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Where You Least Expect It

TORI CARRINGTON

Tori Carrington

Where You Least Expect It

«HarperCollins»

Carrington T.

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WALK. DON'T RUN….Whatever was going to happen, Aidan Kendall had decided to stay and ride it out. The truth was, he was tired of running. Tired of packing up his suitcase and hitting the road to nowhere. Tired of being alone, keeping people at arm's length and waiting for the shadow following on his heels to catch up with him and destroy him. Maybe that was the reason he'd stayed in Old Orchard. Perhaps subconsciously he'd known that this was where his running would end.So, he would stop running. And that included from the mysterious and unique Penelope Moon…and whatever bonds were developing between them. But would their love be strong enough to survive the truth?

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“Is everything okay?” Aidan leaned forward to try to capture Penelope’s gaze.

She smiled, but there was no happiness there. “Sure. Why wouldn’t it be?”

“It’s just that you got awfully quiet there for a moment.”

“I was just thinking….”

What? What had she been thinking? Aidan refused to speak the question aloud, but he found he was curious about Penelope in a way he hadn’t been curious about a woman in a long time. He was filled with a desire to reach out and touch her, to urge out whatever it was she was holding in her mind…in her heart.

He found himself reaching out to cup her chin. Just a gentle play of his fingertips up along the delicate line of her jaw. So soft. He wanted to assure her that everything would be okay.

She blinked those big dark eyes, appearing startled yet curious as her tongue darted out to moisten her lips.

Lips Aidan wanted more than anything to kiss. And in the next instant, he was doing just that….

Dear Reader,

Well, if it’s true that March comes in like a lion and goes out like a lamb, you’re going to need some fabulous romantic reads to get you through the remaining cold winter nights. Might we suggest starting with a new miniseries by bestselling author Sherryl Woods? In Isn’t It Rich?, the first of three books in Ms. Wood’s new MILLION DOLLAR DESTINIES series, we meet Richard Carlton, one of three brothers given untold wealth from his aunt Destiny. But in pushing him toward beautiful —if klutzy—PR executive Melanie Hart, Aunt Destiny provides him with riches that even money can’t buy!

In Bluegrass Baby by Judy Duarte, the next installment in our MERLYN COUNTY MIDWIVES miniseries, a handsome but commitment-shy pediatrician shares a night of passion with a down-to-earth midwife. But what will he do when he learns there might be a baby on the way? Karen Rose Smith continues the LOGAN’S LEGACY miniseries with Take a Chance on Me, in which a sexy, single CEO finds the twin sister he never knew he had—and in the process is reunited with the only woman he ever loved. In Where You Least Expect It by Tori Carrington, a fugitive accused of a crime he didn’t commit decides to put down roots and dare to dream of the love, life and family he thought he’d never have. Arlene James wraps up her miniseries THE RICHEST GALS IN TEXAS with Tycoon Meets Texan! in which a handsome billionaire who can have any woman he wants sets his sights on a beautiful Texas heiress. She clearly doesn’t need his money, so whatever can she want with him? And when a police officer opens his door to a nine-months-pregnant stranger in the middle of a blizzard, he finds himself called on to provide both personal and professional services, in Detective Daddy by Jane Toombs.

So bundle up, and take heart—spring is coming! And so are six more sensational stories about love, life and family, coming next month from Silhouette Special Edition!

All the best,

Gail Chasan

Senior Editor

Where You Least Expect It
Tori Carrington

www.millsandboon.co.uk

We warmly dedicate this book to Terri and Mike Medeiros, Brenda and Jim Chin, Leslie and Bruce Kelly, Christine and Richard Feehan and couples everywhere who have found love where they least expected it. You inspire us….

TORI CARRINGTON

is the pseudonym of award-winning husband-and-wife writing team Lori and Tony Karayianni. Twisting the old adage "life is stranger than fiction," they describe their lives as being "better than fiction." Since romance plays such a large role in their personal lives, it's only natural that romance fiction is what they would choose to write in their professional lives. Along with their four cats, they call Toledo, Ohio, home, but travel "home" to Greece as often as possible.

This prolific writing duo also writes for Harlequin Temptation and Harlequin Blaze under the Tori Carrington pseudonym. Lori and Tony love to hear from readers. Write to them at P.O. Box 12271, Toledo, OH 43612 for an autographed bookplate, or visit them on the Web at www.toricarrington.com, www.specialauthors.com or www.eHarlequin.com.

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Chapter One

Summer always had a way of making Penelope Moon itch. Maybe it was the heat. On this muggy, late-June morning, at just before eight, it was definitely hot. And it would only get hotter as the day went on.

She tugged on Maximus's leash while they walked down Main Street in downtown Old Orchard. The setter and Great Dane mix pulled back, nearly jerking her out of her practical sandals. She pulled tighter, smiling at Old Man Jake who was sweeping the sidewalk in front of his General Store. He gave her the same wary look he always gave her.

No, it wasn't the heat. Well, it was and it wasn't. Something else was to blame for the way she seemed to come alive in the summer, making her want to shuck her clothes and go skinny-dipping, an outrageous act that she would never give thought to at any other time of the year, in the Old Valley River near her grandmother's house. And that had nothing whatsoever to do with the weather in northwest Ohio.

Perhaps it was the extremeness of summer. The heat seemed to amplify every emotion, pump up the volume of sounds, make smells more intense, colors more vivid, overwhelming the senses.

Then again, maybe it was because she was a winter baby and the polar opposite, summer, mystified her.

"Max!" she whispered to the mammoth, untrained dog as he stopped in Lucas Circle in front of a half-barrel planted with red impatiens and started to lift his leg.

Penelope Moon was twenty-four, unmarried in a family with a history of unmarried women, and had taken over her grandmother's New Age bookstore five years ago. Back then, though, it hadn't been a bookstore but rather a general herb shop called Potions and Spells. To be fair, the herbs still sold better than the books, but somehow "Bookstore" in the name lent the shop a more suitable air and encouraged more foot traffic, no matter the customers' preferences.

Penelope still lived in the same house she'd grown up in, accepted that she would always be looked on as peculiar by the town, and appreciated every moment she stood above ground rather than lay buried in it. Heat and uneasiness aside, this morning pretty much resembled every other morning of her adult life. She got up just before dawn, made herself a cup of ginseng tea, watched the sunrise while sitting on the front porch of the old house she shared with her grandmother just outside of town. Then she put Maximus's leash on and walked the two miles to open the bookstore in downtown Old Orchard, where she would spend the next eight hours before heading back home to help her grandmother Mavis make dinner.

Penelope caught herself smoothing down the tiny hairs at the back of her neck, trying to calm her restlessness. A state that even the dog seemed to tune in to as he looked at her with his watery brown eyes and gave a small whine.

She resisted the urge to tell him to hush. The townspeople already thought her strange enough without witnessing her talking to her dog.

