

DEDICATION

To my Dad, Alan E. Thompson,
for giving me a love of writing,
along with his quirky sense of humour....
...and to my very handsome nephew, Jamie Montreuil, for
allowing me to put his 'head in the clouds.'

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CHAPTER ONE

What the hell, Charly thought, I've already lost the job so there's nothing to be gained by being polite.

"Very well, Mr. McKinnon. But I'd like to make a small wager with you. If I win, you hire me. If I lose, you hire any man you like."

As she was speaking, Charly saw the muscle in his jaw relax, the hostility in his eyes change to interest and speculation.

"And the nature of this wager?"

"You choose any company files you wish and give them to me. I'll carry out the inspections under your supervision. Today is Friday. The wager will start Monday morning at nine and end at five p.m. on Wednesday, if you can spare the time, of course. And I'll work without pay. You can make my salary retroactive when you hire me Thursday. Have we got a deal?"

"We have a deal, Miss Benson. I'll meet you here at nine on Monday. But don't spend any money yet." And he smiled.

It was the first time his face had relaxed since the interview started two hours

earlier. But the smile wasn't friendly. It was smug, a definite smirk. Ah well, she'd won the first round.

Picking up her résumé she stood, said, "Thank you for your time, gentlemen," and left the room. The tension that had been with her for the past several hours drained away as she shrugged into her coat, under the curious glances of the office staff.

Moving towards the door, she swung around as she heard her name being called. Bearing down on her was a still-smug Mr. McKinnon, some files held loosely in his right hand.

"You might like to look these over this weekend. We'll do three a day. See you Monday."

Taking the files from him, Charly had time only to murmur, "Thank you," before he had turned back to the boardroom.

Tucking them into her carrying case, along with her résumé, Charly went out and got behind the wheel of her SUV. Aware that she was still under the surveillance of the staff, she started the engine and moved off down the road, out of their line of vision.

Why the devil hadn't the manager told her that Mr. McKinnon was a confirmed misogynist? Was it just her he hated, or was it women in general? The manager had assured her the job was as good as hers two days ago, after reviewing her qualifications and interviewing her. He'd said the meeting with the Board of Directors was only a formality and a courtesy to herself and the directors.

In retrospect, it was clear he'd known beforehand that there'd be a problem with McKinnon. Suddenly she was struck with the feeling that she'd been set up. Mr. McKinnon had bristled from the moment she had walked in the door and the battle lines had been firmly drawn. His questions had been repeatedly slanted towards the problem that her femininity would cause. Also her size.

Was it possible he hadn't been told she was a woman? If he'd seen her application and read her name as Charly Benson, he might have assumed she was a man. Well, she'd show him!

Five years of intensive study had prepared her well for this job and she knew she could do it, given the chance. She had spent three years at Mohawk College studying for her Insurance Institute Certificate and had passed in the top five of her class. Then, knowing she'd need an edge because she was trying to break into a man's field, she had spent two more years at Conestoga College in Guelph graduating with an Electrical Technician's papers.

So now, she was well qualified, maybe even over-qualified and quite aware that Mr. McKinnon's doubts were well founded. Growing up on her parents' dairy

farm near Picton, she had known of the hesitation with which farmers were accepting women in men's roles.

Girls now were frequently a part of relief milking teams and were also employed as milk inspectors. She found it amusing that wives and daughters were often pressed into service driving tractors with heavy equipment behind them, and often helped with the milking, feeding and cleaning around the barns. But just let one of them apply for a job that was traditionally carried out by a man and watch the hackles rise!

Leaving the town of Picton behind, Charly drove, without conscious thought, to her parents' retirement home on the outskirts of Belleville. They had sold the farm last year because Charly was an only child and had no desire to be a dairy farmer - just a farm Insurance Inspector.

So much was riding on this job. She had bought the SUV with a loan from her Dad, had student loans to pay back, and wanted to rent or buy her own place so her parents could enjoy their retirement without having her underfoot. Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday would probably be the three most important days in her life so far, and she had to make good.

McKinnon's smug smile likely meant that he'd chosen the most difficult files he could find and was probably anticipating her downfall with great glee. To be forewarned was to be forearmed and she would be ready for him. There was nothing she could do about her five foot four inches in height, but she could research and memorize the files until she knew them inside out.

Telling her parents only that she'd been given a three-day trial period, Charly poured over the files until she felt she knew everything there was to know about them. She had noticed the one right away that was causing McKinnon to smirk. There was a note on it suggesting that the policy should be cancelled immediately if repairs to the barn weren't completed. It was dated several weeks ago. The file also told her there was no mortgage, so the farmer was probably in good shape financially and his buildings, pigs and equipment were well insured. So what was his problem?

There didn't appear to be anything remarkable about the other two files, but she strongly suspected that they were also women-haters. There would be something to look out for anyway.

She checked her digital camera over carefully and made sure she had an extra fully charged battery. Although brokers were required to submit photos with the policy applications, she knew some would be missing and others outdated.

As Monday morning approached, she found herself becoming increasingly nervous. She had purchased a detailed county map and had located the three farms, then planned the route she would follow in order to visit them without

backtracking.

Her next problem was what to wear. She had to look professional but her clothes also had to be wash and wear, so she had bought five serviceable jumpsuits in deep pastel colours. They were sturdy, washable and quite attractive with an elasticized waist that emphasized her figure.

But she didn't want to wear one on Monday when Mr. McKinnon would be accompanying her. Finally deciding on a pair of chocolate brown trousers and tan blazer, with a tailored antique-gold shirt, she braided her waist-length auburn hair into one long plait which she twined into a knot on the back of her head. Slipping her feet into a comfortable pair of sand desert boots, she picked up matching clutch purse, her files and camera and headed for the car, pulse racing and a knot in her stomach.

The drive to Picton passed in a blur as her mind concentrated on the files and the information she had tried to assimilate. Anything to avoid thinking about Mr. McKinnon and the prospect of having him looking over her shoulder every inch of the way. But thoughts of him rushed solidly to the forefront when she pulled up outside the office at 8:50 to find him already there. All six feet two inches, leaning against his black Cadillac, legs crossed at the ankles, arms folded across his chest. Determined to hide her nervousness, she drove up beside him and, reaching across the width of the car, opened the door for him.

"Good morning, Mr. McKinnon. All set?"

Sliding his body into her little SUV wasn't easy and he grunted as he tried to arrange his long legs between the dash and the seat.

"Sure I'm all set. I'm just along for the ride. Remember?" He glanced at her, unsmiling, implacable, giving nothing away. Certainly not friendly!

So that's how it's going to be, she thought, as she pulled away from the curb. *We'll see*. Glancing side-ways, she realized he hadn't fastened his seatbelt and couldn't resist telling him to do so.

"Buckle up, please."

"Is your driving that bad?" No sarcasm, but no humour was evident either.

"My driving record is excellent, but why take a chance? Besides, the fines are heavy."

As he buckled up, she noticed how well dressed he was, and almost giggled aloud when she realized they must look like Mutt and Jeff because his outfit, with the exception of the shirt, was almost the same as hers. Brown slacks with a knife-sharp crease, tan blazer and brown loafers, and almost a foot of difference in their heights.

"Something amusing you, Miss Benson?"

The words were spoken sharply, and Charly realized he might think she was laughing at him, so decided to come clean.

"It just struck me that we might have the same tailor, judging by our appearances. Will anyone believe this wasn't planned?"

"Frankly, I couldn't care less. I'm only concerned with your performance, not your looks."

And that puts me firmly in my place, I guess, God, what a humourless creature! How does his wife stand it?

Silence reigned for several miles, and it wasn't until they neared Mr. Baker's farm that he broke it.

"I assume you're doing Baker's first?"

At her nod of agreement, he continued, "You know what's required?"

"Check the state of his barn, primarily, and inform him he has one week to complete all necessary repairs, or his policy will be cancelled. Can I ask why it hasn't been done before now?"

"Mainly because we've been without an inspector for some time. But I'm sure you'll manage."

Without looking at him, she could again sense the smugness in his answer. But there was also an undercurrent of bitterness in his voice when he mentioned the former inspector and she wondered briefly about it.

She was lucky - very lucky. Because Mr. Baker was just coming from the barn with a hammer and a fistful of nails as she stepped out of the car. Quickly, she introduced herself and Mr. McKinnon, and informed him why she was there. It didn't take long to realize that he was normally crotchety and crabby, and didn't like strangers. But she poured on the charm, praised the efforts he had made in repairing the missing boards on the barn, and admired his antique tractor. When he realized she knew what she was talking about, he began to unbend and walked with her as she made her inspection.

While her eyes took in details of electrical wiring, general housekeeping, the presence of fire extinguishers, and she made quick notes on her clipboard, he told her he'd been in the hospital for an operation, and that his hired man hadn't bothered with maintenance. She told him about her Dad's farm and about a pet pig she'd had once, and all the while she was aware of Mr. McKinnon just behind them, watching and listening.

Out in the sunshine again, she looked around the machine shed and workshop, but could find nothing to criticize.

"Would you mind if I take some pictures for our files? The ones we have are outdated and should be renewed."

"You go ahead and take your pictures, Miss Benson. I'll put the kettle on and we'll have a cup of coffee when you're finished." He turned and walked into the house.

Charly ignored McKinnon as she took her photos, some of the house, the barn, and the outbuildings. She was aware that he was again leaning on the car and watching her, but then, that was his assignment. When she had finished, she approached the car to put the camera in it, but he was leaning against her door.

"Excuse me, please. I'd like to get rid of this before I go inside. Coming for a coffee?"

"Oh, I wouldn't miss it for the world, Miss Benson." He straightened and pulled the door open for her.

"Keeping you amused, am I?" She realized her question was a bit flippant as soon as she uttered it, but his silent watchfulness was beginning to irritate her.

"Immensely amused. I haven't enjoyed myself this much in years."

Small things amuse small minds, she thought, and missed the sharp look he threw her. It was difficult to tell if he was being sarcastic, because his comments were all delivered in the same conversational tone. She decided it was best to say nothing further, and turned to the house instead.

Mr. Baker had set the table with coffee mugs, cream, sugar, serviettes, and a plate of fresh muffins. Not wanting to offend him, Charly ate one. She was very surprised when he admitted he had baked them.

"Since my wife died, I've learned to do a lot of things that I'd never done before, like laundry, housecleaning and cooking. But I enjoy it."

As he was speaking, Charly suddenly became aware that McKinnon's eyes were riveted on her left hand where it curled around her coffee cup. And he was frowning. Outside of a murmured "Thank you" to Mr. Baker, he had been silent.

Completing a quick tour of the house, Charly thanked Mr. Baker for his hospitality and, when invited, said she would love to come back just to visit. And she meant it. She sensed the loneliness in him and decided he probably didn't have many visitors.

Back on the road again, she suppressed the urge to ask, "How did I do?" Her mind was already reviewing the next two farms and then there was the problem of lunch. By the time they reached their next destination, it would be 12:30 and not a good time to disturb a farmer.

Making her decision, she drove into Belleville and parked in the lot of her

favourite pizza parlour. It wasn't crowded yet because it was only 11:30, so they didn't have to wait for a table. She didn't ask McKinnon what his preferences were and she didn't really care. She normally ate a salad for lunch and she knew this was one restaurant with a decent salad bar.

Once seated across from him, Charly began to feel uncomfortable. He was so damned uncommunicative and this was suddenly a social situation. It had been relatively easy to brush off his presence until now. But there he sat, big as life, just across the small table, studying the menu.

Knowing exactly what she wanted, Charly didn't need to look at the menu. So she looked at him instead and she saw him for the first time as a very attractive male. He would be mid-thirties and his features were rugged, rather than classically good-looking. His eyes were dark velvety-brown, covered at the moment by the sweep of long and slightly curled lashes. His hair was a dark mahogany with reddish highlights, and it was just a little longer than the average cut.

Too bad the personality is the pits, she mused, and then almost died when he glanced up sharply, and stared right into her eyes. *Almost as though he could read my mind, damn it.* She looked away as the waitress approached, and quickly gave her order for the salad bar and coffee.

Muttering, "Excuse me, please," she left the table and made her way to the Ladies' room. How embarrassing to be caught staring at him, like a schoolgirl! *No doubt he's doing his best to unnerve me, but he isn't going to succeed. I want this job and I'm going to get it.*

The self-administered pep talk seemed to help, and she made her way to the salad bar, where she piled her plate with all her favourite things. As she seated herself at their table, she noticed that McKinnon was eating a steak sandwich and thought, *suits you*, and again looked down quickly as he again glanced sharply at her.

This is ridiculous! We're two grown people, having lunch together, and I'm acting like an idiot. I've got to break the ice somehow, but how? He hates women, he answers questions in monosyllables and he definitely doesn't want me to have this job. Oh, the hell with it. I can be rude too.

Ignoring him completely, she proceeded to eat her lunch, reviewing the next two farms in her mind. Once mentally involved, it was easy to carry on as though she were alone. The next two farms were dairy and beef, respectively, and she could see no reason why either one should pose any problem. But no doubt there were problems, or he wouldn't have chosen them.

"You didn't tell us you were getting married, Miss Benson." The statement brought her quickly out of her reverie, and she immediately noticed his eyes again fixed on her left hand.

"That's because I'm not, Mr. McKinnon." *And besides, it doesn't happen to be any of your damn business anyway.* Again, he looked sharply at her and once more, she had the feeling he could read her mind.

"Sorry. My mistake." And he returned to his meal, as though he hadn't spoken. But she caught him looking several more times at the diamond on her left hand.

Glancing at her watch, she finished her coffee and was planning to leave, when McKinnon ordered a piece of coconut cream pie, and she was forced to sit and wait while he ate it. Slowly, it seemed to her.

Paying for the meal on the way out, Charly asked for a receipt and filed it away. Once hired, she would be allowed expenses for mileage and meals, so why not think positively and start now? She noticed there was no comment from her shadow.

The next farm was well maintained, but it appeared that the bulk of the money went into the barns, equipment and outbuildings. As she approached the house, Charly noticed the beds of beautiful roses, but the building was old and needed some paint to freshen it up.

The reason for McKinnon's choice was evident as soon as the door was answered. The farmer's wife was young and pretty and probably not at all enthusiastic about another young female going into the barn with her husband. Well, no problem. After introducing herself and explaining her presence, Charly put her left hand up to her hair to push it back, turning slightly so the sun would catch her ring. At the same time, she commented on the roses with genuine interest, because she had been helping with her Dad's bushes for years.

As the discussion moved from insurance inspecting to roses and rings, Charly sensed McKinnon moving off out of hearing range. *Tough luck, McKinnon. Foiled again.* Mrs. Gordon was quite friendly now, and apologized to Charly because her husband was in town, and could she do her inspecting without him? Charly assured her that would be no problem and got on with it. McKinnon followed silently.

Climbing around through barns was nothing new to Charly, but doing so dressed as she was, was a nuisance. She hated having to be aware of her clothing all the time and vowed this would be the last day she was dressed inappropriately. It would be easier to get at wiring to check it more carefully if she was in blue jeans, as she would be at home. Oh well, tomorrow was another day.

