxiety.

"Here." He took a wrapped sandwich from the bag. "I brought you grilled cheese. Sorry it's cold."

Puzzled by his revelation that she had made earlier plans with Hawthorne and Nate that she couldn't remember, she took the sandwich and merely looked at it. "What did we plan? What's Hawthorne's part in it? What's mine?"

Nate was demolishing his sandwich with huge bites. He spoke with his mouth full. "I'll fill you in on everything you need to know over the next few weeks."

"The next few weeks? I'll have something to say about that." She watched Nate eat, wondering why and how he intended to spend the next few weeks with her. Then she remembered overhearing his conversation on the island with Eudora and what he'd said to Hawthorne only minutes ago.

Things were developing too quickly for her understanding. She stared mindlessly at the wrapped sandwich he had given her. Its paper was spotted with grease. The spicy hot dog she had eaten earlier sat uneasily in her stomach.

"If you're not hungry, how about milk?" He took a red and white half-pint carton from the bag, stuck a straw in it and offered it to her. "To settle your stomach."

Increasingly troubled by his ability to read her mind and monitor her physical state, she shook her head mutely, but still she took the cold milk and drank deeply.

He came to her and carefully cupped his hands around her shoulders. His touch brought the same familiar sense of coming home.

He drew her to him and nestled her comfortably in his embrace. Instinctively she buried her face against his shoulder and clung to him. Pressed to his chest, she felt his heart beating in rhythm with her own. Then without warning he removed her baseball cap and tossed it on the bed.

She shivered as his hands fumbled with her braid.

"Let your hair down."

She trembled and her fingers shook when Nate removed the elastic that secured her braid.

He wove his fingers through her flowing hair, lifting it from her neck, and then let it settle like a cloud on her shoulders. He bent his head and with his lips sought out the sensitive skin just beneath her ear. Where his mouth touched her skin his breath was warm and soft. She felt flushed with growing excitement.

"I need you, Cassie."

She tilted her chin and looked into his eyes. His gaze was intense, his breathing uneven with an urgency that excited her despite her misgivings. Her knees trembled in anticipation, but underneath the passion ran an undercurrent, a hint of danger that tempered her reaction.

"Not this time." With reluctance she pulled out of his grasp, went to the window and opened the draperies.

The afternoon's bright light flooded the room. Nate stood in its glare, struggling for control. Finally he shrugged and ran a shaky hand along the back of his neck. "You're right of course. We've no time for comfort."

"Was that what you were looking for, comfort?" She laughed unkindly.

"Cassie." He shook his head in frustration but didn't lose his smile.

"You're using me, Nate, and I don't like it."

He hooked his thumbs into his pockets and tossed her an insolent grin. "How am I using you?"

She was certain his stance and tone were meant to intimidate her. Instead they only hardened her resolve to stand up to him. "You act as if I'm stupid for resisting a man I've known only a few days."

"I offered you love." His voice fell to a low angry tone. "Love, comfort, acceptance." Disappointment crossed his face. "We need to move on. Get your things."

She wasn't going to let him take charge again. "I'm not going anywhere with you until you explain what's going on."

His eyes narrowed. "I thought we had that settled. Over the next few weeks I'll—"

"Not in a few weeks. I want to know now."

He moved toward her. Alarmed by the look on his face, she backed into the wall. He had almost reached her. "No." She twisted away, but he caught her arm and pulled her against him.

"Cassie, behave." He held her in a rough embrace.

Reason left her. She pushed against him. "No! Let me alone."

"God," he swore softly, then clamped a hand over her mouth and tightened his hold on her. "I'll gentle you yet."

Alarmed by her own loss of control as much as by Nate's anger, she stared wide-eyed into his face, watching as his angry look faded and concern took its place, followed quickly by a look of weariness. Then, squirming in his grip to free herself, she sensed

the sheer power of his masculinity, felt desire for him blossom within her and saw recognition of her surrender register on his face. His breathing quickened to match hers.

He bent his head with a kiss that left no doubt as to his intention. With one swift motion he lifted her off her feet then lowered her onto the bed. Dazed and craving the close physical contact more than she had realized, she held him tight.

Nate stroked her head. "Cassie," he said with wonder. "Cassie, I am so happy I finally found you."

His weight pressed against her chest, making breathing difficult. Sensations rushed through her. Fear. Passion. An overwhelming physical hunger. A need, an actual need for him. She choked out his name. "Nate."

"I know." The words were a whisper against her throat. "I feel it too, Cassie. I know."

She could barely breathe and Nate trembled as if he had been running. Their earlier scuffle had taken the heart out of any protest she could have made. She moved her face against his cheek, felt the sandpaper brush of new stubble. She laughed softly. "I can't believe this is happening."

His face, inches from hers, crinkled in a smile. "What can't you believe?"

"My reaction to you. My physical reaction. It's like a hurricane, like a dream." She stopped, breathless.

"What kind of dreams have you been having in that library of yours?" he asked in a teasing tone.

She grinned at him. "They weren't this good."

His mouth sought hers in a long kiss that left her weak. "Nate, Nate." The mere act of saying his name brought pleasure.

"Shh, Cassie. Hold still now."

She lay stunned by the feelings racing through her, but they weren't enough. She wanted her freedom, needed to move. She ached with frustration. "Please. Give me some room."

He shifted and air rushed into her lungs. With Nate's movement a swift rise of pleasure raced through her. She pushed against his shoulders.

"Cassie, love, stop struggling. Lie still."

The word *love* acted like a charm. She surrendered and lay quietly wrapped in Nate's embrace.

Immediately she felt weightless and she floated upward from the bed until she reached the ceiling. Looking down on the entwined couple, she saw her hair spread in disarray on the pillow. Nate's face pressed against her neck but she couldn't hear what he said.

As she watched, the woman cradled the man in her embrace. With her head tipped back she seemed to merge with him and an ecstatic look illumined her face. A glow surrounded them. Cassie heard Nate call out and then she fell.

She couldn't measure how long she lay beside him in a state of suspended consciousness. Once she opened her eyes and saw a golden aura surrounding Nate. She wondered if she had the same aura, but in the ecstatic state of heightened physical arousal she had entered it mattered little.

When she awoke she once more puzzled over the strangeness of the experience. It wasn't physical coupling as she had known it. Nate himself denied any physical motivation to his actions. Yet both times their merging had started with desire, strong physical feelings, a hunger that surpassed anything she had experienced with any other human, man or woman. Then the question she had been resisting arose. Was Nate fully human?

There, she had admitted it, if only to herself. Her deepest, most frightening question had finally been lifted into consciousness. Was Nate a spiritual being? She thought he might be special, possessing abilities beyond her knowledge. A Bodhisattva perhaps, a reincarnated soul. And if he were from a different time dimension then was she also?

Nate had implied their fates were meshed. What did that say about her? She looked around to see if anything had changed. Only her emotions had changed. The numbing fear had vanished.

She searched the depths of her mind for any doubts or pinpricks of anxiety but felt only calm, loving security. Nate had done what he'd said. He had gentled her.

That expression was his. She wondered if he might have used some kind of hypnosis on her. She thought not, she had been fully aware. Yet she had been gentled as if she were a thoroughbred filly training for an equestrian career. Even that thought didn't chase her sense of wellbeing. Nate had the ability to calm her raging emotions into a state of tranquility.

Could that mean it was possible to find heaven on earth? The consequences of worldwide tranquility were staggering. No violent crime. No spousal or child abuse. It was like a wonderful gift.

But what about free will? In order to be *gentled* her will had to be submissive to Nate's. No. Lack of free will could never benefit mankind. There could be no joy without freedom.

"Cassie?" His voice drew her back to the present. He stood at the side of the bed looking down at her, his chest bare, his jeans riding low on his hips. "Feeling better now?"

She smiled and lifted a languorous hand toward him.

Laughing, he joined her on the bed in an affectionate hug. She smiled into his eyes. His lips brushed her chin, her cheek, her ear. He drew a finger idly across the hollow of her throat. She smelled the sweet scent of jasmine and heard the tinkling of silver bells.

Delighted, she closed her eyes and drifted on a shimmering breeze of exotic aromas and harmonic chords, senses heightened, knowing only pleasure.

"Cassie." He spoke her name as if she were precious. "We haven't time for this."

She opened her eyes. "I hear music. Camel bells."

"That's only a beginning."

He drew her close and she wrapped her arms around his neck. "This is all new to me," she said. "What's happening?"

His mouth silenced her with a lengthy kiss that spoke of love more than words could. When he finally released her, she said, "I've waited so long for...for a man like you to come into my life."

"Cassie." In his whisper she heard affirmation of her deepest wish for love, for belonging. And...despair.

She searched his face. "What's wrong?"

He pulled away and rubbed his brow. "I know you've waited a long time, Cassie, but *this*," he gestured at the two of them on the bed, shook his head, "this shouldn't be my responsibility."

"Your responsibility?"

Nate rubbed his neck, hesitating as if caught in a dilemma. "You've a lot to learn. We'll get to it in time."

Time didn't exist for her. She was still in a euphoric afterglow and she didn't want to think about learning anything, or about the future. She reached toward him. "Sit here beside me."

He gave her a soul-wrenching smile. "I'd rather be with you than anywhere but we need to move on."

She was so drowsy she could hardly lift her arm yet he wanted her to abandon their safe nest. She lay back and watched him as he stood before the mirror and combed his hair, put on a shirt, tucked it in.

He glanced at his watch. "We need to leave."

She tried to lift her head, succeeded in raising it only to rest it again on the pillow. "Come here." She patted the bed beside her.

Instead he tugged her into a sitting position and supported her until her head stopped spinning. "If there were time you could have a cold shower but we need to leave now."

"What's more important than our being together?"

"We won't be together if those men catch up with us."

She protested while he urged her to her feet then propped her against his side until she regained her balance.

He led her into the bathroom and, with an affectionate laugh, ran water into the sink and splashed it on her face. As groggy as if she had been in a hypnotic trance, she shook her head. Hypnosis was probably the answer, unless... It wasn't possible, was it? *Please don't let it be true.* But the knot in the pit of her stomach rose until it filled her chest with pain.

Nate relaxed his grip but didn't remove his supporting hand from her back. "Better?"

She blinked twice. It took only that long for the question that had formed earlier to surface. "Nate... Did you drug me?" She knew she sounded crazy but she wanted to know. She wanted the pain to go away, wanted him to be the man she needed him to be.

He ignored the question and steered her toward the door. "I'll put your things in the car. Where are they?"

She pointed to the corner where the brown grocery bag lay hidden by the dresser. Although her vision was blurred she eyed him with distrust. "You used an aphrodisiac, didn't you? Or a date rape drug in my milk."

"You're right, Cassie. I used the most powerful drug available. Love." Preoccupied, he looked around the room. "Have I forgotten anything? I wiped all the surfaces."

Under the last remnants of her once blissful cloud she felt the stirring of true awareness. She tried to understand the power he held over her. She stared coolly. "You admit you drugged me?"

He shook his head. "I didn't drug you. Forget that. I thought you'd given up your suspicion. I thought you were smarter than that." He opened the motel door and looked outside. "Wait here while I open the car."

His angry reply finally brought her to her senses and chased away any romantic illusions that might still have remained from their lovemaking. From the door she watched him cover the short distance to the car with athletic grace.

Her arousal had quieted but the memory of its power remained sharp. She realized in her inexperience she had mistaken the physical sensations, the rush of desire she felt, for love. She suspected Nate was keeping her docile through some sort of enslavement of her senses. Could he control her physical reactions as well as read her mind? What kind of a mess had she stumbled into?

He motioned toward the car. Dutifully following his command, she left the room and climbed into the front seat.

"Braid your hair and stuff it under your baseball cap again. You make a convincing boy."

Unhappy with the order and his slur on her femininity, she didn't answer. Yet she reached into the backseat, retrieved the baseball cap and man's shirt from the grocery bag and put them on. Obedient once more, she thought, troubled by her lack of resistance. Still, her instincts told her that her physical safety depended somehow upon Nate.

"Where now?" she asked when he turned the car away from Traverse City. Her hope for a car of her own lay in the other direction, with Rena and her neighbor. Cassie had their phone numbers tucked away. She slid her hand into her pocket and ran her fingertips over the scrap of paper.

"I know a place on a lake north of here that should be safe."

"Another safe house?" she asked scornfully.

He tossed her a grin. "You can call it that."

"What would you call it?"

"Just a house. A lake cottage actually."

"And then?"

"Then we'll talk about what's next."

She nodded, her underlying anger eased by the anticipation of a confrontation with Nate where all her questions would be answered and her anxiety about the future would be resolved. She watched in silence as he maneuvered the car through traffic.

"This place is as busy in the summer as it is when the skiers are here in the winter," Nate said.

"Yes." She knew Nate had no more interest in recreational sports than she did at this particular time, but it made sense to go along with him once she'd climbed back into his car. She'd wait it out, wait and see what happened at the lake. Her upside-down emotions had tired her completely. So far Nate hadn't harmed her. She had only her suspicions to make her distrust the man, but why was he so evasive when she questioned anything?

She maintained a stony silence until they had left Traverse City traffic behind. Even then she had no inclination to make light conversation. Nate turned off the highway and followed a hilly gravel road in roughly a northeast direction, as far as she could tell from the location of the afternoon sun.

Her thoughts turned to Eudora, the only one who knew Cassie's history. The only person she could turn to—if she were still alive. She didn't want to lose her one true anchor in life.

She was also worried about her job at the library. She missed its orderliness, its routines. She made a mental note to call and explain her absence, understandable considering Eudora's accident.

And she wondered what Nate wanted from her at this time. It had something to do with Hawthorne. Nate had implied that she'd known Hawthorne before, but when before? Her head ached.

The only thing she knew for certain was she needed answers.

She was plotting questions and rehearsing responses in case he refused to give her answers when he jolted her out of her thoughts.

"It's been too easy."

She straightened. "What do you mean?"

He glanced in the rearview mirror. "Something's wrong."

She looked behind them. "What do you mean?"



"It's been over two hours since they traced you through your credit card. There's no way they'd give up this easily."

"They probably thought I moved on. They wouldn't expect me to stay in one place."

"They would check the motels – stake them out."

"There are too many for that," she said. "They can't watch them all."

He thought for a moment. "You might be right." He glanced over his shoulder. "It still seems too easy. I don't like easy."

"You're scaring me."

He clasped her hand in his larger one. "You've had some shocks in the past few days. First Eudora –"

"Don't. I don't want to think of her alone in the hospital."

"She has friends."

Cassie raised a hand to her trembling lips. Eudora was near death. Nate wanted to help and she needed help, but she shouldn't trust him. She wanted to, longed to trust him. She remembered reading about kidnapping victims who sided with their kidnappers. It was some sort of syndrome. If he were trustworthy then life would be simpler. She could swim with the river instead of against it.

No. That was a victim's rationalization. She wouldn't be a victim. Unlike many hostages, she didn't have a family, an employer or a national government concerned about her wellbeing. Except for Eudora, she had no one.

Her future was her own responsibility and she wouldn't give up her freedom without a fight. Aware that her thoughts had wandered unguarded for some minutes, she glanced at Nate to see whether he had read her new resolve. He appeared absorbed in his own thoughts.

"Where are we going?" She wanted a say in choosing her fate.

"We need to change cars."

"You think they know this one?"

"If they located us in Traverse City they do."

She looked at the bucolic countryside, its mown fields and its well-tended orchards. "Everything seems so peaceful."

"Appearances deceive." His taut jaw and the tense outline of his profile were the only indications of his stress.

Her mouth went dry with anxiety. She wished she had never allowed this adventure to start. She should have told him to get out of the carriage that first afternoon on Mackinac Island.

"You can't back away from your destiny, Cassie."

She jumped. "Don't do that."

"Don't do what?"

"Don't go into my mind, don't go into me. Isn't that what you and Hawthorne call it when you read thoughts?"

"Why not read your thoughts?" His tone was gentle. "It's a great feeling having someone share your innermost thoughts and feelings without spoken communication."

"Not for me it isn't. Everyone needs some privacy." And she didn't trust him, she thought before she stopped herself.

"You can trust me, Cassie."

"Sure I can." An icy loneliness crept over her.

"You don't need to be alone."

He was invasive, unforgivably intrusive.

"Don't suffer silently, Cassie. Ask for help."

"I never ask for help. I'm completely independent."

He slowed the car and gave her his full attention. "It's not so hard. Take a deep breath and ask."

"Ask what? Ask who?"

"Try me. I'm here to help you."

"Oh sure. My protector." Moisture wet her eyes. She blinked it back. "I forgot," she said angrily. "You're here to help me. That's why you *drugged and hypnotized* me and let me think it was love. That's why you're controlling what I do. You trust me so much you're forcing me to obey you with some kind of mind control. That's your version of help. You'll give me everything I need if I give up myself, my independence."

"Don't cry," he said harshly. "I can't take it."

"Then help me. Help me by telling me what's going on."

"I will. I swear. Stop crying. What do you want to know?"

"What happened to Auntie on the island? Why was she pushed over the bluff? I know she didn't fall. What happened at the cabin? What's going on with Hawthorne? And why—" She swallowed with difficulty and fought back the tears. "Why do I feel so threatened?"

"It's all part of a larger plan. I've told you that you'll understand once we're out of here, once we're safe." He increased the car's speed. Gravel spat from the tires. "There's a mechanic I know not far from here."

He motioned toward the backseat. "Look on the map and tell me how far we are from Mancelona."

She wiped her eyes with a tissue then reached for the map. She couldn't figure out their location without some idea of where they were. But then, he might be giving her the task to occupy her mind as he had previously.

"Let's see." She opened the oversized Michigan Atlas to Grand Traverse County. "Where are we now?"

"We're heading north out of Traverse City."

"Will we eventually go to Kalkaska to see about my relatives?"

"We'll head over there. We're going the long way around. I want to change cars first."

"Then I'm looking for Mancelona?"

He smiled conspiratorially. "That's right."

They were allies again. So be it. She slanted a look at him. He wore the familiar smile. Keeping her thoughts and emotions carefully neutral, she concentrated on the map.

On a back road somewhere on the way to Mancelona they stopped at a ramshackle cement block garage that was piled high with old tires and rusting car grills. Nate parked the car out of sight around the back and then went inside the building.

At least his inquiring mind would be busy on something else for a while, she thought. Safe from his surveillance, she took a few minutes for plotting.

She wanted him to believe in her surrender. He seemed determined that she regard him as a savior of sorts. At the very least he considered himself her mentor. If she were going to escape, an attitude of acceptance on her part was important.

Acceptance was top priority.

She would bury her resistance deep within her unconscious mind. From now on she would outwardly agree with Nate and cooperate as fully as possible. All the while she would gain new knowledge and store it as avariciously as she had at the library. Every defiant emotion and every spark of independence must be concealed. Only then would he trust her completely.

Then she could leave him.

Nate stepped from the shed with a man in soiled coveralls. "This is Billy Clyde."

She got out of the car and offered her hand. "Glad to meet you."

The man took her fingers as gingerly as if they were on fire. "Same here, ma'am."

"I've made a deal with Billy Clyde," Nate said. "We'll get our things out of the car and bring them inside."

Cassie tugged the bill of her baseball cap over her forehead against the sprinkling of rain falling from the gray clouds overhead. Her duffel and grocery sack were in the car with her jacket and purse. She opened the glove compartment and emptied its contents into her bag. The map book fit in the curve of her elbow against the grocery bag. Nate had his briefcase with him.

He opened the trunk. "Empty." He slammed the lid shut. "Is that it?" He nodded at the things she held in her arms.

"That's all."

"Get rid of the car," Nate told Billy Clyde.

"It'll be chopped by morning."

Cut up for parts, she guessed.

The man motioned toward the garage. "The car's in there."

Inside the cluttered garage stood a rusting brown station wagon. She climbed into the front seat and wrinkled her nose at the rank, oily odor.

"The engine's a work of art," Nate said.

"I knew it must have one redeeming quality," she said.

"Don't forget anonymity." Nate pulled the station wagon onto the road with a wave at Billy Clyde, who was closing the bay door behind them.

"Do you think anyone saw us switch cars?" she asked.

"No."

She accepted his word. "I can relax then."

He put his hand on her knee. She sat quietly and let its warmth penetrate the denim of her jeans. Completely still inside and out, she opened her eyes and observed his hand as it lay on her knee. It was well muscled with large blunt fingers, clean and neatly shaped fingernails – not manicured, but obviously well cared for.

The day's stress caught up with her. Even as she fought to keep them open, she felt her eyes closing. With the change of cars they were safe for a while. She rested her head against the back of the seat and let her thoughts drift until they receded into a dream of another time in another world filled with people she didn't know.

Much later she awoke to the quiet of a stilled engine and the beauty of blinking stars in an inky black sky. The dark surprised her but the rancid oily smell brought reassurance. She was curled up in the station wagon with her head resting on someone's shoulder.

She stirred. "Nate?"

"Hmm?" His answer was little more than a deep rumble.

She peered into the darkness. "Where are we?"

"We're there."

"Where?" She started to panic and then remembered she was determined to feel safe with Nate. "Okay." She stretched her legs with the hope of easing their cramping. Her stomach growled. She laughed softly at the reminder of the unending need for daily sustenance.

"I'm hungry."

His laugh rumbled in his chest again. "What a bother you are," he teased.

"I suppose you've evolved to a higher spiritual state of being where food isn't necessary."

"Not quite."

Her vision was adjusting to the faint glow from a patch of sky showing between tall fir trees. "Why are we sitting in the dark?"

"We're thinking."

"Ah, thinking. Have you decided what you're going to do with me?"

His rumble neared a growl. "I've thought of several alternatives but none seemed appropriate."

*Love?* The wishful thought slipped through her defenses before she could muzzle it.

*Yes. I hunger for you.*

His answer caused her breathing to quicken. She leaned toward Nate but felt him withdraw. *Come back, Nate. Don't deny our love.*

He cleared his throat and gripped the steering wheel. "Sorry to refuse you but I've decided on a saner course of action for us."

Stunned, she listened to Nate, who spoke of saneness while her cells danced with desire on a molecular level.

"Cassie." Her name, spoken softly, was a caress. "I want you to write a suicide note."

## Chapter Fifteen

Sitting in the parked car in the dark, she couldn't see Nate's face clearly and couldn't tell if he was serious. "Did I hear right? Did you say *suicide note*?"

Nate nodded. "Most people leave a note."

"True, but there's usually a body found with the note." She didn't know him well enough to know if he were joking but she treated his suggestion lightly anyway. "Anyway, if you want to get rid of me it's not nice to ask me to write my own note."

From the dark shadows, his soft laugh seemed ghostly. "Have more trust, Cassie. You won't be murdered."

"It's easy for you to talk of trust. You're not staring death in the face."

"You're disappearing, not dying. Don't be dramatic."

Eudora had called her the same thing, dramatic. She felt a rush of affection for Nate. "I'm not doing either." It was a familiar rush of affection, one she had felt before.

"It's all for the best," he said.

With the realization that Nate was serious, Cassie's humor faded. She wanted to shout that she didn't care what he thought but in keeping with her submissive strategy she pretended to feel trust.

The silence between them grew uncomfortable. When Nate touched her cheek with a fingertip, she jumped.

"Your disappearance will give us time to work with you. We'll change your identity." In the intimate quiet of the car his voice sounded amused. "We'll present a new you to the public."

If she had anything to say about it he wouldn't change a thing. She looked around the impenetrable darkness but could see little past the hood of the car. "Do you have any idea where we are?"

"We're parked in the driveway of the Walloon Lake safe house I mentioned earlier, before you fell asleep."

"We're almost back to Petoskey," she said with resignation. Kalkaska lay to the south.

He smiled. "My options were limited."

"Why can't we go inside?"

"Someone's meeting me here with the key."

"You mean you can't walk through walls?"

"Hardly." His voice held a trace of a smile. "But we won't have to wait long."

She sighed and willed herself to relax. "What's this plan to give me a new identity?"

"We'll change your hair color and style." If Nate had monitored her rebellious thoughts earlier he gave no sign of it now. "We'll cover those beautiful violet eyes with brown contact lenses." With one finger, he tilted her chin. "Perhaps cosmetic surgery to shorten your nose and soften your jaw line."

She pulled his hand from her chin. "My nose isn't too long and I'm not changing identities. I don't know the old Cassie well enough yet."

"You'll learn soon enough. We'll change everything."

She knew he wasn't insensitive. He was deliberately baiting her. But why? Perhaps he wanted her to lose control. *That was it.* He wanted to gain access to her mind again. She gritted her teeth, determined not to say or think anything that would make him suspect she planned to leave him. She needed his trust.

His fingers brushed gentle lines across her cheekbones. He whispered close to her ear, "We'll change everything except your precious soul."

She felt manipulated and banked her anger with difficulty. It wasn't easy. "Where will all this be done?" she asked.

"At our facility in Ohio."

"The Peace Seekers'?"

"Exactly. At Peace Lake."

In the dark she sensed he was willing to talk. "Nate, what's going on? You can't put me off any longer. I'm entitled to know." She rested an elbow on the dashboard and stared at his lounging form, no more than a shadow behind the wheel.

"I plan to tell you everything soon but we need to bring you around slowly. You have a form of amnesia."

"Amnesia?" She sorted out what she had learned in the past few days. "Seth Hawthorne is involved, isn't he?"

"Seth's involved but we'll deal with him after we take care of Cassandra West, who will cease to exist after tonight."

If he had his way her identity, her life as she knew it, would cease. She slumped in her seat. A flash of tears stung her eyes. "I don't want Cassie to die."

His hand groped for hers and held it gently. "It's just a name, Cassie. You'll still be you."

"But my name's an important part of me."

"You'll like your new one better."

He was *so* sure of himself. *Acceptance*, she told herself. She drew a breath and let it out. "Okay." But rebellion died a slow death. "Then change your identity as well."

He laughed. "Cassie."

His amusement hurt. "Why not? Because you're a man? Because you're older or think you're more important?"

"None of those. My identity is set. Nate Chambray has a political career and connections. People would notice if I changed my name."

"And I'm nothing?"

He rubbed her palm with his thumb. "I didn't mean that." He groaned impatiently. "You're on the brink of something powerful, Cassie. The choice is yours. No one can push you. You have to choose your future."

Thinking aloud put her at a disadvantage. It allowed no concealment, no falsehood. "I'm scared," she admitted.

"What's the worst thing that could happen?"

She thought for a moment. "Not death, I guess. Probably imprisonment, horrible injury and pain."

"What if I guarantee none of those will happen to you?"

"How can you guarantee that?"

In the darkness she felt him shrug. She heard rather than saw the movement of his shoulders and the brush of his clothes against the upholstery. "We have ways."

"The way you protected Auntie?"

"That was her choice."

"Surely not!" Indignation stiffened her spine.

"Perhaps not her fall but she and Charles severed their relationship with us. They chose to deny their connectedness. Her downfall was predictable."

"You're threatening me. You're saying that if I leave you, if I refuse to cooperate, my life is in danger."

"Not from us."

"How do I know that?"

"How do you know anything?" He reached for her. "Cassie." Her name was a soft rebuke on his lips. Then his hand was on her forehead, caressing, moving slowly.

Her eyes closed. Here it was, she thought, the *gentling*. *Be prepared this time. Pay attention*. But Nate's hand quieted as if he read her thoughts. Instead he leaned forward and placed his lips on hers. Their breaths mingled, his tongue touched her lips invitingly and then retreated

She wanted more. God help her. With all her fears, doubts and protestations, she wanted Nate.

He moved away with a low growl. "Damn." The one word said more than a string of oaths.

"Nice kiss," she said. She felt warm and rosy and couldn't help grinning at his discomfort.

He answered her with a half-grunt.

The man amazed her. "Why does a sweet kiss bother you when you've no problem with tossing me about on a bed?"



He slammed his hand against the steering wheel.

His loss of control delighted her. No longer was she the only one venting her emotion. "I suppose that's something else I've yet to learn," she said smugly.

"Kissing isn't part of the curriculum. I assume you know how to do that already."

"Then you assume wrong." If a silence was ever pregnant, this one was about to deliver. "I told you that I don't know as much about love as you might think." She backed away.

"Cassie," Nate said warily. He put a hand on her head.

She shook it off and retreated against the car door. "Not this time, Nate. I want to know why you don't approve of kissing me but you can bring me and yourself incredible pleasure in other ways without giving it a second thought."

"I've thought about our joining more than you'll ever know. I don't feel guilty about what we do together because it's soul pleasure."

"Soul pleasure?" Her voice broke in surprise.

"It's expected between consorts. It's accepted, understood as a reward for sacrifice."

"Okay." She didn't understand what he meant by *consorts* but she would deal with it later. At least she had him talking. "And kissing?"

"Kissing is..."

"Different?" she suggested when he faltered.

"It's more than different. Kissing is, ah, physically inciting."

She couldn't suppress a soft laugh at his formality.

"And," he continued, "it is inappropriate behavior for a teacher or a guide." He hesitated. "Or a warrior."

She stayed very still, not wanting to put him off. "Which are you?" she asked quietly.

"Sometimes all three."

"And you don't have romantic relationships?"

"No." His tone was curt, definite and unarguable.

"And if you do?"

"I don't."

Curiosity and disbelief led her to pry deeper. "What if you desire someone?"

"I don't."

"Oh Nate." His lips had touched hers with gentleness and a yearning that was undeniable.

*Don't think that, Cassie. We can't.*

He hadn't spoken aloud. She stared at the dark shadow that was Nate. *Why?* She asked silently.

*You're planned for another.*

*Who says?*

*You did.*

*Me! When?*

He reached out, took her hand and cleared his throat. "We'll get to that soon enough."

"It's time to tell me everything you're hiding." She leaned against him and he slipped an arm around her shoulders. In the driveway, overhung as it was by dark arboreal sentinels, it seemed as if they were alone in the world.

"The time isn't right, Cassie. If I told you the whole story you'd think I was crazy."

"What makes you think I don't anyway?"

He laughed and dropped a kiss on her brow. "There are things you need to learn, things to see... Dreamtime."

"Show me. Show me Dreamtime now."

"Willie's due any minute with the key."

"And after?"

"Then we'll see." He touched her chin with a fingertip that traced an imaginary line down her jaw. "Damn," he swore quietly. "I can't resist touching you."

"I have the same problem."

"This is no good."

She leaned against his broad chest and stretched her legs out on the seat. His arms cradled her while his hand stroked her hair. Filled with a feeling of growing harmony and peace, she closed her eyes. If only...

