

Faith in Love

A romantic couple is shown in silhouette, embracing and looking at each other. The background is filled with warm, golden bokeh lights, suggesting a Christmas tree or festive lights. The overall mood is intimate and affectionate.

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PROLOGUE

It couldn't be possible. That *couldn't* be her face staring back at her in the mirror she held. She was Dr. Faith Black, a psychiatrist, for heaven's sake. She should have known better. The only resemblance the woman in the mirror bore to that woman with the medical degree in psychiatry was the long auburn hair.

Faith sighed and brought the mirror closer to her face so she could study the unfamiliar image. It had two black eyes, one of them swollen shut. A bandage on her right cheek concealed five stitches and part of an ugly purple bruise. Her jaw was swollen, wired shut because of the break. Her lip was swollen, bruised and cut. Her nose, which had been virtually destroyed then reconstructed, was held in place by a plastic guard.

As she laid the mirror on the stand beside her hospital bed, the deep bruises that Roger's fingers had left on her arm attracted her attention. She slumped back against the pillow, releasing a groan of agony. Not only did she look like she'd just gone ten rounds with *Rocky*, she felt like it, too. There wasn't a muscle in her body that didn't hurt whenever she moved.

Seven minutes. That's all it had taken for her life to be destroyed. From the time Roger had come home from work until he'd hit her the first time and she'd locked herself in the bedroom had been three minutes. It had taken less than one minute for her to call 911 and give them her address before Roger had kicked in the door and grabbed the landline phone on the bedside table, hitting her in the head with it.

Everything after that was foggy, but the time the police said they'd arrived was about four minutes after she'd picked up the phone. They'd booked Roger for drunk and disorderly conduct last night, because she'd been too incoherent to know what was happening. But that morning they'd come to the hospital with the appropriate paperwork in case she wanted to file aggravated assault charges.

For the first time in all her years of counseling, she'd followed her own advice. She'd filed not only aggravated assault charges against her husband, but also charges of assault with a deadly weapon since he'd hit her twice with the telephone. She reached up and ran her fingertips across the bandage hidden under her bangs.

The doctor had told her that he'd needed fourteen stitches to close the cut made by the edge of the phone. That was going to leave one heck of a scar.

Faith rolled her eyes heavenward and moaned. Even that movement hurt.

"Dear God," she said through pain-wracked lips. "Why didn't I listen to my own advice?"

The door opening quietly brought her attention from the ceiling, and she looked over to see a small, blonde peek into the room.

"I'm awake, Ginger," Faith said. "Come on in."

"Are you sure?" Ginger asked hesitantly. "After what happened?"

“Come in,” Faith insisted. “You aren’t responsible for your brother’s actions.”

Ginger wandered to the bedside and sank onto a nearby chair. “God! I can’t believe he did this to you.”

“I should have seen it coming, Ginger. His temper’s been getting progressively worse for months. I have nobody to blame but myself—for not getting out of the marriage.” Faith sighed. “I thought I was so careful when I looked for a husband, but ...”

Ginger cut in. “Maybe that was your whole problem. You’re too involved in your psychology stuff. *Fall* in love, Faith. Don’t go looking for it logically, because love has nothing to do with logic. It just happens. And it’s better that way.” After a brief pause, Ginger continued along a different line. “Now about my no-good brother. Roger wanted me to bail him out, but I refused. I don’t care if he is my little brother. He has no business treating people like he did you, and he has to learn that before he hurts somebody else.”

“I appreciate knowing that he can’t get to me yet.”

“It’ll be awhile before he can post bail, too. I camped out at the jail and dissuaded everybody Roger’s lawyer called. That was before I got my hands on his lawyer and told him not to send anybody else because I planned to *stay* camped out until Roger had gone through all of his friends. I want to keep Roger behind bars until you’re out of the house.”

“Make that out of town,” Faith returned with forced levity, “and you’ve got a deal.”

“Is that what you’re planning to do? Leave town?”

“Yes. Tomorrow morning my lawyer’s coming over here, and I’m filing for divorce. I already have a restraining order against him, but I’m not counting on it. A piece of paper won’t hold back a person who’s intent on doing somebody harm.”

“Where will you go? No. Don’t tell me. I’ve always been a softy for Roger’s sweet-talking. Just get the hell out of town as soon as you can. Roger’s going to have to plead guilty when he’s arraigned, because he was caught in the act hitting with the phone again, so he’ll get some sort of prison term. But I sure as hell wouldn’t count on it being for a long time. He has a way of manipulating people to get what he wants.”

“How well I know, Ginger,” Faith admitted. “How well I know.”

ONE

Faith pulled her white RAV4 Hybrid into the first parking place she found and turned off the motor. Opening the door, she stepped out into the cold Ohio air. Quite a difference from the comfortable mid-November temperature in Florida.

Bending into the car, she pushed the button to open the liftback, then straightened up and rubbed her upper arms vigorously as she shut the door with her hip. Now she remembered why she'd moved south after graduating from the University of Illinois, Chicago. It was *cold* up here.

She opened the back of the vehicle then a suitcase inside to pull out a heavy sweater. She needed to invest in a winter coat or parka now that she was moving to Eagleton.

After zipping shut her suitcase, Faith slammed down the trunk lid. She slid into her sweater and pulled it snugly around her. That was better, but not much. Tomorrow she would go shopping and see what kind of coat she could find. Right now she just wanted to stretch her legs and get the kinks out before she went to her relatives' house.

Eagleton, Ohio, was a tree-lined town with quaint old-style shops, not large department stores. The local merchants swept their sidewalks daily and washed their doors and windows until they sparkled, giving the town a squeaky-clean appearance. When she was a child, her favorite shops had been Mrs. Kohler's Candy Shoppe and Duff's Drug Store, where they'd had an old-fashioned soda fountain. Mrs. Kohler's Candy Shoppe was gone now, but Duff's was still in business.

Suddenly craving a chocolate soda, Faith strolled to the corner, crossed the street in the crosswalk, then backtracked to the drug store. As she entered, she saw an elderly man behind a cash register transacting a sale with a young woman about seven months pregnant. The medium-height, white-haired man glanced up, then stopped counting money from the register and gazed over at Faith with sparkling blue eyes.

"Faith!" he exclaimed. "John told me you were coming to town. How are you?"

"Just fine now." Faith smiled and strode up to the pair at the register. She'd always adored Peter Duff and was so glad to see him again that she could have jumped over the counter to hug him. "I'm surprised that you recognized me, Mr. Duff. It's been eleven years since I've been in Eagleton."

Peter Duff laughed. "How could I *not* recognize those big green eyes? A pair of the biggest emeralds I've ever seen. And those pretty auburn waves always shone like fire in the sun." Mr. Duff handed the woman her change and a small paper bag. "Take care of that baby, Kate."

"I will," Kate returned as she hurried from the building.

"Can't figure how that girl got hitched," he said, winking at Faith. "I've never met anybody so shy, especially not a talkative little redhead I remember coming in here as a kid."

Faith giggled, glad that time hadn't changed at least one person from her past. Mr. Duff

would probably always make her feel better. “This is one little redhead who finally learned to keep her mouth shut once in a while and listen for a change. I hope you still have your famous soda fountain. I’m dying for a chocolate soda made your special way.”

Mr. Duff chuckled. “Would I be dumb enough to close down the second most prosperous part of my business? Next to prescriptions, that’s what keeps me going.” Mr. Duff waved at someone across the room as he came out from behind the register. “Keep a look-out, will you, Hank? I have a gorgeous, green-eyed redhead to serve at the soda fountain.”

“Will do,” Hank called to his boss. “I heard you were coming back to town, Faith. Good to see you again.”

“Good to see you, too, Hank,” Faith returned as she waved at him before following Mr. Duff toward the back of the store.

Old home week, she thought. Things hardly ever changed in Smalltown, USA. Everybody still knew everybody else’s business. Unfortunately, everybody had also known about her first steamy summertime romance—with Hank—the year she’d graduated from high school. Four years had scarcely diminished the talk when she’d visited after college and Hank was serving his time in the Green Berets. Had an extra eleven years helped the town to forget? she wondered as she climbed onto a red, vinyl-covered stool in front of the counter.

“If Hank hadn’t married five years ago,” Mr. Duff observed, “he’d probably be knocking at your door again. Don’t think the young man’s ever gotten over his big love.”

Faith’s face heated in embarrassment. “I was hoping people would have forgotten about that by now. And we’re hardly young anymore.”

Mr. Duff chuckled as he dropped a scoop of chocolate ice cream into a tall glass. “Everybody who ain’t my age is young, missy.” He added some chocolate syrup to the ice cream then squirted in some soda water. After stirring it with a long spoon, he set it in front of Faith and handed her a paper-covered straw.

Ripping off a tip of the paper, she wrapped her lips around the end of the plastic straw and blew into it. The paper made a rustling noise but didn’t fly off like it would have when she was a child. She pulled the paper off with two fingers. “Don’t make straw packages like they used to, do they, Mr. Duff.”

“Nope.” He chuckled again. “There was a time when you could send the paper clear over to the next aisle. Lost track of the number of times I found your clutter on the floor over there.”

Giggling, Faith dropped the straw into her soda and leaned over it. She took a long, slow sip, savoring the childhood memories that the taste of a double dose of chocolate brought back to her. Whatever had possessed her not to make her home in Eagleton long before this? It still held her happiest moments.

“Oh, Mr. Duff,” she sighed. “This is heaven. If you weren’t married, I’d shack up with you just so you would make these for me all the time.”

“Speaking of married,” he said, “I can’t remember your last name now.”

“It’s Chisolm again. I took my maiden name back when I got divorced.”

“Excuse me, sir,” a man nearby said.

Mr. Duff and Faith glanced in his direction. She stopped with her lips caressing the straw and stared at him in amazement. At first all she noticed was a pair of brilliant blue eyes—even bluer than Mr. Duff’s. Then she saw what was attached to those eyes gazing at

her with such piercing sadness—and almost choked on her drink, he was so handsome.

His medium-brown, rather shaggy hair made his eyes seem even bluer. His long, straight nose had a hint of a bump near the bridge, and his mouth. Oh, his mouth! It was full and damp from whatever he'd been drinking, and made her want to leap into his lap to smother it with her own lips.

The thought startled her. She'd never had such an instantaneous reaction to a man before. Why now?

With a silent nod and a quick smile, she acknowledged him then let her gaze leave his face. His suit coat fit him so snugly in the arms, his elbows bent on the counter, that she could see how well developed his biceps and triceps were. And his thighs were tight against his trouser legs.

To still her imagination, she poured her concentration into her soda. The last thing she needed was the complications of a romance. She needed to keep her mind on finding a suitable job so she could support herself and not be dependent upon John and Betty Hanlon.

"You ready for your check?" Mr. Duff asked the man as he approached him.

"Please," the man replied. "I have to get back to Dayton before it's time to leave work."

Just the sound of that gorgeous man's voice made her knees weak and her body melt. It was such a rich baritone, so clear, so husky. So totally sexy! And she couldn't help wondering what it would be like to hear it whisper sweet nothings into her ear.

"You big city folks are on a fast track, young man," Mr. Duff said as he added up the man's lunch. "Dayton's less than an hour away. All interstate. You should slow down and enjoy life, son, or someday you'll find out that it passed you by."

Faith grinned. More of Mr. Duff's noted, unsolicited sage advice.

"Here's your check," Mr. Duff continued. "I'll meet you at the register."

"No need," the man said. Using the mirror over the work area across from her, Faith watched the man withdraw his wallet and take out a bill. "Keep the change." She glanced out of the corner of her eye to watch him return his wallet to his back pants pocket. Nice backside, too! The man started toward her, saying, "Have a good afternoon, sir." When he stopped beside her, she let her startled gaze rise to his face. He was smiling the most mind-boggling smile! "Ma'am," he said. And he strode out of the building while she watched in shock.

Across from her, Mr. Duff laughed again, but when she glared at him, he stopped and said, "Sorry, Faith, but it was hard not to see that you noticed him."

Faith returned her gaze to the door. "Who was he, anyway?"

"Never saw him before. Said he was in town on business and decided to eat lunch before he went back to work. His associate suggested that he try here, so he did. That's all I know." Mr. Duff paused while Faith took another sip of her soda. "Except that a certain redhead showed him—and everybody else with eyes—exactly what she thought of him."

Faith choked on her drink, and Mr. Duff rounded the counter to pat her back. She unceremoniously pushed him away and coughed a couple more times before she could catch her breath.

"You all right?" Mr. Duff asked.

"I'm fine." After emitting another small gag, she took a deep breath and released it slowly as she smiled up at him. "You shouldn't say things like that when a person's drinking something."

"You were practically drooling on the man," he replied with a stifled laugh.

"It's not *my* fault that he could make a nun give up her vows just by looking at him." She glanced back at the door then returned her gaze to Mr. Duff. "And he didn't say who this business associate is?"

"Nope. Just told me that much then ordered his lunch." He looked at her sheepishly. "Want to know what it was?"

"Jeez! Am I really that transparent?"

"Always have been, missy. That's one of the nice things about you. Nobody has to guess what you're thinking. It's right there on your face. If Hank and I hadn't been here, you probably would have ... What's the phrase kids use nowadays? Ah, yes. You would have jumped his bones."

"Mr. Duff!"

"Just calling it like I see it. Nothing new there. And if you want to know who he is as bad as it looked like, you'd better start checking around town to find out who his business associate is before somebody forgets he was even here."

"I don't see how *anybody* could forget him," she crooned.

"I'm telling you, missy. Don't let this chance pass you by. Life's too short for that."

"Advice from Eagleton's town sage?" she asked jokingly.

"More like a word of warning. Take your time with that soda, Faith. And it's on me. Just walk out the door when you're done. I really need to get back to work. Flu season, you know, and it's hitting Eagleton like a ton of bricks."

Faith drove up the circular driveway to the old Victorian house that was set back in the woods just outside Eagleton. She remembered the house well, because she'd spent many summers playing in its third-floor playroom with her cousins. Years ago it had been pale green, but now it was a sunny yellow with white trim. The covered white porch ran along two sides of the first floor, and the porch swing swayed in the gusty wind.

She parked her RAV4 and strode confidently up the front steps to the white door. Before knocking, she did a slow turn, taking in the surroundings. The big weeping willow tree was gone now, and so was the tree house in the oak tree nearest the far end of the driveway. Just viewing the vista brought back memories—not so much of events but of the unconditional love she'd found within these walls.

That was far from what she'd experienced in her mother's small apartment. She'd always felt like she had to be perfect for Madge Chisolm. Like if she didn't get the best grades in school or if she wasn't the best cheerleader, she wouldn't be acceptable in her mother's eyes. For the month she spent each summer at the home of her deceased father's sister, she felt like the only thing that mattered was that she existed.

With a sigh of contentment, Faith knocked on the door. In only seconds, it flew open, and her excited Aunt Betty dragged her into the house by the wrist. Faith embraced the small woman tightly. Nothing had changed. Betty still accepted her as one of her own.

Reluctantly pushing away, she held Betty Hanlon's hands apart to examine her and said the same thing Betty had said to her every summer. "Look at you! How you've grown."

Betty giggled. "The wrong way, I'm afraid. You look more like Gregory every time I see you. Oh, how I wish you could have known your daddy. He was such a loving man."

"We all know that being loving runs in the Chisolm family," Faith replied. "Your hair's grayer now, but you don't look a day over fifty."

"Make that fifty-five, and I'll agree with you. Let's go into the living room and sit down."

"I have a better idea," Faith suggested. "Let's go into the kitchen. I love your kitchen."

Faith led Betty toward the back of the house where the kitchen was located, but she stopped short in the doorway. This wasn't the kitchen that she loved. This was something new. White cabinets white replaced the pine cabinets of her childhood. The walls had pale blue wallpaper instead of the off-white paint that had made the kitchen look so cheery. And there was absolutely no hardware on the cabinets, when years ago there had been shiny brass pulls and knobs adorning the drawers and cabinet doors.

This kitchen had an extra large, French door refrigerator/freezer with two drawers, a cook-stove on the center island, and two built-in ovens. And there was a dishwasher, of all things! How was she supposed to pour her heart out to Betty while they were doing dishes if there was a dishwasher? The quaint, homey kitchen that she'd so adored spending time in was gone.

"What happened to your kitchen, Aunt Betty?" she asked in shock. "Why did you change it so drastically?"

"You can blame your cousins for that," Betty explained as she led Faith to the round white table near the bay window. "When we had a gas fire a few years ago, they put their collective feet down—all twelve of them—and made us get modern appliances. Your uncle John and I felt we were out numbered six to two, so we let Patti design our new one. Don't you like it?"

Faith collapsed onto a white fabric chair at the table and picked up a chocolate chip cookie from the plate in the middle. At least one thing was familiar—the smell of chocolate chip cookies, homemade, fresh from the oven. She took a bite and looked around again.

"It's not that I don't like it, Aunt Betty," she said. "It's just that I'm not used to it. I was expecting familiarity—not new surroundings."

"Everything changes with time, dear," Betty replied as she sat down opposite her niece.

Faith smiled. "You've been hanging out with Mr. Duff too long. You're starting to sound like a sage, too."

"How are you feeling after ..." Betty's words trailed off.

"Roger attacked me? I still get headaches once in a while, but otherwise I'm fit as a fiddle." Faith flashed a bright smile. "Besides, not everything that came out of it was bad. Do you like my new nose? Not as big as the other one, is it?"

"Yes, I like your nose. But what about those dreams, those nightmares, you mentioned? Do you still have them?"

Faith cringed at the thought and knew she was destined to have this conversation despite her desire to avoid it. "Not for three weeks. I'm a psychologist, Aunt Betty. I went to a colleague and went through therapy myself to get past the rough spots. Let's leave it at that, okay?"

"For now, anyway." Betty rose and wandered to the cabinet beside the refrigerator. "Would you like some milk with that cookie you seem intent on holding all day?"

"All right!" she exclaimed, glad that her aunt had at least temporarily agreed to drop the subject.

Pouring her a glass of milk, Betty said, "Your uncle John decided to come home early today—to spend more of your ..."

“... first day back with you,” a man said from the doorway. “I thought I’d find my little duchess in here, nibbling up her queen aunt’s cookies.”

In her rush to greet her uncle, Faith knocked over her chair. She flew into his arms and hugged him tightly, then she dragged him to the table to join them, picking up her chair again before she sat down. For several seconds, she examined the couple. What total opposites! Betty was short and slightly obese, with gray hair and green eyes. John was tall, slim, and bald with brown eyes. So totally different, yet so very happy together for nearly fifty years.

“I’ve missed you both so much I can’t tell you,” she announced. “I should have come back long ago.”

“You certainly should have,” John scolded cheerfully. “What did you do with your furniture?”

“It’s in storage until I can find a place to stay and a job to support myself.”

“Actually, Betty and I already discussed that, and we have a suggestion. Why don’t you live in one of our guest houses?”

“Your guest houses?” she asked in amazement. “I don’t remember any guest houses.”

“That’s because we didn’t have fourteen grandchildren and three great-grandchildren when you were last here. The house gets a little crowded during the holidays, so we built a couple of guest houses on the property so the bigger families would have some privacy—and so would your old aunt and I.”

“That’d be great, but aren’t they already furnished?”

Betty flicked her hand like she was shooing away a fly. “Patti’s husband Bernie and Frank will come over and move everything into the basement. And before you say anything, they’ve already agreed if you want the guest house. All you have to do is decide which one you prefer.”

“Great!” Faith said. “And as soon as I find a job, I’ll pay you rent.”

“Only token rent,” John insisted, “and only because I know how important it is to you to be independent. Now about the job part. I’ve been wanting to do something at the station for a long time now, and you would be perfect.”

“What could I possibly do at a television station?” she asked in amazement.

“Host a talk show, like Oprah Winfrey. You’d be perfect with your gift of gab and your degree in psychology.”

Faith waved her hands frantically in front of her. “Oh, no! I couldn’t. I’ve never been on TV before. I wouldn’t know what to do. I wouldn’t know how to act. I’d probably forget everything I’ve ever learned the second the light went on the camera.”

“You’d do fine,” John assured her.

“You don’t understand. I haven’t done any therapy in seven months. I don’t *trust* myself to do it. Not right now, anyway. Why would I go on TV and make myself look like a fool by trying to have psychologists and authors on a show where I have to intelligently interview them?”

Faith rose and wandered to the window seat at the bay window. Not only would she be nervous about being on television, she would be nervous about the possibility of Roger finding her, just like he’d vowed when the police took him to jail after his sentencing. But how could she explain that to her aunt and uncle without telling them that Roger hadn’t received a very stiff sentence? How could she tell them that Roger would spend a maximum of three years behind bars?

Probably not even that, given the fact that he'd already served part of his sentence before that ridiculous trial she'd had to endure. Why hadn't he just pleaded guilty and left her alone? Why had he had to claim self-defense and put her through the agony of facing him in a courtroom? Why had she been holding that stupid psychology textbook when he walked in the door? More importantly, why had she thrown it at him when he'd verbally threatened her?

With a heavy sigh, she returned to the table. None of that mattered anymore. All she cared about was staying out of the limelight for the next few years—just to assure that she was safe no matter when Roger got out of prison.

"I'm sorry, Uncle John," she said. "But I can't accept your offer. Maybe another time, when I'm more confident in my abilities as a psychiatrist, when I've had time to adjust to the idea of being a TV personality."

"All right," he agreed with a casual shrug. "I have another job open if you're interested, but you might not find it as exciting."

"What is it?"

"There's an opening in my research department. You wouldn't have any problem researching things, would you?"

She smiled at him. "Actually, I think I could research things very well, and I appreciate your nepotism." Rising again, she gazed from her aunt to her uncle then back again. "Should we head out to the guest houses so I can decide on one? I may as well set up residence as soon as I can."

John draped his arm around her shoulders and kissed her temple. "That's my duchess. You always did bounce back nicely. You'll do nicely this time, too. It just might take longer given all the circumstances." He glanced down at Betty as she rose as well. "Come along, my queen. Let's go check out those guest houses."

TWO

The memory of that woman in the drug store haunted him for three days. Faith Chisolm. Just her name brought mixed feelings in him. For over two years, Ian McCary had felt that he had no faith left, then after being in Dayton a mere two months, the first woman who captured his attention bore that name. The first time he'd been in that drug store, in that small town called Eagleton, he'd seen a vision of loveliness that he couldn't stop thinking about.

What force had brought him to Dayton, Ohio, anyway? Had God sped the dart he'd thrown at the American map to that point? Or had the devil? It had to be the devil, because God would never inflict such maddening torture of desperate desire to his body.

He pulled his Nissan Sentra into a parking space in front of Duff's Drug Store, took the keys from the ignition and got out, pushing the button on the key fob to lock the door.

This was crazy, he thought as he strode into the store. He had no reason to believe that she would be back there at this particular moment. But he could think of no other way to prompt an official meeting with Faith Chisolm.

"Morning," Peter Duff greeted. "Can I help you?"

"I just want some lunch," Ian replied, searching the building for Faith.

"She's not here right now," Mr. Duff said as he led Ian back to the food counter.

Ian hesitated then tried to act casual as he joined the white-haired owner. "What do you mean?"

"Faith, at least I figure that's who you were looking for. She hasn't been in since the day you were last here." Mr. Duff stalked behind the counter and began to wash his hands, glancing over his shoulder as Ian sat down. "What will it be today—other than a glimpse of that pretty little thing."

"You make a mean tuna salad. I'll have a sandwich and cole slaw."

"Drink?" Mr. Duff asked as he dried his hands.

"One of those chocolate sodas that she claims are so good."

Taking two slices of bread from a bag, Mr. Duff scooped some tuna salad onto one then added a piece of lettuce. "Is that the Faith Special or the regular?"

"There's a difference?" Ian asked in surprise.

"Double chocolate in the Faith Special. Chocolate's her downfall."

"I'll take the regular then."

"Smart man. The Faith Special's pretty sweet—of course, so's Faith." Mr. Duff put the sandwich on a plate then laid a piece of lettuce neatly on the side and dropped an ice cream scoop of cole slaw on the lettuce.

As he set the plate on the counter, Ian asked, "Why do you keep talking about her?"

Mr. Duff shrugged and turned to make the soda. "She's why you're here again, isn't she?"

"I don't know why you would think that."

"Never seen two such transparent people. You were so nervous about her ogling you that you couldn't get out of here fast enough. Of course, I doubt she saw you ogling her right back

because she was so busy watching you.”

Ian smiled and shook his head. “It seems as though I’ve been caught. But please understand that I usually don’t do things like that. It goes against my nature.”

Mr. Duff glanced over his shoulder and laughed. “A man who claims it’s against his nature to look at a pretty woman? What are you, a priest?”

Ian bit into his sandwich and swallowed the bite before he replied, “Actually, I work at the Fuller Advertising Agency in Dayton. I have to come to the television station just outside of town on business occasionally.”

“The TV station, huh?” Mr. Duff said as he set the soda beside the plate. “Who do you deal with there?”

“The advertising department. Why?”

“And you’re new to the area, right?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have a name? Or should I just call you mister?”

“Ian McCary. Where are your questions leading us?”

Mr. Duff smiled mischievously. “If I were you, young man, I’d find a way to meet the owner. Christmas is coming up, and he has a soft heart for newcomers. You’ll probably get invited to his annual Christmas extravaganza.”

Ian examined Mr. Duff curiously. “Meaning?”

“Meaning, I guarantee that Faith will be there.”

“She works at the television station?” Ian asked, stunned. “I haven’t seen her.”

“Nope, but she’ll be at the party. Trust me. Then you can get to know her in a little nicer surroundings. In the meantime, I’ll tell her that you were here looking for her.”

Ian was so shocked that he dropped his sandwich. “No!” When he realized how desperate he sounded, he calmed and said, “What I mean is that won’t be necessary. I’d just as soon that she not know I came back.”

“I don’t see why not,” Mr. Duff said. “She’d be thrilled to know.”

Panic swept through him. This visit wasn’t even on the verge of being what he’d expected. “Please, don’t say anything, Mr. Duff. I might never meet the owner and might not ever see her again. Let’s just leave it at that, okay?”

“Oh, all right,” Mr. Duff grumbled as he left the counter. “Never saw such a nervous nilly when it comes to a pretty lady.”

Ian leaned over his soda and took a drink. The action stirred memories of Faith doing the same thing, her pink lips caressing the straw as though it were a lover. Dear Lord, what was he thinking? Now his thoughts were stirring more than memories; they were stirring his desire as well. He had to eat and get out of there before he went insane with his fantasies of what Faith could do for him—of what *he* could do for *her*—if they were ever alone for more than a couple of minutes.

Hanging her parka on the hook by the door, Faith surveyed her new home. At last, her own things were unpacked and stored where she wanted them. Her pastel blue couch faced the stone fireplace on the far wall of the living room. Her brass and glass coffee table sat before it. Angled toward the fireplace but farther away was her royal blue recliner-rocker, and a brass lamp with attached round glass table sat beside it. Above the fireplace hung her sixty-five inch TV, and her

stereo system sat in her oak entertainment center angled against the opposite wall so the living room looked homey—just the way she liked it.

Beyond the living room to the right was the kitchen, small, with a plain round oak table and matching spindle-backed chairs filling most of it and all the amenities of an apartment, including a dishwasher and microwave oven. To her, those were the most important items, as long as she wasn't having an in-depth conversation with Betty over a sinkful of dishes.

There were two bedrooms in this cottage, one of which she turned into a study containing her computer equipment, file cabinets, and bookcases of reading material—both textbooks and novels. The other bedroom held her brand new queen-sized bed, her oak dresser and chest of drawers, her little-used sewing machine, and a smaller television.

John had already put WiFi in the building, and tomorrow someone would come to install cable television. Soon, she would be set to live comfortably, although not as extravagantly as in Florida. And this coming Monday she would start work at John's independent television station. At the moment, life was very good.

Too bad it had taken so long. Two weeks in bed with a major case of the flu, which she'd obviously contracted the second she stepped into Ohio, had put off her having the movers come. But they'd arrived three days after she'd called to make the arrangements and had unloaded everything in less than five hours. The rest of the time she'd spent unpacking, washing linens and dishes, and putting everything exactly where she wanted it, which occasionally called for moving things around at least twice.

Now, though, four days later, everything was done and all she had to do for the next five days was relax and unwind.

Her cellphone rang, and Faith rushed to the bedroom to answer it.

"Hello," she answered in a sing-songy voice.

"Well, aren't you the cheerful one this afternoon," Betty said. "I take it you're feeling better."

"Much," Faith replied. "Now that I'm all done moving in, I'm ready for some R&R until Monday."

"Do you remember John asking if you'd like to join us for the office Christmas party this weekend?"

Office Christmas party. Faith considered that for a moment. She vaguely remembered something about John mentioning it, but she wasn't sure what he'd been talking about or even if she should consider it, because she was so sick at the time. The party had completely slipped her mind.

"As a matter of fact, I do," Faith admitted with a grimace. "Now. I'd forgotten all about it with everything that's been going on in my life."

"That's what I told him. He went ahead and put your name on the list this morning. I hope you don't mind."

"Actually, I think a party is a good idea. I could use the diversion."

"I'm glad you feel that way, Faith," Betty said with a chuckle. "John and I were going to drag you there kicking and screaming if we had to, but we weren't too excited about causing such a ruckus."

Faith laughed. "What kind of dress should I wear?"

"Something sexy."

A gasp escaped before she even realized it was in her. She didn't like that answer. If her aunt wanted her to wear something sexy, that must mean she and John were up to their old

matchmaking hobby again, and she had to stifle that immediately.

“Wait a minute, Aunt Betty. If you’ve already set me up with a date, ...”

Betty’s familiar mischievous giggle echoed in Faith’s ear. “Relax. We know you aren’t ready for that yet, but there will be several available men there. It wouldn’t hurt you to look nice in case one of them interests you.”

The unexpected image of those piercingly sad, blue eyes watching her at the soda counter flashed through her mind. That man had certainly set her heart pounding again. Maybe Betty was right. Maybe she would find a man to at least spend some time with—to date on occasion, of course, not for a relationship.

“Peter Duff told me about the man in his store the day you got back to town,” Betty said. “He said if ever there was a woman who needed one in her life, it was you.”

Faith groaned at the memory of the embarrassing situation she’d created for herself. Why had she done it in Duff’s Drug Store? Why couldn’t she have done it someplace where the town gossip couldn’t see her? Mr. Duff had been right when he said that she could have jumped that man’s bones if nobody else had been around. He was a good-looking man, and she hadn’t even followed Mr. Duff’s suggestion to find out who he was because she’d been too sick to think about being sick, let alone finding a man.

Oh, well. Situations pass and life goes on. She may as well make use of the party to see if she’s ready to get back in circulation.

“I have an idea,” Betty said, drawing Faith from her thoughts again. “If you’re up to it, you and I can spend tomorrow shopping at the Mall at Fairfield Commons in Beaver Creek. Surely, we could find something suitable for you to wear Saturday night. Not to mention, I need a new dress.”

Faith didn’t even hesitate to agree. “Sounds like fun. What time should we leave?”

“Why don’t we start with breakfast around eight?”

“No way! If you want me to look sexy Saturday night, you have to stop feeding me or I’ll look like Two-Ton Tillie. Let’s leave around nine, and we’ll do lunch instead. That way I can have a nice, *slimming* salad, which is exactly what I plan to have for dinner tonight, so don’t even ask. I can’t come to the house to eat with you and Uncle John.”

“You lost a lot of weight when you were sick, Faith,” Betty retaliated. “But all right. I’ll see you tomorrow about nine.”

The phone went dead against Faith’s ear. “And I’ll drive!” she shouted, knowing that her aunt would insist on driving, anyway.

That was one thing about Betty that Faith didn’t like. She never let anybody do anything other than what she had planned, which was also why Faith had agreed to go to the party. It wouldn’t have mattered if she disagreed—she still would have gone, because Betty had already decided that’s what would happen. And when her aunt and uncle *both* set forth a plan, it was worse than hopeless to be contrary. One could only go along with it and enjoy the adventure.

So they were going to the mall tomorrow. That much sounded like fun, especially since she’d always enjoyed shopping with Betty. The man’s image flashed through her mind again. And maybe she would see *him* at the mall.

Faith plopped down on her recliner, shaking her head in disgust. What in the world was she thinking? She wouldn’t see him at the mall. He had a job somewhere in Dayton. At least, that’s what he’d told Mr. Duff. Maybe she should go back to the drug store and ask the pharmacist if he’d seen the man again. She could make it look like a casual visit. Now that she was well, she could claim, she had a craving for a chocolate soda.

“Jeez!” she exclaimed. She was so transparent he’d see right through that line. She would just have to just bide her time and see what happened.

In the meantime, she had plenty of things she could be reading, things she’d wanted to read but could never seem to find the time. Well, she had that time now, and she was going to use it.