She took her keys out of the front pocket of her cotton dress and looked around the clump of businesses that sat, one against the other, down Main Street and Old Orchard Avenue. Eddie's Pub had already opened, but was likely serving coffee rather than beer this early. The library directly across from her was still closed. She could just make out some activity at the sheriff's office across Lucas Circle and down a ways.

The tiny brass bells in the shape of morning glories tinkled as she opened the glass door bearing her shop's name and hours in purple and white. The colors were mirrored inside with crisp, white wood bookcases lining the walls, and sprigs of lavender displayed everywhere.

Maximus gave a loud bark and pulled free of her grasp, galloping straight toward a waist-high display of aromatherapy lotions she had carefully stacked the day before.

"Max, no!" Penelope hurried after him, leaving the door unlocked behind her.

His leash was within reach, but it was too late. The four-foot pyramid of smooth, white plastic jars tumbled into a pile at her feet, one jar landing on her big toe.

"Ouch! Oh, Max."

She stood staring at the mess, then at the canine—who was looking pleased with himself as he sat next to the demolished mountain, his tongue lolling. She'd had the exasperating dog for two years and had yet to find a way to tame his roguish ways. A Scorpio. Definitely a Scorpio. Though she had no way of knowing for sure. She'd awakened in the middle of the night to find him howling on the front porch where someone had put him, little more than a pup. She'd taken the abandoned pooch under her wing before he could blink his mournful eyes. Penelope had never even tried to find out who had left him there. All that mattered was that he'd needed love and she'd had it to give to him.

If only she was any good at discipline, maybe her life with him wouldn't be so difficult. Even Mavis refused to keep him at the house while Penelope was at the shop.

"You," she said, rubbing his ear. "Out back."

"He ought to be put down, that dog."

Penelope turned from where she was gathering the jars in her arms to find town gossip Elva Mollenkopf in the door, wearing her normal drab clothes and familiar lemon-sucking expression.

I should have locked the door behind me, Penelope thought. She put the jars down on the checkout counter, pretending not to notice the way Elva tried to hide behind displays and the two purple poles flanking the entrance to conceal her presence in the shop from anyone passing outside.

"He's not that bad, really," Penelope said, giving the dog a beseeching look not to prove her wrong. "He's just a little clumsy is all."

"He's a menace."

Penelope raised a brow and forced a smile as she turned fully toward the other woman. Elva wasn't looking at her. Rather, she was trying to see whether she'd been spotted by anyone passing by.

"Drat that Lion's store. I don't know why they stopped carrying my face cream. It would be so much easier if I could still get it there."

Fewer covert maneuvers, Penelope agreed silently.

Of course, even Elva grudgingly admitted that the herbal cream she bought from Penelope's store was much more effective than the name-brand stuff she'd spent an arm and a leg on at the exclusive department store. In fact, during her last browsing expedition, Penelope was convinced she'd seen the face cream Elva claimed to have used right there on the cosmetics counter of the store in question. It was all she could do not to share the information with Elva. But no matter how much the woman bothered her, she needed the business.

Elva glanced over her shoulder from where she had a death grip on the foot-wide pole. "Did the cream come in?"

Penelope nodded. "Received a shipment from the guy in brown late yesterday."

"Thank God."

Elva released the pole and started toward the counter. "How much?"

Penelope named a price as she unlocked the register and put the prepared order on the glass countertop.

Elva's eyebrows rose to meet the poorly dyed black of her hair. "That much?"

"Same price every time you buy it, Mrs. Mollenkopf."

"I think you're wrong. Could you check, please?"

Penelope smiled at her. "Sure."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Maximus get to his feet, his tail wagging with mischievous intent as he rounded the counter. Elva gasped as he pressed his cold snout into her crotch. The calculated nature of his actions made Penelope catch her breath.

"Max!" Penelope grabbed hold of his leash and tried to pull him back, a completely inappropriate laugh erupting from her mouth. She quickly cleared her throat. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Mollenkopf. You know how dogs are."

"I loathe dogs and have never spent time around them, so no, Miss Moon, I would not know how dogs are."

She should have caught a clue in the two years she'd been coming into the shop—but Penelope wasn't about to sass her.

"If you'd waited until I opened the store, Max would have been tied up out back." Terrorizing her business neighbors when they tried to throw something out in the Dumpster rather than burrowing his nose in other people's business.

Elva pulled the skirt of her dress out and stared at it in horror, as if she believed it permanently stained. "I'll have you know that I'm going to file a complaint with the sheriff's office."

So what else is new?

"Pardon me?"

Penelope blinked at the older woman as she finally managed to gain control of the dog and pull him back. She hadn't said the words, had she?

Maybe this morning was not like every other morning, after all.

"What if I give you a special ten-percent discount, Mrs. Mollenkopf?" she said. "You know, by way of apology for Max's behavior?"

"Fifteen."

"Done."

Max sat, and she ignored his expression—which seemed to say "sucker"—as she rounded the counter to complete the transaction.

"Strange, that man."

Penelope squinted at where Elva was staring through the front window at a figure walking down the street. The man's hands were in the pockets of his khaki pants; his crisp, white short-sleeved shirt emphasized his long, lean arms and the deep copper tone of his skin.

"I don't think Mr. Kendall's strange."

Elva glared at her. "Neither does the rest of the town. But I'm telling you, he's strange. Blows in here from out of nowhere a year ago, no family, no mention of a family, and becomes so much a part of the community, you can't tell him from the next guy."

"He's from Oregon. He doesn't have any family. And he's a middle-school teacher at St. Joe's. What more do you want to know?"

Elva looked at her a little too closely, then took her change and counted it again. "I'd like to get a peek at what skeletons he's hiding in that closet of his over at Mrs. O'Malley's bed-and-breakfast." She lifted a finger after putting her money in a black-sequined change purse. "And that's another thing. Who lives in a bed-and-breakfast? A bed-and-breakfast is where one spends a weekend, not a year."

Penelope said, "I'm sure there are no skeletons in Mr. Kendall's closet, Mrs. Mollenkopf."

"Shows how much you know."

Penelope handed the woman the bag of cream just as the door bells rang, heralding another customer. She hadn't even opened for business. She wondered why it couldn't be this busy during the regular workday.

"Good morning, Miss Moon." Aidan Kendall, the topic of their conversation, came inside, seeming to bring the sun with him. "Mrs. Mollenkopf."

"Harrumph," Elva said, sticking her nose in the air and stalking toward the door.

Aidan opened it for her, and she sailed through without so much as a "thank you" or an "excuse me."

"Careful, Mrs. Mollenkopf, or I might get the impression that you don't like me very much," Aidan said in good humor.

She made another sound of disapproval, looked both ways down the street, then hurried away, probably praying she hadn't been seen coming out of the shop. At least until the town cat, Spot, crossed her path, nearly tripping her. The fearless female feline ducked into the shop before the door could close. Max tilted his head to the side and made an inquisitive noise as if unable to believe a cat had just offered itself up for a morning snack. He leaned forward from where he sat in the storage room. Penelope easily closed the door, shutting him in, then moved to continue picking up the jars of fallen cream.