She sighed. "You seem to know all about me but I don't know anything about you. Tell me where you were born, what you liked to do as a child." She smiled, thinking of Nate as a little boy.

"You want my life story?" He laughed. "It's boring."

"No, really, I want to know."

He drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. "The same as I want to know everything about you."

"You do?"

"Uh-huh." He held a strand of her hair to his face.

Tremulous joy filled Cassie. Unless Nate was leading her on for reasons of his own—her delight faded slightly with the thought—he showed signs of the same infatuation she felt. They were like two lovers, she thought, sitting in a darkened car like teenagers, except they weren't lovers or teenagers. But tonight was a night for pretending.

"Tell me about your parents, Nate."

"I chose them carefully for—"

"Wait a minute. You *chose* your parents?"

"Yes, we all do, you know."

"No, I don't know." She took his hand.

"My father was a banker. My mother ran the household. I had a privileged childhood, private schools, private clubs, trips abroad and years of nurturing."

"That explains things then, like your attitude of confidence. You haven't struggled for what you've achieved."

He was silent for so long she thought she had offended him. "I didn't mean that as a criticism."

He stirred and unfolded their hands. "I was just thinking about what you said. I chose my parents for the life they could give me, without realizing that my life might have been too easy to build character."

She shook her head. "No, Nate. It built character."

"After Harvard Law School I did post grad work in Europe and England and held a junior position in the Foreign Service."

"But you didn't marry."

He laughed and bent to kiss her cheek. "I didn't marry. You're hung up on that subject."

"I'm just filling in the gap, that's all."

"Where did I leave off? I was a Fulbright Scholar in India and studied cross-cultural differences with one of the swamis there. That's where I developed my purpose and uncovered my vision for the rest of my life."

She shook her head. "I've spent the last six years shut away in the reference stacks at a large public library. We really are different," she said in a small voice.

"Only in surface things that don't matter."

She shook her head in denial. "How did you meet Hawthorne?"

"In Washington. When I returned from India I knew I wanted a life of service, but I wanted a position where I could do the greatest good for the most people. Seth was at Harvard with me. We gravitated to each other and he interested me in politics."

"Now you work for him?"

"With him. There's an important difference."

In the dark she hoped her smile went unnoticed. His ego wouldn't accept being labeled as Hawthorne's assistant.

"Seth heard about the Peace Seekers colony in Ohio. His sister had joined it. We visited there, received training and heard the rumor that Professor Cooper, one of the murdered Peace Seekers, had a daughter whose remains hadn't been found in the fire that took the Coopers' lives."

The hair rose on Cassie's arms.

“Seth and I were immediately fascinated with this ‘lost soul’, as the Peace Seekers described the Cooper baby. We both felt a compulsion to find her. Months passed and our search hit a dead end and we gave up. We had more pressing projects.”

“Such as?”

“Before Seth ran for public office, we wanted to find a wife for him. If he was to be elected to one of the highest offices in the country it was important that he settle down and give the voters the reassurance of a family man.”

Nate continued. “We wanted a woman who wasn’t too pushy or brainy.” He paused as if expecting a reaction but Cassie let it slide. “We wanted a woman whose past was impeccable. We checked out a lot of women from good families.”

“And you didn’t find any that met your high standards?”

He laughed. “I’m sure we sound like Ivy League snobs. It wasn’t that so much as we didn’t want to make a mistake. There were some lovely ladies with bright smiles but none had the special something Peace Seekers look for—an energy that shines in the eyes and an aura that gives them a special glow that other Peace Seekers can see.

“Seth’s wife didn’t have to be a goddess but she had to have inner strength to put up with being a president’s wife. That’s why meeting you, Cassie, on the ferry was so important. I told Seth that night at the Grand Hotel that I was pretty certain I had found the lost soul, especially when you mentioned Eudora and I made the mental connection about Charles.”

She felt the pressure on her fingers as his grip strengthened. She lifted their hands to her cheek.

“Seth said I was crazy, that I couldn’t make up my mind in one meeting, but I assured him that I had. I told him you were Eudora’s niece but it was your eyes that cinched my decision. You had the Peace Seekers’ look in your eyes and a special aura about you. I felt an immediate connection with you.”

Cassie listened without interrupting. Everything she had hoped to hear was tumbling from Nate.

“When we talked to Eudora about you, she knew right away that we had come to get you.” At a noise outside, he stopped, turned around. Headlights lit up the car’s interior and shattered the peace between them.

He put Cassie away from him. “That’s Willie’s van.”

After the enveloping cloak of darkness, the glare was nearly obscene. She shielded her eyes with her hand. Nate gently squeezed her thigh and then he was out of the car, slamming the door behind him as he strode toward the van.

She was out and after him almost as quickly. She hated having their quiet time end but after what he had told her things were beginning to make more sense.

A bearded man in a hooded sweatshirt climbed out of the van. He hugged Nate roughly. “You beat me here, buddy.”

“It’s a long way from Paradise, Willie.”

"We're getting closer all the time."

"Maybe so, but we've problems here."

"That so?" Willie looked at Cassie.

"Not her. We picked up a tail at the hospital in Petoskey." Nate stared into the cloud-shrouded night.

Cassie followed his look but the headlights had ruined any night vision she had acquired.

"Things seem quiet enough here," Willie offered.

Nate brushed away a moth that buzzed around his face. "I think we gave them the slip when we changed cars."

"We'll know soon enough."

Nate nodded at Cassie. "This is Cassandra."

The bearded man offered his rough hand. "I'm Willie. Where have you been all my life?"

While Nate laughed, Cassie sought an answer to the old line. "I understand you've been looking for me."

"Never mind that now." Nate held out his hand. "Do you have the key?"

"Didn't you look under the doormat?" Willie's hearty laugh was absorbed by the surrounding pine trees. Still chuckling, he reached into his pocket and handed a key ring to Nate, who took it with an impatient grab.

"Turn off the headlights and let's see what we have inside."

When Willie reached into the van and doused the headlights, the sudden dark robbed Cassie of her sight. She stood dumbly while Willie's black shape approached.

"Nate's got a burr up his tail for some reason," Willie said. "It's not like him to lose his sense of humor." He took her arm and they stumbled together through the night toward a house taking shape in shades of gray and black.

"I'm the problem. I think I'm trouble."

"You?" He gave a low chuckle. "No, it's not you. They've been looking for you for a long time."

A hundred questions ran through her mind. Surely it wasn't that hard to find one person. If these people were Peace Seekers, Bodhisattvas as Nate said, with all that name implied, they might have extrasensory powers that gave them the ability to find people.

They could have found her with Eudora at any time, couldn't they? Perhaps not. Eudora had kept her hidden and her adoption records were destroyed in a fire—or so she had said. Perhaps she had never been legally adopted at all.

The lake glittered silvery beyond the house. Without lights the open door looked like a dark hole.

"Up this way," Willie said, moving ahead of her.

She blanked her thoughts and followed him.

If possible, it was darker inside than out. Straight through a short hallway was the living room, or great room, she supposed was a better name. Floor-to-ceiling windows or sliding glass doors, she couldn't tell which, gave an eerie view of a planked deck and a long drop to a lawn that sloped down to the large lake beyond. The water picked up what light the overcast sky held and reflected it to the treetops.

The house had a musty, closed-up smell. Nate opened a window then left the room. Damp night air, fragrant with pine and honeysuckle, chased the unpleasant odor.

Looking out onto the lake, Cassie trembled, either from excitement or fright. Water had always held a special fascination for her. Even a small pond could stir her emotions and make her yearn for its satiny embrace.

Eudora said it was probably because Cassie had been saved from a forest fire by floating in a stream in her own little wooden box. Whatever the reason, water fascinated her. She moved toward the window and stared out.

"Everything's secure here," Nate said as he returned.

"Was the alarm on?" Willie asked.

"Yup. And I've established some other defensive measures."

"How about food?"

"The pantry and refrigerator are stocked."

"I guess you two are all set. Okay if I sleep here?"

"You're expected to," Nate answered.

"I could start back tonight."

"No, stay. There's a room upstairs where you can bunk. We'll use the master suite down here."

Her heart pounded and her mouth went suddenly dry. *We. Together. You can forget it, Nate.* "Can we have a light on in here?" she asked.

"We might as well," Nate said. "Light from lamps looks more natural from the outside than flashlights. I'll draw the blinds."

He closed the vertical blinds over the sliding glass doors and then turned on a lamp next to the sofa. In its soft light the three of them looked each other over. They seemed unlikely conspirators, she thought.

Her stomach growled querulously and she felt a rush of fatigue. She wanted to investigate the kitchen but her ambiguous status halted her. Was she Nate's guest or his prisoner? She sank onto a comfortable chair and rested her head against its back.

"You're hungry." Nate started toward the kitchen.

"Stop reading me," she called after him irritably.

"I don't have to read minds to know you're tired." He looked over his shoulder at Willie. "Are you hungry?"

The grizzled man shook his head. "I ate on the way up." He cast Cassie an eager look that said he'd like to question her. Instead he walked reluctantly toward the stairs. "I'm turning in. I'll leave at dawn."

"Talk to me before you go, Willie," Nate said from the kitchen.

Cassie thought, *Yes, Willie, talk to Nate.* Everyone talks to Nate and he talks back, but he never talks to her.

"Come here, Cassie, you can make coffee."

*Can you read my mood even in the next room?*

*I read you everywhere, Cassie. From the moon if necessary. Through eternity.*

Oh blast him! She rose wearily and trudged into the kitchen. Nate worked at the sink with a box of frozen fried chicken. The sight of him filled her with an unfamiliar and unreasonable need to be held and comforted. Angry with her neediness and his effect upon her, she jostled his elbow with enough force to jar the package from his hand.

"Hey." He grabbed the chicken from the counter where it had fallen and shot her a warning smile. "Watch yourself."

She needed physical reassurance. She needed to touch someone, to make sure she was still real. From the rear she wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her head on his back. A current of pure electricity passed between them.

She shivered. He stood perfectly still. In the silence she heard his breath quicken. "I'll put this in the microwave to heat and then we can relax."

*Relax?* Certainly he had felt the same stunning response she had. Why deny the attraction between them? She followed him to the oven and stood behind him, again pressing her cheek against the back of his soft gray sweater. He smelled satisfyingly of male, dampness and pine. She filled her lungs with his scent while he fumbled with the frozen chicken and the microwave.

Finished, he turned and gathered her in a warm hug. "It will all work out in the end."

She nodded against his shoulder. "Sure."

"I mean it."

"You're saying what I need to hear."

He buried his face in her hair and breathed deeply. "No. It's true. It's why we came."

Her interest sharpened. "Where did we come from?"

He looked at her as if he'd made a decision. "We're Ancient Ones."

"Ancient Ones?" She couldn't make sense of it.

"Bodhisattvas. That's what we call them. It's a joke Seth and I have." He didn't elaborate. Instead he led her across the room, where he opened a cabinet and removed a can of coffee. "Your job is to make coffee."

"In that case I'll show you how Ancient Ones make coffee." She had done this trick many times for Eudora. "Close your eyes."

He raised an eyebrow doubtfully but did as she asked.

She closed her eyes and concentrated with all her might. When she opened her eyes she saw the rich brew in the glass pot and knew she had succeeded in speeding up time.

The microwave timer went off. Nate looked at the coffeepot then peered in the oven at the chicken.

"I moved us ahead," she said, even though she knew no explanation was necessary.

"Okay." He took mugs from a rack on the counter.

"You approve?"

"Exactly what I expect from an Ancient One—a Bodhisattva."

She sighed with relief. "That's what I am too, a Bodhisattva?" The unexpected explanation shocked her. "That's why I have these powers? I'm enlightened in some way? But why don't you use your powers more often?"

"I know better." He poured coffee, set out plates.

An ominous feeling crawled up Cassie's spine. "What do you mean *you know better*?"

"If your aunt had trained you properly you would know to use your powers only in emergencies."

"I know that." She crossed her arms over her chest, drew a deep breath. Her protest came out in a rush. "Those men pursuing us are an emergency, Nate. Our running is an emergency. Are you so blind that you can't see it?"

He rested his hands on her shoulders. "Cassie, Cassie, calm down."

But she was up and rolling and, whether she was right or wrong, it felt good to vent her anger. "Eudora is nearly killed at her own garden party, a man I hardly know practically kidnaps me, we are chased all over the countryside—all this in less than forty-eight hours—and you, you stand there and say not to be upset."

"Cassie—"

"Oh wait." She spun away and placed her hands on her hips. "Did I forget the suicide note?" She knew she was being defensive, but she couldn't stop herself. The last two days had been incredibly stressful. What's more, she couldn't stand Nate's criticism. She felt ashamed about misusing her powers as Eudora and Charles had chastised her so many times. At the same time she was angry over her vulnerability to this man she'd only met a few days ago.

Nate looked wary.

"This same man who drove me all over Michigan's Lower Peninsula and," her voice took on a husky overtone laden with tears, "did unbelievably intimate things with



me – this same man now wants me to write my own suicide note.” Her voice broke and she couldn’t go on.

“Ah, Cassie.” He reached out and pulled her close against him.

“And then,” a sob rose in her throat, “then he tells me I’m one of the Ancient Ones.” She sniffled into his shoulder. Only his hand stroking her hair gave her courage to talk through her tears. “The strange thing is I want to believe you. I want to because...”

“Go on.”

“I want to believe you because I’ve been lost and alone all my life until I met you.”

“That shouldn’t have happened,” he whispered against her hair. “You should have been nurtured and trained, helped to remember who you are.”

“Remember what?” she asked between snuffles.

“Everything.”

“Everything may be a start for you but I’m still lost. I need a tissue.” She groped toward the counter.

He handed her a nearby box. “Here.”

She took a handful and wiped her face and then blew her nose.

He waited until she finished then asked, “Can we eat now?”

“Ah.” She tossed the used tissues in a basket under the sink. “That’s so like a man.”

“Are you done? Is everything okay now?”

“No, everything is *not* okay.” But the ache had gone from her throat and her stomach rolled hungrily. “Of course I’m okay. Let’s eat.” She shook her head at the wonder of what she had learned. “I suppose *Ancient Ones* eat?”

He took the crusty chicken from the microwave. “They do if they reincarnate.”

“Reincarnation?” It took a minute for that to sink in. “Of course that’s what this fuss is about. I must have been stupid to forget that.”

Nate sat at the table and helped himself to a steaming chicken leg. “For someone with your abilities, Cassie, you’re awfully dense.” His smile took the sting from his words.

“Oh be quiet and eat.”

## Chapter Sixteen

They demolished the chicken except for one drumstick sitting on a paper plate between them.

"Go ahead," Nate said. "It's all yours."

She shook her head. "I couldn't. I'll burst if I eat another bite." She wiped her hands on a paper towel and thought a cup of coffee would taste good.

Nate pushed back from the table. "Coffee?"

"You guessed it." She realized he had read her thoughts again. Ah well, amazing how tolerant she could be when her stomach was full. She leaned back in her chair, fascinated with watching him move around the kitchen with an ease of effort that accentuated his lean grace. If only –

"Nate?"

He paused with his empty cup in his hand. "What?"

"Do you always read my mind or is there a way I can close it down?"

He filled the cup with freshly brewed coffee. "You mean like turning a faucet on or off? Actually you can resist it, and you do resist it very well. It takes a lot of effort to read you."

"I'm glad to hear that." At his raised eyebrow, she continued, "I wouldn't want to be known as easy."

He laughed and filled a second mug for her. "Don't worry. You'll never be easy – at least not for me."

She smiled, feeling warm and comfortable in the snug kitchen, all knotty pine with wrought iron accents. Someone had given the cabin a lot of love in decorating it. "If I'm not easy for you what's the hardest thing about me?"

His eyes narrowed then he glanced away.

She guessed he was pondering her question. His mind was anything but an open book to her. As hard as she tried she couldn't pick up even a glimmer of a thought. Perhaps he would say keeping track of her was hardest, considering her failed attempt to escape at Traverse City.

She was wrong. A look of unguarded sadness passed across Nate's face and vanished in an instant. That instant was enough to stand her neck hairs on end.

"Letting you go is hardest, I guess," he mumbled.

She couldn't have been more surprised by his answer. She stared. "I'm not sure what you mean."

He set the mugs on the table between them and seemed content to quietly sip his coffee.

She persisted. "You said letting me go was hard."

That same brief look of inconsolable grief marred his features and then he shook it off. "I shouldn't have said that. Give me another chance." He slouched in his chair. "What's hardest about you? I'd say your unpredictability."

She knew he was hiding his real feelings behind words.

"You cry when I think you should be angry," he said, "and you rear up in anger when I least expect it. Unpredictable."

"And you're having trouble letting me go?"

A frown brought a pinched look to his face. "Forget I said that."

"How can you let me go if you've never had me?"

He leaned forward. "How can you say I've never had you?"

Surprised by the challenge in his voice, she pressed on. "We've only known each other a few days."

"Or an eternity."

He took her hands. A current passed between them that stopped her breath. She held on to him as if he were a lifeline and tried to frame a question but could only ask with her eyes.

"Cassie, we've come to know each other very well in the short time we've been together."

She whispered, "Yes."

"It's possible we won't be together much longer. If that happens..." He looked straight into her eyes. "If that happens I want you to know how much I care about you."

She swallowed with difficulty. "I know that, Nate."

"Okay, we mean a lot to each other. Agreed?" His smile coaxed one from her.

"Agreed." She relaxed in the warmth of his smile.

He released her hands and gently cupped them over her ears. "In that case—" He kissed her.

Judas tears betrayed her love for him. She lowered her lids and blanked her mind, hoping to halt her tears, but one wound its way down the side of her nose.

He grunted. "There you go with the tears again."

Through watery vision she saw his troubled look. "I think I need *comforting*," she said wistfully.

His low laugh was filled with promise. "You want me to comfort you? Why now?" He stood and drew her from her chair. "Why, when you've resisted before?"

"You said we might be apart soon," she whispered on her way into his arms.

"And you want me?"

She clung to him.

"Cassie." He buried his face in her hair as though hungry for her scent then covered her neck with velvety kisses.

She found his mouth and returned his demanding kiss, which was so unlike his controlled nature her legs went weak.

When he finally released her, she gasped his name.

As if filled with a desperate need he clasped her to him, kneading her back with a passion that exceeded anything that had passed between them yet. And all the time she felt the unmistakable growing physical evidence of his desire.

"Are we going to make love?" she asked.

"No." But he didn't move away.

"No?" She couldn't keep the amusement from her husky voice, didn't even try. "Then what's happening here?" Forgetting her inhibitions, she moved a trembling hand over him. "Is this evidence of *soul love*?"

He smothered her against him. "Damn it, *no*."

She kissed his neck. "With all your denial you're still very human, aren't you? Very vulnerable. Certainly no angel." As she had once thought.

"Hell no, I'm not an angel." He untangled Cassie from his arms and led her from the kitchen into the master bedroom where he gently maneuvered her onto the king-size bed and lay down beside her in an embrace that sent a fever rushing through her. With her pulse pounding, she filled her hands with his thick hair and pulled his face closer to hers.

"You want me," she said. "I know you do."

"Not in the way you think."

"Why do you keep denying reality?" she asked.

"You don't have any idea what reality is."

His hands caressed her, raising her need, warming her until she thought she would surely die from pure sensual enjoyment. "Nate, please, can't we just act like two normal people?"

"Shh, sweet one. That's not our destiny." His hand fumbled at the back of her neck.

Cradled in his arms, she felt her eyes moisten again. "You want me, Nate, say you do." She heard his protest as the music started in her head, *You're promised to another*.

"So this is what you're up to." Seth Hawthorne's voice jerked her from Nate's caresses.

Bewildered, she sat up and stared at Hawthorne, lounging against the doorjamb. How long, she wondered, had he been watching and why had he returned to Mackinac Island for the campaign dinner and then left again?

"How'd you get past the alarm system?" she blurted without realizing she'd even formed the question in her mind.

Beside her Nate, fully dressed but with hair looking as tousled as if he'd been sleeping, propped himself on one elbow. "This isn't what you think."

"How did you get in?" she asked again.

"That's none of your business. This is between Nate and me."

"It's not what you think," Nate said. "We were resting."

"Resting? Yeah."

Cassie bit down an angry retort. Why did he feel the need to lie to Hawthorne? She wasn't ashamed of loving Nate.

Nate looked at his watch. "You took your time getting here, buddy."

Hawthorne's expression hardened. "It looks like you've had time enough to stab me in the back."

Cassie wanted to defend Nate but her own emotions were so ragged she knew if she spoke she would say something she regretted. Instead she let the men talk it out.

"You should have left her alone," Hawthorne said.

Nate rolled off the bed and confronted him. "Nothing happened between us and what the hell difference would it make to you if it had?"

Hawthorne seemed taken aback by Nate's show of temper. Fascinated by this crack in Nate's control, Cassie watched him while Hawthorne said, "She's promised to me."

"Wait a minute!" She held up a hand. "Things are happening too fast." She stared at Nate. "Don't I have anything to say about what I want?"

His look brushed past her, telling her he would deal with Hawthorne first.

Her temper, already high, ignited into a raging fire. "I'm not promised to anyone!" She wrenched herself to her feet. "I'm not a *thing* to be passed hand to hand."

Hawthorne placed an arm across the doorway, successfully blocking her march out of the room. He glowered at Nate. "You haven't made much progress in taming her since I left you in Traverse City."

"And I'm not an animal to be tamed." She crossed her arms over her chest and glared.

"We've made progress," Nate answered. He seemed relieved just to be talking normally again. "It may not seem like it but Cassie has some idea of who she is."

"I'm not sure of that?" Her anger subsided under Nate's calming influence. Doubts about him lingered. And she took some sort of perverse pleasure from giving Nate a hard time while Hawthorne looked on.

Nate ignored her and spoke to Hawthorne. "She knows, for example, that we're on a mission that requires caution."

That wasn't exactly her understanding.

He went on. "And she's going to cooperate."

She remembered her plan and nodded.

"You will?" Hawthorne asked.

She tugged at what was left of her disheveled braid. "I don't know. It depends on what you ask of me." She looked at Nate. His eyes pleaded for her agreement. *You want this*, she asked.

He gave the briefest of nods.

She finally caught on. She and Nate were co-conspirators against Hawthorne. The quicker she acquiesced the sooner Hawthorne would leave. "I'll do whatever is necessary." She almost added, *sir*.

Hawthorne showed surprise at her change in attitude. She didn't dare glance at Nate for fear of laughing. "On my own terms of course."

She chanced a look at Nate. He winked. *You're a jerk*, she told him silently. He rubbed his chin and looked away.

"Can you read her?" Hawthorne asked. "She lets you?" he asked after Nate nodded. "She isn't blocking you anymore?"

Nate's gaze met Cassie's briefly. "No."

Hawthorne visibly relaxed. "You have made progress."

"Told you so, buddy." He clapped a hand on Hawthorne's shoulder and guided him into the living room. "Willie's upstairs catching some sleep. There's another bed in the loft. If you want you can sleep there."

Eager to overhear their conversation, Cassie followed.

Hawthorne looked back at her. "What about her?"

"The name's Cassie," she said hotly.

Nate looked at her. "We're sleeping down here. She trusts me."

She glanced toward the ceiling then back at him in time to catch his amused look.

"And we've work to do. No sense everyone staying up."

"What work?" Hawthorne asked.

"The note."

*Oh yes, the note.* Cassie arched an eyebrow at him.

He looked stern. *Be quiet. Seth can't read you now, but if you keep on who knows what might happen.*

Astonished, Cassie stared. He rarely spoke to her sub-vocally in front of anyone else. Mostly during times of loving.

"She's willing to do that?" Hawthorne asked.

"She's willing."

She blanked all rebellious emotions. Instead she thought of chicken, of coffee, Nate's kisses—anything but her real feelings. Nate's expression was relaxed and unguarded.

"When are you going to stage the suicide?" Hawthorne asked.

"Tonight."

Hawthorne looked relieved.

*Tonight. So soon?*

Nate gave her an annoyed look. She quickly blanked her mind.

"We'll head south with Willie at dawn," Nate said. "You can catch a few hours' sleep or leave now."

Hawthorne put his hands in his pockets. "Well..."

"It doesn't matter either way. Thought you might possibly want an alibi. I don't know why but—"

"You're right, I should get back to Lansing." Hawthorne looked at Cassie with suspicion. "You won't need help with her?"

Nate laughed. "If I do, Willie's upstairs."

Hawthorne's look measured her. She wasn't sure she liked him. He rubbed his head and succeeded in disturbing his burnished hair. "I made the trip for nothing."

"I wouldn't say that, Seth. We've settled several things. It was necessary to talk in front of Cassie."

*Oh yeah.*

"She'll regain her memory gradually at Peace Lake." Nate smiled condescendingly. "Soon she'll be a team player."

*Right.*

Hawthorne smiled at her and touched his fingertips briefly to his lips. She swore she had the feel of them on her own. "So long, Cassie."

"So long...Seth." Already his name seemed more familiar on her tongue, more a part of her. Was she remembering him from the past? She looked at Nate, seeking reassurance, but his expression was somber.

She stayed in the living room while the men went to the door. She caught bits and pieces of what seemed to be innocent conversation. "Eat? No. Be careful with her. Sure." The door closed and, still playing a role, she waited with arms at her sides.

Nate ignored her and strode purposely toward the table lamp. She watched with curiosity while he turned it off and opened the vertical blinds to let in light from the moon, which was peeking through a break in low-hanging clouds, just bright enough to cast ivory light on the lake. He stood silhouetted against the wall of windows with his back to her.

She approached him. "So this is it, Nate?"

He jumped as if he hadn't heard her step. Unusual for him not to be aware of every sound, she thought.

He looked at her. "What do you mean?"

"This is where I'm to die."

"Ah, Cassie." He rubbed the back of his head. "It's a faked suicide. I've told you before. You've got to believe me." He stared at her so intently she could almost feel him rummaging through her head. "Okay," he said at last.

She released the rest of her breath slowly, with as little ripple as possible. "So where's the notepaper?"

"There's no hurry."

"No, let's do it now. Let's get it over with, this faked suicide of mine, so I can have my new identity."

He turned again and studied the lake.

She stood as close to him as she could get without actually touching. "It's a beautiful lake to die in."

He turned and grabbed her shoulders. "Cassie," he said in a harsh whisper, "why torture me with talk of dying?"

Tears welled up but she pushed them down. No time for tears, someone had written, somewhere, a lifetime ago. "I don't want to torture you." Her whisper matched Nate's in intensity. "If there's no danger involved let's *do it*."

"It's okay with me," he said.

She felt his grip on her shoulders loosen and then his hands moved down to her hands, touching her fingertips before letting them go. She fully expected to see them glow in the dark, such was the electricity that passed between them.

He led the way to the kitchen. "There's paper in my briefcase," he said over his shoulder.

The kitchen was bright and cheerful after the gloomy living room with its dark windows reflecting the shimmering menace of Walloon Lake. *Crazy as a loon*, she thought. Crazy to be doing this, for sure.

Nate set out a pad of paper and a pen.

She picked up the pen and looked it over. "No eraser. I'd better do it right the first time."

He looked tense. "I can find a pencil if you want."

"No need." She waved aside his concern. Now that the time had come she felt icily confident. *Sign away your life, Cassie*. She concentrated on trusting Nate. It was important he believe her if she was to make her plan work.

He seemed calmer when she looked up. "I'll want my duffel and purse from the car. Could you get them please, while I write this?"

"Sure."

She lowered her head over the pad of paper and then looked up as he spoke her name.

"Cassie? I'm not forcing you to do this."



"I know." She loved the guy, which was idiotic of her given all that had happened, but true. "I trust you, Nate."

He gripped her shoulder. "I'll get your things."

She picked up the pen and wrote without thinking, just letting the words flow from her subconscious.

"Dear Auntie – Ritz, Sarah, whoever, I'm sorry. Please don't hate me. I can't stand the thought of being alone. You'll know what I mean. I can't believe it has come to this. Don't cry for me. I'm with God now."

She signed "Cassandra West" at the bottom, heard the front door open, and Nate came into the kitchen with her duffel and purse. He set them on the table. She shoved the note toward him.

He read it then glanced up as if checking her emotional temperature.

"I thought it was slightly ironic there at the ending," she said, "my being with God."

"Good touch." But his smile didn't reach his eyes. "Leave your things in the canoe."

"Everything?" She hated parting with her possessions.

"Where you're going you won't need them."

"I suppose you're right." She opened her purse then hesitated. "I'm not sure I've thought this through."

He pulled the other chair away from the maple table and sat down. "Okay. Take all the time you need."

She looked through her purse and took silent inventory. Billfold, credit cards, comb, cell phone, makeup, pens, breath mints. She saw Nate smile and knew he had read her. She smiled affectionately and continued her inventory. Fingernail kit. Toothbrush holder. Again he tossed her a wry grin.

"I'm fastidious."

"You are that." He covered her hand with his then let it go as if he'd been burned.

*I felt it too, Nate. We're on fire.*

*Get on with it.*

"It's all here, I guess. Sunglasses." She set the purse down and looked at her duffel. It had a plastic lining but that didn't matter. It wasn't going in the lake. "How are we going to do this thing?"

"There's a canoe on the lawn down by the lake."

"Real bitches, canoes. Too easy to tip," she said.

He eyed her, measuring her attitude, she suspected, but he didn't react otherwise.

"Let's do it then," she said, rising.

He picked up her duffel like a gentleman's valet. She trailed behind him with her purse slung over her shoulder. As they passed through the living room she grabbed her suede jacket from a chair. "I'll leave it all in the canoe."

On the deck she noticed more clouds had moved in. The moon was barely visible behind puffy wisps that scudded across darker shapes piling into angry thunderheads.

"Looks like rain, but what does the weather matter once I'm gone?"

"Cassie." His voice held a warning note.

"I think we're doing this wrong." She pulled up short of the steep flight of steps that led to the grassy slope and then turned and retreated toward the house.

"What's wrong?" He caught her arm as she started back inside. "What's the matter?" Impatience was strong in his voice.

"We haven't planned this properly. We haven't thought it out."

"Cassie, sweet." In the shadows of the unlit room he drew her to the sofa, sat her down and sat beside her. "I'm going to put your things in the canoe, paddle it out far enough that it will drift away and then slip overboard and swim back to shore. I'll leave the note with your things in the canoe."

The way he explained it, she wondered why she had felt panic. "What if someone sees you?"

