the fact that he was as intangible as mist.

Only when he was greeted by a short, goofy looking man wearing a white dress did he realize the bind he was in.

ÒMr. Alexander, welcome to triage,Ó the man said, smiling like some cartoon character with more teeth than common sense.

ÒTriage? Is that slang for purgatory?Ó

The man quirked his two bushy, white brows. ÒNo, triage is the stage before purgatory. ItÕs where we decide where you belongÑ.Ó he gestured behind him and three golden doors appeared Ñ Òdoor number one, door number two or door number three.Ó

MattÕs head began to throb, or it would have if he still had a head. This little man was as confusing as hell. ÒListen, Dopey, you may have eternity here, but I donÕt. At least I think I donÕt. Could you please cut to the chase?Ó

The man consulted a scroll, which he plucked out of thin air, and clicked his tongue disapprovingly. ÒIt says here patience was never

one of your virtues. Apparently, neither was respect of oneself and others, compassion, and chastity.Ó

Matt snorted. ÒHow about the thousand bucks I gave to Sun Youth last month?Ó

Dopey skewered him with a blistering glare. ÒThat would be charity.Ó

Matt got his drift and chuckled proudly. If the truth be told, he was about as chaste as a nymphomaniac whore with too much time on her hands. Which was what had landed him in this whole sordid mess to begin with.

ÒSo what do these doors stand for? Is Vanna waiting for me on the other side?Ó

Dopey flashed a mischievous grin. ÒPerhaps not Vanna, but a woman. Yes, most definitely a woman.Ó

Things were looking up. This whole death deal might not be so bad after all. ÒIs she hot?Ó

ÒThat would be door number two. ItÕs very, very hot in there.Ó

The situation suddenly lost all comic appeal.

That kind of heat he could do without. ÒSo how is this game supposed to play out? Do I spin a wheel? Pick a door? Stand on my head and hum ÔPop Goes the WeaselÕ?Ó

ÒNothing that simple. In fact, it will probably be the most difficult thing youÕve ever had to do.Ó

Matt scoffed. ÒThereÕs nothing I canÕt accomplish if I set my mind to it. Anything to avoid door number two. Just name it.Ó

DopeyÕs face gleamed until it beamed resplendent. With a swirl of his hand, he showed Matt what awaited him behind door number one. It was a woman, no doubt about that. A thin, mousy woman with horn-rimmed glasses, sitting in front of a roaring fire with her small, perky nose buried in a book.

MattÕs face fell. ÒSheÕs not my type.Ó

Dopey displayed a perfect row of pearl-white teeth. ÒShe better be, Mr. Alexander, because you have exactly ten days to make her fall in love with you.Ó

****

Evelyn Hyde loved old books. She loved the smell of timeworn leather, the feel of crinkled yellowing paper beneath her fingertips, the crackling sound they made each time she turned a page. Everything about those timeless classics penned in times of war, famine, oppression or plainly simpler eras when basic values actually mattered—fascinated her and left her breathless. She could lose herself in a book for days, thinking of nothing else but flipping to the next scene or chapter. These enduring tales inspired her, made her believe some things truly were meant to last forever.

She settled in her favorite recliner before the fireplace in the modest New England cottage she'd inherited from her parents, preparing to be swept away by her latest find—a wonderful first edition of Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre. Being a librarian definitely had its perks. Over the years she'd developed some pretty impressive contacts as far as used books were concerned, and this baby had all but fallen into her lap.

SheÕd barely read three pages when the strangest feeling came upon her. The feeling that she was no longer alone. Her gaze quickly scanned the room, and Ñ as crazy as it sounded Ñ she half expected to find someone sitting on the couch across from her. Of course, there was no one there and she shook her head in self-reproach, returning her attention to her book.

The bizarre sensation, however, did not abate. She feltÉwatched.

Evelyn laughed at her silliness. She was just shy of her thirtieth birthday Ñ far too young to be going senile. SheÕd read stories about women who lived alone. Women who grew eccentric as the years passed and eventually acquired a dozen or so cats to soothe their solitude. Ms. Delaney, who lived down the street from her, was a prime example. The sweet, plump spinster had the most unsettling habit of talking to people who werenÕt there.

Well, she was nothing like her neighbor or any of the women sheÕd read about. Yes, she lived

alone, but she did not own a cat and she most definitely was not lonely. Not with all these fascinating characters to keep her entertained night after night.

She managed to read a few more pages of JaneÕs riveting plight when she experienced an inexplicable tingle at the nape of her neck, like the cool kiss of a ghost. She shuddered and flung a furtive glance over her shoulder.

Get a grip. YouÕre far too pragmatic to start believing in ghosts.

The fire flickered, causing eerie shadows to skip across the walls. The shadows suddenly merged, swaying to some inaudible tune, as if performing a sensual dance. Then, for a moment ever so brief, she couldÕve sworn they formed the shape of a man.

And thatÕs when Evelyn decided the time had probably come for her to adopt some cats.

Matt felt he was in hell already. For the past three days heÕd struggled to get Evelyn to see him,

but she refused to acknowledge his presence. That trick with the fire had been pretty neat. Still, the blasted woman continued to ignore him.

He was starting to believe Dopey had purposely set him up to fail. How could he possibly get EvelynÕs attention when she had her face constantly buried in a book? She probably wouldnÕt have noticed him if he was a flesh-and-bone man standing stark naked two feet away from that pretty as-a-button nose of hers.

For days heÕd followed her around like some pathetic puppy, practically doing somersaults to get her to glance his way. HeÕd trudged through snow and slush here in Nowheretown Maine, painfully missing the bright L.A. sun heÕd enjoyed most of his adult life. The New England sky was gray, like an old washed-out blanket, but for some reason it refused to rain or snow. And EvelynÕs routine was as boring as hell. She went from her house to the library, then back to her house again. Yesterday, sheÕd actually gone wild and dropped by the grocery store on her way home. Matt had nearly

died from the excitement. Or he wouldÕve, if he wasnÕt already dead.

No wonder the woman reads so much. Evelyn Hyde, he concluded, must be bored to tears.

ÒDopey, I could really use your help here.Ó MattÕs voice echoed listlessly in the empty house. Evelyn was still at the library. Unable to spend another second in that drab place, heÕd called it quits and returned to the cottage on his own.

Instantly, the white-gowned man materialized before him.

ÒWhat seems to be the problem, Mr. Alexander?Ó

ÒThe problem,Ó he replied, ÒisÒ that I canÕt get her to see me.Ó

Dopey watched him with an infuriatingly calm look, scratching one of his oversized ears. ÒSheÕll see you when sheÕs ready.Ó

Matt tamped down an oath. ÒAnd when exactly will that be?Ó

ÒPatience, Mr. Alexander. Good things come to

those who wait.Ó

Great, his future hung in the balance and all Dopey could do was spit proverbs at him. ÒHow the blazes am I supposed to get that woman to fall in love with me when she canÕt see or hear or touch me? Worse yet, sheÕs as absurd as a nun. The only man she takes to bed at night is Charles Dickens, and heÕs as dead as a doornail!Ó

A cocky grin curled DopeyÕs mouth. ÒThen it appears youÕre in luck, Mr. Alexander. YouÕre precisely her type. And by the way, my name is Eberhart!Ó

Matt failed to stifle the chuckle that rose to his throat. ÒBet you gave your parents door number two for that one.Ó

The humor was lost on Eberhart, who quickly vanished in a flurry of white robes.

Matt sighed. What in GodÕs name was he supposed to do now?

Evelyn had a splendid day at the library. She

managed to retrieve several late books and had even acquired a couple of new classics: ÕAnn RadcliffeÕs The Mysteries of Udolpho and Charles DickensÕ David CopperfieldÕ from her contact at Classic Treasures. This was turning out to be a very exciting week.

Home, sweet home, she thought as she turned the key and entered the Victorian clapboard house sheÕd grown up in.

Her soles ached from all the hours sheÕd spent on her feet, and she had a crick in her neck, a result of all the books sheÕd sorted. All she wanted to do tonight was take a nice hot bubble bath and curl up with Jane Eyre. Sadly, she was almost finished reading the enthralling tale. Jane had just discovered that Mr. Rochester was married and had fled from Thornfield Manor. Although Evelyn had read the story countless times before, she was anxious to experience the thrill of the climax all over again.

The moment she stepped foot in her home, however, the peculiar feeling returned. The one that made her skin prickle and her heart race. The one

that had her seeing shapes in the shadows and hearing whispers in the whistle of the breeze.

Stubbornly brushing the sensation away, she dropped her purse in the hall and hastened to the kitchen to make herself a nice cup of herbal tea. SheÕd eaten a sandwich at the library before sheÕd left for the day, so she didnÕt have to bother with supper tonight.

After drinking her tea, she made her way to the bathroom, where she proceeded to fill the tub with fragrant suds. The small bathroom slowly filled with lavender-scented steam, as she gently slipped out of her clothes. Humming a chirpy tune, she removed the rubber band from her hair, releasing a cascade of unruly curls. Completing the ritual, she took off her glasses and placed them by the sink. She was about to lower herself into the tub when for no reason she could explain, sheÕd felt compelled to wipe the steam from the mirror.

Instantly, her heart slammed into her throat, drowning the scream that threatened to spill from her parted lips. In the mirror, mere feet behind her,

stood the most gloriously handsome man sheÕd ever seen. He had hair the color of burnt honey, aquamarine eyes that sparkled like the Caribbean Sea at dawn, and he watched her with a glimmering intensity that stole the moisture from her mouth and made panic coil in her belly.

And in the midst of this delusional fantasy, all Evelyn could think about was that she was as naked as the day she was born.

Chapter Two

Matt was perfectly content to watch Evelyn strip, for once happy she couldnÕt see him. It turned out this whole ghost thing had some benefits after all. Unfortunately, viewing was the only pleasure he could engage in. He was definitely going to miss making love to a woman. There was something very delectable about the creamy texture of a womanÕs skin, and EvelynÕs was no exception.

He took in the sight of her naked figure: her shapely legs, her heart-shaped butt, those firm, perfectly symmetrical breasts that would fit in his palms just rightfi he cupped themÉ

Matt decided he liked Evelyn Hyde a heck of a lot better without her clothes.

And that hair!

He never wouldÕve guessed that silly bun concealed such a wild mass of russet-brown curls. It had to be a sin against nature to pin up a mane like that. He shook his head in baffled disbelief. What was the senseless woman thinking? Did she purposely work at making herself as unattractive as possible? If he didnÕt know any better, heÕd say Evelyn Hyde went to great pains to repel men.

Then it struck him. The reason she loved books so much. EvelynÕs reading obsession stemmed from a desperate desire to avoid living her own life. Why have sex when you can read about it, right?

At that moment, he wanted nothing more than to show her exactly what she was missing. If only heÕd met her when he was still alive, he would have taught her a thing or two about letting loose and having fun. Now, he couldnÕt as much as wrap one of those wicked curls around his finger, couldnÕt sprinkle feathery kisses down the gracious curve of her neck, couldnÕt touch or taste or smell her. The realization rankled, and for the first time since his death he was assailed by a crippling feeling of loss.

No longer in any mood to behold everything heÕd never have the opportunity to embrace again, he was about to vanish from the bathroom and leave her to her privacy, when she suddenly wiped the steam from the mirror and stared straight at him.

For a few seconds their gazes locked, and Matt knew deep down within hiÑ in that place where consciousness dimmed and instinct took overÑ that she saw him. He caught a flicker of surprise and disbelief in her eyes, peppered with a dash of something else. Something thick and sultry and laced with a special kind of awareness only a man and woman can share.

Then she blinked, and the moment was lost. She spun around in search of him, but she glanced right through him. The awareness was gone, replaced by a ripple of confusion that pinched her brows and crinkled her forehead.

Matt felt a stab of disappointment. Nevertheless, for the first time since heÕd gotten this impossible assignment hope ballooned inside him. Sooner or later, Evelyn Hyde would have no choice

but to acknowledge his existence, and when she did, heÕd make damn sure he found a way to show her that life was a hell of a lot more interesting when you actually experienced it.

The next morning was Saturday, and Evelyn looked forward to spending a quiet day at home. The vision in the mirror last night had been quite troubling.

I must be under more strain than I thought, she reasoned. Why else would I be seeing things?

Nothing a peaceful day with a good book couldnÕt cure.

After having a light breakfast of buttered toast and tea, she took a couple of hours to tidy up her home. Saturday mornings were reserved for cleaning, and she always proceeded the same way: she started in the kitchen, slowly made her way to the living room, then finished with the bathrooms and bedrooms.

In no time at all, she was done. There were definite benefits to living by yourself; you had no

one else to clean up after. Evelyn was just about to sink into her favorite recliner with a new book ÑÑ sheÕd regretfully finished *Jane Eyre* last night ÑÑ when the doorbell rang.

A little put off by the interruption, she went to answer it and found her neighbor Agnes Delaney standing on her doorstep.

ÒEvie, dear,Ó the elderly woman said, displaying a neighborly smile, Òwould it be too much of an inconvenience for me to borrow some milk? I ran out, and my poor kitties canÕt go without their morning snack.Ó

ÒNo problem, Ms. Delaney. Please come in.Ó

Agnes followed Evelyn inside. ÒThe vet says I shouldnÕt give them too much milk,Ó she explained, Òbut they just love it, and I canÕt bring myself to refuse them.Ó She tossed a surprised glance over EvelynÕs shoulder. ÒIs this a bad time, dear? I didnÕt realize you were entertaining a young man. And such a handsome lad he is too.Ó

ÒMs. Delaney, thereÕs no one ÑÑ Ó

ÒOf course, I can see you. I may be getting on

in years, but IÕm not blind,Ó she said to the phantom only she could see.

