

CHAPTER ONE

“You can’t cancel; I’m already on the ferry,” Christine informed her cell phone incredulously. The recorded apologetic words from her voice-mail droned on, not listening. She hit the ‘call back’ button and paced along the rail of the top passenger deck as she watched the ferry dock shrink into the distance. Instead of leaving Pia a scathing message, she hit ‘end’. Fuming at her dependably undependable friend, Christine reconciled the fact that her Outer Banks vacation was not going to happen. She made her way to the steep stairs that led down to a lounge and hopefully to someone that could tell her when she might catch the next ferry home. A gorgeous dark-haired man starting up the steps gazed blankly beyond her. Wondering if he even noticed her, she moved aside, missed the step, and fell. Tumbling downward in what seemed like slow motion, a tirade of sarcastic grievances buzzed through her head while she waited for a painful impact.

Catching the girl in midair was simply a reflexive act.

With his arms suddenly full of female, he continued upward to manage her awkwardly twisted leg and broken sandal. The dark haze that had clouded his eyes dissipated enough that he finally became fully aware of her.

Her lips parted in wonder as she watched his face change.

After securing her, he moved up the remaining stairs with a fluid grace that spoke of immense strength. His heavy brows furrowed with concern as he moved to the center of the upper deck. “You okay? I guess I wasn’t looking.” When she didn’t respond, his dark eyes met hers with an intensity that took her breath.

He whispered, “You have the most amazing blue eyes.” She smiled and the darkness in his eyes brightened, flashing warm brown hues.

He inhaled her soft fragrance as a red-golden lock of her hair sparkled, caught in the breeze that brushed it across his face, completing the magic that renewed him.

Unbidden, her fingers traced the strong coarsely stubbled line of his cheek to his jaw. Blushing, she pulled her hand back.

Her tender exploration and subsequent embarrassment made him smile. He held her closer, his mouth moving within a whisper of her full lips, “Guess I should shave,” his voice rumbled.

She might have laughed if she could breathe. The moment stretched between them filled with electricity.

Her hands moved to rest on hard, thickly muscled shoulders that held her with ease. She grasped him more firmly and felt him tense in response, gasping as though her touch was painful. She stilled, not knowing if she had done something wrong, still trapped within the magnetic draw of his mouth.

He breathed deeply, moving to the bench seat. With his eyes never leaving her, he placed her on the bench.

She did not release him until she realized that he was kneeling in front of her. Waiting. She reluctantly let go and watched as he removed the broken sandal and examined her lightly tanned ankle.

Holding her foot in his huge hands, he moved it from side to side, “Does that hurt?”

She marveled at the hands that dwarfed her foot. His face seemed familiar and she wondered if they had met before. No. No way, she would remember him. His wind-blown

chestnut hair just touched his collar and sensual brown eyes, fringed by rich lashes perused her. She blushed again, embarrassed when she realized that she was making little gasping noises as she gawked at him.

With a deep thick voice and a smile that lit up his eyes, he repeated, "Does it hurt?"

"No, it's...fine," she squeaked, finally able to speak. Her face was getting redder and speech more challenging.

"You wanna do it again?"

"I..." She found that she liked the thought and belatedly stifled the stupid nodding movement her brainless head was making. Puzzled, she shook her head, "Excuse me?"

He laughed.

The sound of his laughter sent her into a giggling frenzy. She brought her hand to her mouth, caught in the warmth of his encompassing gaze.

"See if you can stand." Holding her hand, he helped her up.

She stopped giggling and she looked down at her undamaged-thanks-to-him legs. *Not bad*, she thought, thankful that she had worn the small denim shorts that clung to her curvy hips and a short white tank top that exposed two inches of smooth skin below her navel. She gazed up and determined that he stood more than a full foot taller than her five-foot-two-inches, making her feel insignificant. He might have even been intimidating if not for the warmth in his eyes. "If I limp a little, will you stay and let me boss you around?" Her brilliant blue eyes held his.

"I'll do anything you say, even if you don't limp."

