



**Stalked by Love**

Brenda Williamson

(c) 2009

ISBN 978-1-59578-617-3

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Manufactured in the United States of America

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### **Blurb**

Nightmares of a stalker, visions of drowning, and someone mysteriously leaving buttons are not the only bizarre happenings in Holly Meadow's life. A handsome stranger she picks up in a bar becomes the center of her life after a torrid night of sex, and she doesn't know whether to fear him or trust him. Either way, his lust makes her a prisoner of desire.

A fixation with a beautiful woman controls Lark Ellis. Destiny has thrown her in his path and he doesn't have the power to break free of his obsession to claim her heart. Little does he know that his pretend chance meeting will ignite the danger he hoped to avoid. However, Holly's in trouble, and he can't refuse to help, nor can he ignore the

passion she brings to his bed.

The culminating fact is, they are puppets in the hands of fate unless an unnoticed detail opens their minds to an overlooked element in their past.

## Chapter One

Holly rubbed her throbbing temples. Her dreams of a man stalking her turned restless nights into tiresome days. While he didn't exactly feel threatening, he left her with a disturbing sensation that put her in fear of something.

As a distraction to her headache and her lingering worries, she picked up the last of the mail. She sifted through the stack and dropped everything except the Christmas card. Sealed with a snowflake sticker, the big red envelope had a strange familiarity that troubled her. An ominous depression shadowed the festive season every year, and she never understood why. As far as she could recall, nothing disastrous had happened to her.

She peeled off the seal and lifted the unglued flap. Tucked inside was a single folded sheet of white paper. She pulled it out. No words, no design, just a slip of paper.

*Hmmm, no card?* She looked inside again. At the bottom lay a disk shaped piece of black plastic. She stared at the object, concerned and puzzled. An eerie sense of déjà vu gave her goose bumps. As if it had happened before, she dumped the button onto her desk blotter and watched it roll to a stop. The blank notepaper fluttered from her fingers as her thoughts blurred.

*A bridge. A snowy night. Christmas music on a radio.*

*She clung to the man, terrified for her life.*

*The chill of an icy river constricted her lungs as a darkness coiled around her. She lost sight of the one person able to save her, as the weight of death tugged, pulling her from his grasp, from her hold of his coat.*

Holly dropped to the hard seat of her desk chair, gasping for air. She felt as if the man tried to help, yet in the dreams, he always disappeared, leaving her alone.

"Damn." She pounded her fist on the surface of the old desk, upset that as hard as she tried, she couldn't figure out what her dreams were trying to warn her of.

Unnerved by the odd omen, she gathered everything and stuffed it in her purse. She rushed from the office, shoving her arms into the sleeves of her coat. Outside the building, the day-old snow crunched under her fur-topped leather boots. Echoes surrounded her. Ratta-tap-tap of something in the breeze ensnared her dizzy thoughts. She slowed her pace, leery of the sound, wary of the danger it presented. Cautious with her moves, she glanced around as if she were looking at the scenery so no one suspected she searched for them—those imaginary people her mind was trying to conjure.

She continued making her way closer to her car. Unlocking the door, she tossed her purse to the passenger seat. Paranoia made her crazy. The mountain of work on her desk gave her a reason to pause and consider her haste to leave.

*What am I doing?* She reached for her purse, deciding to forget the momentary upset and go back to work. No one could do anything about a nightmare.

Then she saw him. A dark, shadowy outline of a man in a long trench coat stood by the far corner of the building. She felt his gaze on her, even though she couldn't see his eyes. The longer she remained bent over, half inside her car, staring out the passenger window, the more the glass fogged from her breath.

*Move.* She willed him to leave.

*Move,* she urged herself.

The sun had lowered, leaving the parking lot dappled with the glow from lights on poles. She continued watching the outline of the man. Why did he stand there? What did he want? Was he the person her mind tried to warn her about?

Fear pushed Holly to climb into the car. She turned the key in the ignition. “Come on,” she grumbled when the engine cranked hard in protest of the cold.

She tried again. When it started, she shifted into reverse. The tires spun on the icy pavement and the vehicle slid sideways.

“Damn.” She shifted into drive, taking more care with her maneuvering, even though she felt the threat of something sinister waiting for her.

This wasn’t a night she wanted to be alone.

\*

Lark Ellis pushed himself away from the cold brick wall outside the theater house. Ever since he’d laid eyes on Holly Meadows in the Primrose Place bar, he felt the connection to her. In his memories, he lived other lives connected to the woman. She looked a little different each time. Her name changed. The identifiable aura had not. It radiated from her like a warm feeling of love and peace that reached for him.

Lark hurried to his car. He’d spent many sleepless nights obsessed with finding his soul mate again. He no longer questioned why his life repeated from one reincarnation to the next. It just did, and with similar direction, as if he followed a map. Only taking a few detours, the destination remained the same. The definitive of all aspects was the woman he was compelled to find and love again.

Spending many nights and long hours staking-out Primrose Place, Lark had found her, as he knew he always had, as he knew he always would. Now, weeks later, here he was every night, watching her leave work. When she didn’t take notice of him that first night he saw her at the bar, he knew something was wrong with either his instincts or his sanity. Until he figured out why she didn’t recognize him, in the same way he did her, he decided to keep his distance.

Tonight her odd behavior worried him.

*Where’s she going?* He let his car roll up to the stop sign after she turned in the opposite direction of her house.

With his lights off, she’d not see him behind her in the dark part of the parking lot. Once he pulled out into the traffic on the highway, he had to switch them on. He left one car between him and Holly just to hide the fact he tailed her. The last thing he wanted to do was upset her.

Lark had hoped to maintain good visibility. The increasing fall of white snow flurries clung to the windshield until he turned on the wipers to swish them away. It was just like the weather not to cooperate. His insides knotted. The chill from outside leaked into his car—into him.

Holly made a left, went two blocks, and turned right. The car in front of him pulled off the road into a shopping center. It put him directly behind her. He backed off on the gas to keep the distance, not that she’d see much with the snow obliterating everyone’s vision.

He glanced out his side window. The scenery, even snow-covered, made him uneasy. The familiar route turned his anxiousness into complete dread. He backed off more, not as intentional as much as instinctive like an inherent self-preservation.

Only fate surprised him.

Once Holly bypassed the route he suspected she might take, his troubled thoughts eased away from what might happen. Although, the direction she did take wasn't a great comfort either. Her journey ended when she pulled to a stop at an all too familiar place.

Parked in the lot outside the large brick building, she got out of the driver's side. Lark pulled along the curb. The rhythm of his heartbeat increased with the renewal of concerns he had for Holly's wellbeing. He hopped out of the car and jogged up to the chain link fence. From there he watched in obscurity as she walked up to the doors of the police station.

*Maybe she knows she's in trouble.* He had to help, make her understand that whatever she remembered, there was no changing destiny.

Without thought, he took a shortcut, instead of the shoveled path. The cold from the deepening layer of slush and snow seeped into his shoes, wetting his socks, chilling his feet. Uneasy, he stopped at the foot of the salted brick steps. He stared in debate at the double glass doors. There was no changing Holly's fate if he got involved. Hadn't he learned that by now? He turned away, hoping her future wasn't on a parallel path with his, whether she knew him or not.

## Chapter Two

The police detective looked at Holly's evidence and then up at her as if she were a nut. She felt silly, but that didn't give him the right to gawk as if she needed a straitjacket.

"Ma'am, these aren't threatening. It's probably just a prank."

"It's Christmas time, Detective Burton, not mischief night." She slammed her hand on the desk in frustration, the sting radiated to her elbow.

"Ms. Meadows, a red envelope, a white piece of paper, and a black button. What could I possibly investigate with these?" The frown lines in his aged face deepened.

Unhappy with his job or not, he didn't have the right to dismiss her concern.

"You could trace the maker of the envelope or fingerprint the paper and the button. I don't know, I'm not a detective, that's your job, or so I thought when I came in here." Anxiety made it hard for her to breathe without a small gasp.

"Look, there's nothing we can do for you until you're directly threatened by someone." He turned the button over, mindlessly flipping it around his fingers.

"Sure, wait 'til I'm dead in a ditch." She snatched her evidence off the desk and tucked it in her purse. She held out her hand for the button.

Fear made her crazy, especially when she didn't know why or what made her think something terrible was going to happen to her. Her blood pressure rose to the point she felt dizzy. She resisted the urge to rub her temple, and fight the overwhelming images tumbling free.

*Her fist clenched tighter, making it impossible to open her hand, spread her fingers. The swirling cold overhead sent a shiver down her back. Icy ripples forced her under the surface of water until the light dimmed. If only she had opened her hand.*

Holly blinked away the flash of memory she had from her dream. She looked down at her palm, the imprint of the button leaving a circling in the center.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Meadows," the detective said with a tone equating genuine sympathy. "But there's just nothing we can do."

He was right. What could he accomplish other than placating a woman's fear of a crazy prank? She didn't know why she was the target of a hoax, or why it came when her nightmares had escalated. Troubled by demons in her minds, she just didn't see the connection. But she felt it, and that worried her plenty.

"I'm sorry, too." Holly left, keeping her emotions under control until she got outside.

Upset, tired, and scared, she leaned against the building and cried. Not the hysterical blubbering she felt like releasing, but something close. Mental illness didn't run in her family as far as she knew. With her parents dead, and having no relatives or siblings, she didn't have the ability to question anyone from her upbringing.

Once she finished letting out her frustration, she wiped her face with the back of her cold hand and trudged down the steps to her car. The tearful release didn't erase her bad day, and home didn't have the inviting sound it should. She still had no desire to be alone.

Holly got in her car and drove away. The appearance of headlights behind startled her. She hadn't seen another vehicle moving when she left the police station. Because of

the heavy snow, she drove slower. It gave her the opportunity to keep her eye on the rearview mirror. It wasn't until the lights swept away, indicating the car turned, that she let out the breath she held.

Rattled by everything, she was happy the drive to the bar was short. She needed a drink to soothe her nerves.

She had no one in her life—a fault of her own doing. The prospect of hooking up for one night was the best distraction from her stressed mood. That kind of stranger in her life didn't worry her. They'd meet, get a motel room for the night, have mindless sex, and then never see each other again—or not so she would know, if she had enough to drink.

Holly got out of the car and glanced up at the familiar sign, *Primrose Place*, her favorite pastime. The place had a quiet clientele, with an atmosphere she enjoyed. From the first day she had walked into the quaint establishment, she felt as if she belonged there.

She held her collar tight to her neck as protection against the nippy air and reached for the door handle. Inside, a man in a long trench coat stalled her advance. A tremor shook her body right down to her knocking knees. Her faulty brain began a staggering round of paranoia that kept her stationary as if her cold feet had frozen to the floor. Immediately, her gaze dropped to his gloved hand on his lapel.

*A missing button!* Her thoughts buzzed with warning. She then realized how she still clenched the button the detective had handed back to her. If she could move, she'd look at it for comparison. Only her fixated state of mind kept her immobile.

*Do something*, she silently urged.

*Do anything*, she mutely begged.

Her unquestionable obsession prevented her from looking away. She watched his hand drop downward to the area of the missing button. A deft maneuver of his fingers and suddenly the button appeared through a buttonhole.

An inaudible whimper, the closure of her eyes, and a slow deep breath were her means of gaining back her composure. She then took the opportunity to glance around the room. Upon exam of the quiet surroundings, she noted two other men with similar coats.

"The weather," she mumbled under her breath, inhaling the silly chuckle from her foolish suspicions. Everyone had on coats because of the weather, and there was no reason to suspect a conspiracy to drive her mad.

She pushed forward, walking to an empty table in the back corner. The sounds of Christmas stirred the air with a festive melody. A lively rendition of 'Frosty The Snowman' had a few people in the room singing along. If her thoughts weren't so washed-out from worry, she might have hummed the tune herself.

"Can I get you something to drink?" a man asked, while she adjusted her seating in the booth.

"Yes, I'll have tequila." She looked up.

His dark brown eyes, serious and captivating, held her gaze. *Be wary of strangers*, she reminded herself when her attraction to his handsome face continued overruling the warning. "I'm sorry. I thought you were the waiter." Without glancing away, she noted the waiter to the side of him.

"I'll have the same," the stranger ordered, not looking away from her.

His deep voice sent goose bumps racing up her arms. She rubbed her coat sleeves, dispelling the ripple of excitement. While having a one night stand was a crazy plan,



discarding it in favor of a more substantial affair was even crazier. She didn't know him, and if she did, he'd be crazier than her to want to have anything more to do with her other than enjoy a couple hours of pleasure.

"May I?" He pointed to the seat.

She nodded, anxious to get started on her lustful quest. A big distraction like sex with a gorgeous man certainly had curative powers.

"I'm Holly." She scooted over to give him room.

"Lark," he replied, in a quiet tone of self-confidence.

The strong silent type furthered her attraction, as did the normality of his presence. Déjà vu once again brought her senses aware. *Had they met before?* Nowhere in her mind was an ounce of concern and she was glad. She didn't want to back away from a fling with him. Rather, her heart and soul rushed forward with a multitude of desires.

"Do you come here often?" She tried fitting him into the setting as if that might be why she thought she knew she was safe with him.

"Not really."

"Did you know this bar has been here since the forties? Different names, different owners, but it's always been a bar." The trivial comment was all she could think of for conversation. Topics of discussion eluded her. His looks captivated her thoughts, and it wasn't as if she could ask, 'Where'd you get those gorgeous eyes?'

Silence didn't take her by surprise, it overwhelmed her, and the following minutes remained void of talk. The "strong silent type" of man had drawbacks. Her thoughts swung in another direction while she fiddled with the white snowflake-cut paper coaster awaiting her drink.

*The storm whipped the snow flurries into her face as she hung there, staring up into the terror-filled gaze of the man holding onto her. Her unfocused eyes felt the sting of dampness and squinting blurred her vision. Rushing water stirred beneath her, engulfing her into its whirring sound. The cracking ice, the cold surrounding her, remained a backdrop to the need she had to stay focused on the brown-eyed gaze giving her battered thoughts solace.*

"Are you all right?" Lark's voice broke through the entrapment of her wandering mind.

"Fine," she muttered, blinking away her unshed tears.

What made her so sad? The nightmare wasn't real. She wasn't falling into a river, or drowning.

Their drinks came and sat untouched. She fingered the rim of her glass, circling the top with several passes. Lark slid his hand over hers, stopping her mindless fidgeting. He pulled her arm, turning her palm up, and sprinkled salt in the center.

"I usually have—my—tequila—straight." Air wheezed from her lungs.

Lark dragged his tongue across her open hand. The wet glide moved slowly from one side to the other. His thoroughness sent shivers of excitement up her arm and into her chest as he licked away the salt. Unprepared for his forward move, she giggled. The ticklish maneuvering continued, trailing, tracing the lines in her skin.

She watched with rapt attention, mesmerized by his forwardness. He lifted his head and put his glass to his lips. His gaze stayed on her, over the top of the glass with a hesitant expression, as if she were to do something. She smiled, unable to think of anything. Her fingers remained trapped in his warm grip as he drank the tequila and

followed with taking a bite into a slice of lime.