Evelyn heaved in exasperation. ÒMs. Delaney?Ó

ÒYes, dear?Ó

ÒThereÕs no one here but me.Ó

Ms. Delaney reflected for a moment, then shot another glance over EvelynÕs shoulder. ÒShe canÕt? You poor dear. How frustrating it must be invisible.Ó

Evelyn gave up. ÒIÕll go get that milk.Ó

When she returned a few minutes later, Ms. Delaney was still talking to herself. The poor woman really was off her rocker. If that was what prolonged solitude did to you, perhaps it would be best to reconsider some of the choices sheÕd made for her life.

ÒI wish I could help, young man,Ó Ms. Delaney was saying, Òbut she wonÕt be able to see you unless she wants to.Ó Agnes paused for a moment, a befuddled frown creasing her forehead. ÒWhoÕs

EberhartÓ

ÒHereÕs your milk, Ms. Delaney,Ó Evelyn said in her most upbeat voice, attempting to mask the disturbing effect her eccentric neighborÕs visit was having on her.

ÒThank you, dear.Ó Ms. Delaney took the mug Evelyn offered, staring at her with a contemptuous look on her grandmotherly face. ÒThereÕs a lot of negative energy around you, Evie. It hems you in, and keeps everything and everyone out. Let go of your fears. Only then will you see what I see.Ó

Evelyn thanked the woman for the strange advice, tactfully escorting her to the door. The moment Ms. Delaney stepped out of the cottage EvelynÕs shoulders sagged with relief. What a bizarre week this had turned out to be.

Exhaling a lungful of air, she hastened to the living room, where her book ÑCharles DickensÕA Christmas CarolÑ patiently awaited her return. She barely had a chance to sit down when a strange sound broke the blessed stillness surrounding her. Oddly enough, it sounded like meow

ÒWhat now?Ó Both curious and annoyed, she stood to investigate.

Meow. The sound led her to the back door. She quickly swung it open, and a blast of cold air instantly invaded her home.

Her gaze drifted downward, and the sight she beheld made her blood run colder than the crisp March breeze gushing in. There, on her back porch sat a miserable-looking kitten. Its gray fur was wet and matted, its white paws stained like a dirty pair of slippers.

ÒOh, no. Shoo!Ó she cried.

The cat refused to take the hint. It shivered and mewled, looking at her as if she was the answer to all its prayers.

ÒPlease, shoo!Ó Her voice rang with desperation. ÒIf I feed you, youÕll keep coming back.Ó She placed her hands on her hips, struggling to crush the compassion fisting in her chest. ÒIÕm willing to bet this is precisely how poor Ms. Delaney got her first cat.Ó

The kitten continued to stare at her, its eyes

two round, beseeching pools of despair.

Evelyn groaned. Despite her better judgment, she went to the kitchen and returned with a saucer of milk. The grateful cat bulleted into the house and hungrily drowned its whiskers in the bowl.

Evelyn crouched next to her new companion, scratching it behind the ears. A dejected sigh escaped her lips. Her descent into madness had officially begun.

Matt slouched on the couch across the room from the aggravating woman heÕd been ordered to seduce, contemplating new ways to die. HeÕd spent the last three hours watching Evelyn read, and if he still had an ounce of flesh on him heÕd be slitting his wrists right about now.

This day was turning out to be as thrilling as an evening at the bingo hall. And it was barely two in the afternoon. He thought back to how he usually spent his Saturdays. Chances were heÕd still be in bedÑ a womanÕs bedÑ doing things that wouldÕve made prissy little Evelyn blush just reading about.

Instead, he was stuck here in Deadsville, counting off each minute that crawled by, listening to nothing but the frustrating echo of his own thoughts.

The only sound that pierced the monotonous silence was that damn cat hissing each time she crossed his path. Matt had decided about an hour ago that the mangy beast was a female. Probably the reincarnation of one of his exes, if any of them had had the misfortune of suffering the same fate as he.

She sat on the rug across from him now, curled at EvelynÕs feet, glaring at him with blatant mistrust. The blasted creature refused to take her eyes off of him, so he decided to alleviate his boredom by engaging in a staring competition.

The cat won.

Feeling more than a little antsy, he stood and stalked the room. Once again, the cat hissed at him.

ÒWhatÕs wrong, Slippers?Ó Evelyn asked, finally allowing her gaze to stray from the lousy book she clasped. ÒDoes the fire frighten you?Ó

ÒThis is great, just great,Ó Matt growled. ÒSheÕll talk to the cat, but she wonÕt as much as

spare me a glance.Ó

To MattÕs surprise, the book plunked to the floor as Evelyn vaulted to her feet. ÒWho said that? How did you get in my house?Ó She scanned the room with wild-eyed alarm.

Matt approached her, finally experiencing that adrenaline rush he so missed. ÒYou can hear me?Ó

Evelyn squealed with fear. ÒWhere are you hiding?Ó

ÒNowhere. IÕm right in front of you.Ó

ÒWhy canÕt I see you then?Ó

ÒBecause, apparently, you donÕt want to.Ó

ÒOf course I want to. Why on Earth wouldnÕt I want to see someone standing in my own living room? WhoÑ what are you? A figment of my imagination?Ó She wagged her head in dismay. ÒIÕve taken leave of my senses, havenÕt I?Ó

ÒLady, youÕre asking the wrong guy. IÕm not exactly what youÕd call the poster boy for sanity. Or common sense, for that matter. But I can promise you one thingÑ I can take you on one hell of a

ride.Ó

Evelyn squealed again, this time in revulsion. ÒGet out of my house!Ó

Guess heÕd said the wrong thing. Funny, that pick-up line had always worked for him in the past. ÒSorry, canÕt do that. For the next week weÕre stuck with each other, whether we like it or not.Ó

ÒNo, no, no,Ó she whined. ÒYouÕre not really here.Ó She sank to the floor and retrieved the book sheÕd dropped. ÒItÕs this book,Ó she attempted to convince herself. ÒIÕm reading about ghosts, so IÕm imagining one in my house. Yes, that makes perfect sense.Ó

ÒIf you say so.Ó

ÒStop doing that!Ó

ÒDoing what?Ó

ÒTalking.Ó

ÒWhy would I stop talking now that you can finally hear me?Ó

ÒBecause IÕm teetering on the edge of a complete meltdown.Ó

Matt chuckled. ÒThis I gotta see.Ó

ÒYouÕre insufferable!Ó

ÒSo IÕve been told.Ó

Evelyn sighed. ÒOf all the ghosts I couldÕve imagined, I pick one who fancies himself a comedian.Ó

ÒMaybe you could use a couple of laughs, among other things.Ó

An appealing flush crept up her throat to stain her cheeks. ÒI have everything I need right here.Ó

ÒSure you do,Ó he taunted. ÒThatÕs why youÕre standing around talking to yourself.Ó

Distress tugged at her brows. ÒYou ought.Ó She let her body plop into the recliner. ÒItÕs finally happened. IÕve lost my mind. I knew I never shouldÕve let that cat in.Ó

Evelyn had never before experienced such abject misery. SheÕd finally gone and done it. SheÕd fallen off the turnip truck. And to think just a few hours ago she was lamenting poor Ms. DelaneyÕs

state of mind. How the tables had turned.

ÒMy nameÕs Matt, by the way,Ó said the gruff, surprisingly silky voice. A voice that caressed and teased in the same breath.

ÒPleased to meetÑ Ó She bit her tongue. ÒNo, IÕm not doing this. YouÕre not real. I refuse to engage in this delusion any longer.Ó

ÒSuit yourself. But just so you know, IÕm not going anywhere.Ó

She opened her book decisively and continued to read where sheÕd left off. Scrooge had just awakened in search of the second ghost and was overcome by a trembling fit. She suddenly found herself empathizing with the old miser.

Just then, a tickling sensation skittered across her left cheek. ÒHow do you read this stuff?Ó The voice asked, only inches from her ear. ÒItÕs archaic.Ó

ÒItÕs a classic,Ó she replied emphatically.

ÒSure, a classic bore.Ó

She bristled. ÒHave you ever read it?Ó

ÒSaw the movie once.Ó

She felt him beside her, a tangible energy that pulsed with each word he uttered. She nearly reached out and touched him, ÑÑ realizing how silly the impulse waÑÑ she kept her fingers in her lap, where they lay curled around her book.

ÒIf you ask me, these ghosts had it easy. Scaring the bejesus out of an old man is a heck of a lot easier thanÑÑ Ó A long, pregnant pause followed.

ÒThan what?Ó

ÒNothing. Just thinking out loud.Ó

She huffed, annoyed. ÒWell, donÕt.Ó

SheÕd barely read a paragraph when the voice interrupted her yet again. ÒTell me, Evie, what do you do for fun? Besides read, that is.Ó

Evelyn was stumped. What else was there? ÒI went to the movies last month.Ó

ÒHow exciting.Ó

She struggled not to take offense at the caustic remark. ÒIn the summer I love to garden.Ó

An unmistakable snort punctuated the air. ÒJust

how old are you, thirty going on eighty?Ó

Defeated, she closed the book and placed it on the end table beside her. ÒTwenty-nine.Ó

The ghost clicked his tongue. ÒShame.Ó

ÒWill you please go haunt someone else?Ó she moaned.

ÒWish I could oblige, but youÕre the one IÕve been ordered to haunt.Ó

ÒWhy?Ó

ÒBecause for some reason, the powers that be believe you need me.Ó

Struck by a bolt of indignation, Evelyn stood and began to pace, nearly tripping over Slippers. ÒI most certainly do not.Ó

ÒTell that to Eberhart.Ó

ÒEber what?Ó

ÒEberhart. The spirit who sent me here.Ó

A punishing headache threatened to assail her. She stopped in front of the hearth, placing her palms on the limestone mantelpiece for support. Her shoulders sagged beneath the weight of her anxiety,

as the very foundation of her reality slowly collapsed around her.

ThatÕs when she felt the subtle pressure of a comforting hand upon her back. The touch thrummed with heat, like the prickle of an electrical current needling her skin. The sensation was disconcerting, but not entirely unappealing.

Swallowing past the knot in her throat, she pivoted on her heels to face her phantomÉand saw him standing before her as clear as day. He looked like an angel with his golden hair and pale blue eyes, a pearlescent glow pulsating around him like a halo.

For a moment she felt blinded by the sheer beauty of him. Then darkness fell to enshroud her.

Chapter Three

Something soft, like fur, brushed her face. Warmth blanketed her chest. A strange, earthy scent teased her nostrils. Evelyn swam toward awareness, forcing her lids open, and the room slowly spun into focus. She awoke to find the cat sitting on her chest with its rear end only inches from her chin, its bushy tail fanning her face. Gently, she placed Slippers on the floor beside her and eased herself to a sitting position. The fire crackled. It licked the logs with long, orange tongues and filled the room with the soothing yet pungent scent of burning wood.

As the fog swirling in her head cleared, she remembered what had happened moments before blackness claimed her. Had it all been a vivid dream?

ÒWelcome back to the land of the conscious, Sleeping Beauty.Ó

She closed her eyes and released a mewling whimper, not unlike the sound Slippers had made when sheÕd found him on the porch earlier today. ÒYouÕre still here.Ó

ÒTold you I wasnÕt going anywhere. IÕm a man of my word. Well, not really. But now that IÕm a ghost, IÕve got to be on my best behavior to avoid the fiery depths of hell.Ó

She followed the sound of his voice, angled a tentative glance in his direction. He stood by the fireplace, one elbow propped against the mantelpiece. The sight of him made her heart stampede against her ribcage with steel hooves. He was tall and lean, angular and sinewy. Wide shoulders tapered down to a flat abdomen and narrow hips, leading to a pair of well-defined, muscular legs. There was a quiet, if not arrogant, confidence about him—the way he held himself with both strength and elegance, one knee slightly bent, a cocky grin tugging at one corner of his

mouth. She could tell this man was acutely aware of his seductive charm and abrasive personality, and prided himself on both. His jeans and shirt were transparentÑ as was hisÑ yet somehow, he still managed to look powerful, solid.

His gaze simmered with a scrutinizing kind of heat, lazily drifting toward her breasts. Too late she realized Slippers had somehow undone several buttons on her blouse, exposing her black cotton bra. Blood whooshed up to suffuse her cheeks, and she wasted no time buttoning up. ÒI can see you, you know.Ó

Pleasure flitted across his face, that wry grin spreading into a full-fledged smile. ÒWell, Hallelujah! ItÕs about time.Ó

ÒWhat happened? Did I pass out?Ó

ÒYou took one look at me and went out like a light.Ó With three fluid steps, he closed the distance between them, squatting beside her. ÒI know I have a powerful impact on women, but IÕve never had one faint at the sight of me before.Ó

He exuded a tiger-like grace as he crouched

next to her, his heels barely touching the floor. There was something predatory and dangerous in the way he leaned forward, invading her personal space as if they were intimately acquainted.

ÒIÕm honored to be the first.Ó Evelyn made no attempt to mask the sarcasm in her voice.

She let her gaze wander to his face, and something thick and wet clamped over her heart. He looked like a painting, with his straight patrician nose, his full lips, and those liquid blue eyes, which at the moment twinkled with an unspoken taunt. ÒYou look familiar. Have we met before?Ó

ÒIÕm Matt Alexander.Ó

The name rang a bell, but she didnÕt place it right away. Then it struck her. No wonder he was so beautiful. He was some famous actor. SheÕd seen one of his movies once, ages ago. ÒYou were in a car crash.Ó She remembered reading something about it on the cover of *People* magazine the other day at the grocery store.