Pushing herself up, she strode into her study, perused all of her paperback novels, and picked out a short, light romance.

Studying herself in the mirror, Faith tugged at the snugly fitting, emerald green sequined mini-dress. Granted, it looked good on her, with its low scooped neck that showed just a hint of her cleavage. The sleeveless dress made the green in her eyes even more pronounced. Needless to say, it was a very fitting choice for the season.

Faith herself would never have bought such a dress, but she was powerless when Betty took it to the clerk while she was changing back into her street clothes and purchased it on her store credit card. Now she felt obligated to wear the dress even if it did make her feel uncomfortable. Two inches above the knee was the highest she’d ever worn a skirt, and this one came a good four inches above.

Going to the closet, she took out her new silver high heels and stepped into them. Hopefully, no man would ask her to dance that night, because she certainly wouldn’t feel comfortable in these shoes. Taking the white, silk bolero jacket off a hanger in the closet, she slipped her bare arms into it and returned to the mirror. It looked nice with the dress, especially with the emerald green sequined ribbing along the edges.

A knock at the door startled her, and she spun from the mirror. Hurrying through the living room, she scooped up her new silver clutch purse and started to the door. She hated purses and never carried one, opting instead for a wallet and a lipstick discretely stuffed into a trouser or skirt pocket. But she never went anywhere without her identification, and her dress that night certainly didn’t leave room for pockets.

Faith pulled open the door and was met with a cold blast of Ohio winter. “Whoa!” she exclaimed as John entered the cottage. “I forgot this is the frozen north. I need to get my coat.”

“I have something better for a beautiful duchess going to a ball,” he returned as he pulled a silver fox stole from behind his back. “This should keep you warm enough between the car and the door. Betty thought her old rag would go perfectly with your outfit.” Wrapping it around her shoulders, he added, “And I must say that she was right. You look ravishing tonight, and that isn’t just a doting uncle’s opinion. There won’t be a man at the gala who doesn’t notice you.”

Her face heated as she blushed. “Thanks, Uncle John, but I feel a little conspicuous.”

“And you will be, too, so get used to it. You’ll deserve every look the men send your way. Let’s go before Betty gets out of the car and drags us to it.”

When John dropped Betty and Faith at the door of the hall he’d rented for the festivities, Faith was sure it was the wrong place. The outside was so drab. But when she opened the door for her aunt, she realized how wrong she was.

The huge crystal and brass, three-tier chandelier hanging from the lobby ceiling had to have cost a fortune. The paneled walls were polished to a high sheen. Faith ran her hand over the back of a russet brown couch big enough to seat five people comfortably. It had the smooth texture of real leather. And there were three of them, as well as five large russet brown chairs to match. An

enormous mirror approximately five feet high and eight feet long with a gold in-laid border adorned the entire wall directly in front of the door. To the left was a coat-check room which was staffed by two young men wearing starched white shirts, black trousers, and black bow ties.

“Wow!” Faith breathed. “This is sure deceptive on the outside.”

“Isn’t it?” Betty agreed. “And every year they have the most beautiful, most tasteful decorations in the ballroom.”

“I can hardly wait to see them.”

“John will only be a few minutes,” Betty said, “then we’ll check our wraps and go find our table. I hope you don’t mind not sitting near the band. John hates it because the amplifiers don’t go well with his hearing aid.”

“They don’t go well with my right ear, either,” Faith admitted cheerfully. “I’ve had trouble ever since ...” A frown crossed her lips. “Well, you know.”

“Hey!” John said as he joined the women. “No frowning tonight, duchess. You’re here to have fun.”

“And I’m sure I will.” Faith grinned and tugged down the hem of her dress. “I’ll just have to be careful how I sit—and dance, if I get any offers.”

“If?” he teased. “I have a stick hidden under our table you can use to beat off all the spare men you won’t have time for. Now let’s get rid of those furs and party.”

After giving their wraps to the young men in the coat-check room and getting orange, numbered tags, John escorted the women into the ballroom. Faith hesitated in the doorway until John laid his hand on her lower back and pushed her lightly forward.

The ballroom was enormous. Three chandeliers identical to the one in the lobby hung from the twelve-foot ceiling. Fifteen round tables were draped with white tablecloths, and each held a simple hurricane lamp with a red candle in it and a holly wreath around the brass base. Each table had eight chairs and eight place settings surrounding it.

In one corner stood a live eight-foot blue spruce tree adorned with white angel lights, gold beading and a large white and gold angel light on top. In the opposite corner, the five-piece band was setting up its equipment while a portable compact disc machine set up by the microphone played instrumental Christmas music for the early arrivers.

Faith followed John and Betty to table number nine, situated about halfway across the room from the band but right next to the twenty-by-thirty foot wooden dance floor. When John pulled out a chair, she glanced at the table and saw Betty’s name written in calligraphy on a place card. Betty sat down while John pushed in her chair, and Faith glanced at the next card to see if it was hers.

Nope. That seat was for somebody named Ian McCary. The seating arrangement must be boy-girl-boy-girl. When she started around John, he grasped her elbow and steered her to the chair beside Ian McCary’s. She grimaced when she saw her name on the next place card. They *were* setting her up. Now she was going to be forced to spend the night being cordial to somebody she didn’t know—and might not even like. Then she noticed the place card on her left. Craig Emerson. At least, she had a choice of whom she preferred to talk to.

“I hope you don’t mind me putting you between two strangers,” John said as she sank down on the chair he held for her. “I’ve met them both, though, and I think you’ll like them. Everybody else at the table is about your age and single so you won’t feel out of place.”

“I’m sure I’ll be fine,” she replied with a smile. “I can always talk around Ian McCary and chat with Aunt Betty if I get bored.”

“I have a confession before you do that,” he admitted with a grimace. “Craig specifically

asked to be seated beside you—said something about your name giving him good vibes, and he wanted to meet you. Ian I've only met once. He seems like a nice guy, but he's kind of quiet. Normally, I would have put him next to somebody available who's as gregarious as you are, but he's new in town. I thought the two of you might have that in common." John's dark eyes lit up mischievously. "Besides, he's what my granddaughters call a hunk. If nothing else, you'll have a good view when you talk to your aunt."

Faith giggled and shook her head. "Uncle John, when will you ever learn that looks aren't everything where I'm concerned? They're only the first thing I notice."

"Right. What can I get you ladies from the bar? Your normal white wine, Betty?" When she nodded silently, John returned his attention to Faith. "Would you like the same, duchess?"

"I'll have a diet cola," she replied. "I don't drink much, and I want some rosé with dinner."

"Diet cola it is. Be right back."

While John got their drinks, Faith and Betty chatted quietly. In only moments, a tall gentleman appeared at their table, saying, "Good evening, Mrs. Hanlon. How are you this evening?"

"Absolutely wonderful," she replied, gazing up at the dark-haired, dark-eyed man. "And quite ready for a Christmas dance."

"I hope you'll save one for me."

"Of course, I will." Betty turned her attention to Faith. "Faith, this is Craig Emerson."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, rising slowly and tugging on her hem to pull her skirt down. "I understand you requested to sit by me. I appreciate the thought." He was definitely good looking, even though he wasn't quite as tall as the man in Mr. Duff's store. Startled, she pushed the thought from her mind then extended her hand. He accepted it with a smile. Yuck, a limp handshake. Nice guy so far, but she didn't particularly feel comfortable with him. Then again, one shouldn't judge on first impressions, so she may as well give it a shot. "It's nice to meet you."

"I'm particularly honored," he replied. "I've been looking forward to this since your uncle mentioned that you were coming to work for him."

Faith stifled a cringe as she sat back down and covered her nylon-clad legs with the tablecloth. Jeez, what a suck-up. But something other than that bothered her about this guy, and it wasn't just the way he leered at her body as though she didn't need the dress to conceal it. Thank goodness, it was only one evening, and Betty was sitting nearby.

"Hi there, Craig," John said as he returned to the table. "I see you've already met my psychaitrist niece." He glanced over toward the door and saw a large crowd of his employees and their spouses or dates entering. Handing Faith her diet cola then Betty her wine, John returned his gaze to Craig. "Looks like it's time to play the host. Take care of my dates, will you?"

"Gladly," Craig returned, his eyes not leaving Faith for a second. "I'll be right back, ladies. I want to get a drink."

About fifteen minutes later, Faith was ready to get up and walk out of the ballroom, all the way back to Eagleton and her cottage. Craig wouldn't let her talk to anybody else, and she was almost desperate for relief. It wasn't that he wasn't charming, because he was, but he was a bit boring. And she hated his constant attention for some reason. Instead, she longed for a different voice to be drifting in her ears—one like the rich baritone that she'd heard at Mr. Duff's counter the day she'd arrived in town.

"Excuse me, duchess," John said.

Ah, a voice other than Craig's. Now she had an excuse to give her attention to somebody

else for a few minutes. Turning on her seat, she caught sight of a man's black suit jacket. Not John's because he was wearing dark blue. Her eyes wandered up the jacket to the power-red tie so neatly knotted at the throat.

"I want you to meet Ian McCary. Ian, this is ..."

Her eyes widened in shock when her gaze drifted farther upward and she saw the man. It was *him!* The man from Mr. Duff's place. Her jaw dropped in increased disbelief when she saw his bright smile and heard his deep voice say, "Faith Chisolm."

THREE

This was it. Her life was passing before her eyes. She'd embarrassed herself so badly in Mr. Duff's store that she was going to die now that the handsome man was standing before her. She was sure of it.

But somehow her body moved—in automatic drive, probably. She was rising, slowly, to her full five-ten in three-inch heels. She felt like she was going to fall off them, but that bewitching smile of his kept her moving upward until she was erect. Her right hand moved toward him as though it had a mind of its own. His fingers curled around it, their palms cupped together, in a firm handshake. Her knees felt as though they would give out as excitement shot through her body. She *loved* a firm handshake.

"Have you two met before?" John asked.

"Not formally," Ian replied.

Faith's gaze wandered to his piercing blue eyes, but the sadness she expected to see was gone. Replacing it was a merriment that made them seem even bluer—if that was possible. And he still hadn't released her hand!

No, there must be another explanation for these feelings coursing through her. She'd probably been so bored by Craig that she'd died and gone to heaven.

"We happened to be in Duff's Drug Store at the same time one day, and I heard him use her name. Isn't that right, Ms. Chisolm?"

"*Dr. Chisolm,*" John corrected with a note of pride. "She's a psychiatrist."

Oh, no! John was giving this man more information than she wanted him to. And the man had addressed her directly, so he obviously wanted her to respond. Now what was she going to do? She doubted that her voice would do more than squeak at the moment. Afraid to say anything, she nodded her head twice.

John slapped his hand on Ian's broad shoulder. "That must have been one hell of a chance encounter, young man, because I've known this young lady since she was in diapers. She hasn't been at a loss for words since she was fifteen months old and said her first sentence—*I'll get it!* when the telephone rang. She hasn't stopped talking since."

Faith wished that her *uncle* would stop talking. He was giving out too many family secrets to a man who still held her hand in his, who was making her melt inside just by looking down at her. Diapers! Of all things to mention to a man as attractive as ... What was his name again?

"Yo, duchess," John said. "Are you still in there?"

She nodded again but said nothing as Ian laid his free hand on the back of her chair. They met eye to eye now that he was bending over a little; his body was marginally closer to hers. The scent of his after-shave drifted to her nostrils, and she inhaled deeply. *Stetson*—her favorite. Then his voice interrupted her thoughts yet again in a very friendly tone.

"Please, sit down."

She was seated before Ian released her hand and sat down in his place beside her. To her dismay, he didn't take his eyes off her. She tried to focus on starting a conversation, but she was so shocked she didn't know what to say. Although, judging from the look on his face, he was shocked, too. He hadn't expected her to be there any more than she'd expected to see him.

When she reached for her glass of cola, Faith saw her hand shaking. Oh, jeez! She was showing him—and everybody else who could see them—exactly what kind of impression he made on her. How in the world would she ever sit beside him all evening without making an absolute fool of herself?

Withdrawing her hand, she lifted the edge of the tablecloth and bent over to peer under the table. To her horror, both Ian and Craig followed suit.

"Drop something?" Craig asked.

My brain! she screamed mentally. In truth, she'd bent over to see if there really was a stick under the table—so she could knock herself over the head and put herself out of her misery. But she couldn't tell these men that, either.

What she *needed* to do was get hold of herself. Forcing herself to act casual, she started to straighten up in her chair, but her left shoulder caught the edge of the table. It tilted slightly, spilling her cola, as well as three other drinks.

"Jeez!" she exclaimed in distress as she rubbed her shoulder.

Ian, Craig and John instantly mopped up the spilled liquid, and she grimaced at the sight of the mess she'd made. If only she could disappear so she could be free of the embarrassing scene she'd created. Betty scrambled to her feet and grabbed Faith's right elbow to drag her out of the way.

"What's wrong with you tonight, dear?" Betty asked in concern. "Are you just overly nervous again? Or are you still sick?"

In the head, Faith added in her mind. If she were smart, she would get out of there now and avoid the nervous tension coursing through her body. But aloud, she forced herself to speak in a cheerful tone. "You put that stick under the wrong table, Uncle John."

John broke into raucous laughter that drew everybody's attention to him. Finally, Faith thought, she was no longer the primary focus of the table.

"I think my duchess could use that rosé wine now instead of with dinner," John announced merrily. "Ian, since you don't have anything to drink yet, would you get it for her while you get yourself something? Craig and I can finish this."

"I'd be glad to." He smiled down at Faith. "One rosé wine coming up, Dr. Chisolm."

"I feel like such a fool," she mumbled.

"Don't worry about it," he assured her in a whisper. "We'll make it through this with our secret in tact. I promise."

"I sure hope so," she returned in a like tone.

"I'll be right back," he said as he hurried away toward the bar in the back corner of the ballroom.

"What were you two whispering about?" Betty asked as she pulled Faith a little farther away from the table.

Faith blushed at the thought of what must be going through Ian's mind right now. She'd made a complete spectacle of herself and probably embarrassed him, as well. "Nothing important. He was just reassuring me that my little scene here was nothing to worry about."

Betty smiled at Faith fondly. "He's right, too. Everybody has accidents—especially you, if you'll recall. John always said that you were the world's number one klutz."

"And I just proved it to the world, didn't I."

"It will all be forgotten by the end of the night, Faith. Don't let it spoil your fun."

"You're right, Aunt Betty. I'll act as though nothing happened, and everything will be fine."

"Ian's a very attractive man. I probably would have reacted the same way if I were about thirty years younger—and unmarried, of course."

To avoid conversation with Ian, Faith let Craig monopolize her time with chatter she paid little attention to. Most of the time she eavesdropped on Ian's conversation with Betty and John. All she learned, though, was that he was originally from Oregon and had graduated from Princeton. The rest of their conversation basically centered around politics and, for a reason Faith couldn't understand given John's agnostic views, religion.

When dessert of chocolate cake with chocolate frosting was served, Faith gobbled up her small piece in six bites. As soon as she put down her fork and pushed back her dessert plate, Ian set his dessert in front of her. She glanced over at him, asking, "What's this for?"

Ian flashed her a bright smile, his blue eyes sparkling with mischief. "Mr. Duff told me how much you love chocolate, and I firmly believe that pretty ladies should get all the chocolate they want."

"You realize, don't you," she taunted, "that if you change your mind, you're liable to lose a hand trying to get it back."

"I'll take my chances," he returned with a wink.

Faith picked up her fork and dug into his cake. That had gone well enough. She hadn't said anything to make herself look foolish, and she hadn't jumped on his lap to thank him with a kiss—which was her first reaction. Maybe she could actually make it through the evening without another incident.

After the waiters and waitresses had cleaned off the tables and served those who wanted coffee, John went to the bandstand draped with pine boughs and red Christmas tree ornaments. He made a brief Christmas speech then asked his secretary to draw names from a seasonally decorated basket for the door prizes under the tree. When the secretary called her name, Faith rose.

Beside her, Craig whistled wildly, and she glared down at him. She hated it when men reacted like that, and judging from all the Jack-Daniels-on-the-rocks that he'd had, she suspected that Craig was inebriated.

Steeling herself to make this public walk to the bandstand, Faith tugged at the hem of her dress.

Faith grimaced when she turned around and saw both Ian and Craig standing beside her seat. "Jeez, Louise." Shaking her head, she looked from one man to the other then glanced around her before whispering, "Would you two *please* park it? You're embarrassing me."

Both men dropped back onto their chairs. Only Ian kept his hand on her chair to push it in as she sat down again.

"I'm sorry, Faith," he apologized with a smile. "Mother-ingrained manners."

Faith giggled, glad that he'd relieved some of the tension. "Mothers can have that kind of effect on people, can't they?"

“So,” Craig said, drawing her attention to him, “open up your present and show me what you got.”

Like a child, she tore the green and red holly design wrapping paper on the small box. Inside was a coupon for dinner for two at The Savory restaurant.

“Wow!” Craig said, quite impressed. “That’s been rated as one of the best in the Dayton area. If you need a dinner companion, don’t forget my name.”

And what was that again? she thought sarcastically. She didn’t know whom she would take to dinner, but she did know it wouldn’t be Craig. She detested people inviting themselves places and always rebelled when it happened to her. Although, from the way Craig was acting tonight, maybe she would take Ian. What better way to make her point than to invite a man Craig so obviously considered his rival. What better way to take Ian than to ... What was she thinking? She had to stay away from Ian after the way she’d acted that night. He was just too dangerous to her sanity.

Before she could respond to Craig, his name was called, and he hurried to accept his gift, opening it on his way back to the table. He grinned at Faith as he dropped back onto his chair. “This one’s for Kelly’s. They’ve got good food, too. We’ll go on a night when they have prime rib to make the most of the coupon.”

What a cheap son ... Ian’s cheery voice interrupted her thought.

“I sure hope you two don’t get fat on all that free food.”

Faith turned her gaze to him and smiled. Thank goodness, Ian had been there to still her storm. She was almost ready to tell Craig exactly what she thought of him. Not only had he invited himself to use her dinner coupon, he assumed that she would want to use his. Despite her earlier belief that the evening would be ruined because she was forced to sit beside Ian and endure her lustful memories, she felt relieved that he was there. For some reason, he had a calming effect on her.

Three more gifts were handed out before John announced that it was time to dance. Even before he left the bandstand, the quintet began playing an easy-listening tune that Faith recognized but couldn’t quite place.

Craig laid his hand over hers. “May I have this dance?”

Darn! If he’d said something like “Let’s dance,” she could have declined. But he’d been so polite that she could almost forget his arrogance of a few minutes earlier, and she could certainly forgive it.

“All right,” she agreed, more because she loved to dance than because she felt obligated.

With the rest of his companions either going to another table to talk with friends or heading for the dance floor, Ian leaned forward, crossing his arms on the table, to watch Faith’s reaction to Craig. He didn’t think she was that interested in him, but he didn’t know her so he couldn’t be sure. So much could go wrong if he misread her body language and made a wrong assumption.

Right now she seemed content as Craig moved her around the dance floor in time to the slow song. He held her right hand near his shoulder and rested his left on her narrow waist. Faith seemed to enjoy dancing, too, and she moved very well with her partner.

How long had it been since he himself had danced? Each anniversary with Mary, but the last time they’d celebrated had been almost three years ago. So that’s how long it had been since he’d been on a dance floor. Was it like riding a bike? Could he get back out there

and not make a fool of himself by stepping on a lady's foot?

He would love to be the man with Faith, but he wasn't sure he could pull off a slow dance. Given the possibilities of arousal, uncertainty, and nervousness, he didn't dare ask her—or cut in while Craig was dancing with her. Craig was too smooth on his feet, and Faith would probably compare them. No, if he wanted to dance with her, he would have to try with somebody else first. But who?

"I couldn't bear to see you sitting here alone," a woman said as she sat down beside him.

Turning his attention to the tall, slim brunette he'd noticed earlier, he smiled. "I'm all right."

"I'm sure you're just fine." She lifted her hand and extended it toward him. "Marcie Withers."

"How do you do, Ms. Withers," Ian replied, shaking her hand in a light hold. "My name is Ian McCary."

"I'll let you call me Marcie if I can call you Ian."

"Sounds fair." This was the perfect opportunity for some practice, Ian decided. "Would you like to dance?"

"I'd love to."

Rising, Ian led her to the dance floor by the hand and assumed the same stance that Craig had with Faith. To avoid any eye contact with Faith, Ian stared into Marcie's dark eyes, which were heavily made up with mascara, liner, and shadow. Faith had on eye makeup, too, but hers was much more subtle. In fact, all of her makeup was more subtle. It hardly seemed like she was wearing any.

When the song ended a few minutes later, everyone stopped where they were and applauded. Ian glanced around the dance floor. Craig and Faith were standing not far away, and she was gazing over at him sadly. She didn't seem pleased that he was dancing with another woman, but instinct told him that she would never say anything about it. She had much more class than that.

The music started again, and Ian returned his attention to Marcie. "Another one, ma'am? We missed part of the last one."

"Sure!" Marcie replied as she draped her arms over his shoulders. "Only this time, let's do it right."

Ian cringed but still laid his hands on her hips. He didn't want to be dancing like this. He wanted to be able to look down at her so he wasn't tempted to watch Faith.

Then their eyes met, and he found himself unable to break with her sorrowful stare. Faith was quite upset, and it hurt him to know that. But why? They had scarcely spoken all evening. They knew nothing about each other. This whole experience was so new to him that he didn't know how to react to it. Should he apologize? Or should he ignore the situation and hope she would feel relieved that he didn't bring it up?

Craig's hand roamed to her derriere, and Faith tore her gaze from Ian. Ian's first instinct was to race over and rip Craig's hands off his arms, because Faith looked livid. She obviously didn't want such an intimate caress. But Ian stopped himself. He was dancing with another woman, and he certainly didn't want to create a scene and embarrass Faith again.

When Craig released her other hand and laid his free one on her bottom, as well, she glared at him and whispered something. Craig offered her a seductive grin. After a few

words back and forth, Craig held her as he had originally. Finally, she and Craig left the dance floor to sit out the next one. As soon as she reached the table, Faith picked up her clutch purse and left the room.

Ian escorted Marcie to her seat and leaned over beside her, bracing his arm on the table, as he watched Faith leave. Maybe now was his chance to talk to her for a while. "Would you do me a favor, Marcie?"

"What?" she asked.

"Would you occupy that guy who's been dancing with the redhead in the green dress?"

"Craig Emerson?" she exclaimed. "No way! The man's a sleaze."

"Please? I need to apologize to Faith about something, but I can't with him hanging on her all the time."

"No. Emerson should be locked up in a loony bin. The man's crazy. Always talking about reincarnation and how he won't date a woman unless the karma is right."

"I'm not asking you to date him, just dance with him for a couple of songs. Just long enough for me to make the appropriate apology. I wouldn't ask if it weren't important. I made a big mistake the first time we met, and I need to rectify it—especially since we were seated together tonight. Maybe she can enjoy her evening more if I tell her how sorry I am."

"And that's all you want from me?" Marcie asked skeptically.

"I promise."

"Oh, all right."

"Thanks, Marcie. You're a sweetheart."

Instead of leaving the room, Ian went to the bar and ordered two rosé wines. With the drinks in hand, he strode into the lobby, determined to make amends with Faith if it took all night. Acting as casual as he could given his nervousness, he sank into one of the leather couches and set her drink on the coffee table before him. Then he leaned back and draped his arm over the back of the sofa as he took a sip of his wine. For the most part, he was a teetotaler and he hoped this third wine wouldn't put him over the edge. But he needed it to help him relax enough to talk to her.

High heels clicking on the marble floor alerted him to her approach, and he inhaled deeply to still his nerves. This was it. He was going to have a real conversation with her. But the very thought of it was getting him excited again.

"Hi, Faith," he said as she came into view down the hallway.

His heart leaped into his throat when she turned toward him, her jacket draped over her bare left arm. She looked even better in just the dress! This whole thing was crazy. He should run out the door and never come back. In his entire life, he'd never been as attracted to a woman as he was to Faith Chisolm. The physical had never meant much to him before. But her enormous, bright green eyes, her dark red waves, her delicate figure, her generous smile—all of them drew him toward her as if he had no mind anymore.

He rose as she approached him, her smile brightening her entire face.

"What are you doing out here?" she asked.

"It got pretty hot in there," he replied, extending his arm toward the couch. "Would you join me for a while? Or do you think your date would object?"

"Do you mean Craig?" She sank onto the cushion of the sofa and tugged at the hem of her skirt again.

Ian stared at her legs as he sat down beside her. To block his view of her firm thighs, she laid her jacket on her lap. Closing his eyes, he took a sip of his wine. Maybe *that* would

put Satan behind him.

“Craig’s not my date,” she said.

Startled, he shot his gaze back to her face, then a slow smile spread across his lips. “You mean I wasted the entire evening resisting the temptation to interrupt your conversations? Resisting the urge to cut in while you danced?”

Faith shrugged. “Guess so.”

“Sometimes I can be such a fool.”

“You weren’t the fool, Ian. I was. I was so shocked to see you that I could have crawled under the table to hide from everybody.”

Ian chuckled. “If I recall correctly, you tried to and got caught in the act.”

She giggled. “I guess I did. So, what department at the television station do you work in?”

“Actually,” he admitted as he passed her the glass of wine sitting on the coffee table, “I don’t work at the station. I kind of indirectly finagled an invitation by having a meeting with John Hanlon, although I didn’t know he was your uncle.”

FOUR

Fury overwhelmed her. Ian McCary was no better than any other man. He wormed his way into meeting women just like all of them. Without thinking of the consequences movement would cause, she scrambled to her feet. Her skirt clung to her panty hose, leaving her entire left leg exposed to his view. When she saw him overtly staring at it, she tossed her drink in his face and tugged it down.

Bending over, she yanked her jacket off the floor. Her skirt hung up a second time, so she draped her jacket around her hips. When she started to leave, she walked into the coffee table. With a yelp of pain, she lifted her leg and grabbed her shin.

Then she felt herself falling—until she hit something partially soft, partially hard. She looked up into Ian's bright eyes as she lay draped across his lap.

His hand came down on her stomach as if to stop her descent to the floor. Both her skirt and her jacket were hiked up so far that she knew the dark panel on the side of her panty hose showed. He pushed her to a sitting position beside him, set his glass on the table, and scrambled to his feet, shedding his suit jacket as he did. In a single, fluid motion, he draped it across her lap then dropped back down beside her.

The whole time her eyes didn't leave his face. He wasn't laughing at her. In fact, he looked like he was truly concerned. This wasn't how he was supposed to react to the situation. He was supposed to think it was funny so she could run away from him and not feel like she was running from something good.

Slipping his arm around her shoulders, he pulled her against him. She was still staring at him as she spoke. "You're not laughing."

His expression changed to one of aggravation, and he replied in a hurt tone. "I don't think other people's misfortunes are funny. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, except for a bruise I'll probably have tomorrow—or even later tonight." She paused a moment, unsure she wanted an answer. But she needed to hear the words before she could make any judgments. "Why aren't you angry with me?"

Ian's blue eyes widened in astonishment. "Angry with you? Why should I be angry with you?"

"I threw wine in your face."

"For an affront you took at something I said," he added patiently. "Although, I have no idea what it was."

Faith couldn't believe this was happening. Not only was Ian extremely good-looking, he was understanding, too. She could never walk away from him knowing that. Then again, he had wormed his way into an introduction. But still she didn't push away as she explained, "You said that you indirectly got an invitation to the dance by meeting my uncle. If you wanted an introduction, why didn't you get one from Mr. Duff the day we were in the drug store? It's a lot better than worming your way into one."

"I'll admit that I knew you were coming tonight, but I had no idea you were related to

Mr. Hanlon. I'd gone back to Mr. Duff's store looking for you three times before he finally talked me into meeting your uncle. From the way things were going, I thought it would be my only chance to get an introduction."

"You went back three times?" she asked in amazement. "Why?"

"You're the first woman in my life who's intrigued me to the point where I can't think clearly about anything else. I wanted to see if you're as nice as you look."

"Am I?"

Ian grinned at her. "Let me put it this way, Faith. I can't think of another person here that I'd rather have fall for me—or *on* me."

Grimacing in embarrassment, she said, "I seem to be a bit more clumsy than usual tonight. Do you think we could start this evening over so I can make a better impression?"

"I think that would be a fine idea." Rising, he extended his right hand and said formally, "My name is Ian McCary, ma'am. And yours?"

"Faith Chisolm," she replied as she accepted his offered friendship. Their fingers wrapped around each other's hand, and Ian pulled her to her feet while she held his jacket against her stomach. She stumbled when one heel went lower than the other but didn't take her eyes from his. "And I wasn't falling for you again. I broke my new shoe."

Simultaneously, they looked down. Sure enough, the silver heel lay about a foot from her shoe.

"I was going to ask you to dance," he admitted, "but it seems as though you'd have a little trouble."

"Actually, I'd love to dance," she replied. "I'd much prefer doing it without shoes, anyway. These things are hurting my feet."

Ian put his jacket back on while Faith tugged down her dress. Once she was settled, he took her wrist and laid her hand in the crook of his elbow. He picked up her shoe heel and stuffed it into his pocket. Then he picked up her purse and jacket, and handed them to her. Finally, he asked, "Shall we go, Dr. Chisolm?"

Faith met his gaze. "Yes, Mr. McCary. I think that would be nice."

Holding onto his arm with both hands to steady herself as she hobbled into the ballroom, Faith basked in the secure feeling that swept through her. For some reason, she knew Ian would never hurt her; and at this point in her life, she needed that more than anything else.

They'd taken three steps into the room when Betty rushed up to them, questioning her frantically. "What happened, Faith?"

Too embarrassed to admit that she'd once again been the family klutz, she only told part of the truth. "I broke my heel. I guess I learned my lesson about buying at the cheap stores. First time out, and it was a goner."

Betty chuckled as the trio returned to the table. "It's a good thing Ian was there to keep you from falling on your face."

"Good thing," he agreed, flashing Faith a conspiratorial smile. "Would you like to dispose of those shoes and hit the dance floor with me, Faith?"

She looked up at him and mouthed a quick thank you before she replied aloud. "I'd love to."

"Where have you two been?" Craig asked as Faith draped her jacket over the back of her chair.

While Ian dried his face with a napkin, Faith kicked off her shoes, dropped her purse on

her chair, and replied, "Just getting away from the crowd for a few minutes." Turning to Ian, she said, "I'm ready."

When Ian took her hand and started toward the dance floor, Craig shot to his feet to block their path. "Where do you think you're going with my companion, McCary?"

"Craig," Faith declared, "you have no ..."

"It's all right, Faith," Ian said. "I don't mind answering." He turned his gaze to Craig. "Faith promised me a dance, and I'm getting ready to leave. This is our last chance."

Stepping around Craig, Ian led Faith to the floor and gently spun her into his arms. Gazing up at him, she laid her left hand on his shoulder and said, "You have a lot more patience with Craig than I do."

"I haven't had to deal with him all night, either," Ian replied with a smile.

"Are you really leaving soon?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Aren't you enjoying yourself?"

"At the moment, I'm enjoying myself tremendously, but *your* evening would be much more enjoyable if I go home. I'm creating too much tension, and it's obvious Craig won't leave until you do. Things will be easier with me gone."

"It isn't right that you should have to leave to pacify *him*."

"I don't mind, Faith. I've accomplished three-fourths of my mission, and seven-fifty's a darn good batting average."

"And what was your mission?" she prompted.

"To meet you, to talk to you, to dance with you, and to get your phone number. The first three I've taken care of, the last will be easy to leave without now that I know John Hanlon is your uncle." The music stopped, and Ian glanced at the band over his shoulder. Faith looked as well and saw that they were turning music in preparation for their next number. Returning his gaze to Faith, he asked, "One more for the road, doctor? Since that song was so short?"

"Sounds good to me," she returned.

As the music started again, Ian slid his hand to the small of her back and pulled her closer. This was what she'd been dreaming of for weeks, having him hold her against him. Then a frown came to his lips, and she frowned in return. "What's wrong, Ian?"

"Sh-h," he hissed as he used the hand on her back to push her head against his shoulder. "Let's just dance."

Faith released a soft sigh as his hand caressed her head then slid down her hair, stopping between her shoulder blades to caress her soft skin. Her hand slid off his shoulder and squeezed his upper arm. Unable to restrain it, a moan of pleasure drifted from her. He seemed so strong!

This was the most sensual dance she'd ever had. The scent of Stetson kept her spellbound. He held her only close enough to rub lightly against her breasts. With his lower torso, he swayed against her to give her the merest hint of his desire. None of his motions were passionate; none were restrained. All were a perfect blend that roused her senses so totally that she had no desire to think, only feel.

When the music stopped, he cupped her head between his hands and tilted it back to gaze down at her longingly. This was it. He was going to kiss her and make her respond as she had to no other man. But instead of doing so, he spoke in a near whisper.