"Great." Now she smiled, her face haloed by wind-teased golden red curls, "I like a man that does what he's told." Her hand slipped from his gentle grasp and she took a few steps. "It's fine, but only because you caught me," she smiled up at him, "Maybe I should have faked a sprained ankle," she pulled off her other sandal and tossed it in a nearby trash can, "just to make you carry me again."

"Anything you say..."

"No, I'm good. I guess I just like having you around."

"I'm not going anywhere."

She couldn't think of anything she would rather hear him say.

"I'll get you some new sandals on the island. Those little island shops have that sort of thing, don't they?" He rambled, a bit nervous himself.

"I have other sandals." She pushed back the unruly curls, set aflame by sunlight, and captured him again with her gaze, "There is one thing I want."

"Lunch?"

"Besides lunch. But now that you mention it, I'm starving."

He laughed, "Name it."

"Yeah, your name." She wanted much more, but decided to start at the beginning.

The too-simple request momentarily confused him. "My--name?"

"I don't want it. I just want to know what it is." Her low throaty laughter shook him.

"You'd better hurry and tell me, or I'll make one up."

"Eric. Actually, you can call me anything you want." He caught his breath, "What's yours, you know, your name." Usually witty and self assured, now he stumbled miserably over every word.

Her laughter resumed. Not haughty or condescending, a warm sound indicating that she really enjoyed talking to him, as clumsy as it was. "It's Christine. Not Crissy or Tina, I don't like little cute nick names."

“Christine. That’s good, perfect. Nice name. No need for cute little nick names, even if you are—cute—and little.” He paused as though he’d run out of words and then stumbled back into the conversation. “What else can I do for you? Besides, lunch. Not letting you starve is a high priority on my ‘to do’ list.”

She considered a moment and moved near as if to touch him, then changed her mind. “Cute?” She clasped her hands together, needing to control them, and maintained a breathlessly close proximity. Her deep blue eyes tugged him even closer and she ventured, “You can show me Ocracoke Island.”

He let out his anxiously held breath. “No problem,” he whispered so closely that she could feel the shudder in his response.

*Summer breezes in twilight
whisper over leaves
and inspire a long imagined kiss
to blossom
and fall.
Gossamer bliss unfurls
misting through the air.
Bringing scents of green,
green love, growing anew.
Vibrant beneath the rising moon,
this night-flower of devotion.
Fragrant with the mystic nature of coming together,
Of convergence,
of union.
Gleams with pale,
pale beauty.
An iridescent glamour
capturing desire.*

The ferry approached Ocracoke and passengers began to return to their cars.

Christine looked up at Eric expectantly.

Eric offered his hand to her in invitation.

She placed her hand in his.

He wove his fingers through hers as though afraid he would lose her.

“Com’on.” She pulled him along.

He didn’t seem to care where they were going, as long as she brought him with her.

She led him back to the stairs and down to the main deck. Heading for her car, she stopped suddenly and scampered backwards, “Too hot,” was all she could say when her bare feet made contact with the sun-heated deck.

“I know, I get that a lot,” he responded without missing a beat as Christine crashed into him and stood on top of his feet. Now she looked up at him, laughing. He began to reach for her, thinking to pick her up, but in this non-emergent situation, he couldn’t figure out where to put his hands. He shrugged, “Need a lift?” He pivoted and bent down.

“You usually pick up hitchhikers?” She jumped up on his back and wrapped her arms around his neck, clinging tightly when he stood.

He gasped, “No, just you.” He shifted her higher, holding her knees so she was secure enough to stop choking him, then let her point the way. Her car was situated on the rear of the ferry overlooking the trail of churning water they left behind. He bent down so she could unlock her car door and then with a clever maneuver, deposited her in the driver’s seat.

When she looked up at him and realized that the ride was over, apprehension flashed in her eyes.

Imagining that he was the source of her distress, he backed away.

“Stay,” she squealed, jumping back out onto the hot deck, scuttling backward, and hopping up to the threshold of her car’s door. She stood precariously balanced, wondering how needy she must seem.

Her impetuous invitation tugged him back instantly. He moved in as close as possible without actually touching her.

“When will I see you again?” Perched almost to his height, her bright blue eyes again captured his.

“Like I said, I’m not going anywhere.” He reached for her hands to steady her, “How much of my company do you think you can stand?”