Her notes complete and pictures taken, Charly returned to the driver's seat of the SUV, ignoring McKinnon as he again folded his length into the tight quarters. She replaced the Gordons' file and withdrew the next one, glanced at the map, and started the engine. He buckled up his belt, and proceeded to stare out through the windshield.

Driving to the next farm, Charly had some time to wonder about him. How could anybody stay silent for so long and be so gloomy? It just wasn't natural. Why all the animosity towards her? Although she had a strong feeling it wasn't just her. In fact, she'd be willing to bet he treated all females with the same distant dislike.

Being a very outgoing person herself, Charly was finding it more and more difficult to remain silent, but knew herself well enough to know that if she started a conversation and he didn't respond, she would likely end up being very rude. And she couldn't afford to be just now. So she held her tongue and drove on.

CHAPTER TWO

A surprise awaited her at the last farm of the day. When the door was opened, an old school friend, with whom she had lost contact, greeted her enthusiastically. She could almost sense McKinnon snorting with derision as they rapidly chatted about the years they had lost. She deliberately prolonged the conversation an extra few minutes.

After promising to return on her days off sometime for a real visit, Charly completed the inspection. She was aware that McKinnon had perched himself against a bale of hay and was letting her get on with it by herself. Could that mean he was beginning to trust her, or was he just testing her? She wasn't concerned because she knew her inspections were thorough and professional.

Overall, the day had been easier than she had expected. The actual work gave her no cause for worry. Her only fear was that McKinnon would find some reason to justify not giving her the job. So far, so good, and tomorrow was another day.

Charly walked back to where she had left McKinnon, only to find that he had gone outside. Joining him by the car, she put her files together neatly and prepared to leave. With the car once more out on the highway, she had time to look at her watch and feel pleased that it was just after five, in spite of her coffee break in the morning and her two afternoon chats.

Arriving back at the office at five-thirty, Charly went into the now-empty building with McKinnon to return the completed files to the boardroom and pick up three more for the next day. Still he maintained his silence, speaking only when necessary.

"We're staying on the Isle tomorrow, so we should finish early." Handing her the files he had chosen, he turned to the door and waited with his hand on the light switch, until she left the room.

Charly couldn't wait to get away from him. The 'Isle' was Quinte's Isle, Prince

Edward County, bordered by Lake Ontario and the Bay of Quinte. She had grown up on the Isle and knew many farmers who were neighbours of her parents while they had been farming, so it was quite conceivable she would know some of the farms he had chosen. Leaving the building, she tossed a "See you tomorrow" over her shoulder, as she headed for her car. He didn't reply, just unlocked his Cadillac and got in.

With another forty-five minute drive ahead of her, Charly took a minute to read the file names. What luck! Uncle Henry! Well, she knew for sure which farm she would visit first. And maybe she'd just give McKinnon something to think about while she was at it. Her mind was busy formulating plans all the way home, so the time passed quickly.

The weather had been unseasonably warm for May and Charly knew the farmers were expecting a cold spell soon. Although she now lived near the city, she still kept an ear to the weather from habit. The forecast also called for rain and winds by mid-week from a storm front moving up from the Eastern States. She had learned at a young age that the weather was one thing farmers had to accept and work around.

Studying the files that evening, she found them to be quite unremarkable. Just farms. Perhaps McKinnon knew now that she couldn't be thrown. Or perhaps he knew something about them that she didn't. Asking her Dad for a quick rundown on the two other files, she was assured that they were both quite respectable and responsible.

"In fact, I think Tom Harrison is a director for the company, isn't he?" he asked Charly.

"I guess it's quite possible. The day I was in there, I was too busy trying to defend myself against McKinnon's attacks to take any notice of the others. Thanks, Dad. It would be just like him to throw in a director's file and hope I embarrassed myself."

"Now, Charly, he can't be all that bad. I don't know the man personally, but I've never heard anything against him. Are you sure you aren't imagining things?"

"Yeah, I suppose I'm just paranoid because I want this job so badly." She dropped the subject and went to the phone, her good humour restored as she thought of McKinnon's face tomorrow.

"Hi, Uncle Henry. Are you going to be home tomorrow? Yes? Will you do me a favour? I've got to come over there with a stuffed shirt on business and I want you to pretend you don't know me, until I give you a signal. Don't ask why. It's just a little joke among friends. Okay?"

After some muttering, her uncle finally agreed and they said their goodbyes. Charly was grinning as she prepared for bed.

McKinnon never so much as batted an eye when he joined her next morning in her car. She had donned Western boots, snug jeans, and semi-dressy western shirt and had tucked her hair up under her western hat. Outside of a brief "Good morning," he was his usual inscrutable self.

It was just a short drive to her uncle's farm, and Charly could hardly wait to get there. She jumped out of the SUV, picked up her clipboard and headed over to where her uncle was working on a tractor engine. She swung her hips and made the most of her snug jeans, knowing that McKinnon was following and watching. Her uncle straightened up as she approached, and she watched in amazement as he looked past her, smiled and stretched his hand out to McKinnon.

"T. G., how are you?" He asked, shaking hands with him. She looked from one to the other, knowing suddenly that her plan had somehow gone quite wrong. As they talked to each other, ignoring her completely, she became annoyed, then enraged. Turning her back on them, she yanked her hat from her head, forgetting about her hair. As it tumbled in glowing auburn waves to her waist, she stomped into the barn, leaving the others where they were. She was unaware of the gleam in McKinnon's eye as he watched her progress. Her uncle had his back to the barn, so saw only the admiration on T. G.'s face, not the reason for it.

Hurrying through the inspection, Charly wrote up her notes and then set the file aside. Working quickly, she braided her hair and fastened it up as it had been yesterday. The fun hadn't even started and already it was over. *Serves me right for trying to get the better of him.* When she approached the men again, she found they were deep in conversation, but stopped speaking as soon as they noticed her presence.

"Everything seems to be in order, Mr. McKinnon. I'd like to get on to the next one, if you don't mind. Goodbye, Mr. Thomas."

Throwing an arm around her shoulders, her uncle gave her a squeeze and said, "You don't need to pretend you don't know me, Charly. T. G. already knew we were related. Good luck with your job. I know you'll make a fine inspector."

Feeling like a little girl again, Charly muttered "Goodbye," again and headed for the vehicle. McKinnon sauntered along behind, grinning broadly.

Back in the car, Charly tried to get herself under control. For once, he had the upper hand and she didn't like the feeling. To make matters worse, the next farm was Harrison's. Should she come right out and ask if he was a director? It would make her look even more stupid. Maybe she'd recognize him when she saw him. Deciding to stay quiet, she drove off, hoping for the best.

She did recognize him as soon as he appeared. He had been one of the ones who had spoken up in her defence several times during the interview. Relaxing immediately, Charly chatted away with him as they toured his buildings and

examined the wiring. The farm was in excellent condition and obviously paying for itself. But she checked everything over, knowing there were two directors watching her now.

It was again lunchtime when they were finished, and she decided to drive over to Bloomfield, before stopping for lunch. It was a small village but had an excellent restaurant, and the third farm was just outside of town.

Her salad in front of her, Charly became consumed by her curiosity. *T. G. McKinnon. Tom Gregory? Timothy George? Terry Glenn?* None of them fit, and she just couldn't stand it any longer.

"What does the T. G. stand for?" She looked across the table at McKinnon and wondered if he would answer her, or maintain his usual stony silence.

"My mother said it stood for 'Thank God', because she had three daughters and my Dad wouldn't give up until he had a son. My birth certificate says Thomas Gordon, but I have to look at it now and then to remember, because I've never been anything but T. G. Satisfied?" He was almost smiling, as though he knew she had been sitting there trying to pin a name on him.

"Yes, thank you." Returning to her salad, she decided that T. G. suited him better. He certainly wasn't a Thomas, maybe a Gordon; then again, maybe not. And he had actually said several sentences to her. Wow - a major breakthrough! Her silent contemplation was interrupted when he asked, "And Charly? That's not exactly a feminine name."

"Short for Charlene, but I was wearing denim overalls and trailing Dad around the barn from the time I could walk, so Charly I was. And still am." She looked up at him as she spoke and found his eyes on her mouth. They were no longer indifferent or cold, but only for a moment. He masked his expression quickly, and made a comment about how early they would be through today, barring any unforeseen circumstances.

Again picking up the tab, Charly vowed there would be none. She was beginning to feel as though she'd been inspecting farms for weeks rather than days. And she also felt that McKinnon had lost most of his reservations about her.

The day ended early and without incident. The temperature was still unseasonably high and the weather was beginning to be oppressive. She was glad to get home and take a long hot shower, before studying the files for tomorrow. Tomorrow - the day that would decide her whole future. On one hand, she was quite sure she had the job, but on the other, she still doubted that McKinnon really wanted her on staff. Maybe today he had been friendlier so that she would relax and let her guard down tomorrow.

However, Wednesday morning found Charly dressed in a pale blue jumpsuit, her hair neatly braided and fastened to the back of her head. Her boots had been

cleaned and polished and she looked and felt like a professional. The farms they were looking at today were on the other side of Belleville at some distance, so it would be a long day.

McKinnon seemed to be in good humour when she picked him up at the office. He was smiling as he said good morning, and after a quick glance at her outfit, said, "Much more suitable attire, Miss Benson."

"I'm glad you approve, because this will be my standard uniform from now on."

"Oh, you've been hired, have you?"

Blushing, she glanced sideways, and was surprised to see a hint of humour in his smile. Maybe he wasn't such a stuffed shirt after all. Sighing inaudibly, she pulled out into the traffic and decided to enjoy herself.

Easier said than done, she mused, as one after another, the farmers proceeded to complain to her about the insurance they carried, the prices they had to pay, the claims that had been settled unfairly, in their opinion, until her head was swimming. She knew that she must remain loyal to the company at all costs, and yet she didn't wish to alienate any clients.

Surprisingly, McKinnon came to her rescue on several occasions. He was knowledgeable and reasonable, and they seemed to respect his opinion. Maybe they just think I don't know anything because I'm a female. Pushing the negative thought aside, she carried out her inspections, aware that the weather was becoming even sultrier.

During lunch, a severe storm warning was issued for the area north east of Belleville. Charly decided to hurry through the next inspection, knowing that McKinnon was probably anxious to get home. There was bound to be a backlash of rain and wind on the Isle. With the radio on, they listened to the updates as they drove to their next destination. The farm was situated on a back road quite some distance from Belleville, and wound through heavy bush. The trees were still, the sky a dull steel grey.

On reaching the farm, Charly didn't waste any time. She asked her questions, ran through her inspection and made her notes. She didn't skip any areas that needed checking on, and as the milking system was an older one, she went over to have a better look at the wiring on the milking machine motor housing. McKinnon had followed her around, and was standing over by the window. She leaned forward to check the wires, her back to him, and suddenly felt a jolt of sexual tension run through her. It was powerful, like a charge of electricity, and her body responded of its own accord.

Straightening slowly, she turned and looked at McKinnon. He was staring out the window, but the telltale flush along his cheekbones told her all she needed to know. So. The man wasn't as inhuman as he appeared. In fact, if that thought

originated in his mind, and she knew it had, he was very human, and very susceptible to the sight of a female derriere in tight pants. *Well, well, well!*

The farmer was obviously concerned about the weather as well. He was letting the cattle out of the yard into a field away from the buildings and opening windows and doors to the barns. Charly knew that since the severe tornadoes in Woodstock and Barrie, farmers all over the province took warnings of severe weather very seriously now. She didn't like the feel of the weather. It was too quiet, too still. Nothing stirred, but the sky had an eerie hue to it and an aura that she could only describe as alive, although the clouds didn't appear to be moving.

Joining McKinnon at the car, she asked, "Can we beat it home?"

"I hope so." Just three words, but she knew he doubted it. "Would you like me to drive?"

"No thanks, if it's okay with you. When I'm nervous, I prefer to have something to do. And I don't mind telling you I'm nervous." As she finished speaking, the radio crackled and the announcer advised them that the warnings had been updated to tornado alerts for Central and Eastern Ontario, to be in effect until at least nine p.m.

Ten miles down the road, Charly suddenly started to shiver. It wasn't cold in the vehicle, and she knew it had nothing to do with the temperature. She had had these warnings before. Stopping the car, she turned to McKinnon and said, "Please don't ask any questions and please don't interrupt me for a few minutes. There's something I have to take care of. Just bear with me."

Closing her eyes, she took a couple of deep breaths, and forced herself to relax totally. Years of meditation practice enabled her to shut out all exterior influences and clear her mind. Envisioning the vehicle, T. G. and herself, she imagined a huge golden, impenetrable bubble around the car. She held the thought in her mind, and as a great sense of peace came over her, she opened her eyes.

McKinnon was staring transfixed at her. Come to think of it, he had cause. To suddenly stop driving, ask him to be quiet and then sit back with her eyes shut, must make him think she was losing her sanity.

"Can I ask what that was all about?" He was still staring at her, a frown wrinkling his brow.

Before she could form an answer, she saw his expression change and heard him swear. The SUV was filled with an unearthly roaring, and as they watched, trees slammed down into the road in front of them. The car rocked in the force of the wind and rain, as it drove against them. Turning to look behind, she couldn't see a thing. The windows were streaming with water and the roar of the wind was

deafening.

Looking over at McKinnon, she saw the white line around his mouth and his clenched fist as it rested on the dash. Feeling sudden compassion for him, she placed her hand on his thigh for a moment. "It's okay, McKinnon. We won't be harmed."

"How can you know that? Why aren't you terrified? Why did you stop the car when you did? We almost got wiped out." His words came out jerky and grim at the same time.

"I can't explain it right now. Maybe later. Just believe me that we're going to be safe. The storm won't touch us." She quickly withdrew her hand from his thigh.

As though to give credence to her words, the rain began to slacken, and the wind came in bursts. With visibility now returned, they looked out and couldn't believe the devastation around them. Large trees and small had been uprooted and were flung every which way, some in front of the car, some behind it, but none touching it. They could see a swath cut through the bush and it seemed to part, and go around the car, then continue on. McKinnon stared at her for long moments. He looked outside again at the destruction and then looked back at her. "I don't know what you did just now, but I have a feeling I owe you my life. How did you know you should stop the car? I didn't hear a thing."

"Please don't ask me right now, McKinnon. I don't have time. I have to let my mother know I'm okay. No interruptions, please."

"You can't do that. We don't have a phone signal here."

"Please, no questions." Once more, she did her deep breathing, cleared her mind, and concentrated on sending her mother the knowledge that she was safe. Letting the thought go, she waited a few seconds until she felt the message had been received, then opened her eyes, only to see him staring at her again.

"Are you a witch?"

"No, McKinnon. I'm not a witch. And I really will try to explain later. But right now, I think we should try to figure out what to do next. Unless I'm mistaken, we're going to be here for some time, like maybe all night."

Opening the car door, he stepped out and looked around. The rain had stopped as quickly as it had come, and only a few gusts of wind swirled around him. Charly got out and looked around too. It was unbelievable. The road was blocked in both directions, with many fallen trees, and she knew they wouldn't be able to clear it.