“Your turn.” He lowered her hand, adding a dash of salt to her moist palm.

Captivated, she continued to look into his eyes, following instructions, licking the same area he had. It made her smile, thinking of it as their first kiss. After a quick gulp of tequila, she eagerly leaned toward him to bite the lime wedge he held to her lips. Juice trickled down her chin. Something in his nature disturbed her, and at the same time, she enjoyed his quietness.

“Did you like it?” His thumb swept across her chin and back, up over her mouth.

“Yes.” What was there not to like about a handsome man caressing her lips?

He repeated the process involved with drinking the tequila. A giggle slipped out of her when his tongue flicked her palm again. He followed with a gentle brush of his lips, much softer, like a tentative kiss. Her heartbeat quickened. The surreal moment turned her whole day into a faded memory, there was nothing she wanted to think about other than Lark.

Holly scooted closer, angling for a good position to let his next move land on her mouth. She sidled into place as near as possible, leaning forward with a slight tilt. Not too much, she didn’t want to fall forward against him prematurely. Inclined to let him make the first move since his palm licking, she waited with baited breath.

His kiss never came. Instead of capturing her mouth with the softness of his full lips, he took another drink, emptying his glass. No more salt. No more lime. Then he waved the waiter over with another round.

Disappointed the progression of intimacy wasn’t as forthcoming as she had anticipated, she sat back and drank the rest of her tequila.

“This used to be my favorite time of the year.” She closed her eyes, trying to remember the good times, when it seemed as if a hundred Christmases had gone bad on her.

“It’s not anymore?” Lark’s hand stayed on hers, his caress a constant reminder they could end the night together.

“Maybe it still is.” She sighed, unsure why she brought up the topic.

Every year around Christmas time, bad dreams spoiled the season. Yet, she didn’t want to face depression when she was next to him. She reached up to touch his face, stroke the strong line of his jaw, and maybe plant a kiss on the dimple in his cheek. The familiarity of his voice, his expressions, and the very way he made her feel at peace were nice, and yet continued to be troublesome when she tried placing where they had met before.

When she drew up the courage to guide him to her kiss, Lark grasped her hand, stopping her from touching his face. He turned her hand over, sprinkling salt, and putting his lips over the area, plying the wrong part of her with his tender osculation.

She let the effects of the indulgence and the man, work their wonders. A romantic at heart, she felt wooed by his persistent caresses and glances. The one-night stand she sought was long behind her. Desires beyond the physical beckoned to be sated. She wanted more for herself than a brief affair. She wanted a man to fill the void she had in her heart for as long as she could remember.

Over the course of the evening, conversation remained inconsequential with meaningless drivel that often made her laugh. However, the alcohol she’d consumed hadn’t helped to inspire sobering topics as her inhibitions lowered.

Lark's beguiling gaze challenged her to act upon instinct. Optimistic of success, she shunned the fear of rejection and reached toward his face again. "I feel as if I've seen you before." She connected to the curve of his jaw.

"Maybe you have." He leaned toward her as if it were his way of offering an incentive to proceed.

She stroked over the roughness of light stubble, the prickling stimulating her senses.

"Have we met?" She traced his lips, still wet from his last drink.

"Not in this lifetime."

No, it couldn't be this lifetime or she wouldn't have forgotten. *But could it be another?* She closed her eyes, bringing back the images, the memories of those nights where the dreams were good.

*His hands were heavy and warm on her breasts, kneading and shaping, plying her with his tender strength. She loved his adoring touch. He tasted of peppermint—a breath mint, not a candy cane. It was Christmastime, and he embraced every aspect of the season.*

*He kissed her, tenderly at first, then more aggressive, as if he didn't have time to waste in devouring her breath. Her widening smile didn't stop his moving lips. She was in love and she hoped never to lose that safe feeling.*

"What a funny thing to say." She paused, drew her hand back, and stared at him for clarification. The statement struck a topic that bumped up against something she had wondered about—reincarnation.

Lark ordered them another drink without commenting. The talk remained trivial, non-Earth shattering or thought disruptive. She talked of work, and he of something mundane like the weather. She didn't mind. The resonance of his voice, the mannerisms in his speech, the warm timbre of his tone, soothed her troubled soul.

"I don't know what it is that worries me about having a long-term relationship—" She stopped talking, realizing she had let her relaxed state of intoxication lead her into personal chatter. "I'm sorry. You don't want to hear about my phobias."

"Are you ready to go home?" He swirled his glass in circles on the wood table, and then lifted it, swallowing the remaining tequila.

"Yes," she answered, hopeful their night wasn't going to end because she babbled too much.

Lark slid from the seat, pulling her along. He helped her to her feet. Wobbly legs made it hard for her to stand. She teetered forward and found strength in his arms as he prevented her from slipping to the floor.

"I shouldn't have had so much to drink." She laughed, hanging onto the lapel of his coat.

He pulled her closer. His embrace tightened against her back. She stared into his eyes. Lust reflected back. Hers? His? Who cared which of them wanted sex more, as long as that was the ending result of their night.

"Kiss me." She seized the opportunity, desperate to make Lark the man that stood in the shadows of her dreams.

He bowed his head, bringing his mouth near hers. She tipped her head back and lowered her lashes as a whimper of excitement bubbled in her throat. Lightheaded from too much tequila, she leaned on him for support, waiting for his breath to mingle with hers.

*This is the one.* Her mind screamed with inexplicable madness and joy. *He's the man that can save you from madness.*

"Can you walk?" His liquored breath wafted under her nose.

Holly opened her eyes, and caught a glimpse of his smile as he turned her away. *Did he think she was too easy, or too drunk?*

### Chapter Three

Lark guided Holly across the barroom and out the door. He led her straight to her car. His thoughts hovered on the missed kiss. Her willingness made it hard for him to stick to his solid reasoning for not getting involved with her. He had decided, after seeing her safe, knowing she wasn't searching for him, he'd let her go.

Regrets tortured him as he escorted her to her car. Now that they had spoken, mutual loneliness drew him to her more. She didn't show any concrete signs she recalled her other lives, yet something in her mournful stare told him she was troubled. How could he abandon her now?

"Can you drive?" He assisted her step-down from the sidewalk to the street.

"Sure." She fumbled in her pocket and produced a set of keys, holding them up as if that assured him.

Her attempt to get one inserted in the lock failed.

"Here, let me." He tried taking the key from her hand.

"Doesn't fit." She swayed, backing up and dangling the key away from him.

"I'll get it to work." He swung his hand at the jiggling cluster.

Holly stumbled, losing her footing as if she'd fall and he grabbed her and the set of keys.

"You're probably trying to use the wrong one." He propped her against the car.

"I can do it, really I can." Her arm raised, her hand shot forward, and her fingers snatched at the air, working to get the keys back.

Her giggles weren't as much child-like as they were giddy. He caught her falling forward, and it put her beautiful smile close, like she was in the bar. How did a woman, different in appearance, still have the same smile each rebirth? The amazing sparkle in her blue eyes vanquished his shaky resolve. His impulsive emotions reached their limit. He pushed her against the car, finding her unresisting to his grasp. Using his body to hold her up, he ignored her puzzled expression and pressed his mouth to hers.

Lark withdrew almost instantly, feeling guilty for taking advantage.

"Don't stop," she whimpered.

The sweetness of her desire controlled him as her fingers took a greedy hold of his coat. He dove back into the kiss, savoring the lingering flavor of lime on her sucking lips. Holly had all the passion he remembered of Heather. That wonderful vigor of love transcended death, flowing into her rebirth. Feeding off her lust, Lark tried to push aside his plan of not connecting with her. This lifetime he vowed to break the cycle, maybe change the outcome for her. He thought his love was strong enough to let go.

Holly didn't know him. She had no recollections of their past. This was the right time to give her up to a better future. He broke the kiss and looked into her glistening blue eyes.

"Take me home, Lark." She breathed his name as if it were a testament of her love.

He lost the battle of resistance and took over the control of her mouth. Trapped by indecision, he managed opening the car door while they continued the heated kiss. She was his weakness. Like an addict, he succumbed to the moment. He'd have one night with her, just to obtain a cherished memory.

In the car, on the drive to her house, Holly's fingers were a flurry of energy that unfastened most of his clothes. Her cool touch slipped inside his coat and down his t-shirt. Without a belt, his snap came undone easily on his pants. Her firm caress rubbed along the zippered seam. Pushing on the denim, his hard arousal sought release.

"Not here." He held one hand on the steering wheel and directed her exploring touch away from his throbbing crotch.

Her questing fingers took a new route. They traveled to his face and stroked his jaw. The sudden quietness of her excited hum, consumed his attention just as he pulled the car to the curb.

"I've always like your dimples." Her comment surprised him.

"Always?" He questioned the phrasing, his lungs tightening from the prospect of her recalling him just a little.

"Did I say always? I meant I think dimples are cute on a man." Her puzzled expression told him her mind was at war with memories.

Lark got out of the car, pulling Holly across the seat and out on the same side. He didn't give her a chance to stagger up the snow-covered walk to her door. Bending, he scooped her up and carried her.

"Weee..." she sang, swinging an arm into the air, and then curling it around his head.

She put a hand to her mouth, stifling the giggle. That beautiful sound ignited a flame hotter than he'd ever experienced. Her features relaxed and her gaze turned pensive.

"I don't usually bring guys home the first time I meet them." Her fingers continued their mindless sweep around his eyes, down his nose.

She was drunk.

Guilt for taking advantage returned, keeping him from entering her house. Another pang of love pushed him to leave her before they got involved. He stood her on her feet, and found the key to her door.

"I want you to come in." Holly backed through the opening, holding her hand out to him.

Even as he started to shake his head no, he slid his fingers over her palm. The hypnotic lure of her gaze towed him over the threshold more than her tug. He pushed the door shut, closing off his escape.

"You have such pretty eyes." He cupped her face, stroking his thumb over her cheek.

"Hmmm, so do you."

Lark petted the length of her neck, swirling the back of his hand along her jaw. He was a slave to his yearning heart. Leaning in, he kissed her soft lips, sipping at the corner, enjoying the lingering moment of tranquility.

"Would you like a job as an actor?" She drew back, tugging again on his hand. "I work in a theater."

"I know."

He went with her to the sofa. They lowered side by side. The scent of lust seeped from Holly's pores, encouraging him to the dampness of her neck. Salty-sweet, the moisture drew his tongue along the pulse beneath her skin. It seemed no matter what body she came back in, his true love was beautiful. Her eyes, her smile, her skin, everything fit her spirit, and yet, something warmly inherent told him, no matter what she looked like, no matter what her name was, he'd always love her, until the end of time.

"I've always found you the most attractive man." Her hands continued operating on the removal of his clothes, pushing his coat down his arms, shoving his shirt up. He pulled back and helped by shucking the garments.

"Always?" He questioned the phrasing again.

She didn't hear him.

"Mmmm, what a magnificent body you have." Her fingers spread over his chest. "I love it."

Lark jerked Holly's coat down her back, removing it to get at her curves. Caressing the slender framework of her torso brought her close enough to hug.

"I want to be naked against you," she murmured her wishes in his ear. "I want to feel your skin rubbing mine."

"What else do you want?" He attacked her heated kiss, manipulating her so he could undress the upper half of her.

"Everything." Her lips parted from his and then pressed tighter.

Together, they got her blouse out of the way.

He removed her white lace bra and exposed the lush fullness of her breasts. Cupping his hand over one, he squeezed the pliant flesh and pulled at the hard knot of her nipple. Rubbing, massaging the chill to her flesh, he coaxed the bud into a plumper bead.

Holly tipped her head back, humming a joyful sound when he bowed his head and licked one rosy distended tip. Her grip strengthened in response to his firm nibbling, fingers flexing, grasping and releasing his biceps. Moving on, he lifted his head and pulled her forward, gathering her into his embrace. The roundness of her breasts flattened to his ribs, making the pounding of her heart close to his.

He inched her long skirt up, searching beneath the fabric for her leg. First, he traveled over the leather boot, reaching the top and lowering the zipper on the side. He pulled the footwear off. He removed her other one as well. Her bare foot brushed his pant leg up so that her cold toes raked the side of his calf.

Holly had her own agenda, hunting for a part of him beneath the waistband of his boxers. She found what she wanted very quickly.

"Oh God," he groaned as the cool wrap of her fingers ringed his cock.

Anxious to the core, she swung a leg over his lap, and straddled him.

"I want you." She shoved him back against the sofa cushion

He tugged her skirt upward, rubbing his palms over the outsides of her thighs.

She kissed him, driving her tongue forcefully between his lips. They took on new angles, twisting their heads to seal their breaths together. Her hot, wet lips smacked his, hungering in the same way to bond permanently.

Lark's love grew unbearable. His chest tightened with each painful thought of Holly never recalling their past. It was sad to think the feelings they had shared or the dreams of a future they planned were gone.

"Move this way," he instructed at an intermission of their kiss.

Pushing his hand against her hip, he reached further under her skirt and rubbed the cheek of her bottom. Restlessness led him over to the other supple roundness of silky skin. He rubbed a finger along her thong, pressing a teasing caress the length of the crevice it followed.

"Ah..." she moaned.

Her lips made sweeping passes over his and her panting grew heavier as he fingered

deeper into her tight posterior. The kisses skittered over his face in a haphazard manner.

“Lift.” He worked up the skirt so it bunched around her waist.

In a deft move, he tugged her thong aside and lowered her onto his rigid cock. He sat still, allowing her hot, tight core time to absorb the size of his stiff erection.

The feverish kissing led to faces, chins, necks, and back to lips. He nibbled on hers as she started to rock, lifting and lowering against his lap, forcing his cock deeper into her. Each rise came with a quicker descent.

She dragged his shirt up, and he whipped it off over his head.

“Fuck me,” she mumbled, kissing his chest, swirling her tongue around one of his nipples. “Fuck me hard.”

Lark thrust up from the sofa. He pushed his hands against the cushion, giving him the leverage to raise and jostle her forward.

“Yes.” She sucked on his skin, leaving a trail of wet kisses up the side of his neck to his ear. “Don’t hold back anything.”

Her slender fingers skated across his skin as if she hunted for a better hold. In a frenzy of lust, he gripped her waist, lifting her to force his rutting penetration deeper. Her answer to his upward jolts was a trilling whimper of pleasure. She tossed her head back, thrusting her breasts into his face. He watched the lush, pink-tipped mounds bounce.

He slid his hands behind her back and supported her arching body. Pulling her close, he chose one puckered nipple, and latched onto it with his teeth. He tugged and sucked on one breast and then the other. In return, Holly’s excited body twisted and clenched on his cock. She rode him with an experience he liked, and yet didn’t. Virginal, she wasn’t. Another man had introduced her sweet body to sex. It hurt to have the thoughts of another man making her a woman. It felt odd to suffer a jealousy like he’d never had before.

His position on the couch, along with the vigor of Holly slamming her bottom down on him, made his balls swell. Only, the alcohol in his blood acted as a sedative, holding back his orgasm, making him strain for release.

Holly had no problem with hers. She humped him like a madwoman with a need to intensify her moment of rapture. Lark reached between them, giving her the needed fondling she sought. He rubbed down her belly and wiggled his finger over her clit.