She bit her bottom lip and flashed a rapturous smile, conveying the message that went beyond words.

“It may take a while to see the island,” he murmured as he leaned so close that his breath on her neck caused a tingling sensation. “Don’t drive too fast once you get off the ship.”

“Afraid you can’t keep up?”

“Afraid I might lose you.” He answered more seriously than he had intended.

“You won’t lose me.” She sighed, “You really are hot.” She moved closer, knowing he wanted to kiss her and hoping he would do just that.

With gentle fingers, he tilted her chin up.

She held her breath.

His hand moved through her hair to the back of her head and he drew her to him until his mouth finally touched her lips.

She gasped. Her hands roamed over his hard chest, locking up around his neck and bringing her body against him to drown them both in pure sensation.

He deepened the kiss, holding her head and lower back tightly to him as his mouth took full possession of hers.

Her head spun and she held on, her legs too rubbery to support her with such potent emotions sizzling through her. The clenching ache in the pit of her stomach both frightened and exhilarated her. Briefly wondering how far and fast they might go; Christine acknowledged to herself that she didn’t care.

With his breathing barely under control, Eric pulled his mouth from hers. He whispered, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to maul you.”

She snatched him back and initiated her own brand of mauling.

“Excuse me, ma’am, you need to get in your car and do that somewhere else,” an amused middle-age man wearing a state ferry employee uniform suggested.

“Oh...” Christine was horrified to see that the ferry had stopped, the cars were pulling off, and they were standing in the middle of it all making a spectacle of themselves.

Eric chuckled as he helped her into her car, “Go on, I’ll follow you.” He closed her door.

She frantically rolled down her window. “Where?” She asked, trying to reorient herself.

For a moment he became serious, “Anywhere you go, I’ll follow. I promise.”

Her eyes met his with an urgent plea, “Don’t let me get lost.”

“Never.” He touched her cheek and looked as though he would kiss her again, “It’s a small island; I can find you.” He turned and jogged to his car.

Having already removed the wood-stops from behind her tires, the smiling state ferry worker guided her onto the island. She nervously watched her rearview mirror as she drove through the parking area along the docks to the narrow waterfront road that led to her hotel. When they reached the hotel, Eric parked beside her and greeted her with another breathtaking kiss as though their separation had lasted days instead of minutes.

“Do you have a room?” He smiled down at her, pleased that she was having difficulty focusing enough to answer his question.

“Maybe. Pia was supposed to make the reservation.” She smiled, knowing there was probably no reservation and not caring. She wasn’t even mad at Pia anymore.

“Let’s get you checked in,” he suggested hoarsely.

Christine pulled him down to her for another steamy kiss and then released him. “Yeah, let’s do it.” She blushed, embarrassed by her own highly uncharacteristic behavior when she realized that she was dragging a stranger to her hotel and her motives were at best questionable.

Eric grinned as though he knew exactly what she was thinking, “Hmm, what do you mean?”

Christine covered her mouth with her hand, “I didn’t mean it...” She stressed ‘it’.

“Yes, the big ‘it’. You don’t have to worry about ‘it’. We’re getting separate rooms.”

“Good. Oh...I think I’m disappointed.”

“Good.” He took her luggage and left her to consider that.

Christine didn’t try to hide her delight when he arrived at her room with damp hair and fresh clothes fifteen minutes later. She had unpacked and put on her spare sandals, they were stylish, but not at all comfortable.

Eric took her on a walking tour of Ocracoke island, which she discovered was the best way to see it. Cars moved very slowly through the narrow main street yielding to tourists on bicycles or walking clad in shorts, tank tops, swimsuits, and rubber flip-flops; standard attire in the summer heat. Despite the numerous tourists, the salty humidity and southern laid-back life style kept the pace slow and relaxed. After a week in the sun among the islanders, who speak unhurriedly in their own unique brogue, even the most stressed-out Yankee might find his speech drawing out into an idle drawl.

Christine settled into the island’s rhythm. After a leisurely lunch, Eric took her to a small shop.

“Those aren’t working,” he indicated the uncomfortable sandals on her feet, “Here’s what you need,” he dangled a standard pair of soft pink island flip-flops.

