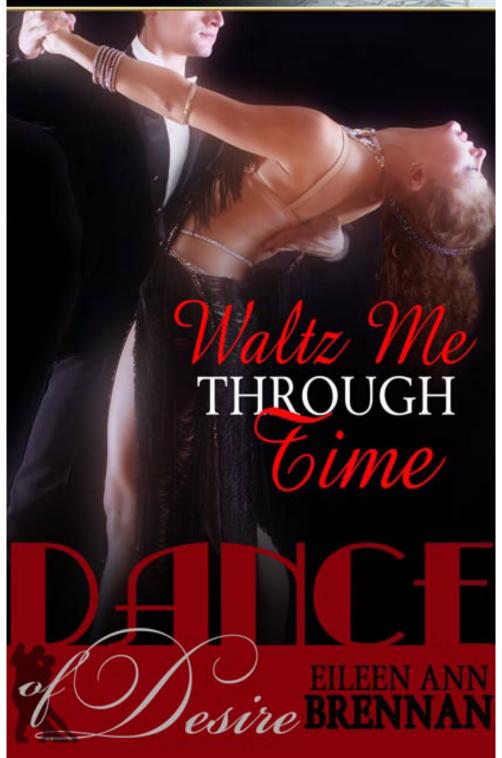
## ELLORA'S CAVE VOYAGER



## Waltz Me Through Time

Eileen Ann Brennan

Stanley Caldwell is ecstatic to finally locate his wife after losing her during a lively dance...but he's not thrilled with what he finds!

She doesn't remember the dance.

She doesn't remember him.

She doesn't remember she belongs in 1902...

#### An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



Waltz Me Through Time

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# WALTZ ME THROUGH TIME

Eileen Ann Brennan

#### Dedication

To Pookie – the most attentive posse a girl could ever hope for.

To the Wild Writers – you know who you are.

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## **Chapter One**

Juliana Douglas stood in the doorway of her shop and watched the taillights of her boyfriend's car peel off into the early morning light. She hadn't meant to start an argument but in the six months they'd been seeing each other Alex had had to work every weekend and every major holiday. The thought of another lonely Friday night had sent her off the deep end. It wasn't fair that the pilots with seniority took such advantage of him.

She sighed, savoring her first sip of coffee. That's what mornings were for—coffee, well, coffee and sex but she'd have to settle for coffee today. Goodness that man could be so pigheaded! Why couldn't he try to trade to get a weekend off?

It was early but it wouldn't hurt to open the shop. You never knew when a stray tourist or jogger might stumble on in. Second Hand Rose brought in a decent income. When the economy was good there were always people looking for a bargain and when the economy tanked *everyone* was looking for that bargain. The sign above the door said she handled *gently used, elderly* merchandise, which consisted of anything from vintage clothing to antique furniture and everything in between.

Nestled in a converted house a block off St. George Street in St. Augustine, Florida, her shop had a steady stream of pedestrian traffic, which kept her busy most days. Living above the store was a godsend. The old sections of town were quaint and she loved being in the heart of the ancient city but if she had to regularly drive through the narrow streets, usually clogged with lost tourists, she'd slit her wrists. How Alex handled the sixty-mile commute to the airport in Jacksonville amazed her.

She flipped over the *Open* sign. A quick check of the weather told her it would be a perfect day to place a few large items along the side of the stoop leading up to the shop.

A standing dress form with a 1920s-style flapper dress, a brass coatrack and a stuffed badger would be today's pieces.

Reaching behind the checkout counter near the door, she turned on the radio, choosing an easy listening station that occasionally snuck in some classical. She liked the retro ambiance it added to the place. She looked about the shop and let out a contented sigh. Not much had changed when the old house had been converted. Existing walls remained, providing a mishmash of rooms where she displayed her mishmash of antiques. Gosh, she loved this place.

Grabbing her coffee mug, she wandered into the back room. Quiet mornings were the perfect time to wade through paperwork. As she settled down at her small desk the front door groaned and creaked open. Whoa-ho, it had been a good idea to open early. Her welcoming smile froze when she saw a heavyset shirtless man with more tattoos than Tommy Lee carrying a massive steamer trunk. His eyes darted around her shop as if he wasn't sure he was in the right place. Somehow, she didn't think he was.

"Can I help you?" She forced her smile to reach her eyes.

"I'm looking for Rose. She around?" The man swung the trunk down, almost knocking over a hand-cut crystal vase.

She grabbed the vase as it teetered on its stand and set it out of the way. "Rose? I'm afraid there's no one named — Oh, you mean like in Second Hand Rose?"

The man nodded.

"Actually, there is no Rose, but I'm the owner of the shop. I'm Juliana." The heavy odor of sweat and onions reached her and she tried not to wrinkle her nose. Evidently her visitor had missed his morning shower.

He gave her a puzzled look and squinted at her. "Then why don't ya call the place Second Hand Juliana?"

Juliana mentally rolled her eyes. Well, Tommy Lee didn't exactly look the type to know hit songs from the 1920s. "Long story. Can I help you with something?"

"Yeah. I was wondering if you'd buy this here trunk."

She ran her hand across the fine oak slats and fingered the brass latch. An intense yearning, bordering on longing, welled up inside her. She had to have it. A handsome piece, large enough to use as a coffee table and it would be great for storage. She could probably move it within a week or so. That is, if she could bear to part with it.

"I might be. How much are you asking for it?"

He gave her a price, a little on the low side of what she thought it might be worth but who was she to argue? If that's what the man wanted...

"Do you have the key?"

"Nah. That's why I'm willin' to let it go fer so cheap. There's stuff rattlin' around inside but it's just a bunch o' old useless junk."

Hmm. Why was he in a hurry to get rid of it, especially without checking what was inside? Was it not his to sell? "Where did you get it?" she asked, hoping her suspicions didn't come through in her tone.

"I'm cleanin' out my auntie's attic. She lives down the street a piece." He pointed in some obscure direction. "We're puttin' her in a nursin' home. Loosin' her marbles, ya know?" He twirled his index finger next to his temple. "This here's been sittin' in the attic long's I can remember. We gotta git her moved by tomorra and none in the family wants it so we're thinkin' of makin' some money on it."

That sounded reasonable. She glanced at the lock again. Maybe something from her collection of lost keys would fit the lock. It wasn't unheard of for trunks and suitcases to have standardized locks. It didn't matter. She had to have this trunk. It was a work of art. "Okay. You've got a deal. I'll be right back." She went to her office and quickly returned with a check for the requested amount before he changed his mind. "If you have anything else you want to get rid of keep me in mind."

The man shoved the check into his jeans pocket and nodded. "Will do." He was through the door and down the block before she had a chance to thank him.

The ringtone of her cell phone chimed and she withdrew the slimline model from her back jeans pocket. A warm glow settled over her at seeing Alex's ID. They'd had a few arguments over the course of their relationship but he never failed to set things right.

"Hello?"

"Shopgirl! Hey listen, I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. I know when I've got a good thing going and I don't want to mess it up. Forgive me for being a jerk?"

It wasn't exactly a poetic apology but she guessed it was the best a guy like Alex could do. She couldn't help thinking that if he really wanted to apologize he'd figure out some way to get a weekend off and spend it with her. Hell, she'd close her shop if she could spend the time with him. "Well, I guess so."

"That's my girl. Do you miss me?"

"Of course I do." And it was true. She missed him and hated his erratic flight schedule. It changed frequently, and never knowing when he would be in town put a strain on their relationship. But they had weathered it so far and she hoped her understanding and patience—this morning's argument notwithstanding—would soon push her handsome airline pilot into popping the big question. "I had the most wonderful antique drop into my lap after you left. A giant steamer trunk. It looks to be from the late nineteenth century."

"Another piece of junk to pawn off on the unsuspecting public?" His soft chuckle took away some of the sting from his words but it showed again how little he thought of her shop. He treated her business like a hobby, something to keep her occupied until she got a *real* job.

"Alex! You don't mean that!" Although she more than suspected he did.

"Sorry, kiddo, I have to go. You know how testy the passengers get when you leave them sitting on a plane without a pilot. Even you know you gotta keep the customers happy." Gotta keep the customers happy. Well why couldn't he exert a little effort and keep her happy? Lately, the more she opened up, the more he closed down. They never seemed to do anything but go to bed. Not that she didn't enjoy sex but except for an infrequent casual dinner out they spent all their time together in her apartment. When they first started dating, he'd taken her clubbing and dancing all the time, but they hadn't done that in months.

"Okay. I'll see you on Monday night, right?" She hoped she didn't sound as needy to him as she sounded to herself.

"Count on it. I don't know what time I'll get there so wait up for me."

"All right." She hesitated then blurted out, "I love you, Alex." She'd never come right out and said it before but it seemed like the thing to say, especially after his apology for an argument she'd started.

"Yeah. Sure. Gotta go." His phone clicked off.

Her face heated at his abrupt end to the call. Well, that was about as successful as lead balloons, the Titanic and new formula Coke. She shrugged. What did she expect? He was in a hurry and she'd blindsided him.

The old trunk caught her attention. If she couldn't have Alex, she could at least check if she had a key that might fit the trunk. Who knew what sort of treasure lay within? Of course it was probably just a bunch of junk like Tommy Lee said but she couldn't resist the temptation to create a little drama. What if it was filled with diamonds or thousand dollar bills? She chuckled. *Get a grip, girl*. If there had been the slightest chance of anything valuable being in the trunk Tommy Lee would have taken an ax to it.

Reaching behind the checkout counter, she pulled out a sapphire blue velvet box shaped like a treasure chest. Opening it, she removed the top tray, which held a conglomeration of mismatched earrings. It was against her religion to throw out a lone earring. The minute you did, its mate would turn up. Besides, who said earrings had to

match? She retrieved two large dangling orphans and slipped them into the holes in her ears.

Beneath the tray lay a collection of stray keys. As she rummaged through them, their hollow clanking sounded like mournful cries for recognition. She selected three that appeared to be the only candidates that would fit and knelt before the chest. The first two fit the lock but did not turn. The third also fit. She closed her eyes and sent out a wish to the key gnomes.

Here goes nothing.

\* \* \* \* \*

Throughout the day Juliana eyed her "treasure trunk", wondering if it really did hold more than junk. She felt drawn to it, as if she couldn't take her next breath until she discovered its mysterious contents. Then again, it wasn't something she wanted to do with an audience around and it made her nuts that she couldn't investigate it. Not that she was complaining. The balmy springlike day had brought out droves of snowbirds who thought seventy degree weather in February was a miracle.

That morning as the last key turned and she cracked open the lid a group of young mothers with preschool children invaded her shop. Juliana had been waylaid answering questions and making sure busy little bodies didn't destroy her store. After that there was a constant flow of customers. Best of all, they were *buying* customers not just *looking* customers.

By late afternoon the traffic had dwindled to nothing. As glorious as the day had been, once the sun set the temperatures could easily drop to the thirties. A forty degree variance wasn't unusual but it did tend to send everyone scrambling indoors. She brought in her coatrack, badger and antique dress dummy and, flipping the sign to *Closed*, pulled down the shade and locked the door.

Now was her chance. Switching off the overhead lights, she turned on a 1960s pole lamp. Its soft glow created a small island of intimacy around the trunk. Kneeling, she

turned the key and pushed open the lid. A musty smell laced with the strong scent of lavender reached out and tickled her nose.

What appeared within the trunk took her antique-loving breath away. Someone had carefully preserved the remnants of a life within the depths of the old steamer trunk. As she gazed at the upper layer of articles Juliana felt torn between treasure hunter and interloper. Whoever had packed this enormous trunk had obviously expected to return to it but apparently never had.

Her heart raced as she knelt and reverently lifted and gazed in wonder at one item after another. Newspaper clippings, old-fashioned dance cards and theatre programs. There were even a few pieces of sheet music. She skimmed each without really seeing it, so overwhelmed at what had fallen into her possession.

Beneath a few old newspapers she uncovered a rhinestone tiara, which she immediately placed on her head, a collapsible silk top hat, ladies' fans and all sorts of wonderful objects. There was even a delicate lace shawl wrapped in faded tissue paper. The lavender scent gently touched her as she admired the intricate black lace shot through with gold threads. She'd been right. It was a treasure trunk.

She held the shawl up, spellbound by the delicate pattern and silky fabric. It shimmered even in the dim light. She imagined it was the type of shawl a society lady might wear to a glamorous event with her husband...or an intimate rendezvous with her lover. Juliana had to force herself to put the exquisite garment down and continue her exploration.

As she removed each item, she examined it and carefully placed it on the floor around her, sorting the treasures. One yellowed newspaper article caught her eye. It contained a large picture of a dancing couple. The woman in a flowing gown appeared graceful and at ease with wherever her partner led her. Juliana felt a pang of disappointment that the woman's back was to the camera and only a slight hint of her profile was displayed. Her hair was sculpted in a fashionable chignon and she appeared to be fascinated by her partner. Juliana shifted her attention to the partner, who seemed

to be every bit the society gentleman, a tall man whose face had been caught fully by the camera.

Juliana stared at his expression and a feeling of longing swept over her. A longing so deep, so pervasive she forgot to breathe. *My goodness, what would it be like to have a man look at me like that?* 

Was it the way the camera caught him mid-turn as if he were posing for a portrait? The lighting? Difficult to say what it was but he had eyes for no one except the woman in his arms. His expression held such a look of hunger, of possessiveness...of love.

It reached out to Juliana, drawing her into the picture. Yet behind the loving expression she detected a hint of mystery, of danger. The dancer had high cheekbones and a strong jawline that suggested he possessed more than a little bit of arrogance. Only the hint of a cleft in his chin saved him from looking ruthless. His mouth slanted up in what could be the start of a smile. Pity she'd never know if he was prone to smiling. Even though the paper was yellowed and a bit crinkled she could tell he had the lean body of an athlete, which was perfectly encased in a black tuxedo with tails. His dark hair was slicked back in an unfamiliar, rather dated style, making her wonder when that look had been in fashion.

She skimmed the caption to the picture. *Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Caldwell III enjoying a waltz at the Ponce de Leon Hotel during a ball given in honor of the marriage of Mr. Henry Flagler to Miss Mary Lily Kenan.* 

Oh my gosh! She had a piece of St. Augustine history right here. When was this? She turned the article over, scrambling for a date. February 21, 1902. Good grief. That was today's date. The picture was taken today but over a hundred years ago. She stared at the dancers again and sighed aloud as she gazed down at the debonair gentleman. Whatever he had, he certainly knew how to use it. Mr. Stanley Caldwell the Third had been one incredible male specimen.

Jeez, she must really be lonely. What was she doing drooling over a guy who probably died of old age back in the 1950s?

Looking around at the piles on the floor, she placed the article on a stack of dance cards and theater programs. Her stomach growled, tearing her away from her treasure trove to glance at the cuckoo clock behind the register. Ten o'clock and she'd barely made it halfway through the trunk. Still, it was time to clean up the clutter, grab some dinner and get to bed. She'd finish inventorying tomorrow.

She carefully stacked her newfound cache back into the trunk, leaving the lid up in the hopes of dissipating some of the musty scent that overrode the intoxicating lavender fragrance. She congratulated herself on remembering to set the security system and nightlights. St. Augustine wasn't a hotbed of crime but a girl had to be careful. She jogged upstairs but stopped halfway and returned to the trunk. Something about that lace shawl made her want to keep it near. She retrieved it, then pounded up the stairs.

Her apartment was cozy and charming—real estate terms for small and old—but she loved it. She laid the shawl on the living room couch, again admiring the fragile black and gold pattern. Shuffling through her CDs, she selected a Debussy. The old picture of the dancers had put her in a classical mood and *Clair de Lune* was one of her favorites.

The soft music filled the apartment as she wandered into the kitchen and poured herself a generous glass of chardonnay. Opening the refrigerator, she hoped something besides half empty condiment bottles and jars would appear. She really did need to go shopping. She brightened, remembering her leftovers from when Alex had ordered takeout last night for dinner. There they were on the bottom shelf behind his six pack of Budweiser.

She retrieved the box and ate while standing at the kitchen sink. The gorgonzolawalnut salad had just the right amount of tang and sweetness to make her taste buds pop. She took another sip of wine as the music wove a magical trance around her, leaving her swaying to the hypnotic chords and arousing her, making her yearn for Alex and his talented hands...and other body parts. Once she'd had enough to keep body and soul together she returned the remaining salad to the fridge and topped off her almost empty wineglass. Even though she was alone tonight, something about that old newspaper picture had her longing to feel sexy. The thought of flannel boxers and an oversized t-shirt, her usual outfit when Alex wasn't there, held no appeal in her semi-aroused state.

Rummaging in her bureau, she found a sheer, black, floor-length negligee that left nothing to the imagination. A favorite of Alex's, it had a neckline cut to the waist and a front slit that stopped an inch below her crotch. Three long satin ribbons served as a belt. Her blood thrummed and she remembered his hungry expression the first time she'd worn it. She'd opened the door to welcome him back. They hadn't made it to the bedroom. He'd had her good and hard right against the front door of the apartment. Oh yeah, the gown had been a good investment.