ÒThatÕs right.Ó

Something sheÕd read about his accident

nagged at her, skirting the perimeter of her consciousness, but she couldnÕt quite grasp it. ÒHow awful for you.Ó

He flashed one of those boyish grins that simply oozed charm. ÒNot really. I didnÕt feel a thing. But being dead does kind of suck.Ó

Despite the compassion lumping in her throat, she couldnÕt suppress a ripple of laughter. ÒIÕm sure it does.Ó She rose and walked toward the window to stare at the meager sprinkle of snowflakes the overcast sky had finally decided to release. ÒTell me, Mr. AlexanderÕ Ó

ÒMatt.Ó

ÒMatt,Ó she conceded, Òwith all the gorgeous starlets youÕve known, what could you possibly want with me?Ó

ÒI want to take you out of here,Ó he said with unfaltering conviction. ÒFor once in your life, Evie, youÕre going to kick up your heels and have some fun.Ó

She turned two stunned, disbelieving eyes his way. ÒYouÕre insane.Ó

ÒThen, sweetheart, you and I are a match made in heaven.Ó

Evelyn couldnÕt believe sheÕd let Matt talk her into this. But heÕd kept nagging and nagging, refusing to grant her a single moment of peace, until sheÕd finally agreed to dig out her old skates and allow him to escort her to the skating rink.

ÒYou cross this place every day on your way to work and youÕve never once thought to go ice skating?Ó he asked.

She reluctantly laced her skates, anxiety snowballing inside her. She hadnÕt skated since she was fifteen. ÒIÕm really not very good at this,Ó she muttered to the specter beside her, hoping no one noticed her talking to herself. ÒIÕll just make a complete fool of myself.Ó

ÒAnd what if you do? Take it from someone who knows, foolishness can be very enjoyable.Ó

ÒEasy for you to say. YouÕre invisible.Ó

He fixed her with a challenging stare. ÒAnd

you might as well be.Ó

ÒOuch. That wasnÕt very nice.Ó She swung her leg to the ground, burying her blade in the wet snow.

He shrugged. ÒIÕm not a very nice guy.Ó

Evelyn watched him with a knowing smile. ÒThe gentleman doth insist too much, methinks.Ó

Matt cocked a brow. ÒRun that by me again? In English this time.Ó

She stood on wobbly legs, trying to get accustomed to her skates, wondering who ever had the bright idea to strap knives on a pair of boots. ÒYouÕve never performed a Shakespeare play?Ó

ÒSorry. Hollywood potboilers were always more my thing.Ó

A couple passed by, giving Evelyn a puzzled stare. She cleared her throat self-consciously. ÒJust practicing some lines for a play,Ó she told them.

They forced a smile, but the look they gave her right before they walked away convinced her they thought she was nuttier than a peanut butter

sandwich. Now she understood how poor Ms. Delaney must have felt earlier today. Evelyn swore never to pass judgment on anyone again.

ÒStop stalling and get out on that ice,Ó he commanded.

She sighed. ÒIf I do, will you stop talking?Ó

ÒYou wish.Ó

A brisk wind stroked her face. Snowflakes danced around her as she slid onto the frozen pond. Matt followed her, gliding a few inches off the ice as if on invisible blades. He skated in wide circles around her, pretending to be a figure skater. Laughter tickled her throat at the sight of him spinning like some clumsy ballerina.

The wind touched her cheeks with icy-tipped fingers, slithering under her scarf to burrow beneath her wool jacket. Despite how well sheÕd bundled up, she felt the chill. And yet Matt wore only a light pair of jeans and a pale gray T-shirt. Snowflakes swirled in a wild flurry around him, like the fluttering wings of moths, but they failed to rest upon his nose or shoulders. They passed right

through him, as did the other skaters, as if he were as insubstantial as a cloud.

Still, to Evelyn he was as real as anyone, and she wondered yet again why heÕd been sent to her. Surely not for the sole purpose of taking her ice skating.

She took a few reluctant steps forward, struggling to maintain her balance as people whizzed by on either side of her. Her feet quivered threateningly, and she prayed she wouldnÕt sprain an ankle. Holding her breath, she inched ahead as Matt watched her, thoroughly amused.

What in heavenÕs name had possessed her to do this? SheÕd never been the physical type, even as a kid. While her peers had been dancing or figure skating or playing ball, sheÕd been at the library reading the next Nancy Drew mystery. Gym class had been her most dreaded subject, and she felt as awkward now, on this skating rink, as she had back then.

ÒCome on,Ó Matt called to her, Òmy grandma skates faster than that!Ó

She bit back a retort, mindful of all the faces surrounding her. Instead, she focused her energy on remaining on her feet.

It took a few turns around the rink before she began to feel a little steadier on her skates. Slowly, her speed increased, and she actually started to enjoy herself. The crisp wind whipping her hair and cheeks felt surprisingly invigorating. Adrenaline shot through her bloodstream, electrifying her. Soon, she forgot to feel self-conscious, aware only of the sheer joy of being out here among the glistening trees, surrounded by a shimmering swirl of falling snowflakes. She captured a few of them on her tongue, savoring the cool taste of snow, wondering how long it had been since sheÕd last taken the time to truly appreciate the pleasures of a winterÕs day.

Matt gave her a thumbs-up from the far end of the rink, his expression brimming with delight and unmistakable smugness. Despite the I-told-you-so look on his face, she graced him with a grateful smile. She really was having fun.

Then everything spun out of control. A teenage boy came barreling toward her, jostling her. Evelyn lost her balance and plunged backwards, landing on the ice with an ungraceful thud.

Within seconds Matt was beside her. ÒAre you all right?Ó

ÒMy ego is a little bruised, but apart from that IÕm fine.Ó She tried to stand, but lost her footing and slid right back down again.

Matt swallowed a chuckle. With a withering glare in his direction, she tried to get up again, this time by lifting her butt first and trying to thrust herself up with her hands from a push-up position. Again, her feet slipped out from under her and she landed flat on her face.

Laughter exploded from Matt. She spent the next minute or so unsuccessfully fighting to get back on her feet, and all the insensitive jerk could do was stand there laughing at her. Embarrassment lumped in her belly, tears of frustration stinging her eyes.

ÒWish I could give you a hand,Ó he said, Òbut

unfortunately, I donÕt have one.Ó

Anger crowded out reason. ÒThis is your fault!Ó she yelled, oblivious to all those around her. ÒI told you I couldnÕt skate, but you kept insisting. Serves me right for listening to some stupid ghost.Ó

All of a sudden, she glanced up to find herself the center of some freak show. Everyone had stopped skating and was looking at her as if sheÕd fallen on her hands and knees in search of her marbles. A flood of mortification drowned her voice, swelling in her windpipe until she could hardly breathe. With as much dignity as she could muster, she crawled off the ice.

She sensed Matt floating toward her. ÒIs the tantrum over?Ó

She ignored him, stripping the skates from her feet and quickly sliding on her boots. Then, without a backwards glance, she plowed home, hoping the brisk wind would blow Matt Alexander back to L.A. and out of her perfectly ordinary world.

The insufferable woman had gone right back to

ignoring him. She sat in that ugly pu-ge-en velvet recliner, a white blanket wrapped around her shoulders, reading one of her brainy books-not the Charles DickensÕ one. SheÕd apparently had her fill of ghosts for the day.

For the past hour, Matt had been pacing in front of her, trying his damnedest to distract her. HeÕd tried talking, singing, even dancing a jig to no avail. Evelyn Hyde was as stubborn as the New England winter. He might as well have been invisible again, and there was nothing he hated more. HeÕd spent most of his childhood feeling invisible. HeÕd be damned if he ever felt that way again.

At least Slippers acknowledged his pre-sence. The scruffy beast prowled around him, hissing with unmistakable dislike.

ÒDonÕt you have a mouse to go catch?Ó he growled.

EvelynÕs gaze remained riveted on her book.

Irritation crested inside him. So sheÕd taken a tumble and bruised that astonishingly well-shaped

butt of hers. What was the big deal? As to the embarrassment sheÕd supposedly suffered, what difference did it make if a dozen or so people thought she was a little batty? Bats could be cool. Take Batman for instance.

Matt was way out of his league here. What kind of sick joke was the universe playing on him? Why would the powers that be send a depraved playboy to win the love of an introverted librarian, who quoted Shakespeare for GodÕs sake?

ThatÕs when an idea struck him. Maybe if he started reading some of her books, he could figure out the sort of man she liked. He perked up at the thought. The plan had definite merit. He was an actor after all. His job was to bring to life the very fantasies she so eagerly devoured. He could be any man Evelyn Hyde wanted him to be.

He eagerly scanned some of the titles on her bookcase, which spanned the entire wall on his right. Jane AustinÕs *Pride and Prejudice* caught his eye. He remembered the movie with Keira Knightly. SheÕd forced him to watch it on a when

theyÕd dated for a spell. HeÕd start with that one, he decided.

A few shelves down he saw the book Evelyn had been reading when he first appeared to her, Jane Eyre.

BBC serial with Toby Stephens, he thought. Movie with William Hurt.

Perhaps heÕd risk a few chapters of that one as well. Assuming he could figure out a way to get the thick volume off the shelf and flip the pages.

Hey, if Patrick Swazye could do it, so could he. All he had to do was concentrate. Right?

This concentrating concept was a load of bull. What did he know about channeling his emotions? All his life heÕd taken what he wanted when he wanted it, and now he couldnÕt as much as pull a damn book off a shelf. Matt sighed in frustration. This whole Casper deal wasnÕt all it was cracked up to be.

Evelyn was fast asleep, so he figured, SinceÕs he

was a ghost and no longer needed eight hours of shut eye. ÑI heÕd use this time to do some research. Unfortunately, things werenÕt going his way.

Once again, he attempted to take hold of Pride and Prejudice, and failed.

ÒEbe, I could really use your illustrious guidance again.Ó

The darkness shivered, slowly filled with light. Within seconds, Eberhart stood before him, as scintillant as if heÕd swallowed a piece of the sun.

Matt puckered his mouth appreciatively. ÒNeat trick.Ó

ÒHow can I help you, Mr. Alexander?Ó

ÒThought IÕd kill some time by doing a little late night reading. Any way you could give me the use of my hands?Ó

The old saint watched him with a wizened gaze. ÒYou donÕt need my help for that.Ó

Matt snorted. ÒReally? Take a look at this.Ó He tried to pull out a book. As he expected, his fingers slid right through it.

Eberhart shook his head. ÒYouÕre energy, my dear boy. Energy is as tangible as matter, and it can be molded into anything a person or spiritÑ wants, if he or she desires it strongly enough. Desire can be a very powerful thing.Ó

Matt snickered. ÒYou donÕt have to tell me that.Ó

ÒYouÕve never experienced true desire, Mr. Alexander, only the desire of the flesh. True desire stems from the soul.Ó

ÒFlesh, soul, itÕs all part of the same package,Ó he replied with a dismissive shrug.

Eberhart eyed him disapprovingly, like a parent scolding a child. ÒAnd youÕve just proven my point. The day you experience true desire is the day you gaze into the heart of existence itself. Only then will you understand how magical the soul really is.Ó

And with that vague, totally useless remark, he melted back into the darkness.

With an exasperated huff, Matt focused all his energy on taking hold of the book again. ÒI really want this book,Ó he chanted over and over again. ÒI

deeply desire it.Ó

When nothing happed, he muttered an oath. ÒIÕm a flaming idiot.Ó

This blasted situation was hopeless. Evelyn Hyde would never fall in love with the likes of him, which meant heÕd spend eternity in purgatory, atoning for his sins. For a moment earlier today, out on the skating rink, heÕd actually thought he had a chance of winning her over. SheÕd gazed at him and given him a smile so radiant, heÕd felt it deep down in the pit of his soul. She really was quite lovely when she smiled, in an earthy, wholesome sort of way.

Suddenly, he was assailed by the shimmering desire to see that smile again, to be the one who placed it on her face, and the most incredible thing happened. His fingers closed around the book.

ÒWell, IÕll be damned.Ó With a triumphant chuckle, he pulled the volume from the shelf. ÒEbe olÕ buddy, guess youÕre not a total kook after all.Ó

Chapter Four

Matt spent the entire night reading. All those years of whizzing through scripts at lightning speed had finally paid off. HeÕd finished *Pride and Prejudice* and an impressive chunk of *Jane Eyre*, when he heard the telltale shuffle of EvelynÕs feet the next morning.

Time to put the books away.

He placed the volumes back where heÕd gotten them, then stretched out on the couch and assumed his most innocent expression, as he waited for her to come padding into the living room.

The evening had proven more than a little enlightening. In fact, heÕd made a shocking and unexpected discovery; he was exactly the sort of cad Evelyn loved to read about. The heroes in her

favorite books were real arrogant, self-serving bastards. Take Mr. Darcy, for instance. He hardly gave Elizabeth the time of day, and when he finally did it was to tell her that she was beneath him, but heÕd do her the honor of having her anyway.

Edward Rochester was no better. He attempted to trick Jane into marrying him, all the while hiding his deranged wife in the attic.

Women. They just loved to hate the men they loved, if that made a lick of sense.

All the better for him. This was one role he knew how to play exceptionally well.

A good half hour passed before Evelyn strolled into the living room, dressed in a plain pair of loose-fitting beige slacks and a black cardigan, a cup of tea in hand. Her hair was pinned up in that despicable bun again, but her skin glowed rosy with health and her face held a warm, peaceful expression.

Until she caught sight of him and it contorted into a dark scowl.

ÒMorning, sunshineÓ, he said. ÒMiss me?Ó

She visibly stiffened. ÒLike a toothache.Ó

He cleared his throat, pretended to scratch his temple in reflection. ÒListen, Evie, I know you said some pretty nasty things to me yesterday, but IÕve decided to be big about it and forgive you.Ó

She gasped, nearly spilling her tea. ÒYou swaggering, pompous, self-absorbedÑ Ó

ÒSexy, irresistible rake?Ó he finished for her.

Rolling her eyes, she exhaled a long, suffering breath. ÒLeave me alone.Ó She spun on her heels and headed to the bookcase.

Matt smiled. In the stories heÕd read, the more the heroine wanted the hero, the more she struggled to avoid him. If her dogged insistence to ignore him was any indication, Evelyn was probably half in love with him already.