“Perfect,” she snatched them from his hand, pulled off the tag, and handed it to him. In the short time it took for him to pay, she had them on and tossed the others in the trash.

“You go through a lot of shoes.”

“Yup.” She took his hand and led him out of the shop.

“Where we going?”

“Ice cream cones.”

“Are you still starving?”

“Yup.”

Their next stop was the sweet shop where they bought ice cream cones and attempted to lick up the constant streams of melting triple-scoop ice cream as they strolled along the docks.

Perched in his favorite spot on a nearby pylon, a fat stork watched as a small group of sea otters played, all waiting for the fishermen to return with the day's bounty.

Along the narrow main road skirting the bay, Eric pulled Christine toward a small stand tucked under a wind-sculpted canopy of cypress trees that advertised kayak rentals and parasailing.

The man behind the bamboo counter smiled brightly at the couple. He addressed Eric, "What brings you to my little island?" He appeared to be about Eric's age, not quite as tall, but very well-built. He looked the part of an attractive Caribbean-island-player, his chocolate skin and unforgettable face second only to his smooth speech.

"Aaron, your island?" Eric shook his head, "What did you do, steal it?"

"No one can prove that." Aaron paused, seriously watching Eric for a moment. He looked closely at Christine, then gently clasped her hand and smiled warmly, "And what are you doing with my girl?"

"Your girl? No way. You can have the island, the girl's mine." Eric would have snatched Christine away from Aaron but was out-manuevered.

"What did you do, steal her? Let's see this lovely hand." With his own smooth jovial manner, Aaron lifted her left hand, "What's this? No ring. Looks like I might have a chance with this one." He smiled brightly and patted her hand. "What did you say your name was?"

"Christine..."

Eric dramatically snatched Christine's hand from Aaron, "My girl. Find your own." He wrapped an arm around Christine, who was enjoying the friendly banter, "Don't speak to him, no good can come of it."

"What's wrong, you afraid her taste will improve?"

"Just protecting her from the land sharks."

"Now that was just wrong. You have offended my sensibilities. Christina, you must choose. And please, let him down easy."

"Christine," she corrected, offering Aaron her hand.

"I knew that," he clasped her hand between his. "You see, she prefers me." Aaron winked at Christine.

Eric separated their hands, "You see, no good." He held Christine possessively, "Maybe if we ignore him, he'll go away."

"Not likely. I will certainly persist until her hand is fixed. Unbelievable, a girl like that with no bling. Eric, I expected better from you."

"You sound like your mamma," Eric accused.

"You talkin 'bout my mamma?"

"I don't want a ring," Christine interjected.

They both stopped and looked down at her.

"What do you want?" Aaron asked.

She smiled at Eric and looked back at Aaron, then thoughtfully replied, "Adventure."

"And dinner. Right?" Eric asked.

"See, I told you she'd pick me." Aaron made a move toward Christine that was blocked by Eric.

"Which do you want to do first?" Aaron held up the pamphlets that advertised kayaks and parasailing for her to choose from.

"I don't know, I think parasailing looks too scary."

"Not too scary." Eric smoothly assured her.

“Definitely too scary, but the little boats look fun.”

Even as she spoke, Eric was attempting to pay his friend for the kayak rental.

“Don’t worry ‘bout that. Besides, your money’s no good.” He smiled at Christine, “You can go with him this time, you know, save the best for last.”

Eric was already choosing a tandem kayak, “In your dreams.” He placed the boat in shallow water, “All aboard.” He helped Christine into the front of the kayak and settled himself into the back.

Aaron handed them each a paddle, launched them into the serene bay, and left them with a small salute. They glided smoothly into deeper water.

Eric playfully splashed a little water from his oar onto Christine’s back, “Since you refer to these as ‘little boats’, I’m guessing you don’t know much about kayaks.”

“Maybe, but I am a fast learner.” With her paddle, she expertly splashed water backwards, drenching his mid section.