"Thank you, Faith, but I have to leave now. Good night."

With those words, he rushed out of the ballroom.

Faith stared after him in amazement as she wandered back to her seat. What had just happened, anyway? One second he acted like he was ready to carry her from the building and make love to her; and the next, he was running away like she'd just kicked him in the groin. Actually, a little faster, but with the same fear of being hurt that such an act would cause. It didn't make sense.

She sank onto her chair in a daze.

"That was one of the rudest displays I've ever seen," Craig said in disgust. "A gentleman doesn't take off and leave a lady in the middle of the dance floor."

Her chest felt hollow, like somebody had ripped out her heart and lungs. She found it difficult to breathe. Her eyes brimmed with tears as she stared at the empty doorway.

"No, a gentleman doesn't," she agreed in a mumble. With a sigh, she turned her sorrowful gaze to Craig and spoke in Ian's defense. "But then, I wasn't much of a lady earlier, either."

"That's no excuse," Craig declared. "And I'm going to tell him so the next time I see him."

"I don't mind, Craig. Really. Just let it go."

But in her heart, wherever it had gone, she did mind—not because he'd left like he had, but because she doubted that she would ever see him again. What hurt the worst, though, was not understanding why he'd done it.

Ian practically ran to his silver Sentra after he got his overcoat and tipped the young men in the cloakroom. Starting the engine to warm up the car, he crossed his arms over the steering wheel and laid his head on them.

All the trouble he'd gone through just to meet Faith; all the glorious torment he'd suffered with his fantasies; all the wonderful agony of denying his desires that he'd endured on the dance floor. All for *what*? To realize a dream that he never should have had in the first place.

The guilt raging through him was so painful he struggled to breathe. His chest grew tight with regret. He'd virtually seduced her during the dance then left her alone without a word of explanation. First his faith had faltered, now this. If he didn't stay away from Faith Chisolm completely, he knew exactly what would fail next—his restraint!

Oh, how he'd wanted to kiss her! To hold her tight against himself and show her how desperately he needed her. But if he'd done that, if he'd indulged in any more of his fantasies, he knew there would have been no turning back. Now, at least, he had a chance to forget her.

"Dear God, help me get over this woman," he prayed aloud. "I can't do it alone."

He should explain to her, should tell her everything about his past so she would understand why he'd run away. Somehow he had to let her know that he'd been afraid of his feelings, ridden with guilt for even having them. He had to tell her that she meant too much to him, that he couldn't risk more than conversation and a dance. He should tell her that he could never see her again, except possibly in passing.

A letter. Maybe he could write her a letter and ask John Hanlon to deliver it for him. That was probably the best way to handle the situation.

His decision made, Ian shifted into reverse and backed out of the parking space.

"I was really surprised to see Ian leave after you danced with him, Faith," Betty said on the ride back to the house. "You seemed to be getting along very well."

Faith didn't want to talk about Ian; she didn't even want to think about him. But Betty had brought up the topic, and she could see no way of getting out of this discussion without showing her distress. "Aunt Betty, *must* we talk about him?"

"He seemed like such a nice young man, didn't he, John," Betty said.

"He is a nice young man," John replied, "but Faith spent most of the night with Craig. What else was Ian supposed to do? Spend the night wishing for more?"

Yes, Faith thought. He should have stayed and seen how attentive Craig got after he left. It would have served him right to be sitting there sulking while she had a good time.

"He didn't seem to give Faith much of a chance except for a few minutes on the dance floor," Betty insisted. "He could have been more diligent in his courtship."

"Craig and Faith got along just fine, didn't you, duchess. I think he's interested in you."

"I suppose," Faith agreed noncommittally. "Is this conversation really necessary?"

"It's been what?" Betty asked as she turned to look at her niece. "Eight months since you divorced Roger?"

"Almost."

"Then it's time to get on with your life. Start dating again. It isn't like the man died, you know. You don't owe him a period of mourning."

Faith sighed, knowing that this conversation was careening downhill so fast that she couldn't stop it. "I'm not giving him one. I'm just not ready to make a commitment yet. Is that so hard to understand?"

"Nobody's asking for a commitment, duchess," John reminded her.

"You sure couldn't prove it by Craig. He seems to think that my *karma* and his are entwined—that we're soul mates—that we've been together in a former life and belong together now."

John shrugged then turned a corner. "He's a firm believer in reincarnation. You can't fault a man for his religious beliefs. Ian and I were just discussing that tonight. He's a very interesting man, Faith, but you have to accept the fact that he's not one to get involved with a woman."

Not get involved! she thought in shock. If he'd even tried a teensy bit harder, she would have gone home with him. But no! He had to run away like a ... Wait a minute. Maybe that was why he ran; maybe he *wasn't* the type to get involved with a woman. No, that was crazy thinking, the kind that would get her locked in an asylum. Ian wanted her; she could *feel* it, for heaven's sake. And he'd been the one to make sure that she could.

"Faith?" Betty asked, "are you planning to see him again?"

"Ian?" Faith asked in a daze.

"Heaven's no. Craig. Are you going to see Craig again?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. It's possible, I suppose. He won those dinner coupons and insinuated that he would take me, but he didn't ask for a date."

Betty nodded as she turned back to gaze out the windshield. "You will. I guess poor Ian will just have to wait until you're done playing with Craig."

"Jeez, Aunt Betty!" Faith exclaimed. "Nobody said that I'd ever go out with either one of them. Can't we just drop the subject now?"

"I think that's a good idea," John inserted. "Although, Craig is an executive at the station. He could give you a very comfortable life."

With a groan, Faith pressed her hands against her ears and leaned her head against the frame of the car. She didn't want to hear any more about either one of the men flanking her at the table. She just wanted to go home and get some sleep so she could get up in time for church tomorrow.

"Do you think we went too far with Faith tonight, John?" Betty asked in concern as they got ready for bed.

"What do you mean?" he asked, hanging up his suit trousers.

"Ian and Craig, of course."

"All we did was give her the opportunity to meet them. What was so terrible about that?"

"Nothing, but that's not what I meant. I was talking about on the way home. Faith seemed kind of distracted by our conversation."

"She was just acting like she has since she was a child," John said. "She didn't want to hear the truth."

Betty sat down on the vanity chair in the master bedroom suite and applied cold cream to her face. "I think it was more than that. She and Ian were awfully close for a while in the lobby. And I mean that in the physical *and* emotional sense. I think she was upset because he left her."

"Come on, Betty. The man's so devout he wouldn't give Faith what she needs without a commitment. You heard how he was talking about religion tonight."

"And just what do you think she needs?"

"A good roll in the hay with a man who won't beat the hell out of her."

Betty stopped wiping her face with a tissue and stared at him in the mirror. "You can't honestly believe that Ian would do such a thing."

"He certainly wouldn't beat the hell out of her," John agreed, "but he's not about to give her that good roll in the hay without his wedding band on her finger, either. Faith's not ready for that, and I don't blame her. Besides, she spent a lot more time with Craig tonight. I think they're much better suited, especially considering that he stayed around the whole evening and didn't leave her stranded on the dance floor. Ian may be devout, but his manners leave a lot to be desired."

"I thought you liked Ian."

"I do—just not as a potential suitor for my precious niece."

"Faith's devout," Betty reminded him as she continued to take off her makeup.

"Faith's spiritual. There's a big difference. Now I think we should drop this subject before we ruin a perfect evening with an argument."

"I think that's a very good idea. It's Faith's life, and we can only do so much to interfere before she stops listening and starts asserting her independence. *That's* a well-known fact in this family."

FIVE

Disgusted with himself, Ian ripped the paper in half four times then tossed the scraps into the air. He watched as the pieces drifted down around him. Six wadded up sheets of paper laid in the wastebasket beside his desk. Seven times he'd tried to write the letter to Faith, and seven times he'd failed to come up with the right words. Not one of the theses he'd written in his school days had been as difficult as a simple note of explanation to a woman he never should have gone out of his way to meet.

But he had gone out of his way, and he'd also been as charming and sensitive as he could, in an attempt to gain more than just her interest in his body. Now that he so obviously had it, he realized that he'd made a huge mistake. If he lived a hundred years, he would never be able to court her in a respectable manner. He was simply too much in lust with her.

He wandered to the window and stared out into the gloomy December Sunday afternoon. Apparently, they were only destined to share that night, which had been nothing more than two people sitting next to each other, nothing more than a couple of strangers enjoying each other's company for no more than fifteen minutes out of an entire evening.

He released a long, sorrowful sigh. Destiny! If he were honest with himself, he would admit that it was foolhardiness. He'd met a woman he found attractive, and now he was afraid to pursue a relationship. He knew for sure now that his ending up in Dayton, Ohio, wasn't God's doing. It was Satan's. Predestination had nothing to do with his move like he'd thought a few days ago.

Before he'd come here, he'd thought his life was a mess. Now it was in even worse shape. What had possessed him to take such a drastic step two and a half years ago, anyway? Why hadn't he just stayed with his job instead of changing to something completely different? He would probably be remarried by now if he had, not celibate and so desperately aroused that he was ready to make love to the first woman who attracted his complete attention.

What was Faith doing at that moment? he wondered. Was she reliving the humiliating experience of being left on the dance floor and hating him for it? If she was, that was good. Then if he did see her again, he wouldn't be tempted to drag her to where they could have privacy and burn a kiss on her full lips that she would never forget.

He jerked away from the window at the thought and stalked back to his desk, dropping onto his chair. One more time, he thought as he picked up his pen. If he couldn't find the right words this time, he would give up forever and accept that he would just have to avoid her.

Dear Faith, he wrote. Scratch out dear. Didn't want her to think this was a love letter. Okay, just Faith. *Faith, I'm so sorry for my behavior last night that I can't seem to find the right words to apologize.* That was good. An apology right off the top. Made sense. Now to explain.

I don't know why I turn into a horny bastard ... He scribbled through the words until he

tore a hole in the paper. Where had those words come from? It was as though Satan himself was writing this letter.

"That's it!" he exclaimed angrily. "I quit. I'm sorry, Faith, but I'll just have to ignore you from now on. I only hope that someday you'll forgive me."

Faith rocked in her recliner as she stared at the fire she'd built after church. She never wanted to go there again. The preacher was so boring with his constant fire and brimstone message she'd wanted to scream that there was more to religion than that. Next week she would go to another church, a small one that had a younger minister who could preach to present-day problems.

Last night Craig had spoken a lot about reincarnation, but she'd never given it much thought. He'd told her that, from the moment he saw her aura, he knew that she was from one of his past lives. At the time, she'd thought it was a strange thing to say, but now she wasn't so sure.

She felt like she'd known Craig for a long time, even if she wasn't very comfortable with him. In fact, she actually felt like she'd met him somewhere before, but she had no idea where that could have been since he'd told her that he'd been raised in Vermont. That was one state to which she'd never been.

It was odd, the difference between how she felt about meeting Craig and meeting Ian. With Craig, it was a case of where have I seen you before? With Ian, it was as though something was drawing her to him.

She sighed and kicked back the recliner. It was painfully obvious that Ian didn't feel the same way now that she could look back on the night objectively. She'd heard him discussing religion with John, and she'd felt his desire for her when they danced. But what difference did that make? A lot of people could discuss religion intelligently and still be agnostic. John did it all the time.

Her cellphone played *Fur Elise*, interrupting her thoughts, and she answered it. "Hello?" No response. "Hello!" Again, there was no reply. "Is somebody there?" A click in her ear indicated that the person on the other line had hung up. Probably a wrong number.

She went to the refrigerator and took out a can of Diet Coke. On the way back to the living room, the phone rang again. Still there was no reply. Even though she was a bit irritated by the rude caller, she spoke politely. "Are you trying to reach someone in particular?" The phone went dead as the caller hung up. "Idiot!" she proclaimed, wishing she had a handset so she could slam it back onto the hook.

To avoid her thoughts, Faith opened her soda, set it on the table-lamp next to her, then picked up the mystery book laying there. Reading was much better than thinking, anyway. It could relax a crazed mind—like hers had been since she'd set eyes on Ian McCary last night—so meditation became more productive.

Ian paced his den. Should he try one more time or not? He'd told John that he would call Faith, but each time he'd tried, he got scared and hung up on her. Eight tries at a letter and two at a phone call. For some reason, he just couldn't contact her.

Picking up his phone, he dialed the number he'd written down about twenty minutes before. After three rings, Betty answered.

"Is Mr. Hanlon there?" Ian asked, without giving his name. The next to the last person he wanted to talk to right now was Betty Hanlon. He was afraid that the persuasive woman would convince him to go against his better judgment and visit Faith in person.

"Just a minute please," she replied. "John, it's for you."

This wasn't going to be easy, Ian decided. John Hanlon was going to be furious that he'd gone back on his word, but it wasn't like he hadn't tried. It wasn't his fault that his tongue got tied up in knots when he'd heard Faith's low, sultry voice.

"Hello?" John said into the phone.

Ian inhaled deeply then blew out his breath through his nose. "It's Ian McCary, Mr. Hanlon. I thought I should tell you that I couldn't do it, because I didn't want you to tell Faith that I'd gotten her number from you so I could call her."

"Why didn't you?" John asked irritably.

"Oh, I did. Twice. But I couldn't say anything when she answered."

"Why not?"

"You don't understand, Mr. Hanlon. This isn't easy for me. I've been a widower for two and a half years, but I haven't dated in all that time. Forgetting my manners like I did last night is very embarrassing. I don't know what to say."

"You're a widower?" John asked in amazement. "For some reason, I thought you were divorced."

"I can't explain it all to you, because it's still quite painful, but I can tell you that my late wife was the only woman I've ever been intimate with. That's why it's so difficult for me to be around Faith. Your niece is a beautiful, intelligent woman, and I find it hard to keep my distance when I'm near her. I think it's best if I don't see her anymore. Would you please tell her that I'm sorry about everything that happened last night? Tell her that I won't bother her again?"

"I'll explain everything, and I'm sure she'll understand."

Ian didn't *want* Faith to know everything, because he was terrified that she would try to see him, anyway, and he couldn't risk that. Staying away from her was the only way to stay celibate.

"No!" he exclaimed. But he forced himself to calm down when he heard the panic in his voice. "I mean, please. Promise me that you won't tell her. I don't want her to feel sorry for me. I know what it's like to have a woman treat me like I'm some poor soul who needs special attention to get me out of my slump. But that's not the way it is. I've been celibate because that's how I wanted it. Please promise that you won't tell her."

"All right," John agreed, "but ..."

"Please, Mr. Hanlon. Let's just leave it at that. Good-bye."

The phone clicked in his ear, and John hung up slowly. What an odd man Ian McCary was.

"Who was that, John?" Betty asked curiously.

John sank into his recliner. "McCary. He called to ask me to apologize to Faith for him—about what happened last night."

"I thought you said he was going to do it himself when he called earlier."

"Apparently, he tried but couldn't talk to her after she answered. He's a mighty strange

young man, Betty. He said he's too attracted to her to date her."

"That's practically what you said last night," she reminded him.

"I know, but when I hear it from him, it sounds even stranger." He paused to take a dip of his coffee. "Did you know he's a widower?"

"I had no idea," she replied.

"His wife's been dead for two and a half years, and he hasn't even dated in all that time."

"That's really sad. I feel sorry for him."

John turned his startled gaze to his wife. "Why? He's a good-looking man. Surely, he could have any woman he wanted. Why would he not even date in two and a half years?"

"Not everybody heals quickly, John," Betty told him. "He probably needs more time because he loved his wife so much."

"I suppose, but I still think it's odd."

Betty pushed herself out of her rocking chair and started toward the kitchen. "Well, I suppose I should put the roast on now. Since you unilaterally decided that we should play matchmaker for Craig and Faith, I have to make sure everything's perfect."

"I was right about this one, my queen," he replied with a chuckle. "McCary just told me that he won't be seeing Faith again."

"That, my dear," she said as she left the room, "remains to be seen."

At a quarter to six, Faith donned her coat, locked her door, and walked briskly through the drizzle to the main house. When Betty had called and told her that John had invited Craig for dinner, Faith had objected. For the final year of their three-year marriage, Roger had virtually run her life, and she didn't want anybody to treat her like that again.

But she'd accepted the invitation, anyway, because Betty and John had always been good to her. Besides, she truly enjoyed spending time with them. And Craig wasn't such a bad person. If she could get him to discuss reincarnation, a subject that interested her now that she'd considered the concept, she might even find the evening enjoyable.

Another reason she'd accepted Betty's invitation was that dinner with Craig would take her mind off Ian for a while. Even while reading her book, her mind wandered back to the ballroom where she'd knocked over the drinks, to the lobby where she'd lost her temper, to the couch where she'd fallen across his lap, and finally to the dance floor where he'd shown her his desire before abandoning her. At her relatives' house, she could forget for a while.

After knocking on the back door, Faith opened it and entered to find Betty at the kitchen sink washing lettuce for the salad.

"Hi, Aunt Betty," Faith greeted cheerfully. "Can I help you?"

"Craig should be here before long," Betty replied, "and your uncle needs to talk to you before he comes. He's waiting for you in the living room."

Faith studied her aunt as she hurried through the kitchen. Something was terribly wrong for Betty to speak in that tone of voice. Had Betty and John had an argument? Or had she herself done something to perpetrate Betty's mood?

Wandering into the living room, Faith saw her uncle reading the *Dayton Daily News* in his recliner. She smiled at his desire to read a "real" newspaper instead of reading it online. Taking a deep breath, she plopped down on the couch across from him. "Don't you usually

finish your Sunday paper by noon, Uncle John?"

"I slept until almost ten this morning, and your aunt and I went to brunch at the Raddison. When we got back, I got a phone call that took a while then I started my paper. I got another phone call later and after that the afternoon basically went to hell."

"What happened?" she asked in concern. "Did you and Aunt Betty have an argument?"

"I'd call it more of a difference of opinion accompanied by a couple of stubborn personalities." John folded his paper and laid it down beside his chair. "Did Betty tell you that I needed to talk to you privately?"

"That's why I'm here. What's up?"

"Those phone calls were from somebody you know."

Faith stiffened. Had Roger found her? No, that wasn't possible. Unless he got a *lot* of time off for good behavior, he was still in prison. Relaxing a bit, she asked, "Who was it?"

"McCary."

"Ian?" she asked in amazement. "What did he want?"

"We chatted for almost an hour, mostly about work. I'm only telling you this part because your aunt thinks you should know. The main purpose of his call was to ask for your phone number."

"Oh, yeah!" she exclaimed, remembering his fourth reason for setting up their meeting. "He told me was going to, but I didn't think he would after the way he left last night."

"The second call he made was to tell me that he couldn't talk to you on the phone. He said he'd called twice but hung up when he heard your voice, which is something else he didn't want you to know, but I'm mentioning it because of Betty. All he asked me to tell you was that he was sorry about last night, but he still can't see you again."

Faith felt like all the life had gone out of her. Those phone calls earlier hadn't been wrong numbers. They'd been Ian, and he hadn't been able to talk to her. She didn't know if she should laugh at his nervousness or cry because he was rejecting her.

"I wanted to leave it at that, but Betty made me promise to tell you everything. She said that you have a right to an explanation, that you would understand because you're a psychiatrist. But I'll be damned if *I* understand."

Gazing at him curiously, she asked, "What else is there?"

"Did he happen to mention to you that he's a widower?"

"A widower?" she repeated in shock. "When did his wife die? Does he have children? Why would he be so secretive about something like that if he was so interested in meeting me?"

John sighed and scratched his bald head. "Damned if I know why, and I don't know if he has any kids. But his wife's been gone for two and a half years, which is how long it's been since he's been to bed with a woman. Hell, he hasn't even dated during that time."

Faith's eyes widened in shock. This was the most incredible news she'd ever heard. A man as attractive, as masculine, as Ian McCary hadn't even dated in two and a half years?

"That's not all," John said. "The man was never intimate with anybody but his wife. Apparently, he hadn't even sown his wild oats before his wedding. Hell, as devout as he is, he was probably a virgin on his wedding night."

"Are you sure about all of this?" she asked.

"Everything except the virgin part he told me himself. He said it's the reason that he can't be around you, because it's too hard for him to keep his distance."

Shaking her head in disbelief, she mumbled, "This is incredible."

"It's also true."

"I'll have to find out where he lives and go talk to him. I need to explain that I don't want a serious relationship right now. Maybe he'd like to just be friends."

"Don't you dare, duchess," John demanded. "I promised him I wouldn't tell you anything except that he was sorry about last night and he couldn't see you again. Everything else he made me swear to keep secret. If you go barging over there with questions and pity, determined to make his life right, he'll know that I told you."

"Oh, all right," she agreed. "I think I understand what he's going through. I'm not too fond of revealing all my deep, dark secrets to casual dates, either. But if I ever think of a way to approach him without his realizing what I'm doing, I'll find out where he lives."

"I know from experience that I can't stop you," John said with a grin, "but be gentle on the lad, duchess. McCary's a widower just now getting back into circulation."

"McCary's a widower?" Craig asked from the doorway.

Faith and John shot their startled gazes to the man. How had both of them missed the doorbell ringing? Faith wondered. Had their conversation been that engrossing?

The first to recover, John spoke sternly. "Yes, he is. And we would appreciate it if that information stayed right in this house. It's not something that he wants spread around yet."

"Fine by me," Craig said as he joined Faith and laid his arm around her on the back of the couch. "I'd rather not talk about McCary, anyway. He seems to be my only rival for Faith's attentions."

"Dinner's ready!" Betty called from the hallway. "I hope everybody's hungry."

"I know I am!" Craig called back. Rising, he grasped Faith's hand and pulled her up while John pushed himself out of his chair.

During dinner, Faith questioned Craig extensively on his knowledge of reincarnation. He explained about karma and how free will could also play a part in reincarnation, in that one could choose or outline life circumstances but that the outline could also change once one took the human form. By the end of the main course, he was starting into predestination's role in reincarnation.

At this point Faith nearly became incensed. She also believed in free will and predestination, which she felt were vital aspects of spiritual life. But she certainly didn't feel that reincarnation was connected to either.

But she said nothing. She was forming an idea that she needed to discuss with John after Craig went home. Maybe she could make a deal with her uncle about a one-time special, which she would research and help put on the air. Reincarnation was a fascinating subject, whether it was real or not. If she could do a good enough special on it, if she could get enough feed-back from the public on how well it was received, maybe she could take John up on his offer to be Ohio's Oprah Winfrey. After all, Phil Donahue had started in the Dayton area. Why not her?

"Let me help you clear the dishes," Craig offered as Betty got up from the table and picked up two plates.

"Thank you, Craig," she replied. "I'd appreciate that."

"I'll help, too, Aunt Betty," Faith said.

"Actually," John inserted, "I think now would be a good time for me to talk to you about the job you're starting tomorrow. Why don't we go back to the living room?"

"We'll bring the coffee in there when we're done," Betty offered.

"All right."

In the living room, the pair took the seats they'd occupied before dinner, then John said, "I know what you're thinking, duchess, and it's a terrific idea. A documentary on a subject as controversial as reincarnation might just help our ratings. Do you want to take over the research of it?"

"Do I!" she exclaimed. "I'm sure I could get a ton of information."

"Then it's yours. Now all I have to do is convince you to host it."

"I'd like that, but you'll have to back me in the nerves department. Mine might fall apart when I get in front of a camera."

"I'm not a bit worried about that, duchess," John said with a laugh. "You've always been a big talker. That's not about to change when you're on the air. You spend tonight figuring out how long this might take you, and tomorrow we'll set up a tentative time in our schedule."

"All right!" she shouted. "I'll go back to my cottage as soon as I finish my coffee and get to work on it."

SIX

Faith was getting nervous. Something was up. She could *feel* it. For three days, she'd hardly been able to work efficiently on her research, because Craig dropped by her desk to see if she needed any help several times a day. He took her to lunch; he took her to dinner. He monopolized her time so effectively that she didn't even have time to visit with John and Betty.

Even though she'd tried to get out of going to dinner with Craig, she hadn't been firm. Apparently, Roger had destroyed her ability to stand her ground against a man, just as he'd destroyed her confidence in her abilities as a psychiatrist. Someday, she would get over all the damage Roger had done. She was determined to, and she would do it.

Thursday Craig hadn't shown up at all during the day. She was glad, but she was also curious when he'd been so attentive before that. Because she was so tired, she'd gone home from work, directly to a hot bubble bath. After that, she'd sat down to read and relax.

Yesterday Craig was still missing. Around noon, John had stopped at her desk and asked her to join him for lunch. It was then that she learned Craig had been called away on a family emergency. That was fine, but her instincts told her something else was up. If he'd truly been going away on a family emergency, he would have had no reason *not* to tell her that he was leaving town.

Now that it was Saturday, she was ready for a weekend of relaxation. She slept in late and spent a good deal of time giving herself a manicure, pedicure, and facial. Then she'd taken a shower that lasted until the hot water turned lukewarm.

Dressed in her favorite nightshirt, she turned on her streaming to catch her favorite holiday movie and lay down on the couch to watch it. About halfway through the phone rang. She pushed the stop button so she wouldn't miss anything while she was talking.

"Hello?" she asked.

"It's Aunt Betty, dear. Would you like to come up for the evening since Craig's out of town?"

"No thanks," she replied. "I'm all set for bed and watching a movie. I've been pampering myself all day, and I'd just like to keep doing it. Every woman needs that once in a while, you know."

"I certainly do," Betty said. "It feels heavenly at times, doesn't it? How about tomorrow night instead?"

"Only if you agree to let me cook for you this time."

"I never complain when somebody else wants to cook," Betty agreed.

"Great. I'll start hauling stuff I need up to the house about four. It won't take that long to cook it, but I know you don't have some of the utensils I'll need. See you tomorrow."

Betty hung up at the same time Faith did and turned around. Behind her, Ian frowned, saying, "She isn't coming, is she."

"She's busy pampering herself," Betty replied, shaking her head. "I'm sorry I got your hopes up like I did."

"That's all right. I wasn't sure this was a good idea, anyway."

"You like my niece, don't you?"

"Of course!" he exclaimed. "She's a beautiful, intelligent woman."

"Then take a chance. From what John told me, you haven't done that in two and a half years. It's time you get back into circulation."

Ian wandered to the window seat in the bay window and stared at the small house in the distance. A light flickered in the window. Light colored smoke spiraled from the chimney against the dark sky. He sighed, wishing he had the courage to walk down there and say hello.

"I would have tried harder to get her to come up here, but she would have gotten suspicious," Betty explained. "She's been seeing so much of Craig since the dance that I'm not sure how close they are now."

"That's all right. It was sweet of you to try and fix me up with her, but I'm not sure I'm ready for circulation yet."

"How old are you, Ian?"

He shot his startled gaze to her face. "Thirty-seven. Why?"

"You're much too young to put an end to intimate relations. You can't spend the rest of your life grieving for your wife."

"Oh, I don't," he said quickly. "I just haven't found a woman that I was interested in dating until now. Believe it or not, it's been seventeen years since I've had a first date. I'm more than a little nervous about it."

"That's why I suggested having it in our company. A semi-blind date—with somebody there to pick you up in case you fall on your face." Betty grinned and sat down next to him. "But I highly doubt you'll do that. Besides, with Craig out of town, he won't keep interrupting like he did at the dance. I'll get you and Faith together for an evening if it's the last thing I do. And that evening's going to be tomorrow night for dinner, starting about four-thirty. You can make it, can't you?"

Ian sighed at length, still very concerned about deceiving Faith the way they were. But he did want to see her. "I was going to do something else, but I'll change my plans. I'd really like to see her again—even if it turns out that we have absolutely nothing in common."

On the way home from church, Faith stopped at the grocery store to pick up supplies she needed for the stir-fried meal she'd planned.

At the house, she changed from her good clothes into her dark blue velour robe. Then she padded sock-footed to the kitchen. After mixing the marinate sauce, she cut three pounds of boneless breast of chicken into bite-sized pieces, put it in the bowl in which she'd made the marinade, then covered it and set it in the refrigerator. That was all she needed to do before she started taking her cooking supplies to Betty's house.

She glanced at the clock on the microwave. Two-thirty. An hour and a half before she had to leave. She had plenty of time to take a shower. It had been so hot in that little church she'd found that she really felt like she needed one.

As the warm water sprayed over her, she considered her decision. It was a small Presbyterian church, but it was very friendly. Many people had come up to her and welcomed her to their midst. Faith liked that in a church—the feeling of comfort, of belonging. That’s what made a church right, and that was the church she planned to join.

Her decision made, she rinsed the shampoo from her hair and dried off. She glanced at the clock beside her bed. Three o’clock *already*? Now she had to dry her hair, which meant that she would have to style it, too.

Fifteen minutes later her hair was completely dry, and twenty minutes after that it was full of bouncy curls. She studied herself in the mirror. It looked nice, but by the time she made three trips to the car to drive her belongings up to the main house then three trips to bring the stuff in the Betty and John’s house, the drizzle would leave it curled only at the ends. Oh, well, she was just visiting her relatives.

After dressing in a pair of ragged, torn blue jeans, an old sweatshirt, and running shoes, she set everything she needed on the kitchen counter. She slipped into her coat, picked up her wok and rice cooker then headed out the door.

“Where do you keep your knife sharpener?” she asked when she was ready to cook.

John got her the sharpener while she took a paring knife from the drawer where Betty kept them. While she set about sharpening the knife she’d chosen, John glanced at the clock. “Halftime’s probably about done now. I’ll leave you to your preparations.”

“No problem, Uncle John. You and Aunt Betty just relax and let me handle things here in the kitchen.”

Faith quickly sharpened the knife then set it aside and opened the carrots. Using a potato peeler, she shaved the skins into the sink with the garbage disposal.

Why had Craig left like that? she wondered. The man had seemed desperate for her attention, yet he’d taken off without a word of explanation. Only one theory seemed possible. He was plotting something that he didn’t want her to know, and she had a feeling that she knew what it was.

Several times during their few days together, she’d mentioned that she was disappointed because Ian had never called to apologize for his actions the night of the dance. Yes, it did bother her, she’d told Craig, because Ian had seemed to like her quite a bit. Yes, she did like Ian a lot, as well. No, she didn’t dislike Craig.

Wait a second. *She* hadn’t been the one to bring up the subject of Ian. Craig had. At least twice a day. Could Ian be the reason that ...

Footsteps entering the room brought her attention from her thoughts, and she asked, “Would you please hand me the green onions in that bag?” Picking up the knife, she cut the ends off a carrot while absently listening to the rustling of the bag. She picked up another carrot to do the same when the plastic bag of green onions dropped onto the counter beside her.

“There you are,” a man replied.

Faith gasped in shock. The knife in her hand moved closer to her body. Instead of cutting the end on the carrot, she slid the tip of the blade across the side of her hand just under her thumb. Instantly blood started flowing; the cut stung.

“Damn!” she exclaimed, dropping the knife into the sink.

“Oh, my God!” Ian shouted as he turned on the cold water faucet. Grabbing her wrist, he thrust her hand under the hard stream at the same time he ripped a paper towel off the holder beside the sink. “Betty! Get a Band-Aid! I’m sorry, Faith. I thought you knew I was

coming. Betty said that she'd tell you at the last minute."

Faith was so embarrassed that she wanted to crawl into the disposal and turn it on. Why was it that every time she was around Ian she did something stupid and klutzy? And the way she looked! She hadn't dressed to impress a man. Her hair was basically straight now, and she was wearing her most comfortable old clothes. Why hadn't Betty told her that he was coming?

He took her hand out of the water and dried it off with the paper towel. But the bleeding hadn't slowed. "That looks pretty deep, Faith. Maybe I should take you to emergency for stitches."

"I don't need stitches," she declared. "Just let me apply some pressure to it, and the bleeding will stop."

"Come over here," he said, helping her to the table and pulling out a chair for her. As she dropped onto it, he knelt before her, studying her hand carefully.

"What happened?" Betty asked as she hurried into the kitchen with a box of Band-Aids.

"She cut herself," Ian said. "It looks pretty bad, too. I think she should get stitches."

"I don't need stitches," Faith insisted. "Just get me an old towel. I can stop this and wrap it in gauze or something. Then I'll finish making dinner." She turned her gaze to the man kneeling beside her. "If Ian will stop fussing over me, that is."

"This wouldn't have happened if it hadn't been for me," he said. "I seem to have a detrimental effect on your gracefulness."

John laughed as he joined the others. "My darling duchess has *never* had any gracefulness, Ian. You aren't making things any worse for her. You should have seen her the time ..."

Faith glared at her uncle and cleared her throat. Now was no time to tell Ian family stories, and she refused to let John continue.

"Uh, never mind," John said as he knelt on the floor beside Ian. "Let me see it."

"Would you guys stop fussing over me?" she asked irritably. "Just leave me alone to finish dinner."

"Nope," John declared. "You sit here with a cold compress on that. Betty can do what you tell her."