"Was it something I said?" Aidan asked, aiming a thumb at Elva's quickly retreating back.

Penelope wondered why her skin suddenly seemed to burn all the hotter. "I wouldn't take her behavior, um, personally. She doesn't appear to like anybody much."

Aidan bent to pat Spot as she made a perfect figure eight around his ankles, even as he gazed at Penelope. "Yeah."

Her skin grew hotter still. Much hotter than she was comfortable with.

Darn summer and its heat.

She put the next load of jars down on the counter, then moved to the thermostat to switch on the air-conditioning. "Looks like it's going to be another scorcher."

"I like it hot."

Penelope suddenly had a hard time swallowing.

Aidan Kendall liked hot weather.

She slowly turned to find him picking up the jars.

"No!" she fairly shouted.

His puzzled expression made her wince.

"I mean, you don't have to do that. Really, you don't." She hurried over to take the jars out of his hands. "I have plenty of time to take care of it before I open up."

Aidan stood still, allowing her to take the jars from him. Only, his arms could hold much more than hers. She juggled hers as he held up the last one, his grin making her toes curl inside her sandals.

"Just trying to help," he said.

She looked at him and found herself leisurely staring into his deep brown eyes, noticing the slight crinkles at the corners, taking in the broad, manly curve of his jaw, the sensual definition of his lips. She wasn't sure what it was, but she felt restless when he was around. All it took was one glance from him. He threw off an energy that messed with her own calm, making her not only want to peel off her clothes, but climb out of her own skin.

Which would be all right, if only she didn't itch to try on his skin instead.

Penelope unloaded the jars. "Is there, um, something you wanted, Aidan?"

He shrugged and slipped his hands back into his pockets. "Isn't it enough to want to stop and say hello to a friend?"

A friend.

Penelope fingered the smooth lid of a jar she held and considered the word. Such a simple word, really. But not one she had come across often in her lifetime in Old Orchard.

She'd never really had any friends. Her peers and the rest of the townsfolk had always seemed more like wary strangers.

Except for Aidan.

Every now and again he would pop up into her shop, giving her those curious toe-curling looks and trying to strike up conversation.

She smiled at him. "It's more than enough."

"Good, because it's not the reason why I stopped by."

She gave a tiny giggle.

A giggle? She didn't giggle. The sound was so unfamiliar to her that she caught herself looking around to make sure someone else hadn't entered the shop.

She cleared her throat, thinking that she really needed to get a grip.

Aidan felt all the tension seep from his muscles. He enjoyed Penelope Moon's laugh. There was something genuine about the musical sound. Something that reached out and grabbed him unaware, reminding him of what was light and happy rather than dark and sad.

There was also an innocence about her that made him feel good. When he was around her, he forgot the reason he'd first come to this small town in the middle of nowhere and allowed himself to be, well, basically himself. She didn't ask questions of him. Didn't pressure him for details he was loath to give. She merely accepted him for the man that stood in front of her.

She was also a sight for jaded eyes.

Oh, he knew what the rest of the townspeople said about her. The nicest thing they said was that she was a bit odd. The worst, that she was a practicing witch—one you didn't want to cross lest she cast a spell on you. The latter had come from Mrs. Mollenkopf herself the other day. He'd overheard her in the post office when he'd gone to buy a book of stamps.

He supposed Penelope Moon did look the part, what with her long, silky black hair and big black eyes and pale skin. But rather than see her as odd, he preferred to think of her as real. As real as anyone he'd met since his late wife.

"Leo."

Aidan blinked, realizing Penelope had said something. "Pardon me?"

"Your sun sign. You're a Leo, right?"

He cracked a grin. He should have known what she'd meant straight off. She'd been asking him to give her his birth date since the first day they met. When he'd refused, she'd taken to trying to guess his sign.

Just as he always did, he shook his head. "Not a Leo."

Her soft mouth turned down into a frown that merely enhanced her natural beauty. She didn't have on even a touch of lipstick, but her lips were still the deep, ripe color of strawberries in season. He'd bet she didn't wear mascara, either, even though her lashes were thick and sweeping, and vividly outlined her dark, dark eyes.

She cocked her head as she looked at him looking at her. "If I got your sun sign right, would you admit it?"

He slowly shook his head. "No."

"Taurus."

He chuckled. "No."

He didn't want to think about the truth behind his hesitancy. The fact was, he couldn't give her his real birth date for fear of what might happen in the future. And he didn't want to lie to her either.

Better to keep things light between them.

He watched her touch a leather band holding a charm—one he couldn't make out—around her slim wrist.

"So, you said there was a reason you came in here?" she said quietly. Too quietly.

Aidan blinked and looked up into her fathomless eyes. "Um, yes. I wondered why I didn't see you at the Fourth of July planning committee meeting last night."

She broke the connection of their gazes as she looked down. "Hmm…I don't know. Maybe because I'm not a member of the planning committee?"

She moved toward the mess of jars all over the floor and bent to continue picking them up.

She was slender. Almost too slender. Easily as tall as he was at five foot eleven, her limbs were long and willowy, almost model-like. Or they would be if she wore more flattering clothes. Instead she leaned toward muted earth-tone dresses that he guessed to be a size or two too big. It was at moments like these, however, when she was bent, forcing the fabric to mold to her body, that he noticed how very curvy she was.

And was reminded of how long it had been since he was with a woman.

"I see," he said, crouching to help her. "So the meeting conflicted with another committee meeting, maybe?"

She looked at him shyly. "No."

"Ah. So the reason has to be a man, then."

Her flush was so complete, so unexpected, that his stomach knotted.

"Um, the answer to that would have to be no, as well."

Aidan's chest tightened. Over the past twelve months he'd come to see that this woman had so very much to give…if only she could be encouraged to do so. Her opinions were fresh and unbiased. Her appearance uplifting. Her very presence like a spring breeze.

He hated to watch her go back and forth from her grandmother's house to her shop, never stopping to talk to anyone, never veering from the well-tread course, never batting an eye when on occasion the town kids would call her the witch that so many of them believed her to be.

He'd thought if he could get her to come out of her shop, upset her normal pattern, force the town to see her for who she really was, he would be doing her—and them—a favor.

And if a small fringe benefit was that he would have an excuse to spend more time around her, he wasn't going to acknowledge it. Of course, he couldn't allow himself to get involved with her. Or anyone else for that matter. Not until he could take care of some very important issues on his personal agenda.

She whispered something.

"Pardon me?" he asked.

She blinked at him, seeming horrified. "I didn't say anything."

"I could have sworn…" She looked utterly aghast, and he realized that whatever she'd said hadn't been meant to be heard. He smiled. "Never mind." He leaned back on his heels and handed her the jars one by one, while she reached up to place them on the counter. "Anyway, the holiday is only a week away and the committee is no closer to agreeing on a theme than they were three months ago. I could really use an ally." He offered up a grin. "Someone whose vote I could count on. Besides, acting like a member of the community might be a good idea."

Her eyes narrowed a bit as she continued taking the jars from him. "I've been a member of this community my entire life."