A frown carved a deep groove between her brows. ÒHave you been reading my books?Ó

ÒWhat makes you say that?Ó

ÒI have them sorted in alphabetical order by author. Pride and Prejudice comes after

Persuasion, not before.Ó

HeÕd forgotten the dratted woman was a librarian. ÒYou must have put it in the wrong place.Ó

He could almost see her hackles rise. ÒI never misplace a book.Ó

ÒThen it must have walked over there on its own, because IÕm a little low on substance right now.Ó

Evelyn harrumphed, but she must have bought his explanation because she dropped the subject. She stood before the bookcase for an exceptionally long time, staring pensively, then put her tea aside and selected a few volumes from the overstuffed shelves.

ÒDonÕt tell me you plan to stay in all day reading again?Ó

She carefully placed the books in a tan colored canvas bag she pulled out from a nearby drawer. ÒNo, every Sunday I go to Cedarhill Orphanage and read to the children.Ó

Matt felt as if heÕd been sucker punched.

A librarian who reads to orphans. This just keeps getting better and better.

ÒYouÕre a regular Mother Teresa, arenÕt you? I donÕt think thereÕs any doubt which door youÕre getting.Ó

She flung him an annoyed, befuddled look, right before she strapped the bag onto her shoulder and pranced out of the living room.

ÒYup, sheÕs got it real bad for me,Ó he muttered, floating off the couch and quickly following her out the front door.

Arrows of gray light poured into the small room, streaking the faded linoleum floor. Fifteen children sat upon an oval, Oriental rug with gold and burgundy prints, watching Evelyn, their young faces alight with eagerness. She occupied a wooden chair before them, one of the volumes sheÕd selected earlier perched in her lap.

Matt had chosen to sink into a tattered yellow

couch heÕd found in a quiet sitting area a few feet away, from which he could observe without distracting her. For the past few minutes heÕd been listening to her read, lulled by the melodic rhythm of her voice as she brought the story to life. HeÕd expected to be bored but was surprised to realize he was enjoying himself. She had a way of infusing passion in each word she uttered, a way of adding the proper intonations to heighten the effect or pausing at just the right moment to build anticipation. There were some actors he knew who would benefit from a few lessons with her.

The children were mesmerized. All except for one.

He sat in the armchair across from Matt, doing his best to look bored. The boy, who was about eight or nine, was pretending not to listen. But every now and then when no one was looking, heÕd slant a sideways glance at the storybook to catch sight of a picture Evelyn was showing.

Matt recognized the slumped body, the cocky hitch of his shoulder, the-I-donÕt-give-a-damn look

on his face and felt a clutch of compassion.

Invisible, he thought. Alone and trying real hard not to let anyone know how crappy it makes him feel.

But Matt knew. Even though both his parents were still alive, he understood what it felt like to be an orphan. Nothing was more important to his parents than their careers, and growing up heÕd always felt like an afterthought. Sure theyÕd sent him to the best schools, had thrown money at him every chance they got, but never once had they read to him or taken him ice-skating or tossed a ball his way. So heÕd learned to experience life on his own and not give a shit about anyone but himself.

Self-preservation 101, he reasoned.

Evelyn paused, jarring Matt out of his morbid thoughts. She was gazing at the boy, and the sadness on her face was palpable.

ÒChildren, the sun seems to be in my eyes,Ó she said. ÒWould you mind if we moved?Ó

Standing, she dragged her chair across the room to the sitting area. All the children rose and

followed, crowding in around the lone boy until he melted into the heart of the group. ÒMuch better,Ó she exclaimed, continuing where sheÕd left off.

Matt stared at her, amazed by her perceptiveness and empathy. For a moment she looked his way, and he glanced into the crystal depths of her eyes—eyes that were neither blue nor gray, but an enthralling combination of the two. In that fleeting second when their gazes locked, he saw beyond the horn-rimmed glasses, beyond the plain clothing and tight-woven bun to the woman who lay beneath. And her beauty damn near took his breath away.

ÒThat was quite something,Ó Matt said when they returned to the cottage. ÒWhat you did for that boy back there.Ó

Evelyn busied herself placing the childrenÕs books back on the shelves in just the right order. ÒHe wants to join us,Ó she replied, ÒbutÕs too proud. For weeks now heÕs been sitting on his own. I figured it was time I put an end to it. Maybe next

week he wonÕt feel so awkward sitting with the group.Ó

Silence swelled between them, and she felt compelled to glance over her shoulder to see if he was still in the room with her. He stood in front of the fireplace, studying the pictures on the mantelpiece.

ÒAre these your parents?Ó He pointed to her favorite family photograph, which sheÕd lovingly placed in an antique pewter frame.

ÒYes.Ó Emotion made her voice sound gravelly, and she swallowed to wash away the tightness in her throat.

ÒAre they still around?Ó

ÒNo. They died five years ago.Ó

ÒBoth of them?Ó

She nodded heavily. ÒMy father passed away first, and my mother followed a short month later.Ó She paused, allowing that old, familiar ache to blossom inside her. ÒThe doctors said she had an aneurysm, but IÕve always believed she died of a

broken heart.Ó

Matt fixed her with a startled stare. ÒWhy, Evie, IÕm shocked.Ó

Done with the books, she turned from the bookcase and walked his way. ÒWhy is that?Ó

ÒIt appears youÕre a romantic.Ó A lopsided grin tugged at his mouth, only this time it wasnÕt laced with arrogance but with an odd blend of affection. His statement, along with that handsome, cocky smile caused a swarm of butterflies to take flight in her ribcage. ÒTell me, Evie, have you ever been in love?Ó

The butterflies grew fangs. ÒNo, and I never plan to be,Ó she answered curtly.

ÒThat makes no sense. Why would a romantic not want to fall in love?Ó

She stared deeply into the hearth, watching the flames mate and blend into one until she could no longer tell them apart. ÒBecause I have no desire to die of a broken heart,Ó she whispered, more to herself than to him.

ÒAh, I see.Ó He moved closer, forcing her to look at him. ÒThen IÕm the perfect man for you.Ó

ÒHow do you figure that?Ó

He flashed another one of those devastating grins. ÒIÕll never die on you, seeing as IÕm already dead.Ó

The laughter started deep in the pit of her stomach, rumbling like an earthquake until she had no choice but to release it. ÒYou have a very unique way of seeing things.Ó

ÒWhat can I say? I like to think outside the box.Ó

She swept her gaze over his perfectly chiseled face, wondering what kind of life heÕd led, who heÕd loved and left behind. ÒWhatÕs your story, Matt?Ó

Instantly, the humor seeped from his expression. The mocking glint in his eyes dulled. ÒI donÕt really have one.Ó

ÒEveryone has a story.Ó

He gave her one of his trademark shrugs. ÒMy

mother was an actress, my father a screenwriter. They were married long enough to have me and my brother. Then they divorced. My mother decided to stay in New York, while my father hightailed it to L.A.Ó

He crouched before the fireplace, gazing into the heart of the flames. ÒMy brother and I spent most of our childhood commuting between the two citiesÑ winters with our mother, summers with our father. Eventually, I got into the film business, too, and decided to call L.A. home.Ó

ÒThat mustnÕt have been easy for you, going back and forth that way.Ó

ÒI got used to it. I can tell you one thingÑ life never got boring.Ó Despite his attempt to infuse levity into his voice, Evelyn caught a dark flicker in his eyes that told her his road to adulthood hadnÕt been nearly as smooth as he wanted the world to believe.

ThatÕs when she understood something fundamental about Matt Alexander; he was just like that boy at the orphanage. The more he wanted to

be a part of something, the more he pulled away. The more he hurt, the more he pretended not to care, and humor and sarcasm were the tools he used to forge the impenetrable barrier of his isolation.

Just then, Slippers crept up to Matt, circling him, warily sniffing the air.

ÒI think heÕs starting to like you.Ó

ÒShe.Ó

ÒSorry?Ó

ÒThe catÕs a shes.Ó

Evelyn hadnÕt bothered to inspect the animal. ÒHow do you know?Ó

ÒOnly a female would have such morbid fascination for me.Ó

Later that evening, as Evelyn finished washing the dishes, she felt the heat of MattÕs gaze upon her, and a tingling sensation spread across her abdomen. Nothing unsettled her more than being observed, especially by someone like Matt. He oozed cockiness and confidence—the two things she

sorely lacked. She wondered what he was thinking as he watched her, with one eyebrow raised ever so slightly and his arms braided across his magnificent body.

She couldnÕt help it. She had to ask. ÒWhy are you staring at me?Ó

ÒIÕm trying to picture you in a slinky dress.Ó

She nearly dropped the plate she was drying. ÒExcuse me?Ó

He stood. She felt the air stir as he approached. ÒWhenÕs the last time you painted the town red?Ó

The soft hum of his presence enveloped her. ÒI donÕt remember.Ó She set the plate aside and turned to face him, shocked to find him standing mere inches away from her. What would happen if she reached out and touched him? Would her fingers slide through him? Or would they become entangled in a whirlwind of energy?

ÒNow thatÕs real sad. I bet Ms. Delaney remembers.Ó There was unspoken challenge in his taunt. She told herself not to fall for it, but a part of her couldnÕt help but wonder if he was right.

He leaned closer, and her flesh prickled in response. ÒCome out with me, Evie.Ó

Her heart gave an involuntary kick. She wasnÕt sure if it was a result of fear or anticipation. ÒAre you out of your mind? ItÕs Sunday night. IÕve got to be at the library bright and early tomorrow.Ó

He feigned an exaggerated yawn. ÒYup, twenty-nine going on eighty. I might as well mosey on down the street and ask Ms. Delaney to join me.Ó

Indignation knifed through her. ÒVery well. IÕll go.Ó She couldnÕt believe sheÕd just said that. Not only had she lost her mind but her better judgment. Matt had an uncanny way of getting under her skin and making her do things she normally wouldnÕt even consider.

His face literally shone with pleasure.

ÒBut if I end up making a fool of myself again,Ó she warned, skewering him with a finger aimed at the chest, Òbeing dead will be the least of your problems.Ó

The sound of his heartfelt chuckle rent the air. ÒI love it when youÕre feisty.Ó

She bit her lower lip to keep from smiling. The manÑ uh, spiritÑ was incorrigible. With a defeated sigh, she strolled out of the kitchen and climbed the stairs to her room.

ÒHey, Evie,Ó he called after her. She stopped mid-way, turning around to face him, her hand braced on the balustrade. ÒLeave your hair down tonight.Ó

She frowned. ÒItÕs so wild. I just canÕt seem to do anything with it.Ó

ÒNothing wrong with wild. It goes well with feisty. And throw on something sexy while youÕre at it.Ó

Sexy? She wasnÕt sure she owned anything that qualified as sexy.

Dread swamped her. What had ever possessed her to agree to this? SheÕd never been much of a party girl. She hadnÕt even gone to her own prom. The only date sheÕd had in years was with shy, sweet Earl from the library, and theyÕd spent the evening at a used bookstore.

And here she was, going out with a ghost! A

ghost whoÕd been named sexiest man alive by People magazine, no less. She really had taken a dive off the deep end.

The moment she turned her back to Matt, the smile sheÕd been fighting wriggled free, spreading across her face. Eagerness danced along her nerve endings, infusing her with a stimulating blend of excitement and schoolgirl jitteriness. The feeling was new, as irrational as it was perilous, and completely intoxicating. A silly giggle bubbled in her throat. It felt surprisingly liberating to be nuts.

When she got to her room, she spent an exceptionally long time examining her closet, and was quite disappointed at what she discovered. She did not own a single item that wasnÕt practical. Was she truly that boring? Perhaps Matt was right. Ms. Delaney probably had a sexier wardrobe, and the woman was in her seventies!

With a discouraged moan, she carefully assessed each outfit. ÑIt too drab, too old, too matronlyÉ

And then she sawÑ it buried so deep within her

closet sheÕd forgotten it was there. ÕThe dress she hadnÕt worn in nearly seven years.

Perfect, she thought and briskly yanked it off the hanger.

Matt paced at the foot of the stairs, struggling to crush the seeds of exasperation taking root inside him and failing. What was taking so damn long? Open heart surgery probably took less time than a woman getting ready for a night out. He was tempted to innocently drift upstairs and peek into her room, but he curbed the urge.

Patience is a virtue. WasnÕt that what Eberhart had said? Matt needed to rack up as many virtues as he could right about now.

He wouldÕve liked to pass the time surfing the net or channel flipping, see what some of his old buddies were up to. Maybe even read up on his death and check out what kind of media coverage it had gotten. But unfortunately, Evelyn didnÕt seem to own a computer, and the only television set was upstairs in her bedroom. HeÕd never been this cut

off from the world, and it left him feeling antsy, completely at loose ends.

Better get used to it, he told himself. I highly doubt hell has cable or high speed internet.

A patter at the top of the stairs interrupted his musings. ÒItÕs about ñ Ó He flung a glance over his shoulder and paused mid-sentence, dumbfounded. His entire being thrummed with a strange kind of heat at the sight of Evelyn wobbling down the steps in a pair of high-heeled black pumps.

For the first time, Matt was speechless. As an actor, heÕd seen costume designers and make-up artists perform some pretty remarkable transformations, but nothing had prepared him for this.

She wore a beaded, black cocktail dress with a flirty mesh hem that stopped just above the knee, displaying a shockingly hot pair of legs. The bodice hugged her figure, perfectly cupping her breasts, the straps wrapping seductively around her neck. A thin mesh shawl that matched the skirt hung around her shoulders, beneath a shower of untamed copper

kissed curls. SheÕd removed the ghastly glasses and had even gone as far as to brush some color onto her cheeks and coat her lips with a sparkling pink lip gloss.

Now weÕre talking.