"Forget it. I want to do this so Aunt Betty can rest for a change."

"Then I'll take over knife duty," Ian insisted. "You take care of that cut, then you can finish the rest. How's that sound?"

"Better," she agreed.

While Faith supervised, Ian cut the carrots and onions into bite-sized pieces. As he worked, Betty put some Bacitracin on Faith's cut then laid two gauze pads over it. To keep the pads in place, she wrapped three long strips of adhesive tape around Faith's hand. Finished, she gathered up her first aid supplies and left Faith and Ian alone.

As soon as Betty was gone, Faith plugged in the electric wok and poured some sesame oil in it to heat. When she turned to get the strainer from a cupboard, she bumped into Ian.

He grabbed her shoulders and steadied her as he stared into her eyes. For several seconds they just stood there, and Faith was sure he wanted to kiss her. Then he caressed her upper arms and spoke in a near-whisper that carried a seductive tone Faith doubted he was aware of. "I really am sorry about your hand, Faith."

In an instant, her mood changed. She wanted to break away, to accuse him of having used trickery to see her again. But in her heart, she knew that her aunt and uncle were the

culprits who had concocted this meeting. Besides, she *liked* having him touch her like this. She felt warm and content and not at all dominated.

Taking a deep breath, mainly to see if her lungs were still working, she returned his words in a deliberately soft, smoky voice. "It's all right, Ian. Really. I'm fine."

"You didn't know I was coming, did you."

She shook her head, unable to respond because of the lump blocking her vocal cords. His tender caress felt so good, almost as good as dancing with him had.

Ian smiled, moved his hands to her neck, and slid his fingers into her hair. "I hope you don't think that I set this up tonight. I knew you would be here, but this whole thing was Betty's idea."

It felt good to have a man treat her with tenderness instead of brutality. It reminded her that she was truly a desirable woman. "I'm not surprised." Her voice squeaked, and her face heated as she cleared her throat. "Aunt Betty and Uncle John both like to play matchmaker. I hope you won't feel obligated to stay—if you should want to leave early."

"I'm not going anywhere. Now I want to do one more thing before I help you finish dinner."

He hesitated, and they stared at each other in silence for several seconds. Excitement flooded through her. Was he going to kiss her. Oh, how she hoped so! This was something she'd been looking forward to ever since ...

"I want to apologize for leaving you like I did the other night. The only reason I did it was because I was too ... uh ... physically excited to be around you any longer." He paused, as though unsure he should continue. Then he said, "That's not quite true. There was another reason I left—along with that one. You see, I couldn't bear seeing you with Craig."

Faith gazed into his blue eyes, searching for an emotion, but she saw only his sincerity. Smiling, she said, "I lived through it. Didn't take a header over any more people. Didn't take a nose-dive in the lobby." She straightened her shoulders and winked up at him. "I didn't even knock over any more drinks."

Slowly withdrawing his hands, he asked, "Then you aren't mad at me?"

"Never was," she assured him with a merry smile. "We'd better finish dinner before the oil burns. If I promise not to play with anymore sharp implements, will you set the table?"

Ian chuckled. "Okay, as long as you promise."

While Ian searched the cabinets and drawers for the place settings he needed, Faith watched him. He was wearing a blue turtleneck sweater that hugged his decidedly masculine body, and he was built better than any other man she knew. His dark blue jeans clung to his legs to show off his hard, muscular thighs—as well as hint at what he had hidden under the fly that might please a woman.

To her surprise, Faith found the fact that he left a little to her imagination exciting. If she made it through this meal without jumping into his lap to see if she could find out how much room he had to spare, she should be awarded a medal of fortitude.

But dinner actually went quite well, as did the dessert. When the dishes were washing in the dishwasher and the mess was cleaned up, Betty handed Faith and Ian their jackets.

"Go spend some time alone now," she said. "You don't need to entertain us old fogies."

Faith giggled. "I'd hardly call you and Uncle John old fogies."

"Doesn't matter. You two go now. We want to watch some TV."

"All right," Faith returned as Ian helped her into her parka. "We're leaving." As she zipped her coat, she glanced over her shoulder at Ian. "Ever get the feeling that you're not

wanted?”

He chuckled. “There are times when I get that impression.” Laying his hand on the small of Faith’s back, he steered her toward the back door. “Thank you for inviting me tonight, Betty. I really appreciate it.”

“You two just have a good time,” Betty said with a smile. “See you for dinner tomorrow, Faith?”

“All right,” Faith returned. “Good night.”

As they drove their separate cars back to her cottage, Faith realized she was glad that John and Betty had set up this evening, because she’d desperately wanted to see Ian again. She just hadn’t realized how badly until he was in her presence. And he was such a charming, well-read man. He seemed to know at least a little bit about everything.

At her place, they hung up their coats on her coat rack by the door, she said, “I hope you don’t mind. There’s a psychological thriller streaming that I was going to watch tonight.”

As they wandered into the living room, he gazed down at her with a gleam in his eyes and replied in a deep, sexy voice. “Whatever turns you on, sweetheart.”

Faith laughed and picked up the remote control from the table by her chair. Tonight, she was going to sit on the couch with her company. No sitting separately when she was in the presence of a man like Ian. Plopping down on the sofa, she kicked off her shoes and pushed them under the coffee table with her feet then curled her legs up on the couch next to her.

Beside her, Ian untied his running shoes and set them beside hers under the table.

“Shoot!” she exclaimed. “Where are my manners? Can I get you a diet cola or a glass of ice water? I’m afraid that’s all I have on hand. I wasn’t expecting company.”

“Not now, thanks,” he replied as he laid his arm across the back of the sofa behind her. Reaching down, he grasped her left wrist, lifted her hand from her lap, and studied the bandage, where there were dried and wet patches of blood.

“Is that cut still bleeding?” he asked in concern.

Her heart raced; her lungs cried out for more air. And all he was doing was *touching* her. What would she ever do if he tried to kiss her? Probably pass out in his arms! Forcing herself to respond, she said, “Maybe a little.”

“Do you have a first aid kit? I’ll change the bandage for you and check to see how it’s doing.”

“I’m the family klutz, remember?” she replied jovially. “Of course, I have a first aid kit. It’s under the bathroom sink.”

“You made dinner tonight,” he declared as he rose. “You took care of my stomach, so let me take care of your hand. I’ll be right back.”

Faith watched with interest as he strode toward the bathroom. What a nice, firm set of buns he had! What she wouldn’t give to play with them for a while. But obviously the chances of that happening tonight were very slim.

In a couple of minutes, he returned with the kit and sat down as he laid it on the coffee table. Without a word, he took her hand in his, carefully removed the adhesive tape from her hand, and pulled the gauze pads from the wound, which was still seeping blood. Instead of wiping off the little bit of blood on her hand, he lifted it toward his head. His lips caressed her injury.

Faith released a small gasp of surprise at how sensuous his action was. The excitement

that raced through her was almost more than she could bear. But she stifled the urge to throw her arm around his neck and kiss him right, because he moved his attentive lips to the palm of her hand, to the underside of her wrist. Her eyes slid shut, and she moaned softly at the sensation of desire that enveloped her.

But instead of him kissing her the way she wanted, Ian lowered her hand to his lap and opened the first aid kit. "I'd better get that covered again. I wouldn't want you to get blood all over this nice couch."

After he finished his task and put the first aid kit away, he sank down beside Faith and laid his arm on the back of the couch again. He wasn't sure what he watched on the television that night. He was too involved in his thoughts of Faith and how nice it would be to take her to bed. But he wouldn't because this was technically their first date. He didn't want to spoil their potential relationship by pushing her too fast.

When she leaned back against him at the beginning of the movie, he instinctively wrapped his arms around her. Without thinking, he kissed her coconut-scented hair then tried to turn his attention to the television. But all he could think of was how nice it was to hold her. How long had it been since he and Mary had done this? Had they *ever* done it? He couldn't remember it if they had. Mary had been a very restrained woman; she hadn't show affection like Faith did.

Near the end of the movie, when the hero was rushing to save the heroine from the clutches of a stalker, he heard Faith sniffing. He smiled. Mary had *never* cried at a movie, not even a heavy romance like *Love Story*. Reaching into his back pocket, he withdrew his handkerchief.

"Thanks," she mumbled as she accepted it from him. Wiping the tears from her eyes, she used the other end of the handkerchief to blow her nose while he hugged her. She laid her free hand over his and squeezed it. "I'm a softy, I know, but I can't help it."

"I think it's wonderful," he whispered into her hair. "It shows how sensitive you are."

The movie ended, and he reluctantly pushed her away. "This has been the best evening I've had in a long time, Faith, but I have to go home. It's late."

After he put on his shoes, Faith walked him to the door and said with a smile, "I'll wash your handkerchief and give it back the next time Aunt Betty and Uncle John set us up for an evening together."

"I have a better idea." Gazing down at her, he nervously fumbled with his parka zipper. "Why don't we bypass the middlemen and set up an evening together ourselves?"

"I'd like that. How about dinner at The Savory? I have a coupon for two free dinners."

"You haven't shared that with Craig yet?" he asked in surprise.

"I've been saving it. Are you interested?"

"Sure! Tuesday night?"

"Tuesday's fine."

Unable to resist, he slid his hands into her hair and cupped her ears. This was it. He was going to kiss her no matter what she said. She'd agreed to a date, and that meant she was interested in him.

When his face closed in on hers, she gasped at the gentle peck he planted on her lips. Then he pulled back and stared down at her in amazement. That little kiss had unleashed a flood of emotions in him that he couldn't resist. He wrapped his arms around her, pulled her close, and covered her mouth with his.

The burning desire was instantaneous. The heat of her response to his lips grinding hungrily against hers proved it. She melted against him as he slipped his tongue between her lips. It collided with hers, dueling frantically, demandingly, beseechingly all at once. The fire in his loins was incredible, more than he'd ever imagined possible.

His hands moved lower, to her firm buttocks, pressing her against his pelvis so she could feel his swollen desire for her. He wanted her—now! Not even two seconds from now when they got to her bedroom. But he had to remain steadfast in his decision to wait.

Jerking free of the embrace, he released her as abruptly as he'd taken her into his arms. He swallowed hard to still his rampant excitement then said, "Thank you, Faith. I had a terrific time tonight. I'll call you tomorrow, all right?"

"Fine," she said as he raced out the door.

SEVEN

Faith stared at the copy of the newspaper article in her hand. This couldn't be happening. She'd spent hours chatting with Ian on the phone both Monday and Wednesday nights, and they'd talked almost all through dinner on Tuesday. But he'd never mentioned this. Why not? Was he hiding something? Or was this just something too painful for him to discuss?

Granted, he'd told her over dinner that very few people in the area were aware that he was a widower, but he'd wanted to tell her because he felt she deserved to know. Why hadn't he told her *how* his wife had died at such an early age? And why hadn't he mentioned that his three sons had died at the same time?

Pain ripped through her heart. Why had he chosen not to confide in her? Didn't he realize that she would understand? Tears brimmed in her eyes as she gazed unfalteringly at the two-paragraph article. The children had been thirteen, nine, and five. Why hadn't he told her about them? Justin, Jason, and Kyle. They must have been beautiful children judging from the looks of their father. How could all of them have been taken away from Ian at once? It was so unfair.

A tear slid down her cheek as she tore her gaze from the article and looked up at Craig and asked, "How did you find this?"

"I went to Oregon," he declared. "I knew he was hiding something, and I wanted to find out what it was."

"You did this on *purpose*?" she asked in horror. "How could you invade his privacy like that?"

"I thought you needed to know what kind of man he is," Craig said as he dropped onto the sofa. "I talked to a lot of people in that town, and a few of them speculated that there was more behind those deaths than the paper mentioned."

Faith gasped. She didn't like what he was insinuating, but he hadn't actually said the words, either. She needed to be very careful not to make the accusation herself, so she asked, "Just what does *that* mean?"

"McCary is the only one in the family who didn't get die. It sounded suspicious to everybody who mentioned it to me. Of course, most people took the article for what it was—a shame that his family had been wiped out. But some people think McCary made *sure* that his family no longer existed."

"You can't seriously think that Ian would murder his own children—or even his wife."

"I certainly can."

"Well, I don't believe it," Faith declared as she shot to her feet. "And I won't unless *he* tells me it's true."

"Surely, you don't think he would *admit* to it."

"I think he'll tell me the truth." She strode to the coat rack and yanked his overcoat from it. Stalking back to him, she threw it at him. "Now get out of my house. I want nothing

more to do with you.”

“But, Faith,” he said, rising, “I only did it so you wouldn’t be fooled by him. You and I are soul mates. I can feel it. Why won’t you accept the fact that we belong together?”

“Because I don’t believe in reincarnation. You and your auras and karmas! You just use them to suit your own purposes. What anybody else feels about them means nothing to you. Well, I feel like I’ve known you for a long time, too, but that doesn’t preclude me from having what you call bad vibes.” She pointed at her front door. “Now get out. I can’t stand the sight of you right now.”

“You’re going to be sorry, Faith,” he warned as he stalked to the door. “When you realize that McCary’s not the man you thought, you’ll come running back to me.”

And he strode out the door, slamming it behind him.

Faith picked up her book and threw it as hard as she could at the closed door. If he thought that she would come crawling back to him if she learned some deep, dark secret about Ian that she didn’t like, he needed to think again, because it wouldn’t happen. She’d rather rot away the rest of her life alone than turn to him as a mate.

Wandering to the kitchen, she picked up the phone and dialed Ian’s number. She needed to talk to him about the article. If she didn’t, she would wonder forever if he had something to hide.

“Hello?” Ian answered with a note of curiosity in his voice.

“Ian, it’s Faith,” she replied, struggling to keep her voice calm. “I was wondering if you’re busy.”

“Not at all. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“No!” she replied. “Let me come to you. I need the drive time to think.”

Ian didn’t really want her in his apartment, but he didn’t want her to suspect that he didn’t. The best thing to do was let her come. “All right. Do you remember how to get here?”

“I still have the directions I used Tuesday night. If you haven’t cleaned your apartment since then, I’d suggest you do it now if you don’t want me to see it dirty. I won’t be able to talk to you in the hall like I did for those few minutes Tuesday.”

“It’ll be clean enough for you.”

Ian stared at the portrait of three boys on his wall as he disconnected the call. What was he going to do? Should he take it down, or should he leave it and explain everything to Faith?

Sighing, he dropped onto the sofa. If he took that portrait down, he would just have to hide every other photograph of his sons that he had in his apartment. There was obviously no way around it anymore. He had to tell Faith everything he could about his past if he wanted to keep her friendship. And he definitely had to explain everything about his family’s deaths. He could only pray that she would understand why he’d been so secretive and forgive him for deceiving her like he had.

To calm his nerves, he went into the bathroom and took a shower. Thank God, he’d stored away all of Mary’s pictures or he would have to hide them. He didn’t want Faith to know what his late wife looked like yet. Not that she was unattractive, but the opposite. Mary had been beautiful, and he didn’t want Faith to think that was what he valued in her. He wanted her to believe the truth—that he liked her for her intellect and humor.

Besides, Mary was different from Faith. All he needed to do was explain that if Faith ever questioned his devotion. And even after this short time, he was devoted to Faith, but he didn't want her to get scared off, either. He had to keep that kind of emotion to himself if he wanted a long-term relationship with her. If he wanted to marry her so he could consummate the desire that they each exhibited whenever they were together, he had to move cautiously.

He'd just dried his hair and dressed when there was a knock on his door. He stared at it anxiously. This was it. He would tell her everything and hope that she forgave him.

His hand shook as he opened the door, but his anxiety disappeared instantly when he saw the tears in her eyes. Grabbing her hand, he pulled her into his arms and shut the door with his foot.

She returned his embrace. Ian *needed* to prove that he was no murderer. He wanted to make her feel so good in his arms that she would never doubt his morality. Tenderly, reassuringly, he kissed her hair. Maybe he could convince her that he could never do what someone had so obviously accused him of if he acted this way toward a woman he scarcely knew.

"It's all right, Faith," he said quietly as he escorted her to his couch and helped her out of her parka. "Here. Sit down. Tell me what's bothering you. Maybe I can help."

She held up the article while he tossed her coat onto a chair and sat down beside her. "This." Her voice cracked, and she cleared her throat. But when she continued, the pain in her heart was obvious in her voice. "Why didn't you tell me everything?"

Ian stared at the article that he himself had written. It was short, concise and exactly what he'd wanted printed. No fuss, no accusations, no speculation. He'd known what the people of the town were thinking; it had been very obvious by the looks on their faces. And that was why he'd decided to change jobs. He couldn't bear all the stares, whether they were of pity or speculation.

After a heavy sigh, he asked, "Where did you get that?"

"Does it really matter?" she returned.

Unable to look at her, he rested his elbows on his knees and buried his head in his hands. "You don't know what I've gone through because of what happened, Faith. You couldn't begin to understand—even as a psychiatrist."

Faith's heart went out to him. This man was suffering more than she'd expected he would. Was it because he'd deceived her and been caught? Or was he upset because he hadn't dealt with the grief yet? Knowing that he must talk about it, she voiced her suggestion in a soft, caring tone. "Then try talking to me as a friend."

"I went to Hades and back to get that article published just the way I'd written it. Between my father and me, we didn't miss a single person at the newspaper or the coroner's office or the police department that we didn't have to plea with for hours just for the cooperation we got."

"What are you saying?" she asked, stunned by his response.

But he continued as though she hadn't spoken. "I was supposed to come home for dinner that night, but I had an emergency at work that needed my attention. When I got home about nine, it was too late. There was nothing I could do—and I tried so *hard*. I started with Kyle because he was the youngest. Then Jason, Justin, and Mary. Nobody responded." He turned his sad blue eyes to Faith and gazed at her. "Please believe me, Faith.

It looked like they were sleeping in the car when I got home.”

“I believe you,” she said, laying her comforting hand on his thigh.

He laid his hand over hers. “Thank you. But there’s more. It wasn’t food poisoning that killed them. Mary was severely manic-depressive, but she’d only been on thorazine for a couple of months. According to the pharmacist, she’d just refilled her prescription for Ambien that afternoon; and according to the coroner, she’d probably used it all to kill herself and the kids—by putting it in their dinner, or maybe their milk. Everybody had it in their system, but the boys had much more than any doctor would prescribe to a child. Mary dragged Justin and Jason to the garage, probably after they’d fallen asleep. She laid them by the car exhaust and turned on the car with the garage door closed. She probably carried Kyle to the garage because he was only five and not too heavy for her. She sat in the back seat with him on her lap. I’ll never understand why anybody thought I did such a thing to my family.”

“Oh, Ian,” she said. “I’m so sorry. But you have to remember that this wasn’t your fault. She was a sick woman. As for people thinking you would do it, they probably needed somebody other than the victim to blame.”

“Which is exactly why I should have paid more attention to her,” he declared. “But I was too busy with my job. I *thought* that it was all that mattered to me.”

“You thought?”

“Yes. I know now that it wasn’t because it was too easy to leave it. It would have been hard if I’d been committed to it like I should have been to my marriage and family. Looking back on it, I realize that I wasn’t truly committed to anything at the time. Now I know that I could stand by a woman long before I could stand by my job. A job is something you can change with a little education or perseverance, but you can’t do that with a person. The next time I commit to a relationship, *nothing* will take time away from it.”

“Then you learned from a bad experience. Now would you like to explain why you covered up what happened by claiming food poisoning?”

“I did it for Mary. We’d covered up her illness, too, and I didn’t want her to lose that in death. I didn’t want anything hanging over the memory others had of her.” He paused to study her for a moment. Then, laying his hand on the side of her head, he drew her closer, laid her head on his shoulder, and stroked her temple with his thumb. “Unfortunately, my desperation to keep her secret backfired. Rumors started that claimed *I* had done the dirty deed. Thank goodness, police don’t prosecute a person on rumors. I could have gone to prison for life—or even been executed.” He paused again then asked, “Faith, would you mind looking at some pictures with me? I want to show you my sons.”

“I’d love to,” she agreed softly.

For over two hours, they poured over his photograph albums. He had beautiful children, all tow-heads with cherubic faces, although Faith was curious why none of the pictures showed his wife. But she said nothing. She knew there had to be a reason, and it was something very important to him if he’d left the spaces where he’d removed her pictures.

The closeness they shared over the snapshots, the memories of his sons that he shared with her, increased her respect for him. Now she knew that he was more than just a caring person. He was a man who could show his feelings, as his sniffles and occasional tears attested to. And nothing impressed her more than a man who could demonstrate his sensitivity.

When he closed the last book over her lap then laid it on his coffee table, he turned on the couch to face her.

"I can't tell you how much it meant to me that you came over tonight. I've wanted to tell you about my sons since the first night we were together, but I didn't know how. I'm beginning to think that you getting your hands on that article was the best thing that ever happened to me."

"I'm glad you felt you could confide in me, Ian," she said.

He caressed her head, sliding his fingers into her hair. "I wish I could tell the person who handed you that article how much I appreciate it."

Faith leaned against his hand and smiled as she gently grasped his wrist. "I'm still not going to tell you who it was."

"I don't care anymore." He shifted closer to her, until his shoulder touched hers. "You're here. You listened to a man who couldn't keep the tears from his eyes. You showed me that you honestly care."

"I do, Ian," she breathed. Her senses tingled with excitement at the close proximity. She wanted him to embrace her completely, desperately, passionately. If only he would abandon his reserve, ...

"Faith," he whispered, "I feel for you like I've never felt for another woman. I can't be in the same room with you without getting excited. I can't explain it. It's like I've never known what making love is like."

"I know what you mean, Ian. I feel the same way."

"But I can't do it, Faith. It's too soon in our relationship. And then there's Mary. She never wanted to do it. I tried everything I read about to get her interested, but she still put me off. The only time she was ever interested was when she wanted another child. Even then we'd only do it when the time was perfect. Then I'd try even harder because I didn't have to coax her into it. If it didn't take, it was wait another month and try again. But I was always faithful to her. That's probably why it's been so easy for me to be celibate all these years. I never had anything really good in bed to miss."

"That's a shame," she said, not knowing what else to say.

He smiled and gave her a peck on the lips. "No, sweetheart, it's good. It means that when I do decide the time's right, it will also be for the right reasons. Although, I've got to admit that you're making it very hard for me to *stay* celibate. Most of the time, I just want to lay you down very gently." With his arm behind her back, he laid her down on his sofa so her head rested on a matching round pillow. "Just like that. And drape your legs over my lap." He cradled her knees under his arm and did as he explained until her upper thighs rested against his groin. "Then I want to bend over and kiss you."

Caught up in his fantasy, Faith slid her arms around his neck as he lowered his body over hers. "Like this?"

Her lips captured his, and she dove her tongue into his mouth to reunite with his. He inhaled deeply, sliding his free hand under her waist. She felt his arousal grow under her leg as he pushed her tongue from his mouth with his and probed deep in her mouth.

His hand slid up her side, and Faith moaned into his mouth as it cupped her covered breast. Instantly the nipple grew excited; instantly her body responded. His fingers tenderly pinched the hard nub of her breast, tweaking it, toying with it. She wanted more! She wanted to feel him in her body, where she could please him.

His fingers moved to her shirt, slipping the buttons through the holes slowly, until he

reached the waistband of her jeans. His warm hand slid over her ribs, massaging her side, lingering beneath the rise of her breast, then moved upward to her firm lace-covered mound of flesh.

He toyed with her nipple again, using his thumb to strum the hardened tip like a guitar string. His full lips burned a greater heat into her than she'd ever experienced. Not that she'd had much experience—just Hank and Roger. But Ian had to be the best lover around to create such wild, unabashed desire in a woman who had more than once been called a cold fish. How could Mary have *not* wanted him? Day in and day out—in the middle of the day. For breakfast, lunch, dinner, and bedtime snack.

For the first time, she felt like her life was just beginning, like she *needed* a man in it, not merely wanted one. But in her heart, she knew that she didn't need just any man—she needed Ian. Desperately and totally.

To her dismay, Ian broke the kiss and gazed down at her, his blue eyes filled with desire. "Oh, honey, I've never wanted a woman like I do you."

She swallowed hard, determined to rid herself of the lump of disappointment rising in her throat. "The time isn't right, is it?"

"I wish it were, Faith," he replied, "but you're right. After everything we said here tonight, after everything I explained about my past, it's just not the appropriate time. I'm sorry."

Faith shook her head and watched him button her shirt for her. "Don't be. I'd much rather know that you have a conscience than have you give me something you don't feel comfortable with."

Finished with his job, he bent over again and hugged her. "You're incredible, Faith. I don't think I've ever met such an understanding woman."

She smiled as he pulled back. "I'm not sure if it's understanding or nervousness. I'm a little anxious about this, too, you know. I've only been with two men in my whole life—and one of them was when I was very young. I feel kind of backward in this day and age."

"I guess that makes two of us." Ian rose then pulled Faith to her feet. "Maybe you should go before we talk ourselves into something that isn't advisable right now."

"I agree."

After helping her into her coat, Ian walked her to the door and opened it for her. Before she could walk out, he spun her into his arms and kissed her again, his tongue dueling deliciously with hers for several seconds before he released her.

Gazing down at her with a wicked grin, he said, "That, my dear, was for your dreams. Good night."

"When will I see you again?"

"As soon as I can get to you," he assured her. "And maybe then we won't have this barrier to contend with."

EIGHT

The next morning about ten o'clock one of Faith's co-workers came to her and announced that he'd run into Mr. Emerson on the elevator and that Mr. Emerson had asked him to send her to his office right away. Faith glanced around and noticed several others nearby watching her.

Everybody in the research department knew that Craig was interested in her because he'd come to her desk so often. Now he'd summoned her to his office. That man had gone too far last night, and he'd gone too far just now. And she fully intended to tell him what she thought of his tactics.

Five years ago when she'd met Roger, she'd been impressed by assertiveness, even aggressiveness. Five years ago she'd felt loved and wanted and protected by a man who was always there. Today she just felt smothered and angry.

Marching up two flights of steps, Faith stormed past Craig's secretary and threw open his office door, slamming it behind her. "How *dare* you summon me here like I'm your lackey."

Craig stared up at her in shock. "What's wrong with you?"

"I don't like you treating me like this, and I won't stand for it."

"I just wanted to ask you a question."

"What kind of question could you, a personnel manager, possibly need to ask someone in the research department who's doing a perfectly fine job?"

"I wondered what McCary had to say when you confronted him last night."

Without a word, she started toward the door. She heard Craig moving behind her, but she ignored him until he grabbed her arm to stop her.

"Let go of me," she ordered as she spun to glare up at him.

"Look, I don't know what's gotten into you today, and I really don't care. I figure it's just that time of the month."

"Now you're patronizing me. She's a woman, so she's mad because she has PMS. Well, I'm *not* mad because of that. I'm mad at you because you butted into somebody's personal life behind his back. It was a despicable, childish thing to do. Now let go of me."

"McCary must have given you a damned good song and dance," Craig said. "A real sob story. And as long as you were at his apartment last night, he probably had you feeling so sorry for him that he convinced you to console him in bed."

Faith's glared at him with fury burning in her soul. "I'm warning you once, Craig. If you don't let me go right now, I'm going to scream so loud and so long that Uncle John will fire you on the spot—*without* severance pay."

Craig released her. Instead of leaving as she'd intended to do, she stood her ground, determined to say everything that was on her mind. No man would ever dominate her again. "What you did was unforgivable, but Ian would probably forgive you, anyway. He's a good, kind-hearted man who would never harm anybody. And he has a conscience—which is a

hell of a lot more than I can say for you.

“As for last night, you had no right to follow me, which is probably exactly what you did if you knew where I went and how long I stayed. That’s called stalking, and there are laws against it. If you *ever* follow me around like that again, I’ll go to the nearest police station, file charges, and get a restraining order against you. Is all of this sinking in, Craig?” she asked. “Do you understand exactly what I’m saying? Because I sure wouldn’t want any misconceptions between us.”

“Faith, please.”

“Do you understand?” she demanded.

“I listened to you, Faith. Why won’t you let me have my say? At least, let me explain why I did it.”

Faith crossed her arms under her breasts and glared up at him. “So explain.”

“I was concerned about you. I had a feeling that you would go running to McCary with the article, and I wanted to make sure he didn’t hurt you.”

“If you were so concerned, why didn’t you come knocking on the door? You did suggest that I’d slept with him because I’d taken so long in his apartment. Why didn’t you suspect that he was murdering me? Like you claim he did his family.”

“You’re being unreasonable about this, Faith. I didn’t say that he murdered his family. I said that people in the town *suspected* that he did. There’s a big difference.”

Beginning to soften a little, Faith took on a more casual stance and planted her hands on her hips. “That’s true, but you were virtually warning me that he was a killer. Why you didn’t suspect that he was killing me instead of sleeping with me?”

“Because I get so jealous.” Craig took a step closer to her. “Can’t you see how crazy I am about you, Faith? Can’t you see that I started this investigation because I was afraid that I was losing you? We’re soul mates. We’ve been together in a former life, and we need to be together in this one. Why can’t you believe that?”

“Because I don’t believe in reincarnation. I told you that before.”

Moving another step closer, he asked, “Could we start our relationship over? I know we got off on a bad note, and I want to make it up to you. Let me date you. I’ll ask you out, and you’ll agree to go—if you want to. I won’t force myself on you anymore.”

Faith considered his suggestion. She’d only been divorced a little over eight months. She didn’t need a commitment in her life right now, and if she saw Ian exclusively, she would be making a commitment. If she dated Craig as well, she would be avoiding a serious mistake of getting involved with one man so soon after her break-up.

“All right,” she agreed after a few seconds’ pause. “We can start over again.”

“Then how about a movie tomorrow night?”

“Just a movie,” she insisted, knowing that was a relatively harmless way to start. “No dinner before, and no drinks after.”

“All right. I’ll pick you up around six, and we’ll go to a seven o’clock showing. How’s that?”

“It’s fine.” She turned to leave but stopped with her hand on the doorknob to look back at him over her shoulder. “But this is the only second chance you’ll ever get.”

Friday night Ian called and invited Faith to help him do some last minute Christmas

shopping the next day. Eager to spend more time with him, she agreed without hesitation. She liked Ian a lot and wanted to be with him as much as she could.

Instead of going home after their day together, Ian suggested an early dinner. Again she agreed. To her surprise, they went to Duff's Drug Store. Mr. Duff greeted them cheerfully when they strode up to the soda counter.

"Well, I see you two finally found each other," he said as they sat on two stools at the counter. "What can I get you today?"

"I don't know about Ian," Faith said, "but I want some junk food. How about one of your greasy hamburgers and an order of your greasier fries."

"And a Faith Special," Ian added, winking at the older man. "I'll have a strawberry soda and the same junk food."

"Sounds like a fattening meal," Mr. Duff returned.

Faith straightened her shoulders. "I was a good girl at lunch. I had a salad and a Diet Coke, right, Ian?"

Ian gazed at her in the mirror behind the soda bar. "It wasn't from a lack of trying to get you to have something more filling. You're a little on the thin side, and I'd like to put just a few more pounds on that gorgeous frame of yours."

"Hey!" she exclaimed as Mr. Duff turned to get their meals. "When a person's jaw is wired shut for eight weeks, a person kind of loses her appetite. It takes time to get back the pounds."

The smile on Ian's face disappeared in an instant. His eyes widened in surprise. "Why was your jaw wired shut?"

"Mr. Duff already knows this, and there's nobody else around to hear, so I guess it's all right to say it out loud. My ex-husband beat the hell out of me just before I divorced him."

"Tore her face up pretty good from what I hear," Mr. Duff added. "But that's one strong, determined young woman. She bounced right back."

"Well," she admitted, "almost, anyway. This scar on my cheek?" She ran her finger over it then traced the one under her bangs. "And the one here on my forehead came from a phone being bashed against my face. And this nose isn't the one I was born with. He pretty much destroyed the old one. I decided that, as long as I was getting reconstructive surgery, anyway, I should get the nose I wanted."

"Is that why you moved to Eagleton?" Ian asked.

"Sure is."

"Why didn't you put the guy in jail?"

"I did. He's serving a three-year sentence right this second. Unfortunately, that's the maximum. I was going for attempted murder, but I couldn't get it because I'd thrown a textbook at him before he hit me the first time. He had to duck to avoid getting hit." She chuckled now that the incident was a mere memory. "Actually, I was aiming for the broad side of a barn and missed. I was more shocked than he was when I almost hit him."

Ian's blue eyes narrowed in anger. "That's ludicrous! What kind of judge would let a man who'd beaten you so severely get away with little more than a slap on the wrist?"

"There are all kinds of judges out there, Ian. Some of them are strict and some are lenient. He happened to get a lenient one."

"What happens after he gets out? Have you done anything to protect yourself from him?"

"There's nothing I *can* do as long as he's in prison, but I fully intend to get a restraining

order as soon as I'm notified that he's being released."