"That's not what I meant."

He refused to release his grip on the last jar. She held on to it even as he did. He swore he felt a strange warmth climb up his arm and down into his stomach.

"I know," she said finally.

Aidan moved his fingers until they were covering hers. Her skin was so soft, so warm and inviting under his. He'd forgotten what it was like to touch a woman in that simple yet intimate way. Forgotten how alive it made him feel.

The bells above the door jingled, shattering the moment. He released the jar. Penelope's flush deepened as she put it on the counter, then she rose.

"Good morning, Sheriff Parker."

A jolt of fear shot through Aidan as he got to his feet.

He reminded himself that he had nothing to fear from Sheriff Cole Parker.

At least, not yet…

Chapter Two

If Penelope had felt restless before, Aidan's brief touch upgraded the emotion to chaos. A heart-stopping awareness that toyed with her body temperature and cut the bottom out of her stomach, made her feel like a stranger to herself.

Oh, she'd always thought Aidan attractive. Very attractive. But she had never before linked herself to him in the same sentence, as in "Aidan and I." She hadn't dared.

Now her mind was going a million miles a minute doing just that.

He smiled at her as if he knew what she was thinking, and her pulse leaped.

"I just came by for some more of that tea you made for me the other day, Penelope," Sheriff Parker was saying as he took off his hat. "I usually don't go in for that kind of stuff, but, well, I liked it."

It seemed to take a great deal of effort to tug her gaze away from Aidan's face. "Sure. I'll just put some water on to boil."

"Sheriff." She heard Aidan greet the other man as she plugged in her electric teapot, then eyed the tins of herbal teas on the shelf behind her. For the life of her, she couldn't remember what tea she had fixed for Cole.

"Aidan," Cole said back.

"How's everything across the Circle this morning? Any new crimes to report?"

A simple question. But when an answer wasn't immediately forthcoming, Penelope looked over her shoulder to find Cole running his fingers through his hair, obviously troubled.

"Funny you should ask that. Something strange did happen last night."

Penelope settled on green tea with a hint of ginseng and measured a few spoonfuls into a small teapot. She turned to put some prepackaged raspberry biscuits onto a plate, tuning in to an odd kind of tension emanating from Cole. He seemed to be eyeing Aidan in a curious way.

Cole finally sighed. "Old Man Smythe's filling station was hit last night. He was robbed at gunpoint."

Aidan was in the act of accepting a biscuit when—Penelope could have sworn—his hand hesitated. "Nobody was hurt, I hope?"

"No, no one was hurt. But Smythe did give an interesting description of the assailant. He said he looked exactly like you—" The sheriff rubbed the back of his neck, then lapsed into silence as the kettle began to whistle.

Penelope turned to pour hot water into the pot. "Actually, his exact words were 'that schoolteacher Kendall robbed me.'"

Penelope nearly knocked over the teapot. She turned to watch the two men stare at each other.

Then, finally, Cole chuckled.

"Yeah, I figured the old man was overdue for a visit with the optometrist."

She handed Cole his tea and offered a cup to Aidan, as well.

"Thanks, Penelope." Cole blew on the liquid, then took a sip. "Ah, heaven." He smiled at her. "You wouldn't happen to have a package of this stuff I could buy, would you?"

"No, that's my own personal stash," she said, then laughed. "Of course I do. How much would you like?"

The next ten minutes or so were filled with light talk of what else was going on in town and wrapping up Cole's purchases. Finally, Cole put his hat back on, accepted another cup of tea in a disposable cup and bid them a good day.

The tinkling of the bells seemed to echo through the shop for a long time after he left.

"Imagine, Mr. Smythe thinking you were the one who robbed him," she said, wiping the counter.

Aidan didn't appear to hear her. His expression was somber and thoughtful as his gaze fixed on the sheriff's office across Lucas Circle.

"How much do I owe you for the tea?" he asked absently.

Penelope blinked. "It's on the house, Aidan."

He peeled off a couple of dollars and put them on the counter. "I'll see you later."

Penelope watched him leave, noticing that Spot followed him out with a brief glance in her direction. She felt more than a little disappointed. Had she imagined what had passed between them before Cole had come in? Dreamed that his fingers had lain on top of hers for a brief moment, making time stop?

She swallowed. Silly, really. Thinking a man like Aidan Kendall could be interested in her.

She opened the storage room door, then took Max's leash in hand and set about her normal everyday chores, telling herself she would do well to remember the town was divided into two very distinct camps:

her…and everyone else.

And it seemed "everyone else" included Aidan Kendall.

He'd stayed in town too long.

Later that day, after seeing the summer school students off with just enough homework to make them groan, Aidan headed back to his room at Mrs. O'Malley's.

What a difference one sentence could make in a man's life. A few simple words said by someone with the power to make them damning.

He should never have come to Old Orchard at all. And he definitely should have left six months ago when the teacher he had temporarily replaced returned from maternity leave.

Aidan let himself into Mrs. O'Malley's bed-and-breakfast, grateful she was in the kitchen preparing dinner and didn't notice him come in. She usually wanted to know about his day, and he usually enjoyed watching her face light up as he shared student anecdotes, and reports on how they were all doing.

He hated to imagine what expression she would wear when she found out who he really was.

He climbed the stairs and unlocked the door to his room at the far end of the hall, then closed it behind him. Since he was a semipermanent boarder, he'd offered to look after his own things. At least, that had been his excuse. In reality, he didn't think it was a good idea for Mrs. O'Malley to know what all was going on in here. He stood in the middle of the large room. To his left two computers were set up on the old antique desk, one running on a separate cable line and doing a continual search on news articles across the country. The other, an older system he used to compile the data he received. Next to the desk were stacks upon stacks of newspapers he subscribed to and picked up from a post office box he rented in a neighboring county.

In one year he'd come up with nothing.

In one day he'd come up with everything.

Davin had finally caught up with him…

Aidan sat down on the bed and dropped his head into his hands as if trying to hold everything in. An image of Penelope Moon's pretty face flashed across his mind.

Penelope.

He'd been selfish. Selfish to think he'd be safe here. Selfish to make himself a part of a community that could be hurt merely by being associated with him. Selfish to want a woman who deserved so much better than what he had to offer her.

He slid open the drawer in the bedside table and took out a five-by-seven frame. The glass was dusty. He wiped it off and stared down into the faces of his wife and his three-year-old son. Two people lost to him forever. Two people who had also deserved better than him, because he'd been unable to protect them.

He slid the backing from the frame and took out the photo behind the one of his wife and son. It was a studio portrait taken some twenty-two years ago, when he was eight. A picture taken of him and his identical twin brother, Davin. A picture taken before his mother had suffered a beating that had nearly killed her and his father was sentenced to two years in prison for felonious assault. A picture taken before both his parents died in a house fire when he and Davin were fourteen.

Before everything in their lives that had already been bad had gotten even worse.

There was a brief knock at the door. “Aidan?”