Evelyn Hyde was absolutely stunning. Too bad she went to such great lengths to conceal it. If that wasnÕt one of the seven deadly sins, then it sure as hell shouldÕve been.

Uncertainty sparked in her eyes the moment she stood before him. ÒItÕs too much, isnÕt?Ó A nervous, mewling sound escaped her lips that would have made Slippers proud. ÒIÕm going to go change.Ó

ÒDonÕt you dare! You look ÑÓ thick, syrupy emotion coiled deep within him. ÑÒincredible.Ó

A deep flush stained her cheeks, and long, black lashes fell to shadow her cheeks. ÒItÕs the only fancy dress I have.Ó She sounded apologetic.

ÒItÕs perfect.Ó

ÒI bought it ages ago for my Aunt LydiaÕs and

my Uncle BobÕs silver wedding anniversary. IÕm surprised it still fits.Ó

ÒLike a glove,Ó he reassured. ÒYouÕre going to turn some heads tonight.Ó

ÒOh, no.Ó Dismay darkened her features. ÒI donÕt want to turn any heads. IÕd rather be invisible.Ó

ÒInvisible?Ó

ÒI was going to say inconspicuous,Ó she replied pointedly.

ÒSame difference.Ó He arched a quizzical brow. ÒIÕm curious, Evie, why do you try so hard to be a wallflower, when youÕve got more spirit than any woman IÕve ever known? And believe me, IÕve known quite a few.Ó

ÒI donÕt try to be a wallflower,Ó she said in her own defense, but the statement lacked conviction.

ÒThen prove it. Come out with me tonight and let the world see you Ñ really see you Ñ for once. How long do you plan to hide behind the shabby clothes and that godawful bun? LifeÕs short,Ó he added for good measure. ÒIt can end in the blink of

an eye. Take it from someone who knows.Ó

Her shoulders sagged as the fight went out of her, and he knew heÕd won. With one last glance down the length of her body to assess her appearance, she walked past him and grabbed her coat from the closet. ÒFine, have it your way.Ó

Matt glided to the front door, quirking his lips. ÒFinally, a woman after my own heart.Ó

The Spirit LoungeÑ a tasteful nightclub located a short twenty-minute drive away in PortlandÕs Old Port districtÑ buzzed with live music and conversation. Evelyn was surprised at how crowded the place was for a Sunday night. The glistening hardwood dance floor overflowed with gyrating bodies, swinging and hopping to some upbeat tune. A bustling swarm of people, clad mostly in black, surrounded a circular bar, which squatted at the center of the club. Tables and white leather couches were scattered throughout the establishment, where patrons sat nursing their drinks.

Evelyn stood frozen at the entrance, anxiety ballooning inside her. This world was as alien to her as MarsÉor L.A. for that matter. The lights, the music, the animated crowd made her mouth go dry and her palms grow clammy.

ÒNow, this is more like it.Ó Matt beamed, his voice tinkling with approval.

ÒMaybe we should go somewhere a little less busy,Ó she proposed.

ÒWhy the blazes would we do that? This place is happening. And the nameÕs got a certain ring to it,Ó he quipped.

Reluctantly, she followed him through the lively throng to the only empty table available. She rigidly slipped into the puffy white chair across from Matt, her pulse drumming in perfect beat with the song. The excited glimmer in his eyes told him he felt right at home here in the heart of the city, where people lived fast and partied hard.

ÒIt ainÕt L.A.,Ó he told her, Òbut PortlandÕs got a certain charm. I could almost get used to this.Ó

Evelyn thought of HarborsideÑthe small town

where sheÕd lived most of her life, located just outside of FreeportÕ with a hitch of longing. She just couldnÕt picture herself as a city girl. She loved the slow-paced lifestyle, the mint-peppered scent of nature in the breeze, the safe, close-knit community of Harborside. Everything was bigger and brighter in Portland. So bright, her eyes burned from it.

Within minutes of their arrival a waitress, wearing a skin-tight black dress, shimmied up to their table. ÒCan I get you something?Ó she asked her.

Evelyn felt a stab of panic. ÒI donÕt know what to have.Ó She didnÕt have much experience with drinks. They all had fancy names she could never remember.

ÒA cosmopolitan,Ó Matt suggested. ÒGirls always order cosmopolitans, thanks to Sex and the City.Ó

ÒA cosmopolitan,Ó she snapped, without having the slightest idea what sheÕd ordered.

A few minutes trickled by with Evelyn sitting ramrod straight, clicking her fingernails on the

polished wooden surface of the table.

ÒYou really donÕt go out much, do you?Ó he observed.

ÒI donÕt have much of a social circle,Ó she said self-consciously. ÒItÕs not usually customary for a woman to go dancing by herself.Ó

ÒWhy not? I go out on my own all the time. Or I used to,Ó he corrected, a hint of nostalgia peppered with regret lacing his words

ÒItÕs different for guys.Ó

ÒGuess youÕre right. For some reason, you women always feel compelled to go around in groups. You canÕt even go pee without your girlfriends there to cheer you on.Ó

The waitress returned with her drink, and Evelyn busied herself paying for it, then curiously grabbed hold of her straw and drew an experimental sip. The beverage had a bit of a kick, but it was actually quite tasty Ñ sweet but not too fruity, with a hint of lime and just the right tanginess. She gulped down a couple of mouthfuls, quite pleased to notice it took the edge off her nerves.

ÒLike it?Ó

She nodded. ÒNow I know why all the girls order it.Ó She took another swallow.

ÒI wouldnÕt drink it too fast if I were you,Ó he warned. ÒIt might not taste like it, but that little concoction delivers quite a punch.Ó

The deafening strains the band hammered out of their instruments suddenly died down, replaced by a ballad, and she actually started to relax. The melody gently rocked her as the singer crooned in a warm, raspy voice and shadowy figures swayed in the dark.

She ventured a glance in MattÕs direction and found him watching her with a sizzling keenness that sent a tickling sensation skittering from her throat all the way to the pit of her stomach.

ÒI wish I could ask you to dance.Ó His voice was gruff, simmering with an undercurrent of longing.

Her next breath rattled in her chest. ÒIÕd look silly dancing on my own.Ó

ÒIt really bothers you, doesnÕt it? What people think.Ó

ÒI just donÕt want to be.Ñ

ÒConspicuous,Ó he finished for her.

Dipping her head, she took a nice, long swig of her drink. ÒWhat the heck.Ó She stood decisively and made a beeline for the dance floor. Matt happily followed.

She squeezed through the crowd, finding a nice little corner where she could stand and let the music transport her. She closed her eyes and allowed herself the pleasure of sinking into the melody without the distraction of the hundred or so strangers surrounding her.

And then she felt it. A feathering sensation gliding across her waist, an electrical prickle tenderly guiding her forward until her entire body thrummed with energy.

With a gasp, she parted her lids and realized in her dazed stupor that Matt was holding her. She could actually feel his hands on her, a tingling heat that burned a trail straight to her soul. Warmth

flooded her system, squeezed the air from her lungs until her chest ached.

She closed her eyes again and leaned into him, drowning in the strange, unfamiliar sensation of being embraced by sheer electricity. MattÕs touch was like no other. She felt the heat of his hands, but not the weight of them. She knew his fingers stroked her, but couldnÕt make out their shape or texture. Still, in that brief wedge of time when he held her, he was more real to her than anyone sheÕd ever known before. He filled every corner of her mind and heart, made her senses swim and her pulse race. But worst of all, he made deep, sultry emotion bloom inside her.

And thatÕs when dread dribbled in to pierce the smoky bubble engulfing herÉbecause darkly as seductive as this dance was, the last thing Evelyn wanted was to fall for a ghost.

Chapter Five

Matt edged in closer, losing himself to the totally addictive feel of her in his embrace. HeÕd never thought heÕd be privileged enough to hold a woman again, and here he was dancing with Evelyn, drawing her tightly against him, feeling her heat sink into him and slowly bring his body to life. He savored the wispy caress of her hair against his chin, the warmth of her breath fluttering across his cheek, the softness of her breasts grazing his chest. Each sweet sensation was like a piece of heaven, fueling his desire. And as his desire for her grew, so did his ability to feel her.

For a moment, he forgot he was no longer made of flesh, that he was only mist and shadows. He ached for her like any other man, wanted to lose himself in this shy, strangely alluring woman in his

arms until night trickled seamlessly into dawn.

The music changed, the tempo picking up a notch. Still he refused to release her. Holding her made him feel alive again, and he wasnÕt ready to lose that yet.

Unfortunately, the choice wasnÕt his. Evelyn suddenly stiffened and jolted her body away. At the loss of the connection, the wonderful medley of sensations he was experiencing instantly ceased, like a light going out inside him. From one moment to the next, he felt empty.

ÒIÕm sorry,Ó she squeaked. ÒI feelÉdizzy.Ó

Their table was no longer free, so she sank into a couch someone had just vacated. She dropped her head against the back, staring at the winking lights overhead, inhaling short, shallow breaths.

ÒAre you all right, maÕam?Ó a man sitting nearby asked.

ÒSheÕs fine,Ó Matt absently replied, forgetting that no one but Evelyn could hear him.

ÒIÕm fine,Ó she repeated with an air of nothing

glance in MattÕs direction. ÒI guess all that dancing made me a little lightheaded.Ó

ÒAnd your boyfriend let you walk off the dance floor all by yourself?Ó

Evelyn blushed. ÒIÕm not here with anyone,Ó she muttered, avoiding MattÕs drilling stare.

The pompous bastard actually had the gall to come sit beside her. ÒGuess itÕs my lucky day then.Ó

He was one slick son of a bitch. Matt recognized the type. ÑÑ the smart black suit worn over a white T-shirt, the glossed-back hair, the flashy Rolex knock-off on his wrist, not to mention that smug, IÕm-too-sexy smile. Everything about this guy screamed: IÕm getting laid tonight.

ÒGet up and walk away,Ó Matt advised.

She ignored him. ÒIÕm Evelyn,Ó she introduced herself.

Matt swore.

ÒItÕs a pleasure, Evelyn. IÕm Todd.Ó

ÒNice to meet you, Todd.Ó If Matt didnÕt know any better, heÕd say she was doing it on purpose to

spite him.

ÒWould the lovely Evelyn be so kind as to let me buy her a drink?Ó

Pretentious prick. ÒHeÕs trying to get you drunk so he can get into your pants,Ó Matt translated.

Evelyn shot him a withering glare, then graced her new companion with a flirtatious smile that looked completely foreign on her face. ÒA cosmopolitan would be wonderful.Ó

Todd flagged down the waitress, making sure to flash his fake Rolex. ÒA cosmopolitan and a whiskey, straight up, please.Ó

ÒHow Ôbout I give you something straight up?Ó Matt growled, pretending not to see the fierce glower Evelyn directed his way.

ÒTell me, pretty lady, what are you doing at the Spirit Lounge all by yourself on a Sunday night?Ó

Matt snorted. ÒSheÕs certainly not here to hook up with a jackass like you, thatÕs for sure.Ó

ÒWill you just stop?Ó she said through clenched teeth.

ToddÕs face contorted into a confused grimace that would have easily earned him the starring role in Dumb and Dumber. ÒStop what?Ó

Evelyn blinked. ÒPaying me so many compliments,Ó she improvised. ÒYouÕre embarrassing me.Ó

Shifty-eyed Todd displayed a donkey-like grin. ÒCome now, IÕm sure a girl like you is used to being showered with compliments.Ó

ÒI feel like tossing you into a shower,Ó Matt pitched in. ÒYouÕre so full of shit.Ó

ÒNot at all,Ó she replied sharply, aiming the comment more at Matt than at Todd.

The waitress returned with their drinks. ÒThatÕll be twenty-four dollars please.Ó

Todd pulled out a thick wad of cash and handed her a couple of bills. ÒKeep the change,Ó he said with a wink. The waitress beamed.

Matt rolled his eyes. ÒOh, brother.Ó

ÒFor the lovely lady.Ó Todd made a show of handing her the drink, his flashy watch winking

with silver sparks. As Evelyn reached out to take hold of it, the presumptuous jerk purposely brushed his fingers against hers.

An emotion Matt had never before experienced speared through him. It felt oddly like jealousy. Acting on impulse, he gave the guy a nice, hard shove. Todd hurtled back, a shocked look on his face, splashing the drink all over EvelynÕs only fancy dress.

She shrieked and rocketed to her feet.

ÒIÕm so sorry,Ó Todd blubbered. ÒI donÕt know how that happened.Ó

ÒThatÕs quite alright,Ó she said. ÒIt was an accident.Ó She turned to Matt, her eyes narrowing into slits. ÒIÕll just go to the ladiesÕ room and get myself cleaned up.Ó

ÒIÕll be waiting,Ó Todd called after her. ÒWith a new drink.Ó

Matt followed her to the ladiesÕ room, softly chuckling to himself. The look on ToddÕs face when heÕd socked him one had been priceless.

The moment Evelyn got him alone, however, his laughter quickly ceased. She was livid. A gentle flush dusted her cheeks, and her mouth was set in a hard, grim line. ÒWhat in heavenÕs name do you think youÕre doing?Ó She grabbed a handful of paper towels, angrily patted down her dress.

ÒSaving your pretty little butt, thatÕs what. That guyÕs bad news.Ó

ÒWhy? Because he was generous enough to buy me a drink?Ó

He œcked a brow, his annoyance reaching a dangerous peak. ÒAre you really that clueless? Your friend Todd is about as subtle as a Quentin Tarantino flick.Ó

ÒI disagree. HeÕs polite and charming.Ó

A woman came out of a stall and flung a furtive, uneasy glance in EvelynÕs direction. Barely taking a couple of seconds to wash her hands, she scurried out of the bathroom.