CHAPTER THREE

"I'm afraid your estimation of the situation is right, Miss Benson. We'll be here for the night." He didn't look in the least happy at the prospect.

Knowing it would be a long night in the confines of her small SUV, Charly suggested they stay outside for a while and stretch their legs while they could. The storm had abated totally, although there was still a low cloud cover moving rapidly overhead.

"Let's climb over the trees and have a look at the road on the other side. Are you game?"

She challenged him with the question, knowing it was a bit unfair because he was again wearing dress pants, shirt, tie, blazer and loafers.

"Oh yes, I'm game, Miss Benson. Let's go."

Progress was slow as they tried to make their way over and under and around trunks and branches of trees. Some still had roots attached with earth clinging to them, torn from the ground like matchsticks. Finally crawling through to the far side of the blockage, they stood looking up the road to another mess of trees in the distance, also blocking the road.

"One night here may be a slightly optimistic estimate, Miss Benson." McKinnon had his hands in his pockets and, as she was just behind him, she had a good chance to admire his firm hips, the material of his trousers stretched tightly across them.

Moving up beside him, she suggested hopefully, "Maybe the other side isn't so badly blocked. Want to come and see?"

"Why not? There really isn't much else to do. Besides, we're already quite wet from climbing around this mess. Or hadn't you noticed?"

She hadn't, not until he mentioned it. And suddenly Charly began to wonder at the wisdom of her actions. The temperature had dropped considerably with the arrival of the tornado and it would be a long night. Making their way back to the car was a bit easier and once there, she changed her mind about exploring further. In fact, the car was beginning to seem like a better place to be, with every passing minute.

Once inside, she started the engine and turned the heater on full power. Then she fiddled with the radio until she found the Belleville station. As news of the devastation reached them, they listened in silence, each wondering and worrying about their own family and friends. The reports made no mention of the Isle. Most of the damage was to the northeast end of the city and outlying areas. There had been no fatalities reported as yet and, on the whole, it seemed less severe than

the Barrie tornado.

"Well, I guess I can assume my property is safe. What about your family?"

"South west end of the city. I imagine they're safe if they were at home."

"Well, Miss Benson, where would you like to dine this evening? I was going to take you out to dinner to celebrate your new position as our Farm Inspector, but it looks like that will have to wait. By the way, you are good at your job and you will be an asset to the company. My apologies for the rough time I gave you the other day, but there were extenuating circumstances."

"Apologies accepted and I thank you. Getting this position means a great deal to me, Mr. McKinnon, and I won't let you or the company down. As to dinner, all is not lost."

Climbing out of the SUV, she went to the back and removed her 'care' package, as she called it. Her Dad had presented it to her when she had bought the vehicle and she had carried it around ever since. There was an auto rug, a sleeping bag, and a box. She tossed the rug and sleeping bag into the second seat and carried the box back to the driver's seat with her.

"This is one advantage of being an only child and female. Fathers tend to worry more and be more protective."

Shutting off the car engine, she took out four cans of drinks - grape, V-8, apple and orange. Next was a large bottle of dried fruit and nuts, and lastly, another large bottle jammed with granola bars, still in their wrappers.

"Dinner is served, Mr. McKinnon. If there's any danger that we'll be here much beyond breakfast, we'll have to conserve this stuff, but at least we won't go hungry. Sorry I can't provide a hot meal."

"Believe me, Miss Benson, this looks like a royal feast. I'm not very good at going to bed hungry. By the way, can you drop the Mr. McKinnon and call me T. G.? Formality seems a bit ludicrous under the circumstances, don't you think?"

Glancing at him, she was surprised to see a genuine smile lighting his face. The change in him was quite remarkable, as though the storm had released him from some emotional prison.

"As you wish, T. G., although I've been thinking of you as McKinnon for three days now, so I may slip once in a while."

"Just McKinnon? No Mr.? How unprofessional, Miss Benson!"

Not only smiling, but almost actually flirting. Really, she thought, he's coming to life with a vengeance.

"Which kind of juice would you like, T. G.?" she asked, and smiled when he chose the grape.

"Maybe I can imagine it's a very young wine. And you?"

"Oh, I'm definitely a V-8 person. If I had made up this box, it would have been all V-8. Although I suppose one could get tired of that, given a long enough period of isolation. And that reminds me; I must have a word with dear old Dad. By putting this stuff in my car, he set up the expectation of my becoming stranded and maybe even caused it. He should know better at his age. Oh well, I guess I can forgive him this time."

"I won't pretend to understand what you just said, Charly, but I thank your Dad from the bottom of my heart. I'm starving."

"Why don't you remove your tie, unbutton a couple of buttons on that shirt, and act like you are home by your fire, relaxing?" Shaking a handful of fruit and nuts out for herself, she offered him the jar, adding, "You do have a fireplace at home, don't you?"

"I do, yes. But how did you know that?"

"Because you look like a fireplace person." Popping a cashew in her mouth, she watched as he pulled off the tie and stuffed it into his blazer pocket. He unbuttoned three buttons on his shirt, giving her a glimpse of a hair-darkened chest and a gold chain gleaming at his neck. Finding their relationship changing a little too rapidly for her liking, Charly began to ask him questions about the company she now worked for. He answered freely enough, until she came to one that threw him.

"Why did your last inspector leave, T. G.?"

She felt him stiffen beside her before the question was completed and knew somehow she had entered forbidden territory. He was silent for so long she was sure he wasn't going to answer, then began to speak.

"He was fired. You see, Miss Benson, he was spending time inspecting my dear wife when he was supposed to be out inspecting farms. When he left, she went with him. End of story."

"Oh, McKinnon, I'm sorry. I wouldn't have dreamed of asking if I'd known." Charly wished with all her heart that she'd done some research into the directors before now. She felt as though she were a Peeping Tom, looking into his life in a way that was none of her business.

"Don't be sorry, Charly. I'm only telling you this because you're going to hear it from someone else, and I'd like you to know the truth. The marriage was a mistake from the start. We were both too young and didn't have any idea what we were getting into. I wanted children, she wanted to party. He wasn't the first man she'd had an affair with, but it was the first time she was so blatantly indiscreet."

He chewed on a piece of dried apple, then continued, "Anyway, we've been

divorced for a year now, and except for the anger that remains at her betrayal, I'm much happier living alone."

Tearing the wrapper from a granola bar, he bit a chunk off, then asked, "What about that diamond on your left hand? I've bared my soul. Now it's your turn. Besides, I have an idea about it and I'd like to know if I'm right."

Charly shifted slightly to try and get more comfortable. Damn small vehicles anyway!

"First I want to ask you something, McKinnon. You picked those first three files because they were the ones most likely to cause me problems, didn't you?" Her question was more curious than accusatory.

He grinned as he answered her. "Guilty. I figured if you could handle Baker and a couple of young wives, you'd make it. I was right."

"Then you should know the ring is for the benefit of the young wives. It belonged to my Grandmother. I didn't come into this job with my eyes closed, and I knew hostile wives could be a problem. The ring won't pacify them all, but it will help a little."

"What about lecherous men? Have you thought of that?"

"Oh, yes. And prepared for it too. There was a very good Judo school in Hamilton and I've got my black belt. I'm not concerned."

Although it was too dark to see now, Charly felt his opinion of her rise several notches. Finishing her granola bar and V-8, she tidied away the food. Reaching across in front of McKinnon, she took the flashlight from the glove compartment.

"Okay, T. G., who's first for the bathroom? It's quite large, really, but doesn't have a shower."

Giggling, she corrected her statement quickly. "Well, it did have, but we've missed it."

"Judo or not, I'll go first, if you don't mind. God knows what the storm stirred up in the bush. He climbed out of the car and she realized it was much colder now.

While he was gone, Charly tipped the seats back as far as they would go, thankful for the recliners. She placed the rug on his and pulled the sleeping bag up to hers. After all, he had a blazer. She just had her long-sleeved jumpsuit.

When he returned, she took the flashlight from him and asked, "Any beasties out there?"

"None that I could see, but don't be long. This is rabies country."

"Thanks, McKinnon. You really know how to put a person's mind at rest. See you."

The jumpsuit she had found so comfortable and professional now became a thorough nuisance as she tried to keep it out of the wet bushes. And the air was cold! She returned to the car in record time, to find McKinnon stretched out on his reclining seat, his blazer off and folded for a pillow. He had also removed his shoes and had spread the blanket over his legs. His shirt sleeves were rolled back to his elbows, and in spite of the cramped quarters, he looked quite comfortable.

"This hotel isn't bad, Miss Benson. I might even give it three stars in my review."

"It isn't morning yet, McKinnon, so don't be too hasty. The beds don't leave much room for tossing and turning. In fact, I think it would be safe to say turning is probably out of the question."

Removing her shoes, Charly settled herself into her sleeping bag, trying to get comfortable under the steering wheel.

"You have more room than I have, T. G., but you also have more body to arrange, so I guess we're even."

It was dark now, and Charly could see nothing. She was quite comfortable in her sleeping bag, and having company while she was stranded was an extra bonus. He really was quite human.

"It's too early to sleep yet, Charly, so how about telling me what you were doing during the storm? I've been very patient up until now."

"Agreed. You have been patient and I knew you were going to ask, but I still don't know how much or how little I'm going to tell you. It just isn't something I'm comfortable talking about to most people."

"Why don't you just start at the beginning and see what happens? Believe me, I'll be an attentive audience, as well as a captive one."

"Okay, McKinnon. But please remember, this isn't easy for me. How much do you know about metaphysics?"

"You mean séances, witchcraft, black magic, and stuff like that?"

"No, I don't. I mean dream analysis, reincarnation, spiritual realm as an actual part of the physical realm, telepathy, etc."

"I read a bit about it years ago, but I discarded most of it as someone's fantasy. With the exception of reincarnation, that is. I need more information, but it makes sense to me."

"Well, when I was about five, my parents joined a metaphysical study group. They brought home a series of instruction cassette tapes on meditation, dream analyses, holistic healing, etc., and played them over and over. I guess I absorbed a great deal of it, because I began having precognitive dreams when I was about seven. They were about fires, plane crashes, car accidents and stuff like that. The

dreams usually happened about a week before the incident. When I would hear about it, I would become very upset, I guess thinking that I should have been able to prevent them from happening. But I never knew where they were taking place, just that they were going to happen."

"My parents started taking me to the meetings so that I could better understand what was occurring. Soon the precognitive dreams stopped, but not the other dreams. I learned how to analyze the symbols in my dreams so that I could understand my behaviour and change what needed changing. I also was able to get answers to questions or problems through dream analysis. It's just too vast a subject for me to get into right now, but you spend one third of your life sleeping and a great deal of that time dreaming. There is so much knowledge and understanding to be gained from dreams, you couldn't begin to guess at the extent of the benefits."

"I think the single most important thing that I learned from the study group was the fact that thoughts on the physical plane are deeds, or things, on the spiritual one. I know it sounds fantastic and a very difficult concept to grasp without the background study, but it's the basis for what I was doing this afternoon."

"First of all, I stopped the car because I suddenly got a cold chill. To me, that meant that we were in extreme danger. Now comes the part you'll have trouble with. I simply put myself into a meditative state, something else I learned at a very young age, and envisioned a large, golden ball of light energy around the car, you and I. I held the thought for a minute or so. It's a bit like generating a positive force field, but there's no way I can prove that it works. My parents and I have been doing this for years, during blizzards, when one of us was going on a trip, and we've never been in accidents. Makes us feel good anyway. Today was the first real demonstration of a positive reaction."

Pausing, she glanced at him then asked, "Have I thoroughly confused you?"

"Not entirely, but you've certainly given me a great deal to think about. I may get my books out and have another look at them. It sounds like an interesting way to spend a rainy day."

"That's the funny thing about it, McKinnon. If your mind accepts the theories, it becomes a way of life and you find every aspect of your life changes. It becomes impossible to lie, cheat, or hurt anyone in any way, by thought, word, or deed. I was so young when I was introduced to it all, I just assumed that everybody knew and practiced these things. But when I tried to talk to the other kids at school, they laughed at me. Up until today, I haven't discussed it with anyone but my parents. Thanks for listening. It was good to talk about it."

"So one might say you are a good witch?"

"You're really determined to make me out to be a witch, aren't you, McKinnon?"

Okay, here's some witchcraft for you. Think of something you want, but don't tell me what it is. As soon as you get home tomorrow, write it out on a piece of paper and seal the paper in an envelope with the date on it. Then write on another piece of paper the following words: My conscious mind accepts the fact that I desire and deserve the following: then you add whatever it is that you want. And it can be anything from changing a bad habit to acquiring a gold watch. When you write it out be sure to write 'I have', not 'I want', as though it were already a fact."

"Now, for the next thirty-three days, you write the same thing out just before going to sleep. Then wait for the results. One thing it is especially good for is training yourself to remember your dreams."

"Here's another exercise for you. Sit back, close your eyes, and follow my instructions. You are about to be introduced to the most powerful force on the planet. It's called the Universal Law of Attraction and it applies to all of us, all of the time."

"Imagine that there is a powerful magnet in the core of you. Whether it carries a positive or a negative charge depends on you – your thoughts - but mostly your feelings. Then imagine that the Universe is a huge shopping mall. You can have anything you want – good health, money, healthy relationships, new car, or new furniture. You are only limited by your feelings of self-worth, your imagination and your ability to believe."

"Suppose you'd like to have twenty-five thousand dollars. Visualize a big bubble. Inside of the bubble, see yourself holding a cheque for twenty-five thousand dollars. See the big smile on your face, feel the happy feeling in your gut."

"You have just created an event that will take place, depending on how badly you want it and provided you keep your inner magnet positively charged. Once a day, take a couple of minutes to visualize the bubble again and feel the excitement holding that cheque will bring to you. See a shimmering green light like the Northern Lights, surrounding the bubble, becoming stronger and bigger each time you practice the procedure. Then thank the Universe for giving it to you, as though you already have it, and let it go. It isn't your responsibility to figure out how this will come about – that's the job of the Universe. It is only up to you to feel worthy and to believe. You can open your eyes now."

"One of the quickest and best ways to generate and maintain a positive charge on your internal magnet is to give gratitude and thanks, once a day, for at least seven things for which you are grateful. What you focus on is what you bring to yourself, be it poverty or wealth, illness or good health, sadness or happiness. The Law of Attraction is always working so we must be aware of what we are bringing to ourselves."

"When it comes to health, anything is fixable, using only your mind. I know that sounds totally unbelievable, but there are many documented cases where people

have cured themselves of 'incurable' diseases, without medical intervention. When you know that your entire body is composed of completely new cells approximately every seven years, it stands to reason that you can replace diseased cells with healthy ones, simply by focusing on health rather than illness. As the diseased cells are replaced with healthy ones, your general condition gradually improves, until you are well. The trick is to focus on health, give no thought or energy to the illness and give thanks daily for the healing."

"Anyway, I think that's more than enough for one lesson. We had better get some sleep in case we have a ten-mile walk in the morning."