"It's a dark night. After midnight. I haven't seen a light or anyone around since we arrived."

She shook her head. "It's no good."

"After I'm back we wake Willie, get into the van and head for Ohio. We'll leave the station wagon here. I'll wipe it off and," he paused and smiled, "as they say at the races, we're off."

She concentrated on trusting him. "This will devastate Auntie."

"She'll never know."

Her heart thudded with shock. "You mean she's not going to live?" She started toward the phone.

He caught her wrist, drew her back down on the couch. "The call can be traced."

"I'll wait until we're ready to leave. I have to check on her. I can't die without knowing how she is."

"You are not going to die," he said, teeth gritting.

She closed her mind against everything except trusting Nate with all her heart. "It doesn't seem right." She was close to tears. "She'll never know I didn't kill myself."

"She'll know. We'll send her a dream."

"Can we do that?"

"Sure. Eudora's a sensitive. We'll send her a message that you're with us and you're all right."

"Will she know where I am?"

"She'll know."

"Damn! This is so frustrating. To have lived this long, twenty-nine years, and not know while all the time Auntie—" She looked at her lap, fought down anger and then concentrated on trusting Nate. She exhaled deeply.

"All right now?"

She squared her shoulders. "Except for one thing."

The man had tremendous patience. Even though she listened for it she didn't hear even a small sigh. "I need to be the one to paddle the canoe out and swim back."

"No way."

"Listen to me, Nate. What if someone, a neighbor we don't know anything about or a passerby—"

"At midnight!"

She ignored his outburst. "What if someone sees a man paddling into the middle of the lake?"

"No one's going to see me."

"But that's just it. What if they do? Do you want this to be a successful suicide or not? Bear with me, Nate. I know this is right. I need to be the one to go out in the canoe. You wait here in the house. You can't even walk down to the shore without risking being seen.

"Don't you see?" she insisted. "Isn't it right?" She waited, trusting, loving, knowing he'd do the right thing.

"You're right."

She checked the emotions she was emitting but felt only gratitude, trust and love. True her heart beat a little faster, a little stronger, but that was only her reaction to winning a round with Nate. However tiny the victory, they were a team and she had made a contribution to their success.

*Thank you for trusting, Cassie. You're important to me.*

*I know, Nate. You have my love.* "Okay," she said, "you stay here while I go out on the lake."

Nate rose and she stood beside him. "I'll put the canoe into the lake," he said. "You can't handle—"

"I can," she said firmly. "I'm a Bodhisattva."

He laughed softly, hugging her, and then shook his head. "I'm losing it. I forgot for a moment."

She kissed his cheek. "Goodbye, Nate, until later."

"Until later." He took her arm. "Be careful in the water. I'll watch from here."

She stepped out onto the deck alone. The moon was completely covered by gathering rain clouds. A forbidding night for a swim. Well, the lake wasn't that wide, she thought as she made her way down the steps.

She ended up dragging the canoe to the lake. It made a soft splash when she pushed it into the water beside the dock. Then she stepped carefully into the canoe and steadied herself before pushing off. Her duffel and jacket were folded neatly in the bottom next to her purse. She took up a paddle and started the familiar childhood paddling routine of dip, pull, turn, lift until she reached the middle of the lake.

Once the paddle was stowed in the canoe she removed her shoes and stuck each in a pocket. Without pausing for even a moment – one scared thought was all it might take to send her paddling back to the dock and Nate – she slung her purse across her neck, grabbed her jacket and slid over the side into the cold water.

Treading water, she lifted her jacket into the air and quickly lowered it, capturing air inside it and creating a flotation device that would help with the long swim to shore.

She took one last look back. She tried to make out the shoreline with its row of vacation homes, which she knew lined most northern Michigan lakes. In the overcast night it was impossible to see the shore. Nate undoubtedly couldn't see her in the water – not without the moon's reflected light.

*Here I come, Nate,* she thought just in case he was scanning her thoughts even at this distance. Then, keeping her mind purposefully blank except for the now familiar loving and trusting of Nate, she gathered her buoyant jacket in one arm and struck out for the shore – the one *opposite* where he waited.

## Chapter Seventeen

When she reached the marina on the other shore, she crouched in the shadow of its small store, away from the security light's glare, then searched through her wallet for change. She would panhandle for coins before she'd risk using her credit card again.

Finally she had enough quarters sorted out. She stuck them in her jeans pocket, the one with the slip of paper with Rena's number. She had already decided to call Rena, the one person she knew in the area.

She sat on the ground, jacket over her head as protection against the steady rain, and carefully drew the scrap of paper from her pocket with shaking fingers. The paper had nearly disintegrated from its immersion and the numbers were indecipherable.

She was stumped for a moment, stunned by this complication she hadn't anticipated but, as quickly, she shook her despair off and drew on her courage. A clear emergency had arisen. Despite her good intentions and however much she hated risking it she would have to try to envision the past again in an effort to contact Rena.

She drew a deep breath. She had done this before to warn Eudora. This time she would need to travel back to Traverse City, if she could. *Concentrate*. Remember Rena. They had sat in her car in front of that motel in Traverse City. That was where she had written her telephone number and her neighbor's on the paper and slipped it to Cassie before she went into the motel with Nate. If she remembered correctly, she had glanced at the paper briefly—ever so briefly—before putting it in her jeans pocket for safekeeping.

Under her jacket's shelter, she leaned against the concrete block building and closed her eyes. Visualize, she told herself. Go back...back.

The car's interior came into focus. "Here," Rena said, writing on a crumpled piece of paper. "Here's my number in case you need it, and my neighbor's number in case you want a car."

Cassie took the paper and pushed it into her jeans pocket without looking at it. *Without looking at it!*

"Rena." Frustrated, Cassie leaned forward, saying as clearly as possible, "I need your help. Now."

The scene ran on much as Cassie remembered it. She shook Rena's shoulder. "Can't you hear me? I need help."

Rena smiled. "Stay alive. Stay well."

"Rena!" Cassie yelled. What use was reliving the past if she couldn't change things? Obviously Rena couldn't hear her. She had done something wrong. Eudora had responded differently the last time Cassie had projected herself backward in time,

perhaps because Uncle Charles had trained Eudora. "Rena, I need your phone number. Now."

She looked at Cassie as if lost in thought. "Wait," she said. Cassie held her breath, not daring to utter a word while Rena thought. "You'd better memorize my number in case you lose that paper."

"Yes, yes." Breathless with anxiety, she took the paper from her jeans. Scanning the numbers, she memorized them. "Thank you, thank you." She shoved it into her pocket.

"Stay happy."

Rena hadn't heard the water-soaked Cassie, the Cassie crouched in a store's shadow on a stormy night, but somehow she had made contact. Rena had picked up on her distress and given the help she needed.

Someone grabbed her shoulder and shook it. With a bone-rattling jolt she returned to the present. "Uh!"

"What're you doing here?" a rough voice asked.

She covered her face with her hands as much as possible and peered out from under the jacket's inadequate cover straight into a blinding flashlight. "What's wrong?"

"You can't stay here." The fisherman wore a slicker for protection from the driving rain. A floppy hat shielded his face.

She pulled the soggy jacket farther down over her face and stuck her feet into wet shoes. "Okay." With her purse clutched under her jacket, she struggled to her feet.

The man ran his flashlight's beam over her. "You're looking for trouble hanging around these boats, sonny." His voice softened. "Don't you have a dry place to sleep?"

She realized he hadn't seen her hair or discerned from her figure that she was female. She looked at the ground and deepened her voice. "I just want to make a phone call."

His antagonism returned. "Move on or I'll call the sheriff."

She muttered, "Okay, okay," with as good an imitation of a rebellious teenager as she could manage.

"What the hell you doing out in this storm anyway? You drunk?"

She shuffled toward the road, keeping her head down. "I'm okay. I missed my ride home."

"Oh." Sympathy returned to his voice. "Need a lift?"

She damned herself for the unnecessary ad lib, fearing he would take a longer look. Her figure would soon prove she wasn't the *sonny* he thought she was. "No. I'm okay."

She trotted quickly into the darkness along the road that circled the lake. Think confidence, Cassie, she told herself. Sure, she had failed at using the store's telephone and perhaps had aroused the fisherman's suspicion, but things could still work out. One mistake wasn't a tragedy.

Miserably wet, she sloughed along the roadside through puddles that had formed in low spots. The sooner she found her kin in Kalkaska the better. The mere thought of them brought a sense of calm to her.

She couldn't propel herself through the air but she could think herself farther along the road and speed up time that way. At midnight the country road was deserted. She closed her eyes and thought herself to the nearest intersection.

She stood for a minute, filled with the familiar awe at what she had done. From the crossroads she saw the neon lights of a roadhouse bar. It would have a phone she could use to call for a ride. All she had to do was stay in the cover of the trees and keep off the road if she saw a car approaching. She no sooner had the thought when she noticed headlights approaching from half a mile away. *Nate?*

If she had spotted a lurking helicopter she wouldn't have been more shaken. *Why did she think it had to be Nate? Couldn't the headlights be those of the fisherman at the marina?*

Because everything turned to Nate now. Her every thought, every instinct, revolved around him. Now that she had finally left him, she had courage to face her feelings for him.

She hid behind a pine's thick trunk. As the car neared the intersection, she shut her eyes and quieted her clamoring thoughts against Nate's ability to read them. Then the car passed, leaving behind only the sound of tires splashing over the water-soaked road.

She realized she must look a mess. If anyone fit the description of a drowned rat, she did. The rain, like most Michigan storms, had passed swiftly and left in its wake an annoying fog and drizzle that spun halos around parking lot lights illuminating the parked cars.

Drying off was impossible outside. She would have to make herself presentable in the ladies room before using the phone.

In the smoke-filled back hallway, the sound of pinball machines mixed with country western music. An affectionate couple was having a heart-to-heart talk and beyond them was the ladies room door.

Her reflection in the mirror over the ladies room sink disheartened her. Bending low, she blew hot air down her neck from the automatic hand dryer. Its delicious warmth dried her blouse but her hair hung in wet ribbons down her neck.

Another glance in the mirror showed she looked dryer than she actually felt. After a touch of lip gloss she reworked her braid then headed for the pay phone.

She waited for a grungy uplander with a scraggly red beard, tattoos and leather vest to pass before she tried Rena's number.

Rena answered sleepily after six rings. "Hello?"

"Rena? This is Cassie." Would Rena remember her? *Stop second-guessing yourself.* "From the Laundromat."

"Cassie?" Sleep clouded her voice. "It's after midnight. Where are you?"

“Um.” She looked over her shoulder. “I’m at a bar near Walloon Lake and I need a ride.” Aware of the need to hurry, she pressed on. “Can you pick me up or meet me somewhere?”

When Rena hesitated, Cassie started again, “I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t an emergency. Please, Rena—”

“It’s that Nate bastard, isn’t it?”

“Not entirely, but I’ve left him and I need a ride.” Using her power was handy but not trustworthy. Cars were certainly more practical. “I’ll pay you.”

“Stop with the money bit. It’s not that. It’s midnight.” She heaved a sigh. “Where should I meet you?”

“The farther from Walloon Lake the better. I want to get away from here.”

“There’s a café at Kewadin. Do you know where it is? Can you get a ride there?”

“I’ll manage.”

“If it’s not open I’ll be parked in the lot. It’ll take me a while.”

“Same here. I’ll see you there. Rena, thanks.”

In the main room the smoke hung close to the ceiling. On a rainy Sunday night only a few of the chrome and plastic tables were occupied. Pinball machines lined one wall. A large-screen TV showed a country western video while a couple slow danced on a dance floor the size of a postage stamp.

The bar itself ran the length of one side of the room. She had put on the soaked suede jacket to cover her wet clothes. Now she wished she had her baseball cap. In the shadows along one wall, she stood and looked over the few men gathered at the bar. She needed a ride to Kewadin to meet Rena. She didn’t want a ride to Kalkaska. She didn’t want anyone to be able to tell Nate where they dropped her. Better to meet Rena, switch cars—use Nate’s strategy for evading pursuit.

She could use her powers to help if necessary but she wanted to save that energy for emergencies, as Nate had instructed her. Either she found a ride to Kewadin or she stole a car—an unthinkable alternative. This rural area was too far from Petoskey to call a cab. Besides, she had no desire to leave a trail of phone calls.

She studied a table of women who were making eyes at the few men at the bar and talking among themselves. She doubted if they would drive her anywhere this foggy night.

The unattached males seemed more likely prospects—and more dangerous—but Cassie’s confidence was running high. She could do anything after fooling Nate and completing her escape. *Don’t think about Nate. Don’t think about hurting him, just concentrate on getting to Rena.*

She had used her powers in speeding up time. She could deal with a single male. Not two, not a group, but one male should be no problem.



She sauntered toward the bar, looking the men over on the way. Looks weren't important but temperament was. She was looking for affability, malleability and not too drunk. Please, not too drunk.

She took an empty stool at the end of the bar and stared at the bartender. At the edge of her vision she saw heads turned her way. What did she expect? It was almost closing time. She had walked in alone.

"Buy you a beer, hon?" the nearest man asked. He wore jeans and a hooded sweatshirt as protection against the rain. A black Caterpillar hat covered his stringy hair.

"Thanks for the offer but I'll get my own."

"Hey, what's one beer?" He took some money from his pocket and put it on the bar. Smiling, she told the bartender, "This guy wants to buy me a cola."

"You've got it." He slid the money off the bar as if he'd been doing it for a long time.

"Where'd you come from?" He looked her over. "I ain't seen you before."

She caught a glimpse of herself in the smoked mirror behind the bar. Her hair hadn't dried yet to its silvery blonde color. When it did, she could expect more attention.

"I'm meeting a girlfriend at a café not too far from here." She didn't want anyone overhearing her destination. "Do you know anyone who might drive me?"

He looked around the room. "Well, one of the boys here could give you a ride, or I might myself."

"That so?" She stuck a straw in her glass and hoisted it to him. "Thanks for the drink." She looked him over. He seemed decent. "You married?"

He laughed. "What's that to you?"

"I wouldn't want to get you in trouble with your wife."

"If I had an old lady she'd be here with me. Ain't that right, Rick?" He nudged the man beside him. "None of us come here without our old ladies, do we?"

"Naw, not us."

The boys at the bar guffawed, enjoying their own joke, she thought. She sipped fizzing cola through a pink straw.

"When you want to leave?" he asked after a while.

"As soon as you're ready." She had already sniffed out his breath, and one beer could smell as bad as ten, she knew, but his eyes weren't bloodshot, his speech wasn't slurred. All the time she'd sat there he hadn't taken one pull from the longneck bottle.

"What kind of car do you drive?"

"Ninety-three pickup." His eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"Just wanted to make sure it would get us there."

"It'll get you anywhere you want to go. That baby will take us anywhere at all. What's the matter with your car?"

"I don't have one. I walked over."

"In the rain?" He looked her over again, his eyes lingering not unexpectedly in all the familiar places. "Yeah you're wet for sure. Where'd you walk from?"

"The lake." He could choose from several nearby.

He whistled. "That could be a couple of miles. What's a gal like you doing out alone at night? Don't you have an old man to take you around?"

"I was with a guy but he didn't want me to leave."

She saw him straighten. "Why not? You in a fight?"

She had made a tactical error, she saw, and tried to make up for it. "Not really but I won't lie to you. He's probably out looking for me right now."

He grunted. "Tough guy, is he?"

Cassie shook her head. "No. There won't be any trouble. I just thought you should know."

"Yeah, well... I don't know." He looked at his watch. "I might have to get on home."

Picking a guy up was harder than she had imagined. She was being too honest. Why hadn't she just cajoled him into driving her where she wanted to go? Principles, she thought. She disliked lying, disliked using people.

"Look, if you want to give me a ride for the fun of it I'd appreciate your help. There's no danger that I know of. If you have the time, I need a ride."

She would give him money for his trouble when they reached the café. For now she didn't want him to know she carried cash.

He thought it over then nodded. "It's a deal."

"I want you to know I'm not interested in any funny business. I want a ride, that's all. Nothing more. If you want to drive me around and tell your friends about it tomorrow let's go."

Still holding the longneck beer bottle in his hand, he slid off the stool and grabbed her elbow. "Let's go."

They left amid a rebel yell and a few "ride 'ems" but Cassie didn't react. A quick glance at her hero gave her a glimpse of his broad smile. Okay, they were even. She had her ride, he had his reputation.

## Chapter Eighteen

Outside in the parking lot the man Cassie had picked up confirmed her assessment of his character by holding the truck door open and waiting while she climbed into the pickup before he walked to the driver's side.

"Where to?" he asked.

"Do you know where Kewadin is? If you do, there's a café near it."

"Yeah, I know it. Everyone around here does. What'd you say your name was?" he asked.

She hadn't said. "I'm Mary. What's yours?"

"Jeff."

She smiled. "Well, Jeff, I'm grateful for the ride."

"We ain't there yet."

The way he said it made her wonder again if she would be safe with him. "No, but I know you'll do what you said you would."

He scratched his cheek with grease-stained fingers. "I'll take you where you want. Nothing better to do."

If he had he wouldn't be here with her was the implication behind his words, but she couldn't help believing he was getting a kick out of driving her around. She could only wonder what he would tell his buddies at the bar.

They rode in silence with only occasional headlights appearing behind them. A car passed once, but nothing occurred to make Cassie feel as if they were being followed. Still she had that curious, prickly feeling at the back of her neck whenever she thought of Nate, which was too often.

He was painful to contemplate. Their separation hurt too much. If her life ever straightened out perhaps she could try to work things out with him. A futile thought, she knew, but her tender side couldn't stop thinking about him.

Her eyelids drooped and she tried not to think of Nate as the pickup covered the miles to Kewadin. Sooner than she expected they pulled off a narrow winding road onto a driveway that led to a wooden building with a lake glistening beyond. A neon sign in the window read simply "Café".

"Is this the place?" he asked.

Cassie recognized Rena's old car in the otherwise empty parking lot. "There's my friend." She pressed a twenty into his hand. "Thanks for the ride."

He tried to hand the money back. "That's okay."

"Please. For the gas. It makes me feel better."

He gave her one last long look and pocketed the money.

With a farewell wave of her hand Cassie stepped down and ran through the mist toward Rena's car. Behind her the pickup pulled away.

Rena climbed out. "Lord, Cassie, you look like a drowned rat and you smell worse, like lake water."

Delighted to see her new friend, Cassie laughed. "I swam my way to freedom."

Rena eyed her thoroughly. "If you want coffee there's a Thermos in the back."

"I'd love some."

"Okay then, let's go." She waited for Cassie to climb in before asking, "Who did you get to drive you here?"

Cassie busied herself pouring a cup of coffee without spilling it. "Never mind him. The less you know the better it is." She had a tingling sensation at the back of her neck. Nate was near. She couldn't shake her uneasiness. "Is your gas tank full? Want some coffee?" She offered Rena a plastic cup.

Rena shook her head. "No thanks, and the gas is okay."

Cassie took a sip of the steaming brew, felt it warm her stomach all the way down. "How's your son?"

"He's okay. We live with my parents and he's nearly grown." She turned the key in the ignition. "Where to?"

"Kalkaska, but take the back roads. I don't want to be found."

Rena shrugged. "I suppose I can find a way."

As Rena navigated the twisting narrow roads, some paved, some gravel, she wanted to talk and Cassie let her. Hearing about Rena's failed marriage and how her parents helped raise her son in Michigan while Rena had worked for a few years in California took Cassie's mind off her own middle-of-the-night worries.

As they approached Kalkaska she rubbed her itching neck, hoping to dispel the night's tension. "Let's see if we can find a motel, Rena. I need a shower." She was ready for light, any light, to chase away her nighttime blues. That was all they were, she reassured herself. Leaving Nate the way she had—sneaking away like a cat burglar in the night—had brought on a dark pessimistic mood.

*Nate*, she thought.

*Cassie*. She jerked, convinced for all the world she had actually heard his voice, gritty with concern. She couldn't have. Her mind was playing tricks on her, unfair tricks.

In what way were they unfair? She argued with herself.

It wasn't right for Nate to come into her life and whisk her away from all she had known with no chance to make a clear, logical decision. No chance to check with Auntie.

Auntie was dying.

There had been no chance for Cassie to resign her job or close her apartment or say goodbye to the few friends she had. With those men after Nate and her, there had been no time. No time for trust to grow. Only time for running, for deception and manipulation.

And love. Nate loved her, she knew, even if it was his own style of platonic, unconditional love.

*Not so, Cassie. Remember his arousal.*

*Arousal?* No. That was the last thing she wanted to remember.

"Rena..." Cassie dug at the back of her neck with her fingernails, wishing she could get rid of the faint buzzing in her neck. "I want that shower. I think I picked up a bug in that lake."

"I'm not surprised. How are we going to pay for a room?"

"Money's no problem. I have traveler's checks and cash enough for a few days. I brought it with me when I went to Mackinac Island to see my aunt."

"What aunt? I thought you were with that Nate guy."

For Rena's safety she was probably better off knowing as little as possible. "I'll tell you when we stop."

The promise reminded Cassie of Nate's withholding information from her. She thought of how angry she had been with his evasiveness. Perhaps his motivation had been as pure as hers. She hadn't given him the benefit of the doubt.

Half an hour later, after they had awakened the owner of an inexpensive motel in order to register, Cassie emerged from the bathroom with a towel tucked around her.

"Rena, can you see why my neck is itching?"

Rena looked up from the TV. "Sit here beside me."

Cassie lifted her hair while Rena's rough fingers explored her neck. "There's nothing here. Lord, Cassie, your hair's beautiful. Even wet it glows like silver. I bet it gets you a lot of notice."

"Nate wants to change its color." The secret slipped out of its own volition. "He says I'll be safer that way. It would be easier for me to hide."

"Hide from what?" Rena asked. "That man's a con artist if I ever saw one. I don't trust him, not one bit."

Cassie hated hearing Rena speak harshly of Nate. "You don't know him like I do. Ouch." She winced.

"That hurt?" Rena parted Cassie's hair for a closer look. "Each time I've seen you you've been running from this Nate guy. If you like him so much why run away?"

Cassie wasn't sure, except she had been independent, a loner, for so long that accepting help was difficult. Calling Rena had been a big step in trusting. "It's complicated."

"That's what you said before." Rena leaned closer. "Hey, there's something stuck here." She picked at it with a fingernail. "It's a little piece of plastic." She laughed. "Lord, Cassie, did you wear something new and forget to take off the price tag?"

"No." Cassie ran her hand under her hair, trying to feel what Rena was talking about. "What is it?" Even before Rena answered Cassie was fairly certain what she would find. She held her breath and waited for the devastating answer.

"There!" Rena said triumphantly. "I've got it. Look."

Cassie turned slowly so as not to dislodge whatever it was. Even though she looked carefully she saw nothing on Rena's outstretched finger. She leaned closer. "Where is it?"

"Here." Rena indicated her fingertip. "Can't you see the plastic dot on the end of my finger?"

Cassie went cold and shivers ran along her spine even as she felt her cheeks burning.

"It was stuck in your skin above the hairline."

Cassie fought tears. "I've never seen anything like that before. Could it be something used to track people?"

Rena stared, disbelief clear on her plain, honest face. "How could you track anyone with this thing?"

Sorry now that she had blurted out her suspicion, Cassie shrugged. "I don't know. It's probably nothing."

Nate would have the newest technology, newest sensors. She didn't want to tell Rena too much about his abilities, didn't want to frighten her. Nate had probably known where she was all along. As she swam away from him in the lake he had followed her progress. Her mind reeled with the implications. He wasn't simply tracking her by her thoughts or through their special *mental connection*. He'd had her under electronic surveillance all along.

She thought aloud. "If Nate knew where I was he could have intercepted me at any time. Why let me think I was free?"

"It beats me. This is weird."

"I'm probably wrong," Cassie said. "It's my overactive imagination." Nate might not know about the commune in Kalkaska. She'd only said "relatives". Possibly he was following her to see where she would go.

"What a jerk he is," Rena said, "putting a tracking dot on you." She shook her head. "That man scares me."

"I'm not afraid. He wouldn't hurt me, Rena, or you either, but I *am* angry and hurt."

With the admission, tears welled in her eyes. She blinked them away. He might have stuck on the dot the first night when they had slept together in the loft or one of the other times when his trust in her was lowest.

"I tried to make him think I was going along with his plans," she continued. "Probably he never believed me."

"Lord, Cassie. Where do you suppose he is now?" Rena looked around the room as though she expected to see Nate appear from behind the dusty draperies that barely stretched across grimy windows.

"He's somewhere nearby. You can bet on that." Cassie looked at Rena's outstretched finger. "Hold that dot carefully, I want to keep it."

"You can barely see it." Rena brought it to her face.

"Don't sneeze. If it falls on the floor we'll never find it." Cassie took an old envelope from her purse and held it up to Rena's hand. "Brush it in here. Careful."

For all Cassie could tell Rena placed an imaginary speck of dust in the envelope. From the distance of a few inches it disappeared in the motel room's dim light.

Cassie sealed the envelope and zipped it into a pocket in her purse. "We might want to use this later." She looked at Rena's troubled face. "It's not important, I'm sure."

Rena shook her head and when she spoke it was slowly, as if the words came reluctantly. "I don't know, Cassie. I was glad to drive you here but..." Her voice trailed off. She looked at Cassie doubtfully.

"It's okay, Rena. I've asked too much of you on short acquaintance. You've done more than I've ever expected."

"I've got a kid at home."

"And he needs you."

"Yeah, but he's nearly grown and he doesn't need me as much anymore." She shrugged as if she wanted to say more but thought better of it. "I'm here now, so what's next?"

She was too generous. "I can't ask anything more of you, Rena, but I do need a car that can't be traced and I can't rent one. I tried that and failed."

"I've got a car." Rena thought for a moment. "If you want to buy mine like you asked before I'll let you have it. You can drive me to the bus. Ever since I left California I've been dying to get back."

"But are you going to leave your son?"

Rena shrugged. "He has his own life here with my parents. I'm like a fifth wheel in their home. Or if he wants he can go with me. I should never have left California. I've friends there. I would have friends and the sun and good times. Do me a favor, Cassie, buy my car."

"You mean it?"

"Yeah I mean it." She laughed her throaty laugh.

Plans formed slowly in Cassie's mind as she sat on the bed, stared at Rena and considered her own future. Even in the room's stifling heat she started trembling with

the thought of the steps she was about to take. Her clothes were laid out near the heating unit. They were damp but would do. As she dressed they worked out the rest of the plans with Rena adding a twist of her own.

Six hours later Cassie hugged Rena tightly then watched with moist eyes from across the street as the woman boarded the bus to Traverse City. They had argued it out over breakfast in a café filled with local craftsmen and retirees, drinking three coffee refills while they planned the details.

Rena was a large woman and couldn't wear Cassie's jacket but they found another fringed suede jacket for her at a local sportsman outfitter's. At the motel room Cassie darkened her hair to a sable brown with temporary hair color then helped bleach and tint Rena's hair to Cassie's natural silver platinum. When her hair dried Rena pulled it back under a bandanna and let it spill out from underneath the scarf that framed her chunky face.

From half a block away she looked just like Cassie, except for the extra weight. With Cassie's raspberry canvas purse slung over one shoulder she fit Cassie's description fairly accurately. Any unsuspecting bus driver or passenger would agree that a woman resembling Cassie, dressed in identical clothing, had taken the bus from Kalkaska to Traverse City.

The tracking dot sat in the envelope in the purse – Rena's idea. The ruse was a long shot but Cassie agreed. She was desperate to buy time before Nate caught up with her or before he decided to move in and stop her. Now that Rena was carrying the dot toward Traverse City Nate would be on the move in his car. Once the bus left with Rena aboard Cassie would have more freedom.

Ever since Rena had discovered the microdot Cassie had kept her eyes open for any sign of Nate but hadn't seen even one suspicious-looking person. Most likely he was getting a few hours of necessary sleep. Nate was completely and fully human, she knew, despite his specially developed sensory and psychic abilities. Although he didn't need as much sleep as some people, he couldn't watch her for twenty-four hours straight.

She had enjoyed the morning with Rena. They had shopped at the local discount mart as any women might do. Cassie bought a new purse and some of the other necessities she had left behind in her duffel. As they shopped she put her worries behind her and concentrated on making sure she had everything she needed.

Now those few hours of respite were over and it was time for the serious business of searching for her relatives.

When she stepped into the office of the motel where Rena and she had stayed a bell chimed in the rear. "I'd like to check out," she told the woman who entered from the owner's quarters.

"Was everything all right with the room?"

"It was very nice. I wonder if you know anything about a commune around here."

"A commune? Well, I don't know." The woman looked puzzled.



"I'm searching for a cousin I haven't seen for a while. Someone told me they thought she lived in a commune."

"I've heard of a few places," the woman said with distaste. "Down in the forests, on undeveloped land, there are places where you can find people living without even phones or electricity."

Cassie thought it sounded like a good place to hide a Peace Seekers colony, and if she was a Peace Seeker then most likely some of her relatives were. It was worth checking out. "That's a possibility."

"I'd watch out if I were you. Those people are eccentrics. Townspeople don't bother them and they don't bother much with us. It doesn't pay to meddle."

"No." Cassie hesitated and then took the risk. "There's something else I wanted to ask. There's a man looking for me. Ah, my ex. I'd rather he didn't know that I was here. If anyone asks about me could you keep my stay confidential?"

"Sure, guess I could." But the look on her face told Cassie she had just furnished another bit of gossip for the next town meeting.

From the motel office, Cassie drove directly to the local newspaper. A small city editor would know most of the people in one way or another. She asked to speak to the senior editor. "I'm looking for my cousin," she told the silver-haired man who shared a private office with an antique rolltop desk. "Do you know the location of any communes around here?"

He took one last glance at the computer screen in front of him then gave Cassie his full attention. "We've our share of local flakes and cults. The government usually leaves them alone as long as they pay their taxes and don't mess with firearms."

He pulled a map from a drawer. "There's one here, and here." He highlighted the likely areas with a yellow marker. "You can keep this map."

She took it from him. "Thanks for your help."

"You might want to talk to the postmaster. They all know what goes on in each other's territory. Talk to the mail carriers. Even houses without phones receive mail delivery, unless they have post office boxes."

At the post office the carriers had left on their routes for the day. The supervisor wasn't in a mood to answer snooping questions, as she characterized them. She told Cassie the time the carriers were expected to return and said she could talk to them on their own time but no one could disturb employees at their work. Neither rain, nor snow, nor Cassie.