She sipped her wine as she released her unruly auburn hair from its ponytail and redid it in a haphazard chignon. Careful not to dislodge the lovely tiara, she secured the mass of curls with a giant clip, letting wayward tendrils frame her face. Next she stripped and tunneled her way into the negligee, tied the ribbons and turned to the mirror.

The woman who stared back looked primed and ready for sex. The sheer negligee caressed her generous breasts and her nipples puckered aggressively, yearning to be teased. The slit revealed a shapely leg kept toned by frequent runs through the ancient city streets. A faint flush blossomed up her torso and ended at her cheeks. The tiara sparkled in the dim light, giving her a regal but wanton appearance.

Jeez, she looked like the *Playboy* version of Snow White.

She took another sip of wine then rolled the cool, wet glass across her breast. The filmy garment was no protection and she shivered at the sharp contrast of the chilly glass against her heated nipple. Placing the glass on the bureau, she pushed the fabric aside, allowing an unrestricted view of her breasts. She could almost feel Alex's desire as she cupped herself and stroked her thumbs across her nipples. Her fingers slid down

a silky path to tangle with the curls at the juncture of her thighs. She stared at herself in the mirror, wanting, needing to feel passion, excitement. Reaching lower, she slipped a finger between the soft folds of her pussy, seeking the slick portal as she swayed with the closing notes of the Debussy piece.

One finger wasn't enough, neither was two. She'd grown used to Alex's thick, eager cock and her fingers didn't hold the same magic. What she needed now was her battery-operated buddy. Smoothing her negligee back into place, she took another sip of wine. It was going down way too easily tonight.

She'd have another glass, put on the CD again and climb into bed with ten inches of hard, thick plastic. It wasn't a hard, thick man but for tonight it would have to do. The black and gold shawl caught her attention as she walked through the living room. Now that would be sexy. If she was going to play dress up, she may as well go all the way. She draped it around her shoulders and tied a loose knot below her breasts. She shivered as the silken fabric glided across her naked skin. It was cool yet at the same time as warm as a lover's caress.

Closing her eyes, she let the magic of the shawl seep into her very being. The distinct impression of waltzing in some bygone ballroom overtook her. Laughter, clinking glasses and some unidentifiable music filled her head. She opened her eyes and the illusion disappeared. Sighing at her own whimsy, she executed a less than graceful pirouette into the kitchen.

As she refilled her wineglass, the haunting strains of *Clair de Lune* reached her ears. She stared at the glass. Maybe she didn't need another. She could have sworn she hadn't put the CD on yet.

No. Wait. The sound wasn't coming from the living room but from below. Had she forgotten to turn off the radio in the shop? It wouldn't be the first time, but wasn't that strange? The station was playing *Clair de Lune*. She giggled. The DJ must be having a Debussy night too.

Unlocking her apartment door and switching on the shop's lights, she traipsed down the steps but stopped before she reached the bottom. She really had had too much to drink. The music seemed to be coming from the steamer trunk. Out of the corner of her eye a blur caught her attention, but when she turned to look it was gone. Then it seemed to appear on the other side of the room. She stared at her wineglass again. Too much of a good thing? The blur shot by her again, only this time it seemed to take form. It looked like two people...dancing?

As she watched, a woman in a flowing emerald gown and a man in a tuxedo with tails waltzed by, never bumping into anything in the crowded shop. It was as if they danced right through the objects in their path. Electricity crackled in the air as the dancers whirled by her again. Juliana descended the remaining steps and stared, openmouthed, as the dancers moved faster and faster. The man seemed to take a more solid form but the woman didn't change. They were no longer dancing in time to the music but glided by at a furious pace.

Suddenly a bright light flashed. A roar like a freight train rumbled through the shop.

The lights flickered.

Darkness swallowed her.

### **Chapter Two**

Juliana stood frozen in place, her pulse pounding like African drums. The lights flickered once, twice, then stayed on. She blinked. Then blinked again. The woman was gone but the tuxedoed man stood before her.

*Mr. Stanley Caldwell the Third?* 

His eyes, dark as two turbulent pools, widened when he saw her. He extended his arms and stepped toward her. She had the feeling he would pull her into those arms and crush her to him. She stepped back and he stopped as if he knew he frightened her.

"Juliana. My darling Juliana." Her name burst from his lips as if he'd waited years to say it. His tone lay somewhere between a whisper and an entreaty but Juliana couldn't process the scene before her. How did he get into her shop, and more importantly, who the hell was he? No way on Earth could he be who she thought he was.

She squinted. "Um, do I know you?"

He stepped back as if she'd struck him. Then his eyes narrowed and the merest hint of a scowl crossed his handsome features. "I should have realized," he murmured, closing his eyes. He took a deep breath, seeming to center himself. The scowl vanished. He opened his eyes and his mouth curved into a knowing smile as he held out his hand. "May I have this dance?" The strains of *Clair de Lune* rose from the trunk.

The cuckoo clock picked that moment to announce it was midnight. Juliana stared at the man. His smile deepened and his eyes twinkled. That start of a smile from the newspaper picture was now completed a hundred years later.

The clock continued to chirp. Maybe she was the one who was cuckoo? She gripped the wineglass, startled she hadn't dropped it. Sliding her finger up the smooth stem, she chuckled. That was it. Either she was drunk or dreaming, possibly both. Mr. Stanley Caldwell remained motionless, hand extended.

If she'd thought he was hot in the old picture she'd been sadly mistaken. Hot didn't begin to cover the image she'd conjured up now. Starting at his gleaming black shoes, her gaze worked its way up his well-proportioned body. There was something about a man in a tux, especially one with tails, that made her mouth water and her heartbeat quicken.

She stopped to linger over his broad chest and imagine it without the starched shirt and sleek black jacket. In her mind's eye she could see sharp planes and contoured muscles. She backtracked from his wonderful shoulders and noted how they tapered to a narrow waist and slender hips. She would bet the grocery money that his butt was firm and well-rounded.

She lifted her eyes to his face. An amused expression greeted her. "I didn't think an offer to dance required quite so much contemplation. It's really not a difficult question."

The low timbre of his voice sent a thrill down her spine. The tone had just a hint of a Southern drawl and reminded her of plantations and mint juleps sipped on wide verandas.

He arched an eyebrow.

*Oh yeah, he's waiting for an answer. What the heck.* 

If she was dreaming, why not go with it? She took a fortifying gulp of wine and placed her glass on a nearby shelf. She'd probably have one hell of a hangover in the morning, but two molten chocolate eyes were searching her face, demanding she acquiesce.

She slipped her hand into his large, welcoming palm and he drew her into his arms. Taking the classic waltz stance she'd seen on *Dancing with the Stars*, she arched her back and placed her other hand on his shoulder. With a nod and a smoldering stare, he led her in a tight circle in the center of the shop while he hummed *Clair de Lune*. No wild twirling. No frenzied whirlwind. A simple, restrained dance.

Testing, she squeezed his shoulder. For a figment of her imagination, he certainly felt warm...and solid...and very real. A slightly familiar spicy scent, like old-fashioned bay rum, surrounded him, calling to mind exclusive balls and nights spent twirling in his arms.

"It is customary to converse with one's partner while dancing but I find it difficult to put coherent thoughts together. You are still more ravishing than should be allowed." His husky words melted over her as his eyes captured hers and refused to release them. Self-conscious, she blinked and peeked back, then gathered her courage and perused the depths of his eyes with open interest.

#### What did he mean *still*?

He seemed to hunger for the sight of her. His gaze moved from her eyes to her lips and hovered there so long they went dry. She ran her tongue across her upper lip but stopped when his stare widened then narrowed as he seemed to focus solely on the delicate, pink tip. A quivering sensation shot to her clit, igniting a slow flame that licked the tender flesh between her legs. She tightened her muscles to prolong the delicious throbbing.

After a moment, his gaze roved lower. At his sharp intake of breath she tripped but his strong hand on her waist held her steady. Following his gaze, she saw what had caught his interest. Her negligee gaped open, fully reveling one plump breast. In reply to his attention her nipple hardened and puckered, inviting not only his look but his touch. A sharp yearning clenched her belly and wetness gathered between her folds. Her clit tingled as he stared at her breast. The oddest feeling of déjà vu struck her without warning. She stumbled again, and again he caught her.

As impossible as it seemed, somehow she had the impression she'd danced with this man before. If nothing else, this was certainly the most vivid dream or, she couldn't stop a soft chuckle, hallucination she'd ever had. Before she could latch on to another impression he swung her in a tight circle and gathered her closely in his arms.

His breathing deepened and she felt a growing moisture on his palm as his hold tightened on her hand. She answered this physical response by shifting her hips closer to him, so close she could feel the heat of his body through the sheer fabric of her negligee.

He raised his eyes to meet hers. Midnight pools filled with hunger stared at her. The music played on but he slowed their steps, reducing the tempo of the dance until they barely moved. His hand on her waist eased her closer still. With their next turn she nestled her hips against him. The hard ridge of his erection felt like heaven as it prodded her belly. She closed her eyes and rubbed against him, savoring the length, the power of his thick cock.

At her touch he lowered his head, grazing her temple with his lips so softly she wasn't sure if he actually touched her or if she just wished his lips were on her flesh.

"I can't decide if your skin is as soft as a fresh Georgia peach or moonlight on a forgotten lake. I only know that I want to touch all of it, all of you. I thought I would never find you again."

"Huh? What are you talking about?" She lifted her head. His odd words brought her out of the hypnotic state his closeness had lulled her into.

"Nothing important, darling. Being with you is all I've ever wanted, all I've ever needed to make me complete." His warm breath on her ear sent her back under his sensuous spell.

The man could certainly turn a simple phrase into poetry. And his touch sent waves of desire pulsing through her. She'd had realistic dreams before but this topped every one.

His mouth skimmed along her jawline then down her neck to the sensitive spot above her shoulder. The spot Alex never seemed to find. Her dream man took his time, nibbling, sucking, licking until he had her gasping and writhing in his arms. He grasped her hand tighter, as if afraid she'd pull away. Not likely. She wanted him to continue what he was doing until, oh, maybe next Thursday. Shifting her other hand,

she wove her fingers through his hair. The strands sifted through her fingers like fine silk. An insatiable hunger smoldered in her belly, making her sway to feel his heated cock press more firmly against her.

Without warning, he lifted his head. His mouth hovered over hers for an eternity before he lowered his lips. His kiss was slow, probing as if remembering, savoring and delighting in what he found.

With each moment the kiss grew more insistent, demanding that she allow access not only to her mouth but to her very being. His tongue stroked hers, searching out her most sensitive areas with practiced skill. She moaned her disappointment when he lifted his lips to caress her face with his gaze.

"Juliana, Juliana," he groaned. "Have you any idea how long I've searched for you?"

His words made no sense but when he lowered his mouth to hers again all thoughts, all questions flew from her mind. She shuddered under the assault of his lips, letting him probe, taste, sample anything he wanted.

He released her hand and she skimmed it up his arm and across his shoulder, vaguely noting the strength of the lean muscled contours before she cradled the back of his head with both her hands. She shuddered as his hands traveled down her sides to grasp her bottom and pull her tighter against him. Eagerly she welcomed the increased intimacy. The heat coiling in her belly slowly snaked downward to center in her throbbing pussy.

He broke the kiss and ran a trail of open-mouthed kisses along her neck and shoulder. With one delft movement he untied the elegant shawl and let it slip from his fingers to the floor. "Oh, Juliana. Too long. Too long since I've had you. I've no finesse, no control." His lips centered over her exposed breast. He let out an anguished groan and sucked her distended nipple into his mouth.

She nearly wept from the sheer glory of the sensation. His mouth, both gentle and rough, sent shards of excitement racing to her clit. She rubbed her pelvis against his

hips, reveling in the length of his erection but it wasn't enough. She wanted him inside. She needed his rigid shaft pulsing inside her.

"Oh God." Oh no, did that pitiful whimper come from her?

He lifted his head while his hand continued to fondle her other breast, plumping it, squeezing it, circling his heated palm over her nipple.

"I know, darling," he rasped. "I can't wait any longer either." He walked her backward until her legs touched the smooth wooden slats of the trunk.

A wicked smile played across his sensuous lips. "The steamer trunk." He pulled her toward him and reached behind her to push the lid closed. "Somehow it seems rather poetic, doesn't it, my love?" He eased her back to lie on top of the trunk. Her negligee fell open, exposing her fully. His eyes widened as they swept the length of her, then lingered on the silken triangle between her legs. She spread her thighs, inviting his perusal. The scent of her arousal reached her and she hoped he noticed it also. When his nostrils flared, a small tingle of satisfaction flickered through her.

He remained at the foot of the trunk, staring down at her. A small bead of sweat trickled down his temple to his shadowed cheek. "You're more beautiful than I could possibly have remembered."

"Please," was all she could utter but the glint of hunger in his eyes told her she'd said the right thing.

He removed his coat, dropping it with aplomb.

Leaning up on her elbows, she watched as with equal composure he stripped off the vestiges of civilization until only a naked, magnificently aroused male remained.

She studied his body with the same intense curiosity he'd given her, drinking in the sight of his lean, powerful physique, of well-defined pecs covered with a fine mat of dark, crinkly hair. Her gaze followed that hair as it arrowed down a set of drool worthy abs only to fan out again and surround his sex. Her breath caught in her throat at the beauty of his sex—his cock, long and thick and jutting out from his body, his heavy balls begging for her touch. She looked her fill as moisture and anticipation flooded her

pussy. When she could drag her eyes away from his glorious erection she noted his sinewy thighs and muscled calves. Dancer's legs, she thought, and allowed her smoldering gaze to drift upward to his guarded one.

"Do you remember yet?" His voice held a note of optimistic pleading but she didn't understand what he wanted from her. She closed her eyes, searching for a memory, but it lay just beyond her grasp. It didn't matter. All she knew was that she wanted him more than she'd ever wanted any man.

She opened her eyes. He hadn't moved. His hands had remained clenched at his sides during her perusal of his body.

Somewhere from the depths of her inner soul she acknowledged to herself she wasn't dreaming, she wasn't drunk. What she did with this mysterious stranger was of her own free will. That same part of her soul told her that he wasn't a stranger, that her fleeting impressions were more than that. They were...memories.

She leaned back on the trunk, spreading her legs. "Please," she said again, lifting her arms in age-old invitation.

"Juliana!" The cry ripped from his throat and he fell on her. His heavy body crushed her between him and the polished wood of the trunk. She reveled in the feel of his hard muscles fitted to her welcoming curves. "My Juliana."

Without waiting, he laid claim to her; the force of his penetration shattered her fragile hold on reality. She belonged to him, whoever he was. He remained motionless, his full length buried to the hilt. She used that moment to adjust to him and revel in the sheer joy of having him inside her, and sighed in contentment.

At the sound, he braced himself on his forearms and began a slow measured dance, thrusting and withdrawing, thrusting and withdrawing. Contentment immediately morphed into a wild storm of need. She met him thrust for thrust, bracing her feet on the trunk and lifting her hips.

He stared down at her, his dark brown eyes hooded now so that only raw demanding desire shone through. His heady, spicy scent aroused her senses. She entwined her arms around his sculpted shoulders and arched herself into his possession as he plundered her dripping slit.

His thick cock filled her, stretched her, leaving no question about his passion for her. Her mind whirled faster than his dancing and desire flooded through her. She gripped his sweat-slicked shoulders, digging her nails into the sinewy flesh in an attempt to ground herself but it was useless. Her entire world whittled down to their fevered bodies as they edged toward the moment they would explode. She arched her hips higher, taking him in again and again. His grunt of satisfaction sent another wave of heat rolling through her.

The sound of slick flesh slapping slick flesh, the heat of his burning cock as it plunged deeper and deeper inside her, the sight of his bared teeth and straining neck muscles sent her spiraling out of control. Her orgasm seemed to pick her up and slam her against the shore like a ship wrecking on the rocks.

With a strangled groan, her mysterious dancer arched back and gave in to his own climax. She shuddered at the sensation of his warm, sticky essence shooting into her. Clenching her pussy, she milked him and tried to prolong his orgasm. With one last thrust he froze then collapsed on top of her.

After a long moment, as sleep unrelentingly claimed her, he nuzzled her neck and placed a soft kiss below her ear. From somewhere far away she heard a deep, rasping drawl. "Forgive me, darling. I swear I'll never lose you again."

\* \* \* \* \*

Juliana awoke to the gentle yet insistent nudge of a long, thick erection against her thigh. An instant later a hot, probing mouth nuzzled her breast, rooting until it centered over her nipple. The first suck sent a tremor that made her shiver with a wave of pleasure. Oh how she loved being woken up this way.

Keeping her eyes closed, she gave herself over to the intense desire for her determined lover. A warm hand skimmed up her side to cup her other breast.

Languidly, she stretched her arms over her head before dropping them around muscled shoulders so taut, so sleek they could have been carved from marble.

"Oh yes," she sighed when the thick pad of his thumb began a circular motion around that nipple. It tightened into a turgid bud as he continued to nibble and suckle her other breast.

There was no point in opening her eyes. Her exhausted body told her it was the middle of the night and darkness blanketed the room, yet her mind pictured every inch of her mysterious lover.