"I sure hope that's good enough. I've heard a lot of horror stories about men going after their wives once they're released, and I don't want anything to happen to you."

"Nothing will," she assured him. "Now let's discuss something upbeat. This conversation is depressing me, and I don't feel like being depressed after the nice time I had today."

They arrived at her cottage a little before five-thirty, and Faith suggested that they build a fire in the fireplace and just relax for the rest of the evening. He went outside and got some logs and sticks from the nearby pile then arranged them on the cast iron grid over the paper she'd wadded up and laid on the stone floor of the fireplace.

With the fire blazing, they moved the coffee table out of the way then leaned against the couch to watch the flames. Ian draped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her against him, announcing, "This has been one of the most peaceful days I've ever had."

"Same here," she agreed as she laid her head on his shoulder.

When he kissed her hair, a moan drifted from her, and she snuggled closer against him. "It's really nice just sitting here, isn't it."

"Um-hum."

"You don't particularly want to talk tonight, do you," she observed, moving her head so she could gaze up at him.

With his free hand, he pushed her bangs out of his way, and he tenderly kissed the long scar across her forehead. "Not particularly." He kissed her new nose gently. "I'd rather use my lips for something else."

His mouth covered hers; his fingers slid into her mane. He draped her legs over his lap while she slid her arm around his neck. His kiss changed with her acceptance, gradually becoming more intense as he repositioned his arm around her back.

He broke the kiss, but offered her three more short pecks. "I adore you, Faith." He kissed her chin then lifted it slightly and kissed her throat. "You're skin's so soft, so lightly scented with soap." His lips caressed the junction of her neck and breast bone. "Being like this with you is better than I could ever have imagined it would be with a woman."

His hand slipped to her breast and kneaded it as the nipple hardened in his palm.

The excitement was almost excruciating! Faith thought. The joy Ian could fill her with, the instantaneous excitement that he could create in her, were the best experiences of her life.

Suddenly the truth dawned on her. At some point, whether it was the first day she'd seen him or over the period of time they'd been talking on the phone, she'd started growing in love with him. She couldn't say that she actually loved him yet, because she was no longer sure that she knew what love was. But she was very deeply attracted to him.

Ian's lips caressed her neck as his hand massaged her covered breast. His tongue trailed across her throat, over her chin, to her mouth. It traced her lips slowly, tantalizingly as they parted enough for him to enter when he was ready. But she was ready now, for more than just play. She wanted it all!

Her breath became hot, labored, as excited as the rest of her. And he wasn't even kissing her! Her loins became inflamed with desire; her breast that he massaged cried out for more. At last, when she felt that she could bear no more of his seductive torment, he inhaled deeply then captured her mouth fully. His tongue probed, darting around and

clashing with hers.

Still kissing her, he laid her down, one hand under her back, the other cradling her head so she didn't hit it on the floor. He stretched out to lie beside her. With a soft moan, Faith slid her hand up his arm, but the shirt sleeve obstructed her full enjoyment of the act.

Determined to experience more of him than she already had, she unbuttoned his shirt and slid it down his shoulders. But it caught on his wrists. Without breaking the passionate kiss, he quickly unbuttoned the sleeves then tossed his shirt out of the way. But his undershirt still prohibited her complete enjoyment of his body, so she slid her hands under it.

The hardness of his stomach, the furriness of his chest, strengthened her arousal. Oh, how she wanted to feel him against her! Completely, totally, his muscular, hairy chest against her bare breasts. She tugged at his undershirt, desperately fighting the urge to find a way to tear it from his body. Then, to her dismay, he broke the kiss.

She opened her eyes in time to see him yank his undershirt over his head and toss it aside, as well. She inhaled sharply. He looked so good with that mass of thick, brown hair covering his chest. Unable to resist, she ran her fingertips through it, slowly, softly, barely touching his skin.

When he spoke, his deep voice crackled with a mixture of excitement and nervousness. "May I see you, too, Faith?" Silently, she reached for the top button on her shirt, but he grasped her wrists gently and laid her hands beside her head. "Please. Let me."

Starting with the long sleeves, he unbuttoned her oxford-style shirt slowly, deliberately drawing out the process. Each time he released a button from its constraints, he kissed her exposed skin. Her wrists, her throat, her chest, and all the way down her stomach until she wanted to cry out that he was going too slowly, that if he didn't take her soon she would surely burst and have nothing left to give him.

He stared down at her torso, naked now except for her blue lace brassiere. His brilliant blue eyes shone with adoration. She wanted to say something, but she didn't want to break the spell. So she remained silent as he fumbled with the clasp between her breasts.

Instead of tossing the ends of her brassiere out of his way, he moved the left one slowly aside to expose her excited nipple. He lowered his head and kissed it lightly, then he sucked on the hard bud until she moaned in pleasure and slid her hands into his hair. He did likewise with the other breast, sliding his tongue through the cleavage before he kissed it.

Without losing contact, he slipped his tongue over her breast, across her chest, throat and chin, until he reached her mouth again. Her body tingled with excitement. The burning trail left by his sweet-talking tongue screamed for even more intimate contact. Then he lowered his torso against her as his lips reclaimed hers. He moved against her sensually, chest to chest, driving her further toward pleading with him to satisfy her completely.

But he did nothing more than lay against her, his desire and hers meeting in the most intimate manner possible with them both wearing jeans. Their lips were locked so securely that she didn't think she could break the kiss to ask for more.

A knock at the door registered somewhere in the back of her mind, but she ignored it. Another knock, and another, before Ian broke the kiss and spoke with his lips against hers. "I sure hope you weren't expecting company, honey."

Faith gasped in horror at his words and whispered her answer into his mouth. "Craig."

NINE

Pushing his torso up to brace himself above her, Ian questioned her in shock. "Emerson?"

"I told him I'd go to a movie with him tonight." She smiled at him and trailed her fingers through the hair on his chest. "But I had such a good time with you today that I forgot about it. I'll get rid of him."

Ian sat back beside her, his knee bent as he gazed down at her naked breasts. More than anything, he wished he could finish what he'd started, but he knew it was inadvisable. With trembling hands, he reached for the ends of her brassiere. "It's probably a good thing that he interrupted when he did. We were getting a little more amorous than I'd planned."

"Oh?" she crooned as he fumbled to hook her brassiere again. Giggling, she pushed his hands away and did it herself. "Are you saying that you'd planned for that to happen?"

His face heated in embarrassment. "Not the way it did, but yeah, I was definitely going to make out with you for a while today."

The knocking increased in volume, and Craig shouted. "Faith, are you in there? I'm here for the movie."

"Just a minute!" she called as she scrambled to her feet. She shot Ian a grimace while she buttoned her shirt on the way across the room. As soon as she finished, she pulled back the door. A rush of cold December air breezed through her tousled hair. "Hi, Craig. I'll be ready in a few minutes."

Craig entered while Ian searched the living room for his undershirt. Faith chuckled and said, "Try the other side of the couch, lover boy."

Ian glanced up and rose when he saw the irate glare in Craig's eyes. But when he noticed Faith's playful expression, he smiled. "Evening, Emerson."

"What are you doing here, McCary?" Craig demanded. "And with no shirt on."

"The fire got a little hot?" Ian asked as Faith scurried into her bedroom. Slipping his undershirt over his head and pulling it into place, he strode over and swept his other shirt off the floor. "I hear you're going to see a movie. Which one?"

"What the hell do you care?"

"It sounded like a good idea, so I thought I'd go to one. I didn't want to show up at the same theater and make Faith feel awkward."

Craig stared at him in shock. "You mean you don't mind me taking her out?"

"Should I?" Ian returned. "I don't own Faith. We have some good times together, but I'm not about to tell her what to do."

"Don't you give a damn about your relationship with her?"

"Gee," Ian said, feigning shock, "do you think she might do something I'd been jealous of?" His eyes and voice hardened as he finished dressing and strode to stand beside Craig. Keeping his voice low, he said, "Lay so much as your little finger on her without her permission, Emerson, and I'll tear you apart." He grabbed his coat off the rack by the door

and shouted back toward the bedroom. "I'm leaving now, Faith! Have a nice evening!"

"Thank you!" she returned as she poked her head out the door. "For everything. Good night."

"Night, sugar," he returned before closing the door behind him.

Faith disappeared back into the bedroom, changed her wrinkled shirt and brushed on some cover-up powder. After combing her hair, she strode into the living room with a bright smile. "I'm ready now."

"Why was McCary here?" Craig asked.

"He took me Christmas shopping, then we had some dinner. Didn't you know that was his car outside?"

"As a matter of fact, I didn't." He held Faith's coat while she slipped into it. "I can't believe that you made a date with him when you knew you had one with me tonight."

"It was a spur of the moment thing," she replied as they walked to his car. "He was going shopping and asked if I wanted to go along. Since I had a few more presents to get, I said yes." What a lie! Her shopping had been done for a long time, but Craig didn't have any business asking her these personal questions. He didn't deserve *any* answer let alone the truth. "Did you decide which movie we were going to see?"

Opening the door for her, he said, "I thought I'd let you decide."

Faith waited until he got in behind the wheel before she replied. "There are three I've been wanting to see, but I'm not sure which I prefer. Why don't we decide together?"

To Faith's relief, Craig did exactly as he had promised and took her straight home after the movie. As soon as she saw his car disappear down the driveway, she hurried to the kitchen with her unfinished bag of popcorn and got a Diet Coke from the refrigerator. Then she sat down couch and dialed Ian's phone number, waiting impatiently through three rings before he answered.

"Hi there, sexy," she growled into the phone. "Thinking of anything important?"

"*Very* important," he returned with a laugh. "I'm thinking about a sexy, auburn-haired beauty who takes my breath away every time I see her."

Faith laughed and tossed some popcorn into her mouth. "You'd better be. That same redhead was thinking about you all through a stupid movie—and before you ask, no, I don't know if it was good. I wasn't paying attention."

"Oh? Did you have something else on your mind?"

"Only an interrupted moment of passion."

"Is this going to be an obscene phone call?" he teased. "If it is, I want to tape it."

"If I didn't have church tomorrow, I'd get in my car and show up at your place to finish what we started." She grimaced. "Although, Craig knows where you live because he followed me the other night. He's probably already lurking in your parking lot to see if I show up."

"He followed you?" Ian asked in shock. "Why?"

"He's the one who gave me the copy of the article."

"If I had known that, ..." Ian started to say.

"Which is exactly why I didn't tell you sooner. But since you two seemed to be getting along all right earlier, I figured it was safe to tell you. Besides, I'm glad he told me. It gave us a chance to get a little ..." She paused for effect then continued in her most seductive tone. "Oh, shall we say a little ... *closer*?"

Ian chuckled. "I think I'll buy the man a thank-you card tomorrow. What are you eating?"

"Popcorn. It's my downfall."

"Mr. Duff told me that Faith Specials are your downfall."

"Then we'll just say that I have *three* downfalls," she breathed.

"I'm afraid to ask what the third one is."

"Chicken," she replied with a laugh.

"Okay then. Tell me what it is."

"You." Turning serious, she said, "And I'm not just talking about that sexy body of yours. I'm talking about your friendship, your sense of humor, your sensitivity, ..." Unable to resist, she lowered her voice to a husky whisper. "... and that incredible style of kissing you have. I can feel your lips on mine right this second."

"Do you have any idea what you're doing to me, woman?"

"I hope I'm getting the most excitable part of your anatomy nice and ... excited." She put some more popcorn into her mouth. "Am I?"

"Undeniably," he admitted. "But all that crunching is a bit distracting."

"So are you, lover boy. I think it's time that I say good night. That's the main reason I called, anyway. Well, that and to tell you that I had a lousy time with Craig tonight. I thought that might make your night."

"More than you know, sugar."

"Okay. Well, I suppose I really should say good night. I have to get up early in the morning. Dream about my living room floor, lover boy. I know I will."

"You can count on it," he breathed.

Instead of going directly to work Monday morning, Faith made a research trip to a local psychic who advertised that she could see a person's past lives. She had no doubt that the woman was a fraud who prayed on unsuspecting victims in need of something to hold on to, but she had to make the visit if she wanted to do a good job on her first program.

Faith sat in the home where the psychic lived and conducted business. It was gloomy in the living room, with dark brown paisley furniture covers on her couch and two ottomans. The covers of the pillows were striped in green and dark brown, while the curtains were a dark brown background with white flowers and green leaves. Two old-fashioned hurricane lamps sat on each dark oak end table, lit but burning with a very dim light. She couldn't have read anything in that room if she'd had to, but it didn't matter. There was no reading material available for the guests, anyway.

All electrical appliances, such as lamps or a stereo system were conspicuously missing. There wasn't even a telephone, just a coat tree that held her parka right now.

A moment later an older woman exited from a dark hallway. Her dyed brown hair showed about an inch of white roots at the scalp. The slightly overweight woman of medium height wore a red sweatshirt that said *Merry Christmas* on it and a pair of navy blue slacks, white socks, and black loafers.

The woman, *Hilda Rassmussen, Psychic*, her sign outside said, examined Faith thoroughly as she sank down in the chair across from the sofa on which Faith sat. She silently examined Faith, which made her very uncomfortable. This was nothing like Faith

envisioned their initial meeting. She'd expected to have to answer some questions so the woman would have an idea of where to start her deception.

"You don't believe in psychics, do you, miss," Hilda observed.

Faith was startled by the woman's soft, melodic voice. It sure didn't fit her appearance. Gathering her courage for the charade she was about to play in the name of good journalism, Faith said, "I've just never had the opportunity to visit one before. I decided to see what you have to say."

"About the two men in your life?" Hilda asked. "Or about your current job? It's not the same one you were doing last year at this time, is it?"

"No!" Faith exclaimed in surprise. How had Hilda known that? How had she known that there were two men in her life? She was going to have to tread very carefully to fool this woman. Someone had apparently gotten to Hilda and given the "psychic" information about her past. The only way to combat that kind of deception was to hide all of the facts Hilda was looking for. "As long as you mentioned two men, maybe you could tell me something that might interest me concerning them."

"Of course," Hilda said, and she closed her eyes as if concentrating on something. After a couple minutes, she opened them again and announced, "This is very odd, indeed. It's not often that I come across somebody who is currently living in a life that has contact with two separate people from two separate past lives."

"Pardon me?" Faith asked, stunned.

"I see a man from your past. He's tall, dark hair, dark eyes. He was very kind to you long ago—in ancient Rome, or possibly Greece. There's also a kind man in your life now, one you can't seem to break contact with, is that right?"

Unable to think, Faith nodded her head. She shouldn't be giving the woman answers; she should be asking questions. But she was fascinated with the accuracy.

"His eyes are blue now. They were very sad once, but now they sparkle with happiness. He's a new man since he met you."

Hilda was making Faith nervous. She hadn't told *anybody* how much Ian's eyes had affected her. They'd drawn her so deeply into her need to mother him that she'd completely forgotten about it. Now she was facing a woman who had taken that secret from her very soul and brought it to the surface, where she wasn't sure she wanted it.

To get off the topic of Ian, Faith decided to direct the woman along a little. "What about this other man you say is in my life?"

Closing her eyes again, Hilda fell silent. Why did she do that all the time? Faith wondered. Why couldn't she just look at her and talk? The silence was almost more than Faith could bear. She wanted to shout, "Say something!" But she didn't dare.

Hilda opened her eyes again and frowned. "I don't think you would want to know about this one."

Ah-ha! She'd finally caught the woman in a gross deception. Hilda wasn't any more than a good guesser. But exposing her so soon in the meeting wouldn't accomplish her goal of a good television special, so she had to get the woman to talk some more.

Faith smiled, saying, "If this man's affecting my life in the present, shouldn't I know about it if I'm going to be prepared?"

"Not everything should be revealed, miss," Hilda insisted.

"Please, Ms. Rassmussen? I'm sure I can handle whatever you want to tell me. I'm a very strong person."

"I know that. Have you had any powerful dreams lately?"

Faith's jaw dropped and her eyes widened in surprise. "Dreams?" What in the world was this woman talking about? Was she trying to divert the conversation to something else? Of course, that had to be it. Hilda thought she was going to break Faith down and get her to tell her something important that would give her a clue as to what to say.

"Yes. Vivid ones. I sense there's an answer to your question in them." Hilda paused to study Faith again. "You really want me to tell you about this man, don't you."

"As a matter of fact, I do. I don't care how bad it is, either, because I've ..." Faith stopped herself short. She'd almost told Hilda something about her past, and she couldn't do that. She had to be very suspicious of this woman if she was going to get the information she needed.

"Physical pain. Yes, I see it etched in your mind. But that was not a man you knew before. He's never been in one of your past lives, and I don't see him coming back into this one. He knows he did wrong. The man I mean you'll see today. You have some bad feelings about this man, and I suggest that you listen to them. Forget about that bad choice and remember that your intuitions have always been good to you."

Jeez! Where was this woman getting all of this information about her? Hilda was right. Despite her foolish marriage to Roger, she'd always had good intuitions. But how had Hilda known that?

"Are there any questions you'd like to ask me?" Hilda asked.

"A zillion," Faith admitted, "but I don't know where to start because there are so many. Maybe you could give me some ideas. Do I go back to my childhood, or do I start with today?"

"Start wherever you feel comfortable."

"Okay. Something happened to me when I was five years old."

"Your father died," Hilda replied before Faith could ask the question. "Your mother never remarried. You spent time every summer here in the Dayton area. You felt at home here, and you're finally back."

"That's right!" Faith said in amazement. "How did you know that?"

"You're father just told me."

What? Her father was talking to Hilda? This left the realm of normal. She had to get away from this distressing topic.

"Then tell me about this other man."

"He isn't important."

"He is to me," Faith insisted. "Now tell me."

"All right. He's a man from another past life—in the South during—no *before* the Civil War. He was a slave owner and a cruel man when he wanted to be, but he was also good when he wanted to be. He sweet-talked many woman and fathered many children."

"And I had one by him," Faith interrupted. "I wouldn't be surprised, because I want children very badly." Faith almost hit herself for having said that, but it had slipped out so easily. If only she could retract the words.

"You'll have a child, my dear—a beautiful baby girl."

Faith laughed, glad that she'd finally caught the woman. She'd already been to a doctor, and he'd told Roger over the phone that she would never have children.

"You don't believe me?" the woman asked.

To cover her mistake, Faith said, "I'm not even married, Ms. Rassmussen." Damn! She'd

done it again. If she didn't get out of this place soon, she would ruin her whole morning of research. "Could we please get back to the Civil War man?"

"You didn't have his child, but not because he didn't try."

"The way men are, that doesn't surprise me, either." But Faith decided that she'd heard enough. This woman was either mentally disturbed or a real con artist. Either way, Faith didn't want anything more to do with her.

Rising, Faith thanked the woman, paid her, then started toward the door. Hilda's voice stopped her in her tracks.

"That dream you had." Faith spun to face this crazy woman. "It's been a while ago now, maybe four or five months back. But you remember it very clearly. You were wearing a toga, and you were crying in a garden. A man came to you, one with dark hair and eyes, and he comforted you. It was a prophetic dream. You know that man now. You couldn't be with him in that life, but you can in this one. And you'll be very happy with him if you make the right choices."

Faith almost fainted on the spot. That woman *couldn't* have known about that dream. Faith hadn't told anybody because it had seemed so inconsequential. Unable to speak, Faith grabbed her coat and fled from the small house. She didn't stop running until she reached her car at the bottom of the steps.

This was crazy. She shouldn't be acting like this. The woman should be committed, no two ways about it. So she'd had a couple of lucky guesses. That didn't mean she was clairvoyant.

Faith started the car and checked the traffic before she pulled onto the street. Yeah, that was it. The woman was a good guesser. But she'd still left Faith shaken. If she did nothing else in her research, she would prove that Hilda Rassmussen, Psychic, was a fraud and send her to prison for swindling people out of their hard-earned cash.

TEN

Faith tried to forget her conversation with the psychic, but it had unnerved her so much that she found it difficult. Hilda Rassmussen had indirectly said that she should stay with Craig—the man with the dark brown hair and eyes. And every portion of her being screamed at her that such a move would be foolhardy. Yet she still dated him twice a week to see if he would live up to his promise of not pushing her for more.

She also spent hours talking to Ian on the phone, as well as dating him on occasion. They still kissed good night, but they restricted it to the open doorway. The fact that they'd nearly lost control that Saturday night was very disconcerting to Faith. She'd never felt so strongly for a man before, and she didn't want to overreact to her emotions. She wanted to be calm and collected and in full capacity of her actions before she made love again.

One evening John invited Faith to dinner and Christmas tree trimming afterward. To her delight, Ian was there when she arrived for her aunt's famous holiday stew. As Faith and Ian loaded the dishwasher, John and Betty got out the lights and ornaments to put on the nine-foot Scotch pine tree standing in the living room.

"It was nice of Aunt Betty to invite you tonight," Faith said. "Are you putting up a tree in your apartment?"

"I don't have much use for Christmas anymore, Faith," he replied, sliding his arms around her waist from behind. "Let me rephrase that. I didn't have much use for it until this year. Funny how a change of scenery will also change your attitude about some things."

She turned in his arms and gazed up at him, questioning him seductively. "Are you sure it's the scenery?"

"Better not talk that way with your aunt and uncle in the house, sweetness," he advised in a husky voice. "And yes, I'm positive it's the scenery, because I've never seen anything as beautiful as what I'm looking at right now."

Laughing, she moved away from him to put more dishes in the machine. "What a charmer. We'd better stop this, or my relatives might walk into the room. I'd hate to let them think that they were right in playing matchmaker for me."

Ian took the bowl from her hands and set it back on the counter. Grasping her shoulders, he turned her toward him. "Were they right, Faith?"

Faith avoided his question by saying, "Only time can answer that, can't it."

Ian didn't want to admit it, because things were happening so fast, but he knew the truth. He'd already fallen in love with Faith. Now all that remained was getting her to realize that he had and getting her to fall in love with him.

But had he *fallen* in love? he wondered as he brought more dishes from the dining room. When he'd first seen Faith, he'd had a purely lustful attraction, all physical with no thought of anything except getting her into bed. After all the time they'd spent in conversation, though, he realized there was more to Faith than a body. She was tender,

caring, intelligent, determined, and warm.

Mary had been a very, very cold woman. Her manner to outsiders was often classified as reserved, but her manner at home was nothing short of frigid. She didn't talk to him much; she didn't offer him or the boys affection unless she wanted something from them. Ian had always assumed that it was because of her illness, but now he wasn't sure. Looking back on it, her parents were the same way, so how could she have been any different?

And looking back on it, the only reason he'd chosen his previous profession was because Mary had thought it was a good idea. It hadn't been dedication, and it hadn't been any sort of calling. It had been his trying to please a woman he thought he'd loved.

Of course, he knew better than that now. Love made a man happy; love made him want to be with his mate as much as possible without wondering what she was doing when they were apart. Love was trust, and he had that in Faith. That was why he never complained because she dated Craig. He knew she would never do anything more than maybe kiss the man—and he even doubted she did that.

Mary was gone now, though, and he'd found a woman who had brightened his life. For the first time, he was truly happy. He loved his new job; he loved living; but mostly, he loved Faith. This was the last time he would ever think of his late wife, except in connection with his sons.

After the tree was decorated, John and Betty excused themselves to put away the cartons. On their last trip out the door, Betty turned out the lights. The colorful strings of lights on the tree illuminated the room in a soft glow. The smell of pine permeated the air. The feeling of joy filled Faith's heart

Taking Faith's hand, Ian led her to the couch and sat down on the floor before it, his knees bent and spread far enough to make room for Faith. He pulled her down and wrapped his arms around her as she leaned back against him.

"It's beautiful, isn't it, sweetness," he said into her hair.

"So was that ornament I broke," she replied, grimacing at the memory of the twenty-four-year-old decoration lying shattered beyond recognition on the floor.

"I think it's a rule that family klutzes are supposed to break ornaments at Christmas time."

Faith smiled at the tree. Ian could always make her feel better about the little accidents she always had. "That doesn't mean I like being a klutz."

"I think it's charming," he returned merrily. "It keeps me on my toes, because I never know what's going to happen next."

They fell silent. Faith sighed contentedly and laid her head against Ian's shoulder. This was such a wonderful feeling—being in a man's arms, just sitting, knowing that he didn't expect to make love later that night. This wasn't the type of relationship she'd had with Roger. He'd only been amorous when he wanted loving. Unless he was in the mood, he fell asleep almost the second he got into bed. He didn't even kiss her good night unless he expected more.

Ian kissed her hair, repositioned his arms so they encircled her shoulders instead of her ribs, and hugged her.

"Feels nice doing this, doesn't it," he whispered.

"Um-hum."

"Almost better than making love."

“Oh, yes,” she agreed in a heated whisper. “Much more sensual.”

“Much.”

They fell silent again, and she caressed his arms, rubbing her hands lightly over his shirt from his wrists to his elbows, over and over, delighting in the warmth they sent through her.

Betty stopped in the doorway and put her arm out to stop John. He glanced around her and smiled, then took her elbow and directed her toward the kitchen. Once there, he said, “Looks like it’s just you and me for the official tree trimming cocoa and marshmallows.”

“Have you asked him yet?” she asked as she got the milk from the refrigerator.

John pulled a small saucepan from the cabinet and set it on the stove. Nodding his head, he said, “He’ll be here.”

“Have you told Faith?” Betty questioned as she poured some milk into the saucepan and turned on the burner.

“Haven’t had time. Have you?”

“No, but one of us should. She’ll want to get him a present when she finds out that he’ll be here for Christmas dinner with the family.”

“I like that boy, Betty,” John said as he took two cups from the cupboard. “I know that I was more inclined to have her date Craig in the beginning, but Ian’s grown on me like Craig never did. I feel like he’s already part of the family. It’ll be a shame if she chooses Craig over him.”

Betty poured milk into the saucepan and turned on the stove. “I feel the same way. It’s odd how he comes here to visit so often. It’s always when Faith has a date with Craig, but he never stays to see them come back, so I don’t think he’s checking up on her. He’s just a lonely, young man in need of a family. And I’m more than willing to let him be my surrogate son, just like Faith’s my surrogate daughter.”

“Maybe someday he’ll be an official member of our family. Sure would be nice, wouldn’t it. Having somebody like him around in our old age, I mean.”

Betty laughed. “I don’t know about you, my dear, but I don’t plan to *get* old. I’m going to stay young forever.”

“Betty!” Ian hollered from the hallway. “John! I’m leaving now. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Are you going to walk Faith home?”

“I’m staying, Aunt Betty,” Faith replied. “We already said good night.”

Faith giggled as she watched Ian stride down the steps and to his car. They’d said good night, all right, and if Betty and John had walked in the room when they had, they would have gotten an eyeful. Making out on the floor like that had been dangerously fun, but it had had to end. Ian had even admitted that he felt safe being so passionate with her relatives in the house, because he knew he couldn’t sweep her into his arms and carry her off to bed.

His restraint was charming, she thought as his car disappeared down the lane, but one of these days she was going to forget hers and jump his bones, anyway. It would serve him right after all the teasing he did to her, getting her all hot and bothered then saying, “Sorry, sweetness, I’ve got to go before this becomes an X-rated movie.”

Faith sat in the kitchen with a cup of hot apple cider and sipped it silently. She'd wanted to be alone since her cousins and their children had started arriving. Already there were about fifteen people in the living room. She'd always loved being with her family when there were no children—not that she didn't like children. She *loved* them, but she wasn't used to them, either. It had been three hours of nonstop noise and activity, and she needed a break. Granted, she could still hear them in the background, but it wasn't quite as bad here in the kitchen.

A woman Faith's age entered the kitchen saying, "I thought I'd find you here." Faith smiled at her closest cousin. Patti was taller and heavier than she, but other than that, they looked amazingly alike. Patti poured herself some of the cider then sat down across the table. "My nieces and nephews get a little loud, don't they. They're one reason I decided to wait a while before I have kids of my own. So, what's this I hear about you having a guest coming later?"

"He's not *my* guest," Faith insisted with a grin. "He's a guest your parents invited to play matchmaker for me."

"From everything I hear, all they had to do was set up that first match, and you two did your own making."

"Ian and I did kind of take off on our own."

"Mom told me about how you got so nervous and flustered at that party. Why didn't *you*?"

Faith blushed. "I was embarrassed enough as it was. I didn't want to relive it."

"And now, here you are with *two* guys wanting to date you. How lucky can you get."

"I can think of luckier things to happen," Faith insisted, "like one guy to spend the rest of my life with—like you have."

When Patti frowned, her expression appeared desolate. "*You* should know that marriage isn't always what it's cracked up to be."

"Are you and Bernie having problems?" Faith asked in a whisper as she leaned closer.

"I don't want to talk about it—not on Christmas."

Faith smiled as Ian entered the kitchen speaking cheerfully. "Oh, oh. Two auburn-haired beauties. Hope I can figure out which one I've been having so much fun with."

Patti glanced over her shoulder. Her mouth dropped open and her eyes widened appreciably. "Wow!" she whispered, returning her gaze to Faith. "What a hunk!"

Laughing, Faith raised her hand. "This one, Mr. McCary."

Grasping her wrists, he pulled her from her chair. "Let me be the judge of that." He lifted her hands to his mouth and kissed each one. "So far, I'll agree." He bent over and kissed the top of her head. "Coconut-scented shampoo. Smell's right." He pulled her into his arms and embraced her completely. "*Feels* like the one, but I need one last test." His lips captured hers in a sweet kiss that even Faith could tell he found difficult to restrain. Pulling back, he gazed down at her with desire blazing in his blue eyes. "Tastes like the one, too, so you must *be* the one. Merry Christmas, sweetness."

"Merry Christmas to you," she returned. "This is my cousin Patti. Patti, Ian McCary."

"Nice to meet you, Patti," he said, extending his right hand in greeting while he wrapped his left arm around Faith's shoulders. "What are you two drinking? It smells good."

Patti shook his hand then scrambled to the stove. "It's apple cider. I'll pour you some." Taking a cup from the counter where Betty had put a supply, Patti dropped it on the floor

and broke it.

“Hey!” he said as he hurried to help her clean up the broken china. “Are you usurping my woman’s position of Family Klutz? Or is this a family trait?”

While Patti and Ian laughed, Faith retreated into her mind. He’d called her his woman. That had to mean that he felt more for her than a simple friendship. Of course, she already knew that, but his words gave more credence to his actions. Her heart swelled with happiness. Maybe she should tell Craig to take a flying leap and spend more time getting closer to Ian. It only made sense since she had more fun with him than she did Craig.

“Yo, sweetness!” Ian called softly as he sat down at the table with a mug of hot cider. “You here on Earth with us?”

“Are you kidding?” Patti interjected, “she’s probably out on ...” She paused melodramatically “... Venus—the *love* planet.”

Horried by her cousin’s words, Faith shrieked, “Patti! Shut up!”

“It’s okay, sweetness,” Ian said with a laugh as he pulled her down onto his lap. “I already suspected as much, anyway.” Wrapping one arm around her waist, he took a sip of his drink. “Sure am glad this is hot. My car’s heater went out on the way over here.” He slipped his hand under Faith’s red sweater with green pine trees and white snow on it. “See?”

Faith jumped to her feet with a squeal. “That was *mean*, Ian McCary.”

He gazed up at her with an amorous gleam in his eyes. “Just trying to warm up on the hottest-looking thing in the house.”

“You’ve turned into a madman,” she countered, smiling.

“Actually, it’s more like a mad-about-you-man.”

Three children with a variety of hair colors raced into the kitchen, the biggest one saying, “Grandma says it’s time to open the presents now. Everybody’s here.”

Ian’s eyes sparkled. “All *right!* Presents.” He grabbed Faith’s hand and started toward the door. “Come on, ladies. I love to see what other people get. Gives me an insight into their likes and dislikes.”

Ian had three presents for him under the tree. John had given him an expensive pen and pencil set, and Betty had given him a sweater identical to Faith’s. Grinning at Betty, he stripped out of the sweater he’d worn and slipped into the new one. Then he sat Indian fashion on the floor at Faith’s feet, obviously waiting until she opened his present to her before he unwrapped hers to him. Together they tore off the colorful wrapping paper and opened the boxes.

Faith inhaled sharply when she saw the red silk bathrobe lying under the white tissue paper. This was impossible. It simply couldn’t be happening!

Ian laughed and exclaimed, “Talk about great minds thinking alike!” Lifting the man’s red silk robe from the box in his lap, he rose to his knees and kissed Faith soundly. “Thank you, sweetness.”

“What’s so funny?” thirteen-year-old Jennifer asked.

“Show the lady what I got you, Faith,” he prompted.

Faith lifted the robe from the box, certain her face was the same color as the soft material. How could this have happened? In public, at that? Why was she constantly embarrassed by the innocent things that Ian did?

“How romantic!” Jennifer crooned. “They got each other matching robes and didn’t even know it.”

“Not quite matching,” Ian corrected. “That one has something in the pocket—other than a piece of paper saying, *Inspected by #15*.”