She climbed into Rena's car and drove around Kalkaska before heading for the forest. She looked at schools, lodges, homes. Gray minibuses roamed the town's nearly deserted streets. Whatever else its citizens lacked their public transportation exceeded anything she had seen in any other small city.

At noon she borrowed Nate's philosophy of hiding in the middle of the action and returned to the center of town and ate at a nearly filled restaurant. Besides, she knew Nate was halfway to Traverse City. She was almost certain of that.

She thought of a few intimate places she hadn't looked for a second homing device. As quickly she reminded herself that Nate and she had experienced soul love—the original safe sex. He had never touched her intimately, unless he had while she slept or while she was in one of his hypnotically induced slumbers. She hated to think that of him, whatever other tricks he had pulled on her.

She spent the afternoon exploring back roads, looking at the places the editor had marked. Nothing seemed to indicate communes. Perhaps they were deliberately difficult to find. Perhaps they discouraged visitors. In the waning afternoon she pulled into a motel that was set close to the road with parking in the rear.

"Where's a good place to eat?" she asked the clerk after she registered.

"There's a tavern about a mile down the road." He indicated the direction with a nod of his head. "Food's good and it's a nice crowd."

Cassie understood him to mean that it was okay for a woman eating alone. "I'll head over after I've settled in."

She looked the motel room over and washed up. Then she found the tavern. It seemed as good as any place she had seen that day. In the parking area was an assortment of pickups and four-wheel-drive vehicles. She parked Rena's car, her car now, and went inside where she sat in a booth at one of the windows.

It was good to be amidst people again. A replica of an old-fashioned jukebox blared country western music and jeans-wearing good-ole-boys swiveled on chrome bar stools. Cassie noticed a sprinkling of women among them and a woman bartender who had a look about her that said she didn't belong in a rustic country tavern.

Cassie couldn't put her finger on what set the woman apart and wasn't close enough to see her features clearly. She wore a long string of beads around her neck. There was something about her rough yet stylishly cut white and gray homespun clothing and her straight, almost military, posture that distinguished her from the others.

While waiting for a waitress to take her order Cassie watched the bartender for a while before noticing a pile of newspapers stacked at the end of the bar. They were today's papers, Cassie guessed, from Traverse City or Petoskey. Perhaps there would be something of local interest in them, some mention of a commune. It was a long shot at best but why not make use of the time spent waiting?

The waitress signaled she would be right over but, sitting alone, Cassie felt conspicuous. A newspaper would give her something to read. She was conscious of doors opening and closing, of people coming in and greeting each other, the way patrons in any local tavern might do at the end of a workday.

She left her purse in the booth to mark it as occupied then walked the short distance to the bar. She had to wend her way past a group of men that were gathered at it.

"Excuse me," she murmured as she brushed a man's arm.

He took one look, turned away to his friends then back again to take a longer look. "Hello, doll," he drawled. "Like a seat?"

"No thanks," Cassie said evenly. "I'm getting a paper." She took one off the top of the stack.

"Sit here, sugar." His friend slid off a stool and stepped aside. "Are you new around here?"

The last thing she wanted was a group of strangers asking questions about her life or her past. She turned away with her paper.

The nearest man gripped her upper arm and pulled her back. "Don't run away." When he smiled Cassie saw his teeth were bad. "We're only being friendly."

Then a remarkable thing happened. Cassie was smiling coolly, making little noises that said thanks but no thanks and trying to back away when the woman bartender moved up and practically speared the man with her gaze.

"Let her go, Jake," she ordered.

The group at the bar quieted. The bartender said in a firm voice, "She said she wasn't interested."

The man's grip on Cassie's arm tightened. "Hell, Liz, no need to get fired up." But Cassie's arm remained clamped in his hand as tightly as ever.

The bartender nodded but didn't move. She looked familiar but Cassie couldn't place her. The resemblance to someone she knew was so distracting she forgot about the man restraining her. The bartender looked Scandinavian, independent and extremely strong. Then it came to Cassie. The woman had the same violet-eyed look, the same blonde hair as Cassie's before she'd colored it, except that the bartender's hair was more honey-colored than Cassie's. Here was her cousin.

Then almost before she knew what was happening Cassie was pulled onto the stool by the man and held there by her shoulders as if she were in a vise. Too startled to think of anything to say, she pointed toward the booth. "My purse is there."

"Let her go, Jake."

Cassie sensed enormous danger emanating from the woman called Liz toward the man who held Cassie's shoulders. In fact her presence seemed to expand and her violet eyes focused directly on the man and filled with malice. Worried by what she saw in the woman's expression, Cassie decided to take matters into her own hands and end the confrontation.

Using surprise as her ally she spun off the stool, pulling the man with her. Before he could recover she shoved him against the bar with so much force he doubled over with a grunt from the impact.

"Hey," his friend yelled, glaring at Cassie.

"Let her alone," Liz said quietly.

Cassie walked toward her booth, newspaper in hand, shaking inside and wanting nothing more than to get her purse and get out of there in one piece.

"I said let her alone." She heard the bartender's voice rise above the nasal wail of the country singer from the jukebox.

She turned. The guy she had slammed into the bar was headed her way. Still hunched in pain, he came steadily with evil intent written on his face.

"Jake!" his friend yelled a warning.

Over the man's shoulder she saw Liz walking toward them, a shotgun held high in both hands.

Cassie grabbed her purse for a quick departure and tried to make herself invisible.

"Get out of here," Liz told Jake.

Before anyone could react or things could cool down he swung around, grasped the gun barrel and whipped it upward against Liz's face, knocking her to her knees. She knelt there a moment then struggled to her feet. The long barreled gun lay on the floor between them.

## Chapter Nineteen

Jake's friends circled him and hustled him toward the door. "Dammit, Liz," a man called out in leaving, "I'm sure as hell sorry about this."

The woman they called Liz didn't react to his remark. She was staring at Cassie as if she'd seen a ghost. Aside from the dazed look Liz didn't appear injured. In an intuitive flash, Cassie sensed that Liz knew her or at least recognized the kinship between them.

"Are you hurt?" Cassie asked.

"It's not bad." Liz held her hand to her cheek and closed her eyes. When she opened them her eyes were clear of the glaze that had clouded them. She picked up the shotgun, pointed its barrel at the floor and glanced around at the staring crowd that had gathered around the two women. A grim smile curved her mouth.

"The fun is over. Get on with the party."

People drifted away, the jukebox cut in and conversation started its climb back to its previous level. The smile on Liz's face faded and she stared at Cassie with an expression of quiet intensity.

"I'll stow this gun behind the bar and we'll talk. What's your drink?"

"Beer is fine." Cassie watched Liz walk toward the bar. The woman moved easily, a touch of bravado in the swing of her hips that showed she felt good about the way she had handled the trouble.

While she waited in the booth for Liz to return, Cassie checked out the other customers. Conversations had resumed but the tone remained quieter and more subdued, as though the shotgun reminded them of the necessity for self-restraint.

Liz returned with beer for both of them. She slid into the booth and fixed her stare on Cassie. "Where did you come from?" she asked, as though it were the most natural question in the world.

"Where am I from?" She wondered exactly what Liz meant. "Why?"

"Please, trust me for a minute. I meant what's your family background?"

She saw no reason to evade the question. She wouldn't lie anyway, unless it was absolutely necessary. "I have an aunt. As for the rest I honestly don't know. Maybe some cousins," she said tentatively.

Liz sipped her drink without comment.

"I'm the last one of my family," Cassie added with an anxious laugh. "At least that's what I've been told."

Liz nodded. "We've heard about you. We heard you were traveling with a man."

*They'd heard? Traveling with a man? Nate.* "I don't understand. Who's heard about me?"

"The people around here, my friends."

Cassie felt her toes tingle. She stared at the woman. Yes, this woman was the reason Eudora had sent Cassie to Kalkaska. The resemblance between them was exceptional.

"Are you alone now?" Liz asked.

Cassie immediately thought of Nate, thought of the microdot he'd placed on her. How long did she have before he realized he'd been tricked and resumed his search?

"I'm alone for now."

"What happened to the man?"

Cassie's answer was obliterated by a siren's wail. She glanced out the window and her heart leapt at the sight of a sheriff's car stopping in the lot.

"What now?" Liz asked, rising. Irritation strong on her face, she looked at Cassie. "Some fool must have called the sheriff. We'll talk later."

Seized by a premonition, Cassie grabbed her purse and slid out of the booth. She stopped at the sight of a burly, brown-uniformed man in a wide-brimmed hat entering the tavern.

The deputy walked over to Liz, tipped his hat back on his head with two fingers. "What's going on?"

"Nothing, Kyle," Liz answered warily.

"Someone said something about a disturbance with a gun."

Cassie stepped back into the booth and lowered her gaze as if by avoiding eye contact she could disappear. When she glanced up she saw the deputy scanning the room. She watched while he greeted several people he knew and then settled his malicious gaze on Cassie.

"You're a new one." He approached and slowly stripped her with his eyes. "Are you from another county?"

Under his inspection her mouth went dry. "I'm just passing through." She straightened her shoulders and tried to appear unconcerned. "I'm from downstate. Troy."

His eyes narrowed. "That's a ways from here."

"I'm visiting my aunt."

"Where does she live?"

Some interested spectators had formed a circle around them. Cassie wondered why he was questioning her but saw no choice other than to answer as truthfully as possible. "My aunt lives on Mackinac Island. I stopped here for dinner."

He put his hands on his hips and leaned closer. His shirt strained across his stomach, which rolled over his leather belt. "Is that so?"

Beside her, Liz stirred uneasily. "Why are you harassing my friend, Kyle?"

"I heard she's been asking questions around town." He eyed Cassie skeptically. "Is she a friend of yours?"

"She is now."

His antagonism shifted to Liz. "You ain't looking for trouble, are you, Liz?"

"No, are you?" The bartender's chin came up and her posture stiffened so that she seemed to grow an inch or two.

"Listen, *little lady*, I'm answering a call from a concerned citizen. If you didn't call, someone else did." He looked around the circle of onlookers. "Any of you report a disturbance?"

No one seemed ready to accept responsibility for summoning the law.

"Any of you see the trouble that happened here?" The deputy named Kyle looked around. "No? How about a gun? Anyone see a gun?"

"Hell no," one man answered with a laugh. "'Course I can't see much after three beers."

In a ripple of muted laughter, the crowd relaxed. Even the deputy cracked a stiff smile.

"Okay." He scratched behind one ear. "Guess I'm not needed here."

The tension started draining from Cassie. At her side Liz remained hard and unyielding.

Unexpectedly, the lawman removed his hat and tossed it on the table in front of Cassie. "I'm off duty now." He lifted his radio to his mouth, clicked a button, said a few words and then returned the radio to its case on his belt. "I could do with a drink, Liz."

Profoundly relieved at the change in the deputy's attitude, Cassie felt her breathing ease to a slower pace. Someone put money in the jukebox and a country singer once again wailed his misery. All around people settled down. Conversation flowed again.

"What's this here?" Kyle reached for Liz's beer mug. "Is this your drink, sweetheart?" He lifted the drink and squinted through the amber-colored liquid at Cassie.

Cassie touched the mug in front of her. "This one is mine."

He picked up her frosty beer mug in his other hand, studied both drinks for a moment before putting Cassie's mug to his lips and then drinking the beer down as if it were water.

Something was wrong, she knew, all wrong. Responsible law officers didn't drink in uniform even if they were off duty, not to mention the fact that he drank her beer.

She sensed Liz's anger more than saw it. She heard the sharp intake of breath beside her, heard the warning rumble in Liz's throat that signaled anger. This deputy was trouble. Hostility flowed from him like a noxious odor. He was testing them, testing the women's wills against his. She had no idea why, she only wanted out.

Or so she told herself. Internally she felt the heat of rising excitement. In the past few days she had been pushed around too often. Restrained anger festered inside like an old wound. Something dark and ugly burst into life within her. Suddenly she was angrier with this crude deputy than she had ever been with anyone in her entire life.

He wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "One beer can't do the job," he told Liz.

Liz stared coolly at him, as if she had been through this a few times.

That knowledge fueled Cassie's anger. Why? She asked herself. Why should he have the right to hassle the woman who had come to her rescue? Why hassle anyone?

The deputy stared at Liz's beer then raised the mug to his mouth and drank until only drops remained in the glass. Cassie sensed the room quieting again.

"That's better," he told Liz after he belched and caught his breath. He slammed the glass down on the polished table. "Bring me another."

Cassie looked at her, wondering what she would do, and noticed that the skin on Liz's injured cheek had swelled and turned red. The man she had thrown out for bothering Cassie had hit her hard with the shotgun barrel.

"I'm not serving you in uniform," Liz said. "Come back after you've changed and do your drinking then."

Her controlled tone, her acceptance of the scene, surprised Cassie. She saw the deputy's gaze narrow, watched his fist bunch and then he reached across the table and grabbed Cassie's arm. "Okay, I'm leaving, but this one's coming along for questioning."

She pulled against his grip. "I haven't done anything."

"We'll see about that." He hurried her to her feet and toward the front door.

Under the pressure of his viselike grip, she stumbled against the end of an empty booth. Around them the tavern fell silent.

Anger welled up inside her, bright and red. She felt an overwhelming hatred for the man and wished she could damage him in some way, any way.

Her vision blurred. When it cleared she was looking out the window, looking at his sheriff's car in the parking lot. She hated the symbol of his authority and the man taunting her. She wanted them both gone. The strength of her emotions created a sickening lurch in her stomach. She shut her eyes and rode the roller coaster inside her.

"Hey," a man yelled from across the room. "What's happening in the parking lot?"

She opened her eyes. Although the room still spun she felt steadier. Suddenly people rushed for the exit. Outside, the sheriff's car burned in a raging, acrid fire.

The deputy tried to drag her to the door but she shook his hand off as easily as if she had the strength of ten men. He stared at her with surprise then, stepping away and giving her a lot of room, he looked from her to the burning car then back again.

"You did that." His voice was a harsh whisper. Without taking his eyes off her, he unclipped his radio from his belt. It crackled once and then he talked into it with tight-lipped intensity. "We've got a situation out of control at Liz's place. I need backup."



She started for the door. *Wait.* She stopped, spun around and confronted Liz's penetrating stare. Had the woman communicated mentally with her?

Liz nodded and touched Cassie's shoulder. Together they watched the asphalt melt under the car and ooze in black streams across the lot. Then the ground buckled under the car, tipping it on its side. The smell of burning gasoline filled Cassie's lungs.

"I'll handle this." Liz's voice was low and steady.

Cassie wasn't sure if she spoke to her or to the deputy. It mattered little. The deputy charged toward the door and his car, leaving her in the bar under Liz's care.

Cassie's knees trembled. She thought of Nate's warning, indirectly, that something like this might happen. *Use your power only in emergencies*, he had said. But she hadn't willed the fire. She had only wished the car and the deputy gone. Thank God nothing had happened to him.

She wondered if she possibly had done anything to cause the fire. Nothing like this had ever happened before in her life. The thought sobered her, stunned her and filled her with terror. She was cold and weak with the impact of her thought.

"Stay here," Liz murmured. "I'm going out there to try to settle things with the sheriff."

Anguished, Cassie sank into the booth and buried her face in her hands. She hated herself for her helplessness. She hated herself for fearing her power and for what she had created with its use.

She lifted her head and looked around the room, wanting to gaze on something neutral, anything that would quiet the humming in her ears and put her energy at rest. She glanced at the front page of the Traverse City newspaper she had picked up at the bar. Under a side bar titled "Late News" was a box with the headline—*Woman Found on Bus.*

*Authorities are puzzled by the identity of a woman found dead on an inter-urban bus early this afternoon. She was described as having silver-blonde hair and blue eyes and was wearing a denim blouse, jeans and a fringed suede jacket and carrying a red purse. Anyone knowing the identity of the dead woman is asked to contact the sheriff's office.*

*Rena.* A painful spasm shook Cassie. Nausea rose in her throat. Rena was dead. She had sent her to her death. The woman on the bus should have been Cassie. Had Nate done this? No. He couldn't have—wouldn't have. Nate loved everyone, every last person, he had assured her. He couldn't have killed Rena.

But...if not Nate, then who had killed Rena, believing she was Cassie? And how could she justify calling Rena for help then sending her to her death?

Rena had wanted to impersonate Cassie, had insisted. Once she'd hit upon the idea Rena had planned the entire caper. She had thought of stripping the color from her hair

and tinting it silver. Too big for Cassie's jacket, Rena had reveled in wearing its exact duplicate. Now she was gone.

Stunned, Cassie sat alone in the tavern in frozen passivity waiting for county reinforcements to arrive and arrest her and take her to the jail for whatever fate awaited.

Liz had read Cassie's thoughts and spoken to her the same as Nate did, by thought transmission. Auntie had been right. There were people in Kalkaska like her. They were known and hated, perhaps hunted, by others.

Yet Liz worked openly in a public place, was on a first-name basis with the deputy. She wanted Liz's explanation but the fear of arrest was too pressing. She had to escape from here the way she had escaped earlier from another place, another danger. Presumed danger, she reminded herself, thinking of Nate.

As she pushed the newspaper aside her glance fell on an item buried at the bottom of "Local News".

*The Sheriff's Department reported today the suspected suicide of a Troy woman by drowning in Walloon Lake. A canoe containing her possessions drifted to shore during the night. Her identity is being withheld pending family notification.*

This notice was what Nate wanted. He now had a report of Cassie's disappearance so their opposition would give her up for dead. He wanted to buy time to reach the Ohio community safely. Instead she waited for the police in a Kalkaska tavern. If she was still here when the police arrived she would have to answer their questions. They would discover she had faked her suicide and was running from the police, although she still had no clear idea as to why. The longer she hesitated the more certain her arrest became.

The tavern had to have a back door. She could leave while the crowd was still outside discussing the fate of the deputy's car.

*Cassie.* Nate's voice, quiet and urgent, reached her. She was hearing things again.

"Cassie." She looked up and he was there in the dark hallway beside the bar. He motioned with his head.

"Nate!" Her relief at escaping arrest overcame any hesitancy and caution and the suspicion she had regarded him with for the past few days. If she didn't go with him she would probably end up in jail. She grabbed her purse and newspaper and ran toward him. "How did you find—"

"Shh. Just come."

"Is it really you?" She clung to his arm as he urged her out the back door. Pungent air heavy with residual smoke stung her eyes. She glanced up at him, saw an aura of love emanating from him and felt washed by its shimmering light.

Her hand in his, they ran down a gentle slope that turned into a ravine a hundred yards or so below the bar. Heavy brush and a dense stand of maple provided cover. Here the air was fresh with the woody scent of vegetation, which washed the sour smell of the burning car from her lungs.

"My things are at a motel down the road," she gasped as they ran.

"No, they're not. They're in the van."

"How did...you manage?" Her breathing was becoming strained.

He slowed the pace. "There are ways." He looked at her with compassion.

She knew what he meant. Perhaps he had put the desk clerk into a light trance to find out what he needed from him. Whatever, he had found her and she was glad of it.

The tavern was out of sight but she heard sirens in the distance. From what she could tell they were moving through the brushy woods at an angle from the tavern. Under different circumstances she would have enjoyed spending time in the mid-summer woods. Now it was fast becoming dark under the leafy canopy. They had no time to waste.

Nevertheless, from necessity he slowed their pace to a fast walk. Although she was tired from lack of sleep and troubled by what had happened, neither condition dulled her satisfaction with seeing him again.

"I read my suicide notice in the afternoon paper," she told him when she caught her breath. She couldn't keep a tremor out of her voice.

He reached over and brushed a strand of hair out of her eyes. "I missed it. What did it say?"

"Only that a canoe had drifted ashore." *It didn't mention how much I hurt you by running away.*

*Forget it. We're together.* "Did they drag the lake?"

She hadn't dreamed it! Nate was forgiving her for leaving him. Amazed at his capacity for love, she shook her head then answered his question as calmly as possible. "It didn't mention dragging the lake. It was just a short item."

He caught her arm. "Stop for a minute." He took a compass from his pocket and studied it in the failing light.

She hugged his arm, wanting to touch him. "I can't believe you need a compass," she said with a light laugh.

As if sensing her need to be held, he put an arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. "We're meeting someone. I want to make sure I'm heading in the right direction."

"Who are we meeting?"

"Willie."

She looked up at him. "Then he didn't return to Ohio?"

"No, I brought him here with me."

She thought of Rena's coming to Kalkaska with her. As if sensing the return of her sorrow, he asked, "What's wrong?"

"My friend who helped me escape," she thought, *from you*, but didn't say it. "She was murdered. At least she —"

"Murdered?" She felt his anger, his distress, as if it were her own. "Why?"

"She was impersonating me."

He brought her close against him and hugged her. She felt his heart beating strongly and rapidly beneath hers.

"I'm sorry, Cassie." His regret washed over her. The emotion filled her head and heart and became hers.

"I know you are." She was glad she could share his feelings without fighting them. She stood within the circle of his arms, content to take in his familiar scent and bury her face in his warmth. She stayed in his arms, accepting his comfort and comforting him in return, gathering strength from his strength.

Then he touched the back of her neck. She remembered the way he'd put her in a trance earlier and the microdot he'd planted. She pulled away.

"How did you do it, and why?"

"What do you mean?" His face was a shadowy mask.

"I'm talking about my neck. How did you put a tracer on me?"

"Oh that." He smiled, clearly pleased with what he had done. "It wasn't hard."

"I suppose not." His self-satisfaction angered her. "If you consider how gullible I am." Her voice had an edge to it.

He laughed outright. "I wouldn't describe you as gullible. How did you find the microdot?"

She thought of how long she had traveled with it. Annoyance increased with each memory. "It itched every time you activated it, or whatever."

His eyebrows rose. "Itched? Hmm. We'll have to work on that. At least you didn't find the other one."

Aghast, she stared at him. "What other one?"

He laughed again, this time with a trace of embarrassment in his expression.

"You used two tracers, Nate? Isn't that overkill? With your talents I'm surprised you couldn't find me by mind power alone."

"I couldn't take any chances with losing you." He glanced at his watch then took her elbow and urged her forward. "Once I found you, I didn't intend to ever let you go. How do you think I located you today?"

"I have no idea," she answered sullenly, hating his invasion of her privacy, his violation of her body. "You shouldn't have done it," she told him angrily. "You had no right to trick me or to deceive me. I'm more than angry. I'm...disappointed. Terribly."

"I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't have but I couldn't take the chance, as I said. What's changed? You didn't seem angry with me in the bar."

She remembered her relief at seeing him and some of her anger dissipated. "I was so happy to see you that I didn't care how you found me. Tell me, where did you put the second tracer?"

His smile was charming but utterly insincere. "If I tell you I'll have no way to keep track of you."

"Nate. I'm tired, I'm hungry and my friend has been killed." She paused and drew in a deep breath. "And I've had a serious run-in with the authorities." She also knew she carried another microdot somewhere on her person. She gritted her teeth to restrain her rising anger. "Tell me where it is and I'll forgive you everything."

He urged her on through the trees. "I'm sorry but I can't take that risk. Not yet."

"You still don't trust me?"

He raised a sapling branch for her. "Would you?"

She ducked under the branch and thought about his question. Would she, if she were Nate? "I guess not." Did she trust him? She wasn't certain. How could she?

For a while they walked single file. Cassie concentrated on following in his footsteps, one after another. The exercise gradually took the edge off her anger, until in a small clearing she touched his arm and halted him.

"Nate, do you know who caused Rena's death?"

He hesitated and then looked into her eyes with so much hurt in his expression she was sorry she had asked. "I didn't cause her death," he said flatly.

She believed him but then realized he had cleverly sidestepped her question once again. "Do you know who did?"

"No, I don't." He helped her over a fallen tree. "Perhaps it was the people who were pursuing us."

"But I thought we lost them. How did they find me?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. Rena might have died a natural death. Perhaps it was a coincidence."

"Nate! Even I'm not naïve enough to believe that. Someone murdered Rena thinking she was me, but why on the bus? There must have been witnesses. How could they kill her in plain sight?"

"Anybody can take a life by using a quick injection, a scalpel or a wire. It's not hard."

Not hard to kill? She hated hearing him speak of killing in that detached tone. Life seemed suddenly fragile and uncertain.

He must have sensed her distress. He paused again and hugged her. "Don't worry. That danger will be over soon. We have ways of dealing with them."

"Do you mean Rena's killers? I thought you didn't know them."

"I don't, but Willie has a plan to put them out of commission for a while."

She wondered what he meant but, wrapped in the protection of his embrace, she didn't question him further. He held her tightly against his broad chest, as if he understood her need for reassurance.

"How did you know I was in trouble?" she asked from his encircling arms.

"I didn't." He released her reluctantly and then led the way along a trampled deer trail. "We realized that we were following Rena, so Willie and I were waiting at your motel room wondering if we should track you when we heard the sheriff's siren. We followed a hunch and tailed him. I came in the back entrance of the bar and hung around. After the car exploded I told Willie to park the van on the road we're heading for. It should be over this next ridge."

"But how did you know I was in the bar?"

"I knew, Cassie."

"You were following me all day, weren't you?" she asked his back.

"I was." His quiet answer reached her over his shoulder.

"Then you couldn't have been with Rena." She spoke without thinking.

"I didn't kill Rena and neither did Willie." His voice was flat, as if he too were tired. He extended a hand and helped her up a steep rise. "I wish you could trust me."

She started to smile but her heart wasn't in it. "Perhaps I will when you start trusting me."

He tugged her to the top of the rise then stopped and put his arms around her once more. "Maybe someday we'll have more time and then we'll trust each other again." He spoke into her hair, his breath warm on her ear. "I hope so, anyway."

With his arms wrapped around her, she felt as if she were at home, warm, comfortable and natural. "Perhaps in time," she whispered.

He brushed a kiss on her forehead before releasing her and then checked his watch and compass in the failing light. "Willie should be waiting for us."

They broke out of the woods within sight of a gravel road. The van waited less than two hundred feet down the road. Nate motioned her forward.

Willie saw them coming and was out of the van and running toward them with the excitement of a boy. "The woman at the bar gave me instructions to her home," he said as they met. "She's meeting us there after things calm down."

"That's Liz," Cassie said. "She's one of us."

Nate grinned. "I like that word *us*. Is she your Kalkaska cousin? The one Eudora mentioned?"

Auntie, oh, Auntie. The weight of a thousand guilt trips fell heavily across her shoulders. "Have you heard about her condition?"

He patted her arm. "She's slipping. I checked with the hospital an hour ago. They said it wouldn't be long now. Her heart's giving out."

"She can't die while I'm out here running around in the woods. I should be with her."

"You are in spirit," he argued.

"Spirit's not good enough!" Her heart ached to be with Auntie in her last hours. "Not for me, it isn't!"

Nate raised an eyebrow at her outburst but merely opened the van's rear door for her and then climbed in after her. Willie sat in the front alone, looking for all the world like an ordinary working man on his way home from his job.

Nate took the crushed newspaper from her clenched fist and read the blurb about Rena's death. After he finished he gave her a compassionate look.

"Willie knows the way," he said. "Close your eyes and have a long talk with Eudora. Tell her what's happened since you left her. Tell her you've found your Kalkaska relatives, that you're with me and you're safe."

Tears filled her eyes. "I could return to her like I did at the garden party—"

"No, you can't. Not now. It isn't safe at the hospital. I've told you, they're waiting for you there."

"It worked before."

"Listen to me, Cassie. You still don't understand. You *are* with Eudora. She is a part of you and you are a part of her. Talk to her, she'll hear you and be glad for you."

Unable to speak, she nodded before closing her eyes.

*Auntie, if you're here... She took a deep breath and stilled her thoughts. If you're here, please understand how much I appreciate your raising me when my parents were lost in that fire. You taught me confidence and how to take care of myself. And when Uncle Charles died, you showed me how to bear grief with courage.*

*Now I thank you for allowing me to meet Nate, and for sending me to my extended family. May God look over you and please...please, know that I love you even if I'm not at your side. Nate says I'm with you in spirit even if not in body. And I believe him. Please be happy knowing I am following your instructions. Forgive me, Auntie, for not being with you.*

After a while her breathing slowed. Anxiety eased.

When she eventually opened her eyes, darkness had fallen. The van passed slowly down a dirt lane deep in the woods. Perhaps it was a state or national forest, or even a National Guard reserve, she guessed. Whatever, it was an isolated place with only a few cabins scattered among the trees.

Willie slowed at a narrow dirt driveway marked with a sign in the shape of an arrow that read "The Lotus Circle Beadery".

"What do you think, Nate?" Willie asked.

"It looks the way you said she described it."

Cassie hadn't heard Nate and Willie talking while she slept. Or had they been communicating subvocally? If they had she had missed it. Then she realized she never

had been able to read Nate's mind at will even though he read her thoughts whenever he wished.

In the dark he found her hand and folded it in his, gently caressing her sensitive palm. Drowsy from her nap, she was content to sit quietly at his side for the time being.

"We're coming to something," Willie said.



## Chapter Twenty

Cassie straightened and peered out the van window. As they rounded a bend in the narrow road, they came upon a clearing with a long log building standing in the center. Light streamed from its row of high windows. Off to the side in a semicircle that ran behind the building and emerged on the other side stood tepees. Large, white wigwams.

The white tepees appeared strangely luminescent in the foggy drizzle that had started falling while Cassie slept during the ride. They reminded her immediately of Sarah Lightfoot, Eudora's housekeeper on Mackinac Island. In Cassie's mind things slipped into place as if pieces in a giant jigsaw puzzle. As the brief insight faded she was left merely astonished by the sight of a Native American plains village set in remote Kalkaska County.

Willie pulled the van to a stop under a darkened wooden portico. "Liz said she would meet us here after she dealt with the sheriff," he said.

Nate peered into the unlit entranceway. "It looks deserted."

In the back of the van, Cassie stared out of the heavily tinted windows at the dark entrance to the long log building. Had they traveled this far only to meet a dead end? "The area behind the front door is dark," Cassie said, "but I saw lights in the windows as we approached."

A dusky shape materialized from the shadows and approached the van. Nate was out and onto the cement apron before Cassie recovered from the surprise. He exchanged greetings with the apparition then shook hands.

Cassie climbed down from the van cautiously. By the portico's dim light she realized the spooky figure was a man wearing a hooded rain poncho.