“Oh yes,” she cried out. “Yes. Please, don’t stop.”

Her bouncing stopped when the wracking jolt of her shudders threw her forward. Kissing her hard on the mouth, Lark drank in the sounds of her ecstasy. Her breath heaved into his lungs in bursts of weakening whimpers. His own release, coaxed by hers, ejaculated forcefully from him. In erratic spurts, he quaked with an intense release of semen. Holly’s insides convulsed—squeezing, pumping, and drawing the length of his cock deeper. He jerked upward several more times, as if that helped to empty his vein. His roaring groan completed the aria of their sexual encounter, and Holly slumped against him, displaying exhaustion.

“That felt good.” She nestled her face under his jaw and kissed his neck.

“Yes,” he agreed, hugging her trembling body. He’d gone without sex for a long time and had almost forgotten what it could be like. Tears leaked from his burning eyes.

Her spiraling strokes circled over his collarbone and slid to his chest where she mindlessly fingered the hair around his nipple. Contentment relaxed him, letting him enjoy the comfort of her snuggling embrace.



“I could do this forever with you.” Her murmured statement dug beneath his cloud of happiness.

Soon he’d have to watch her die.

## Chapter Four

Holly stretched an arm out, rolling it over the mattress. Blindly she searched both sides—hunting for traces that she wasn't alone in the bed. She forced one eye open and stared at the ceiling. Then she opened the other and turned her head, examining the emptiness alongside her.

*Sex with a stranger.* She laughed and sat up. While it had been what she was looking for, she never had much luck in hooking up with men. It took less than a second for her to drop back against the pillow. Her head pounding with a headache, she fought to bring back the memory of her night with Lark.

She closed her eyes, recalling every little detail within her power. Everything remained fuzzy, like a worn out old movie. However, his voice whispering through the haze was clear. "*I shouldn't have come here.*"

A sob sputtered from her dry mouth as the words registered the only way her mind could take them—the sex sucked.

While she didn't remember it that way, what else was she to make of his statement? The fragments of her night that came to her like clips from that old blurry movie didn't fit. She never had the soul-shattering kind of sex that made her want to be so a part of a man. The separation from him hurt.

Her thoughts dizzy with speculation, she touched her lips with her tongue. "Good Lord, no." She wrinkled her face in disgust of the flavor. "I couldn't have puked on him."

The sourness of alcohol and morning breath left a bad taste in her mouth as if her insides had come up, but there wasn't a trace on the bed. It explained the nasty smell wafting around her nose. She pushed to get up and get clean. The sex left her sore. She ached right down to her toes, making her move with care. Her breasts tingled with unique reminders—not a vision, but sensations that shot like lightning into the juncture of her legs. Sex had been good as far as she was concerned. If he didn't like it, too bad.

Holly rose from the bed. She waited until the lightheadedness passed. Her motor skills remained sluggish and she stumbled toward the bathroom. The funhouse image she saw of herself stopped her in her tracks.

"He had sex with a drunken clown," she groaned.

Mascara streaked her cheeks, giving her black eyes. The pink lipstick had smeared beyond the bounds of her lips. She wiped a hand at the stains of make-up and gave up after making it worse.

The idea of hot water running over her tired muscles hurried her toward the shower. She had a hand on the door when something on the vanity caught her eye. The red envelope from her purse lay there with the button. She suddenly felt invaded by the stranger's apparent rummaging through her belongings.

The sight of another button lying on the floor paralyzed her with fear.

Holly hardly recalled her next moves—showering, or dressing. She only knew that she managed to do it fast and get out of the house.

On the drive in her car, her head swam in a quagmire of memories and reoccurrences of dreams. Muddled together as if they were the same, she mechanically steered with no more attention to detail than which moved her along the road.

*“You have such pretty eyes.” He gave her a smile, while his mischievous fingers flicked open a few buttons on her blouse.*

*“Not as pretty as yours.” She laughed.*

Holly concentrated harder. That wasn't how she replied. She said something about his eyes were pretty too. And his dimples, those adorable dents in his cheeks that appeared when he smiled—how familiar they were.

*His warm hand covered her breast, claiming it with a squeeze. She rushed to rip his shirt open, letting his button snap, and fly into the air.*

That wasn't right either. He had on a t-shirt. Was it a dream that paralleled her experiences with Lark? A premonition, maybe.

She pulled her car into the same parking spot as she did the night before at the police station. Someone had shoveled the snow, making the path clean right down to the concrete walk.

She tugged one of the double doors opened, and marched up to the desk sergeant. He didn't know her, yet gave one of those, 'what do you want' glances. Then she saw the crossword puzzle book lying on the counter in front of him. She was a disturbance on his free time.

“I'd like to speak to Detective Burton.”

“About what?” Manners were not his strong suit.

“About a stalker. I saw Detective Burton last night and he said I didn't have enough for him to investigate. Today I have more evidence.”

The desk sergeant's head bobbed up and down as he picked up the phone. “There's a woman here, said she has more evidence about her stalker.” He glanced at her. “What's your name?”

“Holly Meadows. You can tell him it's the woman with the button.”

The desk sergeant continued nodding, apparently listening to the detective. Then he hung up the phone. “He's busy right now. If you want to wait, he'll get to you when he can. There are chairs over there.”

Holly took a seat in the waiting area, confident the detective would have to do something now that she knew who was behind giving her the buttons. She glanced at the table next to her. All the magazines dealt with police issues, nothing she cared to know about, yet bored after ten minutes she picked up one and flipped it open. Handsome men in uniforms graced dozens of ads attempting to sell everything from handcuffs to insurance. The articles were an unusual array of trivia and serious preaching about professionalism in the work place. She looked up at the desk sergeant studying his puzzle book.

Not interested in the magazine, she got up and looked at bulletin boards. The ten most wanted posters were half buried beneath flyers about missing children and missing pets.

“How much longer,” she asked, daring the desk sergeant's wrath by interrupting his hobby. “I have to get to work.”

His shrug was unhelpful.

Holly's hard-soled boots tapped the marble floor as she paced the lobby, as she continued to walk back and forth, hoping the annoying sound might hurry things along. Each time the phone buzzed, she stopped and watched the desk sergeant answer it. Occasionally, other officers passed through the entrance doors and went into the back

area. When a couple came in and stopped to talk to the desk sergeant, they made her uneasy with their long stares. Avoiding them, she faced the bulletin board again, not really seeing the mishmash of tacked-on messages. She reached into her pocket and touched the two buttons. A dream floated forward from the back of her mind.

*"Look at this. You've got a missing button on your uniform." She rubbed her hand down the front of his wool coat. "I could have sewn on another one. What will Hitler's army think of my handsome American Army Captain showing up to the war missing buttons?"*

*"I think this one is loose, too. Maybe you could do both before I leave tomorrow. Right now I have other things on my mind." He drew her against him, crushing her in his embrace as if she'd fight to get free.*

*"When the war is over, tell me you'll never leave me again." She looked into his beautiful eyes.*

*"No matter where I am, no matter how many lives we live, we'll always be together. I promise I'm yours until the end of time."*

Holly rubbed her arms, dispelling the strange sensation she really was the woman in her dreams, and Lark really was the man. It got her thinking about Lark's comment. *'Not this lifetime'*. What had he meant?

"Ma'am?"

She spun around.

"He'll see you now." The desk sergeant jerked his head, indicating she could go on to the back room.

Her quick strides moved her through the door, across the room, and straight to Detective Burton. "I think I slept with the man that sent me the button," she blurted out much too loudly.

The phone talk, shuffling of papers, and the people walking around, all paused. A dozen eyes re-aimed their gaze her way.

"I told you that generally the jokester is someone you know," Detective Burton replied, and thankfully everyone continued going on about their business.

"I don't know him," she whispered through clenched teeth. "He picked me up in a bar."

Holly pulled her hand out of her pocket with the two buttons and dropped them on the desk. "He left me this."

"Two buttons?"

"No, just one, but he was in my purse and took the other one out." She paced in a small circle. "You have to do something to protect me."

"From what? Buttons?" He glanced down at them. "Maybe you could talk to him and ask him to leave you gold-plated ones or something."

She heard an officer snicker to the right of them. Thankfully, Detective Burton showed her more respect and shot the officer a reprimanding hard gaze.

"This isn't funny, Detective Burton. This man is clearly stalking me."

"Ma'am, I can't do anything, except suggest you don't take men home."

"I didn't intend to take him home, well I did want sex, but I figured a motel. However, he kept buying me drinks and licking my hand, and one thing led to another."

The detective's eyes twinkled with amusement and she realized her words didn't come out the way she intended. "I meant he was charming and forced me to drink a lot."

“Forced?” His brow arched. “If he made you do anything you didn’t want to, then I can do something.”

Say yes, her hung-over brain demanded.

“He didn’t force me like that. His quiet nature left me lots of time to drink. I had too much tequila, got drunk, and I let him take me home.”

“My best advice remains, don’t take men home.”

“But he’s stalking me. He mailed one button and now he’s managed a way to meet me and get into my home.” Frustrated, she wracked her brain for something else to add. “He’s charming, handsome, and took advantage of me. No doubt there are other women he’s done this too.”

“A serial lover?”

“I’m not impressed with your humor.”

“Ms. Meadows, look at it from my point of view. He’s not done or said anything threatening. Two buttons could be his way to get your attention. Lots of men have trouble striking up a conversation with beautiful women. So he has an odd ‘come on’ technique. It apparently works.”

She folded her arms together and stared at him with a loss as to what to do.

“Here.” He scribbled something on the back of his business card. “This is someone you might get to help you. Maybe you can hire him as your bodyguard for a while until you feel safe.”

Holly took the white card. She looked at the name ‘Ellis’ and a street address.

“He’s a private detective?” She tapped the card nervously in her palm.

“Yes. Once in a while, he does some freelance stuff for the department. He’s good.”

Left with no other choice, she nodded her acceptance.

Holding her head high, knowing there was no shame in seeking help, she walked out of the station room, ignoring the people looking her way again.

Holly drove straight to the address on the card. If she hired the private detective, she’d at least get more details about the stranger she foolishly jumped into bed with.

The sun hung low in the sky. She missed getting to work at her usual three in the afternoon by wasting the whole day in bed sleeping off the hangover. She couldn’t skip another day by waiting until morning to visit the private investigator.

In a rundown neighborhood, the house she went to had to be the worst on the block. The shutters hung crooked, the siding needed paint, and the only thing keeping the place looking clean was the dusting of white snow everywhere.

With a fear greater from the man she had slept with than the one living in a crummy part of town, she swung open the car door. *Damn*, she hated feeling so vulnerable. She got out and hurried to the porch before she changed her mind. Her hesitancy occurred at the door. *Damn, Damn, Damn*. She reached out, knocked too hard. It made her cold fingers hurt.

“Come in,” a man yelled.

She almost ran from his unpleasant tone. Yet, determined, she took hold of the latch. While the worn brass turned freely, she had to jiggle it and shove her shoulder against the door to get it unstuck.

“Damn thing never works right.” She stopped, looked at the weathered wood, and ran her hand over the cracked, splintered surface. Had she been there before?

Holly shook her head, tossing out the odd thing she said as just a mix up of her

words. She turned the knob again and gave a firm push. The door popped free.

“Hello?” She peered into the dark room. “Mr. Ellis?”

“Yeah.”

She eased inside and pushed the door shut as a courtesy against the chilling draft.

“Mr. Ellis?” She tried to focus on the dim surroundings. “Could we turn on a light?”

She went to search the nearest wall, and then moved to the other side of the door, feeling as if she knew where to find the switch she flipped.

“Don’t do that,” the man in the dark grumbled.

Holly blinked rapidly. She felt as if she’d had the worse luck of all time when her gaze met with the handsome stranger from her sexual feeding frenzy. Panic made her brain sluggish. She backed into the door and heard it groan into its wedged position completely shut.

\* \* \* \*

Lark didn’t know what to say. He hadn’t intended to get involved with Holly.

“Why are you here?” He got up from the sofa, approaching her as one might move toward a fading rainbow.

With a headache killing him, he didn’t know how to deal with the flood of emotions. How did she find him? Had her memories returned? Did she recall this was the same house she had lived in before?

“It was a mistake.” She twisted away.

The fear in her expression alarmed him.

“Holly, wait. He reached out to stop her.

She jerked on the doorknob without turning. It came off in her hand, making her stumble back into him. He caught her and the scent of her shampoo made him take a deep breath. She smelled good. Optimism wormed through him.

“Let go of me.” She wiggled loose.

Her frightened tone unnerved him.

“Why are you stalking me?” She spun around and demanded.

“I wasn’t exactly stalking you.”

“What do you call it?” She took the time to wiggle the knob back in place and turn it before snatching the door open.

“Holly, don’t go. I’ll explain.”

Inching out of the house, she went down the steps too fast and slipped when her foot hit the icy walkway. She fell to the ground, off the walk, into the snow.

Lark rushed to her, careful with his own footing on the walk.

“Stay away from me.” She tried to get up and winced with the kind of pain that formed tears in her eyes.

It crushed him not to have her recognize him, but the hurt went deeper when she acted as if he were a monster.

“Let me help you.” He reached again.

“I don’t need help.” She pushed his hands away.

He squatted down in front of her. Staring into her pretty eyes, he looked for a glimmer of his past lover to emerge.

“Why the buttons?” she suddenly asked.

“Buttons?” The question puzzled him.

"I found them on the vanity." Her tone was accusatory.

He thought over the details of their exquisite night together. When he dropped her purse on the bathroom vanity, it tipped over. "They fell out of your purse."

"Why were you in my bathroom?"

"To take a leak. We did drink quite a bit." A short laugh worked out of him as he recalled the memory of Holly's former self, Heather, shrieking like a banshee. "What's wrong, did I forget to lift the lid?"

"No. I don't know, I didn't notice. It's the buttons I want you to explain."

"I put them on the vanity, what else is there to know?" He grabbed her under the elbow and pulled her to her feet.

"Why?" She walked away, brushing the snow from her clothes.

"I needed both hands to manage my zipper and my aim." He tempted another advance and watched her shy away. "I only saw two buttons, were there more?"

"You didn't send them?"

"Send what?"

"Oh, never mind." In a hurried gait, she went to her car.

"You never said why you came here," he called, trying to stop her from leaving.

She paused. "I thought you might help me."

"With what?"

"I thought, I think someone wants to...never mind, like I said, this was a mistake." She got in her car and started the engine.

After Holly drove off, Lark went back inside the house. He glanced at the mail lying on the table. Bills had piled up. He opened the envelope with his bank statement. Not that he had to look to see he had no money left. He picked up the phone receiver on the wall telephone. *Dead*. Going to his jacket, he found his cell phone. Surprisingly, it still worked, but for how long? He dialed the police station.

"Is Detective Burton there?" he asked the desk sergeant answering. "This is Lark Ellis."

A few seconds passed. "Hello, Lark. It's been a while."

"Why'd you send the woman, Herb?" He sat on a kitchen chair.

"I thought you might need to make some money, your phone's not working."