"I suppose you're right, but it isn't going to be easy after everything you've told me. My mind is busy trying to process it all."

Settling herself more comfortably, Charly yawned, stretched and muttered, "Shut up, McKinnon." The day had been long and exhausting, but now she was warm, comfortable and happy, and ready to go to sleep.

"Goodnight to you too, Charly." He also shifted to try and settle more comfortably. Silence settled over them.

Charly was just beginning to doze off when she began to feel her body come alive with sexual feelings and sensations. She had been thinking about the people who were now homeless from the tornado and about the cleanup that would take days and weeks. So she knew that the thoughts were coming from McKinnon. She tried to shut her mind off, but it was useless. As her desire grew, she could almost imagine him making love to her, and the warmth that began to flash through her body threatened to make her do something she would regret in the morning. Knowing she had to stop him immediately, she turned her head in his direction, and spoke softly.

"McKinnon, are you awake?"

"Hmm. You want something?" She could tell from his response that he had been on the verge of sleep.

Clearing her throat, she pulled her thoughts together. "There are a couple of other things I should have told you, McKinnon. As I just told you, we all have energy fields, magnetic energy. There are about thirty-six different frequencies of energy. When two people are properly mated, their energy fields balance and enhance each other. I have reason to believe we are on complimentary wavelengths, McKinnon. I also should have told you that psychic energy and sexual energy are so similar that the difference between them is almost non-existent."

Sighing, she asked, "Would you please shut your mind down, or think about something else? For some reason, I'm picking up images from you - no specifics, just general feelings. It's not exactly conducive to sleep. And I apologize for intruding, but occasionally these things happen and I have no control over them."

"You really are a witch. But the fact that I was thinking about making love to you is mostly your fault. You walked around in front of me wearing tight denims, and you let your glorious hair tumble down your back when you knew I was watching. I'm sorry for keeping you awake, but believe me, I was having a good time."

"Oh, I believe you, McKinnon. I was there as well. Remember? Anyway, go to sleep. We'll maybe discuss this further another time."

Once more, quiet settled over the car. Charly closed her eyes and settled down more snugly into her sleeping bag. Then she just had to say one more thing.

"You're an okay guy, McKinnon."

"So are you, Charly. So are you."

CHAPTER FOUR

Waking to a bright and sunny morning, Charly immediately looked over at McKinnon, to find that he was watching her with a half-smile on his face.

"Hi, Witch," he said softly.

"Hi, yourself," she answered, grinning, aware that she felt no embarrassment over last night's mind reading. Her hair had come loose in the night, and she could feel his eyes wandering over it as it lay in a tangled mass around her shoulders.

"Would you mind if we bring the Caddy next time?"

"Not at all, but can we come up with a less destructive excuse for being stranded?"

Leering at her, McKinnon drawled, "I could always run out of gas."

"To get down to business, how long before we get dug out of here, do you think?"

"Well, I suggest we take a hike back down the road after breakfast and see how extensive the damage is there. We already know it's very bad ahead of us."

McKinnon had thrown off the rug, straightened the seat up and was replacing his shoes. "Guess you don't have any shaving gear with you, huh?"

"Just one more reason why you should have hired a man." She smiled at him, enjoying the opportunity to tease him.

"No thanks. I'm becoming used to our little female Inspector."

The blockage on the road behind the car was almost as bad as the one in front.

After some discussion, they decided they might as well wait it out. As though it was a signal that they had made the right decision, a helicopter flew over, circled back and dipped at them, to let them know they'd been seen. When they had struggled back through the fallen trees to the car, Charly opened her briefcase and removed a couple of sheets of blank paper.

"Know how to play battleships, McKinnon?"

"Sure. But it's been about twenty years since I last did it."

"No problem. Make your grid with ten squares, numbered from 1 to 10 across the top and A to J down the side. I think it's a 5-square destroyer, a 4-square submarine, and a couple of little 3-square something-or-others."

"Okay. First one to sink all the other's boats wins, right?"

"Right."

They settled down to play, concentrating on the game and the battle of wits. But Charly had forgotten how much in tune with each other they were, and realized almost immediately that McKinnon was reading her mind to pick off her boats, just as she was reading his. The first game ended almost as quickly as it had begun.

"So McKinnon, you not only send messages telepathically, you receive them as well. I told you we were compatible. Now we will have to create new strategies." Charly figured she still had an advantage over McKinnon because she had often tried to use her mental powers in games before with more than a little success. But this time, she couldn't believe it when he sank all of her boats in record time. She had only one hit on his boats and one small one sunk.

"How did you do that?"

"Pure logic. I knew you'd be concentrating on blank squares, so I ignored what I was picking up from you. Then I simply concentrated on my boats, hoping you'd assume that I was thinking of blank squares as well."

"Very clever, McKinnon, very clever. Want to try one more?"

But the next game never happened, for just then they heard clearly the sound of a heavy engine. Charly watched as McKinnon helped the road crew clear the trees with chain saws and axes. She would have offered to help as well, but knew they would refuse. When one of the workers commented on the fact that they had been very fortunate, Charly threw a warning glance at McKinnon, and he just agreed that they had indeed been fortunate.

The drive back to Picton seemed to pass very quickly. There was such a sense of kinship with McKinnon now that Charly found it very difficult to remember he was her superior, although the manager was her immediate boss. They had

established a close rapport last night, and it was impossible to go back to their former sterile relationship.

It seemed that McKinnon felt the same way. "I want you to promise me something, Charly. I won't be going out inspecting with you any more, so if you have problems with anyone, I want you to let me know immediately. We've told the office staff not to take any verbal abuse from anyone - clients or brokers. So now I'm telling you the same thing. If anyone gives you a hard time about their insurance, you refer them to the manager or one of us. Just don't let them be rude to you. You'll be a little more exposed to that kind of thing than the girls in the office, so you'll have more difficulty dealing with it. They can always hang up the phone. Promise?"

"Promise, McKinnon. And thanks. I won't deny that there will be problems of that nature. I saw it yesterday. But if I go out without the expectation of running into it, it won't happen."

"More witchcraft?"

"No, just positive thinking, another thing that works very powerfully, if people but knew it. As I told you before, thoughts are things, so you do bring to yourself whatever you focus upon."

Looking over at her with a half-grin, McKinnon said, "Will you have dinner with me in the near future, Charly? Call it a belated celebration of your hiring, but really I want to talk to you more about these things."

"Perhaps. I expect we'll be too busy for a while, though. There's going to be a lot of cleaning up to deal with. And I imagine your Claims Adjustor will be run off his feet for the next while."

Her words proved to be very true. Everyone in the office was pressed into service as information was gathered, assembled, and claims were sorted out and dealt with. Most of the storm victims had found shelter by the time Charly and McKinnon had returned to civilization.

Friday afternoon she was just leaving the office when she saw McKinnon walking towards her. Pausing on the steps, she waited for him to reach her.

"How are you holding up, Charly?"

"Fine, McKinnon. I heard you were busy working with the cleanup crews. How are they progressing?"

"Quite well. Hydro and phones have been restored, most of the streets are open now, and people are beginning to think about rebuilding. But there's still plenty to do. I'd like to take you out for that dinner tonight, if you are free."

"I could be, I guess. I'll need an hour to go home and get changed. What did you

have in mind?"

"Something relaxed and quiet in Belleville. I've already got reservations for eight."

Grinning at her, he continued, "You see I'm psychic too. I knew you'd say yes. I'll pick you up at seven-thirty."

"Don't get too sure of yourself, McKinnon. I might turn you into a frog."

"The sooner the better, little witch. Then you'll be obliged to kiss me to get rid of the spell. See you later." And he ran down the steps to his car, before she could think of a suitable retort.

Charly dressed carefully for her dinner date. She had to admit that she was excited about the prospect of dining with him. She enjoyed their conversations and the feeling of understanding that was developing between them.

When McKinnon arrived, he came in and visited with her parents for a few minutes. Charly admired the easy way he had with them and the fact that he appeared in no hurry to run off with her.

Driving to Belleville, he commented on how comfortable her parents' home seemed to be. She wondered if he was unconsciously comparing it to his own, before his divorce. If what he had said about his wife was true, she was sure his home must have been anything but relaxing.

When the wine he ordered had been brought to the table, he toasted 'our new little Inspector' and somehow Charly didn't mind being called little. It had often annoyed her in the past, especially during her school years.

Once again, the restaurant lived up to expectations, and they talked little as they dined on escargot, filet mignon, baked potato and asparagus tips. As they relaxed over Spanish coffee, though, they fell into easy conversation, like old friends meeting after a lengthy separation.

"So, Little Farm Inspector, have you run into any problems yet?"

"Hardly, McKinnon. I've been helping in the office since we got home the other day. But I do have a problem. Can you tell me of any houses to rent, preferably out in the country? I want to get out on my own now that I'm gainfully employed."

"You really are a witch, Charly. And there's nothing you can say now that will convince me otherwise." He was staring at her again, with an expression of amused bafflement.

"What made you say that? I just asked if you knew of a house I could rent." She frowned at him, confused.

"Remember what you told me about writing out something I wanted every night

for thirty-three nights?" Charly had forgotten, but she smiled and asked, "What's that got to do with anything?"

"Open this and read it." Taking a small envelope from his inside breast pocket, he handed it to her. Wednesday's date was written on the outside of it and the envelope was sealed.

"You sure you want me to open this?"

"Indeed, I do. In fact, I wish you would hurry up."

Shrugging her shoulders, Charly tore the end from the envelope. She pulled out a slip of paper and unfolded it. The words jumped from the page.

'I have a responsible, reliable tenant for the dwelling on my second farm', the affirmation stated, written in a bold hand. She read it, then read it again.

"Now do you see what I mean? Pure witchcraft. The house was obviously meant for you." He looked at her with an accusatory grin. "I thought you said this would take thirty-three days."

"Usually, but not always. It depends on the circumstances, your ability to believe, and the needs of any other people involved in your request." She stopped speaking suddenly and then asked, "Are you saying that you have accommodation for me?"

"Available immediately, reasonable rent, major appliances included, and all utilities paid. The former owners spent most of their capital fixing up the house. It's a thirty-year old bungalow, and they renovated it completely. Then they had a couple of poor years with their cash crops, and finally had to think about declaring bankruptcy. I happened to hear that they were in trouble, so offered to buy them out for a fair market price. They accepted, and there I was with a beautiful second home sitting empty. I was almost ready to pay someone to look after it for me. When can you move in?"

"How about Sunday afternoon? I don't have much except my clothes and a few necessary items like bed, kitchen table and chairs, and my computer and desk, left over from my apartment days in Guelph. I think my mother has some furniture she's been saving in the basement for a few years in case I ever did move out."

"Would you like me to help with the move? I have a truck we can use."

"That's one offer I won't even hesitate over. Of course, you can help. I'm sure my Dad will be very appreciative. Now, tell me all about the house. How many bedrooms, is there a den, laundry, what colour are the carpets? I can't wait to see it." It was just beginning to sink in that she would soon have her own home and she was getting more excited by the moment.

"That's no problem. I'll take you over for a grand tour right now, if you like."

"Oh, believe me, I like!" She was impatient to be off.

The house was all he had said and more. It was very apparent to her that the former owners had spent a great deal of money, because the wiring was newly updated, and the oil furnace had been removed and replaced with a heat pump and electric furnace. All of the rooms had been recently decorated in a colonial theme with warm autumn colours predominating. She hurried from one room to the next, inspecting everything, and by the time she reached the den in the basement and found the fireplace, she felt like she had truly come home.

The room was painted with a hint of rose, a cream rug on the floor. Off to one side was a small powder room and laundry. The washer and dryer looked new. The main floor had three bedrooms, bathroom, large country kitchen and living room. She already knew which bedroom would be her office and which one she would sleep in.

McKinnon followed her around, taking pleasure in her delight. He stood now, hands in pockets, watching her as she flitted from room to room.

"Would you consider selling this house, McKinnon? You could sever a lot for me, because I wouldn't want the land."

"Why don't you just live in it for a while and think about it, Charly? We can always set up a rent-to-purchase agreement, subject to severance, if that's what you'd like."

"Would you do that? I guess when I think about it, I'm not in any position to buy until I pay back a couple of loans. But that won't take long, and then I'll be asking you again." She still had trouble believing her good fortune.

McKinnon had perched himself on the edge of the bow window and his legs were extended in front of him, crossed at the ankles. His hands were again in his trouser pockets, and his suit jacket was open.

Coming over to stand beside him, she had her hands in her pockets as well. Pockets that she had hidden in the seams of her long dress. It was light emerald green velvet with leg-of-mutton sleeves, high lace-trimmed collar, and tight-fitting waist. The long skirt was A-line and the dress was one of her favourites. She'd had many compliments on it but few people were aware that she had made it herself. She had chosen to wear her hair loose, pulled up on the sides and secured with rhinestone combs. It fell in waves to her waist behind. She knew the dress gave her an old-fashioned air.

"How can I thank you, McKinnon? This is like a dream come true for me."

"You mean you haven't been writing down every night for thirty-three nights that you have a house just like this one?"

"No, I'm afraid not. So far, it was just a thought. But then, thoughts are things, so

here's my house!" She twirled around in delight, taking in the kitchen cupboards, new stove and fridge, and the braided rug where her table and chairs would sit.

She stopped short when she felt McKinnon's hand on her shoulder.

"About the thanks you were going to give me. It's strange, but I feel like a frog. Do I look like a frog to you?"

He had turned her to face him, and she looked up at his warm smile.

"I'm catching the drift, McKinnon, and I'm thinking I should probably go home and pack now. Besides, you look a bit more like a wolf than a frog at the moment."

His hand was still on her shoulder, and he lifted her chin with his fingers. Tipping her face up, he bent over and kissed her lightly on the lips.

"Never a wolf with you, Little Witch. I just wanted to see if the reality came near to the dream. That little sample told me all I wanted to know." Stepping back, he said matter-of-factly, "Time to go, I guess."

Charly was still standing, rooted to the spot. The thought had crossed her mind in the past few days that if she and McKinnon continued to see each other, at some point he would probably try to kiss her. She just wasn't prepared for it yet.

Grinning at her, he said, "Coming, Charly?"

Moving towards the door, she blushed and answered, "Coming, McKinnon."

Saturday passed like a whirlwind as she packed all of her things, chattered endlessly to her mother about her new house, and watched boxes pile up near the door, ready for moving. Her mother had a hide-a-bed sofa and chair for her den, and furniture for her second bedroom. Charly had also arranged for a telephone to be hooked up on Friday. She would have to buy office and living room furniture, but it would give her a good excuse to go to auction sales on the weekend.

McKinnon showed up with his truck just after lunch on Sunday and they soon had it loaded. Her parents followed in their car and the afternoon sped by as they arranged furniture and unpacked boxes. Charly was aware that McKinnon had had someone come in and clean the house thoroughly yesterday. It had been musty the day before, but now it sparkled and smelled like it had been well aired.

It was late when they finished, and Charly was surprised when McKinnon accepted her mother's invitation to dine with them. The distance wasn't far and she knew this pleased her parents. They had missed her during her five years of school in Western Ontario and were happy that she was once more close to home.