“It does?” Faith asked, startled. She dug into a pocket and pulled out a folded tissue. Opening it carefully, she gazed in amazement at the sparkling F on a gold chain. “It’s beautiful, Ian, but it looks so expensive. You shouldn’t have.”

“Nothing’s too expensive for a pretty woman like you, sweetness,” he said. “Let me put it on you.” While Faith held her hair out of the way, Ian fastened the clasp behind her neck. “There you go.”

She cradled the diamond pendant on her fingers and stared down at it in awe. “I don’t know what to say, Ian. Thank you.”

“Your expression is all the thanks I need, but I do appreciate the words. Merry Christmas, Faith.”

Acting instinctively, Faith threw her arms around Ian’s neck and kissed him. She ground her lips against his in a passionate embrace that showed him how much she cared for him. If there weren’t so many people around, she would even have *shown* him how much she appreciated him. And if her cousin wasn’t camping out on her sofa, she would have shown him all night long.

Ian caressed her ribs just under her breasts and pushed her away after a couple of minutes. “We’d better stop this, sweetness. There are impressionable children in the room.”

She wanted to shout, “I don’t care. I love you.” But the words caught in her throat. She couldn’t say them because she was afraid to love right now. Love had hurt her badly, and before she could commit herself to somebody, she had to release the demon in her soul that Roger.

ELEVEN

After dinner, Betty drew Faith aside. “Don’t bother helping with the clean-up tonight, dear. Take Ian down to your place and celebrate Christmas alone for a while. I’ll keep Joey here until about nine.”

Faith smiled as she watched Ian discuss football with her fifteen-year-old second cousin. “It’s sweet of you to suggest it, Aunt Betty, but I hate to interrupt Ian when he’s having so much fun with Patrick.”

“And he had fun wrestling with my other grandsons for over an hour and a half. He had fun playing tea party with Jessica—*twice*. He also had fun playing with the babies, even Denny, and he’s only three months old. When he wasn’t playing with the kids, he was talking with our family. But we all know he isn’t here for the family, Faith. He came to spend Christmas day with you, and you know it as well as the rest of us do.”

“You don’t understand, Aunt Betty,” Faith said, drawing her farther away from the crowd. “Please don’t tell him that I told you this, but I feel like I have to—so you’ll understand. Ian didn’t just lose his wife; he lost three sons at the same time. Christmas must be very hard for him, and I want him to have as much happiness as he can get.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, but that doesn’t change anything. Ian’s not here for the children; he’s here for you. It’s only two hours until nine, so get him down to your house—*now*.”

“But I don’t want to spoil his fun. He obviously loves children.”

“It’s just as obvious that he loves *you*, Faith.”

“Aunt Betty, please. Ian has never said such a thing, and you shouldn’t put words in his mouth.”

“You’re a psychiatrist, Faith,” Betty scolded in a low tone. “How can you deny the obvious? You should know better.”

“Apparently, I’m very good at denial,” she shot back in a whisper. “I denied Roger’s violence for three years. It took him directing it at *me* before I admitted it.”

“That’s different, and you know it. Now get in there and tell Ian you want to leave. Have him walk you home.”

“I’ll conduct this romance in my own way, thank you.” With those words, Faith stalked off toward the kitchen.

Faith, Patti, and Patti’s sister Jane sat around the kitchen table chatting when he entered wearing his jacket and carrying her parka, as well as their presents.

“Excuse me, ladies,” he said, “but I’m taking my favorite redhead home now.”

“Don’t you want to stay and play with the kids some more?” Faith asked in amazement.

“I want to play all right, sweetness,” he said as he laid the packages on the table and held up her parka, “but not with the kids. Even Patrick and Jennifer are a little too young for the games I have in mind.”

“Oo,” Jane teased as Faith slipped into her jacket. “Sounds like something *I* might like to play.”

Faith's face heated in embarrassment, and Patti punched her sister in the arm. "Look what you did. You embarrassed our favorite cousin. Here she is, trying to have a nice little romance with a gorgeous hunk, and you're picking on her like a little kid." She looked up at Faith. "You going to share all the details with your almost-sisters like you used to, cuz?"

Faith's face grew hotter.

"Look!" Jane exclaimed with a laugh. "Her face still gets redder than her hair. It's always been so much fun to tease her." Faith glared at her. "Come on, Faith. You know it's all in fun."

Ian kissed Faith's cheek as she zipped her coat. "One of my favorite qualities is this woman's sense of humor. Of course, I also like her matching red hair and face, too. Come on, sweetness. I'll rescue you from your nasty, ol' cousins." Picking up the packages, he followed Faith out the door, saying, "Night, ladies."

"Who's going to get me away from the nasty ol' man?" she mumbled as he shut the door behind them.

"What?" he asked.

"Never mind."

"So, sweetness, how about a rousing game of *Trivial Pursuit* when we get back to the cottage? I couldn't beat Pat, but I'll bet I could beat you at your own game."

Faith said nothing, but her mind worked overtime. No, he couldn't beat her at her own game, especially when he wouldn't even play it. What was wrong with Ian, anyway? Why wouldn't he ever make love to her? It was obvious that he wanted to. It was also obvious that Betty was giving them time to do it. But Faith knew it wouldn't happen. Even on a special day like this, Ian wouldn't do any more than *play* the game of love.

How could he restrain his passion like that? she wondered as he opened the door of her cottage. How could he get so excited then call time-out? She would *never* be able to restrain her passion around him if he didn't stop. She would go on forever in his arms and not feel an ounce of regret afterward.

While Ian dropped the packages on the couch, Faith took off her jacket and hung it on the coat rack beside the door.

"How about a fire, Faith?" he asked. "I'll drag in a bunch of logs before we start if you want one."

"All right," she agreed. During the walk to the cottage she'd made her decision. Tonight they would make love. She refused to let him leave until they did. "I'll change into the robe you gave me."

Ian stopped with his hand on the doorknob. "No!" He hesitated then added, "I mean, I didn't get it for you so you could model it for me. I got it because I saw you looking at it while I was trying to find my mother a present, and I saw you grimace when you read the price tag. I knew the only reason you didn't buy it was because you thought it was too expensive. I wanted you to have something that would make you feel pretty—because you *are* pretty."

Faith pouted to see if she could soften him that way. "But I thought you wanted to play a game that the kids wouldn't want to."

"*Trivial Pursuit*," he insisted as he went out the door. "Why don't you set it up while I bring in some wood?"

Unable to believe this was happening, Faith wandered to the couch and moved the coffee table. Sitting down on the floor, she opened the game she'd gotten from Patti and

began to set it up. While she did, Ian came in with an armful of small pieces of wood and a few pieces a little larger and deposited them in front of the fireplace. Shrugging out of his coat, he laid it aside then opened the glass door. Once he had the fire burning, he put his coat back on and went outside to bring in some logs.

Faith watched him with a frown. He was being awfully diligent in his work, building the fire to a high flame before closing the door and sitting down across from her. How was she ever supposed to seduce him if he wouldn't even let her dress the part of seductress? Blue jeans and a sweater weren't the proper attire if she wanted to get him into her bed. She should be wearing the slinky bathrobe he'd given her.

"What color am I?" he asked as he examined the board.

"Blue—for your eyes," she replied.

He grinned. "And green for yours. Good choice."

"Actually," she said with a smile, "green because it's my favorite color."

Leaning toward his left, he propped himself up on his elbow. "Roll and we'll see who starts."

After an hour and a half, Faith won the game and Ian exclaimed, "Rematch!"

Faith laughed. It had been fun to play with somebody who gave her a run for her money, and she didn't want Ian to leave. Since they weren't doing anything, anyway, it didn't matter if Joe walked in on them or not.

"Sore loser," she proclaimed as he dumped the game pieces out of the circles, then dug into the plastic bag containing the rest of the game pieces.

"I'm not a sore loser, sweetness. You just gave me my unlucky color." He pulled out an orange circle. "Now I'll beat the pants off you."

"I bought some wine for Christmas," she said, choosing to hold her tongue about his double entendre. "Do you want some?"

"Sure," he agreed, "but only one glass. I still have to drive home tonight."

"Right," she agreed as she wandered to the kitchen. He didn't know it yet, but he wasn't going to be driving anywhere. He was going to be spending the night in her bed. Joe could just sleep on the couch at the main house.

To her amazement, he followed her. "Want some help opening it?"

"I think I can handle ..." Her cellphone played *Fur Elise*, and she stopped to answer it. "Hello?"

"Merry Christmas, Faith," Craig said. "I've been wanting to tell you that all day, but I couldn't get hold of you."

"Merry Christmas to you, too, Craig," she replied, turning her back on Ian. "Did you have fun with your family?"

"It would have been better if you'd been with me."

Ian's arms encircled her from behind, and he nuzzled her neck. Shrugging her shoulder to ward off the tingling from her ear to her elbow, she tried to respond casually. "You know I had my own family gathering to attend." Already she could feel herself beginning to have a physical response to Ian's caress, and even though she didn't want to, she tried to push him away so she could concentrate on her conversation with Craig. "What kind of presents did you get?"

Ian pressed his groin against her buttocks and rubbed against her. The sensation of excitement that raced through her almost caused Faith to moan with pleasure, but she suppressed it as Craig spoke into her ear. "A couple of shirts, three ties, and a sport jacket

from my folks. What about you?"

"I got a Christmas sweater from Aunt Betty." Ian's hands moved over the wool material to cup her breasts. "A *Trivial Pursuit* game from my cousin Patti." He began to massage her while he continued rubbing against her derriere. She was unable to contain the low moan that escaped from deep within her throat. Trying to act like nothing had happened, she added, "A psychological thriller book from Uncle John."

"Are you all right, Faith?" Craig asked in concern.

"Oh, yeah," she sighed as Ian's hands slid under her sweater to her breasts, covered only by the lacy fabric of her brassiere. He kissed her neck as he toyed with her already excited nipples. "I'm just *fine*."

"What's going on there?"

"Nothing," she replied, forcing herself to continue the conversation.

"All right then. Did you get anything else?"

"Of course." She turned in Ian's arms to gaze up at him longingly. "I got a very nice silk robe and a pretty necklace with a pendant in the shape of an F."

Ian's fingers worked at the hooks on her brassiere, finally releasing it. Then he dragged his hands down her stomach and out from under her shirt. While Faith watched him, her gaze on his torso, he stripped his sweater and undershirt over his head simultaneously, and tossed them aside. His bright, intense gaze remained on her body as he slipped his hands under her sweater and up her bare torso, to work them under the cups of her brassiere. Faith sighed as he caressed her.

"Who was the necklace from?" Craig asked with a hint of jealousy in his voice.

"A friend of the family," she replied. Ian ran his hands up the sleeve of her shirt and pulled it from her arm, along with her bra strap. Faith gasped as the cool air caressed her hardened nipple, but a moment later, Ian's warm mouth covered it with a heated kiss. She released breathy moan at the intimate caress. "Oh."

"What the hell's going on there?" Craig demanded.

"Nothing," she replied. Ian suckled on her nipple as he cupped her other breast, pinching the nipple tenderly. "Oh, my God."

At that moment, Ian took the phone as Craig's angry voice demanded answers.

"Bye, Emerson," Ian said just before he hung up the phone.

Faith finished taking off her sweater and brassiere. Ian covered her moderate mounds with his hands and whispered, "Just being with you makes my blood boil like it never has before."

His lips locked on to hers; his tongue probed as far into her mouth as it could. His hands slid into her hair where he entangled it with his fingers. Her breasts throbbed with excitement as he chest met hers; her loins nearly burst with need when he pushed his pelvis against her. Her entire body screamed for satisfaction this time.

Ian's hands slipped from her hair to her shoulders, to her breasts, to her waist. His fingers fumbled with the button of her jeans, releasing it then the zipper before he broke the kiss. But his lips didn't leave her body; his tongue didn't stop its seductive pleasure.

The phone went off again. Ian's lips caught her aroused nipple between his teeth and nibbled it tenderly. Faith moaned. This felt so good! The phone rang again. His lips captured her other hard bud while he hands pushed her jeans over her hips. Filled with desire, she sighed. She was going to get exactly what she wanted. The phone rang again.

Without thinking, she slid her finger down the screen to reject the call. With one hand,

Ian massaged her thigh, his thumb sliding from her knee to the elastic edge of her bikini panties. The phone rang again. She turned it off again. It fell to the floor. She ignored Craig's loud, angry voice coming out of it as Ian's thumb slipped under the elastic, his tongue licking her nipple then trailing up her chest and the side of her neck.

"Oh, *God*, yes!" she exclaimed hotly.

Grabbing his head, she pulled it to her mouth and kissed him with so much passion that she wondered if she'd ever felt this excited before. His hands slid to her bare back then down to her buttocks, covered only with a thin layer of red nylon. He moved them inside the material, massaging her bare backside with such tenderness that she pressed her stomach against his.

His maleness pushed against her body. Her excitement increased until it centered on the feelings in her loins. She felt herself being lifted, being laid gently on the floor. Then he pulled her jeans from her body. Ian's heavy weight came down on her, his body lying between her legs. But he wasn't disrobed yet. He was still wearing his jeans.

He pushed against her rhythmically, kissing her deeply, massaging her breast. Her breathing became more labored. She felt herself nearing that abyss of fulfillment despite the angry voice shouting over the phone. Closer and closer Ian brought her until the agony of ecstasy bubbled up in her chest and she cried out, her body convulsing in the most complete release of arousal that she'd ever had. Only when she lay panting beneath him did Ian stop moving against her.

"Faith!" Craig exclaimed. "Are you all right?"

She reached over and picked up the phone. "I've never been better in my life. Good-bye."

Grinning, Ian pushed himself up turned the cellphone off. "That should stop him from calling back again," he said as he dropped back onto the floor to sit beside her. He caressed her breast, rubbing the nipple with his palm.

"You weren't satisfied," she said.

"I don't have any protection," he explained. "Quite frankly, I'm not used to needing it. But you can be sure I'll come prepared the next time. I have a feeling I missed out on a lot tonight."

There was a knock on the door that startled both Faith and Ian.

"You two decent in there?" Joe asked cheerfully.

"Shoot," Ian said in dismay. "I wanted a little more time for afterplay. Better get dressed, sweetness. I'll stall him."

Before he could rise, she grabbed his head and kissed him. "I have one more thing to say." She smiled softly. "Thank you."

"Oh, sweetness," he replied as he swept his sweater and undershirt off the floor, "it was my pleasure. And the next time we get together for this purpose, I promise it will be the real thing—with plenty of protection for the night."

TWELVE

This was probably one of the hardest things she'd ever done. Making a phone call to a 1-900 psychic was ludicrous, but she had to do it if she wanted to cover all avenues possible for the special. The phone rang seven times while she waited anxiously for someone to answer. She was just about to hang up when the woman came on the line and announced that the call would cost \$3.99 per minute and would show up on the next phone bill. Faith acknowledged it before the woman asked her first name and birth date.

"Are you sitting down?" the woman asked.

"Does it make a difference?" Faith replied.

The woman chuckled and explained that she wanted Faith to be completely relaxed, to close her eyes and concentrate on herself. Faith agreed, then stared at the clock so she could time her call. She didn't want to overspend on something so silly.

In the background, Faith heard the woman shuffle tarot cards she'd explained that she would be using. A few moments later, the woman spoke again.

"Okay, Faith," she said. "Was there something in particular that you wanted me to read?"

"Well," Faith replied carefully, "I'm thinking about changing my job."

"Are you dissatisfied or just wanting something new?"

"Not really dissatisfied. I like what I'm doing, but I don't necessarily want something new, either."

Faith heard the woman lay down some cards before she said, "I see that you're having trouble with a man at the office. He's either bothering you or not doing the work the way he should." Faith said nothing. "Does that mean anything to you?"

"No. I'm not working with anybody like that." But if she wanted to be honest, Craig was bothering her.

"And there's a woman with strong influence on you." *Absolutely not*, Faith thought. "She's either a close friend or a relative."

"I'm sorry, but I just moved and I don't have any close friends yet."

"There's a woman in the cards that has a very strong influence over you," the woman insisted gently. "I see her as not very supportive of your work."

"I don't know what to say, except that it doesn't describe anybody that I'm aware of."

"All right. I also see two men in your cards. One of them is very spiritual." *Wait a second here*, Faith thought. *This is getting too close to the truth.* "There's another man with whom you have a relationship—or possibly a close friendship. Does any of this mean anything to you?"

"I suppose," Faith said noncommittally.

The woman on the other end flipped a couple more cards. "I see you marrying one of these men—sometime in the near future, like the next month or so."

"Oh?"

“One of them loves you very much.”

That was probably true of about fifty percent of all this woman’s calls. For heaven’s sake, how many times did that woman give the same predictions? It was such an easy one to make that it must have been thousands of times a week—if not a day.

But none of this information was on the topic of her job, and she wanted to change back to the original subject. “Could you tell me more about my job please?”

“I see you staying with it for now, but you’ll look for another one at the same time. Is there a hobby or another interest that you might turn into a career?”

This seemed like the most appropriate place to inconspicuously insert her research project and see what the woman came up with. “Reincarnation interests me.”

“I don’t see you getting into that field. I see you staying with the career you have, getting a little further ahead in it, then changing to a new job. But learning more about reincarnation is a way to relieve your stress, so you should follow that, too. It could take you somewhere someday. And the man you’ll marry is very supportive of your career. He stands behind you in your choice.”

Several times Faith tried to get the woman to talk more about reincarnation, hoping the woman would tell her something she could use for the special. But the woman continually reverted to the men in her life. Frustrated, Faith decided that this avenue had been depleted, so she thanked the woman politely and hung up.

But she couldn’t get the conversation she’d had with the phone-line psychic out of her mind. She’d gotten virtually nothing for her project, yet the psychic had been so unerringly accurate that it was eerie.

Two men, she’d said. One of them very spiritual, one of them bothering her at work, one of them very supportive of her job. If that didn’t describe Craig, she didn’t know what did. One was a very close friend, she’d said, one who loved her very much. Obviously Ian, also very supportive of her job. But Faith couldn’t see marriage to either of them in the near future because she wasn’t ready for marriage.

Christmas night Ian had even proven beyond a doubt how much he cared about her by denying himself while satisfying her. And why? Because he was protecting her. On top of that, he’d avoided intimate contact he’d been too embarrassed to buy what he needed.

Faith smiled. Ian was thirty-seven years old, yet he was a mere teenager at heart when it came to contraception. The only reason she hadn’t told him not to bother was because Roger had had two affairs during their short marriage, and protection could go two ways. She certainly didn’t want to chance giving Ian a disease she might not even know she had.

The clothes dryer buzzed, and Faith wandered to the laundry room to fold her clothes.

She’d felt so content lately that she didn’t want the emotion to disappear, and she was afraid it would if Craig ever mentioned what had happened when he’d called her on Christmas night. Thank goodness, he hadn’t said a word.

Ian had reacted pretty much as she’d expected. He’d waited a long time before he initiated such intimate play, and when he finally did, he’d been very tender, very caring, very unselfish. Joy filled her heart just thinking about it. If only she could say that she loved Ian. Then her life would be as easy as it was content. She could tell Craig that she wasn’t interested, that she had no desire to date him anymore.

As she folded a pair of green panties, the doorbell rang. Startled, she hurried to answer it, and was even more startled to see Ian standing on the porch.

“Ian! What a nice surprise.” She grinned when she realized that he was staring at her,

his mouth hanging open in awe. "Come in before you freeze your tonsils."

Suddenly, his mouth snapped shut, and he stepped over the threshold. Faith's smile broadened. This was the first time Ian had seen her in the robe he'd bought her for Christmas, and it obviously affected him as much as she'd hoped.

"So what brings you way out here?" she asked as she led him toward the laundry room.

"I stopped by to see how John and Betty liked their Caribbean cruise."

"That's where they are right now. I'm watching the house for them while they're gone. I'm also doing laundry," she added, waving her panties that she carried. "Why don't you talk to me while I finish folding this load, then I'll put in another load."

"You mean we're *alone* in the house?" he asked, sounding horrified by the thought.

"Don't worry," she said with a seductive grin as she folded another pair of pastel panties. "I won't hurt you."

"I'm going to put my coat in the kitchen," he said, passing the laundry room. "I'll be right back."

By the time he returned, Faith hummed while she folded her delicate satin camisole and laid it in the basket. Everything in the basket and dryer were different pieces of her lingerie. Panties, slips, brassieres, camisoles, nightgowns, and nightshirts. Of all the things for her to be washing! Why couldn't it have been the sweatpants and sweatshirts that she liked to wear around the house? And she was wearing the robe he'd given her! Oh, well. Why not use it to her advantage and see how far he would go?

"I'm glad you showed up tonight," she said. "I'm going to be busy for the rest of the week, and I was afraid I wouldn't get to see you until Friday night."

Faith bent over the dryer to take out another slip, and Ian blew air through his open mouth. She knew the silk material clung to her buttocks like a pair of tight jeans, that he could see the outline of her panties beneath it. And she knew what it would do to him.

"Tomorrow night I have choir practice and Thursday night I have to do some research for my special," she continued as though she didn't notice. "It's really starting to come together nicely. I'm even getting excited about going on the air. Do you know anything about reincarnation?"

"Not much," he replied. "I took a college course on religions of the world, but that was a long time ago."

"Too bad. I could have used a little more input. This morning I called one of those psychic hot lines you see advertised on TV. What an experience! Unfortunately, I didn't get much in the way of usable information." She bent over again to look inside the dryer and make sure she had everything out. "That's it."

Ian caressed her hips and pulled her back against him. Straightening up, she leaned back and sighed as his hands slipped over the soft material of her robe to her stomach. His denim-clad manhood pushed against her buttocks as his hands moved upward slowly, from her lower abdomen to her breasts, where his thumbs toyed with her nipples.

"Oh, man," she sighed. "Is it nice to see *you* tonight?"

"Do you know how much I missed holding you like this, sweetness?" he asked in a husky voice filled with desire.

Faith inhaled sharply and struggled to maintain her calm, to keep herself on an even keel, despite Ian's seductive movements. But even though she tried, her voice cracked with the explosion of longing that flooded her veins. "A lot?"

"More than a lot." He squeezed her breasts tenderly and lowered his voice to a near

whisper against her ear. "I missed holding these precious mounds. I missed playing with their hard, excited tips." Turning her around by the shoulders, he pinned her against the washer, his pelvis pressed firmly against hers, moving seductively against her. "I missed kissing you like this."

His mouth covered hers in a hungry kiss filled with more passion than he had ever shown her. Faith wondered if he'd planned this, but the thought was fleeting, because he broke the kiss to nuzzle her neck while he untied the sash on her robe.

With a moan of pleasure, she threw her head back and closed her eyes. She was going to let Ian take this as far as he wanted to. If that meant stopping before he could be satisfied, so be it. If it meant stopping before *she* could be satisfied, that was fine, too. But she doubted either of them would sleep that night until both of them had doused the flame of desire that had been rising to an inextinguishable peak for the past several weeks.

His hands caressed her warm skin. His fingers worked their ways up her ribs as he spoke in short, seductive sentences that made her breath catch with growing arousal. "I missed kissing you here." His lips caressed the hollow of her neck lingeringly then slid down to the rise of her breast. "I missed kissing you here."

A small groan escaped from deep inside her when his lips caressed her breast. Then his tongue trailed across the skin to the dark nipple. "I missed kissing this." He kissed it then said, "I missed sucking it gently."

For several minutes he suckled, first on one then the other excited bud, as his hands roamed over the rest of her body, from her shoulders to her hips, to her knees, up her thighs. His thumbs slipped under the elastic leg holes on her panties. She sighed heatedly as he knelt before her, his lips moving over her stomach to the top of her bikinis, pausing for his tongue to dip into her navel.

His fingers slid into the elastic waistband on her underwear, and they slid slowly down her legs. His lips followed the waistband, lower and lower until it reached the dark patch of her womanhood. With a groan, she said, "Oh, God."

Helping her step out of her panties, he replied, "God has nothing to do with this, sweetness."

He rose slowly, his hands caressing the sides of her body to keep the robe from blocking his view. "You're so beautiful, Faith." He sighed when he reached his full height before her. "You're so sinful to me that sometimes I think you're a gift from Satan." His hands moved over her breasts to her shoulders and pushed the robe down her arms.

She stood before him, unashamed of her nudity, positive that tonight would be theirs. Unable to still her shaking fingers, she unbuttoned his shirt and slid it from his body, releasing the buttons on his sleeves when they obstructed her task. Then she pulled his undershirt over his head. Now he stood before her, his muscular chest bared as her entire body was.

She reached for his belt, expecting him to stop her. But he didn't. He stood still and let her unbuckle it then slide the button from its hole on his jeans. Taking her time, she slid down the zipper then worked her hand into them.

"Oh, Faith," he sighed as he massaged her breasts, "I don't know if this is a good idea, but I can't stop tonight." He swept her into his arms, asking, "Where's your bedroom?"

Draping her arms around his broad shoulders, she replied, "Upstairs, second door on the left."

He laid her gently on the bed, sat down on the edge, and disrobed. When he lay down

beside her, her lips captured his in a demanding kiss. He still wore his briefs, and she was determined to get them off him. Her fingers on one hand wandered through the hair on his chest while her other hand slipped into his shorts, caressing him until he groaned into her mouth. She spread her legs, silently inviting him to join with her.

But when he moved between her legs, he still wore his underwear. Seeing no alternative, Faith thrust her hands down the waist and pushed them to his thighs. He was bare against her now, and in one swift lift of her buttocks, she thrust herself upward with a moan that had never been more satisfying to release.

Then Ian began to move within her, as willing a participant as she. Faith couldn't believe that this was really happening. After all the dreams, his lovemaking was more than she'd imagined. He knew how to make her even more excited than she already was. He knew exactly where to touch her to make her chest constrict with what had to be a lack of oxygen. He knew exactly how to ...

No longer able to stave off the joyous culmination of fulfillment, she tore her mouth from his and cried out, her body convulsing beneath his. Ian was stiff in her arms now, hardly moving, sweating as though he'd just run ten miles in the summer. But that didn't bother her as he collapsed upon her, weighting her down with his body.

After several minutes, their panting subsided, and Ian rolled onto his back. Faith moved to her side and laid her head on the crook of his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Faith," he said as he rubbed her upper arm.

"Why?" she asked. "That was absolutely the most heaven-sent experience of my life."

"But I didn't have any protection. I couldn't force myself to buy any. Now that I know what it's like to be with you, I'll never be able to turn back again."

"I don't want you to, Ian."

He kissed her hair then hugged her with both arms. "I love you, Faith."

She wasn't sure how she hid the amazement from her voice, but when she spoke, it sounded calm and collected. "You don't have to say that, Ian. It was a great experience, but you aren't obligated to tell me that."

"I told you because it's true. I love you. I could never have made love to you if I didn't. And I'm not going to ask you to tell me that you love me, because I know you can't do that right now. You had a bad marriage, and you need time to recover from the emotional wounds that Roger left. I have absolutely no intention of asking a commitment from you—or even a proclamation of your love. I don't need to hear your words to know that you care about me."

"I do, too," she replied with a sigh. "I care very much. But I also care about sleeping. That was an exhausting experience, and I have to get up early in the morning."

"Then I'll leave."

Faith shot to her elbow and stared down at him. "Leave? Why do you want to leave?"

"Because I don't have any protection. I'm not going to tempt fate more than I already have. I'll talk to you tomorrow, and I'll definitely have protection by Friday night. I'd like to do this again, but I'd like to do it right next time." He kissed her quickly then pulled up his undershorts before sitting on the edge of the bed. "I love you, sweetness. You stay in bed. I think I know the way out." He kissed her one more time after he slid into his jeans. "Good night."

Sweeping his shoes and socks off the floor, he hurried from the room, turning off the light on his way out.

Faith lay back and sighed. Ian loved her, and she didn't have to do anything to earn it. That was a nice change of pace from Roger wanting her to do *everything* for him. She was going to like having a love affair with Ian McCary. He was a man who actually cared more about her than he did about himself. And she liked that.

THIRTEEN

Ian stared at the black robe. Last night he'd finally made love with Faith, and he hadn't felt a bit guilty. In fact, he believed that their intimacy was the most *right* thing he'd ever done.

Now tonight, this. Rising slowly from his bed, he wandered into the living room and collapsed onto the sofa. He rubbed the silk sleeves on his arms, trying desperately to relive last night. But his mind kept wandering to the commitment he'd made simply because he didn't know how to get out of it.

If Faith weren't busy tonight, he would have called her and discussed his decision before he made it. Unfortunately, he hadn't been able to wait. He'd had to give the man an answer right away. So he'd answered. Now he had to tell Faith the whole truth of his background. Or *did* he have to?

Four weeks, he'd told the man. That was all. After that, he would never practice that profession again. In the past two and a half years, he'd come to realize that Mary had pushed him into it. It had never been his first choice of an occupation. He'd always preferred sociology and advertising. After his four-week commitment, he would tell Faith everything, because then it would be his past. Then he could take her home to Oregon to meet his family with a clean conscience.

In the meantime, he needed to buy some protection. Last night had proven that his self-restraint would no longer be effective. Now that he knew what he'd been missing with her, he could never deny himself again, and he needed to be prepared.

"I'm sorry I've been so busy lately," Faith said as she chatted over dinner with Craig Saturday night. "It's like I hardly even have time to sleep." What would he say if he knew that she'd *slept* with Ian twice this past week? "But I really have been trying to find the time."

"That's all right, honey," Craig replied with a smile. "Researching a special can get complicated."

So can other parts of life, she thought. But aloud, she said, "This one certainly has. I've been interviewing all kinds of people—from psychics to ministers. Next week, I'm scheduled for hypnosis. I found one who would try to regress me into at least one past life."

"How exciting!" Craig said. "May I come with you?"

"Come with me?" she repeated. She'd planned to ask Ian if he could get time off work to go with her. "That isn't necessary."

"I know, but I'd love to hear what you say. I've already done self-hypnosis, and I know that we were together in a past life. In fact, I wouldn't mind it if I were hypnotized, too. It would give you more ammunition for your research. And maybe we'll come up with proof

that we were in more than one life together. That happens quite often, you know.”

“That’s what my research shows, anyway,” she admitted. This was crazy. She had to get out of this mess as nonchalantly as she could. But what did she care? She was going to break up with him, anyway. She cared too much for Ian to risk losing him because she was also dating Craig. “I want to do this alone, Craig, mainly because I don’t believe anything will happen. I don’t want you there, so I won’t have to deal with your disappointment. But if you want to have my hypnotist do a session with you, I certainly would appreciate the extra input.”

“I’ll stay in the waiting room.”

“No, Craig. I want to do this myself. And, as long as we’re done with dinner, there’s something I need to tell you.” She paused. When she’d made her decision, she hadn’t thought that the words would be so hard to say. But she still had to do it. Drawing in a deep breath, she said, “Craig, I can’t see you anymore.”

His dark eyes widened in surprise, and he replied in a low, frantic voice. “You *can’t* break up with me, Faith. We’re soulmates. You’ll see that when you have your regression therapy.”

“I’ve done enough research to know that soulmates don’t have to be married. Reincarnation doesn’t even *hint* that they do.” Digging her wallet from her pocket, she took twenty dollars from it and laid it on the table. Then, as she rose, she said, “That should cover my part of the meal—plus a tip. I’ve had a nice time these past few weeks, but it just isn’t working. Good night, Craig.”

“It’s because of McCary, isn’t it!” he called as she fled the building.

Hurrying to her car, she got in behind the wheel and locked her door in case Craig followed her. Starting the motor, she pulled out of the parking lot.

Thank goodness, she’d had to meet him that night instead of letting him pick her up. Thank goodness, her with Craig was over. Now she could concentrate on her relationship with Ian and decide if she truly loved him.

Ian reached across his desk to pick up the buzzing cellphone. As he brought it to his ear, he glanced around his study and frowned at all the wadded pieces of paper he’d tossed heedlessly about. Two and a half years away from his original profession had staled his brain.

“Hello?” he asked.

“Hi, sexy,” Faith returned.

In an instant, his spirits lifted. “Hi, sweetness. I thought you had a date with Emerson tonight.”

“I did. I just didn’t tell you why because I wasn’t sure I could pull it off. But it was *real* easy. Now *you’re* the only person I’m dating.”

“You broke up with him?” Ian asked in surprise. “Why? You told me that you weren’t ready for a commitment.”

“If going to bed with somebody doesn’t constitute a commitment, I don’t know what does.”

As happy as he was to hear the news, he was skeptical that he was really having this conversation. He’d been working hard all day. Maybe his mind was playing tricks on him.

“A lot of people go to bed together without making a commitment. Just because I made one, doesn’t mean you have to.”

“I know,” she said. “I *want* to be with only one person, namely you.”