“Yeah, fast learner,” Eric shook off some of the water. “You’re in front, so you steer.” He showed her how to steer and they paddled along the waterfront until they found a perfect little café situated on the docks. The smell of grilled shrimp lured them inside where a middle-aged man with a peppered beard played his guitar and sang love songs. Inspired by the tender melodies, they quietly ate dinner and sipped wine while watching the fishing boats return.

With the sun nearly spent, they returned to the kayak. Feeling drowsy from the wine and food, they paddled slowly to the middle of the bay. Christine scooted back and leaned against Eric, still humming one of the love songs from the café. She began to sing softly, her ethereal soprano adding its own magic to the sunset. They drifted in the water and watched the sky turn bright red then fade to deep lavender. With the sun disappearing into the water, they rowed back to the shore and returned the kayak before dusk became night.

In the light of street lamps, they walked among the docks where fishermen finished unloading the catch of the day and tidied up their boats for the next morning. A mother duck with her family of tiny ducklings paddled noisily past them and settled in under the docks. Seagulls perched on pylons chattered as they passed, as if conversing with them.

Eventually, the bright moon moved high into the sky, the people disappeared, and all but the street lights went out. The warmth of the humid southern night bid them to stay a while longer. In the quiet moon light they made light conversation and then comfortably walked and said nothing.

Happily exhausted, they returned to Christine’s room and stood on her balcony overlooking the bay.

Christine gently pushed Eric, “Sit.”

“A hammock. What else could go right?” He sat, pulling her along with him.

They lounged on the hammock watching the stars until one flashed across the night sky, completing their perfect day. From her balcony they had an excellent view of the bay as well as the constant signal from the Ocracoke Lighthouse. Watching it, they snuggled together and fell asleep.

The sun’s first rays awakened Christine on their second day together. She was curled around Eric’s long hard body with her head resting on his thick chest.

His stubbled cheek caressed her smooth hair and both arms kept her from rolling off the hammock.

Christine lifted her head, squinted against the sun rising on the bay, took in Eric's long magnificent body, and let out a sigh, "Oh good. It wasn't a dream." She snuggled back into his large accommodating chest.

His voice was low and rough, "No, but I have dreamed about this."

She turned her head to see him and sighed; he was gorgeous. She wondered how he could look so content when she was fantasizing about him carrying her into her room and taking advantage of her innocence. She knew that would not happen with his old-school values. "Oh yeah," she crawled on top of him, "Did we do this in your dream?" She kissed him and then nibbled on his lower lip.

Barely able to draw in a breath, he nodded and kissed her back.

Her hands found his shoulders and she lifted her face just above his, "What else did we do?"

"We..." he paused, his eyes darkly glazed with emotion, "fell in love."

Shaken by the impact of his declaration, she whispered, "Are your dreams always prophetic?"

"Just this one."

She nestled along his side with an arm resting on his chest. "So, what's next? How long will you stay here?"

He stared off blankly, considering her question. "I'm not sure...I guess...as long as it takes."

Wondering when he would leave felt bad, she hadn't thought about it, and didn't want to now. She quickly dropped the question and pulled him away from it, "You gonna feed me?" She shook him playfully, nearly rocking them both off the hammock.

His lips curled to a smile and his eyes returned to her, "Anything you want."

"Breakfast," she demanded, gracelessly leaving the hammock and nearly turning it over. She laughed as she steadied it and pulled insistently on Eric. "Get changed and I'll meet you downstairs"

"Are you always this bossy in the morning?" He staggered upright.

"You said I could boss you around, too late to take it back."

"I didn't say anything about not liking it. If you're not there in fifteen minutes, I'll come looking for you." With that promise he kissed her and left to prepare for their next adventure.

When he strolled into the parking lot fourteen minutes later, she was waiting for him, fresh-faced and wet hair combed into smooth ringlets and smelling of yummy conditioning herbs. She dressed neatly in her white cotton shorts and pink blouse that matched her pink flip-flops and tied down the front with a white ribbon. He kept staring at the white ribbon.

She gestured for him to come to her.

He was powerless to do anything else.

With him at her command, she whispered, "I want coffee, grits, bacon, and eggs with toast and apple-butter."

He laughed and took her hand.

After breakfast, she suggested they return to the kayak rental stand.