He slid the photographs into place, then put the frame back and closed the drawer. Within moments, he stood looking at Mrs. O’Malley from the open doorway.

She smiled at him. “I thought I heard footsteps on the stairs. Why didn’t you come into the kitchen to say hello?”

In the corner the computer made a small beep indicating the search had found something. They both looked at it.

“Always working,” Mrs. O’Malley said.

At one time Edith O’Malley herself had been a ninth grade English teacher. She’d retired ten years ago following the death of her husband, then transformed their family home into a bed-and-breakfast long after her five children had left Old Orchard for busier concrete pastures. Once Mrs. O’Malley had learned that Aidan was certified as a schoolteacher, she had secured the job for him at St. Joseph’s with nary a background check. Mrs. O’Malley trusted him completely, based on instinct, as she didn’t understand computers and never invaded his privacy.

Mrs. O’Malley’s smile slowly faded as she looked into his face now.

“Is everything all right, Aidan? You don’t look well.”

He cleared his throat. “Actually, I am feeling a bit tired, Mrs. O’Malley. Sorry I didn’t say hello, but I had my hands full of class materials and wanted to bring them up here first.”

The smile made a return. “You’ll come down for dinner, though, won’t you? Tonight’s meat loaf night.”

He foraged around for a smile to offer in return. “I wouldn’t dream of missing meat loaf night.”

“Good,” she said, nodding, leaning on her cane to turn around in the hall. A cane she used only now and again when, as she said, her new hip went to war with her old one. “I’ll see you in twenty minutes, then.”

“Twenty minutes.”

He watched her carefully navigate the steps, thinking that if he knew what was good for them all, he would be long gone in ten.

Penelope closed the wood gate, its white paint worn off by time and weather, and released Maximus’s lead. Of course, the moment he was free, he plopped down at her feet, his tongue forever lolling as he gazed up at her.

She patted his head. “A Gemini. Definitely a Gemini.”

She heard pounding coming from inside the one-story house with the wide, slanting front porch and headed for the steps. She and her grandmother Mavis Moon had lived there alone since Penelope’s mother died when she was five. And seeing as neither one of them had much skill when it came to repairs, the house and surrounding yard needed a lot of them.

“Gram? I’m home,” she called out as the old screen door squeaked, then slapped shut behind her.

She heard mumbling coming from the dining room, then, “Of course you’re home. Where else would you be at this time of day? It’s five-thirty and you’re home. Shocker.”

Penelope put her bag of leftover raspberry biscuits in the kitchen and headed for the doorway to the dining room, puzzled by Mavis’s comments. “Did you say something?”

Her grandmother waved her away with the hammer she held. Slender, she looked almost too weak to wield such a heavy object. Especially given the flowing purple tunic that billowed around her petite frame like a circus tent.

Penelope slowly entered the room, her gaze riveted to the pictures of her mother Mavis had framed and positioned willy-nilly.

"What do you think?" Mavis asked, seeming to challenge her with her dark eyes.

"Um, it's nice," Penelope said though she was overwhelmed with images of her mother staring back at her from dozens of angles.

She stepped forward to straighten a crooked frame.

"Don't touch that," her grandmother said, seeming to threaten injury with the hammer if Penelope moved another inch. "Everything is exactly where I want it."

"Okay," Penelope said carefully. "I'll, um, just go in and start dinner."

Had the whole world gone nuts while she wasn't looking? First Aidan had come into her shop looking at her like she was a desirable woman. Then Sheriff Parker had said Mr. Smythe had identified Aidan as the man who had robbed him. Then she'd returned home to find her normally tranquil grandmother pounding the heck out of the dining room wall, instead of relaxing in a yoga stance.

She looked around on the sparkling clean countertops of the kitchen, inside the empty oven, then in the refrigerator. Aside from a half-empty pitcher of lemonade, there wasn't a crumb to be found.

Where was the ground turkey she had taken out of the freezer and put in the refrigerator to defrost this morning? The fresh salad fixings? Even her homemade yogurt was missing.

"I got rid of it all," Mavis said, dropping the hammer onto the counter with a loud thud. "All of it. It was messing with my biorhythms."

"What did you do with it?" Penelope asked.

"Threw it away, of course. All of it."

Penelope caught herself absently rubbing her stomach where it growled. Biscuits aside, she hadn't had a thing to eat all day and her body was letting her know about it.

Out of the corner of her eye she watched her grandmother approach the counter where she'd put the biscuits.

"Don't you dare!" she said, taking the bag from the older woman. She rolled the top of the bag back up, put it on the table closer to her and propped her hand on her hip. "Did you stop taking your medication again?"

Her grandmother waved a bony hand. "Medication, shmedication. I threw it all out with the rest of it."

Dread drifted through Penelope as she headed to check the rest of the house. As an afterthought, she returned to the table and snatched up the bag of biscuits, her dinner if she didn't go out and pick anything else up.

Ten minutes later she'd verified her suspicions: Mavis had thrown away everything in the medicine cabinets, including her doctor-prescribed medications and toothpaste, as well as all the cleaners and detergents under the sink and in the broom closet.

Penelope stood dumbfounded, unable to make heads or tails out of the situation.

Well, at least she'd left the garden out back alone. The crooked rows of young vegetable plants were coming along nicely. In fact, it appeared Mavis had even weeded and watered them.

She made her way back into the dining room, where her grandmother was starting on the second wall.

"Have you eaten anything at all today?" she asked.

Mavis waved her hand. "Who needs food?"

"Last I checked? I don't know. Maybe you?"

"I don't want anything."

"Then, maybe I should call the hospital and ask them to hold a room for you, because that's where you'll be heading if you don't eat something." She glanced toward the living room. "Unless, of course, you've thrown the telephone out too?"

Mavis stared at her.

Penelope swallowed hard. "No, I'm not talking about the psychiatric ward."

"I didn't say you were."

"You didn't have to."

Mavis climbed down off the stepladder and turned toward her. "Don't you ever get sick of it all, Popi?"

It had been a long time since her grandmother had called her the pet name. Her doing so now opened up a soft spot inside Penelope. When she was young, she'd thought it meant something pope-like. Important. She'd found out later that it was merely a Greek shortening of her name.

"I mean, the sameness of everything? We get up at the same time every morning—"

"So, sleep in."

"We eat dinner at the same time every night—"

"So, we'll eat later."

"We talk to the same people, do the same things—"

"So, we'll go out and meet new people, do different things."

Mavis looked a breath away from hitting her with the hammer again. "Can't I even have a nervous breakdown without you being so damn calm about everything?"

Penelope smiled. "No."

Her grandmother hit the wall with the hammer and Penelope jumped.

Mavis examined her handiwork. "I like it."

Penelope rolled her eyes, wondering how much work she would have to do when her grandmother's mood ended this time.

This wasn't the first time Mavis Moon had done something extreme, even by Penelope's own generous definition of the word. About once a year Penelope would come home to find her grandmother acting strangely. The last time Mavis had planted a crop of marijuana in with the corn out back, determined to do for terminally ill patients what the health care system wouldn't.