She was curious to see if McKinnon would mention anything about metaphysics to her parents, but he kept the conversation firmly on farming and she guessed

that he wasn't yet comfortable discussing it with anyone but herself.

"Well, Mom, I hate to break this up, but I've got work tomorrow, so I'd better get home." She laughed, and then added, "It seems funny to be saying that, but frankly, I can't wait to get back and see my house again."

Her Dad came over and handed her an envelope. "You can open this when you get there, Charly. It's a little something in celebration of your new job." He put his arm around her and gave her a hug. "Don't forget to come and visit."

"Thanks, Dad. I won't."

McKinnon followed her home in his truck and went inside with her. "So you think you can live happily in your new surroundings?"

"Oh, McKinnon, do you even need to ask? How could anyone not be happy here?" As an afterthought, she asked, "Would you like a coffee? I think I have all the requirements."

"Okay. But I have to check on something downstairs. I'll do that now."

When the coffee was ready, McKinnon still hadn't come up. Setting up a tray, she decided to take it down, since that's where the sofa was.

As soon as she opened the door to the basement, she could hear the snapping of the logs in the fireplace and knew he had made her a fire.

"I got the feeling you were a fireplace person, too, Charly." McKinnon was kneeling on the rug by the fire, his jeans outlining his muscular body. The sleeves of his red wool sweater were pushed above the elbow and he looked quite at home.

Setting the tray down, she smiled at him. "You are right, McKinnon. I'm very much a fireplace person. In fact, I may set up my office down here, so I can work by the fire."

"Well, there's lots of wood piled by the fence out back. Help yourself."

"Oh, my God, McKinnon!" Clapping her hand over her mouth, Charly dropped on to the sofa.

"What's the matter?" He came over and sat beside her, alarmed at her pallor.

"I just realized I never asked you what the rent was going to be. How much, McKinnon? I've got to find out before I get any more comfortable. I can't believe I did this!"

"Don't scare me like that, Charly. I thought something was really wrong!" Relaxing, he stretched out his legs and put his arm along the back of the sofa behind her head.

"How much, McKinnon?" Of all the things she had done in her life, this was

definitely the craziest.

The amount he named was so ridiculously low, she wasn't sure she had heard correctly.

"But I paid almost twice that much for a two-bedroom apartment in the city."

"Forget it, Charly - end of discussion. Where's that coffee?"

Passing him his cup, she settled down beside him, only to feel the letter her Dad had given her crinkling in her pocket. She pulled it out and tore it open. After scanning it quickly, she turned in great excitement to McKinnon.

"Do you believe this, McKinnon? He's paid off all of my student loans and written off the loan he gave for my SUV. He says if I had been a spoiled brat, he wouldn't have done it. He also says he doesn't need the money, so I might as well have the use of some of it now, rather than waiting until he dies. What a guy!"

Sipping her coffee, she put the cup down and started talking again. "Do you know what this means, McKinnon? I can buy this place as soon as you sever..."

"Shut up, Charly. You talk too much." And suddenly she was in his arms, his coffee-scented lips firm and warm on hers.

CHAPTER FIVE

Tucking her in close to his side, under his arm, McKinnon pushed the hair back from her face.

"Now tell me how this thirty-three day thing works."

Charly had barely caught her breath from the kiss. It had been extremely pleasant and quite unexpected. He was an incredibly good kisser - sensitive, sensuous and gentle all at once. Jerking herself back to his question, she quickly assembled her thoughts.

"As I understand it, we are composed of three main parts - conscious, subconscious and superconscious." She looked up from the fire into his face, the brown eyes fixed steadily and attentively on her. She noted idly how long his lashes were, the slight curl to them.

"Carry on. You're doing fine. Sounds like basic psychology."

"When you first fall asleep, your conscious mind needs to rest, so it steps aside and your subconscious, which doesn't need rest or sleep, begins to take over. It reviews the past forty-eight hours and the coming forty-eight hours, decides if changes should be made, what errors were made that should be corrected, and

what is required for the next day or two. If you remember, and analyze, your dreams, you will be given direction from your subconscious and superconscious, which will assist you in your daily living. The subconscious and super conscious are never wrong, but they have to send messages in symbols so that the conscious mind disregards it, because it doesn't understand it, and therefore can't interfere."

McKinnon had picked up her left hand and was idly playing with her Grandmother's ring. She found she enjoyed the warmth of his fingers touching her skin.

"Are you still with me?"

"Sure am. But where does the superconscious and the thirty-three days come in?"

"The superconscious is your highest self and retains the memory of what it was you wanted to work on for soul development in this lifetime. It reviews your actions and choices and sends messages through profound dreams that occur in the deep sleep phase. These dreams usually are so different from your average dreams that they make a definite impression on you. Often they instruct you to do something you normally wouldn't consider. But remember, it is never wrong. And it is in agreement with your subconscious when it gives you directions, so the choice was actually yours, though you were unaware of making it. You still following me?"

"What about the thirty-three days?"

"Thirty-three days is the normal human cycle. It takes thirty-three days from the inception of a thought to a completed decision - sort of like programming yourself. But in order to convert a thought into a reality, there must be agreement at all three levels. Since your conscious mind wants to retain control, you have to trick it. Thus, the thirty-three day cycle of writing down whatever it is you want. The act of writing it passes it directly to your subconscious and it can get on with figuring out how it is to be accomplished."

"Now for the most important part - the statement I told you to use earlier. If you don't write first that your conscious mind accepts the fact that you desire and deserve whatever it is you want, it will throw up all kinds of roadblocks and excuses why you shouldn't have it. It also sometimes feels that you aren't worthy, especially if you are asking for wealth and success. So you have to trick it. This is all related to the Universal Law of Attraction as well – what you focus on is what you get."

"And suppose I write down that I made love to you?"

"You can make affirmations involving other people if you like, but the important thing is your intent. You should also know that it isn't possible to make someone else do something they don't wish to do. If we were both in agreement at all three levels of our being, it would probably take place. But that involves another whole

area of theory and it's getting late. I really do have to work tomorrow."

"Okay, good Little Witch. I'll let you get away with an evasive answer this time, but we'll discuss it further later. And that's a promise." He stood slowly, unwinding his length and stretching. She felt very small standing beside him.

With McKinnon's departure, the house seemed suddenly terribly empty. With no living room furniture to absorb the sound, her footsteps echoed as she walked down the hardwood hall floor to her bedroom.

Stripping down, she curled her toes in the deep pile of the carpet, enjoying the sensuous feeling of freedom that accompanied the knowledge that she was alone, totally, and could do as she pleased. Her accommodations during her student days had always been shared and there just wasn't the same sense of freedom in the city.

Smiling and humming softly, she went into the shower, still naked and feeling sinfully free. The water was warm, cascading down over her shoulders, breasts and hips. She relaxed under the soothing spray, giving herself up to the purely physical sensations. Dried and powdered, she again went naked out of the bathroom, across the kitchen and down to the fire to check on it before retiring. The logs were still smouldering and throwing heat out into the room, and she stood soaking it into her skin, the glow warm on her body.

Twirling around on her toes, she was again humming as she climbed upstairs and went to bed. She slid in under the covers, enjoying the feel of the sheets sliding over her skin, slightly cool, the weight of the blanket promising warmth within minutes.

As she nestled down and began slipping into sleep, her body again started to tingle with sexual arousal, and she knew immediately it was coming from McKinnon. Lying still, she tried to block it out, but the feelings were too strong. Her breasts were throbbing and aching, her legs were becoming weak. Her reactions were so strong that she knew she would be picking up specifics from him very soon if she didn't stop him. Short of phoning him, there was little she could do unless...

Sitting up, yoga-like, she did her deep breathing, cleared her mind and then conjured up his image. When it was clear, she mentally took his face between her hands and began kissing him - eyelids, eyebrows, forehead, cheeks, chin, earlobes, and finally his mouth. She concentrated all of her mental energy on the sensations he would experience as her lips touched his, just a feather caress first, while her fingers pushed into his hair and exerted just enough pressure on his head to hold it right where she wanted it.

She could feel the excitement build in his body as she imagined her tongue, warm and moist, running over his lips, gently prying them open, touching his teeth. She

could almost hear him gasp, as she slipped her tongue into his mouth to find his, kissing him with a slowly building passion that quickly brought him from passivity to active participation. It was at that moment that she suddenly realized McKinnon had somehow joined her in her fantasy and instead of being acted upon, was acting. He was transmitting just as powerfully as she was and she could no longer tell which thoughts were hers and which his. Nor could she shut him out. She was caught and she had to participate until he willed otherwise.

Falling back onto her pillow, she found that her hands were clasping her breasts tightly as her mind played scene after scene of flesh against flesh, breasts against hair-roughened chest, soft white thighs against dark muscular ones, feet entwined, toes curling and caressing in tune with tongue and lips. She could feel him kissing her body, inch by trembling inch, the heat building, blood racing, and realized there were tears in her eyes because it was just not real enough. But still he wouldn't let her go.

As she lay frustrated and exhausted, she had to acknowledge the fact that McKinnon had shown her very clearly that he was psychically her superior in every way. It frightened her because her own psychic energy had always been a fact shared only with her parents and totally under her own control. She had lost that control now and she didn't like the feeling.

The phone by the bed rang, startling her so much that she sat bolt upright, then grabbed the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Welcome home, Little Witch. Sleep well and sweet dreams." Click. The connection was broken. As she thoughtfully replaced the receiver, she could hear echoes of the humour in his voice. *So, he found it amusing, did he?* But in spite of it all, she slept soundly.

As the days, then the weeks, passed, she was busier than she had ever been before in her life. She didn't see McKinnon, and her fantasy wasn't repeated, though it was never very far from her mind. Sometimes when she was settled in bed, she was tempted to send some energy to McKinnon, but the knowledge of his superior strength held her back.

She couldn't control her dreams when she was asleep, though, and many mornings she would awaken, aware of having had highly erotic dreams and that McKinnon was there with her. She had studied astral projection and knew it was possible to share dreams, but didn't want to explore it further just now.

As the time passed, the weather warmed up, leaves came out full, and flowers bloomed and died, to be replaced by other, later flowers. Charly was delighted to find a variety of blooms appearing and disappearing in her flowerbeds. She spent hours digging around them, pruning shrubs, and setting out some tomato plants

amongst the flowers. Today was Friday, the end of June and she was going to inspect McKinnon's farm. Would he be there? Had he set out his file on purpose? Had someone else set it out? Maybe he didn't even know she was coming over.

She had taken special care with her appearance this morning. Her western boots were gleaming with polish, her jumpsuit was pressed with knife-blade sharpness, and her hair had been braided and coiled in a coronet. She had decided to leave McKinnon's farm until last, just in case he wanted to spend some time with her. It had puzzled her greatly that he had not attempted to see her since she had moved into his house. They had become so close in such a short time, like very old friends, and she just couldn't understand his continuing silence.

* * *

McKinnon had good reason for his distance from her. He had been in the feed mill one day waiting on an order to be filled when Joe Corrigan, a fellow director, and not one of his favourite people, came up to him.

"I hear you have our little Inspector tucked away in a nest in the country. Cozy. Following your wife's footsteps, are you?"

As his face turned beet red, McKinnon's fist bunched up and his body coiled like an overdrawn bowstring. Struggling for control, he just muttered, "I'm not even going to dignify that remark with an answer. But I will tell you this. If I hear you've repeated it anywhere, I'll flatten you. Got that?"

Turning on his heel, he stalked out of the mill and roared off in his truck, his order forgotten.

* * *

When McKinnon's housekeeper answered the door several hours later, Charly was dismayed to find that he was in Toronto and wasn't expected home until much later in the evening. She had been so sure she would see him. Hiding her disappointment, she went out and began her inspection of the barns and outbuildings. He had a very well run business and the standards of maintenance were high, so she didn't really expect to find anything to report. In fact, she was wondering why they had even put the file out. As she was about to leave the straw mow, she heard the distinct but weak mewling of very young kittens. Memories of searching them out in her father's barn came flooding back, and she set her clipboard and camera to one side, and then began moving quietly towards the sound.

It only took her a moment, because mamma cat had heard them as well and was on her way to feed them. Charly couldn't resist taking them from their hiding place and cuddling them for a few moments. One in particular caught her fancy. He was all black, a little larger than the rest, and much more aggressive.

"So, little Bagheera, you're going to be king of the jungle, are you?" He looked up at her with large, liquid eyes, blinking, but lying still in her hand." Tell me, where's McKinnon? Why hasn't he called me? I thought maybe we could be friends, but it looks like I was very wrong. I suppose socializing with an employee is just as much a no-no here as it would be in a big city office. But damn it, I enjoy talking to him."

The kitten was squirming to get his lunch, so she placed him down beside his mother, and laughed when he tried to walk and toppled over in the straw. He was soon eagerly feeding with his siblings.

"Bye, little Bagheera. Grow strong and catch lots of mice." She spoke softly as she gathered up her things and went out into the sunshine. She didn't hear the footsteps pause at the far end of the barn, nor see the tall figure standing so quietly, just listening.

Restlessness plagued her later that evening as she tried to find something to do. Staying in on Friday nights hadn't bothered her before, but tonight was somehow different, probably because she had built up her hopes of seeing McKinnon, only to be disappointed. Driven with excess energy and no outlet, she finally pulled on some old jeans and a plaid shirt, braided her hair, and took gardening tools out to the flowerbeds.

She was attacking the weeds with unaccustomed vigour when she heard a car. As she rounded the corner of the house, she stopped in mid-stride. McKinnon was getting out of his black Cadillac.

"Hi Witch. What's new?"

Warily, she looked at him. He was acting as though they had just parted a few hours ago, instead of several weeks.

"Not much. To what do I owe the pleasure of your company?"

Becoming suddenly serious, he said, "I wanted to talk to you. I hope I haven't come at a bad time."

"Oh, very bad, McKinnon. I'm busy entertaining the mayor and his wife for tea. Can't you tell by my attire?" She grinned at him as she pulled off her grubby gloves. "Come on in."

Since McKinnon had last been in the house, Charly had managed to finish furnishing it. She offered him a seat in the living room while she cleaned up, and she wondered as she did so what it could be that he wanted to talk about. She wasn't long finding out. He was pacing around the room when she came back and her defences rose because she could sense that it wasn't going to be good news.

"Something's wrong, isn't it, McKinnon?"

"Yes, Charly, something's wrong. I'm not sure I can talk about this without blowing up."

"I think you had better just tell me what it is. I'll make some coffee while you get your thoughts together."

Was he going to tell her she was fired? Or that he had sold the property and she had to get out of the house? Filling two cups, she carried them out to the living room.

"Is it something I've done, McKinnon? You're scowling like a bear with a thorn in his paw."

"God, no Charly. It really hasn't anything to do with you, except that you happen to be living in my house." He sat down and picked up his coffee, staring blankly out the window.

"Come on, T. G., tell me. I can't stand suspense. Just tell me what happened to upset you." She sank down beside him, wanting to offer comfort but not knowing how to give it, because she didn't know yet what the problem was.

