

WISHFUL THINKING

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Chapter One

Clara leaned against the gazebo railing, gazing out at the lake in the distance. The cool late summer wind whipped her graying hair in front of her eyes and stirred the tawny sand on the shore. The waning moon lit the world around her with a soft glow, reflecting off the gently rippling lake in bands of bluish white.

The beauty around her didn't interest her on this night. Her mind was focused elsewhere—on the fistful of fragrant powder she held above the grassy yard. Right now, she couldn't afford to concentrate on anything else. When the time was right, she released the powder into the wind, silently visualizing her wish as she imagined the powder hitting the earth and scattering into all corners of the yard and beyond. With a last request that her wish be answered—sooner rather than later—she brushed her hands down the front of her robe and grabbed her crutches to head back to the house before someone noticed she was missing.

"What do you think you're doing out here? It's the middle of the night."

Clara nearly jumped out of her skin at the sound of the feminine voice coming through the darkness. She tightened her grip on her crutches to steady herself so she didn't fall. Breaking the other leg wasn't high on her list of midnight activities.

"Who's there?"

"Relax. It's just me." Once her niece, Mia, stepped into view, Clara let out a sigh of relief—quickly followed by a groan of frustration. This was not what she needed right now, not as she was so close to finally getting her way. "Go back to bed, dear. I'm just enjoying the night air. It's so warm for this time of year. I will be inside in a little while."

"Uh-huh. Sure you are." Mia walked up the gazebo steps and leaned her hip on the railing, her arms crossed over her chest, and a disbelieving look on her face. "I thought that after you slipped and broke your leg last month, Uncle Lou and the doctor told you to stop wandering around in the middle of the night."

They were all crazy if they expected she'd listen. Foolish men, always thinking they knew what was best for everyone. Clara brushed a lock of hair from her eyes and tucked it behind her ear, pretending she didn't hear the reprimand. "Look at the lake tonight. Isn't it peaceful?"

Mia, not one to be distracted easily, frowned and ignored the question. "What were you doing, Aunt Clara? Since you're out here at midnight, this is more than just simply enjoying the view. You've lived here all your life. You don't get excited about the scenery like your guests do."

"It helps me relax so I can sleep better. And on that thought, what are *you* doing out of bed this late?"

A smile tugged at Mia's lips, despite the fact that Clara knew she tried to hold it back. "Couldn't sleep, either. I noticed the back door open, and I figured you had to be out here. No one else is nuts enough to go running around in the dark yard at this time of night...er, morning. What I still don't understand is why. What crazy scheme have you come up with this time, Aunt Clara?"

Clara sighed. The young. They never understood anything. "Many spells are performed at night, Mia. You, of all people, should know that."

"Oh, believe me, I understand. What I don't get is all the secrecy. You only sneak around behind everyone's back if you've got some idea cooked up, or if there's something seriously wrong." Mia frowned, her expression darkening. "Please tell me there isn't something seriously wrong with you or Uncle Lou."

"Oh for Goddess' sake, I'm fine. I was making a wish. That's all." "A wish." Mia repeated, not looking at all sure that she believed it.

Clara nodded as she picked up her crutches and made her way to the gazebo steps. "It seems to be the only way I'm going to get what I want." She ignored Mia's silent offer of help and hobbled down the steps, leaning on the metal crutches for support. She was halfway across the yard before Mia followed her.

"Slow down before you fall and do some more damage to yourself," she said, stopping on the stone path in front of her so Clara had to come to a halt or knock her niece over.

"I'm sixty-four, not a hundred and four. I'm perfectly aware of what my limitations are," Clara told her, ignoring Mia's pointed gaze at the cast on her leg. "You need to worry about yourself and stop trying to mother everyone else. Especially those of us who are older than you."

Mia wasn't deterred that easily, no matter how much Clara had hoped she'd be.

"What is it that you could possibly want? You've got everything you need right here." Mia sighed heavily and shook her head. Clara felt the annoyance radiating from her niece and felt guilty for causing it. But, in the end, it would be worth it.

"It's nothing you need to worry about, Mia. Honestly, you're much too serious for someone so young. Live a little."

She just wanted Mia to be happy. The girl had been alone for too long. She deserved a home and a father for Frances. She had such a nurturing, caring manner, and Clara hated to see it wasted on an aging couple and a tiny bed and breakfast when she could put it to much better use.

Mia *said* she was happy here, but Clara wondered. There had to be some small part of her itching to leave, to live her life the way she was meant to. The girl was only twenty-eight. If her life kept going along its current path, she'd stay single and alone, and never leave Bennett Island.

Mia argued that she had Frances, and yes, Clara understood that the child took a lot of her time. But Frances was happy and healthy, if not a little bit mischievous, and

everyone doted on her for the summers they spent on the Island. Mia had no one to make her feel special. Everyone needed someone like that in their lives, and Mia had been without for too long—three years last month. Her grieving was over, and it was time for her to move on. But, for some reason, the girl seemed insistent on moving in permanently and hiding away from the rest of the world.

Clara wasn't about to sit back and let *that* happen. Mia needed a gentle nudge—which Clara was all too happy to provide. She gave her niece a big smile and gestured to the waning moon above. "There will be a new moon soon."

"I'm aware of that," Mia answered, her tone laced with suspicion.

"That's the perfect time for self-improvement."

Mia laughed at that, which Clara took as a good sign. "Are you planning to get a makeover?"

"No, dear. But it would be a good time for *you* to embark on something new—like a relationship."

Mia let out groan and turned away, hurrying the final few steps to the back door. "I'll be inside if you need me. Please be careful out here."

"Goodnight, Mia." Clara laughed to herself as she watched Mia walk away. The girl was nothing if not predictable. Just the mention of new relationships had her running in the other direction. She didn't understand, despite all that had happened in her young life, that she couldn't fight her destiny. And Clara knew Mia's destiny did *not* lie on this little island—at least not in the way she thought it did.

That was how Clara had come to this—her last resort, a wish spell in the middle of the night. With any luck, the spell would take quickly and bring some happiness for Mia to the island soon. The tourist season was winding to a close, winter was fast approaching, and in a little less than a month Clara's Bed and Breakfast would shut its doors until spring. This might be Clara's chance for several months to help Mia find some true happiness. Clara chuckled to herself.

Sometimes fate needed a little push.

Chapter Two

"Where the hell is Brian?" Jack barked into his cell phone as he tried to navigate his car down the unfamiliar twisting dirt roads of Bennett Island. "He's supposed to be covering for me, right? So why can't I get a hold of him?"

He let out a huge sigh of frustration as he heard his secretary's answer. "This is bullshit. The guy takes vacations all the time, and I cover for him. This is the first one I've taken in six years. You think he could at least pick up his goddamned phone. Just because he's my brother doesn't mean I'm going to let him get away with this crap."

He turned his car down another dusty dirt road, wincing when his car hit a big rock jutting up from the ground. "You have him call me as soon as he gets in. I don't care how busy he is. This is important. *Vital*. I'm not going to cut my vacation short just so he can run around with one of his airhead girlfriends and miss client appointments."

Something large and brown ran out in front of his car, he swerved to avoid hitting it. He slammed on his breaks just as the thing—a *deer?*—dodged his front fender and sped into the woods. His heart pounded hard against the wall of his chest and he leaned back in the seat to catch his breath. The last thing he needed now was to crack up his brand new convertible. "Nancy, I'm going to have to call you back when I get settled in my room. Some kind of wild animal just jumped out in front of me. I don't need to total my car and end up in the hospital."

He disconnected the call, ignoring his secretary's burst of laughter and insistence that he needed to pay more attention to the world around him, and tossed the phone onto the passenger seat. This was *not* the way he'd planned to start his vacation. The traffic on the ride up from Boston had been a nightmare, turning what should have been a three hour car ride into five and a half. By the time he'd driven onto the ferry that would take him across the lake to Bennett Island, his mood had been foul. Getting lost within five minutes on the island's winding roads hadn't helped matters. He'd just managed to get on track again when Nancy called with an important message from a client. Brian, who was supposed to be taking care of Jack's clients until he got back, apparently wasn't answering his telephone.

Almost on cue, the cell phone on the seat next to him rang. Jack snatched it up off the seat and flipped it open. "Jack Cullen."

"Hey, bro."

He narrowed his eyes and tightened his grip on the wheel at the sound of Brian's voice. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Busy. I had meetings all day."

Right. No one had ever accused Brian of being the responsible brother. "Yeah, well, you've got to make time for my clients, too, since you agreed to cover for me for a little while. If I'd known you were going to pull this, I would have asked Dad to help me instead."

"Stop worrying so much. Aren't you supposed to be on vacation? Nancy gave me the messages and I'll take care of all that stuff this evening. Have a great time, meet a nice woman, and get yourself some before you explode. You work too hard. For once in your life, let go and have a little fun. Bye." Brian hung up before Jack could protest—which was probably for the best. He would have hated admitting aloud that his brother was right.

This was *not* a working vacation. He needed the time off—doctor's orders—and he was damned well going to take it. Jack pulled his car back on the road and headed toward the bed and breakfast where he had a room booked for the next two weeks. At least he *hoped* he was headed in the right direction. With all the trees and dirt roads—minus street signs—he couldn't be too sure.

When he saw the white and green sign up ahead that read Clara's Bed and Breakfast, he let out a sigh of relief. *Finally.* He pulled his car into the parking lot and climbed out, grabbing his bags from the trunk before he turned to face the enormous log cabin in front of him. Two stories high with a wrap-around porch and red shutters, the place reminded him of the summer camp his parents had sent him to as a kid. Trees surrounded the house, but he caught glimpses of the lake through the branches when the leaves blew in the wind. This seemed like the perfect place for him to hide away from the real world for a while, and with any luck, help in curing his insomnia.

He walked up the porch steps and through the front door into a huge expansive foyer. The gray flagstone floor would have seemed cold on its own, but the warm beige on the walls and the filmy curtains softened the look. An older style wooden desk stood on one side of the room, an old-fashioned blotter on top.

A small woman with gray streaked brown hair and crutches hobbled through a door on the left side of the room, her leg wrapped in a bright pink cast. "Checking in?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Cullen." It was a statement rather than a question, and it had him blinking at her. Her smile widened and took on a sly look as her gaze traveled over him slowly. He had a feeling she was sizing him up.

"We don't get single people here very often," she told him. "Usually the customers we get are looking for a romantic, private getaway. It's been almost exclusively couples all season. You *are* single, though, aren't you?"

He hesitated, not sure whether he should lie or tell her the truth, but the woman continued before he had a chance to come up with an answer. "Sorry. That was too personal. I didn't mean to pry, I was just wondering what on earth a good-looking man like you would be doing taking a vacation all alone."

"Excuse me?" He'd signed up for a quiet vacation, not a singles' cruise.

The woman shook her head and laughed. "Sorry again. I'm nosy, I know. My niece tells me that all the time. I'm sure she'd advise you to ignore me." She pulled a black, spiral-bound book out of one of the desk drawers and leafed through the pages.

"You're in room 12. It's up the stairs, to the right, at the end of the hall." She handed him an old-fashioned brass key on an ornate key chain from a rack behind the desk. "I'm Clara. If you need anything, don't be afraid to ask. Breakfast is served from six to eight, lunch from noon to two, and everyone sits down for dinner together at six p.m. sharp. The dining room is just off the living room, to the left. You can't miss it. There's a path to the private beach through the backyard. My husband organizes activities like card games and such on some of the nights, but don't feel like you have to participate. Can I get you anything now?"

"I'm all set, thanks," he told her, trying to remember everything she'd said. Activities of any kind didn't interest him. All he wanted to do was head up to his room, take a shower, and unwind.

Clara smiled at him and made a shooing gesture with her hands, not unlike what he'd seen his mother do on countless occasions. "Then go on upstairs. You look like you could use a good long nap. Just remember to be down here at six for dinner, or else you might not get fed until morning. My daughter, Jessica, is the cook and she can get cranky when she gets too many special requests. I wouldn't want to see you go hungry."