A surge of anticipation sang through her veins when a firm knee nudged her thighs apart. Her shallow breaths caught in her throat. With a sigh, she ran her index finger down the length of his erection before cupping his heavy balls. He knelt motionless between her legs, allowing her the enjoyment of fondling his soft sac. She knew the pleasure she gave and reveled in his helpless groans.

"I can't wait, darling," he said, brushing her hand aside. He gripped her calves, one powerful hand on each leg, and lifted them over his shoulders, leaving her open and vulnerable to his touch. "Put your hands over your head," he said. "Hold on to the headboard."

She did as he asked, grabbing the cool, round bars of the brass bed. The motion arched her back, leaving her feeling like a bowstring pulled taut, waiting for the hunter to make his use of her.

In the total darkness sight was impossible but being deprived of it intensified her other senses. His labored breathing filled her ears. His scent, hot and masculine, enveloped her, convincing her no one else had ever come together in such a trembling frenzy of need. His hands skimmed up and down her thighs, inching ever closer on each pass but stopping before they brushed the soft hair at her juncture.

Her clit throbbed with a desperate yearning to feel his touch, the ache so deep she would have reached down and satisfied herself but he'd told her to hold the bars of the

headboard and she would do whatever he asked. She tried to clench her thighs together to grant herself what he denied but his iron grip kept them spread.

"Please," she gasped, prepared to beg if that was what he wanted.

His hands slid to the apex of her thighs and his fingers gently stroked and separated her labia. She shuddered at the intimate touch and his unwavering confidence as he eased her open to toy with her juice-slickened folds. Her nipples ached and she longed to run her hands down her body to touch them, pinch them, do anything to relieve the mounting pressure.

He shifted and rose higher on his knees. As if he could read her mind, he leaned forward, stretching her legs impossibly wide. He scraped the coarse hair on his chin against her burning pussy. At the unexpected sensation she arched off the bed, searching for a closer, deeper contact. He rewarded her by drawing her sensitive clit into his mouth and gently sucking it. Two fingers found her wet slit and he finger-fucked her with the same intensity his mouth paid her tender nub.

She moaned her pleasure and he slid another finger into her. Releasing her clit, he traced the tip of his tongue in a quick darting motion around her plump labia. Her body sizzled and bucked as the first tremors of her climax broke from her. Then she froze, letting the sensations and spasms of her orgasm wash over her. As she hung between heaven and earth, her body trembling with the flush of her climax, he lifted his head, adjusted his position and drove his thickened cock into her wet, quivering slit.

He took her fast, plundering her depths with a primal rhythm, setting a maddening pace. She met him thrust for thrust, giving and taking, again steering herself toward the point of no return.

His strangled shout filled the room and his body stiffened as he ground himself into her. The pressure of his pelvis against her mons sent her reeling over the edge once more. Afterward he held her and she snuggled deeper into his arms. Hmm, she could stay here forever. His warm breath tickled her ear and she skimmed her palm across his chest before giving herself over to blissful sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

#### Riinnnggg!

Juliana rolled over and reached across the hair-dusted chest to turn off the alarm clock. Her head pounded as she snuggled back against the comforting warmth of the strong arm that cradled her. Sleep. She needed more sleep. It felt like a chorus of bell ringers were practicing in her head. Long, powerful legs entwined with hers and that muscled arm pulled her closer still. She playfully twirled her fingers in crinkly chest hair as she let herself drift back to that delicious place between wakefulness and sleep.

Her eyes popped open and she sucked in a sharp breath. Chest hair? Alex didn't have chest hair. She leaned back but a large hand held her in place.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," said a deep voice with a tinge of a Southern accent. "I do so enjoy watching you sleep. You make the most endearing little sounds, you know."

Ohmigod! She pushed to sit up. This time the large hand didn't stop her but stayed on the small of her back, drawing circles. She stared down into twinkling eyes that glinted with humor and more than a hint of lust.

"You! What are you doing here? Who are you?" Oh Jeez, that squeaking sound coming from her mouth couldn't belong to her.

"Do you really need an answer to that?" His low rumble held a speck of reproach, as if there was no question she should know who he was.

As she stared wide-eyed at the man lying beside her recognition slowly worked its way through to her muzzy brain. Oh no, this couldn't be happening. The guy was a dead ringer for that dancer in the newspaper clipping. The guy she'd had the dream about last night.

"Oh please, don't tell me it wasn't a dream. Don't tell me I really..." Fucked you? As if the feel of his heated body next to her skin wasn't enough, a quick glance down at herself confirmed that, yup, she was naked. She grabbed the sheet and scrambled off the bed. Bad idea. That left him completely exposed. Inching his way up until he leaned against the brass headboard, he made no move to hide his morning hard-on. She tried to concentrate on his face but that straining erection kept waving at her, diverting her attention.

"Why the sudden shyness, honey? You weren't the least bit bashful last night."

"Never mind last night." She scuttled to the foot of the bed and retrieved the bedspread that had fallen to the floor. She tossed it across his lap. "Cover that thing up. I can't concentrate with it flapping around like that."

He let out a long sigh and complied. Not that it helped much. The bedspread now formed a tent over his erection. Her eyes traveled north and were greeted with six-pack abs and miles of contoured chest. A faint memory of nibbling her way across that chest and strolling her fingers down those abs brought a hot flush to her cheeks.

"Do I know you?" She mentally rolled her eyes because to actually roll them would make the gonging sound in her head worse. My God, had she really asked the man in her bed if she knew him? Had she no pride? Now he'd think she made a habit of letting strange men into her bed. She wasn't a slut—wait. Didn't saying that make her one?

She'd done a lot of dim-witted things, things she wasn't proud of. However, sleeping with a real guy when she thought she was dreaming pretty much topped the "I am such a dope" list.

*Oh no. Did we use protection?* 

She shifted her gaze to the side of the bed, looking for any telltale sign that a condom had made an appearance last night.

"Juliana, my darling Juliana." The sound of her name, hooked with the endearment, brought her attention back to the devastatingly handsome man in her bed. His brows knit together and he fixed her with a probing stare as if he could read her mind. "I

feared this might happen," he said. "I just didn't realize how much it would pain me. You've been gone so long you've forgotten who I am, haven't you?"

"Gone?" She gathered the sheet more firmly around herself. Forgotten him? Let's face it, she had absolutely no idea who he was.

He shifted to get off the bed but she held up her hand. "Don't come any closer," she warned, not at all sure he'd listen.

"Don't look so panicked. You've no need to be afraid of me."

All traces of his earlier amusement had vanished and in its place she sensed an unwarranted possessiveness, as if one night in her bed entitled him to some special hold on her. He eased himself back against the headboard and raised his knee, mercifully shielding his erection-tent from view, but there was a new tenseness to his posture that contradicted his casual stance.

The haze that surrounded last night began to clear and a queasy knot formed in her stomach. She hadn't been drunk and conjured him up. He wasn't a dream. In her heart of hearts she'd known that but by pretending he was it had given her the freedom to be with him without reproach. And oh, how she'd wanted him last night.

During the night she'd awakened several times to such intense sexual arousal she'd wondered if she'd had an entire night filled with orgasms. Heat boiled up inside her as she remembered discovering him feasting on her pussy. How his tongue and his fingers had delved into her most intimate places, stroking, petting. He'd played with her for what seemed like hours, lapping, sucking, kissing her clit with his skillful tongue. When he'd finally let her come she'd been only able to moan from sheer exhaustion.

A tiny voice in the back of her mind hinted at how much she would enjoy another session like that. She quickly squelched the traitorous thought. Another, more realistic voice in her head told her being alone and naked with a man she couldn't remember meeting was probably not a good idea.

He evidently knew her but aside from his uncanny resemblance to that picture she couldn't place him. And yet she also couldn't shake the feeling that she did know him.

Another more disturbing thought struck her. How did he get into the shop? The doors and windows *were* locked, weren't they? The alarm *was* on, wasn't it? And what was all that whirling and blurry stuff? Well maybe the wine played a part there. She did a mental shrug. It probably also played a part in why she couldn't remember opening the door to let him in.

She took a step away. He didn't seem dangerous but you never knew about strange men you found in your bed. "Okay, you're right. I don't remember you beyond last night. Have we met before? I mean, I did let you in, right?"

"It felt wonderful to hold you in my arms again." His voice fell to a low drawl, reminding her of smooth Southern bourbon and long lingering kisses.

She pushed the thought aside and tried to pursue a few answers. "Why were you dancing in my shop?"

"Come back to bed. We are far from done getting reacquainted." He patted the mattress next to him and gave her a wicked smile. Butterflies danced in her stomach at the sight of that divine little cleft in his chin. She took a step toward him then stopped and shook off his spell.

"Again? Reacquainted?" Ugh! Didn't the man ever give a straight answer? Was he playing games or was he a few donuts short of a dozen?

"All right. I won't rush you. You need time for your memories to return." His voice was low, thoughtful, patient but she sensed a weariness in his words.

"Memories? Return?"

His eyes searched her face, looking for something he evidently didn't find because his lips quirked into a crooked smile and a wistful, resigned expression stole across his features. Her heart melted at the sadness, at the longing in his melancholy grimace. Something in that look opened her heart and made her want to go to him, curl against his solid chest and stay wrapped in his arms for at least a month—maybe two. She had no idea what he was looking for but she wanted to give him, show him, whatever he searched for in her expression.

Her blood ran faster, her skin heated and an empty ache welled up from deep in her chest. He needed her, not just her body. He needed *her*.

"Come back to bed...please." His voice was barely a whisper but his words were strained as if it took a great effort to utter them.

Her gaze shot to his and she came full blast against that look she'd seen on Stanley Caldwell's face in the news clipping. When she'd first seen it last night she'd wondered at its effect on a woman. Now she knew. His expression, so full of lust, hunger and possession, sent a blazing heat rampaging through her body. It carried with it a need so great she was sure to explode if it wasn't fulfilled. His voice, his expression, even his scent seemed to surround her. Surging waves of passion flooded her veins but she stood rooted to the spot, knowing if she gave in to her desire she would somehow lose herself, her very identity.

When she shook her head in an adamant no he leaped from the bed, dropping the bedspread. Swiveling his head back and forth, he scanned the room. "In that case we need to be up and about. Where are my clothes?"

Her mouth went dry at the unexpected sight of his hard body. His cock remained at full mast and an urge to lick her way down the length of it crossed her mind. She admired his easy movement and masculine grace and couldn't help but enjoy the view of his firm butt as he bent next to the bed. Watching him move with such elegance and style, it was easy to see why he was such a fantastic dancer.

A quick glimpse of his heavy balls through his spread thighs continued to stoke the fire building deep within her. Her clit tingled and the muscles in her stomach clenched, making her wonder if she should reconsider his offer of climbing into bed. With a determination that was fast waning, she again pushed her wayward thoughts aside.

"Up and about?" What an odd phrase but he was absolutely right. She had to get to work and he had to leave.

"Ah, your lovely fripperies. You looked most charming in them last night." He held out his hands, the tiara in one and the shimmering shawl in the other. "But you were always your most beautiful just being in my arms. How I have missed making love to you." His low drawl lingered over the words as if he were savoring the taste of them on his lips.

Her eyes flicked to his half-closed ones to find him returning a heavy lidded, hungry stare. Desire flooded her body with a need to have him inside her again. She forgot everything but the raw, burning sense of urgency she'd felt when he'd held her last night. She closed her eyes and took a deep centering breath.

"Put them on." His voice, whisper soft next to her ear, sounded strained, as if it took a great effort to utter those words.

She hadn't heard him approach but then, he did have the stealthy movements of a seasoned dancer. His warm breath tickled her neck, sending tiny shivers down her spine. He draped the shawl over her shoulders then gently placed the tiara on her head.

"So beautiful," he murmured as his mouth captured hers in a searing kiss. There was nothing hesitant or probing about his kiss. His lips took hers as if by right, vanquishing any protest. She tilted her head, letting her inner passion take control, and opened her mouth for his invading tongue. Excitement, desire and that uncanny sense of belonging overwhelmed her. Her soft curves melded to his solid muscles and a warm feeling of coming home enveloped her. She sank into him, letting him support her limp body with his lean, hard muscles. Strong arms circled her, pulling her tight against a powerful masculine frame. His thick cock pressed against her belly and she strained against it, wanting it, needing it inside her.

Her eyes popped open. *Good God. He's doing it again.* She placed her free hand against his chest and pushed.

He lifted his head and slowly stepped back.

Her legs had turned to jelly and for a second she thought they might give out. Her hands trembled. When she opened her mouth nothing came out. Taking a moment to steady herself, she gathered her resolve. She had to get rid of this guy and she couldn't

do it if she continued to behave like an idiot. She was a grown woman who'd made a mistake and now she needed to put it behind her.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have kissed you. You seem to make me do things I don't want to do." She brushed a strand of hair from her face. "Look, I know something very strange and very wonderful happened between us." She looked away to avoid the waves of desire that rolled off him. "But that was last night and this is today so we have to get back to reality and forget last night ever happened." Even as she spoke her body begged for his touch but she resisted its yearning.

She wiped her sweaty palm down the front of her sheet, leaving a faint trail.

His warm hands grasped her shoulders. "I told you, you have no reason to fear me. It hurts me deeply that you do."

She looked up into his soulful eyes. She found no threat, no danger, only a quiet determination and an unyielding resolution.

"Against my better judgment I'll leave you for a few moments to collect yourself while I collect my clothing. I recall now that I left my garments downstairs when I carried you to bed." His large hands squeezed her shoulders as if he could transfer his thoughts by his insistent touch. He released her and strode toward the door that led downstairs to the shop. "It pains me to leave you for even an instant."

Juliana blinked as he disappeared and the door clicked closed behind him. It took a moment to register.

Ohmigod! He's in my shop – naked!

What if someone glanced through the curtains? She clamored down the stairs but stopped midway. A quick blur caught her attention. A sudden crack of thunder sounded and a bright light blinded her.

Oh God, not again.

### **Chapter Three**

Juliana stepped into the shower and turned on the cold water full blast. A little shock therapy might be just the thing to help her hangover.

Well at least he'd left. She'd done a quick check of the shop but it had been empty—even his clothes were gone. If it weren't for the soreness between her thighs and the hickey on her left breast she'd wonder if she hadn't conjured him up. She wouldn't think about that faint blur. It had to have been a trick of the glaring sunlight playing across the floor and that loud noise had just been a car backfiring.

She should be opening the shop but she had to shower. His scent lingered on her. As heady and enticing as the fragrance was, she did herself no favor by continuing to inhale it. The man was a nutcase, probably some kind of a con artist who made his living off unsuspecting women. Now that she thought about it, he didn't look at all like that the man in the newspaper clipping. It was a trick of the light...and her overactive imagination...and her hangover. Thankfully a few aspirin and a bottle of water had handled that. He may have seemed like a sophisticated gentleman because of the tuxedo but he wasn't...and he really wasn't all that handsome either. Certainly not as handsome as Alex.

Alex. Oh no.

The remorse that she'd suppressed since she awoke with a strange man in her bed flooded through her. She closed her eyes and stood under the cold water, knowing the stinging spray wasn't sufficient penance for cheating on Alex. My God, how could she have slept with that guy? Who could have imagined she'd pick up some stranger and have sex with him? She wasn't that kind of girl. She never slept with a guy on the first date. Not even Alex.

A dull ache surrounded her heart. She'd never cheated on a man she was seeing and Alex was more than a casual affair. He felt the same way too, didn't he? He called her when he was out of town...when he could. Though more often he texted her. He spent whatever time he could with her. Well he didn't spend a whole lot of time but that was because of his job. But he did love her. She knew he did even if he'd never said so. Guys didn't usually say the words. They expected you to know how they felt.

She'd fallen for Alex the moment she'd set eyes on him, but didn't go to bed with him until their third date. But for God's sake, a little wine and some dancing and she'd hopped into bed with—no, wait a minute.

She placed her palms against the shower wall to steady herself. They hadn't hopped into bed. No. They'd practically had sex while they were dancing. Right there in her shop! Anyone passing could have looked in through the sheer window curtains.

Even through the freezing spray of water she felt the heat rise up within her as scenes from her night with the stranger wove a tapestry of erotic pictures through her head. He hadn't seduced her. No, she'd thrown herself at him, desperate to have him. She'd all but begged him to make love to her and he had...on that old trunk. Had she no pride at all? It irked her that she'd already asked herself that question this morning. Evidently the answer was "no". She didn't have any pride.

If she never saw the mysterious man again she could forget the whole mess and sweep the episode from her mind. That is, after she confessed everything to Alex and begged his forgiveness. She finished her shower, toweled off and jumped into jeans and a Second Hand Rose t-shirt.

Cracking the bathroom door, she peered out just to be sure. Sunlight streamed through the lace-curtained windows, giving the room a bright, cheery feeling—a feeling she couldn't match. The spicy scent of bay rum still hung in the air but the room was mercifully empty.

Yanking open the door, she hurried past the kitchen, gazing longingly at the coffeemaker. If ever she needed a cup of coffee, this morning was it. A quick glance at

the kitchen clock told her she'd better get her be-hiney downstairs and open up right now.