It was all Penelope could do to stop her from being charged. She had, however, been arrested.

She let out a long breath. "I'm going to the store. Do you want anything?"

"A man."

Penelope stared at her grandmother's back.

"I can feel you looking at me, girl. Stop it right now."

"Where would you have me look?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe at yourself in the mirror." She gave the wall another smack, creating another ugly dent. She gestured with the hammer. "You and me…we're not getting any younger, you know. This morning I swore I could hear time passing."

"It was probably your pacemaker."

Mavis glared at her.

"Do you want anything from the market?"

"I told you what I want."

"And short of dragging Old Man Jake home with me, it's not going to happen."

A thoughtful expression came over her grandmother's face. Penelope turned on her heel, collected Max's leash and went out the front door.

She only hoped that there would be a house to return to.

Chapter Three

What could have been minutes or hours later, Penelope stood on the old wooden bridge about a half-mile away, down the road that spanned the Old Valley River. She stared at the water rushing by below and pondered why every now and again life didn't make any sense at all. Even Max seemed to contemplate the question, lying on the old planks under their feet that shuddered whenever a car drove over. Which, thankfully, wasn't often.

Penelope had studied the stars last night, trying to map out the future, catch a clue on where things might be heading. The same way she did every other night when there was no significant cloud cover. Only nothing had prepared her for today. She'd seen no hint of Mavis' latest mood. No sign that she would look into Aidan's eyes that morning and feel a tingling awareness that she hadn't been able to shake ever since. No trace that she would be standing at the bridge now, staring down at the river wondering if things would have been different if her mother hadn't committed suicide by jumping off the other side of this same bridge and landing on the outcropping of rocks there.

The early evening sunlight hit her full on the back and seemed to outline her reflection in the water. She couldn't make out her own features. The blurry image resembled what little she could remember about her mother's features beyond those she saw in the countless photos Mavis had of her.

After Heather Moon died, no more photographs were brought into the house. Penelope couldn't even remember seeing the old camera her mother had once owned. Maybe Mavis had buried it with her.

She recalled the way Mavis had mapped out the old photographs on the wall like some sort of puzzle missing half its pieces, or like a map leading to nowhere. She shivered.

"Cold?"

She looked up, startled to find she was no longer alone.

Aidan stood on the bridge next to her. He had probably been there for a while, given his relaxed stance next to her. He too was staring into the water.

"No, I, um…"

Her voice drifted off as she realized the question was probably rhetorical. She smiled. "I think you're about the last person I expected to see way out here."

Aidan shrugged, his forearms leaning against the broad wood railing, his strong, masculine hands clasped tightly together. She couldn't be sure, but given the grooves on either side of his mouth, he had been thinking heavy thoughts too.

She squinted at him, remembering the first time she saw him ten months or so ago. He'd been walking down the street outside her shop, much as he did every morning. But back then he had looked more anxious somehow. Terribly alone. And his brown eyes had held a sadness that seemed to reach out and clutch her heart.

She remembered it so clearly because she was seeing the same expression now.

"I went out for a walk after dinner and lost track of time," he said by way of explanation.

Look at me, Penelope silently found herself saying.

"Did you say something?"

He finally looked at her, and the full impact of the soulless shadow in his eyes nearly took her breath away.

Max barked, startling them both, then laid his head back down on top of his paws.

"No," Penelope said quietly. "I didn't say anything."

Although, it was the second time that day that he had appeared to hear her thoughts.

The first time she had silently willed him to kiss her.

She felt her face go hot, then she turned back toward the water and tucked her hair behind her ear. "You know, my mother used to say that there are only a few people in the world who are

capable of hearing another's thoughts." Actually, her mother had told her that there would be one other person capable of hearing her thoughts, and that one person would be the one she was meant to spend her life with. But she wasn't going to say that to Aidan for fear that he would think her strange. Most of the townspeople already thought that. She couldn't bear it if he believed the same.

"My… There was another woman who told me that once." Aidan said it so quietly that the light breeze that had kicked up nearly stole the words before they reached her ears.

Penelope shivered again, but this time it had nothing to do with a chill, but rather a burst of heat.

She pushed from the railing and looked down at her watch. It was already after seven. "I didn't realize it was getting so late."

"Do you have a date?"

Penelope laughed, then stopped when she realized he was serious. "No. I don't have a date. I, um, was just heading to the market to pick up a few things." And a man for my grandmother, she reminded herself.

Maximus lumbered to his feet, nudging his cold, slimy nose into her hand. She absently patted him, then picked up his leash.

"I'll walk back with you," Aidan said.

"Okay."

They'd gone a ways, Max keeping pace between them, when suddenly the tree-lined route curved into a two-lane street and the trees morphed into buildings.

Aidan looked at Penelope walking leisurely beside him. It had been a long time since he'd been with someone who didn't demand that every second be filled with conversation.

But Penelope…

"What?"

He blinked, realizing she'd grown aware of his attention and was even now playing with her leather bracelet in that way she did when she was nervous.

He shook his head and smiled. "Nothing. I was just thinking that I never did get a straight answer to the question I asked this morning at the shop."

She seemed to think back to that morning, when they'd shared that heated moment of awareness. But the image of the sheriff eyeing him suspiciously wiped it out of Aidan's mind.

"What question?"

"Hmm? Oh. Well, since I could really use some help with putting together the Fourth of July town celebration, would you consider coming to the next meeting? It's tomorrow night."

Her gaze flitted away and she fell silent.

"At the rate things are going, we'll end up with something that could have been cut and pasted from the 1950s. I could really use someone to back me up, help me urge everyone into the new millennium."

She still didn't say anything.

"Is everything okay?" He leaned forward to capture her gaze.

She smiled, but there was no happiness there. "Sure. Why wouldn't it be?"

"It's just that you got awfully quiet there for a moment."

"I was just thinking…"

What? What had she been thinking?

Aidan refused to speak the question aloud, but he found he was curious about Penelope in a way he hadn't been curious about a woman in a long time. While capable of walking in companionable silence with her for long stretches, he was filled with a desire to reach out and touch her, to urge out whatever it was she was holding in her mind…in her heart.

They'd come to a slow halt, a block short of the General Store. Max sat down, panting while Penelope turned to Aidan. To thank him for his company? More than likely. But she hesitated when she looked into his face.

What was there? he wondered. What did she see?

He found himself reaching out to cup her chin. Just a gentle play of his fingertips up along the delicate line of her jaw. So soft. She blinked those big dark eyes, appearing startled yet curious as her tongue darted out and moistened her lips.

Lips that Aidan wanted more than anything to kiss.

And in the next instant, he was doing just that.

First there was the welcoming shock of skin against skin, his lips pressing against hers, tenderly, tentatively.

He'd closed his eyes, but he opened them now to see that she watched him through a fringe of black lashes. He read fear, surprise and a wistful yearning that shot straight through him. His throat tightened to the point of pain, and a craving for this woman, so urgent, so overwhelming swept over him, paralyzing him with its unexpected power.