"I want to see the whole island." She waved to Aaron. "We'd see everything from up there." Christine pointed to a couple parasailing above the bay.

"Thought that was too scary."

"Not today, not too scary."

"You sure?"

“Nope. You’d better hurry.”

“Aaron, parasailing. Quick, before she changes her mind!”

Christine’s courage held until her feet left the ground.

With Aaron driving the fast boat, Christine had a prolonged and fabulous view of the island, survived to tell the tale, and then shared her lunch with the seagulls along the docks. The afternoon was spent taking a speedboat ride that turned into an unscheduled swim. After saying goodbye to Aaron, they returned to the hotel to change into dry clothes.

Dinner was at their new favorite café on the docks. A small live band played local country music as they watched a fishing boat unload the day’s catch with an army of storks and seagulls standing ready to attack each discarded scrap of fish.

In the setting sun, they rode bicycles along the narrow village road.

“What next?” Eric asked.

“How ‘bout the lighthouse?” Intrigued by the building, she had saved it for last. She wanted to see it up close, lighting the night.

From a distance, the lighthouse was just a white knob jutting out above the tree line. Up close it was far more impressive, its white bricks stacked up to the sky. They parked their bikes and stood under a wonderfully wind-sculpted island live oak. The evening was quiet, the tourists having left for the night. Christine kicked off her flip-flops and climbed up onto a long horizontal branch of the oak tree.

“Be careful. You could fall.”

She walked gracefully along the six-foot-high branch like a gymnast, “You’d catch me,” she answered casually. The lighthouse lit up, streaming light through the tree branches. She moved to see the light and lost her balance, or maybe gave it up willingly, then landed in Eric’s strong arms. She laughed, “I’m always distracted by shiny objects.”

“I’m always distracted by you.” He liked holding her and wasn’t ready to put her down.

“This is getting to be a habit. A nice habit.” She kissed him, considerably raising the temperature of the steamy night air. “Where’s my flip-flops?”

“You seem to have trouble keeping shoes on your feet,” having already retrieved them, he dangled the pink flip-flops in front of her.

“Yup.” She snatched them. Once back on her feet, she grabbed Eric’s hand, opened the gate, and pulled him through to the lawn that circled the lighthouse.

“I don’t think we’re supposed to be inside the fence.”

“Nope.” She plopped down onto the grass and looked up to the top of the tower, “You think the lighthouse police will get us.”

“Rebel.”

Mischief sparkled in her eyes as she pulled him down beside her. The tower seemed monstrous from their perspective.

She slapped a mosquito off her arm and noticed the swarm coming in from the marsh.

“We’d better run.” He pulled her up with him, “The mosquitoes here carry you home, then eat you.”

“Save me,” she lifted her hand to her forehead in a mock swoon.

“You’ve nothing to fear my Lady, I, Sir...” He looked up to the light, his voice trailing off.

She glanced in the same direction, seeing nothing but the light. She waited. “Eric?” She took his hand and his gaze returned to her. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” He produced a slight smile, “We’d better go.”

She was too familiar with that faraway look and forced smile. Her Dad sometimes would look that way. He never explained. She wondered if Eric had something in his past that could draw him away from her. Maybe, when they were closer, he would open up. She suddenly felt alone.

The ride back was quiet; she was as lost in thought as he seemed to be. Tomorrow she would find out more about him. All she really knew was that he was smart, funny, wonderful, and she loved him. That was enough for now, but tomorrow, he was in trouble. He was going to talk to her.

Eric walked her upstairs to her room, kissed her goodnight, and turned to leave.

“Oh no you don’t,” she pivoted and pushed him a step backwards. When she pushed him another step into her room she realized that she would not have been able to do so without his cooperation. She smiled and pushed him back another step.

Laughter erupted from him, “What?”

She gave him a huge shove onto the bed and jumped on top of him giggling. “Let me show you how to say goodnight.” She kissed his cheeks, and nose, and neck. When she finally reached his mouth, he rolled on top of her and took over.

He kissed her thoroughly, leaving her breathless.

“Yeah, I think you’re catching on,” she moaned.

He gasped, and moved off of her, pulling her up to stand on weakened legs and then took her hand and led her to the balcony. “The bed, it’s not safe.”