ÒGive me a break,Ó he scoffed, picking up where theyÕd left off. ÒHe just wants to score. Why are you so bent set on letting him make a fool of

you?Ó

HeÕd hit a nerve. Pain flickered across her face, deepening her flush. ÒIs it so hard for you to believe a man might actually like me?Ó

Matt felt like a moron. The last thing heÕd wanted was to insult her. ÒNo, just not that guy.Ó

ÒWhy not?Ó

ÒBecauseIknow the type.Ó

ÒYou mean you are the type.Ó

She had him there. ÒHey, it takes one to know one,Ó he said in answer to her biting remark. ÒIf thatÕs the kind of guy you go for, you might as well stick with me.Ó

Evelyn pitched the towels in the wastebasket. ÒExcept for one major difference.Ó Her slate colored eyes glittered meaningfully. "HeÕs alive.Ó

And with that bitter observation hovering like a black cloud between them, she spun on her heels and stomped out of the restroom.

The next day, Evelyn felt like a wreck. SheÕd

left the Spirit Lounge at midnight the previous evening with two thingsÑ a massive headache and ToddÕs phone number tucked safely in her purse. Oh, and Matt of course. She couldnÕt ditch him if she tried. He was like a bad cold that refused to go away.

HeÕd followed her to the library this morning and now stood propped against the shelves across the aisle from her, his arms and ankles crossed, watching her work. Evelyn sorted her books, trying her best to ignore him. Unfortunately, her gaze kept straying his way, so she failed to miss the exaggerated yawn he feigned for her benefit.

ÒThis is what you do all day?Ó

ÒSomeone has to keep this place in order,Ó she replied with a proud tilt of her chin.

He harrumphed, then sank back into blessed silenceÉfor a second or two. ÒSo, have you decided yet?Ó He absently scanned some of the titles beside him.

She climbed a ladder and began organizing a stack of returns on one of the higher shelves.

ÒDecided what?Ó

ÒIf youÕll be calling Todd.Ó His expression portrayed bored indifference, but she caught a strained note in his voice that belied his laidback demeanor.

ÒI might. Then again I might not. Either way, IÕm not telling you.Ó

He shrugged impassively, then took hold of a book and lazily leafed through. ÒSuit yourself.Ó

She sucked in an indignant breath. ÒYou lied to me!Ó

ÒHuh?Ó

ÒYou have been reading my books.Ó

He stared down at the volume he clasped, looking as guilty as sin. ÒMaybe I have,Ó he said in clear imitation of her. ÒThen again maybe I haven't. Either way, IÕm not telling you.Ó

With an annoyed hmm, she clamped her mouth shut and turned her back to him. From the corner of her eye, she saw him slide the book back on the shelfÉin the wrong spot! ÒPut it back where you

got it please.Ó

ÒI did.Ó

Evelyn sighed and plodded down the ladder to place the volume in its rightful place. ÒDonÕt make a mess,Ó she admonished.

Pivoting on her heels, she intended to return to her previous position on the ladder, but Matt closed his fingers around her wrist. A current of pure electricity buzzed through her and wrenched a surprised gasp from her.

ÒAnd if I do, what are you going to do about it? Spank me?Ó Something dark and dangerous smoldered in his eyes, and she was struck by the sheer sensuality he exuded. Suddenly, she understood what had earned him all that popularity on the silver screen. A woman could easily drown in the churning depths of those ocean blue eyes.

The memory of his hands on her the previous night when theyÕd danced flared to life, sent a bolt of molten heat lapping through her. ÒHow are you doing it?Ó her voice dropped to a baffled whisper. ÒHolding books, pushing people, touching me?Ó

He rubbed his thumb against the underside of her wrist, and her flesh prickled in response. She trembled, wanting nothing more than to sever the electrifying contact but unable to pull her hand away. ÒAll I have to do is think of you,Ó he said in a warm, husky tone that resonated with as much energy as the rest of him.

Heat, she thought. Energy and pure heat.

Tamping down the emotion swelling inside her, she found the willpower to break free of his grasp. ÒI have work to do,Ó she murmured, quickly placing a safe distance between them.

He watched her walk away with a knowing smile curling those incredibly well-shaped lips of his. ÒDonÕt let me stop you.Ó

Evelyn saw the silent, unmistakable challenge twinkling in his gaze and swallowed past the thick knot in her throat. This was going to be a very long day.

For the next couple of days, Matt followed Evelyn to work, doing his darnedest to distract her.

He entertained her with his biting sense of humor, annoyed her with his caustic, often smug remarks, and completely unhinged her with those smoldering, not-so-inadvertent touches. He made a complete fool of her more than once, when co-workers and customers alike caught her talking to or worse yet, arguing with herself.

By Wednesday evening, she felt physically, mentally, and emotionally drained. All she could do was flop onto her favorite armchair with Slippers curled in her lap. She didnÕt even have the energy to read. And still, after all this time, she had yet to figure out why heÕd been sent to her. She knew only that by Friday heÕd be gone.

The thought should have thrilled her. HeÕd been nothing but a nuisance since heÕd appeared arrogant, sarcastic, pushy. HeÕd afforded her not one moment of peace in nearly a week.

Still, sheÕd grown accustomed to his presence. Strangely enough, on those rare occasions when he wasnÕt around, she felt lonely. For a person who valued her solitude as much as she did, this was

quite discomfiting.

She hated to admit it, but a part of her wished he could stay—which was totally insane because she couldn't very well have a ghost stalking her for the rest of her life. Nevertheless, she'd begun to think of him as a friend. His presence was oddly comforting, even now as he hovered quietly by the hearth, staring pensively into the dancing flames.

The winking reflection of the fire made his face glow gold and silver, like a tangible mist embedded with microscopic jewels. She let her gaze trail over his profile, committing his features to memory. Something dark and heavy squeezed her heart at the realization that in two days he would evaporate like a spring rain.

"What happens when you leave?" she asked.

The only indication that he heard her was the slight angling of his head in her direction. After a short pause, he said, "Wish I knew."

Sadness gripped her. "You'll go to a better place, I'm sure." Once again, something she'd read

about his accident poked at her consciousness, but it kept slipping from her grasp like the wispy strings of a cloud.

ÒHey, I grew up in the film industry,Ó he added with a hitch of his shoulder. ÒHow much worse can fire and brimstone be?Ó

ÒYouÕre not going to hell.Ó

He chuckled, but the sound was dry, void of humor. ÒI didnÕt make the best choices in my life, Evie. I was always out for number one. DidnÕt give a damn how many people I hurt along the way.Ó The flames roared ominously, streaked his cheeks with ruddy fingers.

A shiver snaked through her.

ÒMy funeral mustÕve been a pretty lonely affair,Ó he continued reflectively. ÒIf any of my exes showed up, it was probably for the simple pleasure of dancing on my grave.Ó

ÒI highly doubt that.Ó

ÒI met a girl in a bar once,Ó he confessed. ÒI turned on the charm, she fell for it, and we ended up

going back to my place. Couple of days later I ran into her again. She said, ÔHiÕ and I said, ÔSorry, have we met before?ÕÓ

Evelyn flinched. ÒOuch.Ó

ÒIt gets worse. I dated another girl for a couple of months, and things inevitably started getting old. I tried to break up with her, but she just wouldnÕt take the hint. So, I made sure she caught me in bed with her cousin. She got the message loud and clear after that.Ó

She gazed at him, owl-eyed. ÒGuess youÕre right. You really are going to hell.Ó

ÒTold you.Ó

Slippers meowed and stretched in her lap, demanding attention. She gently ran her palm down the catÕs soft, furry back. ÒWhy did you do it?Ó The kitten purred contentedly and snuggled closer. ÒTreat the women in your life so badly?Ó

He shrugged. ÒI donÕt know. Because I could. Because they let me. Or maybe it was simply because most of them were no better than my motherÑ inattentive, self-absorbed, and about as

deep, not to mention palatable, as a spoonful of BuckleyÕs.Ó

Evelyn chortled, scratching Slippers behind the ears. ÒYou make relationships sound like a disease.Ó

ÒBelieve me, they are. TheyÕll suck you dry if youÕre not careful.Ó

ÒSo you donÕt regret it, then?Ó

He slanted a glance her way. ÒWhat?Ó

ÒNever falling in love.Ó

His eyes locked with hers, sparkling like sunshine on dew. Something bright and ravenous burned in their depths, as palpable as a caress. ÒWho said I never fell in love?Ó

For one crazy moment, she couldÕve sworn he was speaking about her. Her heart bucked in her chest as a new wave of heat gushed through her, and she thanked her lucky stars she was sitting down because her legs all but melted in a puddle of Jell-O at the foot of her chair.

ThatÕs when Evelyn made a decision. The decision to end all this nonsense and call Todd.

ÒAre you out of your evolving mind?Ó Matt inwardly cursed as he stood in EvelynÕs bedroom the next evening, watching her select her outfit for her so-called date. ÒYou canÕt possibly go out with that dickhead.Ó

How had things gone so wrong? Yesterday, he was sure he had her hook, line and sinker. That falling in love comment had all but cinched the deal. But today, she was bent set on going out with that loser, Todd. It made absolutely no sense.

ÒI can and I will.Ó She rifled through her drab wardrobe with steel determination. ÒOh, and I would really appreciate it if you stopped insulting the man.Ó

Matt felt the red hot singe of jealousy upon hearing her defend the jerk.

Damn. Had he been stupid enough to get caught in his own trap? When had pretense ended and reality squeezed in? What did he care who Evelyn dated apart from the fact that if he failed to win her love, eternal damnation most likely awaited

him?

He thought back to last night. When heÕd alluded to having fallen in love, the words hadnÕt felt like a lie. Why was that?

With a shake of his head, he pushed his disturbing musings aside, refocusing his attention on something safer and far more entertaining: the appraisal of her wardrobe.

With a thoughtful hmm, Evelyn was currently evaluating a dress his grandmother wouldnÕt be caught dead in. It was gray and shapeless, with as much sex appeal as control-top underwear. He cocked a brow and grinned wryly. ÒPerfect,Ó he said. ÒTodd will love it.Ó

She wrinkled her nose and promptly placed it back in the closet. Biting her lower lip, she pulled out a pair of black slacks and a lime-green polo.

ÒDidnÕt realize he was taking you golfing in the dead of winter. The good news is you can always club the horny bastard if he gets out of hand.Ó

She pierced him with an icy, not-the-least-bit-amused stare. ÒDo you mind?Ó

A wayward curl fell to brush her cheek, and she flicked it away with a frustrated wave of her hand. SheÕd been wearing her hair down since heÕd told her he liked it better that way. That had to mean something.

The russet-streaked strands caught the light as they cascaded down her back in a thick, sinful web. Matt edged in closer, his fingers itching to clasp one of those wicked locks. Her hair would be soft, like silk. He could tell just by looking at it. The mere sight of those untamed curls made his body prickle uncomfortably, until he could feel his essence changing, feel mist thickening into mass and energy converting to flesh. He lifted his hand, stunned to realize he couldnÕt see through it. The woman did strange things to him. Things heÕd never before experienced or could ever begin to comprehend.

And that both enticed and frightened the crap out of him.

Decisively, she yanked a black skirt and a pink blouse from their hangers and swiveled on her heels. Unaware that Matt stood directly behind her,

she plowed into him. The sudden contact struck him like a blast to the midsection, made his entire being chime with awareness.

Instinctively, he raised his hands to her shoulders to steady her. He felt her warmth pour into him, felt the silken texture of her hair beneath his palms, felt her hot, damp breath dance along the hollow of his throat. Need rammed into him until he could think of nothing else but tasting that sweet-looking mouth of hers.

For one mystifying instant, he forgot he was a ghost. He was solid. He was real. And he couldnÕt have wanted her more if he were made of flesh and blood and bone. He understood then what Earhart had meant. There was no desire greater than that of the soul.

Giving in to temptation, he let his thumb graze her bottom lip. Pretense fell away. Design ceased to exist. All that mattered was this moment and Evelyn. Sweet, muddle-headed, sexy-as-sin Evelyn.

With a tenderness that surprised him, he tilted her chin up and simultaneously dipped his head,

eagerly capturing her lips with his. Energy and matter spontaneously fused into one. Substance was nothing but the subtle vibrations of the soul, a microscopic hum at the heart of every human being taking shape and form. He touched her, smelled her, tasted her.

Her gentle sigh against his mouth wrenched a strangled groan from him, and he deepened the kiss, plunged his tongue into her mouth. Trembling in his arms, she dropped the garments she held and slid her hands up his chest, melting into him.

Strawberries. The thought sparked somewhere within the thick haze smothering his brain. She tastes like strawberries and smells like spring.

Liquid fire coursed through what had once been his veins, invigorating him. For the first time in his thirty-three years of existence, Matt understood what it truly felt like to be alive.

Too bad it had to happen after he died.

ThatÕs when reason seeped in to douse the raging flames consuming him. He couldnÕt do this. He couldnÕt make Evelyn fall in love with him. To

do so would be to condemn her to the very heartache sheÕd spent a lifetime safeguarding herself against.

Regret dug deep, yanking hooks into his gut. He had tdet her go, the consequences be damned.

Chapter Six

Evelyn had never experienced anything as sweet or as seductive as MattÕs kiss. A bright, electrical charge pulsed from her head all the way to her toes, paralyzing her. She couldnÕt have broken the contact if her life depended on it, and she didnÕt want to. All her senses blazed with awareness, drowned in all that was Matt. He felt solid beneath her palms. Solid and warm. The arms embracing her were as real as existence itself. ÕHard and comforting, demanding and gentle all at once. The lips molding to hers were hot and moist as his tongue explored the depths of her mouth. Heat pooled deep inside her, in a place she rarely explored or dared venture. It was new and exciting, frightening and exhilarating. She went liquid in his arms, her body aching to surrender and meld with

his. Now that sheÕd had a taste of him, she wanted more. She wanted everything he could give.

So when he suddenly broke the kiss, a blast of cold air assailed her, left her dumbstruck.