"Yeah, I know. I don't need it, I have the cell." He shuffled through the other unpaid bills scattered on his table.

"You can't just sit there everyday and do nothing."

"I'm doing something." Getting up, he turned on the kettle to heat water.

"Like what? You don't have a job, so what could you possibly be doing?"

"Well, right now, I'm fixing myself a cup of coffee." He rummaged through the cabinet and took out the container. "Damn," he muttered, tossing the empty jar into the full trashcan.

"What was that?" Herb asked.

"Nothing. Why did you send that woman here?" He glanced out the window, wishing he had stopped Holly from driving away.

"She's frightened by some prankster. I thought maybe you could make a little easy money keeping an eye on her."

"I think I've settled the stalking problem." Had their night been that bizarre that she went to the police? "What else did she say?" he asked, recalling that Holly went to the

police station before they met at the bar.

“Not much. Just talked about those buttons?”

“What’s her obsession with them?”

“Didn’t you talk to her?”

“Yeah, but we didn’t get around to the buttons. She was upset and left in a hurry.” It was his fault for being abrupt.

“She came in here yesterday because someone sent her a button in a Christmas card. Today she returned, telling me a man in a bar picked her up, went home with her, and then left another button for her. She’s really afraid, Lark, but there’s nothing to go on with evidence like that.”

“The man in the bar isn’t a problem. We’ve resolved that. I’ll talk to you later.” Lark hung up the phone.

If Holly were in trouble, how did he help without getting romantically involved? Somewhere, the cycle of their reincarnation and ultimate repeating deaths had to stop.

However, the buttons concerned him.



## Chapter Five

Holly stood at the kitchen sink washing the few dishes that she let pile up over the past several days. Her thoughts staggered from the black buttons, to work, to Lark. He'd said the buttons had fallen out of her purse. Had she missed seeing the second one in the envelope?

When the image of a face appeared in the window, she let out a scream all her neighbors should have heard, and she hoped they did. The night shadows distorted the oval shape of someone in the glass. A reflex made her throw the plate in her hand, shattering the large pane.

She ran to the phone on the wall. With her fingers dripping from soapsuds, she dialed nine-one-one. Her voice shook giving the operator her name and address. As instructed, she checked the locks on the doors and other windows in the house. Then she waited for the police to come.

Ten minutes felt like an hour. Sitting still wasn't an option. She picked up the broom propped by the back door and walked through the house, on guard for the prowler. Her ears pricked to every sound, especially the rattle of windows. It left her unsure if the wind outside was behind the frightening sound, or her faceless stalker.

In the living room, she saw movement by the bushes near the window. *Floodlights*—she made a mental note to have them installed on all four corners of her house. Darkness never scared her more until now.

Holly spun around at the sound of squeaky metal. She stared in disbelief as the front doorknob turned.

*Run and hide.* She didn't.

*Scream.* She couldn't.

On the defensive, she moved behind the door. She lifted the poor choice of a weapon. With the broom held high, she waited, empowered by fear instead of paralyzed by it.

"Holly?" a male voice whispered.

She brought the broom crashing down on the top of her prowler's head. Raising it, she swung again, hitting as hard as all her strength allowed.

"Damn, Holly!"

Adrenaline pumped through her body, self-preservation a driving force. She whipped the broom around for a third time, rattled by the familiarity of Lark's voice.

He caught the handle, stopping the impact. Desperate to fight her intruder, she swung her arms instead. She pounded him with her fists. Against his chest, his shoulders, and wherever else she blindly managed to hit him to no avail. He threw the broom aside and grabbed her.

"Let me go," she screamed, defenseless in his secure embrace.

"Calm down." His hold tightened. "Everything's all right. You're safe now."

He held her too snug, and spoke with too much compassion.

"Detective Burton called and told me you had a prowler."

The terror she suffered made it hard to breathe. "Please, let me go," she begged.

"No more hitting?" His consoling tone and the reason for his presence alleviated her

worst fears.

She looked up at him. Blood trickled from his hairline. It formed a thin stream along his temple to his cheek. He could have hit her back, but hadn't. The strokes down her back, the concern in his expression, all led her to realize this wasn't the man out to harm her.

She nodded in agreement and his hands fell away.

Overwhelming relief broke her. Something was bound to reduce her to tears, and the initial trust she had in him at the bar, returned. She fanned her fingers over the front of his jacket and pressed her face against his chest.

"It's all right," he consoled, his arms sliding back around her. "You're safe with me."

She believed him because she needed someone. When she felt the brush of his lips against her temple, she cried harder than she imagined possible. She accepted the strength of his renewed hold—an embrace both gentle and reassuring. Moving her hands around his waist, she grasped the back of his jacket, worried he'd let go too soon.

"Why are you here?" she sobbed.

"You called the police, remember?" His constant strokes down her back were soothing. "Detective Burton phoned because he thought you'd hired me."

"Were you here before that, looking in my kitchen window?" She tipped her head back to look him in the eye.

"No." His steady gaze gave her the assurance of truth.

Her heart ached to know love. In the back of her mind, she felt as if she'd had it once and lost it. Something not possible since she'd never let herself get emotionally close to any man.

"Someone was at my kitchen window." She released her grip on his jacket, stretching her fingers over the cloth.

"I'll check it out." His arms loosened.

"No. Don't leave me." She dug her fingers into the jacket again worried the opportunity to be close to him would never come again.

"I'm not leaving you." He ran his hand up her back, to her shoulder, and around to her face. "I'm sure whoever was here is long gone. I just want to take you to the sofa." He guided her across the room.

Holly lowered to sit. She gave up her hold on his arm, feeling an attack of embarrassment for her overwhelming clinginess.

"Tell me what you saw."

She watched as he pulled open the drawer in the coffee table and retrieved a small box of tissues. Her expression must have shown her surprise.

"You told me they were there last night when we...um...when we cleaned up a little." His cheeks reddened as he held the box out to her.

She plucked out a tissue, wadded it up and blew her nose. The blood on Lark's face caught her attention and she took another.

"It doesn't hurt too badly, does it?" She dabbed at the cut.

"It's not fatal." He flinched.

"I'm sorry."

"I'll be fine." He took the red stained tissue from her.

Holly grabbed another handful of tissues with a sudden, self-conscious awareness

that she probably looked awful. The clown image returned to her thoughts, reminding her how the sight the night before had chased him away.

Lark leaned forward and pulled her hand down.

"You look all right," he said as if guessing her thoughts. "Nose is clean and your face is spotless."

"But you didn't think so after you had sex with me, did you?" She wished she remembered more of their intimate time together.

"What are you talking about?" He gathered her hands and held them between his.

"I was a hideous sight this morning with my makeup smeared all over my face. You can't deny it. You left because you couldn't stand looking at me."

His smile warmed the very depths of her body.

"I left because I thought you might be embarrassed having me here." He gave her fingers a squeeze. "We had just met after all, and you had too much to drink. I didn't want you freaking out when you woke with a stranger. As for what you looked like, there's never been anyone more beautiful with her make-up slightly askew. I rather thought it was cute, especially when you were all curled up in my lap asleep."

"Asleep," she let out a scoffing laugh. "Passed out is more like it. How'd I get to the bedroom?"

"I carried you." Lark stood and walked several paces away. "Tell me what's going on." He turned to her with his hands on his hips, looking determined, sounding heroic.

"I don't know. I thought I saw someone looking in my kitchen window. I was washing the dishes, looked up and there was an obscure outline of a face looking at me."

"Maybe it was your reflection." He rubbed his hand over his head, his features wrinkling when he brushed the bruised area.

Calmer, she considered his explanation. "Maybe," she replied.

While it would have been a silly mistake, she didn't feel the fool. Lark didn't give her a chance.

"Was there anything else? Did you hear anyone or something out of the ordinary that might give you reason to think someone was outside watching you?" He rolled his head from one side to the other, a form of working out the kinks in his neck. Followed by the rotation of his shoulders, he appeared to relax.

It was odd, the little familiar things he did, as if she'd always known him.

"Tell me from the beginning—about the buttons." He came back toward her.

"Someone sent me one in the mail. Obviously two, since you say you didn't leave the second one in my bathroom." She didn't understand how she'd missed that second one in the envelope, but giving credence to her instincts, or maybe pure foolish hope, she let herself trust Lark.

"I assure you I didn't leave any." He pointed toward the doorway from the living room. "This way is the kitchen, right?"

She nodded, getting up to follow him as he went that way.

"What else is there?"

"Nothing."

"You don't have any suspicions? Possibly a disgruntled employee from work or a friend that you've upset?" He put his hands on his hips again in that school principal fashion. Any minute she expected him to tap his shoe on the floor as if he were hesitant about scolding her.

She shook her head. "Will you help me? Detective Burton said you took on private jobs."

"You want to hire me?" His surprise confused her.

"Isn't that why you came here?"

"I don't know that I can help. If you haven't any idea what the buttons are about, there's not much to go on." He picked up the phone on the wall. "I'm going to call Burton and let him know everything here is all right for now. I don't think we need a patrol car, do you?"

Holly shook her head. She didn't think anyone could make her feel safer than Lark.

Once done on the phone, he grabbed the roll of trash bags where she'd left them on the counter. He climbed up, straddling the sink with them.

"Why'd Detective Burton send me to you if you couldn't do something?"

"I don't know. Just to get me out of the house, I suppose." He tore one bag from the roll and worked the plastic over the window, tying it to the curtain rod above and holding it down by lifting the sash and dropping it on the bottom edge.

"Well, you're here, so do what you do." Holly picked up her purse from the desk by the back door and took out the newest item from her mailbox. She handed it to him. "You open this one, and then tell me I'm crazy not to be alarmed."

"I never said you were crazy, honey." He hopped off the counter.

Holly bit the inside of her lip at the endearment. Her insides fluttered, giving her a giggly schoolgirl warmth that only the cutest boy's notice could produce. Lark's fleeting appearance of embarrassment passed. She dismissed the thought that it was personal and chalked it up to a slip of the tongue, or a habit he had of calling most women *honey*.

He took the envelope from her by the corner, and carried it to the living room. "If you think it's another button, then you shouldn't have touched this." He laid the envelope on the coffee table.

"Why not, the police are too busy for me. Detective Burton said none of this was enough to investigate, and you agreed."

She watched Lark carefully lift the flap with his pocketknife. He pinched the corner of the paper and pulled it out. Tipping it slightly, a button slid to the wood tabletop.

"It isn't much." He flipped it over, angling his head as he studied it.

"I know."

He analyzed the evidence, and she examined him. Everything from his hair to his earlobes kept her interest. She tried reliving the night, bringing back details, but they were so blurred, even the memory of his lips on hers was lost to the inebriation of her memory.

"I'll have this checked out." He carefully slipped the button back into the envelope.

When he headed for the front door, she panicked. "You're not leaving, are you?" Desperation pushed her toward him.

"No, just checking the locks." He gave her a reassuring smile. "I'll stay the night and tomorrow do a little checking on the manufacturer of the envelope and try to get a DNA sample from where the sender licked the flap. It appears as if there might be a partial fingerprint on the button as well, and that may help if it's not smudged, and they have a record."

Holly watched him test the door. Once he sat the envelope on the coffee table, he went about the room checking the windows.

“We haven’t discussed your fee. I can’t pay a lot, but I—”

“Utilities.” He interrupted before she could tell him she’d do anything.

“Excuse me? I don’t understand.” Sex was what she had in mind, though, that seemed more a benefit to her than a payment to him.

He closed the draperies in the dining room and proceeded back to the kitchen. “My utility bills. You pay them. That’s all I require.”

“Seems fair. Are you sure you don’t want to include your rent? Doesn’t seem you should have too much to pay on that dump you live in.”

“There’s no rent. I own it free and clear.”

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean to call it a dump. It was just—”

“No apologies necessary. It is a dump. At the time, I had the cash, and it’s cheaper than renting.” He continued his journey through the house, inspecting latches on windows.

Back in the kitchen, he turned the deadbolt on the door and propped a chair under the knob.

“Is that necessary?” She studied the makeshift brace.

“No, but it makes you feel safer, doesn’t it?” From his bent over position rocking the chair to make sure it would stay, he turned his head and gave her a smile.

She nodded. Lark’s very presence gave her the greatest amount of security.

“You don’t have to sleep on my sofa. I have a bed.” She had wanted it to sound invitational, but when his brow lifted in surprise, she backpedaled from the hasty forwardness.

“In my guest bedroom,” she added, hiding the yearning she had to drag him into her bed while she was sober.

“The sofa is sufficient. It gives me a central location to keep an eye on things,” he answered, recovering too well from his stunned expression.

She questioned his involvement with her. Did he stay strictly to help and nothing more? Her insides churned as she agonized over whether he was attracted to her the way she was to him.

## Chapter Six

Once Holly went to bed, Lark sat in a familiar spot. He touched cushions, remembering the spring to them when he had Holly beneath him the night before. It had been an impractical spot for a full evening of sex. But once he had decided to abandon the piece of furniture for the bed, Holly had fallen asleep against him. So the only part of him that had touched her bed ended up being him sitting alongside her for more than an hour, memorizing the new details to his timeless lover's features.

She had a different name each reincarnation. *Helena, Heather, Holly*. He often pondered whether there were others he didn't remember himself since he had memories of being called *Lee, Lex*, and *Luke*. Even their last names kept the same initials. Yet, no matter the number of obvious similarities, there were subtle differences. Her hair color, her face, her body—there were always changes—not that he ever remembered anything other than how beautiful she came packaged.

Lark looked down the hall, thinking about how he could get up and go to her. There was no mistake in the fact she wanted him to. Yet, the nagging worries he had of being the catalyst to their demise forced him to resist.

When he turned his attention back to the table, he stared at the buttons, the second reason he didn't get up. He tried to connect the buttons with Holly's impending death. Nothing in his past fit them into the repeating scenario. On one cold and snowy day, she'd crash into the Haverty Bridge old wood guard railing. She'd escape the car as it plunged into the river because he'd be there to prevent it. Nonetheless, he'd lose his hold of the bridge and she'd slip from his grasp just moments before he joined her in the freezing cold water. He'd die that day with her, unfortunately, never in her arms, and never in her sight.

Lark pressed his palms to his eyes and tried to forget the details and the outcome of an event he had relived several times. Each cycle of his reincarnation came with the haunting memories that tormented him every day. He had searched familiar places hoping to find the woman that connected to his soul. They'd fall in love all over again, and then they'd tragically die. Maybe he could live with that if he didn't have to live each day remembering...

*The cold steel support of the wood railing numbed Luke's fingers, not giving him the grip he needed to hang on. When they slipped free of his grasp on her wrist, Heather's weight disappeared and so did the hold he had on the rail. For an instant, he took it as a new area numbed by the frigid weather. If not for that bloodcurdling scream of terror, swirling the air around him as they went hurdling toward the river below, he'd believe she was safe.*

Holly's shriek jerked Lark off the sofa and out of his daze. He pulled his gun from the holster strapped around his ankle, and ran to the bedroom.

"Holly?" He surveyed the area and saw nothing except her sitting in the middle of the bed with her hands covering her face.

"It was a nightmare." Her voice trembled.