Tippy-toeing down the stairs—the man did seem to appear out of nowhere—she squinted into the sunlit shop. Everything seemed to be in order. The trunk was where Tommy Lee had dropped it, although now her sexy black negligee lay draped across the open lid. She'd forgotten about the gown in her earlier foray to make sure that guy had left. Odd. She also didn't remember opening the trunk after they'd made love on it.

There was something very strange about that trunk. After what happened last night, maybe she shouldn't continue exploring it. It would kill her but it probably would be best to sell it "as is" as soon as she could.

She waited a long moment. When no more blurs appeared she skipped down the remaining stairs and into the shop. The soft strains of *Clair de Lune* played about in her head but she resisted the urge to perform a few dance steps. That's what got her in trouble in the first place and her brain didn't need any more rattling around inside her skull.

The faint scent of lavender hung in the air. She sniffed but could not detect any trace of the masculine scent that had filled her senses—and her soul—last night.

She pushed away the thought and hurried to the front door. As she grasped the handle she caught sight of the security system keypad and froze. The constant red, yellow and green lights glowed. If the system was armed how did her mystery man leave this morning?

The strains of *Clair de Lune* grew increasingly louder. She started and whirled around. The melody wasn't playing in her head. It was coming from the trunk. Warily, she inched her way to the trunk and snatched her negligee off the open lid.

A blinding light flashed. A deafening noise thundered. A blur swished by.

The trunk lid dropped closed.

She nearly gave herself whiplash turning to see the blur. Oh no, there it was again. It whirled around and she easily identified it. This time he held no partner in his arms but still executed a series of intricate dance steps as he spun around the shop, passing through merchandise and display cases as if they weren't there.

She plopped onto the steamer trunk as her mystery man came to a halt directly in front of her.

"I'd ask for the next dance, but I am quite certain I would be refused," he said, bowing with a quick hand flourish. The man had materialized out of thin air but seemed as solid as the trunk she sat on.

He was clean-shaven and freshly showered. Tiny droplets of water clung to his hair. The tuxedo and tails had been replaced by a white linen suit with a blue and white pinstriped collarless shirt. The outfit wasn't quite as devastating as the black tails but it was right up there. She caught herself. What on earth was she thinking? This was no time for fashion judgments. For God's sake, she had a ghost on her hands!

She scrambled and knelt on top of the trunk, searching for a weapon, but came up with only the negligee in her hand. Somehow she didn't think he'd hold still long enough for her to tie his hands with the wispy garment. Could you even tie up a ghost?

She dropped the negligee and sprang up on the trunk in her best ninja karate stance.

He stared up at her with a puzzled look.

Okay, so the closest she'd ever come to ninja karate was a Chuck Norris movie. Her mystery man didn't know that.

"Don't come any closer. I'm a twelfth-degree black belt." Whatever that meant. She thought that's what Chuck Norris had said. Hmm, even if she knew how to, could you karate chop a ghost?

"Darling, the only belt I see is on that lovely piece of froth you just dropped and, quite frankly, I have no idea what you're talking about."

She frowned. Well neither did she but that wasn't going to stop her. No ghost was going to have her again, no matter how fast he danced or how handsome he looked.

"I don't know who or what you are but this is a no ghost zone." With her index finger she drew a large circle with a line through it. "I don't know how you left and came back with the alarm set but I want you out of here. I don't care if you leave by the front door, by the chimney or if you tango out. You leave me alone."

"Ghost? Is that what you think I am? A ghost?" His chuckle and that damned twinkle in his eyes were beginning to piss her off. He had way too many private jokes.

"Aren't ghosts supposed to be ethereal and translucent?" he asked, hitching his thumbs into the waistband of his trousers.

"You were. Just now." She knew what she saw. He *had been* translucent and he *had* passed through the furniture.

"Ah, I see." He rocked back and forth on his heels and toes and a thoughtful expression crossed his face. "Was I ethereal and translucent last night?"

Juliana's face heated at the memory of how solid and powerful he'd been, how his firm, heavy body had brought her such undeniable pleasure and how she'd lingered over his, trying to give him more satisfaction than he'd ever known.

"I'll take that charming blush of yours as a negative reply." He held up his arms, reaching for her waist. "Now if you'll come down from there I'll tell you who I am."

She hesitated, vaguely wondering when she'd lost her mind and begun believing in ghosts.

"Come. Come. We have things to do before we can go back."

"Go back?" She bent her knees and rested her hands on his shoulders. He swung her off the steamer trunk and placed her in front of him. His grip on her waist tightened. He pulled her closer until his hips rested against hers. He lowered his mouth. She gripped his forearms, holding them in place when he attempted to wrap his arms around her.

As much as she wanted to feel those arms around her, it was wrong. She was committed to Alex.

"Whoa." She ducked her head and pulled away. "None of that. You promised me answers."

He released her but trailed his fingers along her arms, sending a delicious shiver down her spine as she drew away. "All right, I am not a ghost. I am not an apparition. I am not—"

"But what about all that whirling through the display cases?" Was she really standing here discussing transcendental issues with a ghost?

"Dancing is merely a mode of transportation." His voice held the note of patience one normally reserved for addressing a toddler.

She cut her eyes to him and gave him her best "oh really" look. "Transportation, huh? What are you? Some sort of street entertainer? You *waltz* from place to place?"

"No, darling. I waltz from time to time."

"Time to time? You mean like every now and then?"

He shook his head and that sad smile crossed his features again. "I do wish I could help you remember. To be *precise*, I waltz through time itself."

Juliana gave him a long measured look, studying his hairstyle and his clothes and for the first time noticed his two-tone wing-tipped shoes. She wasn't any *GQ* authority but there was something not quite right about his outfit. If he wasn't a ghost—and remembering how he felt in her arms she seriously doubted he was—then there was something very fishy going on.

Cautiously, she took another step away from him. "Okay then. While you're being *precise* what *precisely* do you mean you 'waltz through time'?"

His countenance lost all of its teasing manner and he advanced a step toward her. She retreated a step. "What I mean *precisely* is that I have a certain...capability..." He took another step. She retreated.

"That enables me to..." With each of his advancing steps she took one back until her legs pressed against the steamer trunk. "Travel through time...and space."

Her bottom collapsed onto the trunk. Tilting her head, she stared up at him. His eyes held no mirth, no twinkle, no teasing, only a deadly seriousness that seemed to dare her to doubt him.

"So...I see...you're a...time traveler. How...lovely." She shifted her eyes right and left but he stood too close for her to escape from the shop.

A long finger lifted her chin. She gazed into his dark velvet eyes. Determination and an iron resolve lay deep within their depths. Whatever she may think she had no doubt he believed he could travel through time. His eyes continued to delve into hers and she cringed knowing he would see the skepticism there.

She gave a mental shrug. Who knew? Maybe he *could* waltz through time. Stranger things popped up on the Internet all the time. At least he wasn't wearing a tinfoil helmet and receiving signals from alien life forms.

"You made some comments about holding me *again*, dancing with me *again*. What was that about?" she asked, deciding to play along. "Has that got anything to do with this time travel thing?"

His hand slid around the nape of her neck and he drew her up.

Her knees buckled and she fell against him. Jelly. That's what he did to her. He turned her into jelly. As if he'd expected this reaction, he clasped his arm around her waist and anchored her to him.

"It's my own fault. I should be horsewhipped for what I did," he whispered against her temple. "I'll make it up to you, darling."

His presence overwhelmed her. The distinct masculine scent she now identified only with him filled her senses. Her vocal cords tangled in her throat. His face was close, close enough that all she had to do was tilt her head and he could kiss her, kiss her like he'd done last night.

"Juliana. Juliana, please try to remember." The desperation in his tone snapped her out of the sensual stupor his closeness brought on.

She seemed to lose her brain every time he held her. She had no business being in his arms. Okay, so she was inexplicably attracted to him. Why not? He was a good-looking guy—take that back—a great-looking guy who kept throwing himself at her. What girl wouldn't be attracted to him? But—and it was a huge "but"—she was in a committed relationship with someone else so she'd better stop fooling around.

She wiggled out of his arms and stepped away. "Look, I remember a great time last night but it was a mistake and it won't happen again so why don't you get in your time machine or launch pad or whatever and go back wherever you belong?"

"It's momentum," he said. "It's the force of the momentum when my body moves both clockwise and counterclockwise simultaneously. My body mass transforms into a gaseous state and then into pure energy, which allows me to travel along the time-space continuum."

"Huh?" Her mouth dropped open. All she could do was stare.

He scrubbed his hand across his eyes. "I think about going to a time, a place, and I spin. Dancing permits me to do this without attracting any undue notice."

He spoke in a rush, holding her attention by the sheer force of his presence and the pleading tone of his voice. He raised his hands in an imploring gesture. She couldn't take her eyes from his earnest face as the strange words tumbled from his sensuous lips.

She blinked. Pure energy? Space-time continuum? Spin? Either he really was a time traveler or somebody here had watched way too much *Star Trek*. She was inclined to think he had Spock ears and a phaser at home in a closet.

The front door to the shop rattled and a loud knock sounded. Her gaze automatically darted to the cuckoo clock. "Ohmigod. I should have opened an hour ago. Saturday is always my biggest day." She raced to the front door. In one fluid movement she turned off the alarm, lifted the door shade, flipped over the *Open* sign

and opened the door. The interruption also provided her with an excuse to escape from the incredibly handsome nutcase. Maybe if she ignored him he'd get the hint and leave.

"Good morning." She smiled as a middle-aged woman bustled in with two tweenage girls in her wake. It was a wonder they didn't trip or knock things over since they barely glanced up from their text messaging. Mrs. Hatcher had been a regular customer since Juliana could remember. She had a fondness for anything old and a tendency to push her taste onto her daughters.

"I was afraid you weren't going to open today," the woman said, hustling toward the vintage clothing area. "The girls are going to a retro party tonight and I knew you would have just the right outfits for them to— Well hel-lo." Mrs. Hatcher gave Juliana's "time traveler" a once-over. "No wonder you were late opening this morning." She tossed Juliana a quick wink and a sly smile then added, "If it were me, I wouldn't have opened at all."

The two girls stopped texting and stared.

"Aren't you going to introduce me to this fascinating gentleman?"

Juliana started. Introduce? She opened her mouth then snapped it shut. She had no idea what the man's name was—'cause he sure as hell wasn't who she'd thought he was. My God. She really was a slut. She'd had sex with the man and hadn't bothered to ask his name.

Mrs. Hatcher gave her a pointed look and waited. Juliana closed her eyes and prayed the space-time continuum would drop by and swallow her.

"Allow me to present myself, madam. I am Stanley Caldwell III of St. Augustine, Florida, newly arrived back in town after a prolonged absence." He gave Mrs. Hatcher a slight bow and bent over her offered hand, brushing it with his lips.

"Theodora Hatcher of Ponte Vedra, Florida." The woman giggled. "And these are my twins, Ashlee and Jessica."

He nodded to the girls. "Charmed. May I be of service? There are some lovely frocks back here that just might suit your needs." He held out his hand, indicating they

should precede him to the vintage clothing section of the shop. He turned and whispered to Juliana, "I shall assist these ladies quickly and get rid of them so that we can get back to the matter at hand."

Juliana stood frozen in place, staring after the group. Stanley Caldwell *the Third*? As in the newspaper clipping from the steamer trunk? Her heart thudded against her rib cage. She hadn't really believed he was a time traveler. He'd raised some interesting questions about how he got around and he talked a good game about energy and body mass but for God's sake everyone knew time travel was impossible.

She darted over to the trunk and forced herself to carefully lift the fragile papers and programs as she searched for and found the newspaper clipping. With a cautious glance to ensure he was still occupied, she hurried to her checkout counter and retrieved the magnifying glass she kept for appraising small merchandise.

Smoothing the paper on the counter in a patch of bright sunlight, she studied the picture through the magnifying glass. Even through the faded yellow paper and slight crinkling there was no doubt. Where before she'd thought there was a strong resemblance now she knew that the match was exact, right down to the cleft in his chin. She lost herself in the picture, in that look he gave his partner. She shifted her attention to the woman. It was difficult to determine anything about her given the camera angle and lighting. She was shorter than her partner and her face was tilted up. Did she return that heated look? Did she—

"Do you have any perfume atomizers?"

Juliana started at the sound of a voice in front of her. She'd been so caught up in the picture she hadn't noticed the crowd of people milling around the shop or heard the usual creaks and groans of the door when they entered.

A heavyset woman with short kinky hair, wearing a hat made of beer cans crocheted together, stood at the counter.

Juliana blinked and pointed toward a display case. The women gave her a toothy grin—one that had two gold front teeth—and waddled to the case.

Juliana stared after her. It seemed Stanley wasn't the only nut to fall from his tree and into her shop today.

She no sooner thought of Stanley than the man himself appeared, slowly waltzing Mrs. Hatcher toward the register. Her giggling daughters followed, each with arms loaded with dresses, shoes, hats and shawls. Juliana hurried over to ring up their purchases.

"I can't tell you when I've had such a marvelous time shopping," Mrs. Hatcher exclaimed as Stanley swung her in a wide circle and deposited her in front of the checkout counter.

"It was my pleasure, madam, and I hope you and your lovely daughters enjoy your purchases."

He rounded the counter and edged up beside Juliana and his warm lips grazed the shell of her ear. "Get rid of these people. We have things to do." He murmured softly but the steel in his voice countered his quiet tone. He circled her with his arm, pulling her close against his side.

She shuddered as his hand inched lower to rest somewhere between the top of her thigh and her bottom. Through the soft denim of her jeans she felt the lazy circles he drew on her cheek with his thumb. Shielded from view by the counter, he moved his hand lower to cup and squeeze her cheek. Her folds slickened as his touch awakened the desire she'd felt every time she was in his arms. Raw need to feel his straining, sweat-soaked body and his thick cock buried deep inside her washed over her, leaving her struggling to finish Mrs. Hatcher's purchase.

The shop door opened and two elderly couples strolled in. Stanley gave her an exasperated look and dropped his hand, leaving her torn between relief and frustration.

With an elegant bow to Mrs. Hatcher and each of her daughters, he turned to the woman in the beer can hat, who'd returned to the checkout counter. "You mentioned you were looking for perfume atomizers, I believe? This way please." Stanley took her into his arms and glided her to the far side of the shop.

If Stanley had hoped to clear the shop with his odd behavior, his plan had backfired. The store remained packed. As customers left they talked about the debonair salesman. Curiosity seekers wandered in to see the dancing clerk and stayed to shop.

He was a great salesman, especially with the ladies. As corny as it seemed, regardless of their age they loved being danced around by the handsome gentleman in the white suit. She tried to deny it but she wanted to be one of those women he held in his warm embrace. Better still, she wanted to feel his long fingers foxtrotting across her naked flesh.

There was no break to run upstairs and grab a quick lunch. An energy bar from her stash in her office was all she had time for. She offered Stanley one. He inspected it, took a bite and declared it to be as tasty as sawdust and only slightly preferable to eating sand.

As the late afternoon shadows grew longer, only a few stragglers roamed about the shop. Juliana never rushed anyone, preferring to tidy up while the last shoppers poked about. It had been a tremendous sales day and she owed it all to Stanley even though he'd switched the *Open* sign to *Closed* several times in an attempt to clear the store.

While the shop was busy she'd been able to avoid the whole "Mr. Stanley Caldwell III, Time Traveler Extraordinaire" issue but now it had to be addressed. So many questions popped into her mind. If he was a time traveler—and that was a big if—what was he doing here? Why did he land in her shop? Why did he keep asking if she remembered him? She glanced to the back of the store where his deep resonant voice expounded on the proper occasion to wear a "bowler" instead of a "boater" to a thirty-something couple.

A thin man with thin hair and thin lips sidled up to her. "What do you want for that steamer trunk? I didn't see a price."

If she were a profiler she would have pegged him as an IRS auditor or an accountant.

"Steamer trunk?" She hadn't seriously considered selling the steamer trunk but...

"The trunk is not for sale," a low, seething voice with dangerous undertones hissed from beside her. Stanley had appeared at her elbow and was now glaring at Thin Lips.

"Everything's for sale if the price is right. I'll give you two thousand for it."

"Two thousand dollars?" That was ten times what she paid for it.

"The trunk is not for sale," Stanley repeated through gritted teeth.

"Come on. What do you want? Twenty-five hundred? I've been looking for a trunk like that for years. It matches a set I own." Thin Lips took out a platinum American Express card. "I'm only interested in the trunk. You can keep all that crap inside it."

Twenty-five hundred dollars for an old trunk? "All righ—"

"I won't repeat this again. The trunk is not for sale—not at any price." Stanley emphasized each word, pulling out the syllables with his melodious drawl.

This was too good an offer. She couldn't pass it up, especially since she could keep the contents. "But—"

"No!" His bellow bounced off the plaster walls.

The few remaining patrons put down whatever they were examining and scurried out the door. Thin Lips gave her a questioning look. She stole a glance at Stanley. She'd heard the expression "thunderclouds marching across a face" and now she knew what it looked like.

She let out a sigh and shook her head at Thin Lips. "Sorry. The trunk is not for sale." Boy, that was beginning to sound like a cliché.

The man pursed what there was of his lips and pulled out a business card. "If you change your mind, I might be willing to go higher." She reached for the card but Stanley snatched it and shoved it into his jacket pocket.