The man motioned toward double glass doors that led into the building. A dimly lit sign above the doors read "The Lotus Circle Beadery". Tendrils curled from the lotus flower as though showing the way inside. Aware that her palms were growing moist and her mouth dry, Cassie followed Nate through the doors while Willie signaled he would stay with the van.

Cassie looked around. Inside the front door of the shop a single bare bulb shone down on a metal stand holding a "Closed" sign. She looked more closely at the counters. "This is a bead shop." She had reached the end of her emotional rope. "Where is everyone? Why doesn't someone come?" She looked around blindly. "Where's the man in the poncho?"

She stared at Nate through a splash of frustrated tears.

He hugged her. "Take it easy, Cassie." He smoothed her hair and murmured calming words into her ear. His hand on her back, his solidness and the beat of his heart against hers settled her. She had come home, she realized, but home wasn't this craft shop in a remote forest in Northern Michigan. Home was in Nate's arms.

He moved away from her. "There were lights in the other windows, Cassie. If you're bothered go back to the car. I'll explore."

The thought of sitting in the car while he searched for Liz sobered her instantly. "I'll go with you."

Nate started to protest but she caught his hand and held on tightly. "I'm okay now, Nate. Please, we've come so far. I want to see what's next. Before she was killed, Eudora spoke about The Lotus Circle and some women. I'd forgotten all about it until I saw that sign." She started toward the far corner of the shop where she saw an interior door marked "Exit".

He halted her. "Let me go first. You wait here."

"Please, this is my destiny. I'd rather meet it head-on. I have to take charge. I didn't return to become a puppet on strings again, even if you're the one pulling them."

He stepped back as though he had received a blow. "Then go ahead," he said, watching her steadily.

She refused to worry about hurting his feelings, but as she reached the door marked "Exit" she hesitated. Which would it be for her—an exit or an entrance? Either way she was eager for the transition. She opened the door and stepped into an empty corridor, neither wide nor narrow, again lit by a single bulb. So much for her panic. She glanced nervously at Nate.

He followed her down the corridor. At the first door on the right they stopped. She knocked and immediately heard voices.

A simple woodsman opened the door. His swarthy complexion and straight black hair, streaked with gray, brought Sarah Lightfoot to mind again.

"I'm Cassie West and this is Nate Chambray." She spoke with more confidence than she felt. "Liz sent us."

The man's expression clouded. "Liz should be here by now. What's happened?"

Nate stepped forward. "There was trouble at the bar."

"What do you mean trouble?" The man frowned but his eyes were suddenly alert. "What kind of trouble?"

Cassie began, "The sheriff—"

He cut her off. "If she's with the sheriff, she's okay." Relief spread through the deep lines around his mouth. "I'm Earl." He shook her hand then Nate's. "Come inside and meet the group."

He led the way into a carpeted room furnished with handcrafted wooden furniture. Woven wood blinds covered the windows, which accounted for the streaks of light they

had seen from the road. At three long tables men, women and children of all ages worked on beadwork projects.

Earl announced, "Liz has sent us guests."

In a shifting of chairs and a rumble of voices the group greeted them. A smiling young woman wearing deerskin garments approached. "I'm Falling Water. Welcome to the beadery."

Cassie's thoughts were a jumble. "The sign outside mentioned The Lotus Circle."

Falling Water looked at her for a moment. "Yes, we're connected with them also, but here we make beaded items for sale."

Feeling as if she were living a dream, Cassie followed the woman to the end of the room where a lounge area was filled with well-worn sofas and chairs.

Earl stood uneasily while they sat. "They say Liz has trouble with the sheriff," he told Falling Water.

Surprise lit the woman's face. "Trouble so soon? I thought things were settled for a while."

"I'm in trouble, not Liz," Cassie confessed.

Falling Water looked at her with inquisitive eyes, dark and velvety as sable. "Is she okay?"

"I'm not sure." Cassie flushed. "I left in a hurry."

The woman raised an eyebrow then turned to Nate. "Does Liz need help?"

"I doubt it. She said not."

"Usually she doesn't." Falling Water's affectionate smile revealed the confidence she felt in Liz. She fell silent, staring blankly, obviously thinking her own private thoughts. Cassie grew uneasy and glanced at Nate.

"We appreciate your asking us in," he said, breaking the spell.

Falling Water shook her head. "Oh, it's nothing. And don't worry, you're not in trouble. We have heard of you, Nate and Cassie. Most of us are Peace Seekers also."

Cassie was elated to hear her use the term. Little by little her anxiety was fading, and she was becoming more certain that the key to her past and her future lay with these people. She leaned forward. "You said you've heard of us. What do you know?"

Falling Water's smile raised Cassie's hopes but her expectations were dashed when the woman changed the subject.

"Not much, but I can tell you more about our own Peace Seekers community, which cooperates with The Lotus Circle. They encourage our work in educating the public and by marketing our products. Like Nate's group we teach peaceful ways and work quietly for justice. Perhaps we offend people. For whatever reason, we face opposition. People who profit from the status quo, people who want things kept as they are— who oppose change—oppose us. They use the political structure, law enforcement agencies and bureaucracy to harass us. And sometimes others are unhappy also."

Her earnest soliloquy made Cassie ashamed of her purely selfish quest for identity. "Surely you're not in danger now?"

"Over long years our community has had many deaths, supposedly accidental. Your parents were among those lost." She met Cassie's gaze with sympathy. "Yes. I'm sorry, Cassie. The fire that took their lives was set purposely."

Shocked by the brutality of the act and the certainty with which the woman spoke, Cassie started to protest but put aside her arguments when Falling Water continued speaking.

"We've created a safe zone for Peace Seekers here on the edge of the forest. Other Native Americans have joined our community. Many Peace Seekers have been born to them. Here we use defensive aggression techniques for our safety, such as auric shields, but once we leave here we are on our own."

Nate nodded as if he understood.

"We've watched you, Nate, as you helped Seth Hawthorne in his political career. He means well. In time he will be a good senator. We will do what we can to help."

"You know Eudora then?" Nate asked. "She's been injured and sent Cassie here."

"We know Eudora. Charles was from our group. We heard of her fall." Her eyes hardened. "We doubt it was an accident. One of our people is with her now."

*Sarah.* Cassie suddenly understood. Sarah had left the island to be at the hospital with Auntie. A guilty burden lifted from her heart. "You're watching over Eudora."

Falling Water smiled tenderly. "You love her very much."

Tears of fatigue and loss wet Cassie's eyes. She lowered her gaze to the floor. With a gentle touch Nate drew her head against his shoulder. She gave in to the comfort his closeness brought.

Falling Water stood. "But you are weary and I must see about Liz. You can share a guest tepee. Are there just the two of you?"

"We've a friend outside," Nate said.

"He can stay with you. The tepees are rustic but at least they're not made of skins or bark any longer." She gestured at the man who had greeted them at the door. "Earl will see you settled."

Cassie's tears had dried. "And what about Liz?"

"Liz is fine. You are not to worry."

Cassie was exhausted from the day's emotional toll. After a quick wash in the women's locker room she settled in a guest tepee with Nate and Willie. Willie immediately spread a sleeping bag on one of the double air mattresses, put a pillow under his head and fell asleep. He occasionally emitted a snore that comforted her by its mere presence.

She took off her shoes and curled up, fully dressed, in a sleeping bag with her air mattress and pillow. She lay with her head pointed toward Nate's head on the opposite side of the tepee from Willie. Despite fatigue she found sleep was slow to come. She

wondered if Nate was awake. They hadn't had a chance to talk alone since he had rescued her at the bar.

"Nate," she whispered, "this place is fascinating."

He grunted as if half asleep. "It's different. I'll give you that." Clearly fatigue had dampened any enthusiasm he might have had for finding the beadery.

Propped on one elbow, she lay quietly watching the flickering light that filtered through the glass windows set in the sides of the tepees. Swaying trees cast fleeting patterns across Nate's face. She wanted to tell him she was glad they were back together. Wanted to say she was glad he had forgiven her for running out on him in such a cowardly way. She wanted to say that she had forgiven him for placing the electronic tracer on her. Instead she fell back on her habit of concealing her feelings and introduced a safer subject.

"Nate," she said in a hushed voice, "Falling Water said she knew of your work. Is that likely? You didn't know about this group. You followed me to find them."

"True." He sounded as if she had dragged him up from sleep.

"I'm confused. Why should their information network be better than yours? Why haven't you heard of them?"

He lifted his head from his pillow and made an obvious effort to answer. "Groups such as this one exist everywhere. We only get involved with each other when our lives touch." He yawned and settled back on his pillow. "Let it rest, Cassie. You've had enough surprises for today." He tugged his sleeping bag around his neck and closed his eyes.

She propped herself on her arms and looked down into his face. "Nate?"

His eyelids quivered but didn't open.

She continued, "I can't sleep with questions running through my mind."

He groaned. "Let it go, Cassie."

"I wonder if I should stay with these people. Did Eudora send me to Kalkaska to stay with them?" When he didn't answer she sat up. "Nate, wake up, I'm excited about this!"

Willie snored loudly.

Not wanting to wake Willie, she inched down onto her pillow and whispered, "I think I'm finally going to discover my past."

"Not here," Nate mumbled. "With me, in Ohio."

A pleasant feeling heightened her excitement. "Even though I ran away you still want me to go with you? Even though we've found this community?"

"Yes," he murmured, turning his back to her.

She lay quietly and thought it over. She was torn between being happy because he wanted her with him and her belief that she should stay in Kalkaska where Eudora had

sent her. She wanted to talk to Liz to find out more about her parents and The Peace Seekers and The Lotus Circle.

Her mind wouldn't rest. She wondered what would happen if she stayed at this village for a while. How would Nate react? She thought of the microdot he'd placed on her neck. He had said there was another.

"Nate? I still can't sleep."

"Um," he muttered. "I know."

She eyed him suspiciously. "If you're reading me, stop."

He groaned and propped himself up on one elbow until their faces were only inches apart. "With the mental noise you're making you're hard to ignore," he said with a sleepy smile.

She refused to be put off by his amused expression. "I want to ask you about that microdot, the second microdot."

He sighed. "I knew you would come back to that."

"You knew," she whispered tersely, "because you're reading my thoughts. I asked you to stop."

In the dim light his affectionate gaze caught hers, engulfing her in love. "Sorry, sweet."

She swallowed and tried to ignore the rush of delight the endearment brought. "Please get rid of that microdot."

His face crinkled in a smile that probably matched the silly one she felt on her own. His hand gently touched her cheek. "I can't. Not now at any rate."

"Why can't you?"

"You don't want Willie waking up while I'm removing it."

Her eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"Because..." He was on his hands and knees crawling out of his sleeping bag toward her.

"Nate? What are you doing?"

He worked at her bag's zipper. "I'm joining you."

Her heart took an extra beat and then he had her sleeping bag open. He lay down beside her and gathered her close to him. His mouth nibbled her cheek, her ear, teased at her neck. "What about Willie?" she asked.

"He's having dreams of his own." He held her against his long length. "I thought I'd lost you, Cassie. If we're going to talk I want to hold you. I like the feel of you next to me."

Cassie, covered with the sleeping bag and warmed by his muscular frame next to hers, felt a searing heat rise from her toes to the top of her head.

"Cassie, when you didn't come out of that lake that night—when you didn't come back to me..." He held her against him.

A strong, paralyzing fear ran through her. It was Nate's fear manifesting in her. Her stomach dropped as if she were on a bobsled ride. Trembling, she clung to him, experienced his distress, his fear that she had drowned in the lake. She held her breath and realized that she was reading his emotions for the first time.

Her tremors faded. "Nate, I only thought of escaping. I didn't want to hurt you."

But she had. She had known what she was doing to Nate and in her quest for freedom she had pushed her concern for him aside.

"I'm sorry I hurt you, Nate. You've forgiven me, haven't you?"

He didn't answer, didn't give her the reassurance she needed. Instead he tugged at the band restraining her braid. Cassie felt a rush of excitement, differing from what she had experienced before. Stronger. More male, more domineering. She wanted to subdue him, make him do her will, and she understood once again that she was experiencing Nate's emotions and his desire for her. She wanted to still his hands and take the initiative from him, to trap him under her and possess him.

"Your hair," he muttered when he had succeeded in freeing it. He spread it over the pillow.

Her breathing quickened. She managed to ask, "Do you like its new color?"

He smiled, his eyes glittering. "Silver's nice but this is hotter."

She was on fire. She grabbed his shoulders and held him to her. His urgent kiss subdued any hesitancy she might have felt. She gave herself over to pleasure.

An unusual, ardent energy, different from what she had known before, possessed her and she drew away slightly to look into his eyes. In his gaze she saw a passion equal to her own.

She understood in a flash of recognition what was happening to her. She was reading his emotions, was experiencing the testosterone rush that filled his mind and body with male energy. She marveled at the strength of his response to her.

A rise of sadness followed the feeling. Nate's sorrow, his deep, sobering regret, cooled her, cooled their bodies. She placed her cheek against his bare chest and listened to his heart racing under her ear. "What's wrong, Nate?"

She lifted her gaze and saw his eyes were as moist as hers were. "I read you," she whispered. "I read your desire. You wanted me but then you were sad. The feeling was strong. It was strong enough to push the desire away."

He drew a deep breath and turned from her, patted her arm, dropped a sweet kiss on her head.

She needed more. She needed him closer, had a hunger for physical contact, for physical touch, that couldn't be satisfied by mere affection. She propped herself up on an elbow.

"Nate, I *read* your need. Do you realize what that means? For the first time, tonight, I'm experiencing your emotions as mine." She reached for him and felt him tense.

Again she sensed a rush of sadness and of strong regret. Then a new emotion grew – shame. Nate’s shame stilled her. “Nate?”

He hand trembled on her neck. “Hold still, Cassie.”

“Don’t be ashamed of our love, Nate. I want to be together with you as much as you do.”

“That’s not your desire, it’s mine. You’re experiencing *my feelings, my need.*”

His fingers ran idly over her spine, seeking the magical energy centers that Campbell had written about. She now recognized the centers of sensation, the chakras he had explained. She now understood the Peace Seekers’ technique of relieving tension, of creating pleasure through the chakras. She now understood the process of *gentling*. But she wanted more.

“I wanted you long before I read your feelings toward me, Nate, long before I experienced your physical reaction.” His shame sat heavily in her chest, drawing her into a downward spiral.

“You don’t understand,” he muttered. His hand was on the back of her neck, massaging, stimulating and sending sensations racing through her.

“Um, that’s nice but why can’t we—” She couldn’t finish. With a rush of physical sensations, her breath ran from her. She wrapped her arms and legs around Nate and held on as they soared upward as if in a rising elevator. Up. Up. She couldn’t control her moaning. *Oh please. Oh please.* Each cell turned into a vibrating pleasure receptor. Her spirit cried out and her blood sang unimpeded in her veins. She heard drums beating in a pulsating rhythm, wondered if the sound was from outside. Was someone dancing? No, the drums were in her head. In her breast. In her belly. She was dancing and the drums were echoes of the past.

\* \* \* \* \*

She awoke before Nate. Willie’s moving about in the tepee had disturbed her. From the warm nest of Nate’s arms, she lifted her eyes and glanced at Willie. He nodded, apparently not surprised at finding Nate sleeping with her. She stilled her thoughts so as not to awaken the man beside her.

Under the sleeping bag that she had opened to cover them, she ran her hands over her clothes. She thought of Nate’s mouth on hers.

He stirred.

She quickly blanked her mind. Someday, he said earlier, someday they would make love. What had happened last night was celestial as well as physically arousing and would have been unimaginable to her even a few days ago, but it was not the physical experience she dreamed of one day experiencing with him.

In his sleep, Nate groaned.



She quieted her thoughts until he sank into a deeper sleep. She wanted to think about everything that happened between them last night, all she experienced, but knew he would pick up even in his sleep – her *psychic noise*, as he labeled it.

After she was sure he slept soundly she straightened her clothes and crawled carefully off the air mattress and then retrieved her shoes from the low shelf where she had placed them. Outside the morning mist hung low in the pines. Cassie entered the main building through a side door that led to the women’s locker room. She showered quickly, conserving water as the sign asked. Although her clothes were the ones she’d worn the day before, she felt refreshed by the shower, rested and ready for whatever the day brought.

A sharp aroma of bacon drifted from the dining hall. Her rumbling stomach pushed other thoughts from her mind but she turned away and followed the needle-covered path back to the tepee where Nate slept. In the emerging misty daylight she saw one or two people at a distance. No one seemed to take notice of her.

Inside the tepee she found Nate still asleep. *Wake up, Nate.*

His eyes flew open and then he reached for her. “Cassie.”

She crouched beside him. “Sleepyhead,” she said fondly.

He stretched hugely then reached up and cupped his hand possessively around the back of her neck. “What a great night.” He drew her to his chest. “Life has its pleasures, doesn’t it?”

“Pleasures? Yes it does,” she agreed, a little hurt by Nate’s casual treatment of their experience of the past night. His sorrow, which she had shared as if it were her own, clearly had been healed by their sensuous *gentling*. Her uneasiness was not as quickly banished.

He lifted a corner of the sleeping bag. “Crawl in.”

She shook her head. “I’ve showered.”

“Good. Come here.”

“Breakfast is ready.”

“Breakfast can wait.” He tugged her toward him. She sensed his impatience, his rising passion.

She felt the quickening of her own desire and dampened it. In the light of day the feelings she had experienced in the dark, Nate’s passion, sharing his thoughts and the arousal of masculine heat in him, seemed bizarre. She wasn’t accustomed to losing control to that extent. She wanted time to think it through.

Their shared desire had been like that of a hungry animal. Was that what he felt toward her? Where was love in that hunger? Even now she sensed a lack of caring, only an acute physical appetite on his part.

She pulled away and moved toward the door. “I’d feel guilty if you missed your breakfast.” She blew him a kiss.

His eyes narrowed. She sensed his blank stare hid injured male pride as much as frustration. He tossed the bag aside and she wondered if he was coming after her.

Instead he threw her excuse back at her. "Are you certain you would feel guilty if I missed my breakfast, Cassie? I didn't think you knew the meaning of the word guilty."

She halted. "What do you mean?"

"Did you feel guilt when you ran out on me at the lake?" He reached for his shoes and pulled them on roughly.

She flushed. "I've apologized more than once for doing that. On the way here you said you had forgiven me. After all, you kept me prisoner—"

"You've a good imagination."

She had heard that before. Her cheeks warmed. "Then you seduced me."

"Don't you wish I had." He gave her a hard look. "I thought what has happened might have changed you."

"Changed how?" Her last bit of pleasure with the lovely morning faded into a dull red curtain of anger.

He tucked in his shirt and joined her at the tepee's slanted door. "I thought that maybe you had given up this attitude."

"What attitude?" She faced him, hands on hips.

"Your innocent victim...*seduced* victim attitude. You went with me willingly, were glad to be rescued both times that I saved your neck."

"We need to get one thing straight between us," she said, temper rising. "My *attitude* is not the problem." Anger caused her to say things she might have held back under different circumstances. "I read your feelings last night *and* this morning. I'm aware of what you want from me. I read your lust."

Nate's face was as flushed as hers felt. "You don't understand anything about what's going on between us, Cassie. I've been patient with you, waited for you to find yourself while you've been running around like a scared rabbit using your powers without thinking first."

"I can't believe you're saying this to me!"

"I told you to manifest only in emergencies."

Anger rose sharp in her throat and choked off her response. She bolted from him, ran a few steps then turned and faced him. "Since you read minds, Nate, you know I'm not careless with my powers. I care about others."

"You might care but you use poor judgment. I don't like hurting you, Cassie." His demeanor changed abruptly, as if he'd run out of anger and realized he had picked this fight because she had rejected his invitation into his sleeping bag. He lowered his head and spread his arms. "I'm sorry. I've no right."

Before Cassie could respond Nate shook his head, saying, "No, the truth is necessary between us. You've been acting on impulse, not thinking straight at all."

"I can't believe you'd accuse me of poor behavior considering how you've acted. You seduced me last night to avoid removing the second microdot." The sudden insight hurt more than she wanted to admit.

His amused laugh hurt her. "There is no second microdot. I lied to keep you from running again, but that's not important. What matters is what you think happened between us last night. You think I took unfair advantage of you. Is that right?"

"You know you did," she said hotly.

He grabbed her elbow and steered her away from the tepee and ahead of him along the path toward the main building. "If I remember correctly I wanted to sleep last night but the hot little brunette –"

"I'm not a brunette, that's merely dye, and don't call me *hot!*" She twisted away but even as she protested she flushed with the knowledge that he was right. He *had* wanted to sleep and she *had* insisted that he talk to her. One thing had led to another and Nate had ended up on her mattress next to her.

"Listen, Cassie." His voice was quiet but firm. "I don't *love* lightly. None of us do and despite what you think I've done, I'm not using what's between us to control you."

She strode down the path at his side, digesting what he said, feeling foolish and angry with herself for that feeling.

At her side, Nate muttered, "Your memory's gone...it's completely gone."

His comment revived her annoyance. "There's nothing wrong with my mind. I'm an intelligent woman. It's time you treated me like one."

"I'll do that when you start acting like yourself."

"Myself?" She sniffed indignantly. "I *am* myself."

"You're not the person you once were." Nate's voice filled with regret.

Shocked out of her mood, she took his arm. "When, Nate? When did you know me before? Tell me about it."

Sorrow passed over his face and then his expression cleared as he shook it off. "I knew you long ago, in another lifetime."

She sensed she had caught him at a vulnerable time. "Nate, whatever has happened between us in the past – and you've hinted at it a couple of times – you need to tell me everything. Otherwise I'm not going to Ohio with you. If you are my guide and teacher as you've implied it's your duty to tell me."

He rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I was hoping that if I gave you enough time, and with a little stimulation of all your chakras, you would remember on your own." An aura of regret surrounded him. He held her shoulders until they ached. "I'm sorry for criticizing, Cassie. It's just..." He gave himself a little shake then released his hold on her. His hands hung in fists at his sides. "I'm sorry. I've forgotten how hard it is to say goodbye."

“Goodbye?” There was a sudden lump in her throat. Confused by what he meant, she rubbed her shoulders where he had clutched them. She welcomed the pain. It made her feel alive and made her realize how much Nate cared about her.

“Then let’s not say goodbye,” she suggested. “Let’s talk about what I need to know after breakfast.”

“I’ll show you what you need to know through Dreamtime. Everything will be clearer then. Tonight I’ll help you see the past.”

## Chapter Twenty-One

Nate walked Cassie to the door of the longhouse then left to find Willie. Inside the community cafeteria, she looked around but didn't see anyone she knew. Preoccupied with thoughts of Dreamtime—whatever that was—she placed a few breakfast items on a tray and carried it to a table.

As she ate Cassie couldn't keep her mind off Nate's promise to show her the mysterious Dreamtime. Although she was eager to hear what he had to say, she felt a knot in her stomach over what she would learn from him and how it would affect her life. The longer she stared at the cereal, the fruit and toast, the less appealing they seemed.

Nate's accusation that her behavior was careless still stung. Surely he'd known how upset she had been over the events of the past week. No way did she need to take the entire blame for Rena's death. Or Auntie's tragic fall down the island cliff. But Liz's trouble with the sheriff after his car burned? Although her stomach felt sick every time she thought of it, she had misused her powers that time. The truth was that so many things had happened in such a short time, her feelings had turned almost numb. She'd had to shut down in order to protect herself and function normally.

She went cold. In one way Nate was right. She had used her powers destructively. She had destroyed the deputy's car then had come here and slept like a baby beside Nate. Her spirits sank. She had slept untroubled in his arms while Liz dealt with the mess Cassie had created. And Rena lay dead in some small town awaiting burial and leaving her son motherless, her parents childless.

Her cheeks burned. Last evening's intimacies with Nate must be the last between them. She had little control over what had happened to Auntie and Rena, and even Liz, but she couldn't deny responsibility for her fascination with Nate—if that was what it was.

"Having trouble eating?"

Cassie looked up at Nate. "Thanks to you," she said.

He set his tray opposite hers. "There should be crow on your plate."

She smiled. "I suppose you're right." The truth was she couldn't stay angry with him even if she wanted. Even now, after all the antagonism that had passed between them this morning, they were bound together by some mysterious spiritual bond. When Cassie was with him she felt as if she glowed. Her heart filled with love for him.

He reached across the table and took her hand. "Your love is strong, Cassie, and real. Don't be afraid of it."

Was she afraid to love? She wasn't sure. She'd been rejected by so many people in the past. Knowing Nate's ability to read her every thought, she pushed down any reservations she harbored about his sincerity. As she sat, hands folded in his, she became aware of a magnetic current, almost as though a cord connected them. She didn't resist its pull. Instead she leaned into it, savored the sensation of belonging to him that it brought.

"Nate, I was never happier than when I saw you in that tavern yesterday. If you hadn't appeared I would be in the sheriff's office now or the county jail."

"I wasn't sure you would leave with me."

"If I had any doubts about my feelings for you they evaporated with your forgiving my running away. It meant everything to me."

The reassuring, loving touch of his thumb against her palm encouraged her to confide her deepest feelings. "When there is danger, trusting is easy," she said. "It's only when I stop to think about my life that doubts arise in my mind. Then I'm lost, confused and adrift."

"You've been adrift all your life, Cassie, without your parents. Eudora did her best but she was so afraid to lose you that she wasn't much help. You've finally found your roots here at The Lotus Circle Beadery."

"And with you." With the gentle peace growing between them, Cassie never wanted to leave him.

"With me, certainly, but," Nate's eyes held a shadow she hadn't seen before in them, "I might not be with you always, Cassie, even in Ohio."

Was he telling her not to become too attached? If he was his warning was too late.

"I do love you, Cassie." His pain seemed strong and real. He gripped her hand. "But we need to do what we have come to do—Seth and I."

She shook her head in confusion. "I don't understand. Since we've met you've urged me to trust you, now you're warning me of your leaving."

Nate looked up as Earl approached. This morning the elderly man had put on a fresh shirt. His graying hair was glossy, pulled neatly off his lined face in a ponytail. He stopped at their table. "When you're through eating, Liz wants to speak with both of you in her office."

"She is all right then?" Cassie asked.

Earl's expression was unreadable. "Why wouldn't she be?"

"I was worried about her. You know, I felt responsible for her trouble."

"You can tell her of your concern when you see her."

\* \* \* \* \*

After breakfast Cassie and Nate looked for Liz's office. The sign on the door said, "Community Director". Cassie whispered, "The director works as a bartender?"

"Perhaps the community owns the tavern."

Cassie knocked then entered at Liz's response. Liz sat in a swivel chair at a computer table. Cassie was surprised to see Eudora's helper, Sarah Lightfoot, sitting beside Liz in a handcrafted twig chair. The women stood when Cassie and Nate entered the room.

Her gaze met Sarah's for an instant then the Native American woman looked at the floor.

Liz greeted Cassie with an embrace, arms around her shoulders, smooth cheek against cheek. She smelled like sage. A clean smell. Clean and healing.

She released Cassie. "Sit down, please, both of you."

Cassie glanced again at Sarah but the woman refused to meet her gaze. Something was wrong. She looked at Sarah again. *Auntie!* She groped for Nate's hand and grasped it.

"I'm sorry, Cassie," Liz said. "Eudora has made her transition."

She was thankful for the chair beneath her. Even sitting she felt as if she were falling from a great height. She couldn't cope with the sudden feeling of loss and abandonment. She wanted to run from the room, run from these messengers of bad news.

"Sarah was with her at the end," Liz said.

Anger, bright burning unreasonable anger, flashed through Cassie. "I should have been there."

"No." Liz rolled her chair forward until their knees touched. She took Cassie's balled fists in her hands. "What happened was as it should be. Eudora lived a long happy life. Now what was hers is yours. She's willed it to you."

"Money, if that's what you mean, is nothing to me. I would give up everything to have her back." She wondered how Liz knew about Eudora's arrangements when she'd never discussed them with Cassie. "How do you know this?"

"We knew Eudora well. When she felt the end coming she asked us to send help to her. Sarah went to the island to serve. After Eudora was injured she asked us to help you."

"You sent Nate?"

Liz flicked her incredible violet eyes at him. "No. He's not one of our group."

Nate stirred uneasily.

"But we weren't surprised to find him with you," Liz said. "Many were looking for you." She glanced at Nate again. "Some are friends, some are not."

Cassie tensed and Liz released her fists. "Sometimes, Cassie, it's difficult to tell friends from enemies."

"Two men chased us at the hospital," she told Liz. "They followed us to Traverse City. Nate thinks they're fanatics pretending to be police."

“They act as if they are police officers,” Liz said, “but they’re not.”

Nate spoke for the first time. “Cassie needs protection. I want to take her to the Peace Seekers community at Peace Lake in Ohio and create a new identity for her.”

Liz nodded. “We know of your community and its connection with The Lotus Circle.” She studied Nate as if taking his measure. Her strong features combined with her unusual coloring gave her a look of power that put Cassie in awe of her strength and dignity.

“Cassie may stay with us if she wishes. The true authorities here are no problem for us,” Liz said. “Our community has a working agreement with them. They know we’re here. They dislike us but they also need us. We often work with them, using our psychic abilities in solving crimes. I can call them off Cassie.” She glanced at Cassie. “From now on you will be under our protection.”

Nate looked concerned. “What about those who oppose us?”

Liz drew a deep breath. “They are not so easily dealt with—thugs and assassins created by an alliance between dictators, drug dealers and fanatical terrorists. They oppose progress, any progress but their own desires. Cassie is safe with us because of our auric shield but she most likely won’t want to be confined to our village for long.”

Cassie felt Sarah’s eyes on her and met the woman’s dark gaze. A vague dislike filled Cassie. Sarah had usurped her rightful place with Eudora. She had undertaken the bedside vigil that should have been Cassie’s. The woman had held Eudora’s hand at the end and heard her last words.

Nate took Cassie’s hand in his and put an arm around her shoulders. “What about funeral arrangements?” he asked.

Liz looked at Nate with her candid gaze. Long shafts of pale sun slanted through the window, illuminating her pale hair. Liz’s features were so much like hers Cassie thought if her own hair hadn’t been tinted dark she could have been looking in a mirror.

“Sarah brought Eudora’s body back here with her,” Liz said.

Once again Sarah had replaced her, Cassie thought, still illogically jealous of the woman.

“We’ll hold her funeral tonight,” Liz said. “It will be our celebration for the soul’s return to the Ancient Ones.”