Shades of his mother, yet again. When he'd asked Nancy to recommend a nice, quiet, out-of-the-way place to unwind, he'd been thinking more along the lines of a tropical beach than this. If he'd wanted meddling, he could have just gone to Arizona to see his mom. "I wouldn't miss dinner for the world."

She raised an eyebrow at his sarcasm, but didn't comment on it. "Good. I can't wait for you to meet everyone else. My husband and my daughter and my niece and great-niece... and all the other guests. We're like a big happy family around here." She shut the book and slid it back into the drawer. "For now, though, get some rest before you drop. You look like you could sleep for days. Go through the door to the left into the living room. You'll see the stairs from there."

He wasn't sure if he liked the sound of the big, happy family. Very much a private person, he didn't relish getting to know a bunch of people he'd never see again once he went back home. If he ended up feeling like he was stuck in some warped version of the Brady Bunch, he'd have to think of a very *nice* thank you gift for Nancy.

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Mia stood in the hallway between the kitchen and the foyer, listening to Aunt Clara check in yet another guest. They had a full house this weekend—not a vacant room in the whole place. But the man with Clara had caught Mia's attention. First, she heard

Clara say he was alone. That in itself caused her to wonder. In her limited experience in the tourism business, men didn't take vacations like this without a wife or girlfriend. The brochure billed the inn as a romantic getaway—strange that he'd come by himself for the romance.

And that voice.... it was enough to curl her toes. That deep, sexy, molten honey voice curled *everything*.. She wanted to sneak a glimpse at him, to see if he was as good-looking as his voice had her hoping, but she didn't dare peek around the corner. If Clara saw her watching, she'd try to play matchmaker yet again. *Whatever* he looked like, she didn't need her aunt setting her up on dates—especially with guests.

Still, she could definitely stand right there and listen to that guy talk all day. He could tell her about the theory of relativity for all she cared, or the entire history of the world. She just wanted to hear him speak.

She snorted and rolled her eyes at her childishness. What would Frances say if she saw her mooning over some stranger like this? She hadn't acted that gaga over a man since she'd met Steven ten years before.

Back in high school.

She wasn't in high school anymore, and she needed to pull herself together before she did something stupid. She didn't even know what the man looked like—he could be a green-skinned mutant for all she knew.

The kitchen door opened and shut, and her cousin Jess came up beside her. "What are you doing hiding back here?" Not having the same reservations as Mia, she stepped into the hall to take a look. When she came back, she had a big smile on her face. "Okay, I get the hiding thing now. You don't want the hunk to know you're watching."

Hunk? "I'm not hiding." No. She'd been admiring his voice. From afar. *Huge* difference.

"He's cute, huh?" Jess asked. "In a stuffy sort of way, I guess, with that suit and tie and all, but cute none the less."

Mia shrugged, wanting to have a look for herself but wanting more to make sure Clara stayed out of her business. "I can't see him from here."

Jess's eyebrows shot up. "Then what are you doing slinking around in the shadows? What are you waiting for? Get out there and have a look."

"I'm not interested in looking. I'm just curious as to what's taking Clara so long with the guy. She never talks to anyone for *that* long, and we've got a week's worth of menus to plan."

With a casual shrug that was really anything but casual, she turned and walked back into the kitchen with Jess right behind her. Mia tried to busy herself with the leftover lunch dishes in the sink, but Jess wouldn't let the subject go. "It's been a long time since she's met a young, single man in here, and she thinks you need one, Mia. She's probably trying to think of ways to introduce the two of you even as we speak."

Mia dropped the sponge into the sink, sending soap bubbles floating into the air around her. "That's what I'm afraid of."

Jess propped her hip against the counter and frowned at Mia. "Would it really be so bad to have a life?"

"I have a life. I have Frances."

"Yeah, and she's a great kid. But you spend all your free time with her. What about *you*? What's going to happen when she goes to kindergarten in a year? You'll be all alone."

"I'm happy with things the way they are," Mia huffed. "Besides, Clara needs help. She's having so much trouble getting around on that broken leg."

Jess laughed at that comment. "Honey, she hasn't had trouble in *weeks*. She's doing just fine. Stop making excuses and get out there and live a little."

"Maybe later," Mia mumbled, returning her concentration to the dishes. "I don't have time for a life now, at least not a social life. I have a job to do, and a daughter to raise. Unlike some people around here, I know what's important."

Jess's laughter just increased Mia's frustration. What was it with people around here? It was bad enough dealing with Aunt Clara's constant meddling and badgering. Why did her cousin have to start in as well? Next thing she knew, Frances would be badgering her to start dating again.

"You don't understand," she told Jess, trying to rein in her temper. "Dating is hard. Most men would turn around and run when they found out about Frances. Could you even imagine trying to explain to them that I'm a witch? Face it, Jessica, I'm a social pariah."

"Don't be such a fatalist. I'm not trying to give you a hard time, Mia," Jess said softly, her expression apologetic. "I just want what's best for you. That's all my mom wants, too."

"Yeah, I know. But only I know what's best for me. One of these days, you two are going to realize I can take care of myself. Watch out for Clara, though, because she's going to start bugging you next."

Clara walked into the room before Jess could respond, stopping all further conversation. "What's with the two of you today? I've never known you to be unsocial before. Neither one of you has come out to greet a single guest."

"I've been busy. There's a lot of work to do around here with you *supposed to be* staying off your feet," Mia told her. Jess nodded in agreement before she picked up a dish towel and started drying the dishes as Mia set them on the sideboard.

"What a nice man he is," Clara said, lowering herself into a chair at the kitchen table. "Young, polite, handsome. He's a lawyer, you know, Mia."

Mia rolled her eyes. Just what she needed. "That's nice, Aunt Clara."

"We don't get enough like him around here." Clara sighed and brushed her hair out of her eyes. "You'll have to meet him later, Mia."

Jess threw Mia and I-told-you-so look, clearly suppressing laughter.

"Don't get any ideas, Aunt Clara," Mia warned. "I'm perfectly capable of finding a man on my own."

Clara's silence wasn't a good sign. Not at all.

Chapter Three

Mia moved the vacuum over the carpet absently, playing Clara's words over and over again in her mind. Ever since their midnight conversation in the gazebo, she hadn't been able to get them out of her head. This *was* the perfect time to make a change in her life. *If* she really wanted to.

Did she?

She let out a frustrated sigh. Maybe she did. She wasn't bored here, exactly, but her life wasn't filled with excitement, either. She'd come to stay with Clara and Lou after the fire that had taken Steven—and everything she owned—from her three years ago. She and Frances had been lucky to get away with their lives. Frances had been little more than a baby at the time, just a year old, and Mia hadn't had anywhere else to go. Clara and Lou, her mother's sister and brother-in-law, had taken care of her when she needed them. Now Clara needed Mia, whether she believed it or not. She couldn't walk away from that, not when she owed them so much.

And she had her work. She'd always wanted to heal, ever since she was a little girl. Clara had told her she had the gift—a gift she'd passed down to Frances. When most girls had been playing with dolls, Mia had started a toy hospital and pretended to heal her playthings of all kinds of illnesses. Being a healer was an integral part of herself that she'd never give up, not for anyone or anything. On Bennett Island, and the mainland when the island closed for the winter season, the residents appreciated her talents and sought her out when they needed help with medical problems.

Call it a character flaw, but she *liked* being needed.

It gave her life purpose. Did she really want to risk everything she had just for a little personal happiness?

She took a step back and ran into something solid. With a startled gasp, she shut the vacuum off with her foot and turned.

There was a man standing behind her, looking nearly as startled as she felt. Her face went a thousand shades of red.

"I am so sorry."

His lips curved into a friendly smile. "No problem. Nobody's hurt."

As soon as he spoke, she realized it was the man she'd heard Clara talking to the day before. She swallowed hard at the sight of the face that matched the voice. Jess had been right to call him a hunk. He had sandy brown hair and eyes that reminded of melted dark chocolate. He looked toned and tanned and better than any man she'd seen here all summer.

Jess had also been right about the "stuffy" part.

He wore neatly pressed khakis and a navy blue collared shirt, despite the fact that he was supposed to be on vacation. His clothes looked so tidy she wondered if he'd brought a travel iron.

"You're not hurt, are you?" he continued.

She shook her head mutely, still sizing him up in her mind. Not a hair was out of place on his head. Even his shoes were perfectly scuffless. He might be nice to look at, but a man like that wasn't her type. She could just imagine what his house looked like—neat, uncluttered. What would he think if he saw her suite, with her dried herbs hanging from the walls and the shelves of potions and spell bottles that lined the small kitchenette?

She shook her head. He'd probably laugh and tell her to hire a maid.

She took a step back and embarrassed herself further by tripping over the vacuum hose. He grabbed her shoulders to steady her, pulling her upright with almost no effort at all. The instant he touched her, she felt a shock of electricity travel from his hands to her shoulders. By the look on his face—and the fact that he didn't let go once he had her steadied—she guessed he'd felt it, too.

No. She had to be mistaken. The shock was from the carpet, and the look on his face purely a figment of her imagination. It *couldn't* be anything else. Things like that only happened in the sappy romance books Clara and Jess loved to read. In real life, attraction built slowly over time, it didn't hit like a smack in the face.

Maybe Clara was right—she'd been alone too long. A change in her life was beginning to sound better and better.

"I, um...I'm not usually this clumsy," she told him, backing out of his grasp. Once she broke contact, she expected the funny feeling in the pit of her stomach to go away. It annoyed her by hanging around, playing on her nerves. *Ridiculous, Mia. You've been celibate for so long that the first guy who shows you any sort of attention has you tied in knots.* "I've got to get back to vacuuming. You missed breakfast, but Clara's daughter Jess is in the kitchen. She'll make you something if you hurry."

He didn't answer, he just stared at her. Or rather, at her lips. She shivered, thinking... well, thinking things she had no business thinking of a complete stranger who'd be leaving in a few weeks' time. "I've really got to get this finished now."

His lips curled into another smile, but this one wasn't as friendly as the first. This one was hot, sensual, and totally unlike the image of the cool, collected man she'd formed in her mind. Suddenly the look in his eyes had her wondering what he'd look like out of those preppy clothes, his hair wild and mussed.

Why did her imagination have to choose that moment to go haywire?

She bit back a whimper as he spoke in a slow, sensual voice. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt."

"You didn't. I bumped into you, remember? But I do have to earn my keep around here. Aunt Clara will have my head if I don't get this done."

"Aunt Clara?" he repeated. "You're her niece?"

She nodded. "I am."

"I didn't meet you at dinner last night."

She smiled weakly. "I was busy. I took dinner in my room. I do that often." Frances didn't always enjoy sitting around the table with a bunch of loud guests. It made her a little...hyper, and most of the guests didn't appreciate that, so Mia opted to take a tray to their suite most nights.

An electrically charged silence followed. Something about the guy got to her—not that she'd ever admit it to him, or anyone else. She didn't know the guy. It wasn't really any of his business anyway, since she didn't make a habit of getting involved with Clara and Lou's guests.

As he spoke to her, his sensual smile never wavered. "I'll let you get back to work. It was nice meeting you." Between the voice and the grin, she was a little too close to embarrassing herself.

"We haven't actually met." She could have kicked herself the second the words were out of her mouth. She didn't want to stand there talking to him all morning, and she didn't want to give him the wrong idea. Well, maybe she did, but she couldn't think like that. She had *work* to do. People counting on her. Sitting around chatting with the guests was Clara's job, especially since she'd be stuck in that cast for another couple of weeks.

"So we haven't." He held out his hand in a deceptively formal gesture. "Where are my manners? I'm Jack."

"Mia," she said automatically, taking his hand. As soon as they touched, she yanked her hand back. There was that feeling again, the one she wanted to go away. Only this time, bare skin against bare skin, it was much stronger. It figured that the one man her body would respond to was the one who'd be all wrong for her. They were complete opposites.

At least Frances was helping Uncle Lou with some yard work. She wouldn't have to see her mother acting like some immature imbecile.