"The trunk—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know." Thin Lips nodded to her, grimaced to Stanley and left the shop.

When the door closed, she whirled on Stanley. "What the hell was that about? Do you know what you just did? I could have made a fantastic profit *and* kept the contents. What is so friggin' special about that trunk that I had to pass up twenty-five hundred dollars?"

Stanley stalked to the door, locked it and flipped over the *Closed* sign. He peered out the glass-paned window into the darkness for a moment then drew down the shade.

He turned and in a measured stride closed the distance between them. "The thing that is so—what was that word? Friggin'?"

She nodded, not sure she liked that quiet, dangerous look in his eye or that quiet, dangerous tone in his voice.

"The thing that is so friggin' special about that trunk is that it is the only way I have to find you."

"Huh? I'm right here. I've been at this same address for years. Why do you need an old trunk to find me?"

He stopped when they were toe to toe. She had to lean back to see his face. The sharp planes and contours gave him a stark, forbidding countenance in contrast to his natural good looks.

"I need it to find you...through time, Mrs. Caldwell."

## **Chapter Four**

"What did you say?" Juliana stared up into intense dark eyes that threatened to look through to her very soul. He seemed intent on convincing her of the truth of his words through the sheer force of his will. All traces of the affable dancer had vanished. In his place stood a man who knew what he wanted and somehow she'd landed on the top of his dance card.

"I said you are my wife. I believe I have been tolerant long enough and—"

"Get a grip, Stanley. You're a nice guy and I've really, *really* enjoyed this time with you." She stepped back to escape the scorching heat of his stare. The man did "intense" extremely well. So well she had to swim upstream to avoid being pulled into the storm that raged in his mesmerizing eyes.

"Look, I don't want to hurt your feelings or your ego or anything but we need to have a little reality check here. I'm sorry if I led you on...you know...last night and all..." God, this was embarrassing and he wasn't helping with that sizzling stare. Her heartbeat quickened as his eyes stayed locked with hers. He was doing it again and she was powerless against him.

Moisture pooled between her folds and an aching desire bloomed in her belly. She wanted him. Right here. Right now. She wanted him to wrap himself around her and make her scream with sizzling passion like he had last night.

With a Herculean effort she broke eye contact and retreated behind the steamer trunk. She smoothed her hand over the latch, examining it so she wouldn't have to face Stanley's blatant hunger. A hunger that matched her own, but she couldn't give in to it. Searching deep within herself, she took a long cleansing breath and forced herself to say the words that would end this game.

"I like you, Stanley. I like you a whole lot, probably more than I should after only knowing you one day." *And I shouldn't have this tremendous sexual attraction to you either.* 

"You've made some rather strange claims and I'll be honest, I did have fun playing along with you. But let's face it," she lifted her head and fixed him with what she hoped was a charming yet disarming expression, "we both know you can't time travel and that I'm not your wife."

From across the shop he studied her with hooded eyes. "Why are you so sure?"

His question startled her. She'd assumed once confronted he'd abandon the masquerade. Evidently not. "Oh get real. Both of those scenarios are impossible. I mean, don't you think I'd remember if I was married? I'm pretty sure I'd remember a husband." Especially one as fascinating as you.

"That's exactly the problem and it's all my fault." The air seemed to go out of him. He flopped into an antique rocking chair and stared off into space. The silence stretched until she thought she'd scream just to break the tension.

"We attended a gala. My father's friend Henry Flagler had finally divorced his second wife, mad as a hatter, you know, and he'd married again. It was the party of the season and, naturally, we were there." He rested his forearms on his thighs and leaned forward, hands clasped, head bowed.

"The Henry Flagler? As in major bigwig in early twentieth-century Florida?" So Stanley not only had a great imagination, he knew his Florida history too.

"The same. Anyway, you became bored. This was just another in the steady stream of invitations we received and, to my everlasting regret, you convinced me no one would miss us if we took a short journey."

"Journey? In the middle of a ball? Kind of hard to pack, wouldn't you say?" She tried to lighten the moment but her little joke fell flat.

"We didn't need to pack for where we were going. Just a short jaunt into the future, you said. We'd done it many times before—had a lively outing and returned with no one the wiser. Being as I was as bored as you, I agreed."

"Bored? At a ball given by Henry Flag— Wait, we'd gone into the future before? Together? Oh plea—" She stopped when he held up a hand.

"The musicians were playing a waltz and we joined the crowd on the ballroom floor. It was a simple matter of dancing and moving very quickly. Only this time..." His voice cracked and his shoulders slumped.

She waited. Even if he was full of horse manure, it was a fascinating story and she'd always loved fairytales.

"This time?" she urged.

"This time when we'd gathered enough speed to travel, I let go of your hand. Not intentionally, it just...happened." He stopped and raised his eyes to her. The look of overwhelming anguish blindsided her. It was as if she'd gotten a glimpse of his personal hell.

In that moment she realized every word he spoke was true—or at least he thought they were true.

"And?" she encouraged. "You let go of my hand. So what?"

"And I lost you...in time."

"Uh-huh. You lost me. And why didn't I just dance my way back to the ball?" Again she sought to make a little joke but remained entranced by his story.

"Because you can't travel on your own. I'm the one with the ability. It runs in my family. You can only do it with me."

"So you're saying I've been camping out here in the twenty-first century when I should really be living a happy and carefree life with a bunch of time traveling in-laws in...what? 1900?"

"1902 to be precise."

She stared back at him, leveling as sympathetic a gaze as she could muster. *Don't roll your eyes*. *Don't roll your eyes*. *Don't embarrass him*. A giggle wiggled in the back of

her throat but she gagged on it rather than hurt the man by laughing at his ridiculous statement.

"I see." She nodded, then as casually as she could wandered toward the door and opened it. "Well, that was a lovely story. I hate to see you rush off but I imagine, like me, you've got a million things to do."

He didn't move but focused his attention on the trunk. "That's the key."

She followed his gaze. "No actually, that's another key I found that fit. The original was lost."

"No, no." He scrambled from the chair, knocking it over, and bounded to the trunk. "Don't you see? It must be the trunk. When you opened it something called me here, to this time, this place. The trunk must be the key to getting your memories back." He waved his hands, gesturing toward the contents. "It's in here! Something in here will jar your thoughts and you'll know that everything I say is true." He seemed to swell with a newfound enthusiasm.

"Which brings up that same question." She closed the door but remained next to it.

"If we did all that you say we did and I'm supposed to be your wife, how come I know nothing about it?"

"You've been lost too long. The longer you're away from your own time, the less you remember it." A frown creased his handsome face and the urge to smooth her hand over it and erase the worry seized her.

She pushed the urge away and folded her arms. "And *precisely* how long have I been lost?"

"It's all relative. From what I can surmise you've been lost in time for over a hundred years. You've been lost to me—in my time—for six months, and I have no idea how long you have been lost in this time period. It could be days or years. Time. Space. They all intersect but they all disperse. There is no common denominator."

Juliana stared at the sincere man before her, totally convinced that if he uttered another word her brain would explode.

"That's why you have to discover your memory here. I understand it's incredibly difficult to find it after we return." He knelt next to the trunk and began rummaging through it.

Shoving aside her momentary annoyance, Juliana took a deep breath and tried to sort fact from fiction. The more Stanley talked and the more she heard his quiet, earnest voice, the more she wanted to believe he wasn't a nutcase.

He stopped his searching and held out his hand, silently imploring her to take it. "Come, help me. We can do this together."

His voice held such hope, such sincerity, that a pang of guilt went straight to her heart at the thought of disappointing him. She'd already determined he meant her no harm—and he was great for sales. Besides, his wild imagination enchanted her out of her way-too-practical world and this would give her a chance to continue exploring the contents of the trunk. If it made him happy to think she would miraculously realize she was his long-lost wife then...well...it wouldn't kill her to humor him.

Juliana grasped his hand and knelt before the open trunk. As he leaned over to peer inside his arm brushed her breast, sending a delicious wave of heat through her. She recalled how his hands had glided up her thighs, how he'd made her body sing with quivering passion, how he'd brought her to one exquisite orgasm after another. What she wouldn't give to have one of those orgasms right now.

Stanley pulled out an ornate red ladies' fan. After studying it he tossed it over his shoulder and brought out the collapsible top hat. She snatched it before he could chuck it after the fan.

"Why don't I do that and you watch?"

He raised an eyebrow, shrugged and moved to kneel behind her. He settled his thighs on either side of hers and drew her back against his chest. She closed her eyes when his lips skimmed down the length of her neck. His tongue flicked and teased when he found that all too familiar spot at the crook of her neck. Strong arms circled her and his hands rested just below her breasts. She sank into him, losing herself in the hard

muscles of his arms. After a moment his fingers splayed lower to the waistband of her jeans.

"I was a bit shocked the first time I saw a woman wearing trousers but I must say I rather enjoy the unobstructed sight of your...thighs." He slid his hand lower and slipped a finger between her legs. He wiggled the finger, stroking her clit through the worn fabric. Her whole body quivered at his experienced touch as his warm breath fanned across her neck, sending a delicious shudder through her.

"Oh Juliana, how I have longed to feel you trembling at my touch." Another fiery trail of kisses scorched her neck. All the while his determined fingers continued to stroke her pussy. She wondered if her jeans were wet with the juices that flowed from her.

She rested her head on his shoulder, waiting for his lips to find hers. Love, desire and contentment all rolled into one glorious package surrounded her. Mmm, she'd never been on the receiving end of a feeling like this—not even with Alex.

Alex!

She knelt up, knocking Stanley on his ass. What the hell was she doing? She scrambled to her feet and scuttled around the corner of the trunk. "Enough of that! We need to get to work."

Stanley lay sprawled on the floor. "What is the matter with you?"

"You tricked me! I agreed to look through the trunk with you and you took advantage of the situation." She pulled a dance card from the trunk. "If you still want to do this I'll help but you have to stand over there." She pointed to a nearby glass display case containing estate jewelry and hatpins.

Stanley raised himself to a sitting position and frowned. "Juliana, you're being—"

"That's my condition. Take it or leave it." She sincerely hoped he'd take it. She was dying to go through the trunk but she'd already cheated on Alex and couldn't risk being too close to Stanley. He was far too devilishly tempting and she wasn't at all sure she could continue to resist him.

Stanley stared at her from under knit brows, storm clouds forming in his turbulent eyes. His chest rose and fell. His control looked as tattered as hers. He was going to refuse. He was going to leave. The thought filled her with an acute sadness she had no right to feel.

With a disgusted look he stood, dusted off his butt and leaned against the glass case.

She let out a long, silent sigh, inexplicably relieved he'd decided to stay. Turning away from his heated stare, she dug out the layers of papers and programs, studying them before handing them to Stanley, careful not to touch his fingers when he reached for the articles. He reviewed each one, commented on some then stacked them on the display case. Working her way through the contents, she came to clothing and accessories.

"You still haven't told me where the secret door is," she said in a casual tone. He had some way of entering and leaving the shop without setting off the alarm. For all his talk about dancing time travel, a hidden door seemed much more plausible. "I mean, I'm not surprised. These old buildings probably have a lot of concealed passageways and openings. Who knows? Maybe the Underground Railroad passed through here."

"My love. There is no secret door. Why would I fabricate my ability to— Now you must remember that."

Juliana stood, pulling an emerald green gown from beneath a mountain of tissue paper. The lavender scent filled the room as she shook it out. Wrinkles creased the satin fabric and to say it was as flat as a pancake was an understatement. "Gosh. It looks like a steamroller attacked this dress." She shook it again then held it up in front of her. "It'll be stunning once it's aired out and pressed. I wonder if it would fit me."

"Why wouldn't it? It belongs to you. I've helped you out of it several times." Stanley's voice took on a low, husky quality that sent a delightful shiver down her spine.

She forced herself to ignore his comment and turned to look in a full-length mirror. The gown had a low-cut neckline that was meant to showcase a woman's cleavage. Delicate beadwork enhanced the bodice, which narrowed into a fitted waist before flaring out into a voluminous skirt. "It is lovely, isn't it?" She swayed from side to side, delighting in the skirt's rustling sound.

"It's the gown you wore when I let you..." Regret followed by a small flare of hope passed over his features. She felt a sharp stab of pain at his wistful expression and stared back, wondering how someone she'd just met could become so important to her. Turning away, she swayed a few more times, losing herself in the rich satin fabric.

"I know you don't recognize anything but haven't you figured it out yet?"

"Huh?" She returned from admiring the gown. "Figured out what?"

He let out a deep sigh. "When did you become simple? You used to be such a bright woman."

She opened her mouth to ream his ass but stopped at the glint in his eye and the start of a smile on his lips. The man was infuriating...but oh so charming. "If you're done baiting me, would you mind explaining what I'm supposed to have figured out?"

His expression lost its playfulness. "The trunk. The clothes. The papers. They're your things—our things. In my time, I mean, in *our* time, these items are scattered about the house in drawers, closets. The trunk is in the attic. Sometime between then and now..." He shrugged. "Who's to know?"

She'd fallen in love with the trunk the moment she'd laid eyes on it but that was because she loved antiques not because she recognized anything. He sure had some strange notions. Her things? Not hardly. "Yeah, whatever. Who's to know, right?"

A loud growl rumbled in the shop. She sucked in her breath, hoping to silence her stomach. "I guess that energy bar for lunch didn't go far. Why don't we take a break and grab some dinner?" It also gave her an excuse to avoid exploring her feelings for Stanley a little longer. She glanced at the cuckoo clock. "It's only seven. We can take a

drive up the coast." She caught herself. "If that's okay with you. We both need food and I don't want to order takeout. That's all Alex and I ever do."

Draping the gown over her arm, she gently folded it and laid it in the trunk. She'd see what could be done for it tomorrow. When Stanley didn't answer she turned. Uhoh, thunderclouds were marching across his face again. "Something wrong?" she asked in her most innocent voice.

With lightning speed Stanley moved from the display case and stood directly before her. "Who...is...Alex?" His eyes blazed with anger and the question came through gritted teeth.

"Alex? He's my boyfriend. The man I plan to marry."

Stanley's eyes narrowed and he gripped her shoulders. "No! You have not given yourself to another man, have you? You belong to me!"

Juliana was torn between being flattered and outraged over his jealous outburst. Outrage won out. Fun was fun but enough was enough. She raised her index finger and pointed it at his nose. "I don't want to hear any more of this nonsense. My personal life is none of your business. I've spent the last hour looking for who knows what and I'm starving. Now, we can either have a nice friendly dinner without any reference to spacemen, dancing or who's married to who...whom...whatever...or we can say 'good night, have a nice life' right now."

Stanley studied her for a long moment. From the subtle expressions that crossed his face he seemed to be waging a private war and from the cold stare he fixed on her, her side was losing. Just when she thought he might actually walk out, he gave her a stiff nod. "We'll discuss this later," he murmured, stalking away to a darkened corner of the shop. "But be aware, woman, you have taxed my patience to the hilt and I will not share what is mine."

She ignored his comment. She didn't care if he had some misplaced sense of possession. It had been a long time since she'd gone to a nice restaurant and she wanted

an evening out. Alex always claimed he ate out all the time and would rather stay in. She had a sneaking suspicion that was his way of making more time for sex.

"If you're so sure you're not my wife then tell me about your past," he called in his deep resonant voice.

She heaved an aggravated sigh and spoke through clenched teeth, "I already told you. What I do and who I do it with is none—"

"No, not that. The less I know about that the better. Tell me about your childhood. What is your first memory from when you were a little girl?"

She froze. His request startled and frightened her. It was as if he already knew her answer.

"Juliana?" He came up behind her and rested reassuring hands on her shoulders.

Taking a deep breath, she exhaled slowly, buying herself time. How could she answer? He probably wouldn't believe her.

"It's all right. Just tell me the truth," he whispered.

She closed her eyes. The truth? Why not?

"My very first memory is waking up in a hospital room. I was injured in an accident. I'd fallen off of something very high. I don't know what it was. Except for my first name, I didn't remember anything."

He eased her closer so her back rested against his front. She leaned her head on his chest, the steady beat of his heart comforting her.

His lips grazed the edge of her ear and he placed a soft kiss on her neck. "And when did this happen? When did you wake up?"

"Four years ago."

\* \* \* \* \*

Twenty minutes later they were speeding north on A1A in Juliana's dependable and incredibly boring beige Corolla. In her mind she was born to drive a red Corvette but her bank account was not a mind reader and insisted on the more practical vehicle.

After telling Stanley about her accident, she'd needed an excuse to get away for a few minutes so she'd charged up the stairs and hidden in her bedroom. While there she changed into a long flowing black skirt and green silk blouse. When she'd returned to the shop Stanley had draped the lovely antique shawl around her shoulders. She needed something more substantial in the chilly night air but he'd been so sweet. He'd apologized for bringing up her accident but continued to insist her amnesia was the result of his losing her while "time traveling".

So what if she couldn't remember. She'd hit her head. It was that simple. She hadn't had a run-in with the *space-time continuum*. So what if no one had claimed her after a long media blitz? So what if she'd accepted the kindness of an elderly hospital volunteer and come to work with her at Second Hand Rose?