ÒYouÕre going to be late for your date.Ó

The words didnÕt register at once. They bounced around her fuzzy mind for a few seconds, looking for a place to sink in. ÒYou kissed me,Ó she muttered stupidly.

ÒThought you could use the practice,Ó came his clipped reply. ÒWe wouldnÕt want to let Todd down.Ó

Disappointment dropped like a stone to settle in the pit of her stomach. For a moment she feared she would make an even bigger fool of herself and burst into tears. Then blistering anger flared and crowded out the pain elicited by his indifference. ÒYou presumptuous, self-important Éass!Ó

ÒAnd here I was thinking youÕd appreciate some pointers.Ó

She shoved him away hardÑ and was startled

to feel the weight of him. ÒThe only thing IÕd appreciate is for you to get the hell out of my life.Ó She saw a flicker of something in his eyes. Could it have been hurt? No, of course not. Matt Alexander cared for no one but himself.

ÒYouÕll be getting your wish before you know it.Ó His voice was flat and cold, contradicting the fleeting spark of emotion sheÕd noticed seconds ago.

ÒAnd not a moment too soon.Ó With that she picked up the clothing sheÕd dropped and prepared to storm out of the room.

Right before she turned her back to him, she flung a glance his way, intending to warn him not to follow her on her date, but the words died upon her lips. The sad acceptance she caught on his face choked the flames of her anger as effectively as a bucket of ice water and left her more confused than ever.

Who was the real Matt Alexander, and what did he hope to accomplish, besides humiliating her and shredding her heart to pieces?

ItÕs for the best, Matt thought the moment Evelyn left for her date. Let her forget all about me, even if it is with a shallow, materialistic prick like Todd.

As she, heÕd rightfully pointed out a few nights ago, Todd had a definite advantage over him: he was alive. Matt had nothing to offer her Ñ no life, no futureÑ only heartache. In the past, heÕd never had any qualms taking what he wanted with little regard for the consequences, but even he wasnÕt that big of an asshole. He cared about Evelyn, maybe even loved her, and he refused to hurt her if he could help it.

He winced at the irony. HeÕd always joked that the only way heÕd fall in love was over his dead body. Guess somebody had been listening after all. Hopefully, that same somebody was listening now.

ÒEberhart, I want out,Ó he yelled at the ceiling. ÒDo you hear me?Ó

The air shivered, and EberhartÕs form emerged in a sparkle of white light. ÒWhatÕs the problem

now, Mr. Alexander?Ó

ÒI canÕt do this,Ó he informed him. ÒI refuse to make her fall in love with me.Ó

Shock flittered across the old saintÕs face. He watched Matt as if waiting for the punch line of some joke. ÒYou do realize whatÕs at stake?Ó

Matt nodded, his jawset in a firm, non-negotiable slant.

ÒYouÕre willing to risk eternal damnation?Ó

ÒIf thatÕs what I have to do. I wonÕt break that womanÕs heart. I donÕt care what you do to me.Ó

Wonder spread to soak EberhartÕs features, making him even more luminescent. ÒWell, well, well, Mr. Alexander, it appears thereÕs hope for you yet.Ó

Twin blades of excitement and regret knifed through him. ÒSo youÕll take me out of here?Ó

Eberhart wagged his head. ÒI canÕt do that.Ó

ÒWhy the hell not?Ó

ÒBecause your work here isn't done yet.Ó And with that, the cryptic old saint vanished in a

dazzling explosion of blinking lights, leaving Matt to grunt and curse in his sorry wake.

Evelyn met Todd at a quaint little restaurant in PortlandÕs Old Port District, a mere block from the waterfront. Cobblestone streets stretched before the Victorian brick building, giving the area a picturesque charm. The salty sea breeze, the mournful sound of a foghorn and the distant twittering of seagulls only added to the romantic atmosphere.

Walking into the restaurant was like taking a step back in time. Oak-paneled walls soared around her, surrounding a wood burning stove, which sat upon golden hardwood floors. The place was old-fashioned and undeniably homey.

Still, Evelyn couldnÕt bring herself to relax. The kiss sheÕd shared with Matt kept crawling into her thoughts, kindling her blood as effectively as the burning flames in the hearth. All the feelings sheÕd experienced when his lips had swallowed hers continued to simmer inside her, distracting her from

dutifully listening to ToddÕs riveting account of his job as a stockbroker.

ÒJust last month, I made a killing for one of my clients,Ó he boasted, his dark brown eyes twinkling with pride. ÒNearly doubled his investment in six months.Ó Todd brought his roll to his mouth and tore off a large chunk. ÒI have a gut feel about these things,Ó he muttered emphatically. ÒStock brokering is all about instinct.Ó

She nodded politely and tried her best to look impressed. She wondered what Matt was doing right now. It felt strange not having him around. Not that she should care one way or another, she told herself, after the way heÕd treated her tonight.

ÒMy boss saw right away that I have what it takes to make it in this business.Ó He ran his fingers over his gelled, jet-black hair, angling his wrist unnaturally. ÒMade me partner in less than three years.Ó He lowered his hand to rest it on his chin in a most uncomfortable-looking position, his silver watch glinting in the firelight.

Evelyn scrunched her brows. ÒIs something

wrong with your hand?Ó

He chuckled nervously and took hold of his wine glass. ÒNo, my handÕs fine.Ó He cleared his throat. ÒAnyway, like I was saying, IÕm partner now. Not too many people my age make it to partner.Ó

ÒCongratulations.Ó She forced a smile, then sampled a small bite of her roll as well.

The memory of MattÕs hands on her crept, unbidden, into her consciousness. She could still feel his warmth sinking into her flesh, his fingers meshing in the thick bramble of her hair, his mouth drinking from hers. She could still taste him on her lips, that spicy sweetness that was as inebriating as it was seductive.

Heat again. Energy and pure heat.

A hot flush whooshed up to set her cheeks aflame. She swallowed hard, nearly choked.

ÒAre you allright?Ó

Unable to find her voice, she sputtered and nodded, taking a long sip of her wine. The liquid

could barely trickle past the thick knot of emotion clogging her windpipe. She thought of the way Matt had discarded her after nearly breathing her in. His callousness, his arrogance—and pain lanced through her.

His attitude shift made absolutely no sense. Granted sheÕd only known him a week, but she felt connected to him on a spiritual level, as if she could see straight into his soul. Yes, he was cocky and sarcastic and definitely full of himself at times, but he wasnÕt heartless or mean. Unless sheÕd completely misread him.

Focus your attention on Todd, she chastised herself. HeÕs handsome and polite and actually has a pulse. Forget about Matt Alexander. Tomorrow, heÕs as good as gone.

Evelyn released a heavy-hearted sigh. In a way, Matt was doing her a favor by being a complete jerk.

ThatÕs when a thread of understanding began to unfurl within her. Maybe, just maybe, he was trying to protect her. The kisses heyÕd shared had been real.

The way heÕd held her, touched her had been real. She was willing to stake her life on it. It was the cold indifference afterwards that had been the act, and he was good enough at what he did to make it convincing.

It took all of her willpower to remain seated in her chair and see this torturous date through. Todd continued blathering on, listing every single one of his virtues until her head began to throb. Her lips trembled from all the smiles she forced upon them. But in a way, she was glad she couldnÕt get a word in edgewise because it gave her time to think. She analyzed the events of the past week, trying to understand why Matt had been sent to her only to be taken away. Surely, heaven wouldnÕt drop him into her world with the sole intent of breaking her heart. In this mysterious occurrence, she sensed purpose and design and the inexorable pull of destiny. She and Matt were fated to meet, if not in life, then in death. That had to count for something in the grand scheme of things.

The date from hell finally reached its end, and

Evelyn couldnÕt help but exhale in relief as Todd escorted her to her car.

ÒHow Ôbout we go back to my place for a nightcap?Ó he suggested.

Panic doused her. ÒIÕm sorry, but I really have to get back home.Ó

He leaned closer, invading her personal space in a way that gave her goose bumps. And not the pleasant kind. ÒOkay, your place then.Ó

She took a step back, sidled closer to her car. ÒThank you for the offer, but IÕll have to decline tonight.Ó She wasnÕt sure how to let him down easy. This clearly wasnÕt going to work out, but she didnÕt want to embarrass him or hurt his feelings.

He must have read the rejection on her face because an ugly scowl suddenly contorted his features. ÒWell, arenÕt you the little cock-tease?Ó

Shock rippled through her. ÒExcuse me?Ó

ToddÕs eyes darkened, like storm clouds gathering in the midnight sky. ÒThereÕs no excuse for someone like you. I was nice enough to buy you

dinner, the least you could do is invite me home for a drink.Ó

ÒI never asked you to buy me dinner!Ó she cried indignantly. SheÕd offered to go dutch, but heÕs insisted on paying.

ÒThen why did you call me?Ó

Evelyn stared at the stranger before her. She took in the sight of his perfectly coifed hair, the flashy watch, the spit-polished shoes and shook her head. ÒI honestly have no idea.Ó Nothing about him appealed to her. All she could think about was Matt. All she could see was MattÕs warm, glowing smile, MattÕs sparkling greenish-blue eyes, MattÕs sexy, unkempt golden hair.

Todd sneered. ÒWhat a waste of my time.Ó And with that he stomped away, leaving her to slump against her car.

She slid the key in the lock, opened the door, and folded her body into the welcoming seat. With trembling fingers, she started the ignition, anxious to get back home where she belonged. Back to the safe shelter sheÕd created and MattÕs surprisingly

soothing presence.

Matt sat in EvelynÕs butt-ugly recliner, with that damn cat curled in his lap purring up a storm. Begrudgingly, he stroked the scruffy creature under the chin. Her purr escalated to the sound of a revved up motor. Rolling over, she exposed the furry white expanse between her paws.

ÒYouÕre a female all right,Ó he grunted and scratched her on the belly. ÒPutty in my hands.Ó The animal stretched contentedly, gazing at him through heavy-lidded eyes.

Just then, he heard the front door open and close. His body instantly tensed, his senses sharpening with awareness. Evelyn was home. She hadnÕt been gone all that long for a date. Pleasure and relief swamped him. At least the jackass hadnÕt scored.

She walked in to find him strumming an offbeat tune on the cat and smiled. ÒGuess you won her over after all.Ó

ÒI usually do. ItÕs just a matter of time.Ó He

avoided her eyes. ÒHow was his date?Ó

She took a few tentative steps toward him. ÒYou were wrong,Ó she said. ÒHeÕs nothing like you.Ó

He struggled not to flinch; her words stung like hell. ÒIÕm glad. I hope you two will be very happy. IÕm sure heÕll treat you better than I ever could have.Ó

ÒYou donÕt understand.Ó Tenderness washed over her face. ÒEverything you said about him turned out to be true. The manÕs a first class jerk.Ó

A tempest began to brew inside him. ÒWhat did the bastard do?Ó He shot to his feet, sent Slippers flying. The cat landed with a thud and pranced away with an offended meow.

ÒNothing I wonÕt forget tomorrow.Ó She waved her hand dismissively. ÒHe was rude and insulting. He got very nasty when he realized I had no intention of putting out.Ó

ÒToo bad I wasnÕt there. I wouldÕve clocked the son of a bitch.Ó

Her lips quirked with amusement. ÒHe never wouldÕve known what hit him.Ó

Matt smiled. ÒWouldnÕt have seen it coming, huh?Ó

Evelyn laughed. God, he loved her laugh. It was warm and throaty and heartfelt. It rested something deep inside him—something as achingly sweet as it was hot and hungry.

She took a few steps forward, bridging the distance between them, and the way she looked at him nearly bowled him over. ÒIÕve had an epiphany,Ó she voiced softly. ÒThere are two types of men in the world. Men like Todd who look like harmless lambs but are wolves in disguise. They turn on the charm, compliment you every chance they get, and toot their own horn until theyÕre blue in the face. But the moment they donÕt get what they want, they bare their fangs.Ó

She tilted her head sideways, and her expression brimmed with affection. ÒThen thereÕs the other kind.Ó Almost reverently, she placed her hand on his chest, making his spirit sing. ÒMen like

you.Ó

Her touch, her gaze completely unhinged him. ÒIf you compare me to a lamb, IÕll have to bite you.Ó His voice was hoarse, almost winded.

A radiant smile lit her face. ÒYou, Matt, are blunt and sarcastic and never miss an opportunity to remind the world how unworthy you are,Ó she stroked his chest lovingly. ÒbutÑ deep down where it counts, youÕre a pretty decent guy.Ó

Sweet Jesus, he wanted to kiss her again. He wanted to taste every inch of her creamy skin, to make love to her until the line between life and death blurred and time itself ceased to exist. She was absolutely mesmerizing.

Tomorrow, IÕm gone, he thought listlessly. It canÕt happen. I wonÕt let it.

He blinked and the curtain went up. Show time. ÒYouÕve got me all wrong. You women always want to believe an asshole can be reformed, but that fantasy only holds true in the books youÕve got lined up on those shelves. If you want my advice, stay away from men like me. YouÕll save yourself

some serious heartache.Ó

ÒThere you go again,Ó she whispered. ÒTrying to convince me what a louse you are. Tell me, whoÕs hiding now?Ó

Go ahead. Make her believe sheÕs wrong, Matt told himself. Put on the performance of your life. ItÕs the only way to keep her from getting hurt.

But the biting remarks and smart replies just wouldnÕt come, because for once in his miserable existence a womanÕs opinion of him actually mattered. God help him, he didnÕt want to crush the sparkle of trust and admiration blazing in her eyes.

She still had her hand on him, and the heat of her palm set his soul on fire. Then she did something that made the walls of his resolve crumble in a pile of rubble.

She kissed him.

Chapter Seven

Evelyn had never been this brazen before, but never had she craved anything or anyone this much. The overwhelming need to touch and be touched swelled inside her until she thought sheÕd suffocate from it. Kissing Matt was the most spontaneous thing sheÕd ever done, and the most exhilarating. Again, she was amazed at how solid he was. She could feel sinewy muscles beneath her palms, feel the strength and hardness of him as he crushed her body to his.