"It's nice to meet you, Mia." Jack spoke in a tone that went straight to her stomach and fluttered around like a thousand butterflies. "I'll see you around, I hope."

"Probably, since I'm here all the time."

He gave her one final hot glance before he walked out of the room. The man might not be her type, but he really had a great rear end—stuffy dress pants and all.

Once she was alone again she threw herself back into cleaning the living room—this time with a lot more ambition than earlier. She had to do *something* to get her mind off Jack and the voice that made her panties damp just hearing it.

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That had been unexpected.

Jack walked into the kitchen as Mia had suggested, his mind still a little dazed. The second he'd touched her, an unfamiliar sensation clenched in his gut. Why had he never noticed anything like that before? Because work had stopped him from taking notice of the little things, like Nancy always warned?

Probably. He couldn't think of any other way to explain it. He'd dated plenty of women, and none of them had ever affected him the way Mia had within seconds of meeting her. But why her? She wasn't his type at all. She was cute, in a ruffled sort of way, but nothing like the polished women he usually dated. Her dark hair had been pulled back into a kind of a loose twist, with some of the curly strands hanging wildly around her face. Her skin was clean, devoid of any makeup, and her clothes a plain blue shorts set. Nothing spectacular there. In fact, she looked way too young for him—like a kid right out of high school.

So why did he react so strongly?

Maybe it had something to do with the air around here, so far north. It messed with his head. Or maybe it was because last night, for the first time in months, he'd gotten a full night's sleep.

He was still trying to shake off the feeling when a woman came out of the walk-in refrigerator set into the far wall. "Hi. Missed breakfast, huh?"

"Yeah. Mia sent me in to find Jess."

"You found her."

For some reason, he'd expected an older woman, maybe in her forties. But this one looked like she couldn't be much older than Mia. They had the same color hair and the same green eyes, but there the similarities ended. Jess was tall and painfully thin, where Mia was shorter and a lot curvier. He smiled to himself. He'd take curvy over bony any day.

"You don't happen to have any coffee hanging around?" he asked. "Leftover is fine. I just need my daily caffeine fix."

"There's some in the pot on the counter. I just turned it off a few minutes ago. It should still be warm." She walked back into the refrigerator, but poked her head back out a second later. "Want me to cook you something?"

"No, thanks. I hardly ever eat breakfast."

She frowned. "You sure? I don't mind."

"Nah." He took a mug from the counter and filled it with coffee. "I'm fine with this."

"Suit yourself. But you might want to start showing up for breakfast. The air and the lake can make a person really hungry." Jess shrugged and disappeared back into the fridge.

Wishful Thinking

After downing the bitter, lukewarm coffee in a few gulps, he made a mental note to get up earlier the next morning. Something told him that breakfast around here would be very interesting.

Chapter Four

On the third day of his visit, Jack sat outside the log cabin, rocking slowly back and forth in one of the large wooden swings that hung from the porch roof. The weather was unseasonably warm for mid-September, and he'd dug a pair of shorts out of the bottom of his bag to wear. He'd even thought about going down to the lake later on for a swim—if *he'd* remembered to bring his swim trunks.

Strange, how settled he felt here. And unsettled at the same time. When he went to bed last night, when everything was so dark and quiet that he couldn't fall asleep right away, he'd thought about his strange meeting with Clara's niece the day before.

Mia.

Why she still stuck in his mind when he hadn't seen her since yesterday morning, he hadn't a clue. But he couldn't banish her, no matter how hard he tried. At home, he'd been too busy to notice anything but his job. For years, pleasing his father and making partner in the family firm had been all that had mattered. Since he'd gotten to the bed and breakfast, his cell phone hadn't rung once, and he'd kept himself from calling the office to check in. With nothing to do that resembled work, he'd developed a new outlook on life. Things had to change once he got back home.

He should slow down. Stop working so hard. The problem was, he'd been alone for too long, and he didn't have anyone to tell him to relax. Nancy had once told him he was going to work himself into an early grave. After visiting the doctor for his insomnia and headaches, he could honestly say he believed her. For him, settling down and taking it easy had never been an option, not even on the weekends. He'd wanted it all—the big house, the fancy cars, the expensive clothes and electronics. Now he had it. But what had it gotten him?

Severe migraines, endless nights of tossing and turning in bed, and an empty apartment to come home to every night.

He supposed he should be happy, never having to want for anything or rely on anyone to support him. He'd fooled himself into thinking he *was* happy. Until this vacation. Now he just had to decide what to do about it.

"Hello," he heard a soft voice call. He looked up to see a tiny, dark-haired child blinking at him unsurely from the bottom of the porch steps. An uncertain smile broke over his face. "Hi there."

The little girl walked up the steps and took a seat next to him, patting his knee lightly with the palm of her hand. "You look very nice."

"Oh, really?" Nice? He couldn't remember the last time someone had called him nice. Usually they just referred to him as a cold bastard. He sighed at the thought. To be fair, he supposed he'd earned the nickname.

The girl nodded solemnly, her huge green eyes wide. "My momma says that you can tell a lot about a person by the way he looks."

"Didn't your momma tell you not to talk to strangers?"

She nodded again, her little pink tongue darting out to wet her rosy lips. "Yes. But you're not a stranger. You're Jack."

He frowned, taken aback. "How did you know that?"

"Auntie Clara told me." She sighed, and he had a feeling there was more to it than she let on. Strange. She couldn't be more than four or five, but she seemed to be an old soul. "My name is Frances."

Auntie Clara? Could this little girl be Mia's daughter? He stuck out his hand. "Nice to meet you, Frances."

She accepted his hand and held on, a tiny frown marring her delicate features. "Why do you hurt so?" she asked in a quiet voice.

"I-I don't." How would she know anything of what he felt inside? He pulled his hand away from hers, shaken at the power of her gaze. "Maybe you should go find your momma."

She shook her head, her mass of dark curls shaking around her shoulders. "Momma's right inside. She sent me out to the garden for basil." She reached into the pocket of her white dress and pulled out a handful of green leaves. "It cures headaches, you know."

"Is that so?"

Frances nodded, those huge eyes boring holes right through him. She stood and wiped her palms down the front of her dress, leaving dirt streaks on the fabric. "I have to bring these to my momma now. She's making a tea. When you need something to help your headaches, just ask my momma. She'll fix you up."

With that she took off, leaving him wondering how such a little thing knew about his headaches. He shook his head against the thought. She hadn't known, she'd just been guessing. Some of the things she said made him think she'd just been repeating what she'd heard from the adults around her. "Basil curing headaches? What small child would know that?"

"You'd be surprised at what Frances knows."

He jumped at the sound of another voice, this one coming from the front door. Clara hobbled out onto the porch and over to the swing.

"Do you mind if I sit down? My leg is starting to get a little tired."

"Not at all." He moved over to share the swing.

"I take it you met my great-niece." Clara said softly, gazing out at the yard.

"Frances," he muttered, still shaken by her predictions—and those eyes.

"Don't let her get to you. She's young, doesn't understand yet that she needs to keep her gift quiet."

"Her gift?"

Clara nodded. "She's going to make quite a healer someday, gifted just like her mom. I've never met a pair with more natural ability in my life. They know things the rest of us could only wish to know." She sighed. "Of course, the air up here tends to have strange effects on people."

What in the world was she talking about? "Yeah, I can imagine."

Clara shook her head. "There are things here you'd never imagine. This place is very powerful."

"Um, sure."

The silence around them threatened to choke him with weirdness. Did Nancy know the people who ran this little place were all nuts? He was about to excuse himself when Clara spoke again.

"What is it that you want out of life?" she asked, taking him by surprise.

Jack raised his eyebrow at Clara's strange question. "I have everything I want."

"I don't think you do." She looked at him then, her gaze locking with his. What was it about this family? Were they all so strange, or just the ones who lived up here?

"I'm sorry, but you couldn't possibly know that. We just met the day before yesterday."

"And I see it. In your eyes." She clicked her tongue. "You can pretend you're happy all you want, but your eyes don't lie."

Ha. He'd made a living out of bending, if not downright breaking, the truth. Being a divorce attorney, it was a part of his job. That's how his clients got the big settlements, and how he got the big paychecks. Still, one look in Clara's knowing eyes and he knew he couldn't fool her.

"I don't know why I'm telling you this. My life is a little screwed up right now."

"Because of a woman?"

"A woman?" He barked a laugh at the absurdity of it. "I don't have time for women. It's a lot more complicated than that."

"Work, then?" She just laughed. "You can turn it around, you know. It's not too late."

"What are you talking about?"

"You still have time to make some happiness for yourself. Find yourself a nice woman to settle down with. Have a family, a life other than the one at your office."

He sighed. "I'm not looking. Really." He'd have to introduce this woman to his mother. They'd get along famously.

"You should be. You aren't getting any younger, you know."

He scoffed at the idea. "And that's exactly why I'm not planning to waste any more time on a lost cause. I don't do well with commitment."

"You aren't a lost cause, dear." Clara smiled. "Don't write love off just yet. I have a feeling things may be turning around for you."

"Are you some kind of psychic?" Like he even believed in that kind of thing.

She shook her head, seemingly oblivious to his sarcasm. "No. I just pay more attention to the world around me than most people do. Try it sometime. Listen to nature, to the world. You'll know what's right if you go with your instinct, instead of all that fancy training you must have."

She took something out of her pocket and handed it to him. It was a small, red cloth bag, about three inches square. He'd found a similar one in his bedroom—blue instead of red—and had learned that when you picked one of them up and sniffed it, you got a lungful of some pretty pungent spices.

"What is this for? I already have one of these things."

"Not this one, you don't. All of my guests get blue charm bags in their rooms, for harmony during their stay. But you, I think you need a little something extra."

"Charm bags, huh?" Had he slipped into *The Twilight Zone* when he wasn't looking? "What are they for?"

"Oh, lots of things. Different combinations of ingredients produce different results."

A sinking feeling started in the pit of his stomach. "So what does red stand for?" He was afraid he already knew the answer.

She smiled a Cheshire cat smile. "Love, of course."

Love. *Wonderful*. "Listen, I—" "Hold on a second, Jack. This is important." So was his sanity. "I don't think I—"

She shushed him with a wave of her hand. "You mustn't think of anyone in particular when you concentrate on the bag. Just the qualities you look for in a woman. If you use it correctly, it will help you find your ideal mate."

He laughed at the idea. What *did* he look for in a woman? Someone who wasn't after his money, for a start. Someone who wouldn't question him when he came home late at night or forgot to call. Someone who understood his need to network, to keep up his business contacts. "Okay. Um, thanks."

He got up to leave, fed up with the weird turn in the conversation, but her small, cool hand on his arm stopped him. "Trust what I say, Jack. You'll be much happier if you follow my advice."

"Sure." And when he woke up in the morning he'd find out that there was a heat wave on the North Pole.

"You should consider taking a swim this evening. The lake water can heal any hurt."

He shook his head as he left the porch and went back to his room. The old woman was crazy. There wasn't any other explanation. They'd just met. How would she think he was there to heal? There was nothing to heal from. He'd never let anyone close enough to hurt him—yet another trick he'd learned from his father.

With a shuddering sigh, he came to a realization. He'd failed at every attempted romantic relationship he'd ever entered into.

Jack Cullen didn't fail.

He never failed at anything. If he didn't think he could do it, and do it well, he didn't bother to try. So what had happened to mess it all up? He'd been so sure. He'd followed his plan to the letter. He'd gone to law school, established his career, went to work for his father and uncle like he'd been expected to. The only thing he hadn't been able to do—and it wasn't for lack of trying, no matter what his mother said—was find a woman to share everything he had. He was too dedicated to his career to give a relationship his all. And if he couldn't manage it one hundred percent, he gave up.

Without even realizing it, he'd given up on something he should have made a top priority. His happiness.

He sat on the edge of the bed, making a fist around the bag in his hand, and thought about what he wanted in a woman. He might not be looking, but it didn't hurt to play along. Hey, if it would make an old woman happy, why not. It was all just for fun anyway.