"You scared the shit out of me." He put the gun back in his holster, and ran his hands over his head, frustrated by their past lives tangled into the present ones.

"I'm sorry." She pulled the sheet up, clutching it to her chest as if she had been naked instead of wearing a nightshirt.

Even red-eyed, drippy-nosed and tousled hair, she was gorgeous and extremely desirable. He looked away and let his gaze drift around the room. The soft lighting from a small lamp on a table made the room cozy, something he hadn't taken notice of the night before.

"I really am sorry," she repeated.

He wanted to offer her the kind of comfort she required—climb onto the bed and hold her, love her with all his heart so she'd never suffer another moment of loneliness. However, the threat of danger kept him backing toward the exit.

"It's all right, it's only two a.m. You might want to try to get some rest." He pulled the door closed as he left.

Lark returned to the sofa, thankful for the brief interruption to his grievous thoughts. When they began returning, another distraction put a halt to his churning brain. The slight creak of Holly's door had him up, staring at her distressed expression.

Pale, ethereal, she advanced. The deep blue of her almond-shaped eyes glistened with remnant tears. Beneath the nightshirt, worn thin from many washings, her firm breasts pressed the fabric.

"You should get some sleep," he suggested, hoping to make her go away.

"I can't." She remained in the doorway as if she needed an invitation from him to sit in her own living room.

"Well then, I guess you can guard me." He fluffed a throw pillow, pretending to make himself comfortable on her sofa, avoiding his longing to bring her down to him.

He listened to her movements after she went to the kitchen. The water running, the clank of a kettle on the stove, and eventually the whistling indicator that the water was hot, led him to believe she fixed something hot to drink. Right after, a spoon tapped a ceramic mug.

*Don't get involved with her and things will be different.* He pushed himself up off the sofa, unable to heed his own warning. *Leave her to this new life, on her own, and maybe she won't have to die.*

What was right didn't stop him.

"Do you have another cup?" He paused in the doorway and took in the length of her.

She turned and reached into a cabinet. Her nightshirt rose, exposing the crescent curves of her bare bottom.

"Cream? Sugar?" She sat the cup on the counter and poured water into it.

He moved closer. "Both."

She jumped, and he grabbed her wrist, realizing he startled her. Coffee splashed over the side of the mug, but not on her.

"I got it." He put his other arm around her to hold the cup steady, trapping her, making it possible to feel the sensuous heat of her swarm his body.

She nodded and slid her fingers out of the handle. He backed away, and set the mug on the table.

"Here's the sugar. I only have powdered creamer." She pushed two jars toward him.

"That's fine." At this point, he was willing to drink it black, since he hadn't had any all day.

She stayed next to him. Little catches in her ragged breathing smoothed out. The

rising steam from the cup captured her scent and lifted it to his nose. The faint fragrance of perfume became a tether, not letting him step away.

“Thank you,” she said, barely above a whisper.

“Powdered creamer isn’t much different than real cream or milk. I don’t think it requires a ‘thanks’.”

“Not the creamer.” She touched his arm. “Thank you for staying the night.”

He turned his head. Her bluest-of-blue eyes took on many shades depending on her mood. The disturbing dark color, held fear. He didn’t like that she had no understanding of why she had every right to be afraid.

\* \* \* \*

The silence between her and Lark became unbearable. Holly abandoned her untouched coffee and returned to her bedroom. The night held too many stimulants. The least of her idle thoughts was the stalker. Lark’s presence made her skin tingle, her insides shiver.

She brushed her hand over her aching nipple and continued to stoke the sensitive area. Drifting off, her wants touched the odd memories of dreams—the visions of someone else.

“Not here, Lex,” she begged.

He pushed her fur-trimmed hat back from her head and held her face.

“It’s been too long already.” His mouth covered hers, sucking at her lips, kissing her with the passion she tried denying.

“If I get pregnant, what will people say?” She pushed at his shoulders, not giving it much effort.

“By then we’ll be married.” He took her arm, and led her deeper into the back of the wardrobe room where the theater props were kept.

She glanced at the worktable, the coat lying there waiting for her to sew on the missing button before the show that evening.

“I have a lot of work to do,” she insisted.

“So do I, honey.” He spun her around and lowered her to the prop bed they used in the production of *Sleeping Beauty*.

*She watched his hand skitter down the front of his coat, unfastening it quickly. He shucked it from his shoulders and tossed it aside. Muscles rippled beneath his black t-shirt, and then it was gone.*

*He got on the bed, half over her, half to the side. In awe of his handsomeness, she lay mesmerized while he flicked the clasp undone on her cape.*

*“You’re too beautiful to be working behind the scenes.” His hands slid beneath her, lifting her up to him. “On the stage is where I want to see you.”*

*“I like my job.” She tilted her head back, offering him the space under her chin to press his kiss.*

*Talk faded.*

*“Lex,” she whispered. “Lex, will it happen again?”*

*“What, honey?”*

*“Will we...”*

*His fingers opened her blouse enough to press his lips to the swell of her breast. She twisted in his hold, rushed to have him further along.*



Holly opened her eyes. There was something important she needed to know. *What was it?* Was the answer there in her dream? She closed her eyes and struggled to go over the scene in her head again.

Forcing a dream to come wasn't working. She tried thinking of something else. The buttons were a clue to someone's game, and she gave time to them.

Her eyes grew heavy. The buttons were there as big as ever.

*Lex had her skirt bunched up on her back, out of the way.*

*"Oh yes. Don't stop now," she cried, her orgasm escalating, then drawing back when he pulled out.*

*"You're worried you'll get pregnant, remember." He massaged her bottom, squeezing and slapping it.*

*A slight groan, he leaned on her, reaching beneath, scraping his fingers between her cunt lips and extracting the fluids she'd expelled in two other orgasms.*

*Another rattling tremor of sound reverberated from him as she'd heard dozens of times before. He pulled his soaked fingers up from the split of her bottom, dragging the wetness to her anus, and then pressing the lubricant into her bottom.*

*The thrusting strokes resumed the stimulation of her climax, and she let out the echoing whine of frustration. She wanted him in her.*

*"Easy, honey." His cock replaced his fingers, and he inched into her.*

*Short jolts already alerted her to his orgasm. He pumped quicker, holding her by the hips as he jerked. Together they reached the finale, her bent forward, head down and bottom up, while Lex pumped, driving his cock deep into her until the hot fluid finished spraying out of him.*

Holly jerked awake. She pulled her fingers out of her twitching cunt and sat up in bed. She glanced at the clock.

"Four a.m.," she moaned.

A sound got her off the bed. It wasn't disturbing, and she had to go to the bathroom, so she cleaned up and put on her robe. If there were any problems, Lark would have woken her.

He was in the kitchen when she got there.

"Hello." She didn't think good-morning had an appropriate ring to it since it was still dark outside.

"Hi." He smiled. "I cleaned up the glass and sealed the plastic over the broken window better with tape. It was getting cold in here."

She nodded, understanding his need to explain why kitchen drawers and cabinet doors were open. It looked as if he ransacked the whole room trying to find tape and a dustpan.

"If we get this place straightened up I could make you breakfast." She pushed a drawer closed and then a cabinet door.

Lark did the same. They met at the last drawer. Her hand ended under his.

"How'd you sleep?" He rubbed his finger over her knuckles.

"So-so. How about you?"

"Not much." The gentle glide of his forefinger moved up to her wrist.

"Maybe we can get some sleep later." She stepped closer, touching his face with her opposite hand.

"We'll have to go to bed sooner or later."

Holly smiled, hearing the underlying meaning to his words. “Yes,” she agreed and stroked his jaw, letting the stubble of his whiskers tickle her palm.

“You’re in your bare feet.” His hand fastened to her hip and slipped to her back as he bent and slid his other arm behind her knees.

“So are you.”

“Yes, but there might be glass on the floor that I missed with the broom and it’s not my feet I’m worried about.” His hot, coffee-scented breath fanned over her face.

“I can get the vacuum.”

“Later.”

Holly folded her arm around his neck as he picked her up. “Then I should get dressed.”

“Undressed.” He whispered the idea against her lips.

She held the back of his head as he devoured her gasping puffs of excitement. If nightmares didn’t keep her awake all night, the idea of Lark touching her again had.

He wheeled around and sat her on the kitchen table. She savored his kiss, accepting the passion and his presumed mission to explore the inside of her mouth as if he needed to know every detail.

“You taste good,” he murmured against her neck, pressing soft kisses under her jaw.

She twisted her head, giving him full access. His lips seared a burning path from the pulse he sucked to the lobe of her ear. He nibbled around the rim while his hands pushed her silk robe from her shoulders.

“Hurry,” she urged.

His full lips and wet tongue traveled from beneath her chin. He nuzzled her nose, showing a pronounced affection while depositing kisses on her cheek. Once his breath meshed with hers again, a hundred visions, like memories, flashed through her mind. He attacked her mouth. His tongue speared her lips and rushed up against hers. She slackened upon him, weakly intoxicated from his ardor, heavily aroused by his caress.

Lark’s kisses trailed down her neck and over her collarbone. The lower he ventured, the farther he pushed her robe. His hands lightly skimmed the surfaces of her shoulders and back, drawing her closer.

She guided him with her fingers twisted and locked in his hair. The short silky strands dusted the tips of her right breast as he licked a circle around her left nipple. His mouth latched on, and in his tugs, he made enjoyable suckling sounds.

“Yes,” she moaned, thrusting her fingers deeper into his hair and holding him to her aching breast.

She kissed the top of his head and it brought his face up. His one hand remained fixed on her hip. The other managed a place inside her robe where he stroked up and down her side.

“Take me to bed.” She combed her fingers over his ears, rimming the edge with a gentle touch.

“Hold on.” He swept her off the table.

Inside her heart, she cried for the sheer enthrallment of his lust. Tears sprung to the surface of her eyes as he pecked small, loving kisses to her face. At the corner of her mouth, along the side of her nose and over her eyelids, he showed her the tender passion she craved to know.

In the bedroom, he placed her gently on the bed. Already shoes-and sock-less, it

didn't take long for his shirt and trousers to be discarded. She barely noticed the moves that revealed his body to her.

His aroused cock swayed during his approach. He bent slightly and grabbed the knot in the sash of her robe. A firm tug and he jerked her up on her feet. The sensual heat of him drew her closer. His scent acted an aphrodisiac to her senses.

She should have felt threatened, except the tweak of her nipple between his thumb and finger, kept her focused on the pleasure. He rolled the spiked tip, pinching firmly, tugging gently, and releasing. Her breast bounced. Snaking his hand beneath the robe, he cupped between her legs, rubbing her cunt. The heat of his palm melded with her damp skin, and he stroked his finger into her wet center.

Holly whimpered, aroused by the massaging passes over her aroused clit. She spread her legs for him, beckoning his entry. With a surprising force, he accommodated and thrust two fingers up, into a vortex of sensitivity. She inclined forward, leaning on him, her hips pulling back from the prickling sensation.

Lark held onto the sash, not letting her get away from the quick jabs. The roughness stimulated her already-fingered cunt into an orgasm. Her insides clenched in short spasms, bringing cries of ecstasy from her.

She trembled, clinging to the hard muscles of his shoulders.

"Tell me your fantasies, Holly." He extracted his finger from her twitching vagina. "I want to fill them."

She shook her head. No fantasy could be bigger or more dangerous than pretending he loved her.

"One sexual fantasy." He removed her sash and rubbed the silky strip against her breast. "Maybe you'd like to feel in control?"

He turned her around and sat on the bed. Scooting back, he laid down. His erection stood upright, thick and ready for her to take him.

"Come on," he coaxed with his stretched out fingers.

She swallowed, staring at the length of him lying on her bed, daring her to do as she pleased, calling for her to take charge. Empowered by his gift of submission, she lifted her arm, reached, and took his hand, letting him pull her down to him. With a knee to the mattress, she pushed off the floor and swung her leg over his, lifting his cock up as she straddled him. She rested her bottom on his hairy thighs. His balls were close to her cunt, and his cock stood propped against her belly.

"You're in control, Holly. You have the power." He wound the sash around his wrist and raised his arms over his head, wrapping his other wrist with the opposite end of the sash. Hardly a restraint, the strip of silk represented her control over his submissive position, and she found the sexual game had some merit.

"Fuck me, honey."

She pushed her hands over his ribs, rocking forward with her hips. His cock nestled between the lips of her sex.

"That's it," he encouraged with a gratified moan.

His erection brushed over her navel and came close to reaching her breasts.

She closed her eyes, picturing... No, it was more like remembering.

*"God, you got nice tits." He was on her, straddling her waist, leaning and holding the headboard, plunging his cock between her breasts. "Open your mouth."*

*The plump head pushed her lips apart.*

*"That's it. Yes, like that. Suck harder."*

"That's right, you're in control." Lark bucked her up and she fell onto his chest. She opened her eyes, staring into his, seeing him as she had in dreams.

*Not dreams.* She rejected the idea they could be memories.

Holly pushed herself back upright, scrubbing her hands over the mat of hair swirling a path from Lark's nipples down the center to his abdomen. A delightful sound of pleasure vibrated his chest against her palms. She trailed that fine line of dark fibers to where it thickened into a dark cloud at the root of his erection.

His cock trembled as she wrapped her fingers around the base and massaged the length, working her way to the crown, and back down. She shifted upward, rising to her knees and slowly lowering, fed just the soft cap into the opening of her sex. As she lowered, his thick cock glided into her, stretching and filling the path. She put her hands back on his hard muscled torso and worked her pussy up and down on his solid shaft

His hips lifted. "That's it, fuck me," he groaned.

The undulating motion of his body locked to hers, stirred a rhythmic climb toward her climax. She shoved her hands up his sinewy arms, rubbing the taut bulging muscles of his biceps. Following to the fold of his elbows, along his inner forearms to his wrists wrapped with the silk sash, she grasped his wide-open hands. Their fingers wove together, folding over, hanging tight.

Holly pumped her body up and down, back and forth, riding the enthralling wave of a titillating sensation. Her breasts swung over Lark's mouth, making teasing contacts until he captured the tip of one.

A whimper from her encouraged his suckling. The orgasm she thought she could delay exploded into a myriad of tickling heat throughout her nether region. Her twitching muscles locked onto his thrusting cock, and worked him in deeper. She sat upright to absorb the full impact of him buried inside her. If she had her wishes, she'd sit there all day.

Lark's plan differed. His wrists, bound no stronger than by the imagination, came free of the sash. He pulled her down to him, lifted, turned, rolling her under him.

She lay there in his strong embrace, floating to the pillow. He hovered, resting on one arm at her side, while he used his other hand to caress her face. The feather lightness of his fingers skittered over her cheek, dropping from her jaw, starting over under her chin, and gliding up to her lips. More than lust showed in his eyes. The twinkling gleam of happiness danced in his stare, making her feel at peace.

She coiled her arms around him, wiggling to fit.

"Am I leaning on you too much?" He shifted his weight.

"No, I like you close." She pulled him down.

"You didn't yesterday morning at my house." His kiss brushed her nose. "You were terrified of me."

"I plead temporary insanity. I didn't know you then."