Cassie glanced at Nate. He had talked about the Ancient Ones earlier. Now, sitting stiffly, muscles taut, legs spread, belligerent expression on his face, he stared at Liz and ignored Cassie. Was she in the midst of a power struggle between Liz and Nate, or were they allies?

The corner of Nate’s mouth turned up slightly. She knew he had read her thoughts. Could Liz read her as well? And could Sarah read her also?

*Quiet!* Beside her, Nate leaned back in a more relaxed posture. He rubbed her shoulder.



She immediately dampened her feelings. One word from him, she realized, was all it took and she obeyed instinctively. "I hate this conflict," she told Liz. "I'm terrified that someone else will get killed."

Liz looked at Cassie with surprise.

"She doesn't remember who she is," Nate said.

Liz nodded. "Of course she fears death then. I would too." She stood and Cassie followed her lead. "That's why we're here, Cassie, to do something about the violence that's accelerating over the Earth."

Liz laid a hand on Cassie's forehead and traced a circle with her thumb. *As if scanning me.* She flinched.

"You are her guide then?" Liz asked Nate.

"Yes."

"Strange." Liz looked from Nate to Cassie then back again. "I thought maybe more. I thought perhaps lovers."

At Nate's intake of breath Cassie glanced at him. He stiffened and met Liz's eyes defiantly. "I'm her teacher."

Even in her sorrow over Eudora's passing, Cassie smiled wanly and thought how well he had taught her in many ways, especially one.

"I think a tour of the village would benefit you, Cassie." Liz changed the subject tactfully. At Cassie's objection, Liz continued, "It will pass the time and keep your mind occupied while Earl makes arrangements for Eudora's funeral celebration."

\* \* \* \* \*

As she strolled the grounds, Cassie was grateful for Liz beside her, grateful not to have to think or make plans. The reality of Eudora's passing, although not unexpected, had stunned her temporarily.

She supposed when she'd seen Eudora in the intensive care ward she had accepted the fact that Eudora she wasn't going to make it, but some part of Cassie's mind had refused the reality of her passing at that time.

Now, with Eudora's lifeless body someplace in village, she could no longer deny the truth. She only thanked God that Nate had encouraged her to send Auntie a message while they had been on their way here.

As Liz guided Nate, Willie and Cassie through the village, she introduced them to many people, most of whom were but a blur to Cassie. She wanted to cry out, "The only mother I've ever known has died" to each smiling, welcoming face. But she couldn't act in such a shamelessly emotional way.

But Nate understood the emotions that devastated her. From time to time he squeezed her hand. One glance at his shadowed eyes told her that he felt her pain as much as she did. Did the people who greeted her sense it also? she wondered. There

was so little she knew, so much to learn, and she had no idea how long she was to remain with Liz. Or how long it would be before Nate left. Before he did she had to decide whether or not she would go to Ohio with him.

Liz showed them the segregated bunks for single men and women and the children's dormitory where caregivers took turns tending the children while they slept.

"For safety," Nate said from behind them.

"Yes, as they had in Israeli kibbutzim, and the children enjoy sleeping in the same room with each other and caretakers. Close bonds form between them." Liz looked at him through lowered lids, almost as if she'd forgotten he was there and resented his presence. "Although the danger is less now than when we founded the village and we have an auric shield established, the authorities and local citizens are still antagonistic occasionally."

"We had that problem in Ohio at first."

Liz ignored Nate's remark. "They mistook us for hippies, thought we were part of the drug culture." She smiled. "Nothing, of course, is further from the truth."

Willie laughed. "That's Peace Seekers for you, no drugs, no booze, no sex." He looked at Nate and grinned. "Mostly."

Cassie flushed and stared at her feet.

Liz let Willie's comment die unexplored. "Our village is set up in what you will recognize as the kibbutz tradition with a few adaptations. Actually our government is based along ancient traditions. Jewish Peace Seekers had a part in modern Israel's beginning. Couples with pre-school children have their own sparsely furnished tepees, the same as the guest tepee where you slept last night."

When they reached the dormitory it was empty. "The children are in school," Liz said. She unlocked the door and ushered them inside. It was an unusual structure with almost everything built in triangles.

"Geodesic dome," Liz said. Cassie had recognized the construction but didn't interrupt her. "Carbon is the basic element of life on earth and the basic shape of carbon atoms is the triangle. It's one of the strongest types of structures, the only one where the larger the structure, the stronger it becomes."

"Does the village run its own school?" Cassie asked.

Liz nodded. "We're a state accredited private school but we accept all who apply. Our teachers are certified." Her pride in her people was obvious.

"Do the older children go outside to high school?"

Liz shook her head. "If they wish, but we teach everything here."

Cassie looked at her with skepticism. "How can you match a larger school's curriculum?"

"It shouldn't be necessary to tell you that." Liz's eyes held a hint of amusement.

Puzzled, Cassie pursued the question. "But what subjects are taught?"

"Everything." A grin broke Liz's solemn expression. "Plus more. The important things. You know them."

"Such as what?"

Liz closed the dormitory door, locked it and then tested the lock. "Rituals, sensing, healing. We use the lotus flower as a primary symbol because it represents creation, birth and resurrection. Legend says that The Lotus Circle first came together in ancient Egypt and consisted of women with exceptional psychic abilities. Members of the group were telepaths, clairvoyants, healers and practitioners of various metaphysical skills such as astrology and forecasting with tools, cards and stones."

When Liz paused Nate asked, "Do you always lock up this carefully?"

Liz's eyes narrowed. Her expression became inscrutable again. "Security."

Nate looked doubtful. "With the shield, are the children actually in danger here?"

She shrugged. "Caution is best. Our youth are our wealth."

Cassie didn't like the tension in the air between Nate and Liz. "Is the village armed?" she asked to shift the attention away from him.

"Armed?" Liz smiled patronizingly. "Peace Seekers and sisters of The Lotus Circle have no need for firearms."

Despite the reprimand Cassie pushed on. "But not everyone lives by your values. What if you're threatened by outsiders?"

"Except for those who see our participation in local government as a threat, we have no enemies. We have no riches, just beadwork and other articles and crafts that we sell for cash to buy what we can't produce ourselves. We live simply, as it is told."

"Still..." Cassie couldn't help thinking of the deputy who had threatened her with jail and the others who had pursued them from Petoskey. "There are those who would harm you just because you exist?"

"Cassandra," Liz said, her tone a gentle rebuke, "I think you know the answers to these things."

Cassie stopped on the path and stared at Liz.

Nate, who had let Cassie question Liz without comment, stepped forward. "Surely you remember that Cassie has lost her memory of home."

A fleeting look of embarrassment crossed Liz's face and then vanished as quickly as it came. "I didn't know how completely she was blocked."

"Eudora never told you?" Nate's satisfied expression showed his pleasure at besting Liz.

She graciously ignored his taunt. "You must have many questions then," Liz said to Cassie. "Ask what you will."

She hated feeling like an untutored child. With the negative emotions between Nate and Liz clouding her mind, her curiosity about the village dimmed.

"Can you unlock Cassie's memory?" Nate asked.

Cassie's cheeks burned under Liz's probing stare. Feeling her privacy violated, she lifted her chin, turned away from the group and headed blindly toward the longhouse where she knew lunch awaited.

Behind her she heard Liz telling Nate that Falling Water might be able to help, but only if Cassie wanted to remember. "The soul protects itself."

\* \* \* \* \*

Cassie spent the afternoon in the bead workshop, studying the intricate designs, helping string some of the more simple patterns and listening to the quiet conversation of the Native Americans as they worked. She hadn't seen Nate or Willie the entire afternoon and wondered what they were up to.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sheriff Bailey, a burly six-foot man, stood and offered his hand when Nate and Willie entered his office. "Gentlemen, glad to meet you."

Nate shook the sheriff's hand and handed him his card. "My cell number's on here, and my Washington DC address. I would appreciate it if you kept them private."

The sheriff looked at the card. "Be glad to. We believe we've got the two men that Liz told us about. Nice of you to come in and ID them."

"Can't tell you how happy we were to hear you picked them up."

"Yeah, nasty buggers, or they would be if they weren't so stupid. Sit down."

Nate and Willie sat across the battered desk from the sheriff. "How did you find them?" Nate asked.

The sheriff gave a husky laugh. "Put out an APB on them. They weren't hard to find. We knew the car, knew there were two of them, and those poor buggers stood out like sore thumbs up here." He laughed again. "Wore suits, both of them. No ties, just suits with white shirts open at the neck. They were kind of scruffy-looking, like they'd slept in their clothes for a week."

He pressed a button on a phone intercom. "We might as well get this over with then you can be on your way. Ellie," he yelled at the intercom, "you got those two guys ready for ID?"

He stood and Nate and Willie followed him out of the room.

"We got a closed circuit set up for ID. None of that old-fashioned stuff here."

Nate glanced at Willie, who said, "We hoped to get a better look at him. I'd kind of like to see him face-to-face after the ID."

The sheriff ushered them into a larger office. "No, that won't do. They can't see anyone while we have them in custody. The FBI's due here in an hour."

"FBI?" Nate said.

"Yeah, they found boxes of disposable cell phones in their trunk. These guys bought up all they could from the different stores around here. Nothing illegal about that. They buy them for resale, they say, but Homeland Security gets nervous about stuff like that because they can't trace the calls or find records of who they're calling and they can be used to detonate explosive devices."

"Where are they from?"

"Somewhere in the Detroit area. They're citizens, all right, but they're not on the right side of the law."

They approached the counter. "Here's Ellie." He nodded at the uniformed woman behind the counter. "Got that set up?"

"Yes, sir, right over there." She pointed to a cubicle with a TV screen.

"Okay, over this way, boys."

Nate and Willie followed the sheriff, who pulled over another chair. "Sit down, get a better view."

He tapped the keyboard and a live picture came up of six men. Nate recognized two of them as the men he had seen at the hospital. Willie whistled.

"Do you see the men among those six?" the sheriff asked.

"Sure do," Willie said. "I'd know them anywhere."

"Willing to swear to it?"

"You bet."

"What makes you sure?"

Willie pointed to the screen. "The darkest of the six. His one eye wavers."

The sheriff touched a key and the camera zoomed in for a closer picture. "Damn, I think you're right."

"And the other, at the right end," Willie said, "part of his forefinger is missing."

The sheriff looked at Willie with pleasure. "How did you know that? How close did you get?"

"Close enough."

"And you saw them torch my deputy's car?"

Nate sat back and looked at Willie. This was the tough part. Was Willie going to lie to the sheriff?

"Couldn't say for sure. All I know is when I drove up to the tavern to pick up our campaign worker these two guys were standing awfully close to the car. It seemed as if they were looking at one of the tires. Next thing I knew the car was in flames."

"You didn't see any accelerant? Didn't see them light a match or anything?"

"No, nothing else. I just saw these two and thought they looked like trouble. Like you said, they didn't seem to fit in here."

Nate turned to the sheriff. "Is that enough to hold them?"

The sheriff sighed and scratched his stomach. "Oh sure. We're holding them anyway about the phones. With the FBI involved and powers of the Homeland Security Act we can hold them for questioning for a while." He looked at Nate. "That's what you wanted isn't it, Mr. Chambray?"

"Yes, that's it."

"Okay, come back to my office and I'll have an officer take down your friend's statement."

Nate looked at Willie, who shrugged.

The sheriff looked at Nate. "I'd like to hear what you have to say about them following you. We can talk while he's giving his statement."

In the sheriff's office they were joined by an officer with a laptop. Nate nodded appreciatively. "Oh yeah," the sheriff said, "we're up-to-date here. Part of the Homeland Security grant. I never thought we'd have terrorists in this part of the state but look what popped up. Guess it was a good idea to modernize."

"Let's sit over here." The sheriff moved to a small table with two chairs set in a corner of his office. "I can't imagine why these boys were following Mr. Hawthorne, can you, Mr. Chambray?"

Nate shook his head. "No, but we saw them at least twice. My campaign worker's aunt was injured in a fall and we saw them at the Petoskey hospital and they seemed too interested in us. Next thing we knew they were at the tavern where we were to pick her up. Then when the car went up in flames, well, we told Liz and she thought you should know about them."

"Yeah, I don't want their kind of trouble around here. Liz is okay, a good woman." The sheriff scratched his head. "If you don't mind my asking, what's people like you, politicians, doing down there with those beadery people?"

Nate laughed. "We weren't campaigning if that's what you're asking."

The sheriff grinned. "They're nice people, but odd, if you know what I mean. They're a bunch of treehuggers if you ask me. Environment, that stuff. Nothing wrong with it of course."

Nate nodded. "They mean well, I'm sure. No, it wasn't part of our campaign. My assistant's cousin lives there and we stopped off to see her and then there was that problem at the tavern. Meanwhile we heard her aunt had died. It just snowballed."

Across the room Willie and the officer stood.

The sheriff said, "For my money, Mr. Hawthorne's one great guy and I sure would be pleased to have him as our U.S. Senator."

Nate stuck out his hand. "Glad to be of help, Sheriff."

"Do you think there's any chance of having Hawthorne visit here during the campaign? This area could use some good publicity. We'd show you a good time. Maybe have a barbecue or something. It would probably help me get re-elected too."

"That sounds good. We appreciate your quick work in catching these guys and getting them off our tail. How long do you think you'll hold them?"

"As long as I can. I'm sure you'll be gone before they're out."

"No chance to see them up close? I'd like to look them in the eye."

The sheriff shook his head. "None at all. They're under tight security as suspected terrorists."

Nate nodded. "Okay, thanks anyway."

Outside in the parking lot, the two men climbed into the van. When Nate closed the passenger door he asked Willie, "Were you able to accomplish anything through the TV?"

Willie shook his head. "Can't say, but I tried. It might depend upon how far away they were in the building."

"What did you do?"

"I focused my thoughts, breathed deeply, you know." He tossed a sharp glance at Nate.

"Yes, I know, but I wondered what specifically."

"I sent them some messages to stay away, visualized fire, visualized Cassie and fire. I didn't have much time. I thought you were going to distract the sheriff."

"Did my best, buddy. We'll just have to hope it worked."

"Are you going to tell Cassie?" Willie asked.

Nate hesitated. "I don't think so. It's too tentative. We don't know how long they will be detained. She's under emotional stress right now with Eudora's death. It might be better to let things alone."

"I bet those men head right back to Detroit when they're released," Willie said. "They have their phones to deliver. They're going to be scared and glad to be free."

"I hope so."

\* \* \* \* \*

Dinner was subdued. Liz was absent, as were Earl and several of the elders. Cassie was too preoccupied with her grieving to give any attention to the quiet conversation between Nate and Willie, who had returned from a trip to Kalkaska. They said they had been getting a feel for the area, possibly for a campaign appearance.

She ate macaroni and cheese, creamy and sharp, made with a mixture of goat's milk and cheddar cheeses, she was told. They debated the recipe half-heartedly. The salad was unusual, she thought, with only a few greens combined with a generous portion of cold vegetables. They had the pungent taste of homegrown. It was too early for Michigan tomatoes but carrots, sweet peppers and beets added color and variety.

Underneath the quiet conversation ran a current of tension. Nate returned Cassie's concerned look but his mind was a blank to her and in the end she wrestled with her

emotions on her own. Liz had said that Cassie would have an opportunity to speak at Eudora's funeral. She had pondered the entire afternoon what she would say but nothing came to mind that seemed appropriate.

How could she explain to these simple people about Eudora's clothing with the pink feathers? Would they appreciate her aimless socializing, her afternoons filled with cards and cocktails? If Cassie spoke of these things would they judge her as overly critical of Eudora? Why, at this time of saying goodbye, did only negative memories come?

Every trait, even a negative one, had its good side. Eudora's socializing brought enjoyment to many. Laughter had followed her. She had raised Cassie with love after her parents were killed but had kept her from knowing her real heritage until now. Could she forgive her for that omission? She had to in order to put Eudora to rest.

As the last table was cleared, Liz entered the dining room. "We'll begin the service for Cassie's aunt when the kitchen staff is through," she announced. "Everyone's help would be appreciated."

Nate joined Cassie on the way to the kitchen. He slipped an arm around her waist. "You're preoccupied with the funeral, Cassie."

"What can I say? I feel so inadequate."

He brushed a kiss on her head. "Just be yourself. That's more than enough."

His love comforted her. "I'm glad you think so."

"We all do."

The kitchen bubbled with steamy warmth and friendly talk. Here the moody silence that had hung over the community the entire afternoon was dispelled. The activity eased the ache that had developed between Cassie's shoulder blades.

Soon Nate was up to his elbows in hot soapy water at a stainless steel sink. He winked as she laughed at suds that had somehow found their way to his ear. Cassie joined other women in scraping dirty plates with rubber spatulas before placing the dishes in soapy dishwater. Falling Water was one of them.

"I thought you would have electric dishwashers, if only for health reasons," Cassie said.

Falling Water smiled and took a glistening plate from the pan. "We are our own dishwashers. It saves water and power."

Cassie handed her a pile of scraped plates. "Of course, I didn't think of that."

"After we wash the plates we rinse them in a mild bleach solution, spray with scalding water then air dry." She pointed to the drying racks. "Everyone is allowed a turn."

Cassie smiled. "I never thought kitchen duty was a privilege."

"It is here. We all like the work. If someone has the sniffles they're sad to miss their turn."



The brightly lit room was full of laughter and bits of gossip. Nate worked cheerfully beside Cassie. When she handed him another stack of dirty dishes, his fingers touched hers and held for just a second. Her heartbeat quickened at his touch. His presence was a support at her time of loss. He was undemanding, loving. Nate.

Falling Water broke into Cassie's thoughts. "Service done in love *is* love," she said, obviously still expounding on the merits of washing dishes.

"You would be good at public relations," Cassie teased. "You've sold me. I'm glad to take a turn."

"We made room for you."

Cassie glanced at Nate. She had made room for him too, in her heart.

*Mine also*, he told her.

She had a lump in her throat. She had forgotten he read her mind so easily, forgotten she could read his. Their eyes met and held. She smiled, glad for their time together even though the future was uncertain.

"Life seems very simple in this village," Cassie noted.

Falling Water nodded. "We prefer it that way. We're a resting place for troubled souls. People come for a while, stay with us, work with us, sleep in our tepees then we send them out again, refreshed. Back into service." She smiled at Cassie. "You'll stay a while then you'll leave."

"What if I wanted to stay permanently?"

"You won't," Falling Water said. "We all know your reason for being here is different."

Her remark renewed Cassie's feeling of vulnerability. How was it they knew her place in life when she had not yet figured it out for herself? She scraped cheese from a dinner plate ruthlessly. "You say you all know? How do you know?"

Falling Water grinned. "It's easy. You carry your identity around with you. You'll remember when you want to. You'll find yourself when you want to."

Cassie looked helplessly at Nate. Falling Water was the second person to say that she had to choose to remember. He grinned at her consternation.

"Can you understand my dilemma, Nate?"

"I've always understood you, Cassie. It's controlling you that's difficult."

Falling Water hooted. "You'll never control her." She laughed as she lifted a plate from the water. Suds splashed against the backboard. "Imagine controlling Cassie."

Nate wrapped his arms around Cassie from behind. "She'll have to learn discipline to know service."

Falling Water looked at them. Their love reflected in her face gave hers a glow. "Discipline yes, but control must come from within."

Wrapped in Nate's embrace, Cassie felt warm and flushed. Eudora had been right to send her here to these loving people. Even if Eudora's fear had held her back earlier in life, Cassie was grateful for her last gift.

Falling Water smiled. "You two were meant for each other, yes?"

Cassie felt her cheeks redden. *Yes*, she wanted to say aloud, but answered only in her heart.

She felt Nate's almost imperceptible hesitation. "No," he told Falling Water with obvious regret. "Not this time."

Cassie went cold all over.

Falling Water's eyes widened. "No?" She stared at them carefully. "You two have an aura, standing together like that. I would have sworn—"

"Well, you would have sworn wrong," Cassie said hurriedly. She pulled away from Nate and bent her head to her work. Angry tears welled in her eyes with the realization that she couldn't even mentally berate him for his thoughtless words without his reading her hurt.

She had blanked her feelings before, she would do it again. An icy shell formed around her heart. Even in the kitchen's heat, she shivered.

She had spent most of her life isolated from others. With Nate's renewed rejection it seemed she would spend the rest of her days in much the same manner. The frost around her heart would serve her well at Eudora's funeral. It would help her through the service and whatever unpleasantness lay beyond.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

In the kitchen Nate touched her shoulder as she viciously scrubbed cheese from a plate. "Cassie—"

"No." She shrugged off his hand. "I understand how things are between us. It's been said before."

"Don't—"

Liz interrupted them. "When you're finished here, Cassie," she called from the kitchen doorway, "please meet me at your tepee and you can change for the funeral."

Cassie looked down at her travel-weary clothes. "I've nothing else to wear."

"We've taken care of that."

Clearly Liz intended to lend her some of the community's clothing. Her generosity warmed Cassie, taking some of the sting out of Nate's rejection.

Falling Water's gaze flicked from Cassie to Nate then back again. She hung a damp dishcloth across a wooden rack. "We're through here, Cassie. Thanks for your help."

"It was my pleasure." Her feelings were as tender as a new babe's and as vulnerable. With tears in her eyes she hurried from the kitchen, ignoring Nate, who followed a few paces behind her. She hoped he was regretting his words.

In the tepee, Liz had laid out a white buckskin dress and moccasins trimmed with blue beading. Nate and Willie seemed uneasy in the women's presence. They mumbled something about taking showers and left.

The departure of the men pleased Cassie. She needed time away from Nate to gain control of her anger and ease her hurt feelings. She held the white dress against her and luxuriated in the feel of the soft buckskin on her bare arms. Still, something seemed wrong.

"Shouldn't I wear black for mourning?" she asked Liz.

"Our people believe white represents the risen soul. Please wear the dress in celebration of Eudora's transition."

Cassie finished dressing and was calmer by the time Nate and Willie returned. Liz took charge and led the three of them toward the longhouse. "You'll have time to say goodbye to Eudora before the service," she told Cassie.

On the way to the longhouse her arm brushed Nate's and she impulsively clutched his hand. Despite their difficulties, his quiet strength bolstered her failing courage. In a healing gesture, he raised their clasped hands to his lips and kissed her hand. Then he stopped and let the others go on ahead while he held her close in a warm hug.

"You're doing fine, Cassie."

His heart beat steadily under her ear, pressed to his left shoulder. Teacher or not, lover or not, he was precious to her—too precious to ever hurt him again. She tilted her chin to look at him and smiled. “I’ll do my best for Eudora.”

“With your hair darkened and wearing that dress you almost look like a native North American princess.”

She nervously smoothed the soft leather. “Should I have asked for something else to wear? I don’t want it to seem as if I’m trying to be something I’m not.”

“You look fine,” Nate answered with an encouraging smile. “More than fine.” He brushed a finger along her cheek. “Liz wouldn’t have given you these clothes if they weren’t right for you.”

Again secure in his affection, however short-lived their connection might be, she walked ahead of him to the longhouse, where Liz and Willie waited at the door.

“Eudora is ready for your goodbyes,” Liz said.

Inside the longhouse the casket stood at the far end of the workshop under a row of windows that looked out onto the gathering twilight. Summer evenings fell late here in the northern latitudes, she realized. The darkening sky cast a purple tint over the candlelit room.

It wasn’t what she expected. With these people, with their tepees and their beadery and their communal lifestyle, she expected the funeral would be conducted outside, perhaps around a bonfire, with ritual chanting and dancing. Instead she saw that chairs had been set up in rows as in any funeral home. Eudora’s wooden casket was closed and covered with an embroidered cloth.

“It’s beautiful,” she murmured.

“Earl and other fine carpenters worked all night making the casket especially for Eudora as an act of love,” Liz said. “It’s made of local pine that we keep on hand for this purpose, pine that has been sanded and oiled to a satiny finish.”

As Cassie approached, Earl rose from a chair at one end of the casket.

“Thank you, Earl,” she murmured, “for everything.”

He returned her greeting silently then opened the casket at Liz’s nod. Eudora had been prepared by a mortician in accordance with local laws. Like Cassie she wore a white buckskin dress donated by the community. Her hands and face had been covered with a warm coppery makeup similar to Earl’s complexion and on her chest lay a beaded breastplate like one Cassie had seen in the shop the night they arrived.

Even in her grief Cassie smiled through her tears, thinking how much Eudora would have loved the decorations and the care taken with her appearance. Cassie had told Liz about Eudora’s love of the color pink, and tiny pink flowers had been placed in her hands and woven into a headband.

Cassie stiffened her resolve and wiped her eyes. She was done with crying. Now, Nate at her side, she kissed Eudora’s forehead. “Goodbye, Auntie. Thanks for everything.” She touched a cold hand. “I love you.”

Nate put an arm around Cassie and her tears threatened to fall again. She fought them off and dropped a curtain over her feelings, sealing them off, and found comfort in Nate's strength.

When Earl and other elders approached the casket, Nate and Cassie sat in the front row of chairs with Willie and Falling Water in the row behind them. Earl took up a drum and started to beat a solemn cadence. His deep chant was joined by others as they filed into the transformed workshop. It seemed Eudora would have drums and chanting at her funeral after all.

Earl ended the chant with one loud beat that made Cassie jump and brought a nervous laugh to her throat. Beside her, Nate brushed a light kiss above her ear.

*I'm glad you're here, she told him silently.*

*It's where I belong.*

The sentiment pleased her, and then she remembered he had told Liz he was her guide.

*And more, Nate said.*

She questioned him with her eyes. Would he ever make up his mind? Would she ever fully understand the nature of their relationship?

When Liz started speaking, Cassie drew a deep breath and gave the light-haired woman her full attention. Liz rested her hands on the casket and used it as if it were a lectern. She spoke of Eudora's life, of her marrying Charles West and their connection to the village and how she had been ready to leave this life, and that she had sent Cassie to them.

Liz went to a side table and lit a fire stick and set ablaze several objects in a clay dish—a feather for a quick journey, dried flower petals for beauty and herbs for healing, she explained.

Earl broke into song. After the first chorus the rest of the group joined in the singing. Not knowing the lyrics, Cassie listened and repeated the words in her mind as they were sung.

*We give you leave, we give you love,*

*We give you life above.*

*We give you peace in many ways,*

*But most of all...we give you love.*

The women's reedy voices took over the chant and they strung out the word *love* for what seemed an eternity. The community sang the haunting melody and chorus over and over until the words consumed Cassie's thoughts and feelings, until her mind was void of everything but the chanting, the women's nasal voices joining and complementing the guttural male tones.

It was one of those illuminating moments, a shift of consciousness where souls touched and they were no longer individuals but one consciousness saying farewell to a beloved member of the community.

When the singing ended tears, healing tears, streamed down Cassie's face. Nate handed her a handkerchief. *Always prepared*, she thought while she dried her face, loving him despite his reluctance and welcoming his masculine strength beside her. Composed finally, she looked at Liz.

"Elder Cassie West will speak," Liz told the community.

Elder? Liz had made a mistake, Cassie thought. She knew nothing about this community except what she had learned over the past twenty-four hours.

She took her place beside Liz at the casket. "Eudora West was an exceptional woman and I will miss her very much." Her voice trembled. She was glad Liz was beside her. The woman's presence, her calming energy, eased Cassie's anxiety.

She went on to tell how Eudora and Charles had taken her in as a baby and raised her. She told of how Eudora had taught her to take care of herself and how she had set her free as an adult. Then she spoke of how she had learned about love from Eudora.

She surprised herself by speaking at length about love—thoughts she didn't know she held poured out. She spoke about love, like wisdom, being inexhaustible. She ended by saying that while she was bidding a tearful goodbye to Eudora she was beginning an exciting life with new people who had taken her into their hearts in such a short time.

Her gaze met Nate's. His love filled her heart with such wonder and peace she couldn't grieve over losing Eudora. With her own words she had learned to appreciate the love he offered. She vowed to love him gently, accept him fully and not try to possess him or bind him to her in any way.

Liz put an arm around Cassie. "We'll conclude the service by singing a round."

With his drum, Earl started the beat and half of the room joined him in the chant.

*Homeward now I journey, homeward now I go,*

*Homeward now I journey, to the new rainbow.*

When they had sung the two lines Liz started the other half of the room with the same chant.

*Homeward now I journey, homeward now I go –*

She drew a spiral in the air with a raised hand and the people in the rear of the room slowly swayed and sang their way to the front and then filed one-by-one in front of Eudora's hand-hewn pine coffin. Cassie stepped forward and received their greetings, each given in their own way, as they passed.

Finally only Nate, Willie, Falling Water, Earl and Liz remained beside Cassie. They formed a tight circle around her, compassion plain on their faces.

"What happens now?" she asked Liz.

Liz answered in the slow, mannerly way of speaking that seemed so natural to her and other community members. "Eudora will be buried in our burial ground as dawn breaks. It is better that way. There are those who might wish us and our departed sister harm. Earl and the other men will see to her."

"I'm glad she will be well cared for."

When Liz led the way into the recreation hall that doubled as the dining room, Cassie saw it had been set up to serve snacks as well as with game centers for the children's amusement. The group of close friends sat with her at one of the long tables.

She selected a few sweet cherries from a wooden bowl. "Thank you for the funeral, Liz, it was beautiful."

"We thank you, Cassie, for your part in it."

Nate smiled. "I'm pleased at how much you're remembering."

His energy merged with hers, pushing sorrow aside and bringing in its place hope for the future. "Did you put those words about love in my mind, Nate?"

"No. You already possess everything you need to know. It's all a matter of wanting to remember."

She sipped from her glass of herbal iced tea and pondered what Nate said. Behind them some of the children played a circle game with a feather ball. Their young voices raised in laughter seemed appropriate after the solemn funeral, with the exuberance holding the promise of a bright future.

"I'm glad you think I know everything I need to know, Nate, because the truth is I have no idea of what to do from here."

From across the table, Liz said, "Eudora has friends who need to be notified."

Cassie felt Nate's hand moving on the back of her neck as his strong fingers gently eased the tension from her. She leaned against his hand, encouraging his caresses, and sent him a fond glance before answering Liz. There was still that sense of competition between Nate and Liz, an oddity among those who professed only love. Still, if it took competition to kindle Nate's affection for her, she welcomed his rivalry with Liz.

"There are Ritz and the Mackenzies and probably a hundred others to notify," she told Liz. "Eudora's address book is in her kitchen desk at the Mackinac Island house."