Ian almost shouted with joy. Even though Faith wasn’t saying the words, her making a commitment must mean that she loved him. She was happy being with him. She’d told him that last night. And now she was saying that she was ready to make a commitment. After all this time, he finally felt like he was getting a life back—one more worthwhile than his previous one.

“I love you, Faith,” he reiterated. “And more than anything else, I’d like to come over and see you right now. But I’m afraid I can’t because I’m working.”

“Oh! Speaking of working, I have an idea. Would you do me a favor and participate in my research project by being regressed through hypnosis? I’ll set up the appointment for you and everything if you want me to.”

“Sounds interesting. Sure, I’ll do it.”

“Great. I’ll call and set everything up. Then I’ll have them call you to confirm it. That way, if it’s not good timing, you can make other arrangements.”

“Okay.”

“Now about getting together for a while. How about tomorrow?” she asked with a seductive drawl. “I could fix lunch in my cottage—away from Aunt Betty and Uncle John’s prying eyes and constant words.”

“They’re back?”

“Got back this morning. What do you say?”

“I say I’m sorry, but I have a previous commitment.” He paused to chuckle. “And you know how I am about commitments. Even if somebody else is reluctant to make them, I don’t mind—as long as I can make my own without the other person feeling threatened.”

“And I don’t feel a bit threatened. Actually, it’s a good thing you can’t do it. I almost forgot about a previous commitment myself. Wait a minute. Does this preclude the possibility of dinner tomorrow night?”

“I’d love to do dinner with you.”

“Good. I’ll see you about six tomorrow night, okay?”

“That’s perfect,” he agreed. “I’d better go now. I still have a lot of work to do, and I’m having a devil of a time concentrating.”

“I hope I didn’t make matters worse,” she said with a giggle.

“If anything, sweetness, you made things better. Now that my brain’s had a break, I know exactly how to approach my problem.”

After giving a loud, lingering kiss into the phone, she said, “Glad I could help, sexy. Bye.”

“I love you,” he replied just before he turned off the phone.

Faith really had helped him with his work. Now he knew how to approach his dilemma. If things went well, this would be the most powerful sermon he had ever preached in his life.

Donning her choir robe, Faith got the music she needed that day and sat down in her position for before-service practice. It was awfully hot in the building that day, but nobody else seemed to be complaining about it. That was odd, too, because people in this small

church did a lot of complaining about things that Faith found nit-picky.

"It's hot in here today, isn't it," Faith said to the alto sitting next to her.

"Actually," the woman replied, "I think it's a little on the chilly side. Are you sure you're feeling all right?"

"I feel fine." Faith rose and turned toward the door when she heard it open. "I hope I'm not coming ..." She glanced up when she heard a gasp across the room. Her eyes widened in shock; she inhaled sharply to keep from crying out. Ian! Wearing a preacher's black robe and carrying a Bible. This wasn't happening. It *couldn't* be.

"Good looking, isn't he?" the woman beside her whispered. "I met him earlier. Do you want me to introduce you at the luncheon social after church? I hear he's single."

"No, thanks," Faith replied. "I'm going straight home."

"Good thing. You really look pale. Are you sure you're going to be okay?"

Faith refused to let a man who had deceived her set her running from the building. She'd made love with a minister. Twice! And now she was forced to see him in church. Dear God, she'd seen him naked! She'd actually put his protection where it belonged. A minister! There was no doubt about it. She could never live through this service.

"I'll be fine," Faith told the woman. "Now, shush. He's getting ready to pray."

Faith wasn't sure how she would make it through the sermon without passing out. Ian was talking about how ministers were *human* servants of God. He was telling everybody how they had feelings and desires just like every other man and woman. Apparently, from listening to Ian's words, the previous minister of this church had left under a lot of speculation that he'd stolen money, but there were also rumors that he'd been intimate with one of the parishioners.

How could Ian be talking like this when he'd done exactly that with her? He was being hypocritical. No, not hypocritical, but at the least deceptive, especially knowing that she was sitting to his left in the choir loft. She couldn't fathom his ability to preach on this topic.

The words he used, though, weren't technically dishonest. He was stating facts that were making the people that Faith could see get tears in their eyes. Several people sobbed quietly as he spoke his message of Biblical love not being inconsistent with physical love, of both being important in people's lives, of the church's members remembering that their previous pastor was a man before all else. But most importantly, he said near the end, they must remember that the strength of love between two people is a gift from God, sent from heaven, and is not to be judged by others.

Faith couldn't remember hearing anything so moving in her life. Because she knew him, she knew that his words came from his heart, from a man who was explaining his own situation without the congregation knowing that was his purpose. It was almost as though he wanted to purge what he'd done with her from his mind.

How could he do such a thing? she wondered as she rose with the rest of the congregation for the final hymn. A wave of heat and dizziness swept over her, and she sat down then rose more slowly. When she glanced up from her hymnal, she noticed that Ian was gazing over at her in concern.

Oh, great, she thought as she mouthed the words to the song, *now everybody knows something's wrong*. How was she ever going to get out of this?

The hymn and benediction seemed to take an eternity, but somehow she made it through them. Now all she had to do was act casual with the choir members and make a quick retreat out the back door so Ian didn't see her.

On her way out of the building, Faith stopped near the reception when she noticed a matronly woman speaking with Ian.

"That was one of the best sermons I've ever heard, Rev. McCary," the woman said. "I never thought much about what you said, but you certainly brought it home in a touching way."

"I'd hoped to," Ian said with a smile. "When I heard why your minister left, I wanted to make the congregation understand that there's more behind the black robe than a man who studies scriptures. Any man can do that, and any man can make a mistake in judgment." Faith turned to leave. "Would you excuse me, please? I see somebody I want to say hello to, and it looks like she's leaving."

Faith had just started out the door when she heard, "Faith, wait!"

Startled, she spun to face him, her face set in anger. But she lost her balance and began to fall backward, pushing the door open in the process. Reacting quickly, Ian grabbed her upper arms and pulled her toward him. He continued to hold one arm then reached around her and pulled the door closed.

"Are you all right?"

"Stay away from me!" she demanded in an irate whisper.

"But, Faith, ..."

"I don't want to hear it. You deceived me, and I feel like a fool. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I haven't done this since my wife died. It was part of my past." He glanced around and noticed that people were watching. "This isn't the place to discuss it. I'll stop by your place later."

"Don't bother," she said. "If you'll excuse me, I'm going home. I have things to do this afternoon."

As Ian called her name, she fled the building. She couldn't believe that he thought she would even consider discussing this with him. He'd deceived her, just like every other man she'd ever met except one—Craig. Craig had always been open and honest, even if she hadn't been too thrilled about it sometimes.

She would go home and take a nap. That way she wouldn't be awake to know if Ian came or not. But when she got there and put on her favorite laying-around-the-house sweatsuit, she couldn't sleep. Instead, she got up and put her hair in a ponytail to do some heavy cleaning. That should take her mind off ...

A knock at the door startled her, and she went to answer it. Ian stood on her doorstep still wearing the suit he'd had on at church.

"Go away," she declared as she pushed the door.

Ian stopped it with both hands and pushed back, opening it with very little trouble before he stalked into the living room. "You're going to listen to me, Faith, if I have to stay here all week to explain."

"I don't need an explanation from a man who would deceive me. I can't trust it to be true."

"I didn't tell you about being a minister because it was part of my past that I wanted to forget. But sometimes we *can't* forget our pasts. Sometimes they pop up when we least expect them to—and believe me, I certainly didn't expect this."

"You expect me to *believe* that line? You expect me to stand here and listen to your excuses for not telling me everything when you had the chance? I won't do that, Ian. I won't let you trick me into believing you again. I won't let you do the same thing to me that Roger

did.”

“Faith, please. I’m not the same kind of person as your ex. I haven’t practiced the ministry since my wife and kids died. That’s when I realized that I’m not cut out to be a minister. I don’t have the right kind of commitment for it.”

“And I’m supposed to believe that you can make the right kind of commitment to *me*?” she snapped.

“It’s what Mary wanted me to be, Faith,” he insisted. “I didn’t realize it until recently, but I went to seminary to please *her*. She’d said that her mother always wanted one of her daughters to marry a preacher. Apparently, she thought it was the most noble profession. Her other sons-in-law weren’t in the clergy, so Mary cried and cried until I gave in. I wanted to get a Ph.D. in sociology—or maybe a masters in advertising. But I caved in and gave Mary what she wanted. I would do no less for you.”

“I don’t want you to give up things that you want—not for me, anyway. I have my own life, and you have yours.”

“What are we going to do? I still have three sermons to preach there before the new minister comes in. Are we going to spend the next few Sundays pretending that we haven’t made a commitment to each other? Or are we going to let everybody in that church know that we’re a couple?”

No longer able to control her anger, she hurled a plastic squirt bottle across the room. “I’ve got a surprise for you, Ian McCary. We’re *not* a couple. I never want to see you again. Get out of my life and *stay* out of it.”

“What about going to church? You must be serious about that one if you went so far as to join the choir.”

“I’ll still go to church, but I sure as *hell* ...” She emphasized the word more to spite his profession than because she wanted to use it. “... won’t associate with you.” She stalked to the door and yanked it open. “Now get out of my house. And don’t come back.”

His heart breaking, Ian wandered past her. What had he done? How would he ever rectify his mistake? *Could* he ever rectify it? Not knowing what else to do, he got into his car and drove away. He’d finally found a woman that he loved more than life itself, and he’d lost her because he hadn’t told her everything she should know. He’d kept a secret, and that secret had turned into the bomb that had destroyed their relationship. At this point, he wasn’t sure he could ever forgive *himself* if she never forgave him.

FOURTEEN

Faith was so depressed that she could hardly eat. All she felt like doing was sleeping. But she had a job to do, a deadline to meet. She had relatives to visit with and pretend that nothing was wrong, pretend like she hadn't just made the second biggest mistake of her life.

Thursday morning she rose about an hour later than normal. Since she didn't have to be in the office, she was grateful for this small amount of extra sleep. She needed to be at the hypnotist's office in a little less than an hour. Thank goodness she'd taken her shower last night after work. A quick breakfast and a wash-up were all she needed to get herself going—that and whole lot of coffee. But as soon as she smelled the coffee brewing, she no longer wanted it. She let it run its cycle then threw it down the drain.

With a sigh she headed into her bedroom to get ready and leave. She would just have to make due with a Diet Coke in the car. That should keep her from getting a caffeine withdrawal headache.

In the hypnotist's office, Frank Bowles, a balding man of about forty, directed her to a heavily padded, fabric-covered chaise lounge. "Make yourself comfortable, Ms. Chisolm."

"Thank you," she replied, lying back on the couch. Did she dare tell him that she was skeptical about the success of this experiment? Probably not, especially since she hadn't mentioned that she was doing this for research. She didn't believe that people could be taken back farther than their life experiences permitted. Reincarnation was fascinating, but she certainly didn't believe in it.

"My assistant tells me that you're interested in finding out about your past lives," Frank said.

"That's right," Faith replied. "Do you think you can do it?"

"Of course. She also mentioned that you'd like it recorded, is that correct?"

"If you don't mind," she said, digital camcorder.

Frank accepted it, put it in on a tri-pod in the corner of his office, and started the camcorder. "I don't mind at all. Do you mind if I use an audio recorder? I like to tape my sessions, as well as make notes. I find I miss things if I don't."

"That's fine."

"Well, then. Shall we get started?" Frank wandered to his desk, pushed down the record buttons on his recorder then sank down into an overstuffed chair that matched the couch. He spoke in a low, soothing voice. "Just relax now, Miss Chisolm. Take your mind off everything. As you listen to my words, soon you'll hear them only in the distance."

Faith tried to follow his directions but found it difficult to keep her mind blank. His voice was soft, telling her that she should relax her feet, her calves, her knees, her thighs. She needed to relax her fingers and her hands, her wrists and forearms, then her elbows, upper arms, and shoulders. Oddly enough, she did feel more relaxed.

Relax her neck, let the muscles drain of their energy until she felt like an infant who

couldn't hold up its head yet. Relax her jaw. Relax her mind; set it free from thought. She felt serene now, calm and peaceful. She felt so light that her body was floating, just like his words suggested.

"I'm going to start taking you back now," he said in a sing-songy voice, "back only three years. Where are you?"

"In my living room," she replied.

"What do you see in your living room?"

"A hole in the wall."

"How did the hole get there?"

"Roger was angry and punched the wall. I'm having it fixed."

He stopped asking questions and told her that she was very relaxed, that if she wanted to open her eyes, she could. But she didn't want to. The lids felt so heavy that she wanted to keep them closed.

"I want you to sink down a little deeper now, Miss Chisolm." Faith could actually feel her body sinking into an abyss of tranquillity. "It's very soothing down here, very quiet. I want you to go back a little farther—to your twenty-first birthday. Where are you?"

"At my birthday party in the sorority house. There are two kegs of beer and a lot of friends. Everybody's drinking a lot but me. I don't drink much."

"Why not?" Frank asked.

"I don't like the taste."

"Did you get a lot of presents?"

"A few. My friends can't afford presents because we're in college."

"What did you get from your best friend?"

"A pretty pin made of green stones—jade, I think. Steven gave me a book on developmental psychology that I would need for next semester's class. He's so sweet."

"Is Steven your boyfriend?"

"In a way. We do things together, but I don't go to bed with him. I'm too busy with my studies."

"What did your mother give you?"

Faith scrunched up her face and spoke angrily. "Nothing. It's my twenty-first birthday, and my mother couldn't even send me a card. She makes me so mad with her selfishness that I could just scream. She's probably with another one of her boyfriends talking about how she's not old enough to have a child my age. That's why I'm majoring in psychology. I want to know what makes her tick."

"Relax, Miss Chisolm. Think about how pleasing it is to float on air, how your body drifts through a sea of tranquillity that completely surrounds you."

Faith's anger disappeared in an instant, and she returned to her pacified state of mind.

"It's so soothing to float like this, so totally relaxing that you want to drift farther back to more pleasant times, times when you played with your father. Do you see your father?"

"Yes," she replied. Her voice sounded so strange, like she was actually five years old again.

"Where are you?"

"In the park. Daddy's pushing me on the swing. Make me go high, Daddy."

"Do you like to go high when your daddy pushes you?"

"Oh, yeah! Daddy pushes me good. And he's going to take me to get ice cream."

"How old are you?"

“Five and a half.” She felt a frown come to her lips. “Something’s wrong with my daddy. He says we have to go home—because he hurts. Then he falls down.” Panic flooded through her. “I have to stop the swing with my feet. I can’t wake him up. I call his name and I shake him, but I can’t wake him up. Wake up, Daddy!”

“What’s wrong with your daddy?”

“Daddy can’t play with me anymore. He can’t push me high because he’s dead. Mommy said it was a heart attack. I don’t know what that is, but it’s bad if Daddy’s dead.”

“Let’s go back a little farther, Miss Chisolm. Think back another year. You don’t have to describe anything to me, just think about it for a minute.”

His voice relieved the panic in her chest, and Faith wandered back with him—to when she was four, then three, then two. Then she was just learning to walk. She fell and laughed and picked herself up. Over and over until she was so tired that she crawled to her blanket, popped her thumb into her mouth and fell asleep on the floor.

That deep, melodic voice was taking her back further now. How was that possible? There was little left of her life. Then she was drifting in a space of nothingness. She couldn’t say that it was dark, but there wasn’t any bright light, either.

Suddenly, there was noise—a lot of it. And smoke so thick that it made her choke. Frank’s voice questioned her from somewhere in the distance. “What do you see?”

Faith looked around and described her surroundings. The women were wearing short skirts with stockings rolled down past their knees. They had on hats or their hair was cut in a short bob. And there was music—lots of smoke from cigarettes—dancing—men who draped their arms drunkenly around the women’s shoulders and fondled their breasts in an open display.

“Do you know what this place is called?” Frank asked.

“A speakeasy. It’s a lot of fun here. I come to get away from my father.”

“You want to get away from your father?”

“Oh, yes. He’s an evil man. He beats me when I don’t do what he wants. Spare the rod and spoil the child, he always says. So I come here.”

“Do you know what your father does for a living?”

“I should,” she replied, surprisingly offended by his question. “I’m eighteen years old. My father’s a Baptist preacher.”

“And he beats you?”

“I’m not supposed to tell anybody, so don’t repeat it. I’ll get in a lot of trouble if word gets back to him that I told.”

“Your secret is safe with me. What’s your name?”

“Nathan Cromwell.”

“Do you remember the year?”

“That’s easy—1923.”

“What city are you in?”

“Jasper, Alabama.”

“Okay, Nathan. Since you’re at a place where you’re happy, why don’t we see if we can get you back even further in time,” Frank suggested in a quiet tone. “I want you to relax completely now. Give yourself over to the peaceful, floating sensation. Think about the life you’ve lived, Nathan. Think about when you were fifteen ... Ten ... Five ... Now you want to go way back, to the drifting, the floating, the quiet resting. There’s serenity where you are. There’s peace like you only get when you’re sleeping soundly. You’re drifting through this

quiet, peaceful space where nothing exists until you find something, hear something, smell something. Can you tell me what it is?"

Faith wrinkled her nose in distaste. "Sweat. It smells awful wif sweat. There's fields, 'n' it's terrible hot." In her mind, Faith glanced around her. "Slaves. Workin' 'n' sweatin'. Some is fallin' down its so hot. Hell's fire! Here he comes. Ah don' wanna do dis agin."

"Do you know your name?" Frank asked.

"Myrtle—jest Myrtle. Got no last name. God, he's comin' fer me."

"Who is?"

"My owner. He's gonna take me 'n' do what he wants, cuz Ah cain't stop him or he'll hab me whupped." She straightened her shoulders proudly as she lay on the couch. "Ah ain't gonna let him see Ah'm sceered. Ah ain't gonna gib him the sat'sfaction, cuz dat's what he wants—me to be sceered ub him. But Ah ain't. Ah'm gonna git 'way from him someday, eben if Ah hafta kill him—er git Moses to. Moses lubs me, 'n' I lub him. We gonna jump da broom tageder."

"You're a very proud, very courageous woman, Myrtle," Frank said when she stopped rambling. "How old are you? Do you know the year?"

"Dunno. Sixteen, mebbe. Sebenteen. Cain't rightly say. But da year's 1832."

"Do you know where you are?"

"Not fer from 'Lanta, Geo'gia. Ah hate my owner. He's terrible mean. Wish Ah could be wif Moses 'n' his owner. Mastah Hill's nice. Ah wanna run 'way to be wif Moses but Mastah Mo'gan'd whup me good—*den* he'd bed me agin, 'n' Ah don' want dat." Faith stiffened. "He's here now. Gonna take me to da woods 'n' hab his way wif me. He's tellin' me how he's gonna make me carry his youngun, but Ah won'. Ah'll kill it before Ah birf his baby. Know what Ah do? Ah close my eyes so Ah don' hafta see his mean, brown eyes starin' at me wif no clo'es on."

"Why don't we take you away from him?" Frank suggested. "Relax now, and think about when you were small. That's good. Now go back even farther. There's no Master Morgan now. He's nowhere near you. You're alone in peaceful quietness. You have a deep sense of well being. Nothing can hurt you; nobody can make you do anything. Drift back through time. Float through that void of serenity. Eventually you come upon something you haven't thought of in a long, long time. You want to know more about it. You want to ..."

"He is such a beautiful man," she said, interrupting him. "His legs and arms are strong with work, and he holds me tightly to comfort me."

"Do you have a name?"

"Aphrodite, like the goddess of love."

"Who is the man?"

Faith sighed contentedly. Even in this deep trance she felt the power of the love consuming her. "My lover, Eros, like the goddess's son. Oh, how we long for each other."

"You sound like there's a problem."

"He is the son of a very wealthy man—a ruler of many houses. I am from but a poor family by contrast. We cannot be together openly. We must meet in secret, but our love is very strong. Eros promises that we will be together often even after he marries the woman his father says that he must. It is enough for me."

"Why do you love him?"

"He is a kind man, compassionate, adoring. He never wishes bad for me. Above all, he wants me to be as happy as I can under the circumstances in which we must live."

“Well, Aphrodite, I’m afraid our time is about up, so I have to bring you back to the present. I think that now’s the perfect time, too, because you seem very happy. I want you to relax again; keep your mind free of thought. Listen to only my voice as I bring you back.”

Faith didn’t want to leave this wonderful place, but she knew that she must. In the distance, she could hear Frank talking to her softly, telling her that she was relaxed, that he would bring her home safely by the time he counted backward from three. Three, he told her. She was relaxed and open to new insights of her present personality in relation to her past lives. His voice was becoming louder as he spoke, as though he was physically closer to her.

Two. She would be full of energy, revitalized, rejuvenated, as though she’d had a long nap. She was going to remember everything and be able to reflect on it clearly, with an open mind. Life was beginning to return to her body; she was feeling stronger. Her arms and legs began to feel heavy on her body; the lightness dissipated at an astounding speed.

One. She was fully awakened now, refreshed and rejuvenated. She could open her eyes and feel the wonderful sensations of contentment.

Faith opened her eyes and gazed over at the man. She felt refreshed, but not rejuvenated. That sensation of love that had come over her remained in her chest, as though it would never go away.

“How do you feel?” Frank asked.

“Fine.” She sat up on the couch and faced him. “So that’s what it’s like to be regressed. I can’t help wondering where all of those notions came from.”

“They most likely came from your past lives,” Frank assured her. “There are ways to substantiate some of them—like the Roaring Twenties scene and the one in which you were a slave. But Aphrodite and Eros would probably be impossible to research with success. I imagine that happened long before there were records.”

“How would I go about researching these things?” she asked.

“I’d suggest starting at the local libraries to see if there are any records in the historical sections. As for the Twenties, somebody *might* still be alive to substantiate your life. I’d start by asking people in the area if they’re related to a Cromwell who was a minister. You’re very lucky that you recalled lives that can be documented. A lot of people can’t.”

“Well, thank you, doctor,” she said as she rose. “I may be in contact to see if I can remember anything else.”

When Faith left the office, she could still feel the love within her. This was a prospect that she’d never considered. Now all she needed to do was talk to John and see if he would extend the date of the special so she could do some back-up research on her findings of the day.

“I haven’t seen you around for a few days, Ian,” John said as they sat in his office at work. “How come?”

“I’ve been avoiding Faith,” Ian replied. “We had an argument Sunday, and going to your house would have made my running into her a bit unnerving to say the least. How is she doing?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen much of her, either. Betty said that she went down to the cottage the other day, but Faith was trying to get some extra sleep. Apparently, she can’t

seem to get enough lately. Now I figure it's because of your argument."

"I'd imagine it is." Ian rose and wandered to a bookcase. "I was hoping that she'd changed her mind about not wanting to see me again."

"This sounds like it was really serious," John said in concern. "What happened?"

"I wasn't totally open with her about my past." Ian's voice cracked under the strain. "You see, I'm a minister, and she found out last Sunday when I showed up at her church to act as a substitute until the new one comes in. I had no idea she was Presbyterian, and she had no idea that I was. It never that came up in our conversations."

"You sound like you're really knocking yourself over the head for this. It wasn't your fault, and it wasn't hers."

"Actually, it *was* my fault. You see, I could have mentioned it a couple of times, but I didn't want to, because I don't practice that profession anymore. I'm only doing it now because the Presbytery was in a bind. They needed somebody quick, so I said yes. Now she feels that I deceived her."

"I wouldn't call that a deception. You just didn't tell her everything."

Ian frowned and put the book back. "Try telling *her* that. I'll guarantee it won't work."

"You really love her, don't you."

"With all my heart. I never even loved my late wife as much as I do Faith. I don't know what to do to get her back."

"Well, have faith. I'm sure she'll come around."

Collapsing onto a chair, Ian considered one of the reasons he was in the office. If he hadn't already *had* Faith—in a different sense of the word—he wouldn't be in this agony now. But did he dare explain that to John, who doted on Faith as though she was his own daughter?

"Can you keep a secret from Betty?" Ian asked. "I really need to talk to somebody about this, but I don't want Faith to find out I did."

"We don't particularly like keeping secrets from each other," John admitted, "but we both know there are times when it's necessary. What's bothering you?"

"There's more to my relationship with Faith than either of us have told you." Ian paused, hesitant to release all of the information but knowing that he had no choice if he wanted advice on getting Faith back. "Christmas night we came very close to making love. It was all I could do to restrain myself. Then, while you were on your trip, we actually did it. It wasn't something we'd planned; it was just something that we couldn't stop. And we did it again once after that. Then Sunday I showed up at her church to preach."

"Oh, my God!" John exclaimed. "I can imagine how Faith reacted to *that*."

"I went to her place as soon as I could—to explain. But she wouldn't listen. She was devastated that I'd deceived her, that I hadn't told her everything about my past, that she had actually made love with a preacher. She told me everything about her past that I would consider important—like her love affair and her marriage. But I wasn't that open."

"Are you *sure* she told you everything?"

"Positive," Ian said, his voice filled with conviction. "I love Faith. Whatever she kept secret from me—if anything—must be very important. The very worst thing I could think of would be her having been a stripper or prostitute, and I could even forgive that. Not everybody wants that kind of information known to somebody they love."

"Do you think Faith loves you?" John asked in amazement.

Embarrassed, Ian mumbled his response. "I don't know. All I know is that I love her,

and her past doesn't matter. All I care about is fixing the present so I can make a future with her."

John shook his head. "I don't know what to tell you, son, except be patient. If Faith loves you, she'll eventually come around. I just can't say that it will happen soon."

"That's what I'm afraid of. Is there anything I could do to hurry this along? Without pushing her into a relationship she doesn't want, of course. I don't want to alienate her forever."

Smiling, John said, "You're the preacher, Ian. Do something *preacher-y*."

"What do you mean?" Ian asked, stunned by John's response.

"Maybe you should pray, son. Even an old agnostic like me does it on occasion."

FIFTEEN

Sitting in the choir loft, Faith tried to listen to Ian's words, but she couldn't concentrate. She still couldn't believe that she'd given herself to a man of the cloth. But according to his sermon last week, Ian believed that she had made love to a man—nothing more, nothing less. He'd also written that sermon when he didn't know she would be in attendance, so he must have been sincere.

But that didn't excuse his deception. Now here he was, talking about relationships and love and lasting commitments. How could she possibly listen to a man who had deceived her? Even if the parts of his sermon that filtered through did make sense.

Quite frankly, sitting here absently listening to him was making her sick to her stomach. How could he preach to these people about this when he knew what he'd done with her?

The woman beside her leaned closer to whisper in her ear. "Are you all right, Faith?"

"No," she replied in a like tone. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"Then get out of here."

The woman moved her legs out of the way, and Faith slid past her and hurried out the choir door. Faith barely made it to the nearest ladies' room. As soon as she dropped down in front of the toilet, she threw up. For several minutes her body rejected her breakfast. When she finally finished vomiting, she sat back on her knees, drained of energy.

Of all the times for her to come down with the flu. She was supposed to leave for Jasper, Alabama, Tuesday afternoon to see if there was any credence to the story she'd concocted while under hypnosis. From there she was going to Atlanta to see if she could find anything pertaining to her slave story. She didn't have time to be sick now.

Pulling herself together, she left the bathroom and went to the choir room to put away her robe. She wanted to get out of there before Ian finished preaching. That way he wouldn't be able to stop her like he had last week.

As soon as she got back to the cottage, she called the house to tell Betty that she couldn't have dinner with them.

"Have you and Ian gotten back together?" Betty asked.

Faith's heart still broke at the thought. "I never want to see him again, Aunt Betty. I can't abide a person who deceives me, even if it was unintentional, because deception can't *be* unintentional."

"Then why aren't you coming to dinner?"

"I got sick at church, and I'm going to bed. I have to leave for Alabama on Tuesday. If I have the flu, I need as much rest as I can get."

"Is there anything I can do?"

Faith smiled. Betty loved mothering people, and under normal circumstances, she wouldn't mind. Right now, though, all she wanted was rest. "Thanks a lot, Aunt Betty, but I'm just going to pour myself a big glass of juice and go to bed. I'll let you know later if I

need anything.”

Faith had only been in bed about twenty minutes when she heard a knock on her door. Rising wearily, she tied her heavy blue velour robe around her and padded barefoot to answer it. To her dismay, Ian stood outside.

“What do you want?” she asked as she turned her back to the cold air and wandered from the door. After last week, she knew that he would only try to convince her to talk to him, and she didn’t have the energy to argue today.

Closing the door, Ian followed her to the living room and sank onto the opposite end of the couch without taking off his overcoat. “I was worried about you, Faith. I wanted to quit preaching and follow you the second I saw you were gone. Why did you take off like that?”

As glad as she was to know that he still cared, as bad as she wanted to throw herself into his arms and have him hold her and tell her that he would never let her push him away again, she couldn’t bring herself to do it. She was just regaining her independence, and she refused to relinquish it so soon.

Leaning against the corner of the sofa, she laid her head on the back of it with a long sigh. “I left for the same reason you shouldn’t be here. I have the flu again.”

His hand went to her forehead. “You aren’t running a fever.”

“Yet,” she added, reluctantly pushing his hand away. Even as sick as she was, his touch sent desirous memories flashing through her mind, and she had to keep her distance. “I spent about five minutes throwing up at church, and I don’t think you should be here.”

“Don’t worry about me,” he said with a smile. “I have a very hardy constitution.”

“But I really don’t want company.”

Ian grinned at her and spread his arms wide. Resisting the temptation to fling herself into their secure embrace, Faith listened to his words—from afar it seemed in her mind.

“Do I look like I’m here to stay, sweetness? I still have my coat on.” She shook her head but didn’t respond as the smile slipped from his lips and he clasped her hand between both of his. “I know you don’t want me to be here, but I was too concerned not to check on you. I didn’t think you would have talked to me on the phone.”

“I wouldn’t have.”

“Well, sweetness, now that I’ve seen you with my own eyes, I guess I’ll go—even if you do look terrible under all that beauty. But before I stay gone, is there anything I can get for you? Seven-Up? Soup? Crackers?”

“Now that you mention it,” she said, smiling softly, “I don’t think I have any crackers, and they just might help settle my stomach. Let me check my cupboard.”

Faith rose slowly, so weak that she found it difficult to move. In a way, she was glad that Ian had stopped by. Although, he’d gone nearly an hour out of his way, round trip, to do it. Crackers sounded good right now, and she didn’t think she had any.

By the time she reached the kitchen, her head spun. Bright spots sparkled before her eyes, and a tinny buzzing rang in her ears. Bracing herself on the counter, she bowed her head for a few seconds in the hope that the dizziness would go away. It didn’t go away, but it did diminish somewhat. With her hand still on the counter, she started toward the cupboard where she stored boxed goods.

Ian watched Faith disappear into the kitchen. Somehow he had to convince her to let him stay. She looked terrible, and he desperately wanted to take care of her.

A thud in the kitchen startled him from his thoughts.

“Faith?” he asked in concern. When she didn’t respond, he rose and strode toward the kitchen. “Faith, are you all ... Oh, dear Lord!”

Faith, unconscious with a small gash just under her chin, lay crumpled on the floor. He dropped to squat down beside her and scooped her into his arms. As he reached her bedroom, she was beginning to regain consciousness; and as he laid her gently on her bed, she opened her eyes.

Grabbing a tissue from the box on her nightstand, he wadded it up and held it under her chin to see if he could stop the bleeding.

“I’ve got to admit, woman,” he said as he sank onto the edge of the bed, “I don’t think I’ve ever met anybody who gets more bumps, bruises, and cuts than you do—short of a football player.”

“What a terrible bedside manner you have, Pastor McCary,” she retaliated with a weak smile. “Didn’t anybody ever tell you that you aren’t supposed to tease sick people?”

Ian chuckled. “I’m glad you feel well enough to joke with me, doctor, but I’m just stating a fact.” He took the bloody tissue from her chin and replaced it with a second one. “You realize, don’t you, that your fainting spell precludes me from leaving. I can’t let you stay here alone if you’re that weak.”

“I’ll be fine, Ian. Really. You can go on home.”

“You ran out of church because you were sick, and now you fainted. I won’t leave until I’m sure you’re all right. And before you say anything, I would do no less for any parishioner living alone.” Taking her hand, he put it over the tissue and stood up. “Hold that while I get a bandage.”

On his way back into the room, he stopped short in the doorway and smiled. He’d been gone less than two minutes, and she was already asleep. If she weren’t so sick, he would climb into bed and show her how much he loved her. But he couldn’t do that, because she didn’t want to hear about his love after he’d deceived her. Forcing himself to keep his emotional distance, he wandered to the bed and sat down again. Faith’s hand, the tissue still clutched in it, lay on the pillow beside her head, so he taped the Band-Aid over her cut.

“Ian?” she asked groggily.

“Right here,” he replied. Taking the bloody tissue from her hand, he brushed some hair off her cheek.

Her eyes fluttered open, and she gazed up at him. “Thank you for helping me.”