"And you do now?" Not a hint of skepticism crept into his smile.

Unexplainable as it was, she knew him in her heart. "I know what's important. Your gentle care has made me very appreciative."

Lark's hand relocated to her shoulder, he stroked downward to her side, over her hip, and slipped his fingers beneath her thigh.

It was then she noticed his arousal pulsating, growing heavier.

“Open for me.” He pulled her leg up.

She fanned it away, feeling him penetrating her.

“That’s perfect.” He moaned, flexing his hips, driving into her.

He withdrew and plunged again, harder. She felt the shockwave of his power ripple through her body. Turning her head, immersed in the sexual fervor, she dug her nails into his buttocks and pulled herself up to meet his thrust. His hurried grunts increased.

“My turn, for control?” He released her legs and stretched her arms above her head.

“Yes.” She clasped his hands.

His weight spread over her, pinning her to the mattress. The solid flexes of his body battered an ache she hadn’t sated. From one end to the other, the nerves beneath her damp flesh quivered. A strained grunt from Lark’s lungs matched the vigorous way he executed the rest of his climax. Tense and jittery, his body crushed her against the bedding. He froze and jerked in several repetitive moves. Then, as if a dam broke, a massive amount of liquid warmth rushed into her.

Lark’s exhaustive pants brought his head down to her shoulder. She placed her hand at the back, stroking through his hair, along his damp neck. Everything felt strangely right between them.

In quiet contemplation, she waited until he shifted off her and lay down next to her on his side to voice a serious topic. “You never asked if I could get pregnant.”

“You never asked if I had a disease.” He slid his finger down her nose. “That’s careless.”

She drew her head back, surprised by his statement.

“I don’t.” He cupped her face, assuring her with a brief kiss. “And I saw the birth control pills in your purse when I picked up the buttons.”

“Not the night we came here from the bar.”

“I was too drunk to care then.” He caressed her shoulder.

“It’s strange the way fate put us together.” She snuggled close, finding the heat of his body a comfort.

“Yes. Fate,” he muttered the word as if it were evil.

A cooling shiver brought on by Lark’s gloomy tone made her hug him tighter.

“I won’t let anything happen to you, Holly.” He rested his chin on top her head. “I’ll do everything possible to change things.”

His voice trailed off in that quiet manner that told her he was drifting off to sleep. Contented by his assurances, and the safety of his presence, Holly closed her eyes.

## Chapter Seven

Lark bolted upright in bed. He moved off the mattress and retrieved his gun from the holster on the chair. They had fallen asleep, and the nightmarish vision of Holly drowning, vanished in favor of a different disturbance to his psyche.

"What's wrong?" Holly's frightened voice had him glancing at her in the bathroom doorway.

"When did you get up?" he asked, surprised she managed to get off the bed without his notice. However, with more thought, he realized his unconscious instincts were sluggish because of the tranquility he experienced sleeping with the woman he loved.

"A few minutes ago, I had to use the bathroom." She tied the sash around her waist, holding the robe shut. "Why do you have your gun out?"

His awareness sharper, he picked up his clothes. "I think I heard something." He jerked his pants on. "I want you to stay in here and if you hear anything, call the police."

"Lark," she breathed his name, seizing his wrist. "I didn't hear anything. Maybe it was me."

"Stay here." He removed her hand.

"You're scaring me."

"Holly, do understand me?"

Once he got a nod of understanding from her, he left the room. A chill of air made him shiver. If given a chance, he would have put more clothes on, but he woke from a rather deep sleep thinking he heard a door shut, something in the distance, not Holly, because the bathroom door wasn't closed.

The one side of his body was numb from what he had to assume was where Holly had slept on his arm. He peered around the archway to the kitchen and ducked back when he noticed the open backdoor. The chair he had propped against it, sat pulled away.

He took another quick look and then went to the living room. Whoever came in had to have used a different entrance.

"Damn." He stubbed his toe on the corner of the foyer table.

Approaching the front door slowly, he touched the knob and found it locked.

"Lark?" Holly called out.

"Stay in your room," he yelled, turning the corner and bumping into the narrow curio cabinet.

The impact toppled the top-heavy piece of furniture. The loud crash sent dozens of knick-knacks to the floor. He reached for the lamp and misjudged the distance. A victim to his clumsiness, it teetered back against the wall.

"Lark?" Holly whispered from behind, and he spun.

"Geesh woman." He raised his gun, aiming it up away from her. "I told you to stay in your room."

"What's happened? Is someone in here? I dialed nine-one-one, but hung up when I heard the cabinet fall."

"I haven't found anyone." He pulled her behind him as he wheeled around. "Turn on the lamp."

Light brightened the area as soon as she did.

“Does anyone have a key to your house?” He took her hand and led her to the kitchen.

“No.”

“Wait here. There can still be glass on the floor.” He walked closer and examined the strike-plate and the deadbolt. “Nothing on it appears to have been jimmied.”

“Even if someone had a key, that wouldn’t explain the chair moved away, would it?”

“I was thinking maybe they have a key to the front door and escaped this way?” He took her hand again and glanced around. In the far corner of the room, next to the refrigerator there was a space for her to crouch unnoticed. “I’m going outside and check the perimeter of the house. You sit here so I know exactly where you are. No getting up or making a sound, okay?”

“All r-right,” she stammered.

He leaned down and kissed her. The scent of her skin distracted him. A warm sweetness from her breath on his face sidetracked his thoughts. He wanted to drag her up and hold her and never let go.

“Take this.” He put the gun in her hand.

“No, I don’t know how to use it.” She tried pushing his revolver away.

“It works just like a prop gun.” He put it in her palm and folded her fingers against the steel. “You have those at the theater, don’t you?”

“Yes.” She turned it over.

“The safety is off, so make sure you know who you’re shooting at if you have to pull the trigger, okay.”

“Lark, let me go with you.”

“No! I don’t want you to die again.”

Holly reached to touch him, except he backed away as his own words hit a brittle nerve. His statement caught them both off-guard.

“Stay here.” He left her sitting there with a puzzled expression.

The sirens made him feel easier about Holly’s safety. She didn’t need to say anything for the enhanced nine-one-one operator to dispatch a unit. The moment the phone call connected, Holly’s address would have come up on their computer screen.

A noise from the side yard drew his attention and he slowly walked into the pre-dawn darkness.

“Lark?” Herb’s voice whispered.

“What are you doing here?” Lark asked.

“I was on my way home when I saw the nine-one-one address. What’s going on?”

“Someone was in the house, but I haven’t found anyone yet. I think they’re gone.”

He kept his voice low. “Holly is hiding between the refrigerator and the wall. Get her out of the house.”

Herb left him for a few minutes, and then came back. “She won’t get up. Says she’s not going to leave until you come for her. I left a police officer with her.”

Lark looked at the door. “Becky wouldn’t listen either during that robbery. I asked her to take the car and go home.”

“Lark, get over it. Becky wouldn’t want to see you tearing yourself up every day over her death. She loved you. Do you think it would make her happy to see that you go around as if you’re dead too.”

“She was your sister. How can you act as if it were some nameless victim of a

crime?” He jumped at the sudden rattle of the bushes. A cat scurried past, and he raked his fingers through his hair. “It’s just a cat. Whoever was here is gone.”

“Lark, you have to let Becky go. Find some peace for yourself. I loved my sister. I miss her. But life can’t stop.”

“No, we can’t stop life, but I’m afraid of it repeating,” he grumbled, turning around and going back into the house.

When he met Becky, for a short time, he considered things were going a different route. She made the memory of his past lives fade. They met at the police station when she came to visit her brother, and everything about her captivated him. Young and vibrant, she had a spirit about her that was engaging, and she didn’t let him say no to her invitation to dinner. It seemed a bittersweet break in the cycle. For a year, they grew closer, and then she died. His fixation to find his true love came back stronger. Herb thought his depression was a result of losing Becky, but all the love he had for her was temporary, a patch over the hole in his empty heart. Finding Heather—reborn as Holly—became his obsession.

The button on the table caught Lark’s attention. He picked it up and hid it in his palm, not wanting to upset Holly.

“She won’t get up.” The officer standing next to her told him.

“I’ll take care of this. You fellows can leave.” Lark stooped down. He held his hand out for the gun he gave her.

“Did you find anyone?” she asked with a steady voice as she placed the gun in his grip.

“No.” He took her hand and pulled her up. “No one’s here.”

When she hugged him, a sigh of relief heaved out of her. He understood it well as he let his breath escape in a similar fashion.

Lark slid the button into his pocket. “I want you to pack some things in an overnight bag.” He steered her to the other side of the kitchen table.

“Why? Where are we going?”

“I’m taking you someplace safer.” He led her to the bedroom and closed the door.

“Where?” She took off her robe and threw it on the bed. “What happened outside? Did you find someone?”

“Just get dressed, and we’ll discuss it after we leave.” He glanced around the room. “Holly, where are the two buttons?”

“In the living room, I think. Aren’t they on the coffee table where you left them?”

He hurried to check and saw them lying there—two envelopes, three buttons. Now there were four.

Lark returned to the bedroom to find Holly hopping on one foot, trying to get her panties up her legs. She was too beautiful to ignore.

“You don’t have to rush.” He grabbed her elbow when she stumbled. “And you don’t have to worry.”

“You’re scaring me by not telling me anything.” She reached down and pulled her lacy white underwear into place.

Each item she selected from the closet, Lark looked at with no interest. Some guys liked to watch a woman undress. She fascinated him by putting clothes on. He relented in keeping secret his find, and tossed the three buttons on the dresser, and then the fourth from the kitchen.



“Where’d you get that?” She clutched a blouse to her chest.

“On the kitchen counter.”

Her lips pursed, her forehead wrinkled, the face she made wasn’t a pretty image.

“Holly?”

“Why is someone doing this to me?” She put on the blouse and slacks. “I feel as if I should know what the buttons mean, and yet I can’t think of a thing.”

He shook his head, not having an answer.

Before his hands touched her shoulders, she spun around and hugged him.

“I won’t let anything happen to you.” He brushed a hand over her head.

“I just want to know why this is happening,” she cried.

“Shhh—” He held her face. “I’ll figure it out.”

“You can’t. There’s not enough evidence.”

“Just trust me.”

“I’ve always trusted you.”

“*Always?*” He questioned her choice of words because it showed him a sliver of her past life again.

“I didn’t mean always. I meant—”

“I have something to tell you, Holly. It might sound unbelievable, it certainly will be painful to hear, but it will explain the reason you feel as if you’ve known me longer than a couple days.”

“How did you know I felt that way?”

“We’ll talk about it when we get to my place.” He led her outside, not sure where he’d begin to explain something she used to remember on her own.

\* \* \* \*

When Detective Burton walked toward them, Lark’s hand fell away from Holly’s back. She felt he distanced himself for a reason—maybe professional appearance, but it had the air of something more personal.

Tired and scared, she didn’t like feeling alone. Surrounded by police and Lark, she had that sense of separation from time, as if she weren’t there, but a ghost looking in on someone else’s life.

“Excuse me a minute.” Lark set her bag down and went to the patrol car parked at the curb. From his arm motions, he appeared to give the officer instructions for searching the house.

The sensation of a disjointed existence faded, and she looked to Detective Burton for some insight into Lark’s past.

“Have you two been friends long?” She tried to focus on him rather than Lark, who was expressing his frustration by hitting a trashcan.

“A few years.”

“He’s an interesting man, but seems depressed at times. Do you know why?” She had to hope it was something other than her situation that made him edgy and gruff at times.

“Two years ago I introduced him to my sister. They hit it off right away and started dating. She said she was going to marry him as soon as he got the nerve to ask her. Then a little over a year ago, he was driving her home. He stopped at a store where a robbery was taking place. In an ensuing shootout, she was killed.”

"I'm so sorry." The explanation explained a lot, including the way she felt him always pulling back from her affections at the oddest times.

"Lark blames himself for her death. However, Becky didn't have to be there. He told her to take the car and leave. She refused."

Lark came back. "Ready to go?" he asked, picking up her bag.

"Yes." She put her hand on his arm, trying to give him the empathetic comfort of knowing what it was like to lose someone. She never had, yet somehow, she knew just the sort of pain a person suffers.

"I'll have a patrol car come by your house and keep an eye on the area," Detective Burton said as they walked away.

"That will make the fellows happy. My neighborhood isn't one of their favorite territories." Lark laughed, looking back over his shoulder.

"Nonetheless, it's in the district, and I'll feel better knowing someone's in the area."

Holly felt better too for the added security. She'd thought her nightmares were bad, but not like the disturbing way someone stalked her.

"I'm sorry about your girlfriend," she said once they were settled, and alone in the car.

Lark stared straight ahead. "He didn't have any business telling you about Becky. And for the record, our relationship wasn't going anywhere. She wanted more than I could give her."

Holly thought over Lark's last comments as he drove them to his house. She didn't like the mystery or implications in his statement. Did he consider her a casual affair, not worth the time to tell his troubles to? It hurt to think his love was with a dead woman when she was there, willing to become everything he needed.

The ride ended her concerns when she got out in front of Lark's house.

His hand covered hers and squeezed. "Nothing will happen to you here."

He had brought her home to be safe. As she watched him get out and hurry around to her side of the car, she was sure he wasn't the kind of man that took any relationship lightly. Every move he made was careful, as if he were handling a delicate egg. He carried her bag, and still took the added effort to keep her from having any mishaps.

"Hold on a minute." He lifted his arm toward her and she grasped his coat sleeve while he kicked snow on the walk aside with his foot. "I'll shovel it tomorrow."

He shifted the bag from one hand to the other. "You can use my room for as long as you need." His arm went comfortably around her waist, supporting her as they walked up to the porch.

Her last visit had been a hurtling crash into the snow from the icy concrete path. She took notice of the salted surface of his steps. Had he done that knowing she'd return?

Lark's strong shove opened the door. He turned on the light and guided her across the living room.

"The last door in the hall is the bedroom. Make yourself at home." He prodded her to go first.

She glanced in the two other rooms, one a kitchen and the other was a bedroom used more like a big storage area.

"I'll go check all the windows and doors." He set her overnight bag on the rumpled covers of the bed. "Don't worry about anything, okay?"

## Chapter Eight

Holly gave him a confident smile and turned away to inspect the room. Small and terribly cluttered, the unkempt bed appeared unused, other than maybe to lie on top. She mindlessly touched objects on the dresser, as well as scrolling her name in the dust. A picture of a man's naked legs peeked out from under a stack of dry-cleaned, folded shirts. She tugged the magazine and stared at the image.

The dark eyes, irritable stare and pouting mouth did Lark an injustice. She saw beneath his broody nature and knew more than anything a photograph could never tell her of the passion the man harbored inside him.

She tore her gaze from his paper eyes and examined the rest of his finely crafted physique. Not enough showed, and she quickly flipped to the center page. Sprawled out on a chair, in the buff, and looking sleepily seductive, he had her in awe. She held the magazine with one hand and slid her finger over the glossy page, tracing his full mouth. With her eyes closed, she brought back the memory of his kiss, of caresses and heated words of lust that weren't possible to recall as anything more than a dream.