"And Seth," Nate reminded her. "Seth will want to come."

"The Kalkaska paper will run an obituary notice," Liz said, "but we should send one to the Mackinac Island paper and the paper in the city where you live."

Cassie considered the suggestion, and then a touch of humor lightened her mood. "That may not be necessary, considering I'm no longer alive."

Liz's eyebrows rose. "What do you mean?"

Cassie felt Nate's fingers stiffen on her shoulder. "I faked my drowning a couple of nights ago in Walloon Lake."

"Why would you —"

"It was my idea," Nate interrupted. "I was worried about Cassie's safety."

Studying Nate, Cassie thought an onlooker might have judged his reaction as embarrassment. That is, if they didn't know as she did that he was beyond any such emotion.

"We will have to report to the authorities," Liz said. "Let them know you're all right."

"That deputy at the tavern..." Cassie frowned.

"Not him," Liz said. "It's another county. The head of their sheriff's department will handle it. We'll ask him to call off any investigation that might be going on." She looked pointedly at Nate, who scowled at her. "We can't have them dragging the lake," Liz said. "The local government is certain to resent the waste of time and money and effort." She shook her head.

Cassie studied the two of them. Apparently the power struggle between them had resumed. "Then," she said, "as much as I hate the thought of leaving here, I'll have to leave in the morning to return to Mackinac Island to take care of Eudora's things."

"Good," Liz said. "Sarah can travel with you."

"Sarah?" She wasn't certain she liked the idea.

"She's your friend, Cassie."

"I'm sure she is but...we started off on the wrong foot and, truthfully, I envy her closeness to Auntie."

"If you feel strongly about it, Falling Water can go with the two of you. Sometimes three are better than two are when there is friction between people."

"And I'll be there," Nate said. He pushed his chair away from the table and stood, arms folded across his chest.

"I thought you were returning to Ohio," Liz said.

"I'll go with Cassie. Willie can drive the van to Ohio."

Liz stared at him stoically. "No more suicides."

He made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a growl.

Cassie smiled, realizing they were on Liz's turf. For the time being the community leader called the shots although Nate, obviously a powerful warrior-type man, exuded a carefully restrained attitude that might have been threatening under different circumstances. He turned and met Cassie's gaze with dangerously narrowed lids.

Instantly her thoughts meshed with his—they were a team. He would tolerate Liz's interference out of respect for her position in the community. Up to a certain point.

Cassie watched Falling Water grin for a moment before she pressed her lips together and hid her smile. The young woman clearly enjoyed seeing her superior challenged.

When the noisy wake had drawn to a close, the tables had been cleared and the room set to right once more, Willie, Nate and Cassie said good night to Liz and the others and headed toward their tepee. The stars overhead in the country sky seemed more brilliant than Cassie had ever seen from her city apartment. The clean scent of the pine forest permeated the cool night air and under her soft moccasins the needle-strewn path felt as soft as feathers.



The stress of the day had exhausted her. Sleep would come as soon as her head hit the pillow. She was surprised then, after a stop at the locker room, to return to the tepee and find Willie leaving with his sleeping bag and kit.

"I'm staying in the men's lodge tonight," he said. "I might play a game or two of cards before turning in and I don't want to disturb your sleep by coming in late."

"That's thoughtful, Willie, but not necessary," she said. "I'm so tired I'm sure I will sleep through anything."

"I'm sure you will. Good night anyway."

"Good night, Willie."

Nate hadn't returned from showering. She undressed and slipped into a nightgown that Falling Water had included in the clothes she gave her. After sleeping in soiled clothes for so many nights she luxuriated in the feel of the soft cotton shift. If alone she might have slept nude but with Nate's sleeping bag opposite hers she needed the covering. She was nearly asleep when she heard him enter.

Through lowered lids she saw the light from his flashlight. She heard him moving around quietly then felt foolish for lying half-awake, pretending to sleep while he prepared for bed.

"I'm awake," she said in a soft husky voice.

Nate turned around. "Did I wake you?"

"No, I just settled down. Willie's not here."

"I know." Nate sat on his sleeping bag near her head.

She tried not to think about what he wore, whether he removed all his clothing or only his outer garments. That was none of her business, she told herself firmly.

Nate laughed. "I sleep in shorts and a T-shirt, Cassie."

"Oh damn! I forgot my mind's an open book to you." Tonight she was too tired to care but she thought about how hard it would be to live with someone who read her unspoken thoughts as often as Nate did.

"I don't do it purposely, Cassie. I'm attuned to you and sometimes I forget to block your thoughts and feelings."

"Well, block yourself now," she said irritably. "I'm going to sleep."

He cleared his throat softly and climbed into his sleeping bag, leaving it unzipped and hardly bothering to cover himself at all in the summer evening.

"Willie's sleeping elsewhere tonight," he said.

"So he said." On the edge of sleep, her reply was little more than a mumble.

"I thought it would be good to be alone since tonight might be our last chance to sleep together."

Her eyes flew open. "What do you mean?"

"I mean sleep in the same room, this way. So close. When we return to the island we'll probably use separate bedrooms, don't you think?"

She might have dreamed that hint of hope in his voice that they would sleep together after they left the village but she had to honestly admit, as tired as she was she hadn't thought beyond this night.

"I suppose you're right." She dared to hope otherwise.

"Do you mind my going to West Cottage with you?"

Did she mind having Nate with her? If he could read her mind he should know the answer. Perhaps he just wanted to prolong their conversation. "I'm glad you're coming along. Didn't I mention it sooner?"

"No."

"Didn't you pick it up from my thoughts?"

"Your fatigue is so heavy all I'm picking up is darkness. I was proud of you at the funeral, Cassie."

Happiness bubbled through her at his praise. "Thanks."

"Eudora would have been proud of you."

"That pleases me."

He turned leaned on an elbow and looked at her. "This is our last night here. I think we should try it, don't you?"

A pulse fluttered in her throat. He couldn't possibly mean... "Try what?"

His laugh was rusty, low and intimate. Cassie's cheeks burned with the realization that he had read her thoughts.

"Well, what then?" she asked, annoyed that he had this unfair advantage over her.

"I promised to show you Dreamtime to recall the past."

He had, she realized. Somewhere, sometime before she had learned of Eudora's passing he had said he could show her the past.

"Tonight's a good time to remember your reason for being here, your purpose in life."

"It sounds awesome. How do I do it?"

"Are you ready now?"

She hesitated not knowing what was involved. "I think I am. What do I do?"

"Nothing much. Ask to see your preconception life."

"Preconception?" The thought made the flesh creep. "Who do I ask?" They were alone in the dark. It was so quiet in the tepee even their breathing seemed loud.

Nate propped himself on his elbows and faced her from his sleeping bag, his face only inches from hers. "Ask your inner wisdom to show you your past."

She held her rising skepticism in check. Tonight, doubts could wait. This show was Nate's. For once she would go along and see what happened. "When do I ask? After I'm asleep?"

"No, before. Lie comfortably on your back, get quiet, then empty your mind and become aware of your breathing."

Unfortunately her thoughts centered on Nate with his face less than a foot from hers. He emitted the fresh, clean scent of soap. She suddenly wished she had showered.

"Empty your mind, Cassie."

She laughed softly. "Empty your own."

Nate chuckled with her. "You do have a one-track mind."

"You should know since you're in it most of the time."

"Close your eyes," he ordered sternly.

"They're closed!"

"Then breathe."

"I never stopped." She struggled to stifle the nervous laughter that bubbled within her. If it erupted he would be annoyed. She succeeded in smothering it then concentrated but couldn't manage to chase his clean scent from her head.

"Perhaps I could relax easier if I crawled in bed with you," she suggested enticingly.

Nate groaned. "I'm not sure that would be a good idea."

"May I?" She started out of her sleeping bag. He made room for her beside him and spread his unzipped bag over them. Her feet brushed his ankles.

He moved away. "Watch it. I'm ticklish."

Her soft laugh broke the tension between them. "There's always something new to learn about you."

He sighed in defeat and gathered her against his broad chest. "You feel good."

She fingered the curling hair on his chest. "Are we going to make love?"

"Yes, we are definitely going to make love at sometime in the future but not tonight. Tonight is for dreaming."

His answer encouraged her. She rubbed an ankle across his calf. "If not tonight, when?"

"When the time is right."

"And who decides that?" she asked.

"Since I'm your teacher, I decide."

That stopped her. "Nate?" It was getting awfully warm lying beside him. With his sleeping bag spread on top of them their body heat turned the tepee into an oven. "I told you I haven't had a lot of experience with men, didn't I?"

He shifted uncomfortably, sending delightful sensations streaking through her. "You told me."

"What are we going to do about it?"

He kissed her hair above her ear. "I'm not sure your inexperience is my problem."

"I think it is." She wrapped her arms around his neck and felt him stir beside her. "Listen, Nate, I'm nearly thirty and believe it or not I've never had a really serious boyfriend. Each time I let anyone get close to me, my bizarre talents scared them off, if you know what I mean."

"They were stupid."

"In a way, but I was too, for that matter. We've agreed about that already. What I'm saying is I care for you more than anyone else in my life." She closed her eyes, unsure now that she had started down this particular path whether she had the courage to continue. "I've been loved by you in the most incredible ways."

"I'd agreed with that." His breath fluttered against her hair.

She wanted his mouth on hers, wanted the pleasure she knew his kisses would bring. The thought raised her courage.

"If I'm going to know real love with a man, I want it to be with you." She waited anxiously for his response. When he didn't answer – and she couldn't detect any feeling at all from him – she asked, "Do you understand what I'm asking?"

"I understand."

"Will you?" she asked in the lightest of whispers.

He nodded rather than spoke. She felt the motion of his head beside hers. Then he lowered his face and kissed her. Certainly it was a physical kiss, but his lips spoke of more than physical love. His mouth was soft and questing, asking for permission to take more. Her lips opened to his pressure but with a low moan he drew away from her.

"Not tonight, Cassie. Tonight is for dreaming."

She realized she was involved with a domineering man, one with immense control, while she was a mere quivering mass of sensuality. Theirs was the most peculiar love affair she had ever heard of but she loved him – trusted him as much as loved him, she realized. She had already made up her mind to do whatever he asked.

They lay side by side while she practiced breathing under Nate's guidance. As time passed she forgot his presence and was aware only of each breath entering her, nourishing each precious cell in her body with oxygen and then leaving in exhalations of golden streams of light.

"Now, Cassie," Nate's low murmur barely penetrated her senses, "ask to remember. Ask to see Dreamtime."

*Dreamtime. Dreamtime.* Behind a shield of darkness, colors swirled in unformed shapes, moving nearer, increasing in size then fading, diminishing until darkness reigned once more. Again and again colors came to her. First came green, olive and drab, and then changing to the color of the sea, aqua and sky blue. Purple, bright hot red, orange and yellow followed and then changed back to green again.

Her eyes opened to a pinkish haze.

“Ah, Cassandra, you’re back.” The soothing voice was familiar but she had no clue as to who spoke.

Weightless, she stretched. She had been joined by nebulous shapes, floating masses of energy, glowing, pulsating, without form but each a familiar friend.

So this was heaven, she thought. Smiling, she asked, “Was I gone long this time?”

“You nodded off for a few minutes.” The haze concealed the speaker, who wasn’t clearly visible. Nor was the lack of form troubling. Everything about the mist seemed familiar. Nothing was threatening. She had the feeling of coming home.

She looked down and saw her essence glowing with the same radiance. “It seemed as if I was gone for a lifetime.”

“Perhaps you were.”

Permeated with joyous sensations, Cassie laughed. “And now I’m home.”

“What did you learn this time?”

“I learned love.” *Nate!* “And patience.” She suddenly recalled the night she had slipped into the lake. “And courage.” She had run from Nate and had felt his pain. “And empathy.” She had felt it also at the farm for the woman Jane.

“There is something I still must know,” she added.

The mist answered. “Ask after you have rested. Then is time to learn your destiny.”

## Chapter Twenty-Three

"Cassie." Someone nudged her at daybreak. She heard songbirds trilling morning songs. Cardinals, she thought, and then a dove cooed mournfully. A waft of fresh air brought the scents of pine resin and dank earth into the tepee.

"Cassie." Nate's voice washed over her like a soothing liquid. She opened her eyes and saw his face inches from hers. They lay side by side, covered by his open sleeping bag.

"Nate." She stretched, exhilarated by awakening to the feel of him next to her, and then she wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him fiercely.

"How was your night?"

She laughed, shaking her head at his question. "You ought to know, you read me easily enough."

"I showed you the way to Dreamtime but I didn't go with you."

"But you're part of my past and you've known all along that I'm destined to marry Seth and help him to the presidency."

"Yes."

She hugged him again, needing the reassurance and security of his solid form close to her. "My memory is restored but what's going to happen to us now?"

He pulled her against him, kissed her forehead, her cheek and finally her ear. "For a start we're going to get Seth elected to the senate."

Cassie sighed. "Even though I'm glad I've learned my purpose for being here, I'm sad about what it means for our relationship. I love you. I don't want to lose you now, especially knowing how close we were in our past lives."

"Sometimes duty and service require self-discipline."

"I understand that, but don't deny you want me, Nate."

"I haven't denied it, have I?"

She hesitated. He had tried his best to conceal and overcome any feelings he might have had for her but she didn't want to argue with him this morning. Still, she *had* to know if Nate considered their predestined plans as immutable as they felt to her.

"I have to spend the rest of my life with Seth, don't I?"

"That's the general plan," he answered.

Cassie's spirits sank. "And Seth *needs* a wife."

"It's best for his personal life and for helping him run a campaign, and for running the country once he's elected president."

“And I’m his appointed helper?”

“I don’t know if I’d say *appointed*. If you remember, you chose your destiny. Somewhere in the back of my mind, even when we thought you were lost to us I held out hope that we would find you.”

She smiled at the thought. “It sounds unbelievable. There I was, living a quiet life in my little Midwestern city while the two of you were developing Seth’s political career and waiting for me to show up.”

“Not exactly waiting. We knew that Seth needed a wife and he hadn’t yet found a soul mate to replace you.”

She sighed again. “When I’m with Seth I don’t feel like his soul mate.” Troubled by her negative reaction to the candidate, she stirred in Nate’s arms. “I’m afraid this thing with Seth might not work out, considering the way I feel about him.”

Nate held her tightly, making her breath catch in her throat. “You can change your mind, Cassie.”

A glimmer of hope rose in her heart. “Is that possible?”

“People do it all the time. After all, we’re only human.” He smiled, his face so close to hers that their noses bumped. “That adage was born of failures like ours.”

Failure. A blot on her record. Perhaps on all of their records. “If I fail does that mean Seth also fails in his purpose?”

Nate stretched out beside her, lazily playing with her fingers and seeming as relaxed as if they were discussing what they wanted for breakfast. “Seth could marry someone else,” he suggested. “He’s already talked of having doubts about you. He’s still looking.”

She hadn’t known that. Now the possibility existed that Seth would reject her as a wife and she would be free.

Nate turned toward her, rubbed her neck and shoulders. His caresses sent sensations streaking the length of her. “He could succeed without marrying you,” he suggested. “We could still assist him in reaching his goals.”

“And what would that mean for us?” she asked quietly.

“We could marry.”

That was what she wanted most, to marry Nate and have his children, spend her whole life loving him and being loved in return. If she had the courage, or perhaps if she were more cowardly, she could try to seduce him into loving her. Once he physically possessed her, she didn’t believe he would give her up. His feelings ran too deep. His principles were too deeply ingrained for him to be her lover and then leave her.

“You’re always thinking, aren’t you?”

She curled contentedly against him. “What are we going to do?”

“Don’t you feel any love for Seth, Cassie? Anything at all? You cared for him in the past.”

She thought for a moment, searching the recesses of her heart and mind. "I really don't know the man at all but he is attractive. I suppose I do feel some compassion for him. He has a tough job ahead of him."

Nate laughed softly. "Compassion will have to do for now." His touch on Cassie's neck was warm and loving.

Her legs tingled. "It's nothing compared to what I feel for you," she admitted breathlessly.

"In the end compassion is a nobler love."

"Why do you always lecture me?" She pulled away. "You want me to marry Seth, don't you?" She waited for his answer but he merely averted his gaze. She thought her heart would break. "I see you don't want to marry me."

Nate groaned irritably. "You're dead wrong. I'd like nothing better," he said, his voice thick with anguish.

"But you won't act on that desire."

He thrashed as if fighting himself and then he groaned in defeat and held his hands over his face. "I love you, Cassie. I won't deny that. I can't deny what I feel for you."

His confession pleased her but his pain was obvious.

"I'll do whatever you want," he said, almost as if in defeat. His breath was warm against her ear. "Charles gave up everything for Eudora. I won't do less for you."

Eudora. Lying in Nate's arms, Cassie wondered if she would end up like Eudora, who had distracted Charles from his chosen duty, causing him to neglect the Peace Seekers colony, and then found no purpose in life except raising little Cassie. Forlorn little Cassie, the only one left after the fire destroyed the colony.

"Charles and Eudora never had a child of their own," she said as if she'd realized it for the first time. "That's sad."

"They didn't think so. They had you."

"I'm wondering. If we marry can we have a baby?"

"There's no way to be certain but I'd love to have another little Cassie just like you."

She hesitated, thinking things through. "And what would you be giving up to marry me? What if we married and didn't have a child? Would you be disappointed then?"

He laughed and eased her out of his embrace. "It would be heaven to spend a lifetime with you. As for children, I wouldn't care one way or the other. I didn't intend to marry or have a child until you came into my life again."

"But I was wondering, you said you're my spiritual guide, and you are Seth's guide as well. Is marriage allowed between us?"

"Everything's allowed, Cassie. I want you as much as you want me. I've never denied that."



She started to say, *but you have*, then stopped, for they had come full circle. Nate loved her. They had established that. The problem was if she stayed with him and denied their destiny he might someday regret giving up his mission.

Cassie stopped thinking. Nate was nuzzling her neck, murmuring her name over and over. He kissed her, mingling their breaths, then his fingers were at the back of her neck. Sensations spiraled upward through her. Her heartbeat quickened, her breathing accelerated. Nate held her tightly, his desire, his need for her was startlingly clear to her. As the celestial music started, she trembled.

She wanted to tell him to stop, to halt this transcendental, luminous experience and love her as a man—a fully human, earthly man—loves a woman. It was too late, she realized. In the expression of love, Nate had evolved beyond her. They wouldn't blend physically today, if ever.

The harmonic choir increased in volume and tempo until her world seemed to tilt. "Nate."

Through a haze she heard him say, "Hang on, love."

Then their souls merged and floated free of the tepee to dance among the treetops in clouds brilliant with iridescent linings. Peace filled Cassie. She heard the tinkling of silver bells as she drifted in clouds whose moisture laved her skin, impregnating her soul, healing her hurts and impurities and finally bringing peace and love to her heart.

Later she felt Nate ease from under the sleeping bag as if fearful of waking her. She put out a hand and stopped him. He kissed her fingertips and whispered, "A shower?"

"Yes," she answered sleepily.

"We'll meet at breakfast. No hurry."

"No," she agreed. They had a lifetime.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cassie looked down the cafeteria line and shifted her weight restlessly. This morning she ignored the others in line. She had some hard thinking to do.

No hurry, Nate had said. They had the rest of their lives. Or did they? Could she live with Nate, marry him with the knowledge that she was shirking duties she had assumed freely and willingly? Not to mention she was taking Nate from his own duties, changing his destiny as well. In the past Eudora had distracted Uncle Charles from his duties to the Peace Seekers forest colony. That distraction had resulted in the torching of the colony and the death of Cassie's natural parents, leaving her orphaned.

The breakfast line inched ahead and she went with it.

Could she fail Seth and live with herself? Could she fail her duty to her country? To her soul?

Still, would she let Seth down even more by marrying him if she were infatuated with Nate?

Okay. She had admitted it was infatuation. Lust.

The man ahead of Cassie turned around and stared at her. She wondered if her thoughts were too loud. Had he read her mind or had she spoken aloud?

She glanced around the dining hall. How many of these people were sensitives or psychics or members of The Lotus Circle? If they read her mind they would be surprised by her thoughts. She listened carefully, tried blanking her thoughts and listening for theirs but heard nothing but morning voices and mumbled greetings. She strained. Still nothing. She clearly didn't have the talent of these people, or hadn't developed it yet.

She had other abilities – her powers. She hadn't thought of them or used them since the incident with the sheriff's car. A stab of anxiety shook her. Except for emergencies, she was through with her powers. Because of her hatred of the deputy her powers had emerged unbidden. She needed to control them.

"The scrambled eggs are fresh and hot," said a woman behind the breakfast counter.

Cassie looked up. "Thanks." She had followed the line as it advanced, even picked up a tray and silverware without noticing. She needed settling down. The headlong flight from Petoskey with Nate, the faked suicide, Rena's death and Eudora's funeral had all upset her equilibrium. And then Dreamtime had revealed her past and her present obligation to Seth. She would be glad to return to Mackinac Island where she would have the chance for a little peace.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cassie, Sarah, Falling Water and Nate sat in a row in the Mackinac Island catamaran ferry, packed in among day visitors on their way across the Straits of Mackinac that lay between the majestic freshwater lakes of Michigan and Huron.

In Cassie's duffel were examples of beadwork from the Native American community where she'd stayed the past few nights, plus a scattering of cedar chips given her to bless their journey. In exchange she would return the medicine mask that she had seen on her earlier visit to Eudora's island cottage.

"When I first saw that clay mask," she said to Sarah, who was wedged in the seat next to hers, "I thought it was evil. I was frightened of it."

"You were supposed to be frightened. Its purpose is to scare off evil spirits."

"I understand that now, but seeing it then made me suspect you meant to harm Eudora."

The corners of Sarah's inscrutable mouth turned up in a smile. "What a child you were then!"

*Two weeks ago*, Cassie thought, then realized Sarah was staring at her with an odd look. "Can you read me, Sarah?"

"Can I go into your thoughts? No, I'm not telepathic. Why?" Her black button eyes seemed to dance with amusement. "Would your thoughts bother me, Cassie?"

"Of course not."

"I think they might. You've no reason to be jealous of me. Your aunt loved you more than life itself."

Cassie flushed and changed the subject to avoid talking about the hostility she harbored for the taciturn woman. "I'm still confused about some things. Even though my memories of my past lives have returned a few things that happened earlier still bother me."

A troubling incident popped into her mind. "Like now. I remember a night when I saw you handing bags to two men waiting on the road behind the cottage."

Sarah nodded. "Groceries for a hungry family. Your aunt didn't mind. She knew I shared her food with others."

"You're right. She wouldn't have cared. Eudora had more unconditional love in her little finger than I have in my entire body." Knowing that made her doubt even more her ability to achieve the goals they had planned together.

"I wonder how things are at West Cottage," she said, shaking off her doubts.

"The Burtons closed the cottage when they left."

"So we'll have to reopen it when we arrive?"

Sarah shook her head. "My cousins are taking care of that. Fresh bed linens. Food."

"Sarah, you think of everything."

She touched Cassie's arm. "I'm glad to help."

She felt her antagonism toward Sarah slip away. Her heart couldn't help softening in the company of these two caring Native American women.

Her thoughts turned to Nate, sitting on the other side of her. Was he constantly monitoring her thoughts?

*Do you mind?* he asked.

She clasped his hand. *Not anymore.* She looked through the catamaran's wide windows, which allowed stereoscopic views of the sparkling straits and the soaring suspension bridge spanning their width.

"Are there sensitives on the boat who can read our thoughts?" she asked him.

"No. A few might pick up nuances and attitudes, but not actual words or thoughts."

"How about Peace Seekers? Are there many of *us* in the general population?"

"The number increases continually as Bodhisattvas choose to return to this suffering world to teach. Most are just ordinary people living simple lives of service as well as they possibly can."

"Ordinary people living simple lives of service," she repeated with a touch of awe.

He linked his arm with hers. "We want to make a positive difference in the world, Cassie, to change people's behavior from acts of violence to acts of compassion."

She leaned her head on his shoulder. "You mean we want people to have a more loving attitude, like this?"

He smiled into her eyes. "This will do for now."

With a sudden lurch the catamaran slowed. Through its encircling windows, Mackinac Island's breakwater slid into sight. People waved from the venerable Iroquois Hotel lawn. Bright yellow awnings and flowers beckoned cheerfully.

"I feel as if I've aged a lifetime since I last made this trip," she said.

"You're older than you think."

"Am I? Of course I am." She sighed over the difficulty of integrating her new knowledge of who and what she was. Yet a lot of her anxiety had vanished after she discovered her true identity.

When the ferry docked the group of four friends remained in their seats and let the tourists disembark ahead of them. "When I realize I've lived so many lives before this one I get a weird feeling, Nate. I feel disembodied, almost as if my legs don't belong to the rest of me."

He smiled. "That's tension. You'll lose it once the newness wears off."

"Are you always aware of your difference, of your commitment to a cause?"

"Most of the time. It's an attitude I work on."

"What a burden to carry around."

He grinned. "Just the opposite."

"Well, it's true, you don't look burdened, but can't a person simply live without thinking constantly about having a purpose in life?"

"Of course." The crowd had thinned. Nate got to his feet and pulled Cassie with him.

Falling Water and Sarah caught up with them on the metal steps leading to the main deck. "My cousin's picking us up," Sarah said.

Sarah waved at a sturdy, round-faced man who greeted her and then put their luggage on his carriage. The four sat on seats facing each other in the surrey while Sarah's cousin drove the spirited team. As the bay horses took off at a trot, he said over his shoulder, "These boys were too long in the barn."

"The hill will take it out of them," Nate answered.

Cassie's heart beat heavily as they neared the Grand Hotel's driveway. Auntie's empty Victorian cottage stood not far ahead.

"We'll have to hold a second memorial service on the island," Sarah said. "Her friends will expect it."

The idea didn't appeal to Cassie. "I hate to reopen wounds." The village's funeral ceremony had healed most of her loss. "These people won't understand that Eudora isn't lost to me. They'll expect me to mourn her. To cry."

"They won't have to know you're here, Cassie," Sarah said. "We'll take care of the funeral, and with your hair darkened and in my clothes you will look completely different."

Cassie smiled at the quiet doe-eyed Falling Water sitting opposite her. "You could be right. Still, I hate this disguise. I don't think it's necessary since Willie took care of the men who were tracking us."

She shuddered. "I hate the thought of someone dying because of me. Even if the men who followed us had threatened our lives, killing them wasn't right. And now Willie's violent act has endangered *his* soul."

Nate held up a hand. "Stop, wait a minute. Where did you get the idea that Willie killed them?"

"You said he had taken care of things."

"And he has, but not with violence."

She shook her head. "I don't understand, you said—"

Nate smiled at Sarah and Falling Water, who nodded at him. "He used defensive aggression methods, mental thought control, to lead them off our trail. He sent them images."

"Images. Okay." She drew a deep breath. She knew so little.

"He aimed images at the base of their skulls. It works every time. It's sort of a temporary hypnosis. It doesn't last forever but it will give us some breathing room."

Falling Water said, "Wait and see how you feel in the morning about the memorial service. You can decide then if you feel safe enough to greet the guests as Cassandra West with the silvery hair."

At the top of the hill the horses were reined in and allowed to rest after the hard pull. Their broad flanks glistened in dappled sunshine while long tails swished flies in the summer's heat.

A breeze off the straits dissipated the pungent scent of warm horseflesh. Sitting beside Nate in the open carriage, Cassie wished time could stand still but she knew that from now on her life would be a struggle as she entered the national political arena with him and Seth. She had only these few days of peace on Mackinac Island before her new life began and she planned to make the most of them.

"I'd like to return to the Victorian era, when wealthy people spent their summers taking the island's healthy air."

"Still wishing your responsibilities away?" Nate asked.

She doubted he meant his words to hurt. He had smiled as he spoke but the words still stung. She glared at him. "I feel guilty enough without your reminder," she whispered. "Please stop."

Sarah glanced at her while Falling Water stared straight ahead as if she hadn't heard Cassie. The driver flicked the reins and made a noise between his teeth. Once more the team strained against the harness and the carriage slowly moved forward.

Under his dark lashes and furrowed brows, Nate's gaze questioned her. Cassie averted her face and pulled away from his touch. She'd thought she had reconciled her feelings toward him. Instead the spurt of anger aroused by his question kindled a gritty resentment of the man who was turning out to have a most formidable conscience.

\* \* \* \* \*

Their arrival at West Cottage passed in a blur of impressions and activities. Cassie called as many of the names in Eudora's address book as she could reach by phone. The next morning she spent time going through her aunt's personal effects with Falling Water and Sarah. She put aside a few things for her own keeping and gave Sarah and Falling Water anything they wanted.

As she had looked through Eudora's belongings, Cassie tried to imagine what a child of hers might like to have of its grandmother's possessions. In her palm she held a gold pocket watch she had found in the back of Eudora's drawer. Surely it was an heirloom from Eudora's parents or grandparents. If Cassie ever had a daughter perhaps she would like the watch.

She shouldn't even think about having children when she had yet to settle the question of whose child she would bear if, indeed, she was fortunate enough to welcome a fresh soul into this world. Would it be Nate's child or Seth's?

"Cassie?"

She looked up to see Nate had returned from picking up Eudora's death announcements, a courtesy to those who couldn't be reached by phone. His deep voice erased her doubts. She ran to him, smiling with the joy of seeing him.

"Here's the lot." He set the boxes on a table then swept Cassie into a close hug. "We should mail them tonight," he said after he had kissed her.

She took a black-edged card from the box and read, "Eudora Canfield West. Memorial Service, Christ Church, Mackinac Island. Thursday, July 27. Ten o'clock."

She shifted her gaze to Nate. "That's three days from now. I don't think many will come."

"They'll come. Funerals and weddings draw people together."

"There's not much time."

"They'll come. The ones who count."

"I hate going through this again. We've guestrooms to clean, food to prepare."

"Sarah and Falling Water will help."

"I'm not sure they can handle everything."

He brushed her hair away from her cheek. "You're always doubting, always rebelling."

She turned away. "Thinking of our future is making me miserable. I can't decide what's right."

"You don't need to decide. We'll marry as soon as possible. It's settled." He kissed her cheek.

"When did we settle that?" Cassie asked.

"It's obvious to me that we can't go on denying our love. We'll have to find another wife for Seth."

He released her. "As soon as we give you a new identity."

Suspicion grew within her. Nate couldn't possibly be talking this sweetly in order to manipulate her into following his wishes—or could he? She slanted him a look. "Is this a game you're playing with me?"