Juliana drove on autopilot, remembering all the generous things Amelia Douglas had done. Not the least of which was leaving Juliana the shop when she'd passed away last year. Juliana had adopted Amelia's last name since she couldn't remember her own.

Juliana cast a sideways glance at Stanley. "Is that necessary?" He clutched the sissy bar above the door with one hand and braced his other on the dashboard. "You know, I've never had a ticket or an accident. I'm doing the speed limit."

"I've never been in a car that went this fast, although I have seen them in my travels."

"Fast? We're doing thirty-five." She rolled her eyes. "You must be one heck of a time traveler if thirty-five is fast. Yeah, a real wild man on that space-time continuum. Hey, would you grab the *Super Shopper* out of the glove box? It's got a two-for-one coupon for a new place I've wanted to try." Alex had mentioned the restaurant once but they never seemed to have the time to check it out.

"Super Shopper? Glove box?"

"Oh for heaven's sake." Steering with her left hand, she reached over, opened the glove box and grabbed the magazine, almost missing the entrance to the restaurant. "Whoa ho, I thought it was a few more miles up the road." Making a sharp right turn into the parking lot, they bounced off the curb. So much for convincing Stanley she was a safe driver. She glanced over at him. He had both hands braced on the dashboard and he'd lost some of the color in his face. *Yeah*, a real wild man.

The parking space fairy was sitting on her shoulder and she found a spot near the front door. Good, she wouldn't freeze to death in her skimpy shawl. The wonderful aromas wafting about the restaurant convinced her it was a great choice.

As they followed the hostess, Juliana caught a glimpse of a familiar profile seated alone at a table near the wall. Her stomach flipped and she did a double take. It couldn't be.

"Enjoy your meal," said the hostess, placing menus on a cozy table with a white cloth and a cheery vase of daisies. Stanley stood back and held out her chair.

"Will you excuse me for a minute? I think I see someone I know." She wove her way through the tables and waiters, hardly noticing them or the other patrons in the restaurant. She stopped next to the man she'd spotted. Her brain registered the half-eaten dinner and the empty chair opposite him.

"Alex! When did you get back?"

He glanced up from signing the credit receipt. His expression ran from puzzlement to surprise to shock and seemed to settle somewhere between embarrassment and anger. "Juliana. What are you doing here?" He stood and tossed his linen napkin onto his plate.

"I thought you were out of town until Monday." She leaned in to kiss him but he drew back.

"What are you doing here?" he repeated, glancing behind her.

He wore khaki slacks and a blue knit shirt she had given him. It perfectly matched his eyes. She inched closer and ran her hand up his arm, savoring the feel of his sinewy muscles. "Why didn't you call?" A queasy sensation tightened her stomach.

His gaze scanned the restaurant and focused across the room. "Look, something came up and I got back early. I'll call you. I've got to go." He stepped aside to pass her but she held on to his wrist.

"Alex? What's going on?" Her chest constricted and a sour taste rose in the back of her throat. Alex shook off her hand.

Before she had time to process his reaction a short plump woman with a gurgling baby came up next to him and shoved a denim diaper bag at him. "Okay, honey. I think the princess and I are ready to go. Oh, hi." She gave Juliana a wide smile. "Have we met?"

Juliana's throat closed up until she thought she would gag. Her pulse thundered in her ears and air raced into her lungs in a silent gasp. She shot Alex a look. His eyes pleaded with her and in an instant it hit her like a curtain crashing down after the final act.

Her gaze shifted from Alex to the woman to the baby whose pudgy arms reached out to the man Juliana had thought she would spend the rest of her life with. Even if she could find words, her mouth wouldn't work. It had shut down along with the rest of her brain as she fought back tears. She gulped and shook her head, the only response she could make.

"Oh, in that case, I'm Stephanie but everyone calls me Steph. I'm Alex's wife and this little handful," she shifted the squirming baby to her other arm, "is our spoiled little princess Nicole. Do you work with Alex?"

Just when Juliana thought her knees would give out and she'd humiliate herself by sobbing, a strong arm circled her waist and pulled her close to a lean, hard body.

"Caldwell. Stanley Caldwell. This is my lovely Juliana. A pleasure to meet you." Juliana heard the mix between cordiality and steel in his voice but a quick glance at

"Steph" assured Juliana the woman was preoccupied with her daughter. Not so Alex. His eyes narrowed and his lips pursed into a thin line.

"Caldwell. I don't recall you mentioning anyone named Caldwell." Alex fixed her with a cold gaze, as if he were the wronged person, as if she had betrayed him.

Something deep inside Juliana rebelled against his churlish attitude. All her mortified feelings fled. What the hell? He was the one cheating on her *and* on his wife. Juliana stiffened. One word from her would have him careening down the expressway to divorce court, alimony payments and child support. The bastard deserved that and worse. She opened her mouth, knowing that this time she'd find the words to ruin his life like he'd just ruined hers.

Stanley squeezed her waist. "Juliana and I are...old friends. I'm in town for the weekend. She graciously accepted my invitation to dine." He looked down at her and she read the warning in his eyes. He raised an eyebrow and slightly inclined his head toward the mother wrestling the feisty baby.

Juliana took a deep breath and closed her eyes. It wasn't fair. The rat bastard lied to her. He'd led her on. He'd said he was single. Never married. But all the time he had a wife. He had a baby.

She slumped against Stanley, praying he would know what to do.

"Don't let us keep you. You seem to have your hands full with your lovely princess." Stanley smoothed his knuckle under the child's chin.

"You're right. I'd better get her out of here while I still have some strength," said Steph, turning toward the door. "It's always nice to meet Alex's friends."

Alex watched his wife leave then returned his attention to Juliana. "It's just a mixup. I can explain. I'll be in touch," he whispered, turning to follow his family.

Stanley blocked his way. "If you ever come near Juliana again I will take immense pleasure in flaying every inch of flesh from your bones." He spoke with such vehemence and yet such sincerity Juliana had no trouble believing he meant every

word. Stanley's fingers tightened as he held her against his side and she could feel his muscles contract in a coil of restrained control.

Conversation at surrounding tables ceased and heads swiveled to watch the unscheduled dinner show. Juliana tried to ignore the rubberneckers but couldn't blame them for gaping at the drama playing out amid their appetizers and entrees. She'd heard one or two murmurs of "owner" and "Second Hand Rose".

Alex's face transformed into an ugly mask of loathing and challenge. He looked Stanley up and down, evidently taking in the white linen suit and two-tone wing-tips and not finding much of a threat. "Oh really," he sneered.

"Really. I don't appreciate how you've toyed with my wi—with Juliana. I should warn you I'm a twelfth degree black belt."

Alex's expression registered an instant of surprise before returning to cold disgust.

If the situation hadn't been so emotionally charged she would have laughed at Stanley quoting her. As it was, she heard several curious whispers from the dinner patrons.

"Can I help you with something?" The hostess smiled up at the two men facing off. A scrawny busboy edged in behind Juliana to clear the table but kept his eye on the small group as if ready to spring into action if needed.

Alex shot Stanley a smirk. "No, thanks, everything was great—just great."

"As a matter of fact," said Stanley with a disapproving headshake, "everything is not great but I believe I can fix it." He drew back his arm and slammed his fist into Alex's jaw.

Alex crashed to the floor. Diners jumped back. China clattered. The busboy cowered. The hostess stared.

"Now," said Stanley, rubbing his knuckles, "everything is great."

\* \* \* \* \*

The blazing heat from her embarrassment should have kept her warm but Juliana shivered in the chilly night air of the parking lot. The delicate shawl wasn't any help.

"Dance with me." Stanley pulled her into his arms and twirled with her in a dazzling spinning waltz around the parking lot.

"Stop! Stanley! What are you doing?"

But he merely stared with unreadable eyes and held her tighter. Within seconds he had her breathless and disoriented. She could almost swear they were moving through the cars themselves.

She flinched at the flash of lightning and the deafening crash of thunder. Stanley brought her to an abrupt halt. She blinked and looked over his shoulder at the steamer trunk. Faint notes of *Clair de Lune* lingered in the air and the scent of lavender teased her nose. An uncomfortable sense of déjà vu flittered through her mind. Turning her head, she registered the display counters, the vintage clothing, the front door and the steady glow of the lights on the security alarm, the lights that indicated the alarm was armed—just as she'd left it when they'd departed for dinner.

Stanley still clasped her hand in a death grip and his arm around her waist firmly anchored her to his steely torso. Her heart thudded in her chest and she detected the same thumping rhythm in Stanley's. Staring straight ahead at his mouth, she noted beads of sweat on his upper lip. His breath came in bellowing gasps as did her own. Other than that, he remained motionless.

She eased herself from his embrace and slid her wet palms down the front of her skirt. She'd been scared a few times in her life but nothing came close to the terror bubbling up within her now. Taking a few, measured steps back, she raised her eyes to his.

An inscrutable expression masked his face, as if he waited for her to make the first move. No problem. She was more than ready to make the first move—straight out the door and screaming down the street seemed the best option.

"Juliana...?" His voice held a world of uncertainty.

She took a few more backward steps and slipped behind the checkout counter next to the door. He hadn't seemed dangerous but...

"How-how did you do that?" She hated the weak, stammering peeps that came from her mouth. Chuck Norris never squeaked like that when he was in trouble.

He wiped his own palms down the front of his white pants and flexed his fingers. "I'm sorry if I held you too tightly. I couldn't take the chance of letting you go and losing you again."

"Don't start with that stuff." Fear and confusion gave her courage she didn't really possess. "I want to know how you did this—and don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about."

"I told you. I can dance...travel through time and space. I merely focused on the shop, held you in my arms and waltzed." He gave her a wry half-smile. "I did wait until we were outside. Those diners had had enough entertainment for one night."

"Well, thank you for small favors. At least I won't appear on YouTube...not tonight anyway."

"You too? Who's 'you too'?"

"Don't go changing the subject. In case you haven't noticed, today has been the most incredibly rotten day of my life. I found out my boyfriend is cheating on me—no, wait. It's worse. He's cheating on his wife with *me*. I'm publically humiliated in a new restaurant. Then one minute I'm in a parking lot and the next I'm in my shop. Best of all, some guy I met a day ago tells me I'm his wife and, oh, by the way, he waltzes through time."

She stopped and ran the events of the past twenty-four hours through her head. "Oh yeah, and I've been consumed with guilt because I cheated on my cheating boyfriend and slept with the guy." She snorted at the last item. "Yeah, I think that pretty much sums up my day. How was yours?" She poured every ounce of sarcasm she could into those last three words.

"Guilt, you say?" Stanley clenched and unclenched his fists. "I damn well know about guilt. You want a *rotten* day? How about this? I discovered my wife has been unfaithful and she doesn't realize it. She doesn't even know she's my wife. To make matters worse, I'm responsible. If it weren't for my blunder she would be home in our bed instead of leading another life with another man. *I'm* the one tainted with guilt. *I'm* the one who has had a *rotten* day."

She'd been so upset with her own problems she hadn't noticed the anger mounting on Stanley's face until it burst forth like a dam washed away in a flood. At his accusations she did the only thing she could. She burst into tears.

"Oh, darling, I'm a beast." He was around the counter in an instant, holding her tightly against him, stoking her hair, muttering nonsensical words into her ear. It only made her cry harder. It was too ridiculous. People didn't time travel. People didn't leave one place and pop up in another without actually *going* there and people did not forget they were married, especially if they were married to someone like Stanley.

She snuggled deeper into his arms, letting his body, his scent, his very essence surround her. That overwhelming sense of belonging enveloped her. The thought of being married to Stanley suddenly held a great deal of appeal. He was such a nice guy who seemed to care for her. He'd helped in the shop and wasn't condescending about it. He even came to her defense against that slimeball Alex.

At the thought of Alex she froze. Stanley must have sensed her horror. He stopped his solicitous murmurs.

How could she have been such a fool? Alex must have thought she was the airhead of the century not to figure out why he was gone every weekend. She'd actually thought he had to work. She'd trusted him so completely it had never occurred to her he would lie. "Thank you," she blubbered against Stanley's tearstained shirt.

When he didn't move she continued, "Thank you for punching out that bastard."

He tunneled his fingers under her hair and massaged the nape of her neck. "I normally don't resort to fisticuffs but it seemed called for in this instance. The man needed his comeuppance."

She sniffled, trying to stem the flood of tears.

He leaned back and leveled the edge of his hand under her chin, tilting her face to his. "I'm sorry you've had such a *rotten* day and I apologize for any part I played in it. I promise I will make it up to you."

She gave him a weak smile and reached behind him for a tissue from the box on the counter. The blinking lights on the security panel near the door caught her attention. Maybe it wasn't working correctly. Maybe they had come through the door and she'd been too stunned to realize it. She edged around him, unlocked the door and yanked it open. The shrill warning whistle sounded. Nope, the alarm was in working order. She quickly punched in the disarm code and shut the door.

A puzzled frown creased Stanley's handsome face. "What on earth was that?"

"Nothing. Just checking." So they'd not only bypassed the alarm, they'd bypassed the door. Stanley and his time travel were sounding less and less impossible.

"If—and this is a big if—if we traveled through time, where exactly in time are we now? I mean is it last week? Next month? 1902?"

"We arrived here at precisely the same time we, ah, departed the restaurant, give or take an instant or so," he said, reaching for her. She sidestepped his embrace.

"I see." Earlier in the day she'd played along with him but now, faced with the very real possibility that time travel existed, a few questions nagged her.

"Let's just suppose you can time travel. Could you have made us come back before we left to go to dinner? You know, make it so we hadn't run into Alex and his family? Like it never happened? Like I'd never know?"

His soft eyes filled with concern. "What is is and it cannot be changed."

She held his gaze. He didn't look away but she sensed a slight withdrawal. "Either you're hiding something or you're not telling me the whole story."

A wry smile played across his lips. "I never could lie to you, even to spare your feelings."

"You could have made the whole thing go away." It was a statement and he didn't deny it. "Why didn't you?"

Stanley hesitated and looked away as if debating how much to tell her. After a moment he seemed to come to a conclusion and fixed her with a measured stare. "I didn't bring us back before we'd left for a reason. If I had that man, his family and most importantly you would have had no memory of what occurred because you never would have gone to the restaurant. Only I would know what happened and I would have gained nothing from the whole unpleasant episode."

He blew out a long breath and shoved his hands into his pockets as if to keep from reaching for her. "My motive was strictly self-serving. Forgive me but had I erased the evidence that the man was a cad, the possibility exists that I would sorely regret my action in the future. On occasion, I utilize the time-space continuum to avoid situations in the future that could have been rectified in the past."

"Huh?" She hadn't expected a lesson in quantum physics.

"It's complicated—and totally irrelevant since we did not return to the past. Just know that it is better for everyone to remember the scene in the restaurant."

She chewed on that thought for a moment. "Basically, you're saying it's better that Alex remember everything because if he didn't and he showed up here he'd never know who you were or why you kicked him in the balls and threw him down a flight of stairs."

Stanley's eyebrows shot up at the word "balls" but he chuckled and nodded. "Yes, something like that."

She grinned back. "All right. That's fair. Next question. Where's my car?"

Stanley shrugged. "I assume it's where you left it."

"Oh, so time travel doesn't include cars?"

He shook his head. "Does this mean you believe me? About traveling through time?"

Hmm, that was a tough one. The whole concept was outrageous. But she was standing in her shop and had no recollection how she and Stanley had gotten there. It hadn't been a trick. If she went to the restaurant this instant, she had no doubt her car occupied the same parking space by the door.

She sucked her lower lip between her teeth and lifted her shoulders in defeat and nodded. "Go ahead, Scotty. Beam me up."

## **Chapter Five**

That clinched it. She was a slut. The corpse of her last romance wasn't even cold and she desperately wanted this man with the devilish glint in his eye. Surely there must be some period of mourning, some time for her to dwell on what a lowlife Alex had been, some time to grieve over her shattered dreams. But no, all she felt was a sense of relief at having the guilt lifted about sleeping with Stanley—that and a surging need to do it again.

Now there was no reason to deny the electricity that shot through her at the sight of him. No reason to deny that her blood boiled when he touched her. No reason to deny how wet she became when he kissed her.

His eyes shone with a bright intensity and a slow smile played across his lips. His hands gripped her waist then slid up. "Do you also believe me about who I am? Who you are?" With the pads of his thumbs he traced small circles on the sides of her breasts.

She closed her eyes, savoring how her breasts swelled, how her body trembled at his practiced touch. Did she think he was a time traveler from another century? He could be, unless he was some sort of magician or wizard, and that was crazier than time traveler.

Did she think she was his long-lost wife? She wanted to dismiss that silly thought but how else could she explain the familiarity she felt at being with him? How she knew what would please him, arouse him? And how did he know the same about her? Yet she had no recollection of him...or of 1902. Was she lost in time? Was she his long-lost wife? She honestly didn't know but that didn't stop her from experiencing the intense pleasure he brought her.

Lifting her leaden hands, she rested them beneath his jacket, low on his hips. His quick intake of breath encouraged her and she slipped her hands around and up his

back. His rippling muscles bunched at her touch and she memorized the feel of each one as her fingers played over them. Was it only last night that they'd met?

"You haven't answered." He leaned in and brushed his lips across her temple.