He smiled to disguise his concern. “My pleasure. Let’s get you out of that robe so you can sleep more comfortably.”

“You don’t need to,” she said, blushing.

“I won’t take no for an answer, Faith.”

Unknotting her sash, he carefully slid one arm under her back and pushed her forward. She grabbed the lapels of her robe and held them tightly against her chest.

“Ian, please,” she said as he gently pried her right hand loose. Tears came to her eyes, and he had no doubt what she was thinking. He was a minister, and she couldn’t let him see her in her nightgown.

“Come on, Faith,” he coaxed as he worked apart the fingers on her left hand. “You know I won’t hurt you.”

“But, Ian ...” she protested.

The robe fell apart, partially revealing the filmy fabric beneath it. Ian stifled his urge to rip off her heavy robe for a good look. If he was ever going to convince her to give him

another chance, he had to show her that she could trust him. Tugging on the bottom of her sleeve until her arm came out, he slid the other sleeve from her bare arm.

With a hand caressing each bare shoulder, he laid her back on the bed. That yellow nightgown was so short that he could see all of her legs and had a glimpse of her hips on the sides. It was so low-cut that he could see most of her cleavage. And it was so lightweight that he could see her dark nipples harden as the cool air hit them.

Faith released a quiet moan as his hands slipped down her arms.

"If you're sick," he said in a forced paternal tone, "you should have more on."

"Wearing pretty nightgowns when I'm sick makes me feel better."

He swept her bangs from her forehead with a then kissed the long scar across it. She opened her eyes and gazed up at him as he examined her with adoration. When he spoke again, his voice as soft as the snow that floated to the ground outside, which surprised him because he was so nervous.

"I'm staying, Faith," he announced. "It may be the only chance I have to show you that you can trust me."

"You don't have to," she replied.

"Yes, I do." He kissed her lips briefly. "I love you, and I have to convince you to give me another chance. That's the only way to prove that you can trust me. Now you sleep. I'll be in the living room if you need anything."

When he started away, she said, "Ian? If I can't convince you to leave, I have an oversized sweatshirt in the third drawer of my dresser. Get out of your Sunday-go-to-meetin' clothes, and make yourself comfortable. There are also some leftovers in the fridge. It's the least I can do for your help."

Grinning, he strode to her dresser and pulled out the largest shirt he found. "Let me know if you need anything."

Faith stared at the newspaper article in shock. For two days she'd poured over reels of microfilm, from 1923 to 1926, in the library, but she'd never dreamed this was what she would find. The headline read: *PREACHER INDICTED IN SON'S DEATH*.

This was impossible. Isaac Cromwell had killed his son Nathan days before the younger man's twenty-first birthday. And why? Because he'd caught Nathan frequenting a speakeasy outside of town, only two weeks before Nathan's scheduled marriage to a young woman named Isabelle Malloy.

Dropping a quarter into the proper slot, Faith pushed the button and let the machine make a copy of the page. Poor Nathan. He hadn't even had the chance to marry the woman he loved. If he'd lost her while he was alive, she could say that she knew exactly how he felt—like his insides had been ripped out, like his soul had left his body, anyway. She knew because that was how she felt without Ian.

He'd been sweet Sunday night, but she hadn't let him stay with her. Not only had the snow begun to come down harder, she'd been afraid that she would feel sorry for him sleeping on a sofa that was too short for him and invite him to join her in bed. That would have been a mistake given their former closeness, so she'd sent him home. And it had been one of the hardest things she'd ever done.

Faith took the copy from its tray and put away the microfilm. Armed with the only information she felt she needed, she went back to the motel. She was awfully tired, not to mention she still didn't feel well. If she didn't get over this nagging flu soon, she didn't

know what she would do. It was throwing her whole system out of kilter this time.

The next morning Faith drove to Atlanta in her rental car. By the time she arrived, she was exhausted, so she lay down on her motel room bed and promptly fell asleep. When she woke, it was nearly seven o'clock at night.

Picking up her cellphone, she tapped the picture of her aunt on the screen. Within seconds a man answered.

"Uncle John?" Faith asked, not sure she'd reached the right number.

"Hi, Faith. It's Craig."

"Craig?" she repeated, stunned. "What are you doing there?"

"I had some business with your uncle. How's the research trip coming?"

"Not bad." Faith didn't want to talk to Craig, so she said, "Would you please put Aunt Betty on?"

"She's not here tonight. John said she's playing bingo with a few of her friends."

"Well, put Uncle John on then."

"Can't. He's busy in the bathroom."

"Oh, hell," she grumbled. "All right. Have him call me, would you? I should go now. I haven't had a bite to eat since breakfast, and that didn't stay down very long. I'm going to see if I can stomach some dinner. Would you please tell Uncle John that I'm fine, and I'll report in tomorrow? Unless he wants to talk to me, of course."

"Will do. Take care of yourself."

"I'm trying to, but with my schedule, I'm having trouble kicking this flu. It's hit me almost as hard as what I had when I first got to Ohio. Now, good-bye."

Faith didn't really want to eat, but she knew she had to have something or she would pass out again. Taking the room service menu from the bedside table, she scanned it for something bland. Seeing nothing but "Soup of the Day," she called the number shown. What was the soup of the day today? Split pea. Fine, she would have that and a large milk.

When her food was delivered, she ate, waited about twenty minutes then rushed to the bathroom and threw up. For the next two days, she decided, she would just stay in bed and let these people wait on her. The research would be there when she was feeling better; she didn't need to kill herself to get it done. Besides, John had already told her that he was going to postpone taping the special until late May. She would have plenty of time to get all the information she needed.

Two days later, she felt only marginally better. She still had trouble eating, but she couldn't stay here forever. She had to get back home where she could recuperate completely. After spending the next week immersed in her research without finding anything that could prove or disprove the slave story she'd given under hypnosis, she turned in her rental car and flew home. She chalked the slave story up to that lunatic psychic's claim that she'd known someone during the pre-Civil War period.

That Sunday she was so exhausted that she slept until noon. When she rose, she ate some toast and tea—and the food stayed down! Thank goodness, she was on her way to recovery. Maybe now that she was home, her body could get back to normal.

To Faith's amazement, Hilda Rassmussen left a message in her voicemail on Monday night. Could she please come to the house the next morning? Something important had come up, and she needed to speak with her. Faith was stunned. What could a psychic possibly tell her that was so important? And how could she have gotten her name and phone number when she'd never mentioned them?

She ignored the message, only to receive a second voicemail the next night. This was ridiculous. If the woman didn't stop bothering her, she would have to get a restraining order on her, just like she had on Roger. Faith smiled. Ginger had written her a letter and mailed it to her old address. The United States Postal Service had forwarded it. According to Ginger, Roger had seen the error of his ways and was getting counseling in prison. He had vowed, Ginger assured her, never to bother Faith again, the greatest relief Faith had ever experienced.

But in the back of her mind, Faith was curious as to what Hilda wanted. The fact that the woman had called twice, the second time speaking in a voice that sounded almost frantic with worry, was very odd. Maybe somebody had spoken with her and told her something that Faith needed to know. Nonsense! That woman was a pure nutcase, somebody she should be analyzing instead of going to for advice.

In the morning, Faith discovered that she couldn't resist. After a breakfast of dry toast and tea, the only thing she seemed to be able to stomach at that time of the day, she drove to Hilda's house and waited impatiently until the woman answered.

"Thank goodness you got my message," Hilda said in obvious relief. "I was afraid your voicemail was full."

"How did you get my name and number?" Faith asked, more curious than angry.

"You gave me them when you set up your appointment," Hilda reminded her.

"I see," Faith said as she sank down on the couch like she had the last time she'd visited. "What did you want to see me about, Mrs. Rassmussen?"

"You must be very careful, Miss Chisolm," Hilda warned, "or you'll lose the child."

Stunned, Faith stared at her. What was this woman talking about? "Lose what child?"

"The one you're carrying, of course."

Faith's eyes widened even more. Was it possible? Had this woman's prediction come true? Faith's stomach churned violently. Oh, no, not again! She was going to ...

"Where's your bathroom?" she asked frantically. "I'm going to be sick."

Even as Faith vomited into this woman's toilet, she knew it was the truth. All of this time she'd assumed she had the flu again, but it was more than that. Not only was she sick almost every time she ate, she hadn't had her period. And she'd been stupid enough to think that it was because she was so stressed, between Ian's deception and her research.

But how could this be? Roger had told her that the doctor said she couldn't get pregnant. Now here she was, carrying a minister's child, one that was conceived out of wedlock. And there was nothing she could do to change it because she didn't believe in abortion.

Rising, Faith drew some water into her hand, rinsed out her mouth, then spat into the sink. This couldn't be happening to her. She couldn't tell Ian, either. If she did, he would insist on that they get married right away, and she wasn't sure that she could trust him yet. Besides, if people found out about the paternity of her child, it could ruin Ian's career. Dear God, what was she supposed to do?

In the living room, Hilda spoke to her, but she didn't hear as she thanked the woman then wandered out the door in a daze. Her life was crumbling around her, and she didn't know how to stop it. Moving on automatic, she drove to a drug store not owned by Mr. Duff and picked up a pregnancy test kit to use as soon as she got home. Before she did, though, she called the office and told them that she was sick and wouldn't be in for a couple of days.

To her dismay, the test proved positive. Okay, she thought, she could have done it

wrong. It could be an inaccurate reading. To be objective, she needed a blood test. That would give her the quickest, most accurate results. After that she would find an OB/GYN and be examined. *Somebody* should be able to tell her that this was just a bad dream.

By the time the test results came back positive, she had accepted that this was more than a bad dream. It was a nightmare! She called her old doctor. There must have been some mistake, she was told. Nobody had ever said that she was unable to conceive, because it was Roger who was sterile, probably from a case of mumps he'd had as a teenager.

She stayed home that Sunday. She couldn't attend that church after Ian had preached there. She would have to find another one once she was feeling better—in what? Another two months? It seemed like forever that she had to wait.

Sunday afternoon there was knock on her door. She went to answer it and grimaced when she saw Ian standing on the doorstep.

"Go away, Ian," she demanded. "I don't want to see you."

"Is that why you weren't at church today?"

"Exactly," she lied. "Now, if you don't mind, I want to be alone."

"All right," he agreed sadly. "I just want you to know that it's safe for you to go back there now. I'm finished preaching for good. My commitment's over, and I won't go back because I know it will make you uncomfortable."

"You're so kind," she said sarcastically.

"I want you to know one more thing, too, Faith," he announced in a voice filled with determination. "I love you, and I won't stop trying to see you. But if you tell me to leave, I will—until I'm convinced that there's absolutely no hope for a reconciliation. Do you understand that?"

"Completely. Now go home, and stay away from me." And she closed the door in his face. If that didn't convince him that there was no hope, she didn't know what would.

SIXTEEN

Faith stared at the download she watched on her laptop, her fury growing with each word Craig spoke under hypnosis. The *nerve* of him ruining her research like this. He had no right getting information, pretending to be under hypnosis, then claiming to be a slave owner named Morgan. She'd worked hard on her project, and she resented his turning it to his own advantage to prove that they were lovers in a former life.

Lovers? Ha! If Morgan had actually raped Myrtle over and over again, it certainly wouldn't constitute them being lovers. Oh, he said that he loved her, which was why he kept going back to her, trying to get her pregnant so she would bear his child. All he'd probably wanted from her was another slave.

What was she thinking? This was all speculation. And he'd claimed to be poor Nathan Cromwell's father. He even went so far as to spout Biblical scriptures that would support his claim that the young man was out of control.

Craig's entire session of hypnosis was a complete sham, and she had no intention of using it. She fast-forwarded through Craig's session so she could see what happened with her co-worker, Jessie's, session.

But instead of seeing Jessie's face, Ian's came on the screen. She stopped fast forwarding so she could hear what Ian said.

"I didn't do it," he proclaimed irately. "I don't care what the rumors say. My in-laws started it. I did *not* kill my family. I wasn't even home."

In a soothing voice, Frank took him back further into his past. This time he pled with a woman named Mary to let him show her his love. Then he sighed and agreed. "Yes, Mary. If it's that important to you that I become a minister, I'll do it. I'm a Christian man. There's nothing I'd like more than to serve the Lord."

Tears came to Faith's eyes. He hadn't lied to her about that. He really had become a minister because Mary wanted him to.

Furious with herself for letting his hypnosis strike a sympathetic nerve, she straightened her shoulders and brushed away her tears. She had to remain detached if she wanted to make this the best special John had aired. But Ian's next words shocked her beyond thought, and she listened to his session in amazement.

"I do wish my father understood."

"Your father?" Frank asked.

"Yes. Dimitrius. He does not understand that I love Aphrodite with all my heart. He says I must take Athena as my wife—because our families must unite in life, as in business."

"What is your name?"

"My name," Ian said proudly, "is Eros, first son of Dimitrius, who is the first son of Nikolaus. I am the future of our family, and they say I must take the proper wife, not a woman from a farming family."

"And you don't want that?"

"I will give my life to be with Aphrodite. I will search for her forever. I will *never* stop loving her."

"You sound very determined."

"Aphrodite is my life. If I cannot be with her in this life, I will find her in another. I will not rest until I do."

Faith brushed away the tears streaming down her cheeks with her fingertips. She couldn't believe that Ian would do something so deceptive just to get her to love him. He had to have gone to Frank and set this up. And she'd thought that Frank would be honest about the sessions. Not only had Craig, who had probably bribed the hypnotist, gotten him to give him the pertinent information, Ian had done the same thing.

Well, she wasn't going to let them get away with this, she decided as she stopped the recording. Striding to the kitchen, she picked up the phone and dialed Craig's number. When he answered, she confronted him.

"What the hell do you think you were doing, Emerson?" she demanded. "I just finished watching that recording, and I know for a fact that you got information from Frank before you *assumedly* went under hypnosis. I want to truth now, or I'll never even say hello to you again."

"I wouldn't hurt your research that way."

"The hell you wouldn't! Tell me the truth right this second, or I'll tell Uncle John *my* truth. My guess is that you'll be fired, especially if I can convince Uncle John that I know what I'm talking about."

"Okay. I admit it. Damn it, Faith. You don't understand. I've been desperate to get closer to you, and you won't have anything to do with me. I thought maybe this was the way to do it. I wanted to prove that we were together time and again, but that stupid hypnotist wouldn't tell me about the good parts of your past lives. He would only tell me about that slave and her owner. I had to go with that and try to get in your good graces by saying that I was really in love with you."

"Well, it backfired, Craig. I won't be using your hypnosis session in the special because it's tainted. Now good-bye—and don't bother coming by my desk to ask me to lunch anymore. I won't be going with you."

Although she heard Craig pleading with her, Faith disconnected the call. Now to call Ian and tell him exactly what she thought of what he'd done. No! If she did that, she would be too vulnerable to his charming persuasion. She would just ignore his session and go on with her research by getting others to agree to being regressed.

Faith's tears flowed as she exited the doctor's office. It was official now. She was definitely carrying Ian's child. She hated herself for not being careful, but she hated Roger even more. Even from jail he was getting back at her. Why had he told her that she couldn't get pregnant? Had he been in denial about his own sterility? Or had he just wanted to hurt her in yet another way?

Her chest was tight with agony. She missed Ian more than she wanted to admit. It was nearly two weeks since she'd seen him. She hadn't even talked to him on the phone. The loneliness was much more than she ever believed she could bear. But she did bear it—for *him*.

She was doing this for Ian, she reminded herself as she got behind the wheel of her car. She was protecting his reputation as surely as he had protected her when she'd nearly

fallen on the floor at the Christmas dance.

Crossing her arms over the wheel, she laid her head on them as memories flooded back. His blue eyes had been filled with concern when she'd lain sprawled across his lap. They'd been filled with concern when she'd sliced her hand in Betty's kitchen. He hadn't let her clean up the shattered ornament because he'd been concerned that she would cut herself again. And he'd been concerned when she'd passed out in her kitchen. If he'd known that she'd been spotting this past Monday, he would probably be concerned about that, too.

All that concern, all that protectiveness, all that love. She was giving it *all* up to protect his career. What was she going to do? Eagleton was a small town, and word of her condition would eventually make the rounds. Sooner or later Ian would hear that she was pregnant.

Of course, there were ways around that. She could move, but she didn't want to. She could avoid going to town for the next eight months, but that wasn't realistic. She could swear all of Eagleton to secrecy, but that was far from feasible. Apparently, the most acceptable thing she could do was go to a Dayton doctor and spend as little time in Eagleton as possible—then hope for the best.

What she needed to do now, though, was talk to John. Starting her Mustang, she drove back to work.

"What should I do, John?" Ian asked as he sat across the desk from his friend. "I honestly feel like our relationship was sent from heaven. I love her more than anything else in the world, but she doesn't want me around." Ian slammed his fist on John's desk. "Damn! If I'd only told her everything from the start." He wandered to the window overlooking the parking lot. Tears clouded his vision as a white car turned into it. "Never mind. I know why. I love her so much that I couldn't bear the thought of her rejecting me because I'm ordained." He spun to face Faith's uncle. "If I could get *unordained*, I would do it in a second."

John rose and laid his hand on Ian's shoulder. "You're beating yourself up over a woman's anger, son. Give her time to calm down and realize how much she misses you."

Filled with skepticism, Ian asked, "Do you really think this will blow over?"

"Yes, I really think it will. Faith's hotheaded, Ian—not stupid and not unreasonable. When she's had enough time to think all this through, I guarantee she'll call you."

"Is there anything I can do in the meantime? To kind of speed things along?"

"Stop by the cottage once in a while," John suggested. "No more often than every couple of weeks. And just be a friend, not a suitor. Let *her* be the one to make the next romantic move."

With renewed determination to win her back, Ian straightened his broad shoulders confidently. "All right, John. I'll do it."

Faith scurried into John's office and sobbed as John scrambled to embrace her.

Why couldn't this be Ian? she thought, her heart rending into hundreds of pieces. She'd seen him in the lobby, and he'd smiled, even greeted her with a pleasant hello. But he hadn't touched her, not even her hand. It was as though they were mere strangers passing each other. If he'd gotten over her this soon, he *couldn't* love her.

"What happened, duchess?" John asked in concern.

She clung to him like she never had before. Why did women have to be so emotional when they were pregnant? Why couldn't they see things straighter than before? Right now, as far as she was concerned, she didn't care if she ever got pregnant again. *Dear God*, she mentally prayed, *if I make it through this pregnancy, I promise never to make love to a minister again.*

"It's okay, Faith," he said, rubbing her back in a circular motion. "Calm down and tell me what happened."

Reluctantly pushing away from him, she said, "I have to cut back on my work schedule starting Monday. And I have to go home when I'm done here."

"Why? What happened?"

As they sat down on the two straight chairs before his desk, he took her hand in his. Faith tried to smile, but nothing happened. Her sorrow was too strong to permit the fraud; her pride was too powerful to admit the whole truth.

"I went to a doctor," she explained. "She said that I have to cut back my schedule because it's too stressful."

"Why didn't you say something before this?"

"I didn't know what was happening before last Wednesday."

"What's happening?"

Her heart ached. She couldn't say this. If she did, it would make it true. It would make it real when she didn't want reality. She wanted it to be a bad dream so she could wake up in the morning and feel fine and eat breakfast without throwing up again. How could she admit that she'd made love to a minister then conceived his child?

"Faith, please," John said. "You're making me nervous. Why did you need to see a doctor?"

"I was sick all the time," she explained. "And spotting."

"What *are* you talking about, duchess? You're not making any sense." He rose and strode to the cooler in the corner of his office. "Here. Let me get you some water."

"Water won't help, Uncle John. Only time will. You see, I'm ..." She stopped. She couldn't do this. She couldn't say the word. All she could do was cry because Ian had deserted her. What a mixed blessing that was! He had deserted her, so she didn't have to tell him the truth and she didn't have to lie. She could just keep quiet and everything would be over in a few months.

John stopped halfway across the room and spun to face her. "Oh, my God. I know what you're going to say. You're pregnant, aren't you."

Unable to speak, Faith nodded her head. Then so many words burst from her that she couldn't stop them. "What am I going to do, Uncle John? I could destroy Ian's career if word gets out that he's the father. I can't let that happen. He's protected me so often that I have to protect *him*. And he doesn't want me anymore. I just saw him downstairs, and he virtually ignored me. A nice hello and that was all. I don't know what to do, Uncle John. I can't get an abortion because I don't believe in them. And I won't be able to put the baby up for adoption because I've always wanted a child. I love it already. Uncle John, please. Tell me what to do."

"Tell him," John advised as he sat beside Faith again. "You know how much he loves children. You have to give him a chance to raise this one to adulthood."

"I *can't*. You have to think of something else."

"Then I'll tell him for you."

Frantic, she exclaimed, "No! This has to be between you, me and Aunt Betty. We can't tell anybody else—except maybe Patti. But none of your other kids. Not yet, anyway. Please. You have to promise that you won't tell anybody else, and you have to make Aunt Betty and Patti promise."

"But Faith ..."

"I mean it, Uncle John. I'll move away if you can't keep this in the family. I swear I will."

"All right," he acquiesced, "but eventually you'll have to say something. This isn't something you can keep secret forever."

"I can try," she declared. "Now may I work half days until my doctor gives her okay to go back fulltime?"

"You know you can."

"Good. I'd better get home now. The doctor wants me to stay off my feet for the rest of the weekend."

Faith dragged herself off the couch when there was a knock at the door. Why didn't Betty just come in like she'd told her to? Why did she have to be such a stickler about making sure that she got her privacy? It was much easier than ...

Ian grinned down at her when she pulled back the door. She stared up at him in shock.

"What are *you* doing here?" she asked in an accusatory tone.

"I just came by to say hi," he replied. "May I come in?"

"Did John tell you to come here?"

"As a matter of fact, he told me that you probably wouldn't mind if I dropped by—as a friend and nothing more—just to see how you were feeling."

"When did he mention *that*?" she asked, irritated. John was in serious trouble right now, and she had no compulsion against going to the main house and reaming him out on the spot.

"Friday afternoon, just before we saw each other in the lobby. Don't be mad, Faith. I'm only here as a friend."

"And you haven't spoken to him since that time?"

"Absolutely not."

"Well, do you know what? I'm not particularly interested in seeing you right now—not after what you did to my research."

He stared down at her, obviously confused by her accusation. "Your research? I don't understand, Faith. What did I do to your research?"

"You talked to Frank before he regressed you, and don't deny it."

"I have no intention of doing that. Yes, I did talk to him. I told him that I had no desire to know if the regression worked and asked if he would be able to fix it so I wouldn't remember what I said under hypnosis. And he agreed. I don't know if it worked or not, and until you use the video in your special, I won't."

Faith studied his expression. His bright, blue eyes told her everything. He was telling the absolute, *complete* truth. He wasn't holding anything back or trying to cover for something he did.

"Why do you think I would do anything to damage your special?" he asked in a pained tone.

"I guess I don't."

Suddenly feeling the cold, Faith shivered as she crossed her arms over her chest and rubbed her upper arms with her hands.

"You'd better decide if you're going to let me in or not," he suggested with a smile. "I wouldn't want you coming down with the flu again."

She turned and wandered away from the door. If she were smart, she would send him away. But pregnancy had somehow taken away her intelligence. She wanted him with her right now, so she may as well let him in.

With a sigh of relief, Ian entered, closed the door, then hung up his coat on the rack beside it. Then he followed Faith into the living room, where she picked up the remote control to turn off the afternoon movie she'd been watching. They sat down on the couch at the same time.

As long as he was there, she thought with a frown, she may as well tell him. She opened her mouth to speak. "Would you like something to drink?"

Her eyes widened in astonishment. She hadn't intended to say that.

"No thanks," he replied, laying his arm on the back of the sofa. "So how is your research going?"

"Fine, thank you," she answered. "And your ad work?"

"Fine." Ian shifted on his seat. His hand brushed against her hair, and he jerked it back.

This was ridiculous, she decided. Their conversations used to be relaxed, not awkward. They should have a lot to talk about.

"So, um," he continued, "are you seeing anybody right now?"

"No." What in the world was happening? Why was he afraid to touch her? Could he tell that she was pregnant? There was so much she should say, but the words just weren't there. "What about you?"

"No."

There was a long pause, several minutes, during which neither spoke. The tension was incredible, Faith thought. Ian moved again, and she felt his hand slide under a lock of her hair that laid on the back of the couch. To her relief, this time he left it. Apparently, he didn't mind touching her after all.

"What were you watching?" he asked.

She shrugged. "A stupid movie that I didn't particularly like, anyway."

Well, so much for that topic. He was probably going to ask about it, and she'd just effectively put an end to his next question. Now they were back to not talking.

Suddenly, he shot to his feet. "I'd better go."

Tears threatened again. Oh, how she hated the emotional swings that pregnancy caused. Almost everything made her cry nowadays, and she *hated* to cry without a good movie prompting it. But she didn't want him to go, either. She scrambled after him as he headed toward the door. "I'll see you out." That wasn't what she was going to say!

He stopped and turned toward her. She couldn't stop fast enough to avoid the collision. His arms embraced her, and she found herself returning the hold, staring up at him with tears in her eyes.

"Oh, Faith!" he whispered.

His mouth captured hers. He hugged her tightly. In only a second, all of the feelings that got her pregnant in the first place flooded through her again. She returned his secure embrace and kissed him back.

He lifted her, carried her to the couch, laid her down so smoothly she felt like she was floating. When he came down on her, she felt like this was one of the best moments of her life. He hadn't stopped loving her like she'd thought.

His hand caressed her breast through the nylon of her nightshirt, and she inhaled to let him know that she didn't mind. When he pulled his arm from behind her back, she almost started crying again. Then she felt him fumbling with his jeans.

He jerked his head back, exclaiming, "Damn!" Watching what he was doing, he flipped his wallet open and fished a foil packet from behind his driver's license. Then he slid his wallet back into his jeans pocket.

Faith stared at the condom. This was probably the best time she would ever have to tell him the truth. All she had to do was say, "You won't need that." But the words wouldn't come out, and the next thing she knew Ian was pleading with her so desperately that she *couldn't* tell him.

"I didn't come here for this, Faith," he said, his bright blue eyes filled with longing, "but I need you so much. Please don't turn me down."

"I won't," she whispered.

While she watched in amazement, he took off his jeans and briefs then prepared himself for their imminent joining. She should tell him, she thought as he recaptured her mouth. Too bad. Now she couldn't talk because he was kissing her again. He was working loose the buttons on her nightshirt and spreading it aside to caress her naked breasts. He was stroking her lower, driving her wild with desire.

He kissed her—first her lips, his tongue clashing with hers—then her breasts, his tongue still working its magic as he taunted her hard nipples in a delicious circular pattern. He snaked his tongue down her belly where his child was growing, then moved lower still and kissed her.

She moaned, desperately wanting him to fulfill them both but not wanting to destroy the excitement he was creating. Her fingers slid into his soft hair, and she moaned again. His tongue continued to arouse her, continued to bring her closer to the chasm of fulfillment—and over into a mind-boggling climax unlike any even he had shown her.

A moment later he slipped into her, filling her with himself, thrusting and burrowing until she reached that abyss a second time. Then he groaned and collapsed upon her.

They toppled onto the floor, their bodies parting as they did. Two simultaneous, distressed groans filled her small cottage.

After a few minutes, Ian jerked away from her. He stared down at her in dread. Grabbing his pants, he raced into the bathroom, stayed for a few minutes, then came out and headed across the living room. While she watched, stunned beyond words, he grabbed his coat from the rack and opened the door. He stopped and looked back at her.

"I'm sorry, Faith," he said, his voice filled with pain. "I hadn't intended for that to happen. I won't bother you again. I promise."

And he fled out the door before Faith could collect herself. By the time she regained her senses and rushed after him, he was already pulling out of the driveway. The tears came again, this time unending. She'd just forced her baby's father away, and there was probably no way she would ever get him back.

EPILOGUE

“Thank you for joining us for *Fact or Fiction: Reincarnation*. Now that we’ve presented you with the information we were able to gather, we leave the decision of whether or not the possibility of living several past lives exists to you. Please join us in September when we look into an offshoot of tonight’s program. *Fact or Fiction: Psychics and Psychic Readings*.”

Ian stopped the recording. His heart was filled with pride. Faith had done a wonderful job with the special. But it made him even happier to see that she’d worn the necklace he’d given her for Christmas. He’d been so thrilled, in fact, that he hadn’t paid much attention to anything else.

That was the third time he’d watched the program from beginning to end. The first time, he’d realized that something was different about Faith, but until that moment, he hadn’t been able to figure out what it was. Now he knew—and he was furious.

He stalked out of the house and drove to Faith’s. He didn’t care if his car clock said 12:32 a.m. He was going to confront Faith this second.

Faith jumped out of bed when she heard the banging on her door. Startled and incoherent, she stared at her alarm clock until it came into focus. Who could be visiting at 12:36 in the morning? Hurrying to the door, she opened it wearing only a lightweight, summer nightgown that clearly showed her condition. As soon as she saw Ian’s angry face, saw his blue-eyed gaze drop to her protruding stomach, she knew why he was there.

But before she could react, he demanded, “Why the hell didn’t you tell me?”

Those horrid tears returned in an instant. It was obvious from his tone of voice; it was even more obvious by the sadness that once again filled his bright blue eyes. She’d hurt him by not telling him about the baby.

She should at least have done it before the special aired. She’d certainly had long enough. She’d recorded it in late May, and it was now the end of June. But she’d *tried* to tell him—several times. She just couldn’t think of words that would sufficiently explain her reason for keeping her secret.

Unable to think, she muttered the only words she could manage. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry!” He stalked into her living room while she followed him. “Do you know how much I’ve suffered because you didn’t want me? I *love* you, damn it. And you knew it all along. But you sat here with my baby growing in your belly and didn’t even have the decency tell me. I demand a *reason*, not a damned apology.”

Her tears flowed unencumbered by restraint. The pain he’d inflicted on her the last time he’d walked out of her cottage was still deep. How could he treat her like this when he claimed to love her? How could he blame her for what he’d done?

“You *left* me!” she shouted in a pained, accusing tone. “Remember? You walked out of that door and told me that you wouldn’t be back. What the hell was I supposed to do? Go crawling to your apartment and beg you to marry me? I have too much pride for that.”

Frustrated and unable to control herself, she walked up to him and pounded on his chest. “How could you do that to me? Was it just because I couldn’t say the words? Was it just because I couldn’t tell you that I love you?”

His features softened. Taking her wrists in his hands, he kissed each fist. “No, sweetness, it was because I have faith in love. I was sure that you would come to me when you were ready. Why couldn’t *you* have had enough faith? Why couldn’t you trust me to understand? I was there to make that baby, Faith, and I was there because I love you desperately. I want to be there to raise it, too.”

He was calling their baby an “it”—like she wasn’t a real person. But she was, and if Ian knew what she herself had gone through to save their child, he would never be talking like this. Drawing in a deep breath, Faith corrected him. “Her, Ian. You want to be there to raise *her*.”

“It’s a girl?” he asked in amazement.

“Yes. The baby is a girl.” Throwing her arms around his neck, she hugged him tightly. “Oh, Ian! I’ve been such a fool. I wanted to tell you. Honest. I just didn’t know how. All I could think of was trying to protect your reputation with the other clergy, but all I’ve succeeded in doing is hurting you. I’m so sorry. I love you, Ian. I’ve missed you *so* much. Can you ever forgive me for deceiving you?”

He returned her hug with one arm as he laid his hand on her stomach. When the baby moved, tears came to his eyes. After kissing her hair, he said, “I never felt deceived, sweetness—just neglected. She’s moving.”

Faith smiled up at him. “She likes her daddy.” She paused, hesitant about making the suggestion. But she knew that she must if she ever wanted to continue her life with the same happiness she’d had before Ian left her the last time. “Ian? Could we try again if I promise not to neglect you?”

“Are you going to let me stand beside you through everything?” he asked with a seductive grin. “The good times *and* the bad?”

“Through everything. I want you beside me, Ian,” she vowed. “I really do.”

“One more question. Do you forgive *me* for deceiving *you*?”

“After I accepted my pregnancy and was rational again,” she replied as she nuzzled his neck, “I realized that you hadn’t deceived me. You just didn’t know what to say any more than I did when I found out that I was carrying your child.”

“In that case, sweetness, would you marry me? I love you, and I missed you desperately when we’re apart. Let’s take this the whole way and make a proper family for our daughter.”

“I’d like that more than anything else.” She stood on her toes and kissed him soundly. “I’ll even make another promise. I’ll never again lose faith in your love. And, Ian? Since you didn’t want to know what happened with your regression, I didn’t use it on the special. Now it’s time to show you a couple of recordings I kept on my computer. I think it will explain why your faith in love was so much stronger than mine.”

Together they watched Ian’s recording of his regression. After having seen her regression in the special, she knew he would understand. Eros had found Aphrodite in another lifetime.