What *did* he want? She'd be attractive—he was a guy, after all. Tall, model-thin, with a perfect face, long, light blonde hair, and ice blue eyes. She'd have pale skin—no tan, because that would cause sun damage and premature wrinkles—manicured, long red nails, and she wouldn't mind wandering around nude all the time.

He laughed as he tossed the bag on the nightstand next to the bed. Lies. All of it. He didn't want any of that, no matter how much he tried to pretend. He'd described the type of women he usually dated, someone who would look good on his arm at a business dinner and even better in his bed at night. But what about what he *really* wanted, deep down inside?

He hadn't a clue.

He shook his head as he stood up. He didn't care for using some bogus charm, but the swim Clara had suggested did sound fun. But not right away. Later, when the other guests had returned to their rooms and he'd have the beach to himself.

Chapter Five

Jack made his way down to the beach at a little before seven that night. Twilight painted the sky in oranges and pinks, reflecting off the surface of the water. He set his towel down by a small cluster of rocks in the far corner of the beach and toed off his shoes. The evening was silent save for the birds chirping in the trees and the water gently lapping the shoreline. The rest of the guests, mostly honeymooners or folks celebrating anniversaries, were nowhere to be found. That was fine with him—he hadn't realized, when he'd booked the room on his secretary's recommendation, that he'd be surrounded by all the lovey-dovey cooing he usually found annoying at best. Maybe that had been Nancy's plan—to get him away from everything so he could finally slow down and see what he was missing.

He saw, all right. Her plan worked too well. For the first time in his life, he realized how alone he really was.

The sun faded into the sky, leaving him alone in the darkness of the waning moon with just his thoughts to keep him company. He sat for what must have been a half hour before finally deciding to go for a swim.

And that was when he saw her.

Mia was walking down the path toward the beach. He thought about waving to her, but then decided against it. He'd rather watch, unseen, for at least a little while. As far as he could tell, she hadn't spotted him sitting half-hidden by the rocks.

Her robe dropped to the pale sand, leaving her wearing what he first thought was nothing—but upon closer inspection he noticed it was actually a flesh-colored bathing suit.

One piece.

Damn.

This whole aloneness thing was starting to get old.

She stepped into the water and waded in to her waist before she dove under the surface. When she came back up for air, she pushed her soaked curls out of her eyes with both hands and shook her head vigorously, sending a spray of water droplets into the air, shining in the moonlight. She rolled her shoulders a few times and turned.

And then she saw him.

He froze, waiting for her to get out of the water and leave—or tell him to give her some privacy. But she didn't. She raised her hand in the air, and crooked her finger. He was hard instantly, and he didn't even consider not fulfilling her request.

He stood up and stripped off his shirt before joining her in the water.

* * * * *

Mia stood still in the water as she watched Jack's approach. She hadn't expected to see him down at the beach so late, but she wasn't disappointed that he was there. She'd wanted to talk to him, anyway, and this seemed like the perfect opportunity.

All day she'd thought about him, to the point where she couldn't manage to get one iota of work done. Why couldn't she get him out of her head? She couldn't even make a simple tea without wondering what he was doing, where he was, or if he was lonely.

She had people counting on her, residents she'd been healing for several years. If she couldn't do her job, she'd lose their trust, and she didn't want to let anyone down. So she needed to learn more about Jack. She was sure that, considering his job and social status, the more she learned about him the less she'd find to like.

She'd come down for a swim after Jess had offered to read Frances her story and put her to bed. She'd been hoping for some quiet thinking time in the place she loved most, but this was even better. This was a unique opportunity for her to solve a problem that had been plaguing her since Jack had checked into the bed and breakfast. She needed to prove to herself that he couldn't possibly be as attractive—as *sexy*—as her mind seemed to believe.

"Hey," he said as he stopped next to her. It was all she could do not to reach out and touch those toned chest muscles. *Physical attraction isn't everything.*

"Hi." Her response sounded weaker than she'd hoped for, but at least she hadn't swooned at his feet. Yet. The night was still young.

"So, come here often?"

She rolled her eyes at his joke. "As often as I can." No. This wasn't helping. She even found his lame lines cute.

She was in serious trouble.

She turned away from him to get her bearings, and her gaze fell on the sliver of moon high in the sky. Almost there. Almost the new moon. Time for changes, Clara had said, time to bring in the new—new self, new job, new relationships. New awareness.

Sexual awareness?

She smiled at the thought. Clara had always told her that you can't fight your own destiny. The pull she felt with Jack didn't want to go away, no matter how much she ignored it. Destiny? Or something else? Well, there was only one way to be certain.

She spun around and wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him down for a kiss.

If she thought he'd push her away, she'd been wrong. With his arms around her back, he molded their bodies together and returned her kiss with enthusiasm. She clung to him, taking as much as she gave and not regretting it for an instant. His hand squeezed her hip, pressing her stomach harder against his erection. She moaned into his mouth and wiggled against him. Her pussy was drenched—and not entirely from the

lake—and her nipples pebbled. The feel of her wet swimsuit brushing against her skin created a delicious friction she couldn't help but revel in.

When Jack broke the kiss and stepped away, they were both panting.

"What was that for?" he asked, his tone aroused and annoyed at the same time. "You could have given me a little warning."

She shrugged, trying for casual but achieving, at best, anxious. "I felt like it."

"Do you always follow your impulses?"

No. Never. "When they're strong, I do." She splashed him a little before she turned and ran. Or, at least, tried to. He'd grabbed her before she got two feet away and hauled her back against him, her back pressed tightly to his front.

She felt his whisper against her ear. "You've got me tied in knots, Mia. I don't know you. I don't understand any of this. But I want to touch you."

She felt the same. She whimpered as his hands slid slowly down her sides and back up again, stopping to cup her breasts in his warm palms. She couldn't hold back a shudder as his thumbs flicked across her beaded nipples, rolling them gently under his touch. She rocked back against him and delighted in the feel of his rock-hard cock pressed into the center of her back. She wanted to feel him between her legs, thrusting that cock into her waiting pussy.

It had been so long—three years—since she'd felt a man's cock inside her, and Jack made her hormones rage for something she hadn't realized she'd been missing.

With Steven, sex had been good. With Jack, she imagined it would be explosive. Everything inside her told her to stop—that she shouldn't be letting him touch her in such an intimate way. He was a stranger, really, though he didn't feel like one. But she'd put this into motion, and she wasn't ready to stop just yet.

He let one hand slip lower, down her belly, lower still, until he cupped her mound in his palm. Through the thin fabric of her swimsuit, she felt like his heat would scorch her. She moved her hips as she felt her pussy drench with anticipation.

"This is crazy," he told her, his voice no more than a whisper against her neck. "We shouldn't be doing this. I should leave."

"You're right. We should stop." Even as she said the words, she knew she'd do nothing to stop him, just as she knew he wouldn't really walk away.

He leaned in and kissed her neck, small tingling kisses that had her squirming in seconds. His hand slipped under the elastic leg band of her swimsuit and moved it away. The feeling of the cool water against her naked skin was amazing—and arousing. He slid his fingers over her sensitive skin, teasing her folds before he found her clit and stroked in earnest. She bucked against him, the sensation almost too much to bear. He slid his fingers into her throbbing pussy as his tongue and lips teased and tormented the tender skin where her neck met her shoulder.

Her orgasm took her completely by surprise—no slow and steady building like she'd known before. It hit her all at once, the sensation exploding inside her and her

inner muscles pulsing. She writhed in the water so much that she wriggled out of his grasp and slid under. Jack pulled her up, laughing. "Are you okay?"

"I think so." At that point, she couldn't be too sure.

She swiped the water out of her eyes and turned to face Jack on shaky legs. The look in his eyes mirrored what she felt inside—unsure, nervous, and very turned on. She bit her lip, not sure of what to say after such an intimate encounter. She felt the inane urge to apologize, yet at the same time her body cried out for so much more.

She reached out and ran a finger down his chest, delighting in his shiver. He caught her hand in his and brought it to his lips, brushing a kiss over her knuckles. He leaned in and kissed her cheek—and then turned and walked out of the water.

Not sure if he expected her to follow, she didn't. Instead, she went to where she'd left her towel and picked it up off the sand.

* * * * *

When Jack turned and Mia wasn't behind him, he felt a sharp pang of disappointment. But what had he expected? He'd touched her in a way he shouldn't have, not for a woman he barely knew. She probably thought he did this kind of thing all the time.

He didn't.

In fact, his actions tonight surprised him almost as much as her kiss had. What had he been thinking? He was many things, but impulsive didn't even make the list. He glanced at her across the sand. She stood looking out into the water, her towel clutched to her chest like a shield. Had he made a terrible mistake? There was only one way to find out. He crossed the sand to where she stood and took the towel from her hands.

"Need some help?" he asked, not waiting for a response before running the towel over her damp back.

"Thanks." Her voice sounded tight, nervous—and aroused.

"Are you okay?" he asked her for the second time that night, fully expecting her to say she was.

She surprised him again. "I-I really don't know. I'm..." Her voice trailed off and she turned to face him. "What happened out there.... it was really, nice, Jack."

"Nice?" He fought back a laugh. Her actions had told him so much more than her words.

She smiled. "Okay, better than nice. But it can't happen again."

He'd been afraid of that. "Sorry if I rushed things. I'd really like a chance to get to know you better."

"I wish that was possible." She glanced up toward the stone steps that led back to the inn, a frown marring her features. "I have responsibilities. I'm very attracted to you—so much that it scares me since I hardly know you. But I can't do this."

Without another word, she picked up her robe and slipped it on, heading back in the direction of the house.

"Where are you going?" He didn't want to let her go just yet, not when he still needed answers. Why had she kissed him? Why had she let him touch her so intimately?

Why would she admit she was attracted to him, but didn't want anything to do with him, in the same sentence?

She stopped and glanced over her shoulder. "I'm going to bed."

He almost asked if she wanted some company, but he bit it back in time. He needed time to think—and so did Mia. The strong pull he felt toward her unnerved him. But he had to admit to himself that it couldn't be anything more than sexual chemistry. He didn't believe in anything as foolish as love at first sight, no matter how much his mind tried to convince him differently.

He shook his head as she turned away and walked across the sand. His body gave an involuntary shudder at the sight of her hips swaying gently against the billowy fabric of her robe. Yeah, it was lust all right, plain and simple. He'd gone far too long without a woman, and now that he found himself faced with a semi-willing one, his body kicked into overdrive. He needed to get laid—something his brother told him incessantly—but the island wasn't exactly brimming with choices. So it looked like he'd be waiting until he got back home, unless he could convince Mia that they'd be damned good together.

He let out a frustrated groan and waded back into the lake. The cool water lapped against his legs and he dove under, not coming back to the surface until he needed to breathe. His head ached, his gut ached, and his cock ached—he needed some kind of relief. Soon.

He slipped his swim trunks down past his hips and took his painfully stiff cock in his hand and stroking up and down a few times. He was close—too close. It wouldn't take more than a few seconds for him to come. Mia did that to him—she'd made him so hot he could barely think straight. He wanted to bury himself in her slick pussy, feel her clench around him as her orgasm took her. He'd been so close. If she hadn't doused herself in the water, he would have been inside her right now, sliding in and out of her hot, wet flesh.

He *needed* that. He needed *her*.

His gut clenched with his impending orgasm as he imagined his cock filling Mia's pussy, slamming into her while she begged for more. He threw his head back and came with a strangled groan. *Jesus*. How was he going to survive the rest of the vacation without falling apart?

* * * * *

Mia watched Jack from a secluded spot on the path, her gaze riveted to the movement of his hand on his cock. She caught her lower lip between her teeth and sighed, unable to look away from the arousing sight. She'd planned on going back to the house and going back to bed, she really had, but when she'd heard him splashing in the water, she hadn't been able to resist a peek. Now she was glad she had stayed. He was so amazing, every inch of him.

She felt her pussy grow damp all over again as she watched him pleasure himself. Part of her wanted to go back there and join him. She'd been here in seclusion for so long she'd forgotten what a real man looked like. Or what he smelled like. Or tasted like.