"Maybe that's the best way. I'll just tell you what happened and you can surmise the rest."

"Okay, shoot."

Briefly, he outlined the confrontation in the feed mill. "So you see, Charly, this whole situation is impossible."

Stunned, she stared at him. "Are you asking me to move out, McKinnon?"

"Good heavens, no. I wouldn't let anybody pressure me into a decision like that."

"Then are you asking me to quit my job?"

"I don't have the right to do that either. I wouldn't expect you to do it."

"Then what do you want from me?" Puzzled and confused, she continued to stare at him.

"I don't want anything from you, Charly, except your understanding. You see, with people thinking and saying things like that, we can't see each other socially. I wanted you to know why you weren't hearing from me. I just won't have you exposed to that kind of malicious gossip."

"For God's sake, McKinnon, the gossip can't hurt me, or you either, for that matter. Didn't you listen to anything I told you? The only people hurt by that kind of thing are the originators of the thoughts and words. Not us." She placed her cup carefully on the coffee table. "Never us."

"I understand that on one level, Charly, but on another I just see red and want to punch somebody out, and that is damaging to my soul, believe me. Especially if I

wallop my co-director in a public place." He set his cup beside hers and rose to begin pacing again. "It's just no use, Charly. We had something really special growing between us, but I won't let them destroy it with their malicious gossip. So it has to be over before it even has a chance to begin."

"There's nothing I can say to change your mind?"

"Nothing. I've been thinking about it for hours and I can't see any other solution. I have to stay so far away from here and from you that no one can point a finger at either of us. It would give certain people a good opportunity to say you should never have been hired, if they could even hint that we were having an affair. And this is a very small community."

"I can't believe this is happening, McKinnon. I feel like I'm losing my best friend. Would you hold me for a minute?" She had risen and stood gazing at him, her feelings evident in her tear-filled eyes.

Crossing the space that separated them, he gathered her into his arms, wrapping them tightly around her and holding her close against him. He dropped his head and rested his cheek on her hair. They stood silently for long moments. Charly drew comfort from the warmth of his arms and body. It felt so right to be close to him. How could people make it into something ugly? She didn't want their friendship to end now. There was so much more she wanted to know about him, so many things yet to discover.

For just a moment, she considered the possibility of seducing him and making him need her so much he wouldn't be able to say no, but only for a moment. It would be easy enough. Just lift her head, touch her lips to his and repeat the fantasy they had shared previously. Her mind began playing it back as she stood soaking in the warmth and scent and feel of him. Suddenly she felt him shudder and knew instinctively he had picked up her thoughts. Trying to blank her mind, she moved to step back from the circle of his arms, but as she lifted her head from his chest, his lips moved over hers and settled firmly on them, as though coming home.

Now the fantasy became three-dimensional reality, with added bonuses. She could touch him as he was touching her, feel the thick softness of his hair as her fingers slipped into it, sense the acceleration of his pulse and feel the throb of his heartbeat next to hers. She could hear his breathing quicken as the kiss deepened and she sensed that he was rapidly reaching his limits of control.

Her own body was responding as it had in her fantasy, giving as much as she was taking, encouraging him to respond to her needs, by a little pressure here, a subtle movement there, all performed unconsciously and naturally. As his hands slipped from her face down to her rib cage, his fingers just under her breasts, she arched her body closer, his arousal alive and demanding against her. Her hands slid down over his shoulders to pull him even closer as the kiss they were sharing lifted

them to heights only hinted at in their fantasies. But his hands had barely closed over her breasts to inflame them with his heat, when he pushed himself away from her, holding his hands up as though to ward her off.

"Stop me now, Charly, please!" His voice was anguished as he turned his back to her.

"I can't stop myself, McKinnon. I don't want to. So if you want to end this, you'd better leave now." Tears were falling, but she tried to keep them out of her voice.

"Charly..."

"Go, McKinnon. For God's sake, just go." She was standing with her arms clasped tightly around her middle, holding in her agony. She watched as he unclenched his fists and strode swiftly out of the house without a backward glance. She heard the engine revving and the tires tearing into the gravel as he spun out of the driveway. She felt a great emptiness invading her soul as the loneliness of the future stretched before her. No more deep voice calling her 'Little Witch'. No more discussions about metaphysics, but most of all, no more laughing and deepening comradeship with her friend.

CHAPTER SIX

It had been years since Charly had cried herself to sleep, so tonight she made up for lost time. She knew all the arguments about professional ethics, getting involved with superiors, and behaving in a manner that could cause people to talk. It was important that she maintain a good image in the community if she wished to retain the respect of the clients as well as the directors and staff. If only his wife had behaved in a different manner.

But knowing all the reasons why they couldn't be together didn't make the pain any less. For a while she mulled over the possibility of resigning and taking another job, but where? There wasn't another insurance company for miles, and even if McKinnon did want to see her again, she would be too far away. Maybe he could resign as a director. She was sure from what she had seen of his farm, he certainly didn't need the director's fees. But then, that wouldn't be a fair solution either.

She fell into an exhausted sleep, only to waken a couple of hours later, tears streaming from her eyes and a feeling of dread that she couldn't shake. She got up and wandered around for a while, made a cup of mint tea and drank it, then sat in the darkened living room and tortured her self with memories of the last scene with him. Her mind replayed it all, from his first words to her last. She relived all

of the emotions and feelings again, but the sadness in her took away all the joy she had felt in his arms. Her soul was crying out for its mate with a depth of feeling she had never before experienced. It was a very long night.

Somehow, Charly managed to carry on with her job. She gave it all of her attention, writing meticulous reports, making very detailed inspections, updating photos that really didn't need it, and putting in much longer hours than was expected of her. When the staff began to comment on her apparent weight loss, and the long hours she was working, hinting that maybe she was working too hard, she made an effort to stay out of the office as much as possible so they wouldn't know what she was doing.

She looked up old friends, but they lost interest in her when she was unable to give them her whole attention. Her most happy times were those spent alone with her flowerbeds, or walking out through the woods across the road. Then one morning she awakened feeling nauseated and headachy. She decided it was a bout of summer flu, so took some Vitamin C and carried on. As the day progressed, so did her feelings of discomfort. By late afternoon, she had severe cramps in her stomach and had to cut her last inspection short. She knew she was fevered by the time she got home and the pain had increased so much, she began to panic. It couldn't be just flu. It was too severe for that.

Picking up the phone, she called her parents, only remembering after the fifteenth ring that they had gone up north for a month of fishing. It was about a half-hour drive to the hospital and she knew she needed medical attention. Gathering up her purse and keys, she went back out to the car and drove to Belleville.

* * *

McKinnon had just sat down to a late dinner when he suddenly doubled over with severe stomach cramps. He had felt fine until only moments before. Clutching his stomach, he went into his bedroom and fell on the bed, knees drawn up to his chest. He stayed like that for an hour, when the pain finally eased and he was able to stand upright with little discomfort. Assuming it was something he had eaten, he went about his business.

It wasn't until two weeks later when he was in the office for their monthly meeting, that the manager asked him how his new tenant was.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean Charly. How is she?" The manager was looking at him strangely.

"Is something wrong with her?" McKinnon was suddenly very attentive.

"You should know. She's living in your house. She had her appendix out two weeks ago. Where have you been?"

"I don't see her, if that's what you mean. She rents my house and that's it. I didn't

know anything about it. I wonder where she is now?"

"I heard she went to her uncle's from the hospital. Her parents are away. She had a nurse call in the next day to tell us she wouldn't be back for at least four weeks. How about doing some inspections for us?"

"Sure. Anytime." McKinnon wasn't really paying attention. He should have known. To think she had to go through that without even a card from him! She must really think he was a brute.

The meeting dragged on forever, it seemed to him. He couldn't wait to get away from what seemed like very petty problems. His mind was miles away but nobody seemed to notice. Finally, he was able to make his excuses and hurry to his car. The others were meeting at the president's house as they sometimes did, but he just pleaded a prior engagement and sped to the florist, hoping the shop wouldn't be closed.

Choosing a large bunch of pink carnations and potted ivy, he placed them in the car, then went into the nearest department store and picked out the softest, most loveable teddy bear he could find. A stop at the grocery store for some mixed cheeses and fruit, and then a side trip into a bookstore just as the girl was about to close up, and his purchases were complete. Except for one thing. He stepped into a phone booth, dialled her number, and hung up as soon as she answered. Had she still been staying with her uncle, he would have had a great time explaining his purchases to his housekeeper.

One more trip into the Chinese restaurant to place an order for take-out, and his plans were complete. Except for some wine. But the store was already closed. Damn!

What if she had already eaten? What if she went out somewhere before he got there? What if she didn't want to see him? He tried to stay calm as he drove into her yard and gathered up his purchases. With arms full, he had to push the doorbell with his elbow. It seemed to take forever before she opened the door. And suddenly the effort was worthwhile. His doubts all vanished as he saw her face light up like a candle.

* * *

Charly replaced the receiver thoughtfully. Who would call and then hang up when she answered? Shrugging her shoulders, she assumed it was someone who had reached a wrong number, and went back to the sofa and her book. She had been reading constantly since she returned home, except for a daily walk, as ordered by the doctor. She had been thinking about McKinnon too. It had been so hard in the hospital with no one but her aunt and uncle to visit. She had refused to let them call her parents, because she knew they had been looking forward to the trip. There was nothing they could do for her anyway.

Day after day she lay in the hospital wondering if McKinnon would come in to see her. Day after day passed with no sign of him. And as soon as she was mobile, she stood by the phone often, talking herself out of calling him. Now the worst was over. She was back in her own little house, her health was on the mend, and she had survived without him. Settling back down, she lost herself once more in her book, promising to make something to eat after the next chapter.

The doorbell startled her into jumping up, and swearing as the muscles in her abdomen protested. She made her way more slowly to the door, hoping it wasn't anyone important. She had begun wearing a comfortable multi-coloured caftan since her surgery and her hair was swinging around her shoulders, free. Her feet were bare. Pulling the door open, she gasped, and then smiled broadly.

"McKinnon. Hi! Come on in." Stepping aside, she held the door as he struggled to the table, trying not to drop anything.

Shoving the flowers at her, he asked abruptly, "Charly, why the hell didn't you call me? Never mind. I shouldn't even ask." Groaning, he pulled her into his arms, his mouth gentle and warm on hers. Kissing her thoroughly, he stepped back and let her go.

"Better put those flowers in water. I think maybe we crushed them a little." Sheepishly, he tried to straighten them.

"We? What do you mean we, McKinnon?" Laughing, she went out to the kitchen and filled a vase. She had trouble keeping her emotions under control, she was so happy to see him. When she returned, McKinnon was standing again, the teddy bear held in his hands, a silly grin on his face. "I think I went a little crazy when I found out what you had been through, Charly. I wish someone had told me when it happened. Nothing would have kept me away." He walked towards her, holding the teddy bear out. "This is for you. I'm not even sure why I bought it. It just seemed the thing to do at the time."

"It was exactly the right thing to do. I've been collecting stuffed bears for years. I have boxes of them in my mother's basement. Maybe I'll bring them over and give them a place to sit in the spare room. After all, this guy would probably enjoy the company." Charly knew she was babbling again but couldn't help it. He was here with her at last.

"Come and sit down, Witch. I want to hear all about it. Was it really bad? If the jolt I had was any indication, you sure didn't have much fun." And he told her about being doubled up with pain the day of her surgery.

"Are you going to go into labour when I have a baby, too, McKinnon?" She teased him.

"I sure would if it was my baby. Oh, Charly, why did you have to bring up that subject? I can't keep my mind off of making love with you as it is. I like your

dress, by the way." He was smiling at her, his legs stretched out in front of him, arms across the back of the sofa behind her. One hand was playing idly with her hair, though she thought he was unaware of it.

"How about some Chinese food? Or have you eaten?" He knew they had to get involved in something immediately or he would take her in his arms and forget his better judgment.

Chatting as she worked, setting up plates and cutlery, Charly told him about her hospital stay, her recovery and her enforced retirement. "I hope the company isn't mad at me for goofing off so soon after being hired."

"Of course not. Having emergency surgery isn't goofing off. How did you get to the hospital, by the way? I heard your parents were away when it happened."

"They're not back yet either. I drove myself to the hospital. It wasn't too comfortable, but I made it."

"Damn it, Charly! Haven't you got any sense? Don't you know your appendix could have ruptured? Why didn't you call me?"

She had seen McKinnon withdrawn, sarcastic, passionate, funny and indifferent. But she hadn't seen him angry, until now. And he was furious. It was a nice feeling, to know that he cared so much.

"But it didn't, so don't have a coronary over it, McKinnon. I'm fine, you're fine, the teddy bear is fine, we're all fine, so relax and eat." She slapped a plate down in front of him none too gently and passed him the Soya sauce.

Silence reigned for several moments, until Charly could stand it no longer. "For heaven's sake, McKinnon, lighten up. Stop sulking. We haven't seen each other for eons and we're fighting. I can't stand it!"

"I'm not sulking, for your information. I just don't like to see people take unnecessary risks. And you did. I thought you promised to call me if you had any problems."

"Work problems, McKinnon. And that was before we decided not to see each other any more. Remember?"

"Don't remind me. Oh, hell, let's just forget it and enjoy the time we have."

They managed to forget their differences for the remainder of a very pleasant evening. They also stayed away from any discussion of their decision not to see each other. Charly was content to enjoy his company for as long as he stayed with her.

"Would you do me a favour, Charly?" McKinnon was sitting across from her, downstairs by the fire, and grinning at her with an almost sheepish look. She wondered what was coming next.

"If I'm able, sure. What would you like?"

"I've been remembering and writing down some of my dreams but I have no idea how to analyze them. If I send some over, would you have a look at them and see what you make of them?"

"Are you sure you want me to see them, McKinnon? Dreams are about as personal as you can get."

"There's no one else I'd trust them with. Besides, I know you'll be tactful. After all, you are a good witch, right?"

"Right. Okay, send them over and I'll do what I can. Some symbols are quite standard, but others will be unique to you. If you would break your dreams down into the major parts for me and indicate what the different things mean to you, it will make it easier to analyze them."

"Can you give me an example of what you mean?" McKinnon was all seriousness now.

"Okay. Suppose you dream of cows. Normally they represent self-indulgence, but since you work with them all the time, they could simply mean work to you. It's also quite important that you describe the setting, the people, colours, activities, whether you are observing or participating, how close you are to the action, the overall feeling the dream leaves you with, and any words, names or number that appear. Sort of like doing a homework assignment."

She threw another log on the fire and sat down again.

"Quite often the messages will be humorous. For example, if you were to dream of being given a new tooth brush with a small horse head on the bristle end, the message would be that you should beware of looking a gift horse in the mouth, probably in connection with dental care. Those are the kinds I like best, because I love puzzles."

McKinnon was laughing, amusement and scepticism both evident in his expression. "Do people really dream stuff like that, or are you putting me on?"

"They really do. I could even show it to you, because it's one of mine. Another time when I asked for a dream to explain a previous dream I couldn't figure out, I dreamed I was having my skull measured to see how thick it was. I woke up laughing and the rest of the dream gave me enough clues that I could figure out the first one."