“Definitely not. Who needs safe anyway?”

“You do.”

Deeply moved by his uncommon chivalry, Christine watched the moonlight sparkle across the bay. “Stay,” she whispered, her meaning encompassing much more than the simple word.

“That will definitely happen,” he promised, “but not tonight.” With a light kiss, he took her inside and then left for the night, closing the door gently behind him.

She would hold him to that promise.

The morning of the third day, Eric didn’t come to her room. After allowing time for possible delays, she set out to find him. He was not in his room. Not wanting to miss him, she returned to hers and waited.

Early that evening he arrived. After kissing her, he told her that he had business to take care of and would return as soon as possible. She sat and waited all night, but he did not return.

Late the next morning he came to her room wearing the same clothes he had the previous day and looking as if he had not slept. He asked her to go back to her home and in a few days he would contact her there. The emptiness she had noticed the first time she saw him had returned to his eyes as he insisted, “Please, leave today. I’ll explain when I can.”

“Don’t do this,” she asked desolately.

“I have to.” He didn’t look at her as he turned and walked away.

Christine didn’t allow tears until she was sure they would have no audience, she knew it was over. Her fairytale romance had ended. Something or someone in his life was more important than her. She did not leave because he told her to; she left because she could not bear to stay another moment. She held on to the hope that he would contact her, but it had been four weeks and he still had not done so.

CHAPTER TWO

Christine took the first morning ferry to Ocracoke hoping to avoid the July heat, crowds, and an overwhelming urge to turn around and go home to her grandmother. She had avoided the crowd, the rising sun had already sent the temperature soaring, and because she had already boarded ferry, turning back was no longer an option. State Ferry workers guided her small car into its space and stuck wedges behind her tires and then the ferry pulled away from the huge wooden dock. A flock of seagulls gave chase, gliding on the ocean breeze and squawking at the passengers as if to remind them of their obligation to provide food for the trip.

With her engine off, the sun's heat made Christine's car unbearable. She abandoned it in favor of an unoccupied stretch of side railing where she could mindlessly watch the water pass. Today the ocean was calm, disturbed only by the occasional overzealous fish looking for breakfast. Delicate man-o-wars drifted near the surface, their caustic tentacles flowing behind them.

She eventually had to seek shelter from the sweltering sun and wandered to the steep steps and then up to the top deck of the ferry. The deck was lined with benches and partially covered by a white awning to block the sun. She sat on a deserted bench situated along the outer railing and let her head fall back. Closing her eyes, she took a slow deep breath, allowing the salty air to work its magic.

Her last ferry ride to Ocracoke one month ago had been so different...

Those memories dominated her thoughts, and at night, twisted into nightmares of giant breaking waves and floating bodies.

Her grandmother had accomplished the impossible when she reserved the cottage in Ocracoke over the July fourth weekend. She didn't want Christine to go alone, but understood that her granddaughter needed to deal with her unresolved emotions. Maybe she would find Eric and he would explain. Maybe she would tell him to get lost. Maybe she would get over him and meet someone else. She had to do something...

*In the morning
Dreams fade
Evaporating with the rising sun
But memories of you erase a night of peace
And return to haunt my day.
When will you fade?
When will memory lose its power to resurrect
The tatters of you that remain?
What will it take to still your restless spirit?
Or at least banish you to the night
Where, like dreams,
You can fade
With the rising sun.*

CHAPTER THREE

“You wanna do it again?”

The familiar phrase jolted Christine from her reverie. Apparently, during her mental absence, a few passengers had joined her on the deck. Two men lounged on the other end of her bench, a third sat across from them, but the words came from a boy sitting on the bench across from her. He was speaking to the very large teenager that was playing cards with him. The teen seemed to be losing interest in the game, but consented to another round. The child, who appeared to be about twelve years old, was very handsome. He had wild sun-streaked light brown hair that needed to be cut and familiar looking dark brown eyes with thick droopy lashes and heavy expressive eyebrows. She watched the game with interest.

She paid little attention to the man on the far end of her bench.