His guarded eyes showed his hurt. "It's not a game."

"You're giving me just enough rope, as the saying goes, to hang myself, so I'll do whatever you want."

"That's not true." He flushed. "You're free to do what you want, the same as anyone else. You can't get rid of me this easily now that we can have a life together."

"I don't see how it can work out between us. There's Seth, there's his campaign. Our promise to him."

Nate's face betrayed his agony. Cassie nearly cried out for causing him such pain.

"Cassie." His steady tone didn't reveal the strain she knew he was under. "Obviously this isn't a good time for making these tough decisions. Let's let things go between us until we're settled in Ohio."

There was coolness in his voice, as if he'd already drawn a shutter over his emotions. "We'll get through this week," he said. "We'll take care of business here. Once you're at the Ohio colony we'll pick up our personal lives. You can decide what you want to do then."

She felt chilled to her bones. She watched an expression of empathy cross Nate's face and then he gave himself a quick shake and backed away from her.

"I'll ask Sarah and Falling Water to help address the envelopes," he said on his way out.

\* \* \* \* \*

Although Nate continued being outwardly helpful, Cassie felt cut off from his affection and experienced a type of pain she hadn't felt before. True, her earlier life had been isolated and lonely, but then she hadn't known what she was missing in the way of a man's love, a soul mate's love. She fell back upon her old habit of suppressing any

feelings until she felt as if she were sleepwalking. Even Sarah and Falling Water noticed the frozen state of her emotions.

Eudora's downstate friends and neighbors started arriving the day before her memorial service and soon every guestroom was filled. Cassie slept in the living room on a daybed under a veranda window. With the window open the night breeze off the water was the perfect air conditioning. Sarah and Falling Water slept on cots on the screened porch outside Cassie's window. Nate kept his distance, sleeping on a cot in Eudora's upstairs sitting room.

Willie's telepathic suggestions to the men following them had removed the immediate threat to her life. With the establishment of an auric shield around the cottage, Cassie dropped any attempt at a disguise. At the Grand Hotel's beauty shop she had her hair restored to its natural silvery color and she once again became Cassandra the librarian.

Arrangements were made with the caterer for a lawn reception following the memorial service, much as they had been for Seth's party the fateful day of Eudora's fall. The coincidence seemed almost too painful for Cassie to bear. She wandered around the house as if in a dream, knowing she wasn't much help to anyone but too caught up in grieving to care.

Seth arrived for the memorial service but would leave by private boat at its conclusion.

Cassie found the white waltz-length dress she had worn to Seth's reception and put it on again in Eudora's honor. At Ritz's inquiring look Cassie explained about white representing the risen soul. Ritz looked skeptical but pursed her lips in a half-hearted smile. The best Cassie hoped for was that Eudora's friend would pass the philosophy on to the other visitors so they wouldn't think Cassie odd for not dressing in traditional black for mourning.

The service was blessedly short. The size of the crowd surprised her. When it filled the small stone church, people stood outside on the narrow street. Although Nate sat beside her, their relationship had weakened and she found little comfort in his presence. On her other side, Falling Water and Sarah sang hymns with gusto, their neatly braided hair bouncing with enthusiasm.

After the service the guests filed out of church and moved down Market Street toward the west bluff in what seemed like a living wave. It was summer, high season, and the island was crowded with day visitors. As there weren't enough carriages for all, most of the mourners walked up the long steep hill to West Cottage. Of course Cassie had hired a carriage for Seth, the Burtons and the Mackenzies, who were special guests. The women in their fine silks and high heels weren't dressed for walking but the summer residents in their sensible shoes made the trek with little effort.

When they arrived home Nate commented that West Cottage's imposing Victorian façade looked transformed. The caterer had done her utmost, even to the extent of decorating the tables with huge quantities of black, silver and pink balloons. The tables



on the side lawn near the gazebo were decorated as well as those on the front lawn facing the straits. Cassie wanted the event to be as festive as possible. She was celebrating Eudora's life, not mourning her passing.

She moved among the guests, greeting those she knew, introducing herself to as many as she could of those who were unknown to her. People stared at her. They were curious, as well they might be. She had apparently taken over Eudora's cottage and was, outwardly at least, having a delightful time at her benefactor's expense.

It was a warm, lazy day with bees floating among the flowers and a mild breeze off the water that finally kept the humidity at bay. The lack of air pollution allowed the sun's rays to fall fully upon the gathered throng.

A bevy of white-jacketed waiters hovered over the guests and made the difference between an ordinary party and an extraordinary affair. Although she was a wonderful hostess, Eudora would never have popped for such extravagance.

On the other hand, Cassie had spared no expense for the wake. Pink tablecloths, she had told the caterer. Everything in pink. The black balloons were the caterer's idea as was the black funeral wreath, five feet across with long black ribbon streamers fluttering in the breeze. The wreath was hung at the highest spot on the cottage's peaked façade.

*Ah, Auntie, if only you could see them.* She could, Cassie knew. She tossed her silvery hair in the breeze, thankful she had let it hang loose in the afternoon sun. It all seemed worth it. All the planning, the tears, preparing the guestrooms, the extra work. The lawn party was a fitting end to Auntie's earthly life.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Although Seth was an honored guest at the memorial service, he spent most of the day sequestered with Nate. Cassie resented being excluded from their meetings. Still, her saner side told her the men needed time together to review Seth's campaign, which had been taken over by other aides after Nate became involved with her.

She hoped for a moment alone after the service and with that thought in mind she went onto the rear deck. All afternoon impressions and flashes of scenes from the day of Eudora's fall had run like a tape through her mind. She sought relief from the troubling images by sitting on a wooden bench and listening to the birds call to one another.

Eventually the chirping of the birds and the occasional clip clop of horse-drawn carriages on the back lane lulled her agitated mind into a more tranquil state. She thought back to the weekend of Eudora's party for Seth and wished she had explored the past with her before she had fallen. If they had talked, what would Eudora have revealed about her feelings, her relationship, with Uncle Charles?

As a child, naturally preoccupied with growing up, Cassie hardly gave her adoptive parents' marriage any thought at all. She supposed a child wouldn't notice unless there was open conflict in the marriage. As it was, her memories of Eudora's life with Uncle Charles were mostly pleasant.

Once again her thoughts returned to the afternoon of Eudora's fall. Nate and Seth must have been at the party all afternoon but other responsibilities had taken up Cassie's attention. She recalled meeting Nate on the back lawn then Seth in the receiving line. If she could relive that afternoon and talk with Eudora she might have a clearer understanding of her life, of the problems and joys that Eudora had encountered in marrying a Peace Seeker.

Why not send her mind back in time? She had done it earlier. Why not now? She hadn't tried seeing visions of the past since the night she ran away from Nate and that had been an act of desperation. West Cottage was a safe haven, a good place for another attempt. Eudora would be her old self again. Cassie could make sure she knew she was loved and ask about her marriage. That was the important part. Did Eudora regret taking Uncle Charles from his duty?

Was attempting to visit the past cheating fate? Maybe she should let Eudora go once and for all time. Perhaps her confusion would lessen if she accepted Eudora's passing and got on with life. Perhaps, but Cassie had gained courage since the afternoon of Seth's reception.

Never again would she take the easy way out. She knew now that life was an adventure to be lived with intent and courage.

She closed her eyes and deliberately thought back to that afternoon. She took three deep breaths. Back...back...back. The deck spun dizzily and then the earth slowly stopped tilting and everything came into focus. She saw herself once again sitting on the deck on a June afternoon watching the guests who had come to meet Seth Hawthorne. They filled the grounds, front, side and back yards.

This afternoon the guests didn't interest her. She wanted to see Eudora. She wanted to see Seth and Nate. On that afternoon two weeks ago she had found them at the gazebo. She watched herself stroll across the lawn toward the gazebo, where beyond its grassy environs the glossy blue water of the straits lay, for once deceptively calm.

At the same concealing stand of tall cedars as before, she stopped and listened.

"Cassandra must be protected," Eudora was saying.

Cassie had done it. It was the fateful afternoon of Eudora's fall.

"There's no question of that," Nate answered. "We'll do our best. Isn't that right, Seth?"

"That's right," Seth agreed. "Eudora, I hate to sound critical, but what made you keep Cassandra's true identity a secret from her all these years?"

Listening, Cassie remembered her shock when she had first eavesdropped on this meeting. Now it all seemed familiar.

"I don't have to defend myself to you," Eudora answered. "Of all people you and Nate should understand how devastated I was when Charles and I went to check Cassandra's family and found them... We found their remains in the burned cabin. And the baby was nowhere to be seen."

"I understand, Eudora."

*Nate.* Cassie wished she could touch him now. She wondered what would happen between them if she revealed herself. Could she change the past? Eudora had said not.

"Can you?" Eudora asked. "I doubt it. Baby Cassandra was the light of my life. When I heard her cries and found her in that box near the stream...well," Eudora sniffed softly.

"We've found Cassie now despite your efforts," Seth said. "It's time we moved ahead with our plans."

"But Cassandra needs protection," Eudora insisted. "The people who torched that cabin would kill her in a second if they knew she lived through the fire."

"That was a long time ago, Eudora," Nate said. "We'll take care of her now."

He had kept his word, and in her ignorance of his motives Cassie had fought his efforts.

"She'll go to Ohio with me."

"You don't know Cassandra as I do."

Nate laughed. "We know Cassie, Eudora. You might not understand now but be assured, we have known her for a long time."

“Okay,” Seth said, “let’s get on with the reception.”

Cassie heard the scrape of feet on the gazebo’s wooden floor. The scene had played itself out just as it had the day of the garden party. And Nate’s intentions for keeping Cassie with him had been noble, no matter what lies he had told or mistakes he had made in his effort to keep her safe.

Although she was pleased to hear Nate’s promise to Eudora, Cassie was anxious to talk to Eudora alone. She wanted to hug Eudora one last time. She wanted to ask if she regretted taking Uncle Charles from his mission. In justifying her marriage to Nate, Cassie needed help from someone. She shut her eyes and willed time to pass. When she opened them the gazebo was empty.

She found Eudora in the kitchen with the caterer.

Eudora turned when she heard Cassie say her name. “Where have you been, child? Stay closer to the kitchen. What if they need your help?”

Eudora’s complaint had fooled Cassie originally. Wiser now, she discerned the love underneath the rebuke.

“I will, Auntie. Please don’t worry about me. I’m going to be all right.” Cassie embraced her, placing a cheek against hers and breathing in Eudora’s familiar scent, an enticing mixture of fragrances, perfume and cosmetics...and felt the tickle of pink feathers against her neck.

“You’ve been a wonderful mother to me, Auntie. I love you. Please don’t feel guilty about anything.”

Eudora’s bony fingers tightened on Cassie’s arms and she held Cassie to her and then released her with an exasperated sigh. “Heavens, Cassandra, I don’t know why you’re hanging onto me. We’ve a million guests arriving and we’ve yet to set up a receiving line for Seth.”

“I’ll take care of it, Auntie.”

“No, stay here at the house as I asked.” Eudora started out of the kitchen.

“Wait, Auntie! There’s something I need to ask.”

Eudora turned. “Be quick about it then.”

“About Uncle Charles and you, about your marriage.”

“Cassandra, whatever—”

“Auntie, listen! I have to know.” Cassie gripped Eudora’s arms. “Did you ever regret marrying him?”

Surprise crossed Eudora’s face then her features settled and a look of infinite sadness filled her eyes. “No.”

But she had. Regret was written on her face.

“This is important,” Cassie insisted. “I need to know the truth. Was there trouble in the marriage because...because he was different from you?”

Eudora sagged under Cassie's hands. "Of course there was trouble. What would you expect? There's trouble in every marriage. That's what life is, working through problems."

"But I mean, were there any *special* reasons for problems between the two of you?"

Eudora looked around the crowded kitchen. "This is not the time or place for this discussion. We agreed to talk later."

Later she would be crumpled at the foot of the bluff. Cassie guided her into a quieter corner. "Would you marry Uncle Charles again if you had the chance?"

Eudora hesitated. "What a strange question. We can't change the past."

"But if we could, Auntie, would you?"

"Would I?" The sadness returned.

Cassie knew Eudora was thinking of the fire, of the death of Cassie's parents. It had been Charles' fascination with Eudora that had caused his inattention to the forest colony. Things might have been different if he had been there. If Cassie drew Nate's mind away from his duty to Seth could another tragedy happen? Would that tragedy cause other persons the pain that Cassie had experienced from the loss of her birth parents, and ultimately the loss of her true identity?

Eudora shook her head. "There's no sense thinking of such things. One goes ahead and does what seems right at the time." Her pale blue eyes looked into Cassie's.

"You have to trust life, Cassandra. Trust life and love people the best you can." Her cold hand clutched Cassie's arm. "I loved Charles and I married him and I don't regret that, no matter what else happened in our lives."

Eudora gave herself a little shake. "Whatever are we doing standing here wasting time!" She turned and, tottering precariously on her skinny high heels, left the kitchen.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alone once more on the kitchen deck, Cassie sat in a shady corner and willed herself out of her deep meditative state. When the earth had stopped rocking under her feet she was surprised to see Nate walk around the corner of the cottage.

"I've been looking for you," he said.

The trip to the past had cleared any remaining resentment toward Nate by reminding Cassie that he had cared for her, had pledged to protect her from the very beginning. Now he loved her and wanted to marry her in spite of her many faults and her continuing distrust of him.

If she was disappointed in anything she was disappointed in herself. Her love for Nate should not depend upon his behaving in a certain way. Couldn't she love him enough to accept him as he was?

She reached out to him. "Sit beside me."

He looked surprised. "Are you sure you want me around? We've hardly spoken for the past few days."

"I'm sorry for the way I've acted. I feel better with the memorial service out of the way. There's just the wake to get through now, and the guests will be leaving soon."

He studied her. "You look rested. You've been under a lot of stress. I'm glad to see you looking so peaceful."

"I'm going with you to Ohio, Nate. I want to."

He took her hand and held it in his. "I'm glad."

Her fingers tingled from his touch. "The important thing is that we'll be together," she said.

"You understand that now?"

"Finally." She rested her head on his shoulder. "Thanks for showing me Dreamtime. It seemed a paradise to me. I wish we were there now."

"We have work to do before we return to that world of light and love."

"How long will that be?"

"Before we return home? There's no way of knowing. You know the saying, only the good die young."

"Yes, but I thought that was meant to comfort parents who had lost a child."

"Believe it. This life isn't the end of things. It's just a school where we progress through the lessons we've come to learn."

She sensed in their closeness that this might be a good time for having her questions answered. "What about those people who pushed Eudora down the cliff and pursued us? What lessons are they learning by harming people?"

"It's hard to tell. Perhaps they're only a reflection of our baser selves. What some philosophers call 'the carnal mind'. Whatever the reason, throughout history the world has been filled with people who craved wealth, control of others or conformity to their ideas. They're willing to fight and kill to get what they want.

"And Cassie, while we are on the subject of violence..."

"Yes?" She wondered where he was leading.

"You'll want to know that Willie torched that deputy's car back at the tavern. He wanted to create a diversion to let you escape. He even told the sheriff that he saw the men near the car to keep them occupied that much longer."

She covered her mouth with her hand. "All this time I've thought —"

"That you were responsible?"

She nodded. "I thought I was evil."

"Well, you're not. You have psychic abilities but they aren't evil. What Willie did, even while wrong, was in the best interest of everyone in the end. Anyway, Cassie, what's done is done. We can't control others. When Willie torched the car, he acted on his own, in the way he thought best. We have to accept what's happened and move on."

"I can't forget those men killed Eudora. There must be more of them around. They must have heard about the memorial service. Everyone on the island knew. Perhaps they'll try more violence. Eudora thought they would." She shivered.

"That presupposes that they have agents who are monitoring our movements or following news items or phone lines."

"Aren't they?"

He brushed a kiss on her forehead. "I doubt it. It's true that they're trying to keep Seth and other people who work for peace from being elected to office, but these men are being investigated now and won't try anything else for a while."

"I don't think I'll ever feel safe again."

"We can't function if we act through fear, Cassie, and we're working with authorities to take care of the threat. Liz also explained to the authorities that we faked your suicide because we felt you were in danger."

She saw a look of contentment on his face. His peaceful mood spilled over into her mind, calming some of her anxiety but not entirely. "In the beginning you said these men were the authorities. That's why we couldn't go to the police."

He laughed softly. "Perhaps that was only a half truth. Remember you didn't trust me then. I couldn't run the risk of losing you. Once I'd taken you under my wing I didn't want you running to the police with stories about me."

"What about Eudora's fall? Are the police investigating that?"

He shook his head. "There's no evidence of foul play. They're closing the case as an unfortunate accident." He held up a hand at Cassie's objection. "I know, I know. But some things are best left alone. The matter is settled. Our stirring up things again will only call more attention to you."

She shook her head with a mixture of exasperation and affection. "Okay, I'll accept what you say even though I don't understand completely, and I've forgiven all the nasty tricks you pulled on me before we found the Kalkaska community. I won't complain about them again. But no more lies, or half lies. I need to trust you and you need to earn my trust."

He tightened an arm around her shoulders and snuggled her close to him. "Agreed. And for your peace of mind we are taking extra precautions. With Seth here we hired extra security and alerted the island police. The state police have brought in undercover officers. This island is fairly easy to secure."

"But there are so many day visitors, hotels and inns."

"You're right, of course, someone could slip through. We're always careful but we can't give in to fear."

She gazed at Nate, studying his features, his strong nose, chin, expressive eyes. The thought of losing him sent a chill down her spine. A premonition? *Another* premonition? *No*.

Nate squeezed her shoulder. "In Ohio the tension will ease. We'll have more time together."

Later, after the sun had set and the last of the guests had left and the caterer had cleared the mess away, she wandered barefoot across the lawn. Here on the island nights were darker, the grass damp and cooler than on the mainland. She breathed in the evening scents of fragrant pine and ripening cherries.

Moisture-laden air off the churning straits dampened her skin wherever it was bared to its touch. The dark sky held a million stars, which seemed brighter away from city lights.

She thought about all that had happened in her life up to this time. And what would happen from now on. According to Eudora's lawyer, Cassie was her sole heir. The value of Eudora's estate wasn't tremendously large but if managed correctly it would last the rest of Cassie's life.

The thought of wealth did nothing to fill the emptiness she felt at losing the only mother she had ever known. Nate had stayed with Cassie through the wake's cleanup then gone to his second-floor bedroom where he had a computer and a fax machine plugged into the phone line. She stared up at his lighted window.

From her vantage point on the lawn she thought she saw his shadow pass in front of the window. Fear suddenly possessed her. If she could stand and look in at Nate, anyone could. At least his blinds should be drawn against an assassin's bullet.

*Stop it, Cassie. Don't think nonsense,* she told herself. The threat that had plagued their footsteps had been tempered by Willie. The danger was over. For now. Nate had assured her.

Trembling despite her bravado, she went inside and activated the security system. She wondered if somewhere an unseen guard watched the cottage or if they were completely on their own after the departure of the esteemed senatorial candidate. Even after learning that she knew Seth in the past, she still felt no affection for him.

Tomorrow she would leave Mackinac Island with Nate. On their way to the Ohio Peace Seekers community they would stop at her Troy bank and sign papers naming its trust department as Cassie's representative. Eudora's lawyer on the island had drawn up the agreements. The bank's attorney would arrange the estate's disposition and convert everything to bearer bonds.

She put on a thin white cotton nightgown and prepared to sleep on the daybed in the living room under the veranda windows where she had slept for the past few nights. Falling Water was spending the night with Sarah at her cousin's house.

Nate and she were alone in the house, although she doubted he realized it, working as he was on the campaign through his electronic connections.

As she slid between the smooth sheets, she bemoaned being alone after so many nights on the road with Nate. *Nate. Auntie.* The pain of losing her was still fresh. Cassie tried to let go of her grief. It helped a little knowing they would meet again in the future but that was some nebulous far-off time. *Now* was what was real to her.



In the daylight she had accepted Eudora's transition and the uncertainty of her own future as adventures to be lived through. Nate had called them *challenges*. At this midnight hour she felt only hollow panic over changing her identity and the loss of Eudora, the only family she knew.

She thought of Nate upstairs. Even though she was going off with him tomorrow, in the dark of night she wasn't entirely certain of him either. She wished he would hold her and ease all her doubts but he had work to do tonight and her dark mood had to be conquered alone. She turned to the wall and stared dry-eyed at the nineteenth century wood paneling that covered the living room walls.

She didn't know how long she tossed and turned before she heard steps on the stairs.

"Cassie?"

She raised her head. "Nate? Are you through working?"

"For tonight." He nudged her. "Move over."

The Victorian daybed sagged under their combined weight and Cassie rolled against him. She put her hands against his soft T-shirt and felt that he was still dressed.

"I'm glad you're here," she told him.

"I sensed your anxiety," he whispered, holding her.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt your work. I wish I were stronger." Miserable, she turned away.

He gently brought her against his chest. "Don't fight the pain, Cassie. Embrace it and then go through it. Experience it, accept it and turn your fears into opportunities for growth."

"I know." She drew a deep breath. "I just can't stand the thought of ever losing you as well as Eudora. And I hate feeling as dependent upon someone as I am on you."

He smoothed her hair. "You're not going to lose me. We're going to Ohio, and you're not going to be dependent upon anyone for much longer. You'll grow stronger and we'll be together."

"We will, but I'm worried it might not be the right thing for us to do. Marriage, I mean."

"No?" His breath stirred her hair. "Why not?"

"If you marry me, you might live to regret it."

"Why?"

"I was thinking of Uncle Charles and Eudora and I thought that Charles was sorry they married." She felt him tense in her arms. "Don't be angry with me."

"I'm not angry but why do you think that?"

"I returned to the past and asked Eudora."

Nate's stony silence was worse than any angry outburst.

"I needed help, Nate, but I know I shouldn't have done it. It wasn't an emergency."

"No." He drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I'm not judging you, Cassie. You make your own decisions."

"Then you're not angry with me?"

He slid an arm around her. "Not exactly." His tone was tender, filled with sensuous undertones. "I had something else in mind when I came down here."

"What was that?" Her pulse beat rapidly.

"There's unfinished business between us."

The warmth of his hand passed through her thin nightgown until she ached for more. She placed her palms on his chest, felt the strength of his muscles under his shirt. In the narrow bed, his hard muscular strength pressed everywhere against her soft curves.

"What unfinished business is that?" she asked when he had finished kissing her. She was fairly certain what he had in mind but after his last rejection she couldn't take the initiative. She wanted reassurance first.

"Do you remember asking me to be your lover?" he said.

She laughed softly, remembering how embarrassed she had felt. "That's not something I'll forget soon."

He propped himself on an elbow. "Before then I'd been so wrapped up in the spiritual side of living I'd forgotten the importance of the physical part. There has to be a balance between the two sides to be a whole person."

She stroked his tousled hair away from his forehead.

"Loving you makes me feel whole again, Cassie."

He kissed her until, breathless, she removed her lips from beneath his with a soft moan.

He nuzzled her neck. "This daybed's too small."

"I always sleep here when the cottage is filled."

"But we're alone tonight."

"I like sleeping in a familiar bed."

He squeezed her gently, as if testing her strength, and then caressed her delicately until she was rosy with love. "Do you know what I want, Cassie? What am I thinking now?"

She tried going into his mind but her own tangled emotions kept getting in her way.

"Come upstairs with me," he said.

This was a new, kinder Nate, more tender but still domineering. She narrowed her eyes. "This is my bed."

He stared at her. "You want to stay here?"

"Here." It was another contest of wills, a competition. His will or hers. If he gave in now, in this matter of little consequence, then she would know his love for her was true.

She had forgotten he could read her thoughts. He sat on the edge of the bed and started pulling his shirt over his head.

"Nate." She touched his arm.

"It's okay." His words were soothing but his voice had a rough edge to it. "Once and for all, Cassie, I want to put your doubts about me to rest."

"I'm sorry. I'll go upstairs with you."

He didn't answer. Instead he slipped out of his clothes and slid into bed beside her. There was barely enough room for two but it would do, she decided

\* \* \* \* \*

Hours later she awoke to dawn's faint light, the mustiness of a damp house and the sound of Nate's steady breathing beside her. She opened her eyes. If she were quiet, perhaps she could shower without disturbing him.

He stirred. "What time is it?"

Marriage to a man who reacted to her every thought would not be easy.

"It won't be easy but I'll make it worth your while," he said as he gave her a warm hug. "Morning, love."

She snuggled happily against him. "Good morning." She felt whole, fulfilled, belonging to someone at last. If he only... "Nate, I have a question."

"I know."

"Stop reading my mind. I want to ask my own questions."

He grinned naughtily. "Sorry."

"When we're married... You do want a baby, don't you?"

"Definitely, don't you?"

"I wasn't sure. You said Peace Seekers don't have children, that they interfered with your commitment."

"I have a more important commitment now, my commitment to you. There's no holding back for me. I'm completely certain what we're doing is right."

He was. She saw that. She kissed his nose. "You wouldn't have made love to me last night if you weren't sure."

"Absolutely not. And you're the only person I would ever have a child with, Cassie. I want you to be sure of my love."

"Oh Nate..." Tears wet her face as she clung to him. His reluctance to have a family had been a large fear.

"Today's the big day, Cassie," he said against her hair. "Are you ready to face your future?"

"I'm as ready as I'll ever be. But I'm scared. I can't lean on you forever."

He laughed. "I don't sense much *leaning* in you. Once you develop your real strength you'll accomplish more with your life than you ever thought possible."

Perhaps, she thought, but her lifelong personality as Cassandra the loner, the hidden, rejected woman, wasn't that easily shaken off. "I hope so."

"I know so." Nate swung his legs off the bed and sat on the edge. "This was a damn small bed you insisted on for our first, uh, *erotic adventure*."

She laughed at his choice of words, so like Nate, so learned, so intellectual—so like her own personality, she realized in a mental epiphany.

He grunted his discomfort and rubbed his lower back. "I hope you're satisfied."

"Oh I am," she admitted. "Completely."

He turned and swatted her bottom. "I meant in getting your own way last night."

"That too," she said, her voice dripping of honey.

"I can see living with you is going to be a challenge. I'd like to leave for Ohio soon." He changed the subject abruptly. "Do you have much packing left to do?"

"No. Sarah and Falling Water can finish up. The agent is going to lease out the cottage, so we can leave whenever you're ready." She touched his bare back tentatively.

He moved sensuously against her palm. "That feels good."

"About last night. I hate thinking I forced you to stay with me against your wishes."

He slowly turned around and captured each wrist in a large hand, pressing them upward to her pillow. "We just settled that issue. You more than anyone should know how much I love you. Listen carefully, Cassie." He gave her a hard look. "For absolutely the last time, I wanted to make love to you as much as you wanted me." He lifted her hands and kissed each one in turn. "No more foolishness. Okay?"

She nodded, but moisture filled her eyes.

Nate brushed a gentle finger across her cheek. "I can feel your insecurity, Cassie. It's fairly pouring from you and it's clouding your aura." He smoothed her hair. "Because of your early insecurities, you'll have to fight your fears most of your life, but you can overcome them. There's nothing in this world or any other that you need to fear—not because of my strength but because of your own.

"In Ohio I'll be busier than ever," he continued, "but that won't mean that I'm not thinking of you wherever I am." He kissed her lightly and then gathered up his clothes. "Don't doubt my love."

She watched him climb the stairs and thought that her life was at a crossroads. One road led to the Peace Seekers community and a life of adventure and love with Nate. The other road led back to her old life of isolation. A familiar twinge of anxiety touched her. Trust his love, Nate had said. She mustn't be afraid of the future. She took a deep breath and felt her fear dissolve.

Every reason existed for her to go forward with happy anticipation. She at long last understood Nate's truth. Love was everything, the main virtue in a person's life. And it was unlimited. *Love is enough*. She could trust the future—trust Nate. She would go to

Ohio with him because she trusted herself as an Ancient One and trusted her spiritual powers.

She had found her purpose, which was to live courageously with love and to trust her own ability to do what was right and necessary. She looked forward to a life with Nate, a life of service and compassion down a long path of peaceful change toward a more loving and more cooperative world. All that was left now was her acceptance of that purpose.

There was no clear way to know what lay ahead but she was willing to accept the challenge.

When Nate came down from showering, Cassie was in the kitchen making coffee. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her tightly against his chest. He was still warm from his shower and smelled of scented bath soap.

"Nate," she said with a smile in her voice, "how long is the drive to your place in Ohio?"

"About eight hours, but we need to stop at your bank."

"It might close before we get there, especially if we stop for lunch along the way."

He kissed her neck. "True. What are you getting at?"

"Today might be our last chance to be alone for some time." It might be their last opportunity for thinking only of themselves and their new love before joining the community. "We could spend the night at my apartment in Troy," she said.

He grinned. "At last, your thoughts match mine exactly."

Cassie turned for his kiss. "At least we agree on something."

## **Epilogue**

In her bedroom in the farmhouse at Peace Lake community, Cassie put down her pen and gazed out the window at the serene vista of rolling fields and low brick buildings. She had written out her memories of her time with Nate since their meeting on the Mackinac Island ferry until the morning they left together for her apartment. It had helped as the community director had said it would. She felt calm for the first time since she had arrived.

At first she had regretted all the times she had mistrusted Nate and run away from him. But as she had written their story a peace had fallen over her. She accepted her struggle as a normal reaction to the surprises she had received. In the end she accepted Nate as the Peace Seeker he claimed to be. She accepted her role in his life and in Seth's life. Now she was at the Peace Seekers community at Peace Lake. Her future lay before her spread out like a blank notebook, much like the one on her desk. She had only to believe it was meant to happen and to find the courage to follow the dream.

*The End*

## **About the Author**

An independent literary consultant and an instructor for online creative writing workshops, Joyce Wells earned a BA and MA in Developmental Psychology. After marrying and raising a son and a daughter, and while working for an executive office group, she returned to her love of writing. She has published poems, essays and stories in anthologies, newsletters, newspapers and magazines, and received an award in a national short story competition. She belongs to Romance Writers of America, International Women Writers Guild, and Detroit Women Writers.

Joyce divides her time between the Midwest and Florida, where she indulges her passion for golf and swimming. When she isn't on the links, she's studying parapsychology and the connection between the present and the past, the physical and the spiritual.

Joyce welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.thelotuscircle.com](http://www.thelotuscircle.com).



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