"Would you show me some of your dreams? It sounds like a fair trade to me. Besides, if I read your dreams with your interpretations it will help me learn how to analyze mine."

"Maybe I will. I'd like to look them over before I give you any of them though. I

have dreams going as far back as I can remember, but I didn't always write out interpretations. I usually read them over on Sundays from the past week to get some idea of where I'm going in my life, and if there's anything in particular I should or shouldn't be doing. I'll go through last week's dreams and put interpretations on them, then I'll send them to you. What's your mailing address?"

She wrote it out on a piece of paper and tucked it into her pocket. Then she smothered a yawn as she settled more comfortably in her chair.

"Oh, Charly, I'm sorry! I didn't realize it was so late. You must be tired, but I was enjoying myself so much I forgot you're still an invalid." Rising, he walked over to her, and placing his hands on the arms of her chair, leaned over and kissed her gently on the forehead. "I'll see myself out and I'll send you some dreams first thing tomorrow. Sleep well and dream well."

Before she could rise, he was gone up the stairs in several bounds, and she heard the door closing behind him. She knew why he hadn't wanted a lengthy goodbye. They were just too painful.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Charly found herself re-reading her dreams over the next few days with a totally different perspective. To read them over was one thing, but to have McKinnon reading them and knowing what they meant to her was going to be like letting him into her innermost thoughts. But then, he was willing to let her see his.

She sorted out some of the best for learning purposes, going back over several years. She was thankful now that she had kept them in loose-leaf form, so that she could be selective. To have him privy to all of them was just too threatening for the moment.

She found herself watching for the mailman on Monday morning and again on Tuesday. As soon as he pulled away from the mailbox, she would hurry out to retrieve her mail, hoping for the package from McKinnon. She was burning with curiosity to see what he had been dreaming.

When the package did arrive, it came in the night, and was tucked in between her front doors. She found it when she went out to check the weather Wednesday morning. Rushing inside, she poured a coffee and sat down. With trembling fingers, she tore open the large manila envelope and pulled out the typewritten sheets of paper.

Clipped to the top of the first page was a note, scrawled in his distinctive, firm handwriting.

"Here they are. This goes back to the first one I remember after our conversation on the subject, and includes every dream I've had since. Will keep on writing. Happy translating! T.G."

Charly had mailed some of hers off to him and expected that he would have received them already. Just knowing that he would be reading them made her feel very close to him.

She settled down more comfortably and began scanning the pages in front of her, images and sensations flooding through her as she allowed herself to drift with his dreams. A very strong sense of his personality began coming through to her and she read quickly to the last page. Closing her eyes, she dropped her head back against the sofa and let the feelings flow for a few moments. Uppermost was a sense of pleasure at the quality of the self-awareness evident in his dreams, and the encouragement he was being given to continue. She roused herself and began writing swiftly, giving a brief outline of the general theme of his dreams, then a more specific translation of some of the symbols.

Time passed, with only the sound of the pen against the paper and the occasional rustle as she began a fresh sheet. When she finally ran out of words, she arched her back and rubbed the nape of her neck. With a fresh coffee beside her, she began re-reading what she had written, trying to see it through his eyes, rather than her own, wondering if it would make sense to him. With very little editing, she decided it was complete, and went into her office to process it on her computer.

The computer system was her treat once the fact that she was completely debt-free had registered. She had considered the possibility of compiling all of her dreams into a journal, and the idea began to take hold, with McKinnon's interest in the subject.

A pattern developed over the following weeks, one that she found immensely satisfying. Her days revolved around reviewing her own dreams as well as his, and the highlight of her days was the retrieval of the fat packages from the mailbox, and her enjoyment in getting to know him very well. He had begun slipping little personal notes into each package and she was replying with her own, so she was able to keep abreast of what was happening in his life, on all levels.

As the weeks passed, she explained to him the meaning of his dreams, but she also took the time to teach him how to interpret them on his own, suggesting that he get some file cards and begin his own personal dream dictionary. She explained that the same symbols would begin to appear repeatedly and when he had them documented, he would soon learn what they meant to him. She also told him that a diary of daily events and happenings would be of assistance as well, so that he could relate dreams to actual experiences. And how to look at

other people in his dreams and, taking the first strong characteristic that came to mind about them, apply it to his own situation.

"The language of dreams is one of the oldest on earth, and simply needs to be learned like any foreign language," she wrote one day, in answer to his question about why she was personalizing everything. "Your subconscious mind looks for anything in picture form that will get a message across. You simply need to learn how to translate these pictures into words. Remember that your dreams, for the most part, are about you and for you. That's why they're personalized."

It was quite some time before he sent a dream which contained a story about his making love to another woman, and she smiled to herself as she interpreted it for him, knowing that he had probably had more than one, but hadn't quite had the courage to send them to her.

"This dream symbolizes the integration of the other aspects of yourself - the unity forming with your subconscious and superconscious minds, and the feminine aspects of your personality. It really has nothing to do with sex. However, should you dream of rabbits..."

Then another day when his dream stated simply, 'Dreamed of a bunch of celery and some lettuce', she wrote back immediately, 'Eat more fresh vegetables! If you see a food that is black or has an X on it, it means that you should avoid it. Chalk up another one for your good old subconscious. He's trying to get your body into better physical condition, so pay attention.'

As his dreams began to show more depth, and symbols indicating cleansing with greater frequency, she told him to be prepared for long-forgotten memories to begin surfacing. 'The symbols of washing, doing laundry, bath towels, are a means of telling you that you are getting rid of a lot of 'garbage' that you've been carrying around in your subconscious. If you find yourself becoming very quiet inside some day, just go off by yourself and relax. A memory will surface and along with it will come a better understanding of it. Recognize it and let it go. Each time this happens, you will find yourself beginning to feel lighter, although that isn't really the correct term. Another of those things that would be better described with symbols!'

There were dreams that she couldn't interpret and she told him to come back to them in several weeks, maybe even months, because they were probably about future events and would make sense later on. And she told him what it meant when he dreamed of an explosion in which he was killed. 'This does not mean to write out your will and buy a coffin. It simply means that there is a major change about to take place within you. Congratulations! Your progress is great!'

She still took great care and pride in her job, dealing with problems that came up with a professionalism that surprised her at times. She was aware of a newfound peace within herself and decided that it came from the closeness she was sharing

with McKinnon through their dreams. And she was always aware of how her feelings for him were becoming deeper and stronger as the days, weeks and months slipped by.

As Christmas approached, she began to hope that they could spend even a few hours together. She longed to feel his arms around her once more, his lips on hers. She had kept a damper on all sexual feelings, but she found, as she thought of seeing him, they began to surface. Her mind was weaving daydreams of an evening by the fire shared with him, the exchange of gifts, the tree with its decorations gleaming in the firelight, the smell of wood smoke and the crackle of logs as they burned. She thought long and hard about what she could give him for a Christmas gift and finally settled on a book that she felt would help him the most. It was a book of dream interpretations that she had found very helpful when she was first learning the process.

She had almost convinced herself the dream was real, when it was suddenly burst like a soap bubble, without any warning. The usual package arrived on the Monday morning before Christmas. The note was attached to the top page, as usual.

'My Dear Little Witch:'

'I want so much to spend Christmas with you. You can't know how much. But if I were to spend five minutes with you now, I wouldn't be able to leave, and we both know that an affair would be disastrous for your reputation. I've decided to take myself off to Australia for a month where I'll visit an uncle and some cousins I haven't seen in about ten years. How I wish you were coming with me.'

'I had no intentions of getting personal, but I find that the more I study my dreams, and yours, the closer I feel to you. I often have the strong impression that you are thinking about me and I believe we share many moments without being together. You have become very important to me, as a friend and as a teacher, and as you probably are very well aware, I don't give or accept friendship easily.'

'I will take you with me when I leave this morning and keep you with me until I return. I'll miss our shared dreams and little notes more than I can say, but the month will pass quickly and I'll have a big fat envelope for you when I get back. Have a good Christmas and think of me on Christmas morning. Take a walk in the snow for me - I'll be enjoying summer weather 'down under'.

It was simply signed, 'Love, T. G.' and she realized she was crying as she folded the paper and returned it to the envelope.

Somehow, she made it through the month. Since her fireside scene of Christmas had evaporated, she simply wrapped the book and mailed it to him, knowing he wouldn't receive it until he returned. She half-hoped he would phone on Christmas Eve or maybe New Years, but both holidays passed silently and she

tried to put on a bright face for her parents. Never had she experienced such devastating loneliness. The hours and days dragged by and she relived their entire relationship from beginning to end, wondering what future they had, trying to find a solution to their dilemma, for she knew he wasn't going to see her as long as she was working for the company.

Her own dreams began containing chase scenes and she realized she was being 'chased' by her own creations - doubts and fears for the future of their friendship. She often woke up with tear-stained cheeks, but no memory of having been crying.

The week before McKinnon was due back, the manager called her into his office when she went in to pick up some files.

"You've been with us for quite a while and we are very pleased with your performance. How about a reward? There's an Insurance Convention in Toronto at the Sheraton Centre in March and, since several of the speakers will be talking about subjects that will be of interest to you, the Directors have authorized me to invite you to join us this year. Your expenses will all be paid, of course, and the convention lasts for three days. What about it? Shall I register you?"

Charly stood staring at him. Although well aware that there were two conventions a year, one for the Presidents and Managers and one for the full Board of Directors, it had never occurred to her that she might be included. Immediately her mind flipped to McKinnon. If she went, would he stay home? If she didn't go, would he wonder why? If they both went...

"Can I think about it for a couple of days? You've caught me by surprise."

"Only a couple, please. We have to let the hotel know how many rooms we require and we like to get them in a block, if possible. Can you let me know by the day after tomorrow? I feel it would be very beneficial for you to go because they usually keep us posted on any new information about fire prevention equipment, alarm systems, and other topics that apply to your area of responsibility."

"Okay, I'll give you my decision then." And she walked out to her car, feeling as though the floor had fallen out from under her.

The answer came to her the next morning as she was writing out her dreams. It was all there for her to see - the trip, the lectures, and the banquet - well, almost all. She didn't see McKinnon anywhere in the dreams. *So I'll go. I guess that means he'll be staying home.* She wasn't sure whether she should be pleased or upset, but she told the manager to book her in when she went into the office later in the day.

True to his word, McKinnon had a very fat package of dreams for her when he returned. She was disappointed to find his note almost impersonal, with only a

thumbnail sketch of his trip and one small sentence about having missed her. She set the dreams aside until the weekend, just not feeling up to the emotional upheaval of reading through them.

She knew now, and had known for some time, that she was very much in love with him. She just didn't want to acknowledge the fact, because to do so meant that she would have to make a decision about it, even if that decision was to accept the status quo and carry on with her life. During the month he was away, she had come to realize that she was ready to accept any kind of a relationship with him that he would allow her. It surprised her to find that she was very calm about the fact that she no longer cared what others might think about either of them.

As the day of the convention drew closer, she found herself becoming excited about it, and frequently asked herself why. She went shopping for some new clothes and chose a dress with great care for the banquet that she would be expected to attend. Right up to the last moment, she believed that McKinnon wasn't going, because he hadn't been in her dreams of the convention.

The last minute arrived and she suddenly realized that dreams didn't necessarily tell all. The manager had told her they would be pooling cars for the trip to Toronto to save on gas, and she was to meet the others at the office on Wednesday morning. When she arrived, she found them already loading cars and wondered whom she would be riding with, but not caring.

"Hi, Charly. I've put you in T. G.'s car, if that's okay with you. He seems to be the only one without a full load." She turned quickly and, for the first time, saw him. He was standing beside the black Cadillac, much as he had been on that first day that seemed like years ago - legs crossed at the ankles, arms folded on his chest, and no smile. She looked uncertainly at him, then shrugged and began unloading her things from the back of her SUV.

He was immediately at her side, taking the suitcase and garment bag from her, leaving just her purse for her to carry. He had the trunk loaded and closed in seconds and was holding open the passenger door for her, when it dawned on her that the others had driven off and she was his only passenger. She didn't know whether to laugh or cry. She only knew she wasn't ready for this.

CHAPTER EIGHT

It was with a feeling of *deja vu* that she settled in the seat and became resigned to the two-and-a-half-hour trip, wondering if he would talk to her, ignore her, tease her, or make love with her.

"You looked a bit shocked when you realized I was going to the convention, Charly. Why?" He looked sideways at her as he swung the car out into the traffic.

"Because you weren't in my dreams, that's why!" She spoke sharply, still unsettled. "I saw the whole convention in a dream weeks ago and you weren't there, so I assumed you wouldn't be going."

"Who was it that told me once one should never assume anything? I knew we were going together before I left for Australia because I also saw the convention and I definitely saw you there. Relax, Little Witch. The dream said we had a great time, so let's just enjoy ourselves. God only knows, we deserve it." The last was uttered under his breath, but she caught it and found herself smiling.

From then on, her mood began to improve and she began firing questions at him regarding his vacation in Australia, a place she had always wanted to visit. The trip was over before she realized it and she was still questioning him as they followed the bellhop into the lobby and waited for their rooms to be assigned.

She hardly noticed as he collected their keys and walked with her to the elevator. He was still talking to her about his trip, as they paused for the bellhop to open their doors and place their luggage inside. But she finally wakened up to reality when he crossed from his room into hers through the connecting door.

"Sorry we couldn't get all of the rooms together for your company, but we managed to keep all of you near someone else from the group." The bellhop accepted the tip McKinnon handed him and left.

Kicking the door to her room shut, McKinnon suddenly reached for her and pulled her into his arms. His mouth closed over hers in a long, slow kiss and she melted against him, relaxing into the haven of his arms. Ending the kiss, he pulled her more tightly against his chest and just held her silently for a long moment. She closed her eyes, savouring the closeness and sense of rightness.

"I don't know who we have to thank for our room arrangement, but I'm not going to question it or complain about it." He released her and stepped back just as someone knocked on the door of his room. "I'll see you before the banquet tonight." And he was gone through the door.

Charly unpacked her things, hanging her dresses up in the closet. She knew she didn't have a lecture to attend for a couple of hours and she also knew that McKinnon would be tied up for the rest of the day. She was still musing over the tenderness of his kiss and the warmth of his embrace. She knew without a doubt that they would make love before the end of the convention and she was content to let it happen when the time was right.

She didn't think beyond the convention to life in the County. She just knew she loved him and was sure he loved her as well. She was humming to herself as she

finished unpacking and went happily to her lecture. She paid close attention to the speaker because she still had a job to do and she was here at the expense of the company, so she would fulfil her obligations. When the lecture was finished, she hurried up to the room to see McKinnon, only to find a note instead.

'Have to make the rounds of the hospitality suites. See you at the banquet.'

In a way, she was pleased because it meant that she could take her time getting bathed and dressed. She knew a dance followed the banquet, but she didn't worry about the seating arrangements, the dance, or anything else that might transpire. She was content to let events unroll in their own way and time, knowing that it would be right.