She leaned against a nearby tree and slid her fingers under the leg band of her swimsuit. When they slipped along her folds, she realized just how wet watching Jack touch himself made her. She thrust two fingers inside her pussy, imagining it was Jack's cock filling her. She found her clit with her thumb and pressed down hard, moving it in slow circles that sent ripples of pleasure through her. Her orgasm rippled through her at the same time as she saw Jack throw his head back and yell out into the night. She slumped against the tree, unable to move for a few minutes. When Jack got out of the water and picked up his things, presumably to head back to the inn, it goaded her into action and she made her way back up the rest of the rocky path to the house.

Where she found Clara sitting on a couch in the living room.

"What have you been doing? Causing trouble again?" Clara asked her, looking her over entirely too closely in the dim light from the wall sconces that stayed on all night.

"I haven't caused trouble in years," Mia answered, brushing a lock of damp hair behind her ear. She didn't need this now, not after what had happened with Jack. And after.

"Uh-huh." Clara laughed. "How's Mr. Cullen?"

"Who?"

Clara gave Mia a knowing look. "I might be aging, but there's nothing wrong with my eyesight. I see the way he looks at you, *and* the way you look at him."

"I don't look at him any differently than I do any of your other guests."

Clara clicked her tongue. "You might as well accept it, dear." "Accept what?" "Destiny."

Destiny? Try serious lust and nothing more. "Whatever." She should have expected this. Aunt Clara never failed. Good thing she'd already formulated her own plan. "I don't want anything to do with the man."

"Sure you don't."

With that, Clara went to bed, leaving Mia alone to think about her words.

* * * * *

Mia woke up the next morning to Frances bouncing on the end of her bed. After her tryst with Jack in the lake, she'd slept soundly for the entire night. Amazing, how just a little activity could relax her so much. She glanced at the clock. *Nine fifteen?* She'd missed breakfast.

"Morning, Momma," Frances said cheerily.

"Stop jumping before you break the springs." She got out of bed and stretched her arms over her head. "Why didn't you wake me up when you got up like you usually do?"

"Auntie Clara told me to let you sleep. She said you needed a break, for once."

Mia frowned. That made it sound like she needed time away from caring for her own child. Nothing could be further from the truth. She loved her time with Frances, and wouldn't trade it for anything in the world. She had her priorities straight—or at least she would from now on.

"Go and brush your teeth, then meet me downstairs. We'll work in the garden today."

Frances groaned. "Oh, Momma, do we have to work today? I want to *play!*" She stomped her feet up and down on the mattress, banging the headboard into the wall.

"Stop it, Frances. Work first, play after. You said you wanted to learn about herbs and healing, remember?"

"But Momma, I—"

Mia held her hand in the air. "Hush."

"Okay." She moped as she walked out of the room. Mia laughed. It would be a matter of minutes before Frances stood in the garden, plucking fat weeds from the beds as she listened in rapt silence to everything Mia taught her.

This was how her life should be. Simple, yet important. Her work did wonders for those around her, and she had the ability to pass the gift on to her daughter.

Jack, unfortunately, had thrown the proverbial wrench into her plans. She was too attracted to him. That could be a problem. She didn't want to rely on anyone—which was why she'd avoided dating since Steven had passed. She had more important things to do, didn't have time to waste with temporary flings.

Until Jack.

He unnerved her, made her sweat, made her want to run in the other direction. She'd been raised to rely on herself, and around him she felt like she could easily lose herself. But she didn't want that to happen. Her life just didn't work that way, not anymore. She had people relying on her—she didn't need to become dependent on anyone, especially a man.

She liked taking care of others. That was what she did. She always had, all her life. Her mother had taught her the ways of witchcraft and healing, the uses for herbs and aromatherapy. She used those teachings every day of her life and in recent years had

begun to pass them down to her own daughter. Her inner instinct dictated that she take care of people.

But did that include Jack?

The answer was exactly what she'd expected. *Yes*. When someone needed help, she couldn't turn them away. He'd come here for a reason. He'd probably be averse to calling it fate, but she had begun to believe that it was what brought him to Bennett Island—but not for the purpose Clara seemed to think. Jack came to heal, like many other people over the years.

He needed a change in his life, more so than she did. If he didn't stop working himself so hard, he was going to work himself into an early grave. She'd seen him sitting on the porch, his laptop settled on his lap or his cell phone in his hand. Even when on vacation, the man couldn't let go, even if he didn't use them. She worried about him, just as she'd worry about anyone who couldn't see that there was more to life than a paycheck.

Was that her purpose here? Was she to show him how to make the changes he so desperately needed? He needed to relax, yet she could see how difficult it was for him. Clara had tried, in her usual interfering sort of way, to talk him into taking the much needed time off, but Mia doubted it would have much effect. Men like him usually had to have a heart attack or a similar scare to get them to see how bad for them that type of lifestyle really was. Jack didn't even look forty yet, but she'd seen much younger men suffer from disorders associated with stress.

Why she felt it was her business, she had no idea. She just hated to see suffering of any kind, and she had a feeling he was suffering.

Even if he didn't know it.

She threw on an old pair of jeans, a t-shirt, and a pair of sandals and met Frances downstairs. The weather had taken another warm turn, and Frances stood at the bottom of the stairs bouncing on her toes. Her eyes had taken on the mischievous sparkle Mia knew so well, and she knew there wouldn't be much teaching today. The child obviously had other ideas.

Frances drew a deep, noisy breath before she started her pitch. "Uncle Lou says he'll take me out on his boat today. Auntie Jess and him are taking some of the guests in the lake, and he said I can help him. He said I know how to talk lots and can tell everyone about the island while he drives. Can I please, *please* go, Momma?"

"He's got that right. You sure do know how to talk." Mia ruffled her daughter's hair, unable to say no to her request when she sounded so excited. There would be plenty of time for learning later, but Frances had to take time to be a child. "Make sure you wear your lifejacket, and listen to what Uncle Lou and Jess say, okay?"

Frances clapped her hands and jumped up and down. "Thank you! Love you, Momma. See you at lunch time." She gave Mia a quick hug and bounded off to find Lou.

Wishful Thinking

Mia sighed and went out to the garden to get started, wondering if she'd run into Jack sometime today. And if she did, would she have the courage to face him after what had happened the night before?

Chapter Six

She didn't have to wait long to find out. Jack came around the back of the house toward her gardens as Mia was watering her rosemary and basil. He'd apparently been running, which she'd noticed him do a few times during his stay, and his gray t-shirt was soaked with sweat. Her breath caught in her throat and she tried to ward off the excited yet uneasy feeling just seeing him caused in her. What should she say? Should she ignore him and pretend last night had never happened?

She shook her head and went back to her watering. She'd take her cues from him.

"Hey," he said as he slowed and approached the garden.

"Hi." She smiled at him, but it faded fast at the intimate look in his eyes. She couldn't do this. She couldn't pretend she wasn't attracted when every cell in her body was calling for a repeat of the night before. If she didn't walk away, she was going to forget all her convictions and do something she'd later regret—when Jack had left the island for good and she was once again left all alone. She started to walk past him to go back into the house, but his voice stopped her.

"Don't rush away on my account. I've got to take a shower anyway," he told her, but didn't move. He stayed right where he was, staring at her and making her weak in the knees, and the longer he stood there the more uncomfortable the silence became. Finally, she couldn't take it anymore.

"Jack?"

"Yeah?" His voice held a husky quality that echoed somewhere deep inside her.

"Didn't you say you had to take a shower?"

"Yeah." But still he didn't budge. His gaze locked with hers and she couldn't make herself walk away. She crossed her arms over her chest and tried to put a professional expression on her face to get him to move along.

"Do you want something?" she asked.

He smiled as he lifted his hand to her face, tracing the line of her jaw with his finger. She shivered, but didn't even think about pushing him away. "Funny. Your aunt asked me a similar question yesterday."

Her breath caught in her throat as she spoke. "Did she?"

"She did." Jack moved his finger down her throat to where her shoulder met her neck, making concentration almost impossible. "She asked me what I want out of life."

"What-what was your answer?" Did she really want to know?

"I want what everyone else does, I guess." He dropped his hand to her waist and pulled her closer. "To be happy."

Yeah. She wanted that, too. But she had a feeling that, like Jack, she really didn't know what would make her happy. She thought she'd known once—she'd held that complete and total happiness in the palm of her hand, but when it disappeared in the smoke and ashes of the fire, she'd realized it took a lot more than living someone else's life to make her happy. She'd moved across the country for Steven's job. She left her family and friends to start over with the man she'd loved. She wouldn't trade what she'd had with Steven for the world, but she wouldn't repeat it again, either.

"Why would she think I need to change my life?" Jack asked, his tone serious. She needed to do something to lighten the moment before she started fooling herself into thinking she could really come to care about him. The less she knew about the real Jack, the man he was when he wasn't vacationing, the better for her heart.

"Because you're boring?" she asked, tightening the grip on the hose she held to her side.

He laughed at that. "You don't really think I'm boring, do you?"

Was he kidding? She'd never met anyone like him. She *should* find him boring—the self-confessed workaholic lawyer he was—but for some reason she didn't. "Actually, no."

"That's a good thing."

She pulled away from his grip and stepped back, training the stream of water from the hose on her thyme plants. "*You're* not boring. But I'll bet you think I am."

He barked a laugh and followed her as she walked through the herb patches. "Hardly. I can't figure you out."

"That's probably a good thing. You don't need to waste your time on me when you can go back to Boston and flirt with the big city girls."

He circled his fingers around her arm to stop her forward motion. "Will you stop moving for a few seconds and listen to me? I want to get to know you, to understand you. I want to spend time with you. What do you find wrong with that?"

The fact that he planned to leave, for starters. She couldn't—*wouldn't*—talk about this with him. Not now. Maybe not ever. In an attempt to lighten the mood and distract him from his prying questions—or at least that's what she told herself—she lifted the hose and flipped the nozzle to high.

"Since you don't seem to be in any rush to take a shower, let me help you a little," she told him as she sprayed cold water in his direction. He let out a surprised grunt, but recovered quickly. In seconds, he'd wrested the hose out of her hand and turned it on her, drenching her with the freezing water. She turned to run, but he grabbed her around the waist and hauled her back against him. With her wet chest pressed to his, she could feel the heat radiating off him.

"Jack?"

He didn't answer. Instead, he leaned down and kissed her.

From the second his lips touched hers, she knew it was right. His lips teased and played with hers and she wound her arms around his neck. If she tried to pretend there was nothing between them, she'd be fighting a losing battle. She and Jack had chemistry stronger than she'd ever experienced, and it had taken her by surprise. It made her legs weak and her head spin—which she wasn't sure was entirely a bad thing.

When Jack broke the kiss and stepped away, she let her mind drift slowly back to reality. "We really should talk about last night."

He gave her a slow, sensual smile that had her stomach doing flip-flops. "I want my mouth on you. My tongue inside you."

"What?" She suddenly had a hard time hearing over the rushing of blood in her ears. The thought of Jack, between her legs, his mouth and tongue...oh, boy. She needed to sit down.

She sank down on one of the white wicker benches that sat at the edge of the garden. "You want to... ."

"Oh, yeah." His tone was husky, his voice impossibly deep. She could barely control her response. She was soaked from the water hose. Not only that, her panties were wet—just from a kiss and a few well-chosen words—that she'd have to change everything when she went inside.

"What do you say? You want to go find a quiet place and spend a few hours getting to know each other?"

Yes, she did. But she stopped herself, thinking it was the middle of the day and anyone could be watching. She'd been irresponsible to let him kiss her. Now she needed to get control of the situation before anything else happened. She patted the bench seat next to her. "We can talk just fine right here."

He didn't look happy about it—in fact, he looked like he might be in pain, but she couldn't help it. Clara, no matter how much she wanted to play matchmaker, wouldn't condone fooling around in the public garden. And she had Frances to think about.

Frances.

She had yet to tell Jack about her daughter. That ought to be an interesting conversation.