"You like that sort of stuff?" Lark's voice startled her.

She opened her eyes and looked at him in the doorway.

"I don't usually snoop—" She tried to push the magazine back under the shirts, but it slipped to the floor.

They both glanced down.

To hide the embarrassment sweeping up her face, she turned away. Only she faced his reflection in the mirror over the dresser. If lost love was in his thoughts, she couldn't tell by the way he looked at her. His hungry gaze made her face hotter than the blush.

He moved behind her. "It wasn't anything I try to hide." His hands glided up her arms, pulling her back against his chest, giving her that warmth of enthusiasm she enjoyed. It was something to do to pay the bills after I quit working for the police department last year."

She tilted her head to the side, enjoying the massage easing the tension in her shoulders. The nightmares, the invisible stalker, the buttons, and especially the visions in her mind, had taken a toll on her strength. Lark was her way to escape.

"Come here." He turned her head with his fingers on her chin and planted his mouth over hers.

When she moaned against his hard and demanding lips, he gently eased away, cautious, maybe confused. His gaze drifted over her face. Didn't he see she was his for the asking—for the taking? He must have as he resumed the claim on her breath and sucked her lips. Her heart beat wildly when he added small kisses to her cheeks and her chin.

Holly lifted her hand to the back of his head. "You're an amazing man," she whispered, rubbing her temple against his lips.

"Not so much amazing, as desperate to have you."

She turned in his embrace, looking into his brown eyes, shaking her head for him not to deny the truth. "Amazing," she informed him with the fold of her arms over his strong shoulders.

His mouth repositioned to dispute, and she'd not hear of it. She didn't want him over-thinking her comment or stop the way he lit a fire in her belly. Pulling him down to her, she pressed herself into the firmness of his torso.

"You have me, Lark." She unfastened his coat. "For as long as you want."

She fingered the buttons, ignoring the sudden wave of trepidation tightening her insides. Stress, pure and simple, she decided. There was nothing to fear except losing a moment of rapt attention from Lark.

Holly slid her hands inside his coat and rubbed the steely contours of his chest. She grated her palms back and forth over his stiff nipples, liking the way the sounds of his contentment vibrated beneath her touch.

She turned and rolled her shoulders back, writhing against the heat pouring from his body. "You know just the right moves to make a woman hot." She smiled, feeling his arousal hard and pulsating along her bottom.

He drew her coat down and kissed her neck. The tender whips of his tongue tickled her ear. The caressing passes shifted to her jaw and her chin as he twisted her head further around to claim her mouth again.

"More," she murmured, engaging the realistic fantasies in her head.

*"I won't ever let you go." His whispering tickled her nape as the wispy hairs fluttered over her ear.*

*"Never?" She reached up, holding his face nestled alongside hers.*

*"Never." He squeezed her around the middle, pulling her tight against him so she felt the line of buttons down his coat.*

"Buttons?" Holly froze, opening her eyes at first, and then shutting them as if she could bring back the connection her mind was starting to form between the buttons and her.

"Yes, let's get this unbuttoned and off." Lark's fingers glided down the front of her, unfastening her woolen jacket.

He pulled it from her arms.

Goose bumps spread over her. She trembled at the way his hands relocated to her blouse, removing it to leave her shivering in her bra.

He bent his head and mouthed the cloth. "Mmmm." He sucked on the tip of her breast through the fabric. There was no hesitation between covered and uncovered. He jerked her bra strap off her shoulder and pushed her breast out of the lace-edged cup.

Holly grabbed his shoulders, feeling his dexterous moves unclasping her bra so she could toss it away. He unzipped her slacks and tugged them to the floor where she stepped free. Her panties followed.

The heat of Lark's breath fanned into the depths of her loins as his suckling shifted from her breast to her belly. She wanted to insist he move lower, to the ache making her squirm, however, he rose up.

She shoved his coat from his shoulders. A few twists and shrugs, and it fell from him to the floor. He steered her around and lowered her to the bed.

"Patience." He nibbled in circles.

"I don't have any."

"I do." He pinched her nipple with his teeth.

"Lark," she gasped, succumbing to the zinging tingle tamed by his wet tongue.

He drew her breast into his mouth with a gentle bathing making her arch. Deep

inside, she wanted the same sating he gave her quivering breasts.

"Please, Lark, take off your clothes."

He rose from her and stripped. Propped on her elbows, she watched as he peeled his shirt off over his head. He already had his pants unfastened. Something he must have worked on while kissing her. He shoved them down his legs and stepped out. Free of clothing, he leaned forward with his hands rubbing the tops of her thighs.

"Is this better?"

"Much." She pushed her hands up through the hair on his chest.

He brushed his knuckles against her sex and she grabbed his wrist, forcing his fingers into the split of flesh.

The touch of his lips on her belly made her laugh.

"Ticklish?"

"Yes."

His tongue swirled around her navel, dipping and teasing her with things to come. If she didn't have the foreboding sense of doom still simmering in the back of her mind, she'd put hopes on a future with Lark.

"Mmmm, I like that." She squirmed.

"And this?" He opened the inner lips of her sex with his tongue, spreading the opening so that the heat of his breath blasted into her.

"Oh God, yes," she moaned, her vaginal walls collapsed, barring the feathering of air.

When she drew back her leg, he grasped her calf, lifted it to his shoulder, assisting her submission. His tongue glided over her slick shaved mound, running up one side and down the other, nibbling on her nether region with his soft lips.

He buried his face in her sex, rubbing his nose against her leg, nuzzling kisses up to her belly and back, to where he pressed a deep kiss into the crux of her spread legs. Her whole body contracted in a spasm when the forceful thrust of his tongue penetrated her.

"Don't stop," she groaned, wracked with an orgasm that made her twist unpredictably on the bed.

He pushed his tongue against her clit, massaging it roughly, drawing her hips from the mattress as she tried to meet his jabs prodding the sensitive area. In moments, she was wet, feverishly hot, and exhausted by Lark's ardor.

He slid up her body, letting the fibers of hair on his chest tickle her alert nipples.

"You're very good at this," she purred, finding the excitement a wonderful cure to depression. "When we met, you didn't seem the type of man to give this much attention to a woman."

"Does it make you nervous?"

"A little." She confessed only a small portion of her unease.

"Is it me?"

"No." She trailed his ribs with a mindless touch.

"Then what?"

"You'll think it strange, but every time we... Never mind."

"Tell me." He encouraged with more sips and pecks to her mouth.

She wanted to open up about everything. His continued insistence helped make her believe he really did want to know.

Lark lowered. His arousal brushed her inner thigh, sweeping her with a chill of

danger—a beguiling enchantment over her senses. Did she risk giving up that reserved part of herself? An emphatic ‘yes’ rushed from her thoughts.

“When we’re together, like this—” She moaned as he entered her, the heaviness of his arousal stretching her as he inched his way in.

“Tell me.” He partially withdrew and flexed once more, driving into her.

She gasped as he hit her with at least a dozen aggressive plunges, before slowing his strokes, pulling one of her legs up to his side.

“I want to know everything in your thoughts, Holly. I want to know you.” His hand circled over her hip to her bottom in a tender caress.

“I want that too. But sharing hasn’t been a natural instinct in me for a long time. Years of keeping my inner turmoil a secret became necessary after my parents sent me to a psychiatrist.”

He stopped shifting, resting over her, showing the depths of his interest in his steady gaze. His muscles tensed beneath her fingertips.

“I get these flashes in my mind, like dreams or events. I don’t know what you’d call them, but they scare me.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” He massaged her hip as if having sex at that point didn’t matter as much as their conversation.

“It doesn’t help. When a doctor sees you as crazy, you don’t have a tendency to open up on a regular basis or even want to try.” She wrapped her arm around his back.

“Besides, this isn’t the time I want to talk about my phobias.”

“All right.”

Lark’s understanding meant a lot. That was all she needed, someone to accept her answers without forcing her to analyze them.

He resumed his motions, rolling his hips against her, thrusting his body up and down so his cock lunged through the snugness of her insides constricting on him. She wondered what it was like for him when an orgasm came. When he let out a strained groan, and his back arched from her, she decided he felt the tight prickling through his groin just the same as she did.

The bed danced in rhythm to his downward jolts. A creak on the floor, a banging against the wall, and the squeak of the frame seemed a perfect fit to the atmosphere.

“Oh God, you feel so good,” he moaned, shoving his hand under her head and lifting her from the pillow.

His mouth fit over hers and his kiss ravaged her thoughts. A wave of excitement buried all her senses, except for the loving feelings she took out of his passionate hold. She held onto his biceps, squeezing the muscles, unable to do more to express the intensity of her climax.

“Holly,” he gasped, as his ejaculation jolted him to a grinding halt against her.

She folded her hand behind his neck, pulling him tight while sweeping her lips from his cheek to his mouth. Tears, a little from him, a lot from her, salted the taste of their heated kiss.

“Don’t cry.” He nuzzled her nose with his.

She nodded. “I can’t help it.”

“Holly?” He kissed her lightly.

“I’m going to die.”

Pulling her close, he rested his forehead against hers. Somehow, the culmination of

her fears became real. She'd always known the worst of her imagination's past would repeat in her real future.

"I'm not going to let it happen." He stroked a hand over the back of her head, keeping her face close to him as she wept. "I promise I'll protect you."

While she believed he'd try, he had no control over her destiny. Someone was stalking her and she had no idea who. All she had were the buttons, and as much as Detective Burton believed they were a cruel prank, she saw them as a grave warning. But to what end?

"Why don't I know what the buttons mean?"

"It would make life simpler if we could dissect the workings of what our mind recalls and what it doesn't, but given time, what you can't remember may come back." Lark shifted to the side of her, propping himself up to look down at her. He placed his hand on her cheek and brushed away her last tears. "We'll figure out what it means, and who's doing this to you. Don't worry about that? Until then, just know you're safe with me, okay?"

She nodded, not fearing her safety as much as retaining what was left of her sanity. "You were going to tell me something back at my house," she reminded him, eager to change the subject and hear more about how he knew she felt as if she'd met him before.

He kissed her forehead. "Later," he replied, drawing the sheet over them, warming her with the strokes of his hand along her arm.

She listened to the tick of a clock and the low hum of a heater running. Nothing else, other than the steady decreasing speed of Lark's breathing kept her company. Her mindless fondling of his chest hair lulled her lover to sleep, leaving her awake with her thoughts.

The buttons remained the bane of her concerns. She shut her eyes praying for a glimmer of enlightenment. Trying hard, she concentrated on the round disks of black, the smooth feel of plastic in her hand, warmed by her grip, meaningless in the mirage of other images.

*She was so cold. The numbing chill of winter, no, it was water seeping into her body. She tried swimming to the surface, to escape the icy claws of death. Yet her fingers stayed clenched in a fist, gripping the last ties she had to something more important than her failing life. She didn't want to lose her lover.*

*Where was he? What was that terrifying yell of pain doing mixed with her scream? She tried to open her hand again and look at what she held. Her fingers parted and darkness closed in.*

*"No!" she cried, needing to see what kept her from the truth.*

## Chapter Nine

“No, please!” Holly pushed, and the arms that held her let go. She opened her eyes and stared at Lark’s worried expression.

“Are you okay?” His knuckles grazed her leg, her hip, her side, as he petted her.

She nodded and his arm lifted up to invite her back to him. A welcome comfort, she rolled against him and put her finger on his mouth and outlined it as she had on the magazine page. The fullness was more evident as a three-dimensional object for her to investigate.

“I lost you, or someone, or I didn’t...I don’t know.”

“It was nightmare. They can be scary. Just relax and remember you’re safe and you haven’t lost me.”

She swirled her fingers into the hair on his chest, resuming the same position she had before falling asleep. The soothing coo of assurances softened the chaos buzzing around inside her brain. If there were a reason to worry, it would be for the headache making her feel as if her brain were going to explode.

“What time is it?” she asked, not knowing where the clock sat, and having lost all sense of time.

He lifted, looking over her. “Two o’clock.”

“Oh no, I’ll be late!” She sat up.

Lark’s eyes rolled downward, his look immediately landing on her breasts. The hot searing lust darkened his eyes. She trembled and blushed at his inspection, self-conscious from the way her body reddened by his intense look.

Holly reached to pull the sheet up, but he stopped her.

“You’re exquisite,” he murmured, leaning forward, fondling her soft nipple, kissing her lightly. “Just beautiful.”

His gaze dropped to her chest, obviously enjoying the sight of her breast rising with her deep breath. Her nipple bubbled out, rosy and plump just so he had more to pinch between his thumb and forefinger.

Holly whimpered, stimulated by the circling sweeps of his fingers and the quick plucks that now hardened the bud of flesh. She rocked forward, wanting more than the light chafing.

His palm spread over her chest, vigorously increasing his kneading. He pulled her toward him and caught her mouth. The invigorating pursuit of his tongue kept her mesmerized. His fingers coiled her hair tight to her scalp, and held her a captive to his ardor.

As willing as she wanted to be, she had to go to work.

“Lark, I have a meeting.”

The inspiring tweaks of her nipple enlivened every nerve threading its way to her center. From an ember to a blaze, the orgasm remained shy of completion.

“I have to...” She arched back on his arm and moaned from his hard suckling against her neck. “Lark I... Oh, God.”

His hand skated down her middle. Already wet from tiny tremors of pleasure, her insides exploded the second his fingers pushed and curled into the sensitive cavern of



nerves. She bucked against his cupped hand, her insides accepting the swift and forceful momentum with quaking contractions.

She felt the pressure of his fingertips against her nape, loosen, and glide to her back. He tried lowering her to the bed, but she had to break free of the indulgence, feeling possessed by a life not her own.

"Lark, please...it's important." She panted, breathing unsteady even after the extraction of his skillful fondling.

He pulled her up and stared into her eyes. "Is that the only reason?"

"Yes." She held a hand to the side of his face. Love at first sight wasn't something she believed in, yet there she was having all the giddy emotions of a teenager and she had to get away for a while to think.

"Are you sure?" He let her off the bed.

"As nice as it is to lie around and let you do wonderful things to me, I do have a job. I can't let whatever evil surrounds me have that one stabilizing part of my life away."

Lark bounded from the bed. She'd say, playfully, if he didn't have such a grim expression.

He scooped her up before she had a chance to put any clothes on. "Stay here."

She ran her hand down the back of his head. "I'd love to, only I have a cast and crew counting on me to keep the production on schedule for the Christmas play at the theater. I can't let them down."

He deposited her on the rumpled covers and leaned over her "If you don't leave my house, nothing can happen to you."

"That's not fair, using my fears against me."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean for it to sound selfish or insensitive." He held her face.

"You have to believe I don't ever want to upset you."

She smiled and nodded. "I know. Staying here is simply not practical."

"Sure it is. The house is warm, we've got plenty of food, and I know lots of distracting games to keep you from being bored."

"Hmmm, and when the bills aren't paid and we run out of food, then what?"

His answer never came, and she never pressed for one as he crawled over her and sunk into her body with one thrust. He took her away to that magical place in her mind she loved to be, just the two of them together for eternity.