When she was dressed and made up and McKinnon still hadn't returned, she waited until it was nearly time for the banquet and then went down to the hall. Each of the ladies was being given a small corsage and she waited in line for hers, looking around now with interest, wondering where he might be. She had been given her meal ticket, and knew what table she was assigned, but she had no idea if he would be at the same one.

Her corsage pinned in place, she slowly entered the room, not seeing any of her group. She wove her way through the tables, reading the numbers as she went, finally locating hers in the corner near the dais. None of the others had arrived yet, so she treated herself to a front-facing chair. She became absorbed in studying the dresses the other women were wearing. Many of the directors had brought their wives with them, although her company didn't do so.

She felt a hand settle on her shoulder, and looked up to see McKinnon smiling down into her eyes. He pulled out the chair next to her and settled himself close beside her. *Like he really doesn't give a damn what anyone else thinks.*

His behaviour towards her throughout dinner and the speeches was friendly, but he kept his comments general and included the others in their conversations as much as possible. When dinner was over, however, he claimed her for the first dance and led her out onto the floor with an arm around her shoulders.

Before the dance ended, she knew it had been a mistake for them to participate. So much had happened between them in the past few months without any physical contact that they were attuned to each other to a degree she had never experienced before. She knew what he was going to say before he said it, she knew what he was feeling without any words being spoken, and she was aware that he wanted her as badly as she wanted him.

"When this number is over, follow my lead and agree with whatever I say. We have to get out of here." As they moved in time to the music, together but apart, she forced herself to focus on the music, the people around them, anything but his warm and sensuous body so close to her own. Twice he stepped on her toe and

apologized, swearing the second time it happened.

When the music stopped, other couples stayed in place for the next number, but McKinnon steered her quickly off the floor to their table, where several of the directors were deep in 'Insurance talk' as she called it. They looked up and grinned as McKinnon said, "I'm taking our inspector out to a movie. She's too young to be cooped up in here with all these old fogies."

His voice was light and his smile was sincere, but she could feel the tension running deep inside of him, barely held in check. Bidding the others goodnight, she picked up her handbag and walked with McKinnon to the door, and freedom. As they crossed the lobby, McKinnon took a newspaper from the rack and tucked it under his arm, then escorted her into the elevator.

Once in his room, McKinnon spread the newspaper open to the Entertainment section, and she thought, *my God, he's really going to take me to a damn movie!*

"What looks good to you, Charly?" He was looking at the page as he asked the question. *The bed is the only thing that interests me, McKinnon*, she thought and once more experienced the familiar feelings as he swung his head up and looked into her eyes.

"Humour me, Charly. Have you seen any of these movies before?" She forced herself to look away from him, and down at the newspaper. There were several she had seen, but only one she had really enjoyed, so she told him.

"Good. I've seen it too. That's all I needed to know." Rolling the paper up, he jammed it into the wastebasket and kicked off his shoes. "Get comfortable, Little Witch. The rest of this night is ours. If anyone asks tomorrow, which they won't, that's the movie we saw." His tie and suit coat were flung carelessly over the back of the nearest chair, and he unbuttoned the top three buttons of his shirt. Again, she had the feeling of having played this scene out once before.

Before she knew what was happening, he had picked her up, removed her shoes and placed her gently on the bed. Stretching out beside her, one arm under his head, one knee slightly raised, he looked up at her. "Beats the little SUV or the Caddy, huh, Witch?"

Charly had been silent up to this point, wondering how he was going to proceed. She smiled at him now, trusting him completely and loving him with all of her being. She settled closer to him, then glanced up and asked, "Want to play some Battleships?"

"I assume you're joking. There's only one thing I want to do and it's the same thing I wanted to do the night we were stranded together, and every night since. I don't know how it happened, Charly, when I swore I would never again be vulnerable to a woman, but I'm in love with you. More in love with you than I ever thought it possible to be in love." He was twisting a coil of her hair around

his finger, and she realized that his hand was shaking.

"McKinnon, are you nervous?" Her own feelings were so strong and so right that she had no more doubts about their future. She knew it would work out in some fashion that was best for both of them, and she was content to let it happen.

Rolling away from her, McKinnon slid off the bed and went to the desk to pour them each a glass of wine. She had discovered that the directors all kept drinks available in their rooms, even though some of them didn't drink. She knew McKinnon rarely drank because they had discussed it the evening they were out to dinner together.

Handing her the glass, he sat beside her on the bed and took a sip of wine. Setting the glass down, he unbuttoned his shirtsleeves and rolled them up to his elbows as though he found them restricting. He ran his hand through his hair, causing it to stand up on one side, then tried to flatten it down again. She realized he was extremely nervous about something, but couldn't imagine that the prospect of making love with her could be the reason.

"Bear with me, Charly. This is difficult for me. It's so long since I've really communicated with anyone that I'm a bit rusty." He took another sip of wine, then set the glass aside and swung his legs up onto the bed beside her. He pulled the pillows up behind their heads and placed an arm around her shoulders. Then he shifted his position again and fussed with the pillows once more.

"For Pete's sake, McKinnon, settle down and talk! I won't bite. I might even help you out if you hit a rough spot. Just talk to me, because your anxiety is starting to rub off and I was feeling great."

Taking a deep breath, McKinnon started to speak, softly at first, then with more strength and conviction. "When I went to Australia, Charly, I was running for my life. All the things about clearing out 'garbage' were happening to me and I wasn't sure I could handle it without your help. But most of it had to do with my ex-wife and my feelings about what had happened between us. I just didn't want to involve you in that. But you were right. I do feel much lighter inside since I got rid of all those negative feelings. And for that I thank you."

He paused to gather his thoughts and she waited quietly, no longer concerned about his restlessness and anxiety. He was doing just fine on his own.

"After I got to Australia and my recall of dreams dried up, I felt abandoned and a bit lost and I picked up the phone a dozen times to call you. But I resisted because I still had a lot of stuff to deal with. I spent most of the holiday wandering around by myself and I'm sure my relatives think I'm more than a bit odd."

"That goes with the turf, McKinnon. Quite a few people have considered me odd, over the years, but it hasn't hurt me any. Go ahead."

"Well, I finally had to admit to myself the truth - the fact that I am in love with you. Studying your dreams, reading the interpretations, waiting impatiently for your notes - all of those things should have told me, but they didn't. It wasn't until I was roaming around on the other side of the planet that I finally realized what I had to do."

Picking up her left hand, he carried it to his lips, pressing them firmly against her grandmother's ring. "Will you let me replace this with my mother's ring, Charly? Will you marry me?" He spoke the words as though they were forced out of him before he was ready. "I feel like the little kid in ninth grade asking his math teacher for a date, but this isn't a crush. I love you, Charly."

Turning to him, she put her arms around him and held him against her, giving him reassurance, warmth and love. Kissing him briefly, she slid her grandmother's ring off and set it on the night table.

"I'm all yours, McKinnon. I think I was from that first moment you barked at me in the boardroom. I just never allowed myself to hope that we could be married, because I knew how deeply your wife's actions hurt you. I had hoped the dreams would help you get cleared of all the negatives, but I'm surprised at how quickly you've done it. You get an A+."

Pulling her down more closely to him, McKinnon heaved a sigh of relief. "I'm glad that's settled. Now will you please shut up? You always did talk too much." His lips closed over hers and this time they lingered, straying to her eyes, her nose, her ears, as he showed her with his body how much he loved her with his heart.

At last Charly was able to give him all of her love, in every way she had ever imagined, knowing that the path they were on would enhance the feelings they had for each other, as they learned more about themselves and became more complete, both as individuals and as a couple. She had so much more to teach him - things he was totally unaware of, and things that would change him even more. Her mind pulled back to the things McKinnon was doing to her and she gave herself up freely to his lovemaking, joining him with passion, love and acceptance of their union.

* * *

"Hi, Little Witch. Did you sleep well?" McKinnon was smiling down at her, his head propped up on one hand.

Charly blinked, stretched, then smiled back at him, pulling his head down for a good morning kiss. He slid back under the covers and gathered her close to him again, groaning as he glanced at his watch.

"Charly, we have to be at the Prayer Breakfast in twenty-five minutes, looking respectable, presentable, and as though we'd just spent the evening at a movie and

then went to bed early."

"Well, McKinnon, you got part of it right, anyway." Charly chuckled at him. "What happens if we just spend the rest of the day right here? Do we get hung at dawn?"

"No, but we have every director leering knowingly at us for the rest of the convention and I don't want that for you." He yanked the covers off of her and gave her a little push towards the edge of the bed. "Quick, into the shower, and I'll help you wash."

Hopping off the bed, Charly looked back at him. "I thought you said we had to hurry, McKinnon." She was turning the water on in the shower when the phone rang, so she didn't hear the conversation that followed.

McKinnon grabbed it before the second ring. It was the manager. "Have you seen Charly, T. G.? Nobody seems to know where she is and we're getting a bit concerned." He sounded flustered and McKinnon wondered what the problem was, so he asked. "What's the matter?"

"I wanted to let her know that her lecture is cancelled this morning, so she can sleep in if she wants to, but she's not answering her phone."

McKinnon paused, and then burned his bridges. "It's okay, John. I'll see that she gets the message."

There was a long silence, then a low whistle. "Well, McKinnon, you've got my blessings. Take the morning off and I'll make your excuses for you. My, my, my." And he hung up.

Stepping into the shower, McKinnon took the soap from Charly. "If you could have one wish right now, Little Witch, what would it be?" He began soaping her back, sliding his arms around her, pressing his body in close to hers.

She moved against him, enjoying the warmth of the water as it cascaded over them. "Just to be able to stay here with you for the rest of the day." Reaching up, she pulled his head down for a long, slow kiss.

"Granted. You see, I too, have my own special powers."

Charly pulled back and looked up at him. By the grin on his face, she knew he was telling the truth. As he explained what had taken place, she blushed, then remembered that in just a short time they would be married, so she gave herself up to the joy of loving him and being loved, secure in the knowledge that they could overcome any challenges they might meet in the future.

And so it was that the dreams became reality and reality became a dream.

EPILOGUE

Having just celebrated their first wedding anniversary, Charly and T.G., as she had learned to call him, were exceptionally happy. Because of the hours they had spent reviewing their dreams, they had become really close before the convention, so the transition to living together had been easy for them. Giving up her beloved bungalow and the dream of owning it someday had been easy, and she had adapted well to sharing T. G.'s home with him.

“Hi, Sleepy Head.”

As Charly came slowly awake, hair tousled and cheeks flushed with sleep, she became aware that T.G. was lying there watching her. He told her often how beautiful she was, and how much he loved her, so she never had reason to doubt his feelings.

A broad smile lit up her face as she came fully awake.

“Oh my gosh, T.G., do you have any twins in your family?”

“None that I know of. Why?”

“Well if the dream I just had is any indication, that’s about to change. In the dream, you and I were each holding a tiny baby - one boy and one girl. How cool is that?”

“Is this dream for real?” T. G. was hopefully curious.

“Because it was an early morning dream, it could simply be about a conversation we are going to have today, or it could be about some aspect of work, because babies can represent new ideas, or it could mean just what it says - we are going to have twins.”

“Well, come here, my love, and let’s make it happen.” Pulling her into his arms, T. G. went immediately about the business of planting the seeds that would produce the crop he was hoping to create. Charly, with her usual enthusiasm, gave him all of her assistance, along with all of her love and adoration.

Meanwhile, two little souls chuckled with glee as they hovered around them, knowing that they had made an ideal choice for their future parents-to-be.

The End.

To my readers:

I hope you have enjoyed this journey with my characters. Preparing their profiles (complete with photos from a magazine or catalogue) and then ‘listening’ for

them to tell me what they want to say and do is what makes writing so exciting for me. The story flows almost effortlessly, when I wait until an idea comes to me. You can contact me at dynamac58@yahoo.ca

Here's a taste of my second novella – Coffee To Go. Enjoy!

Jean.

COFFE TO GO

CHAPTER ONE

“Hi, Mel. How are you?”

“Fine. Now tell me what you want.” Melanie knew from the tone of Susan’s voice that she was about to ask for something.

“I need a really big favour, Mel. Brian invited four associates over for dinner tonight and one couldn’t make it. I need you to come over and fill a chair at the table.

“Susan, are you trying to set me up again?” Ever since she had broken her engagement two months ago, her well-intentioned but misguided sister had kept trying to get her to date again.

“Not this time, Mel. This dinner is really important to Brian. His architect will be here and I could really use your support. I haven’t met any of these people before, so they could be sixty and balding for all I know. Please, Mel?”

“Don’t whine. If you promise me this isn’t a setup, I’ll come over.”

“I promise. Be here about six-thirty. Love ya! Bye.” And she hung up the phone.

Having planned a long hot soak in the tub, Melanie now had to settle for a quick shower. She dressed carefully and applied a light touch of make-up. Her teal blue dress was flattering in its simplicity and she knew it brought out the highlights in her auburn hair. She added a gold choker and drop earrings. Grabbing a small evening bag, she took one last look in the mirror and left her apartment.

As an insurance broker, she was in contact with people on a daily basis, but since her break-up, she had been keeping to herself in her free time. Now she felt a little tremor of excitement at the prospect of meeting others in a social setting.

Tapping lightly on her sister’s door, she let herself in. She saw him immediately – and flashed back to that disastrous episode at the local Tim Horton’s only days ago. In unison, they both said “You!”

Sensing the sudden tension in the room, Brian came over. “I see you’ve already

met my architect, Russ.” Before she could respond, Russ said, “We’ve bumped into each other before, yes.”

Being introduced to the other couple gave Melanie a few moments to become composed, but she was dismayed to find herself seated beside Russ at dinner. At least I don’t have to look at him, she mused. When he tried to make conversation, she answered in monosyllables or ignored him completely, until finally he leaned over and spoke very quietly into her ear. “Stop sulking and smile. Your attitude is going to spoil this dinner for your sister and Brian, and it is really important to them, so I suggest you shape up.”

Without really thinking about it, Melanie turned and smiled at him while swinging her foot under the table and kicking him on the shin. Still smiling, she asked him “How’s that for attitude?”

To give him credit, he just smiled back and raised an eyebrow. In spite of her antagonism towards him, she had to acknowledge the truth in what he said and she made a real effort to be pleasant for the rest of the meal. As soon as it was over and she had helped clean the table and load the dishwasher, she made her excuses and prepared to leave. She found him at her elbow as she reached for the doorknob.

“I’ll walk you out.”

“There’s no need. I can see myself out.”

“That wasn’t a question, Melanie.” He opened the door and waited for her to exit, then followed quickly as she almost sprinted to her car. Holding her car door closed with his hand on the frame, he said “Look, Melanie, I know you don’t like me any better than I like you, but I’m going to be working closely with Brian, so we have to sort this out because we’ll be running into each other. Will you have dinner with me tomorrow night so that we can come to some kind of an understanding? You choose the restaurant.”

Reluctantly she agreed. “Okay. Meet me at Kelly’s at seven-thirty. Now can I get into my car, please?”

Holding up his hands, he stepped back and said, “Be my guest. I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

* * *

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