Jack sat next to her, so close that his bare, damp thigh pressed against her leg. A chill ran through her nerves.

"I have a question for you," he said, his expression dark and sensual, yet probing at the same time.

"What do you want to know?" She expected him to ask about her home life, her family—anything but the subject he chose.

"What is it with those little bags Clara's handing out?"

Her breath caught in her throat. No. This was *not* a good conversation to have. Not now. What had Clara done this time? "What did she give you?"

"Some little red felt bag she called a charm bag. Some kind of love thing."

Mia let out a heavy breath. *What are you trying to pull, Clara?* "She's trying to see to your happiness, apparently, in any way she can. When did she give you that?"

"Yesterday afternoon."

Well, at least it hadn't been after their.... incident. "Good." "Why?"

What's up with all of this natural healing stuff, anyway?" "Natural healing? It's a little more complicated than that."

He sat back on the bench, his back against the stone wall behind them. "Tell me about it."

Here it comes. The kiss of death to any spark of interest he might have felt. Still, she might as well tell him now and get it over with. No sense prolonging this until it was too late. "Clara's a witch."

"A witch?" He laughed. "Like cauldrons and broomsticks and magic wands?"

She shook her head. "No. Not like the Halloween type of witches you're probably used to. She practices traditional witchcraft."

Jack's gaze shot to hers. "What about you? I see you working in these gardens all the time."

"Yes, I practice witchcraft as well."

His expression was a healthy mix of intrigue and confusion. "So.... you're a witch?"

"Yes, I am. I'm a healer." She stared at him, waiting for him to laugh, to walk away, anything to show he thought she was crazy. But he just sat there looking pensive and a little annoyed. She let out a frustrated breath, not wanting to prolong the inevitable. When she'd first told Steven, he'd laughed in her face. It had taken a long time to convince him that she was serious. "Why do you not look surprised?"

He sighed. "I honestly don't know. I guess I knew something was different here. I just couldn't pinpoint what."

"So you believe in it?" She waited tensely for his answer.

He shrugged. "Well, I suppose I do. It's just like any other religion, right?"

"I suppose," she said, a little disappointed at his reaction. She'd been so hoping that he'd be different, that he wouldn't judge her on her beliefs, but that didn't seem to be the case. She watched the interest fade from his eyes as he stood up.

"I've got to get inside and take a shower. I'll see you around, okay?" he told her.

"Yeah. Great. See you around."

He ran toward the house, not stopping until he'd disappeared through the back door.

Mia went back to working in her gardens, but her heart wasn't in the task anymore. For just a minute, she'd held on to the hope that Jack would understand, and that he'd want to get to know her despite what she believed in. But he'd run as if scared without even listening. She tried to tell herself that a man like that wasn't worth her time, but she couldn't help the ball of disappointment that welled up inside her.

* * * * *

Jack stood in the shower, the water as cold as he could get it and still stand under the spray. He was still heated from his run, and the steamy kiss with Mia hadn't helped. The woman, even after her confession, remained a complete mystery to him. She didn't give anything away easily. That was part of what had initially attracted him to her. But this afternoon, everything had changed. The more he got to know her, the more he realized he didn't *know* her at all.

A witch.

He never would have guessed. Not in a million years. Yeah, there was something different about her, but he figured it had something to do with living on the island, being apart from the bustle of the big cities. But, a *witch*?

He'd always laughed at his mother when she'd said he'd know it when he met the one woman meant for him. But the second he'd seen Mia—or, the second she'd backed into him while vacuuming—he'd known. He hadn't wanted to admit it to himself—that would be too impulsive—but he couldn't deny it now. There was something strong between them, and it had nothing to do with sexual chemistry.

But Mia...it *couldn't* be her. They had no chance of making a serious relationship work. They were too different. Yet, the first time they'd made eye contact had hit him like a kick in the gut. The sparks had been instant, for both of them, but she'd thrown a serious cramp into any ideas he'd gotten with her confession.

He could just imagine introducing her at office holiday parties. "This is my wife, Mia. Did I happen to mention that she's a witch? And don't laugh, or she might put a curse on you."

Did witches really do that? Or was it just something in fairy tales? He didn't know. This was all too much. He'd finally found a woman who made him forget about his endless pursuit of all things material, and they were completely incompatible.

Were they really?

He heard his mother's voice inside his head, berating him for acting like a first-class jerk. And the more he thought about it, the more he realized it was true. He felt a connection with Mia. Couldn't that be enough? Was there some way he could convince her that they owed it to themselves to at least give it a try?

He didn't know. He might have screwed everything up by running away from her. The only thing he could do was find her, and really listen to what she had to say. But first, he wanted to find Clara and see if she could give him a little more insight into Mia's world.

* * * * *

Mia worked out in her garden for the rest of the morning, until Frances came back from her trip with Uncle Lou and Jess. The little girl came bustling into the yard, carrying a huge sack of candy. "Look at what Uncle Lou bought for me at the store at the marina!"

"*Wonderful.*" Mia would have to speak to Lou about it later. "Just what you need. Ten pounds of chocolate and sugar."

"It's only five pounds, Momma." Frances sighed as she plopped down on the grass. "Can I help you pull weeds?"

"Not in that dress." She gestured to one of Clara's creations—frilly, but not practical in the least. "If you want to work, you need to go change first."

Frances looked down at her dress and rolled her eyes. "Maybe later." She didn't particularly care for dressing like a wedding cake, Mia knew, but she tolerated it for the summers they spent on the island. Once she got back to the mainland and her preschool she'd be back to dressing in jeans and little t-shirts like the other girls.

"Hi, Jack," Frances said, her voice light and bubbly.

Mia froze. How did Frances know *Jack*?

She looked up, and sure enough, she saw Jack walking toward them, carrying one of Clara's old-fashioned wicker picnic hampers. He sat down on the grass next to Frances. "Hey, kiddo. What are you up to?"

"Watching my momma do the garden. I want to help her, but she said no dresses in the garden."

He glanced at Mia, his gaze questioning. Maybe she should have mentioned Frances a little sooner.

"That's my momma," Frances continued as Mia's heart lodged in her throat.

"I kind of guessed that," he spoke to Frances, but looked at Mia. "You look almost exactly alike."

Mia looked down at her garden. She expected Jack to walk away, but he didn't. He kept talking to Frances. "I was hoping you and your mom would like to take a picnic with me."

Mia shot her gaze up to his. "What are you talking about?"

"I seem to have missed lunch again, but Clara was kind enough to pack me a basket. She said she packed a bit extra, enough for three if anyone wants to share." He glanced at Frances and then to Mia.

Frances's eyes lit up. "Please, Momma? Can we go?"

Mia bit the inside of her cheek. She didn't want Frances getting attached to Jack since he'd be leaving soon, but she didn't want the girl to feel isolated for the entire season, either. And Jack seemed to be making an effort. Maybe he'd accepted her confession better than it had appeared. At any rate, she could at least spend the afternoon with him and get away from the gardens for a little while. "Okay, we'll go."

Frances let out a whoop of delight and followed as Jack led them up a path through the woods that would lead to a small clearing—Clara had obviously given him directions, since he didn't even hesitate along the path. Mia shook her head. She was going to kill Clara later. No matter how many times she insisted, Clara couldn't understand that she wasn't looking for a man—she wouldn't be until Frances was much older.

Especially a man who didn't really understand what she was, and that she wasn't going to change. She'd found that once, with Steven, and she wasn't sure she'd ever find it again.

* * * * *

Jack sat on the blanket next to Mia, watching her watch her daughter play. Clara had shocked him with the announcement that Frances was Mia's daughter, but only mildly. Since he'd met Frances he's suspected she might belong to Mia, but Mia hadn't mentioned her so he'd put the thought to the back of his mind. He didn't care that she had a child, though it probably would have bothered him a few weeks ago. Since he'd embarked on this vacation, everything had changed.

"You're not married, are you?" he asked, even though he already knew the answer. Clara had told him a bit about Mia and her past while he'd helped her pack the lunch. She'd been through a lot so young, and his heart went out to her. Hearing her story made him feel like even more of a jerk for deserting her earlier.

"No." She shook her head, her expression saddening. "I was. But Steven died." She let out a soft sigh and brushed a windswept curl from her eyes. "There was a fire in our house, in the middle of the night. Three years ago. Frances and I made it out. He didn't."

"I'm sorry," he said earnestly. He couldn't even imagine what she'd been through. Compared to her loss, his father's workaholic behavior and sometimes emotional abuse didn't seem like such a bad thing.

She turned to him then and smiled, and something in the region of his heart—if he had one, since that had yet to be determined—tightened. This wasn't a business deal, or related to money in any way, but for some reason it gave him the same kind of rush. It wasn't just sex either, though he wanted that with Mia, it was something more. Something that scared him and exhilarated him at the same time, like he couldn't get enough. When Clara asked him what he wanted out of life, he hadn't had an answer. He did now. He wanted that feeling to continue. Forever.

With Mia.

Shocked at the direction of his thoughts, he coughed and opened the picnic hamper. When she'd said there'd be enough food for three, she hadn't been kidding. He could

feed a football team with what she'd packed. He pulled a couple of sandwiches and a bag of chips from the bag when Mia spoke.

"Tell me something about you. You've been hurt before, haven't you?"

It was more of a statement than a question, and it made him pause. "What do you mean?"

"Tell me who made you afraid to care."

He drew a deep breath, nervous that she could read his feelings so closely. Intuitive, Clara had said, both Mia and Frances. To him, it seemed like so much more. "No one. I'm just too busy to bother with emotions."

She shook her head, apparently not willing to take that as an answer. "Don't lie to me, Jack. I want to be able to trust you, but I can't if you refuse to respect me enough to tell me the truth. I've told you some pretty big truths about myself, and I would appreciate it if you'd respond in kind."

Her questions were too personal, hit too close to home. She tapped into a place deep inside, where no one had ever bothered to touch before. "Where do you want me to start?"

"Tell me about your family."

"My dad and my uncle started the law firm where I work, way back when my brother and I were toddlers. That's all he ever really cared about. He spent all his free time there, leaving before six in the morning and coming home after eight at night. And when he was home, he yelled all the time. Nothing my mother ever did was good enough. Brian and I, well, we weren't worth his time if we didn't plan on going to law school and joining the family firm."

"That's terrible."

"Hey, I survived. There are worse things in life than having an absentee father." He ran a hand through his hair and shifted on the blanket. "My mom eventually divorced him and got remarried. She lives in Arizona now with my stepdad. My dad still works too much, but I can't really criticize him for that."

She laughed softly at what must have been a pained expression on his face. "Was talking about that really so bad?"

He shrugged, unaccustomed to this closeness. "I don't really make a point of sharing my life story with others."

Just like that, she cupped his face in her hands and kissed him. His hand threaded through her hair to hold her close as he pushed his tongue into her mouth. He could easily live the rest of his life just holding her and touching her.

"Momma, can I have a sandwich? Eww! Gross! Kissing." Frances's outburst caused him to break the kiss. Mia's face reddened—an adorable look for her—and she swiped a hand across her mouth.

"Sure, honey," she answered, patting the blanket next to her. Frances flopped down and crossed her legs, accepting the sandwich from Mia.

"My Daddy died," she told him matter-of-factly.

"Your mom told me. I'm sorry."

"I don't remember him cause I was a baby then." She paused to take a bite of her sandwich, continuing around a mouthful of peanut butter and jelly. "I wish I did. Momma said he was a nice man."

"I'm sure he was."

Frances picked up a small bottle of juice from the basket and held it out to Jack. "Can you open this for me?"

"Sure." He twisted off the top and handed it back to her.

"Thanks. Are you going to be my new Daddy?"

He nearly choked on the bite of sandwich he'd just taken. Thankfully, Mia intercepted before he had to answer.

"That's enough, Frances. Jack is a friend. That's all."

The look she gave him told a different story. Did he see hope spark in her eyes? He couldn't be quite sure. Any other date and he'd be running in the other direction. This time, running was the furthest thing from his mind.