How is this possible? How can he feel so real?

His mouth did crazy things to her, stroking and teasing, trailing across her cheek to feather kisses down her throat. All rational thought dissolved in a hazy mist of sensation. The electrical hum of his

hands as they slid up and down her body set her skin aflame, made desire fist deep inside her and her blood burn with volcanic intensity. MattÕs touch was as magical as everything else about him.

ÒStrawberries.Ó His hot breath tickled her ear. ÒYou taste like strawberries.Ó The husky words he uttered were as seductive as his caresses and sent flickers of pleasure dancing along her spine.

Evelyn sighed as her knees weakened and her body went limp against his. The need to cling to him until the stars stopped shining and the earth stopped turning overpowered her. ÒDonÕt ever let me go.Ó Emotion thickened the walls of her throat, and she tightened her hold on him, hoping she could somehow anchor him to her and keep him from drifting away.

ÒJust donÕt say you love me.Ó His fingers fumbled with the buttons on her blouse, closed possessively over her breast.

She stifled a moan. ÒNever.Ó

Cool air tickled her flesh as her blouse tumbled to the ground. Almost simultaneously, MattÕs shirt

disintegrated before her eyes. She took in the sight of his bare chest, let her fingers explore the sheer beauty of him. ÒHow did you do that?Ó Corded muscles tapered down to a ribbed stomach, which was dusted with a smattering of golden brown hair. Hair that felt soft and springy against her fingertips, like whorls of coarse silk.

ÒIÕm not really sure.Ó His voice was breathless, strained. ÒI donÕt feel like a ghost right now.Ó And with that he lifted her in his arms and carried her to her bedroom.

Matt didnÕt understand how this was happening or how he could feel the way he did. It was as if he were made entirely of nerve endings, and they thrummed with each fervid caress, each stolen kiss. Heat zipped through him like lightning, until he glowed with the need to possess Evelyn, taste her, please her like heÕd never pleased anyone before. This desire transcended physical need. It started deep at the heart of him and spread to all his limbs, a burning need that was almost painful.

With eager hands, he stripped away her clothing and took in the splendid sight of her—those luscious curves, her flat stomach, her perfectly proportioned breasts. Everything about her tempted and enthralled him, made him throb with lust. Guiding her to the bed, he blanketed her body with his, amazed to realize that somehow he, too, was naked. He felt her against him, from his breastbone all the way down to his thighs, like satin on rough velvet.

With a moan, she arched her hips against his, sending white sparks of sensation spearing through him. His groin tightened, and just when he thought he couldn't get any harder, he did. Somewhere in his lust-smothered mind, he wondered how he could be as intangible as wind one moment and as stiff as stone the next. The answer didn't matter. All that mattered was that he could have her, and he would even if it killed him.

Good thing he was already dead.

He showered worshipping kisses over her body, explored the curve of her hip, the smooth

texture of her skin, the sensitive nubs at the center of her breasts. Every taste of her was like a feast, feeding his starved senses until he feared he would explode into a million shards of sparkling light.

Hungrily, he closed his mouth over her breast, suckling her taut nipple until she shuddered beneath him. Evelyn writhed, cried out his name. ÒPlease,Ó she gasped. ÒNo more. I need toÉfeel youÉinside me.Ó

The words were more potent than an aphrodisiac, making his blood pump faster and his groin kick. ÒYouÕre killing me,Ó he muttered, gliding up her body and kissing her until he quaked with the need to bury himself inside her.

A guttural sound tore from his throat, and he parted her legs with his knee, tempering himself as he plunged into her warm, welcoming folds. Shimmering heat engulfed him, and in that glorious instant he felt as if they were but one person, forever merged in body and spirit.

Her legs clung to him as her hips arced to take him deeper, her arms enfolding him like a blanket

on a cold day. Wave after wave of pleasure submerged him as they rode the current together, surging and cresting with each rise and fall, until rapture finally overtook them and they collapsed onto each other, sated and spent.

Afterwards, he held her in the cradle of his arms, stroking her silky hair, breathing in the scent of her Ñ a sweet blend of flowers and rain and the heady musk of a woman well loved.

Peace, the likes of which heÕd never before experienced, swept over him, and in that one perfect moment he had the uncanny feeling that heaven had finally opened its doors to him.

Bliss. Pure, unadulterated bliss. ThatÕs what Evelyn felt as she snuggled closer to Matt, lulled by his tender caresses. No one had ever made her feel this way before. The last time sheÕd been with a man heÕd given her more pain than pleasure and had completely mortified her afterwards by recounting every sordid detail to all his friends. That whole, miserable experience had soured her against

relationships and led her to the conclusion that sex was highly overrated.

Tonight, everything had changed. She finally understood what it felt like to make love to someone, not only with her body, but with her heart. Never had she felt such sweet agony, such yearning for completion. And when heÕd finally entered her, it was as if his very essence had spilled into her soul, crackling inside her until she gleamed from it. In that breathtaking moment, theyÕd melded so seamlessly that she hadnÕt known where she ended and he began.

She closed her eyes and let contentment wash over her. Her heart felt so full she feared it would burst out of her chest. The feeling was new, choking in its intensity. ÒLove,Ó she whispered with awe. ÒI love you.Ó The words poured out of her before she could stop them.

She sensed his body tense, sensed the brief peace theyÕd found slip away like grains of sand on the shore. A strange, quivering sensation skated up her arm. In less than a heartbeat, she felt Matt turn

to vapor beneath her hand, as if the tide truly had swept in and carried him away, leaving only the foro behind.

Jackknifing to a sitting position, she turned to find that he was nothing more than a blinding light, a trembling white shadow. Panic engulfed her. ÒWhatÕs happening?Ó

Shock and bewilderment glimmered on his face. ÒI donÕt know.Ó

ÒCanÕt you stop?Ó Her voice was frantic, only a notch below a shriek.

ÒIÕm not doing this. I canÕt control it.Ó

Slowly, he began to fade until he was nothing but a translucent veil of the thinnest gossamer, as scintillant as an angel. Then, in the time it took for her to intone his name, he was gone.

Chapter Eight

Evelyn spent the next few days burrowing in her house in a dejected daze. For hours upon hours, she lay curled in bed with Slippers snuggled beside her, trying to make sense of the past week. Thoughts of Matt kept drifting into her thoughts, banishing all semblance of peace, refusing to grant her the mercy of oblivion. Never before had her homeÑ her lifeÑ felt so empty. Frozen rain pitter-pattered on her roof, echoed ominously around her, and reminded her how alone she was. Drab, gray light poured through the windows to paint lonely shadows on the walls. Shadows that didnÕt speak, or smile or make her laugh. Shadows that couldnÕt hold her or make her blood churn.

She tried to break the monotony by reading, but every word made her cry. She tried to distract

herself by cleaning her house, but in every room she saw Matt. Grief clutched her in its punishing grip, and there was nothing she could do to escape it.

With a despondent sigh, she huddled in bed with the covers drawn up to her chin, trying to forget how Matt had held her, kissed her, made love to her. She swallowed hard against the memories and picked up the remote control. Evelyn rarely watched television. She preferred a good book to the flickering, mind-numbing screen any day. But right now, anesthetizing her mind was exactly what she needed. Flipping through the channels, she let show after show rescue her from her crippling thoughts. Then, by chance or perhaps by some design greater than herself, she landed on an entertainment show. And thatÕs when she saw him, his magnificent picture lighting the screen.

ÒHollywood heartthrob Matt Alexander,Ó the announcer was saying, Òhas awakened from a ten-day coma. After a car wreck that nearly killed him, his chances for survival were grim at best, according to Dr. Mike Thompson at the Cedars

Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles. But two days ago he shocked family, friends, and fans alike by beating the odds and regaining consciousness. His father, screenwriter Jake Alexander, informs us that Matt isnÕt lucid yet. He has, however, been calling out one name repeatedly: Evie. Inquiring minds canÕt help but wonder, who is this mysterious Evie and how come no one has ever heard of her before?Ó

With a zealous cry, she turned off the television set, tossed the remote aside, and jumped out of bed. Excitement effervesced in her veins, energizing her more than a shot of adrenaline. She remembered now what sheÕd read about his accident over a week ago. The impact hadnÕt killed him. How could she not have realized it sooner?

Evelyn quickly dressed, then dusted off her suitcase. Happiness gurgled in her chest. Matt was alive, and he was calling for her.

After dropping Slippers off at Ms. DelaneyÕs house, Evelyn caught the next flight to L.A. A week

ago, the mere thought of traveling across the country on her own wouldÕve terrified her. Today, purpose drove her, fueled her resolve, and filled her with the sweetest anticipation. She didnÕt care that she was going to one of the busiest cities in the United StatesÑ a city so big and so alive, it could swallow a person whole. All she cared about was getting to Matt. She arrived at the Cedars-Sinai Medical Center way past midnight and barreled through the doors, fire licking at her heels. Doggedly, she pried MattÕs room number from a reluctant nurse and sprinted down the winding corridor.

When she reached his floor, two burly bodyguards blocked his door, refusing to grant her access to his room.

ÒPlease, you donÕt understand,Ó she begged. ÒHeÕs asking for me.Ó

The taller of the two took her by the arm and began guiding her to the elevator. ÒSorry, Miss, but only family and friends are allowed in.Ó

ÒEvie,Ó she cried. ÒIÕm Evie.Ó

The second bodyguard sniggered. ÒYou and every other woman in the country.Ó

Frustration bubbled in her veins. SheÕd come so far, only a door separated her from the man she loved, and there was no way sheÕd let two overgrown bullies keep her from him.

ÒOkay, IÕll go,Ó she lied. The moment the guard released her, she tear past him and made a beeline for the door. The second guard tried to stop her, but he was big and clumsy and she was small and fast.

She burst into MattÕs room with the guards in hot pursuit. For an instant she saw him, lying in the hospital bed, looking weak and wane, his head wrapped in white bandages. Her heart slammed into her ribcage as tears welled in her eyes. She noted the soft rise and fall of his chest, the pallor of skin, his dry, chapped lips. Joy nearly choked her. He was really alive.

Then the guards were upon her, taking hold of her arms and dragging her away. ÒMatt!Ó she cried. ÒIÕm here.Ó

ÒMiss, donÕt make this more difficult than it has to be,Ó one of the guards advised, escorting her to the door.

Hopelessness gripped her. Why wouldn't they let her see him?

ÒEvelyn?Ó That voice, that sweet, gruff, melodic voice. SheÕd recognize it anywhere, and it filled her soul with glee. ÒEvie, is that you?Ó

The guards released her, looking awestruck. Evelyn laughed and sniffled and hastened to his side. His gaze washed over her like a cool wave on a hot day. Taking hold of his hand, marveling at the warm, silken feel of his palm against hers, she lowered her face to his.

His other hand rose to her cheek to stroke her. ÒYou came,Ó he whispered.

She sank into his caress. ÒDid you honestly think I wouldnÕt find you?Ó

That familiar, crooked grin tugged at his mouth. ÒIf you hadnÕt, there isnÕt a ghost of a chance I wouldnÕt have found you.Ó

Epilogue

By the end of the week, Matt was released from the hospital. He and Evelyn returned to his luxurious Bel Air estate and spent the next two weeks in perfect seclusion, except for Slippers, who Matt had had flown in on his private jet. They sipped champagne by candlelight, sunbathed in the hot California sun, and made love beneath a star speckled sky, ignoring the vast world that lay beyond the gates.

The media was in a frenzy. Paparazzi surrounded the grounds, waiting for an opportunity to catch a glimpse of the famous couple. Everyone and his dog wanted to know who this mysterious Evelyn Hyde was and how in heavenÕs name sheÕd managed to capture the heart of HollywoodÕs most notorious playboy.

Matt and Evelyn had no intention of satisfying their curiosity. The only satisfaction they cared about was the oneness they found in each other. Languid days melted into steamy nights as they devoted hours to exploring each otherÕs body, giving and receiving pleasure, drowning in the heat of their spellbinding connection. Each time they touched, each time they kissed, energy crackled between them as surely as it had the first time theyÕd made love. They were linked in body and spirit, two halves of a whole that had finally found completion.

One cool night, as they sat on the balcony beneath an opalescent moon, Matt nestled his chin in the crook of her neck and whispered, ÒThis feels like paradise.Ó

Evelyn nodded and closed her eyes, as the rustling breeze kissed her face. ÒMmm, it does.Ó

His warm breath sent a fluttering sensation skittering just below her earlobe. ÒI thinkÕve died and gone to heaven.Ó

Her eyes instantly sprung open. ÒNot funny.Ó

Laughter rumbled in his throat. ÒYouÕre right.

Heaven can wait a good fifty years or so.Ó

Above them stars twinkled, sending diamond chips rolling across the black velvet sky, and that brief instant when the night came alive, Matt couldÕve sworn he saw Eberhart smiling down at them.

About The Author

Anne Hope is the author of contemporary, emotionally intense romances with a twist. ÑA twist of humor, a twist of suspense, a twist of magic. All her stories, however, have a common thread. Whether they make you laugh or cry or push you to the edge of your seat, they all feature the redeeming power of love and the heartÕs incredible ability to heal.

AnneÕs passion for writing began at the age of eight. After penning countless stories about enchanted houses, alien girls with supernatural powers, and children constantly getting lost in the woods, she decided to try her hand at romance. Her Golden Heart finalist, *Where Dreams are Made*, is her debut novel. She lives in Montreal, Canada with her husband, her two inexhaustible kids, her cat and

a school of shamelessly multiplying guppies.

To learn more about Anne Hope, please visit http://www.annehope.com, sign up for her newsletter at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/annehopeauthor, or send an email to anne@annehope.com.

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