His warm breath stirred her hair. The scent of his bay rum cologne surrounded her and she lifted her face to stare up into his enigmatic eyes.

It didn't matter who he was, who she was or what she believed. All that mattered was being with him, holding him, making love with him. "I'm whoever you want me to be." It was a bad line from a B movie but he licked his lips and his eyes narrowed with desire. Sometimes bad lines worked just fine.

His eyes gleamed with that same passion she'd seen in the newspaper clipping. "Forever and always, I want you to be mine." His lips found hers in that forceful, demanding way they had before. He didn't just kiss her. He branded her, marking her as his and making certain she understood.

Juliana didn't care. She'd gladly give him anything he wanted, anything he demanded. She clung to him, pressing herself full against the steely contours of his body, feeling the solid ridge of his thick erection. She smoothed her palms down his back and cupped his buttocks, urging him tighter against her. Heat flared within her at the feel of his hard cock pulsing against her belly. Warm juices flooded her pussy, readying her. Anticipation built. She savored it, knowing that more exquisite sensations awaited.

Wedging her hands between them, she caressed his cock through the fine linen fabric of his trousers. Heat radiating from his sex warmed her hands.

He broke the kiss. "Keep doing that," he muttered in a low guttural growl and buried his head in the crook of her shoulder. He nibbled at the sensitive spot he seemed to know so well and yanked her blouse from the waistband of her skirt. His experienced fingers found her breast and pinched her nipple through the delicate lace of her bra. She gasped as excitement streaked from her nipple to her clit, making her body pulse with delicious expectation.

"I have a better idea," she purred, unbuttoning his trousers. It struck her as odd that he would have buttons on suit pants but desire surged within her until her only thoughts centered on getting him out of them. She tunneled through the fabric until she held his hot, throbbing cock between both hands. It was long and thick and ready for her. She circled the velvet head with her thumb, working her way slowly from the ridge to the sensitive opening. As her nail toyed with his slit, a bead of moisture dampened her thumb.

"Mmm," she murmured, spreading the droplet. "I'll want to taste you but first I want to feel your cock inside me."

He groaned his pleasure and shifted his legs wider when she reached lower to cup his heated balls. "Your newfound frankness and the...liberties you've learned are quite...exhilarating." He words came slowly amid breathless pants. She bent her head and concentrated on stroking him, bringing him greater pleasure. Exhilarating, eh? She'd show him just how exhilarating a twenty-first century woman could be.

With one last tweak his hand slid from her breast and under her skirt to squeeze her bottom. His fingers brushed inside the satin panties and found her wet throbbing pussy. She started at the intimate invasion. With practiced precision he massaged her sensitive clit with his finger, pulling her juices from her heated slit to heighten her excitement. He lifted his head and she felt him watching her, waiting for another reaction.

She tilted her face up and nipped his chin. "Don't stop there," she whispered. Torn between begging him to take her now, this moment, and the desire to prolong the maelstrom of sensations coursing through her body, she continued to massage his heated sex.

"Wet...and so creamy...I'll want to taste you also," he rasped in a low guttural tone, as if his control had slipped a notch. "But I agree. I need to feel my...cock inside you first." He placed a soft kiss on her temple. "I've never said that word in your presence before but I find doing so quite...arousing."

His mouth once again stormed hers as he thrust two fingers deep inside her. His tongue and his fingers conducted an exquisite exploration, rediscovering lost sensations, stimulating her to a panting frenzy.

In one swift movement, he stripped her panties down her legs and pushed his pants and shorts to the floor. She kicked off the panties, grateful she could brush her flowing skirt out of the way, and lifted her thigh to his hip. The rough hair of his leg against the soft flesh of her inner thigh brought another tingle of excitement. He backed her against the wall behind the checkout counter and gripped her buttocks.

"Wrap your legs around me," he rasped, positioning his heated cock at her dripping slit. She wound her legs tightly around his waist and arched her pelvis against him. She clung to him, reveling in the feel of his talented fingers toying with her butt cheeks. He kissed her long and heatedly when he entered her, stretching her. He was thick but her wet channel was ready and welcomed his swollen shaft until he was buried to his hilt. Reaching down with one hand, she separated her folds so that her clit brushed against the crinkly hairs surrounding his sex, heightening her excitement.

He began his thrusts slowly, drawing out until only the tip of his penis rubbed against her slick opening. He hesitated, seeming to wait for her response. His sinewy body braced her against the wall and she longed to impale herself on him, to feel the fullness he denied. She squirmed to bring him back into her.

"No, inside me. Please."

With a low growl he eased himself centimeter by torturous centimeter back until his pubis ground against her mons. She angled herself to draw the most exquisite tremors from the feel of his rigid erection pulsing inside her.

What little control she had was left in shreds. She wanted this to last but, already aroused by their foreplay, she was close, so close. He pulled back longer and thrust deeper until all thoughts of sanity were gone and she convulsed from the driving force of his powerful cock. As her climax grew he kept up his rhythm until she peaked and

fell against him, limp as a deflated balloon. The scent of his arousal mixed with his cologne triggered a sharp impression. They'd made love like this before.

"Again," he whispered. "Climax...again. Come...with...you..." He resumed the driving thrusts, holding her in position to take the relentless assault. She'd not yet recovered from her first orgasm when the next one began to build. Pressure—driving pulsing pressure—grew deep within her.

"Oh Stanley," she moaned, clinging to him. The friction of his starched shirt against the thin fabric of her blouse caused her nipples to pucker with unbearable sensitivity. Tension built, consuming her as his body tensed and his possession of her became complete.

"Now! Let...go...now!" His shout echoed in the deserted shop. The instant she felt his first shudder she gave herself over to the delicious spasms of a second orgasm. As her release crashed down on her so did an indisputable thought. Only a man with intimate knowledge of her needs, wants and desires could bring her to such unquestionable ecstasy. All doubts fell away as they climaxed together, sealing a bond with each other. She knew without a doubt she belonged to this man. She was Stanley's lost wife.

\* \* \* \* \*

Juliana snuggled against Stanley's side and twirled a short strand of his chest hair between her fingers. They lay in bed, watching the haze of dawn creep through the windows. She basked in the afterglow of yet another lovemaking session. Stanley was a generous if somewhat insatiable lover. She slid her palm down his chest, reveling in the taut muscles of his abdomen. "Six pack" had never more aptly described a set of abs.

She walked her fingers lower to tangle in his crinkly pubic hairs and encourage his cock to return to its previous delightful size. He rested his palm on the back of her hand, holding it in place. "Keep doing that," he said, shifting his legs to give her greater

access. She fondled his balls, contrasting the feel of his soft sac with the firm globes within.

"So when you left me yesterday morning you went back to 1902 to change your clothes? Seems like a long way to go for some clean underwear."

"You needn't be so indelicate, sweetheart." He scowled but she caught the glint of humor in his eyes. He slid his thumb along her jawline in a tender caress then leaned over and kissed her forehead. "I need to take a trip back this morning too. I don't believe my suit is serviceable."

"Oh? You mean because we stepped all over it and I used your shirt to, um, freshen up last night?" She giggled, recalling how the need to feel flesh against flesh had had them stripping each other after their initial bout of lovemaking. Their lust hadn't been satisfied and they'd had each other again, this time on top of the trunk. Their clothes had been casualties of their raw need.

He gave her a sidelong glance. "Your sensibilities have become quite lax since you've been here."

She giggled. "No more than any other twenty-first century woman's. We've come a long way, baby."

"I'm inclined to think you've gone too far." He winced when she tugged at his pubic hair. He clasped her hand and brought it to his lips. Turning it over, he placed a soft kiss in the center of her palm.

"I should have realized that 'progressive' and 'woman' in the same sentence rarely occur to the male mind in 1902." But she could get used to being treated like this by the 1902 male body.

"I had hoped that progressive would not be in your vocabulary at all." He pulled the sheet up, covering his torso and tucking it over her breasts.

Juliana sucked in a long breath. When she didn't move Stanley placed his finger on her cheek and turned her face to his.

"I suppose you find my last comment laughable." He brushed his knuckles across her cheek.

She smiled, glad he understood. "You seem to enjoy the benefits of having a progressive woman in your bed."

He heaved a deep sigh then pulled her across his chest. "Indeed I do. Life with you has never been boring, my love, and I believe it will become more interesting once your memory returns."

"My memory." A flicker of sadness marred her early morning happiness. "Oh Stanley, what if I never get it back? Will it matter? I mean, I realize now that we're married. Will it make a difference if it doesn't return? I've gotten along just fine these last four years without any memories."

"My dear, it is one thing to realize you are my wife. It is quite another for you to remember it. I want you to have those memories, not only because there are many wonderful things you should know but your life—our lives—will be much richer if you do."

Her thoughts were less conflicted since she'd decided to buy into the whole timetravel lost-wife scenario. She liked the idea of being married to Stanley—after last night, she liked it a whole lot.

"Is there always that flash of light and that booming thunder when you, ah, travel?" He gave a quick nod.

"Really? It all seems a bit theatrical, a little too Spielberg."

"Spielberg? What's a spielberg?"

"Sorry. It's..." She searched her brain for an old cliché. "It's a bit over the top, bigger than life."

"Oh." He shrugged. "Well, we are trespassing on several laws of nature. I imagine a few theatrics are in order."

She mulled over his reply. "Fair enough. Do you always dance to *Clair de Lune* when you travel?"

He leaned back and stared at her for a long moment, sadness filling his eyes.

"What? What'd I say?"

"Nothing, darling. We absolutely must get your memory back soon." He smoothed a finger along her cheek. "You see, I—we—dance to that wonderful piece of music because it is our special tune. We danced to it at our wedding."

Ouch. That hurt. "Sorry, I should have guessed."

How could she have been so thoughtless? She should have figured there was some significance to the music. She'd have to do something really, *really* special to make up for that faux pas. She couldn't suppress a mischievous smile as a thought struck her.

He'd eaten her pussy several times over the last days but given no indication that he expected her to reciprocate. She wanted to kick herself. Had she been one of those proper ladies with delicate sensibilities? Oh brother, there was no telling how much she'd missed out on. How much he'd missed. She stared at her husband's beautifully sculpted body and shook her head. Well those days were over.

Letting the sheet drop to her waist, she knelt, then glided her breasts along his arm. The soft crinkly hairs tickled, puckering her nipples. Stanley licked his lips and she pressed herself more firmly against him.

Leaning in, she swept a trail of soft kisses across his shoulder and up his hot, moist neck. When she reached his ear she sucked in his earlobe and let out a puff of warm air. "Do you know what I'm going to do to you, Mr. Stanley Caldwell the Third? I'm going to introduce you to a very progressive, very twenty-first century woman."

His brow crinkled. "I believe I've already had the pleasure, madam."

"Hmm, we'll see. First, I'm going to explore my way down to your...what was that word you found so arousing? Cock?"

He started but she flicked out her tongue and traced the shell of his ear.

"Yes, I believe it was cock, wasn't it, baby?" She tried her best breathy Marilyn Monroe imitation, hoping he wouldn't find it too cheesy. She giggled. It didn't matter. Stanley wouldn't know if she was imitating Marilyn Monroe or Marilyn Manson.

He shuddered and stared straight ahead as if in a trance.

"You like when I say that, don't you?" She blew another puff into his ear. "Well let me tell you what I'm going to do with your delicious cock." She rubbed her breasts against his arm and delighted at the deep red blush that spread over his cheekbones.

"I said delicious and that is exactly the word I mean. I don't remember if we've ever done this before...in 1902, that is, but like I said, I intend to explore my way to your luscious cock and I don't mean with my hands."

He sucked in a sharp breath and she delighted in the tent that the sheet formed between his legs.

"Oh, I see that you like that idea." She released another little puff of air. "So do I." She nibbled on his ear again, wondering if they'd ever had verbal sex. Probably not, based on his reaction. But he wasn't stopping her so she took her game to the next level.

Reaching under the sheet, she grasped his straining cock and began a slow pumping motion. "Are you wondering what I'm going to do to you, Stanley?"

After a moment he gave a slight nod, all the while staring straight ahead. He reminded her of an adolescent on his first date. So different from the self-assured, debonair time traveler she'd fallen in love with so quickly.

"Well first I'm going to lick my way down your chest. You have such a beautiful chest, you know. Is that all right with you?"

Another hesitant nod.

"Good. Then, when I can't resist it any longer, do you know what I'm going to do?"

His labored breathing filled the room but except for his billowing chest and a small headshake he didn't move.

What had started as a game with her early twentieth-century husband quickly became more erotic than playful. She squirmed, feeling the slick moisture between her folds. She suppressed a sudden urge to invite Stanley's fingers to toy with her throbbing pussy. This moment was all about him and her excitement increased as it fed off his.

"Then I'll tell you. When I can't resist any longer I'm going to spend an inordinate amount of time licking and kissing that magnificent cock of yours and when I can't stand that any longer I'm going to suck it into my mouth and make us both very happy."

Sweat trickled down his temples and he turned, his arms coming up around her. An expression somewhere between raw sensual longing and terror covered his face.

She caught his wrists and wiggled out of his grasp. "Nooo, no touching, not yet. Put your palms on the bed and sit still."

He stared at her for a long moment then complied, shifting to brace his back firmly against the headboard.

"All righty then." She whipped the sheet off him and tossed it to the foot of the bed. In the dim pre-dawn light the room was a cozy hideaway of friendly shadows and hazy outlines but she had no problem seeing the bold, thick erection that sprang from him. She skimmed a soft hand across his torso and flicked his nipple with her fingernail. He gripped the sheets and a fine sheen of sweat covered his body.

How could she have been married to this magnificent specimen of a man and not taken him in her mouth?

His eyes were clenched shut, his lips pursed and his chest heaved as if he'd just won the Kentucky Derby—as the thoroughbred.

She shifted to kneel between his legs and smoothed a hand through his hair. "Stanley, baby, relax. I promise you'll love this."

When he didn't move she bent and kissed him. His lips, tentative at first, opened under her assault and he let her in. Cradling his head between her hands, she poured all

her love into the kiss, hoping he understood how much she'd come to cherish him. When she broke the kiss, he opened his eyes and she had her answer. Mixed between the hunger and raw desire was the unmistakable look of a man who loved his wife.

A warmth like she'd never known surrounded her heart as she smoothed her palms down his chest and covered his nipples. They quickly contracted into tight nubs and she dipped her head to gently suckle first one then the other.

He gripped the bedsheet tighter.

She slid down, brushing her own distended nipples along his torso and flicking her tongue over his abs. His hips came off the bed when she dipped the tip of her tongue into his navel. "Juliana!"

"Like that, huh?"

His slow, dazed nod sent a swirl of excitement snaking through her.

"Then you're going to love this." She bent and placed a gentle kiss on the tip of his cock. It twitched. She curled her fingers around the base and held him steady as she kissed her way down the length of him. Pushing his powerful erection away from his body, she nibbled at the juncture where it joined his torso. The scent of aroused male filled her senses as she trailed her tongue back up to the bulbous head. Circling the soft ridge, she resisted the urge to take him fully into her mouth. No, if this was his first time it was going to be long and memorable. She kissed and licked and dipped the tip of her tongue into his sensitive slit then paid homage to his sac.

"Oh God, Juliana!" His deep growl sent a tingle of satisfaction straight to her clit.

All the while he kept his palms on the bed and let her pleasure him. When his breathing escalated and low growls echoed throughout the room she relented and took his erection fully into her mouth. The velvet smooth head contrasted with the rock-hard shaft and she went dizzy with the pleasure of having him so completely. At her first deep sucking motion he bucked and let out a strained gasp.

His hands shot through her hair, cradling her head as he pumped his cock in and out of her mouth. She could feel his excitement, his surprise, and sought to bring him to a higher state of arousal.

His hips stilled and he tried to lift her head away but she resisted and sucked him all the harder. With a strangled cry, he raised his hips. Warm cum ran down her throat and she gulped to swallow as much as she could but was distracted by his cries of release. In a frenzy of motion, he emptied himself into her then collapsed back, his arms flung out beside him.

She circled his cock with her tongue, lapping up the last of his cum, then placed a soft kiss on his belly and smiled to herself. Yeah, she would make sure he loved having a progressive wife.

\* \* \* \* \*

Juliana lay snuggled against Stanley's side, satisfied she'd brought him such a spectacular release. She had no idea what was acceptable lovemaking in 1902 but it was a damned shame Stanley had had to wait this long to be on the receiving end of oral sex.

"Unfortunately, my love, I must leave you for a while."

A pang of fear shot through her and she clutched his arm. "You will come back won't you?" Yesterday when he'd left she'd been glad to be rid of him but now she didn't want to be away from him for a moment.

He smoothed a strand of hair behind her ear. "How can you even ask?" He tilted her lips to his. The kiss started with the single flick of his tongue across her lower lip. She opened to him. The touch of his tongue gliding against hers had the expected effect and she melted in his arms. She skimmed her foot up the inside of his hair-roughened calf. He groaned and lifted his head.

"As much as I'd like to spend eternity in bed with you, I need to go back and speak with my brother."

He'd left her breathless from his kiss it took a moment for his words to register.

"Brother? You have a brother?" She'd forgotten he'd mentioned time travel ran in his family.