"Mmm," she whispered. "That was nice."

Aidan had experienced his share of kisses, and what they had just shared was definitely not simply "nice." It was honest. It was sweet. And it was hot.

He stepped back away from her even as a voice deep inside him protested the move.

What was he doing?

He'd promised long ago that he would not involve anyone else in his problems. Would not subject them to what he had lived with for so long that it seemed as natural as the shadow that followed him. Especially since everything finally seemed to be coming to a head.

Yet a few minutes with Penelope found him shoving all that aside, left him seeking a bit of something outside himself. Something that called out to him from her.

He remembered her on the bridge when he'd first walked across to stand next to her. Her expression had spoken of a woman with secrets that seemed to run as deep as his. And he found himself feeling connected to her in a way he hadn't felt connected to anyone in a long time.

Only, Penelope's secrets didn't have the power to hurt others.

She laughed nervously. "I'd…better get going before the store closes."

Aidan blinked at her, wondering how long they'd been standing there looking at each other. What others thought didn't concern him. But what Penelope thought did matter. Maybe a little too much.

He offered a smile. "You still didn't answer my question."

She wrapped the end of Max's lead around her hand. "What question?"

"Whether you'll help me out with the Fourth of July celebration."

She fell silent again, but it wasn't a companionable silence this time, but rather a tense one. He silently berated himself for making her uncomfortable. Of pressing her to do something she so obviously didn't want to do. Especially since he didn't know if he would be here in town much longer.

"I can't," she said simply.

Aidan slid his hands into his pants pockets, reluctantly accepting her answer.

"I'd better go," she said.

Aidan found himself reaching out to lightly grasp her wrist. She looked back at him, curious, questioning.

"I'm…" he began.

The only sounds were of traffic farther up the street and of Max panting patiently at Penelope's side.

"I'm not who you think I am, Penelope," he found himself admitting.

She smiled as she reached out to hold his hand. "Right now, I'm not sure I know who anyone is, Aidan."

Chapter Four

Penelope lay awake late into the night, stretched across the twin bed that used to belong to her mother, thinking about Aidan and his words. And, even more acutely, her own words.

What had made her say what she said? That she wasn't sure she knew who anyone was anymore?

She caught her fingertips lingering against her lips and yanked her hand back to her side, then turned over, trying to ignore the incessant hammering coming from the next room. She'd returned from the General Store with the makings of spinach pasta, but Grammy hadn't touched a bit of it, too consumed with her house renovations. Penelope sighed.

Life in Old Orchard had always been trying for her. Still, there wasn't anything she could do to change it, so why bother trying? From what she understood, her mother had fought the same losing battle…until giving up the fight in a very real way.

Suddenly she realized that she could hear crickets instead of a hammer pounding away. She propped herself up onto her elbows, bunching the simple white nightgown she wore around her waist. What was Grammy doing now?

Footsteps in the hall, then the sound of her grandmother's bedroom door being slammed. Penelope collapsed onto the pillows, glad the old woman had finally called it a night. Maybe, just maybe, she'd be able to get some sleep tonight.

She rolled over to her other side and stared through the open window. The white sheers shifted in the light breeze, creating a ghostly atmosphere.

A drop of sweat trickled beneath the white cotton of her nightgown. The click of her swallowing sounded strangely amplified in the suddenly quiet room. She couldn't really say if she'd ever actually heard herself swallow before. Or had ever been so acutely aware of herself on every level. From the agitated state of her own emotions, to the trembling of her lips even now when Aidan had kissed her hours ago.

She then rolled over onto her back, wondering if Aidan was having trouble sleeping across town at the bed-and-breakfast. Was he thinking about her the same way she was thinking about him? She honestly couldn't say. She'd never experienced what she was feeling now. It seemed like a heated awareness swam through her veins along with her blood, making her dizzy and giddy and remarkably…

She fought to put the feeling into words.

Afraid.

She held her breath for a moment, recognizing the emotion for what it was. She was afraid that she had imagined the desire that had passed between her and Aidan. Scared that the feelings growing within her weren't something she could ignore or explain away. Terrified that she was finally getting a taste of what it felt like to be in love.

Not that she thought she was in love with Aidan. She wasn't. Not yet, anyway.

She wondered what he could possibly want from her. He was a respected schoolteacher at the most respected school in Old Orchard. And she was the dark girl who lived on the outskirts of town and ran that odd shop across Lucas Square from the sheriff's office. Always was, always would be.

To date Aidan…

The sheets rustled as she turned over yet again. Wasn't she putting the cart a bit before the horse? Aidan hadn't even asked her out. But if he had…

If he had, she would have turned him down. Simply because he had everything to lose by being seen with her. And she…well, didn't dating someone open up the possibility of marriage somewhere down the road? While not every couple that dated ended up at the altar, certainly they didn't go into any dating situation knowing they never intended to stand at an altar.

And she'd always known she wasn't destined for the traditional institution of marriage. Had even begun to guess that she'd inherited a degenerate gene or two from the women before her. All she knew about her own father was that he'd been a traveling salesman and that he didn't even know she existed. And since her mother hadn't put his name on her birth certificate, she couldn't look for him. Her mother hadn't known her father either. She'd once joked that they could be a long lost branch from an Amazonian tribe. Grammy had not been amused and had said that the reason there were no men around was that they didn't need any men.

Lucky for all of them, then, that all the children born were female.

Her eyes widened. They had all been female, hadn't they? There wasn't a male out there somewhere rejected because of his gender, was there?

She frowned at the stupid idea, a thought she wouldn't even have considered just yesterday. But in twenty-four short hours it seemed the entire world had gone insane.

Okay, maybe not the entire world. But surely the Moon family had lost a marble or two or three.

Then there was Aidan and his reason for kissing her… She rolled over yet again. She needed to stop thinking about Aidan and get some sleep. She had a feeling she would need it….

Across town, Aidan was doing the exact same thing Penelope was, although minus one ornery grandmother to make his task more difficult.

The only light in the room came from the glowing computer screen that continued its programmed search for articles matching his search parameters. The windows of his room faced the backyard of the bed-and-breakfast, so no artificial light filtered through the light sheers. And given the moonless state of the sky, neither did any natural light.

A quiet beep. Aidan turned his head where it rested on his folded hands and stared at the computer screen.

He tossed off the top sheet and padded across the bare wood floor to have a look. A newspaper from a neighboring county had uploaded its latest stories, and one of them was on the robbery at Smythe's gas station. He clicked the mouse and read through it, but found no more information than Cole had offered.

He stretched to his full height and ran his hand through his tousled hair, unable to shake the uneasiness creeping through him like a shadowy mist. Were his suspicions that Davin had found him true? Or was he allowing his imagination to run away with him? But he was a man who never gave much credence to coincidences. Even if Old Man Smythe needed to have his glasses prescription upgraded, one didn't lightly make the kind of accusation that he had.

He crossed back to the bed and sat down on it, the old springs giving a soft squeak. Of course, his uneasiness couldn't be blamed solely on his suspicions. No, if he were to be completely honest with himself, Penelope Moon had a great deal to do with his current restless state.