Chapter Seven

Several days after their picnic in the woods, Jack woke in the middle of the night with the beginnings of what promised to be a terrible migraine. He got out of bed and dressed in a pair of old sweats and a t-shirt before he made his way downstairs to find some milk to take his medicine—or else he'd end up with another ulcer. He noticed a light coming from the kitchen along with an unusual scent wafting from the room. Mia was standing by the stove, stirring a pot of something dark green and watery. A stick of incense was burning in a wooden holder on the counter, a pungent and vaguely familiar scent.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything," he said as he walked into the room. She glanced up from the mixture in front of her. "Hi there." "Hey. Why are you up so late?"

"I'm making an infusion for Mr. Jenson's skin, to help with the rash he seems to be getting from the trees around here."

Her smile slowly melted into a frown. "Why are *you* up so late? Is there something wrong?"

"Couldn't sleep. Headache."

She lifted the pot from the stove and set it on a potholder on the counter before placing a chrome tea kettle on the burner. "Sit down for a second. I've got something that might help."

He shook his head. "No, really. I'm fine. It's mild."

And it was, for now. If he let it go, experience told him it would get worse.

"Sit, Jack." She took a small wooden canister out of a cabinet and scooped some of the dry mixture inside into a metal tea ball. When the kettle whistled she took it off the stove burner and poured the boiling water—or at least he *hoped* it was water—into a mug. She dropped the tea ball into it and brought the whole thing to the table.

"Are you upset that I didn't tell you about Frances?" she asked, taking him by surprise.

"No. I can understand that you wouldn't want a stranger to know about your daughter." Though he didn't like to consider himself a stranger to her, not after the intimate moments they'd shared.

"Good. I-I haven't been involved with anyone since her father died." She settled the mug in front of him and he took a sniff. It smelled pleasant, but familiar.

"What's in this?"

"Chamomile, mint, rosemary, and lavender."

He blinked at her response. "Is this tea, or the remnants of a bouquet?"

"Ha, ha. Trust me. This will help." She winked at him. "Have a little faith, Jack."

He hesitated before he lifted the cup to his lips and took a small sip. Surprisingly, he didn't feel the instantaneous need to vomit. That had to be a good sign. The flavor wasn't horrible, either. He sipped the tea while Mia sat across from him, enjoying the comfortable silence. When she darted her tongue out to wet her lip, though, he felt a tightening in his groin.

"Finish your tea, Jack," she told him, seeming to read his mind.

He did as she suggested, and was surprised to find that within a few minutes the headache had started to subside.

"Feeling better?"

Talk about psychosomatic. "Yeah, but I told you it wasn't that bad to begin with."

"Is it really that hard to admit that I might be right?"

"Yes."

She laughed. "Keep on telling yourself that. One of these days you might surprise yourself and concede a point to the other person."

That's the way he would have thought of an opponent. But he didn't think of Mia as an opponent.

That was probably where he'd gone wrong in most of his relationships. Knowing what he knew about marriage and divorce, he'd always gone in ready for a fight. But he didn't feel that way now. He could relax around Mia, because he didn't feel like she was going to suck him dry the first chance she got. He liked her open, honest personality—there wasn't a manipulative bone in her body—and she seemed to genuinely care about everyone, not just herself.

"Thanks," he told her, and not just for the tea. She'd gotten him to look at his life from a different angle, and to see that he needed to make some changes.

"For what? This is the kind of thing I do here. I would have done the same for anyone."

He wouldn't be surprised. "Well, thanks anyway. I'll let you get back to your infusion."

"It's done. It just has to cool overnight," she said quickly. Very quickly. Her tone made him even more hesitant to go back to bed—alone.

"Oh. Okay. Then, I guess I'll go and let you get to bed."

"You don't have to rush out. Stay here for a little while. I can make you another cup of tea. You know, just in case the first cup doesn't work completely."

She took his mug and refilled it, making one for herself before she joined him at the table.

"So, is this what your job entails?" he asked. "Staying up until all hours of the night to make herbal remedies?"

"Not always, but I couldn't sleep so I thought I'd get a head start."

He nodded, though he didn't understand as much as he'd like to. The closest he'd ever come to herbal healing was that cough syrup with the supposedly natural ingredients in it. But with the way that tea relaxed his head, he might consider trying it again.

She opened her mouth to speak, her expression questioning. He didn't feel like answering questions at this time of night, especially since the intimate talk they'd had that afternoon in the clearing in the woods. He wanted to change his old habits, and he did his best to make an effort, but he had to take small steps.

So instead of giving her the chance to ask more questions, he took advantage of her parted lips and kissed her. As always, a spark shot through him as soon as their lips met. The chemistry baffled him, but his feelings for her baffled him more. He wanted more out of this encounter than a one or two night stand. He wanted... every thing. He wanted to bring her back to Boston with him, show her off, take her to Arizona to meet his mother.

His mother would love her. His colleagues would think he'd finally gone off the deep end. But none of that mattered right now. He could think about the consequences later. Now, as Mia's small hand rested on the inside of his upper thigh, all he could think about was his rapidly hardening cock and what he wanted to do with it.

He deepened the kiss, pulling her chair closer to him. She moaned softly when he would have expected her to push him away. Encouraged by her response, Jack cupped her face with his hands in a possessive gesture. Mia's hands flew to his shirt and fisted tightly in the soft fabric.

But just as suddenly as she'd accepted his touch, Mia broke the kiss and backed her chair away, standing up so fast she sent it toppling to the floor with a crash. "This is a bad idea."

He hadn't seen *that* coming. "Why?"

"I-I *work* here. You're a guest. That's not ethical."

"Aren't you the one who told me to go with my feelings?"

"That's different."

"No, it's not."

And then he understood. She tried to hide it, but the chemistry between them scared her as much as it scared him. Probably more, since she had a child to think about.

She sighed and tugged on a strand of hair before shoving it behind her ear. "Listen, Jack, this can't happen again. I won't deny that I'm attracted to you, but it would never work. I need more than a week-long affair."

What was it with women always thinking men were only out for a good time? "You know what? So am I. I'm so sick of flings and two-week relationships that I've given up on all of that. I want to build something with you. I don't want this to end."

And because he didn't know what else to do, he stood up, pulled her close and crushed her lips with his. His hands tangled in her hair and held her close. He didn't want to let her get away anytime soon.

Mia, apparently, felt the same way. She stood stiff for only a few seconds before she gave in to his kiss and wrapped her arms around his waist.

Chapter Eight

She couldn't believe she was going to let this happen.

She should stop him, find some excuse to get out of the kitchen—fast—before she let things go too far. But she wouldn't, because a small part of her had to admit that Jack was right. They had to let this thing take its course. It had been building since the first day they'd met, and she wanted to see where it would lead them.

When she broke the kiss, her breathing was ragged and her pussy soaked. Every nerve in her body screamed for him to take her, and take her *now*. Goddess, she needed that man more than she'd ever needed anything in her life. Tomorrow, she could worry about what would happen. Tonight, now, she'd take everything he offered.

When he pushed her robe off her shoulders, she didn't utter a word of protest. Instead, she reached for the hem of his shirt and pulled it over his head, tossing it on the table.

"Wait." His hands were at her shoulders, stilling her movements. He laughed when she uttered a sound of protest. "Not here. Too public."

She looked around, only just remembering that they stood in the middle of the kitchen—Clara's kitchen, where any of her family or the guests might have wandered down to find them. She blinked, not sure of how to proceed.

"We need somewhere more private," Jack continued when she remained silent.

"This way." She took his hand and led him through a door that led to the back hall and the owner's suites. "But be quiet, okay?"

He spun her around and pulled her back against him for a kiss. "I can't promise anything. I'll try."

She shushed him with a finger to his lips as she let them into her suite. "Frances is sleeping. You wake her up, you get kicked out. Understand?"

He laughed softly and kissed the top of her head. "Well, if you put it that way... ."

"I do." She brought him into her bedroom, thankfully across the suite from Frances's room, and closed the door behind her.

A case of jitters struck hard as soon as she turned to face him. She wet her lips with her tongue. "Maybe this wasn't such a good idea."

"It felt pretty good to me a few minutes ago." Jack sat down on the bed and patted the mattress next to him. "Sit. Tell me what's on your mind."

She hesitated for a second before she joined him on the bed. It was hard for her to look at him—with his hair mussed and his shirt missing she didn't think she'd be able

to keep herself from touching him again. But she had some things to say before this went any further. "I-I think maybe we shouldn't act on this."

"Why not? Whenever I touch you, your body gives me a different response."

And she knew it, too, but it didn't stop the fact that if she let herself get any closer to him, she'd be heartbroken when the time came for him to go home.

"You're leaving soon."

"Lousy excuse." He lifted her chin with his thumb and frowned down at her. "Come on. You can do better than that."

"I don't do affairs."

Jack's gaze turned hot and intense, burning a hole through her resistance. "You and I both know that this is so much more than a mindless fling."

"How can it be anything more? We're too different."

"It'll all work itself out in the end," he said, sounding suspiciously like Clara.

"How can you possibly know that? You'll go back to Boston soon, and I'll be here. We can't work through the distance."

"Trust me," he told her, repeating her earlier words to him. "Have faith, Mia."

Instead of giving her a chance to respond, he leaned in and kissed her.

She would have pushed him away, but her mind shut down as soon as his lips touched hers. He felt so good, so right, that she couldn't make herself let him go. Someday soon, she'd have to, but not tonight.

Tonight would be special. The moon cycle had finally come to a completion, and there was a new moon tonight. Time for changes, time for something new. Time to let herself do something she hadn't done in what seemed like forever.

Have fun.

Jack pushed her back against the mattress and covered her body with his. He kissed her deeply as his hand cupped her breast, his thumb flicking across her nipple. The flesh beaded under his touch, their skin separated only by her thin nightshirt. And then he pushed the nightshirt up and over her head and they were together, skin on skin.

"You're so beautiful," Jack whispered against her throat. "Perfect, Mia. Perfect."

His mouth found her bare, beaded nipples and he laved the skin tenderly. She moaned and arched into him, wondering how she'd gone so long without a man's touch. She threaded her hands through his hair as he trailed kisses lower down her body, stopping at the top of her underwear. With his teeth, he grasped the edge and moved them down her hips before using his fingers to tug them the rest of the way off.

"Do you remember what I said I want to do to you?" he asked, his breath hot against her mound.

She could only manage a moan as his tongue flicked across her clit. He used his fingers to spread her folds, and he traced his tongue over her pussy. She let out a panting gasp as he thrust his tongue deep inside her, in and out, bringing her higher

than she'd ever been. She felt the orgasm building low in her belly only seconds before she came, drenching Jack's face with her juices. He gave her clit one last lap before kissing his way back up her body.

"Wow."

"You're telling me." Jack gently bit her shoulder as he rolled onto his back and got up off the bed.

"Where are you going?" She didn't want him to leave just yet. They'd barely gotten started.

He smiled as he stripped out of his sweatpants and dropped them in a heap on the floor. "Don't think you're going to get rid of me that easily. This time I plan to stay. I want to get inside you and make you come again."

She shivered, liking the sound of that. A lot.

But then Jack frowned. "Shit. I don't have any condoms. It's not like I came down here expecting—"

"I have some." When Jess had given her a box as a joke for her birthday a few months ago, she never imagined she'd actually find a time she needed to use them. She'd scoffed at the idea at the time, but she'd have to remember to thank Jess later. "In the top drawer of the dresser." She would have gotten them herself, had she been able to walk. But at the moment, her legs felt like jelly.

Jack found the box in record time and tore it open, ripping a packet off the strip. He rolled the condom on before he joined her back on the bed. "Are you sure you really want to do this? It's not too late to back out now."

She wrapped her hand around his cock and stroked, running her thumb over the tip. "I'm sure."

"Good." He smiled. "Come here." He rolled to his back and gestured for her to get on top of him. She straddled him, her legs hugging his hips, and leaned down to kiss him as he impaled her with his rock-hard cock.

She cried out as he filled her, stretched her almost to the point of pain. It had been so long, and she wasn't sure if she could take it. "Jack," she whispered, her voice strained.