"Three, actually."

"Three brothers? Do they all, you know, travel?"

"Yes, and I am in a great deal of trouble with them for losing you. It's considered bad form."

She blinked. Bad form? Losing your wife is "bad form"?

"Oh..."

"Yes. My oldest brother once misplaced his wife for a few weeks. He had a devil of a time getting her to remember him. He always swore he should have stayed in the future until she recovered. He wasn't, ah, available yesterday when I traveled back and I need to question him on a few points regarding that."

"Do I have any family?" She held her breath. It hadn't occurred to her that there were other benefits to being Stanley's wife.

"Yes, you do. They are quite, er, an unconventional lot."

"Unconventional? What do you mean unconventional?"

"Let's just say that the Douglases have a tendency to make the headlines on a regular basis. I'd been putting them off from visiting us. If it pleases you, when we get you back I'll advise them to come."

A rush of delight ran through her. She wasn't alone. She had a family! "My God, is their name really Douglas? How wonderful!" Who would have thought that by adopting Mrs. Douglas' name Juliana would have stumbled on her own name?

"Do you suppose I was related to -"

"My dear, that is a road best not traveled. Knowing the future of one's descendents could prove...unpleasant."

"Good point." She knelt beside him. "Tell me about the 1902 bunch."

Stanley chuckled. "It would take hours to describe your family. Your time would be better spent trying to regain your memory."

"But I want—" An unexpected yawn interrupted her. "I didn't get much sleep last night but you have to tell me everything about my family."

"Now whose fault is that?" he said, ignoring her request. He ran his hand up and down the length of her side. "Why don't you go back to sleep? I'll make a quick trip and be back before you know it."

She blew out a soft breath and watched his chest hairs flutter. "I should explore the steamer trunk. I've got to get my memory back."

Stanley shifted her and rolled off the bed. He dressed quickly. His crumpled suit and stained shirt gave him the appearance of a wealthy homeless person. "Goodness, I hope I don't run into anyone. Remember, darling, if you do decide to investigate, leave the trunk lid open, otherwise I won't be able to find my way back to you."

She smiled up at him. "I may not remember much but I do remember that." She stretched her arms over her head, watching Stanley's gaze travel the length of her body. Arching her back, she gave him a better view of her breasts. A wicked little voice sounded in the back of her mind. She slowly pulled up her knees and dropped them open, giving him an unrestricted view of her pussy.

His eyes widened and he licked his lips. "My dear, you progressive women tempt the saints themselves. Sleep. I will be back before you know it."

She giggled. "Just giving you a reason to hurry," she said, rolling over and snuggling into her pillow. A nap right now held a whole lot of appeal, especially if he joined her in bed again.

He picked up the sheet from the bottom of the bed and drew it over her, tucking it around her. "You're all the reason I require."

She heard his footsteps on the stairs and a rumble of thunder before drifting off.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Riinnnggg!

Juliana jumped at the sound of her alarm clock. Fuzz clogged her brain. As she made her way back to awareness she hit the alarm and huddled under the sheet. The faint scents of sex, sweat and bay rum cologne tickled her nose.

Stanley! She rolled over but found the bed next to her empty. Disappointed, she burrowed back into her pillow. Who would have thought she'd have a time-traveling husband? She may be a few crayons short of a box but she believed him. As bizarre as it seemed she believed with her whole heart that he was a time traveler. His clothes, his unexplained appearances and disappearances not to mention her own express trip from the restaurant all convinced her he was the genuine article.

Of course, that whole dancing thing was pretty weird but his explanation—what little of it she understood—seemed logical enough.

She rolled over and buried her face in his pillow. None of it mattered. Being with Stanley just seemed right. She wished he'd come back to bed. Was he still in 1902? Was he in the shop exploring the trunk? The shop! Wherever he was, she needed to get her butt in gear and open the shop.

According to Stanley she belonged in 1902, and the thought of relatives and a past thrilled her to her very bones but until she returned to the past she had a business to run. She jumped out of bed and opened the staircase door.

"Stanley?" she called. No answer. Probably not back yet.

Putting on a pot of coffee, she showered, dressed and was taking her first sip from a steaming mug within fifteen minutes. Hmm, it looked to be another beautiful day. What should she put out on the stoop to attract customers?

Skipping down the stairs, she stopped. A feeling that something wasn't quite right struck her. Then she saw it. The front door stood ajar. The alarm was disarmed. She distinctly remembered shutting the door after testing it last night. She tried to picture the moment. No recollection of locking it or turning on the alarm came to her.

"Stanley?" Her gaze darted around the shop. There, half hidden by the glass display counter, lay a heap of papers and clothes tossed in a haphazard pile. The trunk was gone. Had he dumped it out and hauled it outside to search it in better light? He hadn't exactly been gentle with the contents last night. "Stanley?"

She opened the front door wider. No Stanley.

She shut the door and explored all the rooms in the shop. No Stanley.

Her gaze passed over the checkout counter, a thick business envelope lay in the center. They'd been all over that counter last night. Her body heated remembering how Stanley had laid her down, spread her legs and lapped her pussy until she screamed for mercy. Everything but the register had been knocked off. They'd straightened it a little before going up to bed but she was sure there had been no business envelope.

She picked it up and slid open the flap. *Huh?* 

A hundred dollar bill showed in the opening. No, it was a stack of hundred dollar bills. She pulled the bills from the envelope and fanned her thumb across their edges. A sticky note was attached to the last bill. "Everything has a price."

Everything has a price? What the...? Ohmigod, no! The guy who'd tried to buy the trunk! Thin Lips!

She did a quick count of the bills. Twenty-five. Twenty-five hundred dollars. The amount Thin Lips had offered. The amount she'd wanted to accept until Stanley informed her that the trunk was his only means of finding her through time.

She ran to the door and threw it open again, searching up and down the street. The usual early Sunday morning quiet. No sign of any life outside. She slammed the door. How dare that bastard come into her shop and steal her trunk! It didn't matter if he paid for it. The trunk was not for sale!

Wait. She had his card. She could call the police. The sudden image of Stanley snatching the card from her fingers and shoving it into his trouser pocket shot across her mind. Stanley had the card! "Stanley! Where are you?"

The shop echoed with the empty question. She sank to the floor next to the checkout counter. *No! No!* Tears welled in her eyes and a thick sob escaped her throat. Stanley was in 1902. The trunk was gone—and undoubtedly closed! He couldn't come back. He'd never find her again.

Silent sobs racked her body. She huddled in a fetal position next to the counter, giving herself over to the hopeless reality that she'd never again see the man she loved. She'd never know what it would be like to have a family. She'd never know what they looked like, what kind of "headlines" they made, nothing.

Somewhere in her mind she had the vague recollection of feeling like this before. Like she'd been drained of all joy; that any happiness she'd ever felt had been sucked out of her, leaving her empty, vacant. Was that when Stanley had lost her? Before she'd lost all memory of him and the life she'd had before?

She gasped as the unthinkable occurred to her. Would she forget him again? Would her recent memories of him fade like the memories of her past? The thought brought a fresh round of inconsolable tears. She crouched by the counter for what seemed like hours, letting the hopelessness of her situation envelop her.

When her muscles screamed for relief and she'd run out of tears she staggered to her feet and stared blankly around the shop. The spilled contents of the trunk seemed to reprove her for abandoning them so roughly.

Wrong. It was just wrong. Even if Thin Lips stole her trunk, he had no right to throw her things in a heap like that.

She drifted over to the pile and picked up a fan, the collapsible top hat and the tiara and placed them on a display case. Bending again, she gathered more items and carefully stacked them. Handling the objects was like comforting an old feeble friend who was too weak to help himself.

The emerald green ball gown lay crumpled in a heap. She shook it out and let the lavender scent surround her, let it remind her of Stanley. She inhaled deeply, willing the fragrance to bring back memories of another time, another life.

Nothing. Only recent memories of her time with the man she loved surfaced.

Fighting back another round of tears, she held the gown against her. Well why not?

Stripping off her jeans and t-shirt, she fought her way into the wrinkled dress. Struggling, she about had to stand on her head to button up the back. He'd been right. It was a perfect fit. She found the black and gold shawl she'd worn the night before and a pair of dancing slippers and dangled a black lace fan from her wrist.

A forlorn feeling overcame her as she admired herself in a full-length mirror. She would have made an attractive picture in 1902, dancing with her husband, her lover. She lifted her gaze to her face. Red-rimmed eyes stared mournfully back. Turning her head to study her mottled complexion, her ponytail swung into view. No—the hair was all wrong. She searched the pile and found a rhinestone hair clasp and came across a small box filled with interesting costume jewelry. Pulling her unruly curls back, she anchored them into a modified chignon then crowned herself with the tiara. She executed a regal curtsy in the mirror before turning her attention to the jewelry.

A few necklaces, earrings and broaches. She selected an intricately designed necklace but could find only one matching earring. She stared. There was something familiar about that earring.

*Wait a minute!* She bustled to the checkout counter and pulled out her blue velvet box of lost keys and mismatched earrings. Her heartbeat raced as she picked out an orphaned earring. With trembling hands she held the two up to the light. There could be no mistake. They were a pair—one from the past and one from the present.

Was this it? Was this what she and Stanley had been searching for to bring back her memory? After all, these were her things.

What was she waiting for? Gleefully she lifted the one from the trunk to her earlobe, then stopped.

Stanley was lost to her. She had no way to get to him in 1902. With the trunk gone he had no way to find her again either. Did she want the memories those earrings could

bring? Did she want to recall how wildly happy they'd been in that other life? Did she want the constant reminder of a love she could never again know?

She studied the delicate design of the earrings and wondered what pain, what joy they might hold. Did one outweigh the other?

Damn right it did!

Bittersweet joy was better than no joy at all. She inserted the first earring into her earlobe and waited. Nothing. Okay, so it probably took both. She closed her eyes and inserted the second earring.

Hmm. Maybe it was a gradual thing. Maybe the memories didn't all rush back at once. She opened her eyes. Nothing. Despondency like she'd never known settled over her. Not only would she never know how happy they'd been but it seemed certain she would forget him again.

She slumped against the counter, unbearable anguish welling up inside her. From where the box of jewelry sat on the counter in the sunlight, a glint of gold caught her eye. She fingered around in the box until she uncovered the source. A gold band. A wedding ring.

Instinctively, she knew. This was it! This was what they'd been searching for. Her wedding band. Without looking, she knew what the inscription on the inside said. *Dance with Me.* Her hands shook as she fingered the warm metal. Holding it up, it glistened in the sunlight and she confirmed the inscription. Her heart ached, the pain would be unbearable but if memories were all she could have of Stanley and their life before then that's what she would take.

She closed her eyes and slipped the ring onto her finger.

Sensations, memories, emotions bombarded her. A lifetime of thoughts—joyous, wonderful, heartbreaking, sad—flooded through her. Wild flashes of light exploded behind her eyelids. Thunder filled her ears. She gasped and clung to the counter.

The oddest feeling overtook her. She had two distinct sets of memories — one as a St. Augustine shopkeeper in the early twenty-first century and another as a society lady in

the early twentieth century. The first set began where the second set ended. When she thought she could move without throwing up Juliana Douglas Caldwell opened her eyes.

She shifted her gaze from right to left. Nothing had changed in the shop. The electronic register remained on the counter. The display cases held antiques and vintage items. She still wore the wrinkled dress and dainty shawl.

The only thing different was her.

Out of the corner of her eye she caught a blur. It streaked by her and was gone before she turned her head. Excitement bubbled up within, spreading like electricity through her veins.

The blur whirled by her again and began to take form as it spun through the display counters and tables. Another clap of thunder and a blinding light filled the shop. She held her breath as a wondrous joy washed over her. Giddy with anticipation, she clasped her hands together as the form, dressed in a tuxedo with tails, stopped in front of her. "Stanley!"

She rushed into his arms, almost toppling him over. He caught her around the waist and held her to him.

"Now that's the sort of greeting I like." He leaned back, his dark eyes examining her. After a moment a wide smile spread across his face. He picked her up and twirled her around. Her arms circled his neck and she brought her lips to his. As he deepened the kiss he set her on her feet and ravaged her mouth. She clung to him, silently vowing never to let him go.

His eyes twinkled when he broke the kiss and searched her face. The cleft in his chin deepened. "What did it? What made you remember?"

She held up her left hand, allowing the wedding ring to glisten in the sunlight. "It was in the trunk, in a small box buried under all those things. At first I thought it was the earrings. I had one. I mean, here in this time, I had one, and there was one in the box

but—and then it didn't work and then—wait a minute. How did you find me? The trunk is gone."

"Gone?" His expression changed from loving delight to the familiar thunderclouds.

"That man from yesterday. He got in the shop and stole it. Well he paid me for it but I didn't sell it to him. He got in and took it. Oh Stanley, I thought I'd never see you again. It was horrible. Here I go and fall in love with you and then discover I'll never see you again." She buried her face in the crook of his neck. "Oh how I love you." The wild thumping of his pulse as he held her to him reassured her he had truly returned.

"It seems that it was not the trunk that called me to find you when it was opened." He tilted her chin up to look at him. In the depths of his eyes, she saw hunger. She saw lust. But most of all, she saw love. "No, it wasn't the trunk, my darling. It was the ring that called me."

"I don't understand. If it wasn't the trunk, where were you? I've been miserable for hours, thinking I'd never see you again." All that time spent weeping over her lost future—or was it her lost past?

"Stanley Caldwell, where the hell have you been?" She would have stomped her foot but it seemed a bit melodramatic.

He leaned down and brushed his lips to hers. "My love, time travel is not exactly a science. It appears my timing is a bit off. I thought I would return to find you sound asleep. In fact, I had planned to join you in bed to show you how much I missed you." Her insides quivered then she remembered why he'd left.

"Did you find your brother? What did he say?"

A wicked grin spread across his lips before his mouth found hers with a searing kiss. That's what it was, his branding kiss.

Slowly, ever so slowly, he lifted his lips from hers, leaving her wanting more. "Whatever his advice was, it doesn't matter now. Are you ready, Mrs. Caldwell?"

She didn't pretend to misunderstand. This was it. "We can't stay here?"

He shook his head. "We don't belong here."

"What will happen to all this?" She waved her hand. "What will happen to Second Hand Rose?"

"It will become a memory that eventually will fade. People will remember a quaint shop somewhere in St. Augustine that had a lovely proprietress who sold antique baubles and clothing but they won't be able to recall exactly where it was located."

She glanced around the shop. She'd spent so many happy hours here. She would miss it, miss it terribly. Her gaze rested on the envelope, spilling hundred dollar bills onto the counter. Hmm, that could come in handy. "Can we take it?"

Stanley's gaze followed hers. He shook his head. "We really shouldn't take anything back. Someone might notice and explanations could become...uncomfortable."

Well duh. She should have figured that out. Of course she couldn't use twenty-first century money in 1902. A sinking feeling gripped her stomach. Oh no! No microwaves, no ibuprofen, no Internet! Could she do it?

"Um, can we come back for a visit now and then?"

Stanley chuckled. "I don't think that would be wise. Perhaps we had best stay in our own time, at least for a while."

She knew he was right but God she was going to miss her cell phone. She allowed herself a secret smile. No one but Stanley need ever know about the lacy black Victoria's Secret lingerie she was wearing. Explaining it to him certainly wouldn't be "uncomfortable".

"May I have this dance, Mrs. Caldwell?" He held out his hand in invitation.

Juliana looked up into his loving eyes. Memories from both her lives crowded into her mind. Yes, she now remembered what life was like with Stanley Caldwell. She also knew what life was like without him. It would be tough but she could survive without the cell phone...she couldn't survive without Stanley.

She moved into his arms and the warmth of his love surrounded her. "I'd be delighted...Mr. Stanley Caldwell the Third."

They began slowly. Their eyes locked on each other. He twirled her faster and faster until her shop became a blur and still he whirled her faster. A blinding light flashed and loud thunder roared in her ears. When her vision cleared she found herself waltzing with her husband in a crowded ballroom. A quick glance down confirmed her green satin ball gown was meticulously pressed, her lace shawl was draped about her shoulders and her favorite fan dangled from her wrist.

She smiled at the other dancers as they glided past. Mr. Henry Flagler and his new wife, his third she recalled, nodded to her. She, of course, graciously acknowledged them.

She returned her adoring attention to her husband who held her a bit too tightly, as if he feared she'd slip away again. Stanley smiled down and pulled her closer than convention allowed but she didn't care. He brushed his lips along her ear. "Dance with me, my love. Dance with me to the end of time."

The End

## About the Author

Five years ago, Eileen Ann decided to take a year off from her software consulting business. There was too much to do that couldn't be accomplished between airline flights and hotel stays. Just as soon as she got that garage cleaned, she'd jump right back into the rat race.

Well, the rats are on their own. She still can't walk through the garage, but every day she has a hot date with a to-die-for alpha male—or males!—and hunches over her computer as they fight, angst, or wander through her stories. Multi-published in several genres, Eileen Ann resides in sunny Florida with her husband and one and a half children. (Allegedly, her son is away at school—or so he claims.)

Eileen Ann welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her <u>author bio page</u> at <u>www.ellorascave.com</u>.

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