He closed his eyes and groaned, remembering their kiss earlier. She'd tasted so sweet. Her lips had been so soft. Her body as she briefly swayed against him, so inviting.

He still wasn't altogether sure why he'd kissed her. He'd merely had an urge to press his mouth against hers. Partly because she'd looked like she'd wanted it so much. Mostly because he had wanted it so much.

He reached to switch on the lamp, his hand nearly knocking something over. He quickly caught the object, then switched on the light. A glass of milk and a small plate of freshly baked double-chocolate oatmeal cookies sat next to his alarm clock. He smiled faintly. Mrs. O'Malley must have sneaked in to leave the snack when he was in the shower. He'd been so distracted he hadn't even noticed until now.

Penelope. Mrs. O'Malley. Everyone he'd met since coming to Old Orchard. He could only imagine their disappointment when they discovered his true identity.

Perhaps it would be best if they never found out….

He glanced around the room that had become home to him in the past year. It had always been homey, but that was more Mrs. O'Malley's doing than his. Gold-framed oil paintings hung on the walls, the sheer curtains were handmade. The white throw rug with tiny pink and purple flowers complimented the quilt across the foot of the hulking oak bed. The only objects that were his were the computers, the newspapers in a pile next to the rolltop desk, and the dress shirt he'd draped over the back of the chair. Everything else was tucked into the walk-in closet.

It made him sad to know that within five minutes he would be set to leave—which didn't make much sense since he'd planned it that way.

He got up and stepped to the closet, careful not to make much noise as he hoisted the empty leather suitcase from the top shelf, then placed it across the bed. In went his suits, his clothes and a few other personal items. He left out only those things he would need in the morning.

Ten minutes later he sat on the bed looking at the closed suitcase on the floor in front of him, feeling lonely. Maybe it was because in the past few months he'd come to accept the townsfolk as friends. Mrs. O'Malley as family. And Penelope as…

He caught the thought and purposely ousted it. He never should have kissed her. Never should have given her false hope for a relationship that could not go anywhere. And he knew she felt it, had seen it glistening in her dark eyes when he'd reluctantly pulled away from her. If he hadn't kissed her, she probably would view his abrupt disappearance much as everyone else would. Mysterious, but nothing to interfere with normal day-to-day life beyond the gossip his actions would generate. But the kiss, well, the kiss had changed all that.

For reasons he couldn't begin to understand, Penelope Moon and her grandmother Mavis lived in some sort of self-imposed exile on the edge of town, just beyond the bridge where he'd met her during his walk earlier. Nearly every day he watched her open her shop…alone…then close it up…alone…nary a person to help break the monotony of a life that so much resembled his own. But where his reasons for keeping everyone at arm's length were clear to him, hers weren't.

For the first time since losing his family, someone had managed to climb into his heart and his head.

And while he knew his leaving would bring her pain, a selfish side of him was glad that she had made him feel something beyond the numbness with which he'd grown so familiar.

And the long months, perhaps years ahead of him would be filled with something in addition to despair.

Hope.

Hope that maybe life could be normal for him again one day.

A soft sound came out of Penelope's mouth. The part sigh, part moan was so unlike any sound she'd ever heard herself make before. The shadow blocking her vision moved, then Aidan was grinning at her, amplifying the sounds around her, sharply contrasting colors, until just merely being alive seemed too much to bear.

She reached out for him, somehow realizing this was a dream and that she was free to do what she would for these precious few moments—

"Get…up!"

Something beneath Penelope's feet trembled. She'd heard of the ground shaking before, but this—

She awakened with a start to realize it wasn't the ground that was shaking beneath her feet as a result of Aidan's kiss, but rather the sheet being yanked from underneath her.

Mavis was staring at her wild-eyed. Penelope gasped, then watched as the old woman resumed trying to strip her bed while she was still in it.

"Get up, I said!"

Penelope quickly gathered her wits and scrambled to stand on the other side of the narrow bed. The abrupt movement caught her grandmother off guard. She stumbled backward as the bottom sheet easily gave way, nearly knocking her flat on her butt on the hard wood floor.

"Now, what did you go and do that for?"

Penelope reached for her robe, squinting against the sunlight spilling into the room from the window. "Why are you trying to strip my bed while I'm still sleeping at the ungodly hour of…" The face of the electric alarm clock looked black, so she picked up her wristwatch as she shrugged into her robe. "Of nine." Her eyes widened. "Nine?" She stared at her grandmother. "Is it really nine o'clock?"

"What are you asking me for? Does anybody ever really know what time it is?" She cocked her head as she stripped the remainder of the bed linens. "That's a Chicago song, isn't it? I'd get my cassette, but, oh! I threw out all my cassettes."

Penelope stepped into her path, tamping down her anxiety about having overslept and stopping her grandmother from leaving the room with the sheets. "What do you mean, you threw out all your cassettes?"

Mavis squinted her dark eyes. "I don't believe my comment needs explanation."

"And my cassettes?"

Mavis tried to go around her. "You don't have any cassettes." She smiled at her. "Not anymore."

"Mavis!" she shouted, catching the bony woman by the shoulders. "What is the matter with you?"

"Me? What's the matter with me? This from a woman who has never been out on a single date? At least, not any that I know about. And seeing as I know everything about you, I know you haven't been out on a single date."

Penelope opened and closed her mouth a couple of times. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"It has everything to do with everything," Mavis countered. "And, by the way, it's Grandmother. Not Mavis," she said.

Penelope stepped to block her again. "Give me the sheets."

"I will not."

"I said give me the sheets, Grammy."

They stood like that, locked in silent combat, until finally Penelope gave in.

"Okay, then, tell me what you plan to do with them."

"What do you think I plan to do with them?"

Penelope could only imagine.

"I'm going to wash them, of course."

Penelope wished she could believe her. She sighed and stepped aside.

"I'm going to soak them in a mild lye solution, you know, to get rid of any DNA evidence, then I'm going to burn them."

"What!"

Penelope rushed after her, but halfway down the hall Max leapt at her, nearly knocking her down. Oh, God. What was the dog doing in the house? Mavis hated the dog.

Penelope caught Max's mammoth paws in her hands and looked him straight in the eyes. "Now is definitely not the time." She gently released his paws, and he stood there considering her. "Outside."

"Gram, what's Max…?"

Her words trailed off as she realized exactly how Max had gotten into the house. The doors, both the screen and the wood, were missing from their hinges. She marched to the back of the house to find the same there.

She stood, dumbstruck, in the middle of the kitchen, watching through the open doorway as Mavis stuffed the sheets into a large old oil barrel that had been cleaned and filled with water. Wood burned underneath.

She closed her eyes, wondering if she was still dreaming.

No, not dreaming. This would definitely fall solidly into nightmare territory.

She opened her eyes again, but unfortunately everything was as it had been when she closed them.

She looked at the wristwatch still in her hand. She didn't have time for this. She really didn't.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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