"It'll be okay." He lifted his hips a little, seating himself further inside her, as he brought a finger to her mound and stroked her clit. "Relax."

Easy for him to say. Still, the more he stroked her sensitive nerves, the more she felt her body soften around him. Jack held back his movements, alternating the strokes of his fingers with gentle, steady pressure until she felt a second orgasm building. It was then that he gripped her hips and lifted her, bringing her back down on his cock.

With every stroke she felt herself getting closer and closer to coming. Her drenched pussy throbbed for release and she tightened her inner muscles around him. He groaned and pumped into her harder, slamming her down on top of him. Her orgasm ripped through her and she bucked on top of him, unable to control her movements.

In seconds Jack had her on her back, thrusting into her so furiously that the headboard banged against the wall. She dug her fingers into his shoulders as the aftershocks of her climax rippled through her. She felt Jack tense above her as he groaned with his own powerful orgasm. He collapsed on top of her and she clung to him, unable and unwilling to move.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his lips pressed into her damp neck.

"Mmm. Are you?"

He lifted up onto his elbows and smiled at her. "No. I don't think I am."

She laughed as he rolled onto his back and tucked her into his side. She'd lay with him for a few more minutes, but as much as she wanted to, she couldn't let him stay the night.

* * * * *

Mia woke up slowly and stretched her arms over her head. She stopped mid-yawn when she encountered something solid and warm in her bed.

Jack.

Her heart stopped and then started again with a thud. How could she have let him stay all night?

Voices outside her bedroom door caught her attention. *Frances*. She jumped out of bed and pulled on her robe, hoping Jack wouldn't wake up before she found a way to distract her daughter.

She found Frances in the sitting room, watching cartoons with Jess.

"Morning," Jess said when she saw her, a sly smile on her face. "Good morning. Is something wrong?"

"Nope. I just came to return something you lost." Jess's smile widened as she gestured to a small table by the door. "Or, rather, your *friend* lost."

Mia's stomach clenched as she saw the item Jess referred to. *Jack's shirt*. She gulped.

Jess got off the couch and walked over to Mia. "Better put that away before the little one sees what it is," she mumbled before walking into the hall.

Mia followed Jess. "Did Clara see it?"

Jess shrugged, her expression amused. "Don't know. What exactly happened between you two, anyway?"

They stopped in front of the door to Mia's room, and she opened the door to toss the shirt inside. Jack stood there, rubbing his eyes sleepily. She shut the door on him and turned to Jess. "You need to leave."

"He's still here?" Jess shook her head, the smile on her face widening. "I never would have guessed. Not in a million years."

She didn't need this now, not with the repercussions of her actions to deal with. "Just shut up, okay?"

The bedroom door opened again and Jack stuck his head out. "I don't mean to interrupt or anything, but I need the bathroom."

Mia pointed down the hall and put her finger to her lips. "Jess, go, okay?" she repeated, her eyes never leaving Jack's retreating behind. She was hoping for more time alone with him. Too bad he'd put his pants back on—

What was she thinking? She'd just been caught by her cousin and possibly her daughter. She needed to get him out, not back into bed.

"Okay, okay. I'm gone." Jess turned to walk to the door. "Hey, Franny, do you want to come with me to the kitchen? I'll make you pancakes with strawberries and chocolate chips."

"Okay!" Frances jumped off the couch and ran to them. "Hi, Momma. Bye, Momma." She blew Mia a kiss as she followed Jess out the door.

Well.

Jack emerged from the bathroom a few seconds later. He smiled when he saw her, but his expression turned confused. "Please don't tell me you're going to spend the morning regretting what happened between us."

"Okay. I won't."

"Mia, come on. Don't do this."

A tear slipped from her eye, followed by another. She batted them away, refusing to let him see her cry over something so stupid. She'd gone and fallen in love with the guy. How that was even possible, she hadn't a clue. But there it was.

And he was leaving.

He took her hand and led her to the couch, sitting down and pulling her into his lap. "What's the matter now?"

"I don't even know where to begin."

Jack sighed. "You know if I could stay here with you, I would."

"You would?"

"Yeah. Of course." He ruffled her hair—which probably resembled steel wool after sleeping on it all night. "I can't leave my job, though. I have responsibilities. An apartment. Family."

"So do I," she said quietly. She couldn't leave. She couldn't pull Frances away from her family and friends and dump her into the middle of a big city.

"So where do we go from here?"

She shrugged and sniffled. "I wish I knew."

"Then let's take it one day at a time, okay?" He kissed her ear.

At this point, she'd take what she could get.

Chapter Nine

The morning for Jack's departure came way too quickly for Mia. She'd clung to the hope over the last couple of days that he'd change his mind and stay, but it hadn't happened. His bags were packed, and he was checking out as she sat waiting on the front steps to say goodbye.

He came out a few minutes later, his bags in his hands. Just the sight sent a hollow chill through her heart. She knew this would happen—that she'd be left alone and hurt in the end—but she hadn't done anything to stop it. She'd encouraged it, if she had to admit the truth. And it hurt more than she'd expected it to.

"So, this is it." She stood and walked over to him as he came down the steps. She tried to put on a brave face, but had a feeling she'd failed miserably.

"Not even close." Jack dropped his bags and pulled her into his arms. He kissed her hard, long and lingering, right there in plain view of everyone. "I'm not willing to let you go that easily."

She gaped at him until she could form a full sentence. What was he trying to pull? "But I told you before that I can't go with you. We're too different. It would never work."

He shook his head and cupped her chin in his hand. "We'll work something out. For now, let's take it slowly. I'll call as soon as I get back. Boston isn't that far away. I'll come up and visit on weekends. We'll talk on the phone every night."

A tear slipped out of her eyes and she wiped it away with the back of her hand. "Are you sure?" The one thing she didn't want right now was to drag it out. If he was going to walk out of her life, she'd rather it be now than two or three months down the road when she'd grown even more attached to the man.

"I'll call. I promise."

She said goodbye to him and watched him drive away, wondering if he really would call, or if he'd just been trying to ease her mind for a little while.

* * * * *

Jack drove home an hour later than usual, not looking forward to his empty, cold apartment. The one thing that brightened his day would be his phone conversation with Mia. He let himself into his apartment and collapsed on the couch, wishing he'd had a little more time with her in person. But what was he supposed to do? She wouldn't

come with him, she'd made that quite clear, and he couldn't make a three hour commute every day to work. So... for now, they'd just have to take what they could get.

In the past two weeks, he'd realized why so many people said long distance relationships don't work. They spoke almost every night, and planned to visit this coming weekend, but it wasn't the same. He began to wonder if that vacation had been a terrible idea. At least if he hadn't met her, he wouldn't feel so lonely and empty all the time.

He picked up the phone and dialed her private number.

"Hey," he said when she picked up the phone.

He heard the smile in her voice when she spoke. "How was your day?"

"Well, let's put it this way. I'm glad it's over."

"I'm sorry."

"Listen, I was thinking," he said carefully, not sure how his suggestion would be received. He didn't want to hurt her, but he had to try one last time before he made a huge change that might not be necessary. "How would you and Frances feel about spending a few weeks here with me? If you like it, you might decide to stay even longer."

"Like forever?" Her tone turned frosty, and the whole tone of the conversation changed. "I already told you I can't do that, Jack. No matter how much you beg."

Beg? She made him sound like some kind of sniveling puppy. "Believe me, the last thing I want to do is beg. I just thought that maybe now that you've had time to think about it, you've seen how it's the best choice for us."

He realized his mistake in the stony silence that followed, but pride wouldn't let him take the comment back. He waited it out until she finally spoke.

"You know, I think the best *choice* for us would be to let go," she told him. "We never should have tried to make this work. This whole thing has been a terrible mistake. We're just too different. Goodbye, Jack."

He was left listening to the dial tone. He tried to call again, but she didn't pick up. He'd made a mess of things by not coming right out and saying what he'd wanted to say, and he just hoped it wasn't too late to fix his stupid mistake.

Chapter Ten

Mia sat on the porch swing, rocking slowly back and forth. In the days since she'd broken it off with Jack, she hadn't been able to pull herself out of a terrible funk. One week had stretched into almost two, and she still hadn't heard from him. As much as she didn't want to accept it, it was over.

And she was the biggest fool in the history of the world.

She looked up at the sky and her heart sank further into her chest. A new moon. There'd been a new moon the night she and Jack had made love. And now, she faced this one alone.

So much for Clara's ideas.

She'd learned the hard way that she didn't need changes in her life. What she needed, more than ever now, was for everything to remain exactly the same.

The sound of a car's tires crunching on the gravel driveway drew her attention. She looked up just as a little convertible came to a stop in the parking lot. Excitement welled inside her, but she warned herself not to get her hopes up. It could be a guest for late check-in. This was the last weekend the bed and breakfast would be open, and then they would all go back to the mainland until next spring.

At first she thought she must be seeing things when a man who looked like Jack got out of the car. And then she realized it *was* Jack as he walked up the steps toward her.

"Sorry I'm late." He told her. "I had to pick up something before I came, and the store was closed when I got out of work last night."

Late? *Late* was a few minutes. She hadn't heard from him in weeks. "You could have called."

"I can make it up to you."

She sighed. "That's really not necessary. I was just worried. You should have let me know you were okay."

"I have a good reason, if you're interested in hearing it," he said, smiling down at her.

"Fine. Sit. Tell me your reason." She tried to feign indifference, but couldn't quite manage it. "What kept you away for so long?"

He gestured to the star-filled night sky. "The moon."

"What about it?"

"It wasn't there." He sat down on the bench beside her. "Didn't you tell me that the new moon is the perfect time for starting something new?"

She nodded slowly, wondering where he was going with this.

He pulled a small jeweler's box out of his pocket. "Does that possibly include a new marriage?"

He opened the box and she looked down at the large brilliant blue Australian opal ring that sat in the black velvet.

"Oh, my."

"You don't seem to me like the diamond type. I saw this, and I knew right away it was perfect."

He was right. He couldn't have picked a more perfect ring—or a more perfect time.

"I love you. I don't know how this happened, but I wouldn't change it for the world. Marry me," Jack whispered against her hair.

"Are you serious?"

Her hopes were dashed as she thought about moving away. She didn't want to live in Boston, with a bunch of snobs she didn't know. She was perfectly happy here, as much as she loved him, she couldn't do it. "I can't, Jack. We talked about—"

"I quit my job."

"You *what*?" So much for Mr. Predictable.

"I quit my job. That's part of what took me so long to get here. I had a few loose ends. But I don't now. I don't have any ties." He smiled. "Except here."

"But I live on the island all summer. And the mainland isn't exactly Boston. Not even close. You wouldn't be happy here. It's so quiet, you're used to—"

He kissed her. Probably to shut her up, but at this point she didn't care.

When he broke away, he smiled down at her. "I don't care. I'll get used to it. And it's not like we're out in the middle of nowhere. I can open an office or something here. Maybe in the spring. For now, I've got plenty of savings."

Was this really happening? She shook her head and pinched her thigh, hard, to make sure she wasn't dreaming.

"So, will you marry me?" Jack asked again, his expression hopeful—and a little worried.

How could she say no when he'd quit his job just to be close to her? "Yes."

* * * * *

Jack's breath fluttered across her shoulder as Mia lay draped over him in her bed. "I was thinking."

"Hmm." She couldn't manage much more quite so early in the morning.

"I'm going to like living up here, but I think we should buy a bigger house on the mainland. You said you have a two bedroom apartment. That's just not going to be enough."

"Why is that?"

He laughed. "My mother's already getting ready to visit, wanting to badger you about grandchildren."

"Does she know about Frances?"

"Yep. And she's planning to bring a suitcase full of toys for her. She can't wait to spoil the kid rotten. Is all of this okay with you?"

Okay? She'd never been happier. "I love you, Jack."

"I love you, too."

She rested her head on his chest, stroking his side with the tips of her fingers. Leave it to Aunt Clara to find her the perfect man, all because of a little wishful thinking.