He filled her with hard, deep strokes. His solid shaft rammed far into the very recesses of creation, as if splitting open her cervix would bring a rebirth to their souls. She clung to him feeling a connection as never before. Fearful of its existence, yet reveling in the idea they resurrected an ancient love.

Their time together was a quiet comfort, a sublime sexual encounter she enjoyed because of the revelations that he was the man she'd always loved. After the passion, came a few minutes of quiet caresses and endearing kisses. When Lark fell asleep, she watched him for a short while, wishing she could stay with him. A beautiful man, a warm bed, and a sense of real love were a dream come true. However, as she knew she must, she got up and called for a taxi. By the time she had dressed, the car arrived to take her home. If love were as real as he made her feel it was then they'd find it again.

Once Holly arrived at her house, she wasn't so sure she had the mental strength to enter. However, Lark made her feel invincible, capable of overcoming all odds. Standing alone struck her with a different reality. She wasn't rid of the dangers following her from

day to day.

Holly sucked in a deep breath and stepped up onto the stoop. She'd go in, retrieve the vintage clothing for the play, and then get to the theater. What could go wrong with such a simple plan? She pushed aside her lingering reservations, unlocked the door and entered the kitchen.

The daylight made everything appear less menacing. From the pantry, she retrieved the old coat she knew would be perfect for the play. All it needed were a few repairs. Sliding her fingers down the front, she counted the spots missing buttons. She had bought new shiny brass ones. Out of drawer in the kitchen, she took out the scissors and made the necessary snips to threads to prepare the cloth. She stared at the glimmer of light bouncing off the scissors' chrome finish.

*Snow glittered like silver dust in front of her headlights. Even though the doors were closed, the cold winds from the storm seeped into the car. She tightened her grip on the steering wheel, wishing she'd gone another way home. The back roads were always too icy, and left un-plowed until last.*

*Lights from another car threw a glare in her rearview mirror. She saw the driver's face. A sense of relief swept away the concerns she had about her travels on the lonely road.*

"Holly?" Lark's voice startled her and she dropped the scissors on the floor.

He stood in the doorway. A worried frown wrinkled his forehead.

"How did you know I'd be here?" She picked up the scissors and put them on the counter.

"I woke. You were gone. What's to know? You pay me to protect you, remember? I can't do that unless I'm around."

"You still haven't said how you knew I'd be here?"

"I called the theater and you weren't there."

"I had to pick up a coat for the play." She sat it on the counter. "How do I know you?"

"What?"

"You said you had something to tell me about why I felt as if I knew you. I didn't pressure you to explain, because I understand how you probably feel guilty about using me to forget about Becky."

"Becky?" He pushed the door shut and stepped farther into the kitchen. "She doesn't have anything to do with us."

"Maybe not me, but you loved her."

"I thought I could make a life with her. Not out of some profound love I had for her, but to forget you. She was there, believing everything I had to say, and still wanting to love me."

"I don't understand. If you didn't want to tell me about her then what is so important? What do you mean you 'used her to forget about me'? We just met. Or did we?"

"Do you believe in reincarnation?"

"I never gave it a thought one way or the other." She pulled out a chair from the table and sat, feeling an icy terror closing her lungs. "I suppose anything is possible."

"I've been reincarnated several times that I remember, and so have you. Somehow, our souls are linked, and we find each other."

"That's absurd." Even as she denied the possibility, another vision sped through her mind.

*He looked at her hanging from the side of the bridge as if love were a never-ending cycle they controlled. Even in the lines of worry on his face, there was that shimmer of trust he offered her. In life, in death, they'd always be together.*

"Holly?"

"I can't believe it."

"You have to." Lark dragged a chair around in front of her and sat. He took her hands in his, rubbing the backs with his thumbs. "It's my fault."

"What's your fault?"

"A long time ago, in I suppose the first life we were together, we had a fight. You drove off, upset, and angry. If I let you go, maybe nothing would have happened. Unfortunately, I was stubborn. I wanted to resolve our problems, so I followed you in my car. The snow was heavy, turning into a blizzard. I recalled a nagging concern I had of you running off the road. My worst fears were realized, when you did. You managed to get out before the vehicle went off the bridge, but you slipped over the side. I got there in time to help, however, you lost the grip on my coat, and I lost the hold on your other hand and the one I had on the steel support of the broken wood railing. I watched you plunge into the river, seconds before I did."

Holly tore her fingers free his. "We died?" She jumped up from the chair.

"I'm sorry, honey, so sorry I let you fall," his voice turned raspy, choked with emotion.

"It's not true. How can it be?"

He wiped the back of his hand across his face. Tears as real as hers glistened in his regretful eyes.

"The first time we were reunited, you remembered part of what happened. You forgave me then, I thought it was some miracle of God giving us a second chance. I saw the signs too late. Another snowy night, another fight, an accident, and we died."

"That's just not possible. Okay, so what if I were to believe God put our spirits into new people. Why would we know each other? How could we not suspect all along something would happen again?"

Lark shook his head. "I don't know, Heather."

"Holly," she corrected, staring at him with a strange feeling that Heather was right for her as well.

"I mean Holly. Sometimes, words, phrases, and our past names come out of me when I least expect."

"You were called..." She shook her head, not wanting to accept as true all the dreams and nightmares as memories.

"Go on, say it."

"No. You'll agree and then we'll both be crazy."

"Say it!" he demanded.

"Luke." The word burst from her. "I knew you as Luke."

Just as she knew he would, he nodded.

"And I'm going to die." She pressed her hand over her mouth to stop her blubbing cry.

"No you're not. I should have never sought you out. For some reason, you don't

remember enough and I think this was where we were finally to make the break from the cycle. I swore when I first saw you I'd stay away." He jumped up from the chair and went to the door. "If I leave now, maybe everything will be different."

"Lark, you can't leave. What about the buttons, the stalker?"

"It's the only way I know how to prevent what will happen if you're in my life. I'll call Herb and get him to assign police officers to your case. We gave them enough evidence to investigate."

"Lark, please. I don't care what happens or doesn't happen. I can't remember things like you can. I was drawn to you in a way I never had an explanation for until now."

"It's pointless, Holly. We don't get to get married, have children, or grow old together. Our time is so short, it's painful. You don't remember, and that makes it all the more easier for me to leave you. I have to end this."

Lark didn't look back as he walked out, closing the door between them.

She never felt more alone than she did then.

## Chapter Ten

Lark drove home. He tossed his coat on the chair as he sat on the sofa and clicked on the television. His thoughts jumped to different conversations and images of Holly. Memories of their brief time together were all he had now. He was right to leave her before it was too late. His love had to be greater than his desperate need to have her.

A deep pain in his chest made him lay his head back against the sofa. For once, he wanted to die before his time. A heart attack would be a welcome change to the routine he lived each life by. He pictured Holly during one of his happiest moments.

*Their clothing lay scattered on the floor encircling his bed. Her fingers wrapped the throbbing pulse of his existence, making him hold his breath. She stroked and fondled him with a woman's interest in a new toy. Then she kissed and licked with a predatory hunger. He dug his fingers into the mattress, trying not to force himself down her throat, even though the urge to thrust intensified.*

*Still, she knew his desires, swallowing him deep, regardless how he moved to prevent himself from gagging her. Her lips glided up and down his shaft, pressing the vein with repetitive constrictions. Beaded in sweat, he rode out her oscillating plunges on his stiff erection until he exploded.*

"...and because of the heavy snow, the following schools will be closed tomorrow," the newscaster announced on the television.

Lark got up from the sofa and went to the window. His power always went out when they had a snowstorm. He glanced at the flickering lamp and wondered how much longer he had before darkness set in and his heat stopped working.

"It just figures, a storm on top of everything else." He turned from the frosted glass pane.

A sudden string of thoughts hit him and he grabbed his coat. He and Holly had a disagreement. The snow was heavy. He couldn't risk testing his theory that leaving her would prevent the accident from happening. She could still hit the bridge, she could still fall, and this time she'd be alone.

He tried to use his cell phone.

"Dammit." He tossed the phone on the seat, discovering the unpaid service had finally caught up with him.

Low visibility didn't make him more careful in his driving. He wheeled his vehicle recklessly through the streets. Plowing into mailboxes and trashcans, he parked halfway on the lawn of Holly's house. He left the engine running, jumped out of the car, and slip-slided up to her front door, feeling guilty the minute she didn't respond to his pounding knock.

"Holly, open up. I need to talk to you."

No answer sent him to the back door. Unlocked, the door swung freely at the turn of the knob. He rushed into the kitchen.

"Holly?" He tore the plastic away from the broken window and looked to where her car should have been parked at the side of the house.

*Gone.*

If she went to the theater, everything would be good. She didn't have to cross the

Haverty Bridge to get to work, he reminded himself. Still, he had to check and make sure she was all right.

Then he saw something that hammered him with added guilt—the button on the table.

“Holly,” he breathed her name with angst.

Bits and pieces of his lost memory filtered into his thoughts, playing in his head like a movie. The vintage coat, the buttons, and his part in Holly’s death became clearer. He had to get to her in time.

\*

Holly didn’t realize how hard the snow was falling until she drove away from her house. She considered turning back, but as long as the roads were passable, she figured she’d continue on to the theater.

Two blocks before her turn-off, a congestion of cars stopped traffic. A temporary detour pointed her in the opposite direction. She turned, hoping it led back to where she was going. The car in front of her pulled off to the side, probably wondering what she did. Would the new route lead to where she was going? The car behind her turned off onto another street. Did they know something she didn’t?

Holly continued on, alone. The moment she saw the bridge, she remembered the vision—the horrible, nightmarish revelation of her plunging into the river. She stepped on the brake too fast. The car skidded sideways, hitting the old wood railing hard. Upon impact, the boards splintered. She was wrong in thinking the fencing would keep her safe.

“Oh God, no.” Her tire dropped over the side. She attempted to get the belt unfastened and her cold fingers refused to work.

Each move she made, the vehicle rocked. She tried to lean and keep her weight back, but she needed to get out. Her death awaited and she gripped the wheel to hang onto something when the impact with the water came.

Holly looked at her door swinging open. Her gaze went to Lark’s face. He didn’t say anything as he reached across and unbuckled her. The car rocked again and she fought to push him away. She didn’t want him to die with her—*again*.

It was all true. She’d lived another life with him and they died together falling from that bridge. She continued shoving him to get out of the car.

“Honey, let me help you.” He jerked on the buckle.

“Lark, please. Let me go. I don’t want you to die with me.”

“There’s no way in hell I’d ever let you go alone.” He snatched at the strap as she strained to pop the release.

The car teetered, seesawing in slow motion. Lark slipped and fell to the ground in the open doorway. He went over backwards, landing flat on the icy road.

“Holly!” He reached for her.

She barely noticed that the seatbelt had slack in it until she twisted to take his outstretched hand. Fear prevented her from staying still, and she dove out of the car.

The vehicle flipped over the edge of the bridge, dragging her with it over the side.

“I got you.” Lark seized her hand and kept her from dropping.

She heard the car make a splashing crash below. The ripple of cold air shot up under the hem of her slacks, her jacket, and her blouse.

“Let go of my coat and take my hand,” Lark demanded.

"I can't, I'll fall."

"Holly, we'll die if you don't let go before the button breaks free."

Her eyes went wide as she stared at him. The terror in his face was real. His reasoning so clear that she saw what he described.

*In the clenching claw of her fingers, she held tight to the button on his coat. Around her, ice crackled, making little plopping sounds when the icicles fell into the water. He wanted her to let go, take another hold, but she couldn't. If she opened her hand, she'd slip out of his clasp. She felt the band of his fingers on hers already giving way. Staring at her other hand, she felt the tug, and heard the break of stitching. She could almost see the threads snapping beneath her grasp. The button wasn't going to hold her weight and she was too terrified to let go of it.*

"Holly, you said you trusted me. Let go." He slipped forward, releasing a strained grunt.

*The threads broke, his grip wasn't strong enough, his balance lost in trying to hang onto her. He was coming over the side of the bridge with her, falling slower as she dropped away first. He met her scream with a bloodcurdling yell.*

"Holly!"

Desperate to prove her trust, and keep him safe from dying, she opened her hand and grabbed for his wrist.

"That's it," he pulled, dragging her up and over the edge of the bridge.

He fell back in the snow, panting.

"Lark," she crawled forward, climbing over his legs, hugging him tight around the neck as he sat up.

"It's over." He held her face and kissed her. "Honey, it's all over. Look."

She watched him reach in his pocket and pull out a button. The clues were always there in her subconscious, warning her of the end.

"You've been sending yourself these buttons. You didn't remember any of our past lives, but in your mind, there was this one last trace of your fate. Think back to the all the buttons you got, the ones we found. You were there each time. You cut the buttons from the coat."

"To remind me." She turned the button over in her hand. "The missing buttons are from the vintage coat. When I bought it, I thought there was just one missing. Then suddenly they all were and I just assumed I was mistaken."

Lark's arms folded around her and held her snug, warming her with the sweep of his hand against her back.

"If not for the buttons, I don't think I would have ever known how to save you. Such an important detail, I don't understand how I ever missed it. I should have known the button wasn't strong enough to support your weight."

"It doesn't matter now." She stroked the back of his head, hugging him. "We're alive."

"And no one is stalking you." He got up from the ground, pulling her to her feet.

"It's hard to believe I did all those things without realizing." She took a deep breath. "I mailed one to the theater and one to my house. Then there was the one in the bathroom and another in the kitchen. So many, and I don't recall any of it."

"Yet it happened. What can I say? The mind is complex and not for us to understand. But I do appreciate the way yours works."

“Crazily?”

“Beautifully.” He brushed snow from her clothing.

“Oh, Lark, we’re not going to die.”

“Not today and not any time soon.” He pulled her close. “We’re going to get married, have children, and grow old together. We’re finally going to live a long and happy life. I’m going to cherish every minute and never look back.”

“How can you be so sure? We’ve only known each other a few days.”

“Honey, we’ve had lifetimes to get to know each other. I’ve always loved you.”

“That’s what extreme circumstances make people think.”

Lark lifted her chin. “Tell me you don’t know deep in your heart you love me.”

She tried to find an inkling of doubt. “I can’t. I fell in love with you the moment you sat in that booth with me at Primrose Place.”

“Then nothing else matters. If there is one thing I learned from the past, I’m destined to love you until the end of time.”

## **The End**

### **About the Author:**

Even though I was born on Halloween, in New Jersey, USA. I've actually lived most my life in Alabama. Married with one son, I have a farm full of animals and a house full of cats. Luckily, since my husband and I are in the contracting business, I reaped the benefits of having a huge house to fit all my hobbies including taking in stray felines and collecting books.

I've written for more years than I should say, but lets just say it started in the 1970's and we'll not get into just how old I am. I started out a poet and have had hundreds of poems published in magazines. I dabbled with short stories and non-fiction, yet novels were a lingering attraction.

After the turn of the century I turned my attention to writing longer works. E-publishing gave me leeway in what I wanted to publish and erotic romance became a big word in my house as I reworked old stories to fit the genre.

I love writing stories and with a supportive family, I spend endless hours doing what I love. I believe I have the perfect life...well outside of having a few billion dollars, I do.



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