Dark and powerful by all accounts, he noticed her. Quietly occupying very little space, she was the only scenery that captured his interest. Her simple white sun dress was modestly cut, but failed to conceal her exquisite feminine curves. Her naturally bright hair hung in long ringlets glistening red and gold in the sun, but that wasn't what caught his attention. It was her blue eyes looking past him. Not bold or even self-conscious, but pure unspoiled innocence. Unaccustomed to such a blatant lack of appreciation, he wondered what could have her so distracted. He would make her notice him, he decided, and felt an unexpected surge of excitement.

After a decisive victory, the child looked toward the departing teen then back to Christine and said, “That’s my brother. I think he’s mad ‘cause I beat him. He usually wins. My brothers don’t want me to talk to them ‘cause they say I never shut up. Peter won’t play any more games, and no one’s allowed to fish off the back of the ferry, so I don’t have anything to do.”

Christine had not even considered fishing from the ferry. Imagine how interesting life in his house must be. She leaned forward resting her chin on her hands and smiled at the boy. A real smile that exercised all the rusty smiling-muscles in her face, “I would love it if you would talk to me.” She meant it. The past month since Eric had told her to go away had been depressingly quiet.

Once invited, the child stood to take the seat next to Christine. She noticed that he, like his brother, was quite tall. Then he began. He was a fountain of information. She learned that his name was Nicholas and he was ten, not twelve, years old, and wow, really big for his age. He lived with his parents, Chuck and Kathryn, and his brothers, Peter and Jason. They were sixteen and seventeen. Jason was adopted, and all his brothers ever did was tease him and talk about cars and girls. He talked about his pets; Scout, Bob, Annabelle, Guinevere, and Iggy, his rock collection, and how Blackbeard once sailed the waters in this area. He was really stuck on that subject. When they reached the island he planned to visit the pirate shop, then get a boat and search the coast for treasure. That is, if his mom would let him go. Then he spotted a small group of dolphins swimming in the distance, “Look! They’re so cool. You can never get close enough to swim with them, but they never hurt people. I almost touched one once, but they always leave. I can catch stingrays. My dad takes me snorkeling all the time, you wanna go?”

Delighted with his ability to supply cheerfully entertaining conversation, Christine encouraged him with smiles and nods. A bit of his happy energy seemed to overflow to her. She wondered if he could possibly know what a gift that was.

She noticed that the two men sitting near the end of the bench didn't seem to appreciate the gift. They, in fact, seemed annoyed with the constant chatter, opening their bloodshot eyes and glaring occasionally in the boy's direction. The smell of old sour whiskey hung around them.

They carefully held their heads, as if to prevent them from exploding; classic hangover symptoms. She assumed that they had only made the climb to the top deck in order to avoid being sick from the heat and motion of the ferry as they showed no interest in the scenery. She returned her attention to Nicholas, who was explaining how to throw a cast net.

At the far end of the bench, a third man watched her from behind dark sunglasses. His blatant stare left her feeling uneasy. He rose and moved toward her, stopping to lean against the rail. Smoothly removing his sunglasses, he eyed Christine appreciatively and smiled, "Nice day for a trip. Are you traveling alone?"

Christine supposed that he would be considered very attractive. He was probably in his thirties, well spoken with a hint of a brogue, and around six feet tall with an overly muscular build, like someone that spent all his free time in the gym. His gleaming long black hair was pulled back into a pony tail and he wore a small gold hoop earring in his left ear. Although he was well dressed, several days growth of a thick black beard made him appear menacing.

His two companions were over-tanned and swarthy. The taller one was thin and hawkish, and the other had a huge chest and even bigger mid-section. Both wore jeans with tee-shirts and boots, and appeared sloppy and drunk. At the sound of the first man's voice, they sat up and gawked at Christine.

She forced a brief smile. "No, I have a friend," she indicated Nicholas and looked away.

His smile was humorless. "Nice." Still no interest, in fact, she seemed to be brushing him off.

Suddenly Nicholas laughed and pointed at the man with the black ponytail. "Ahhh! Look! The seagull pooped on you! That's gonna leave a stain."

White excrement had landed slightly toward the right side of the man's head, slid thickly down his slick shiny black ponytail, and landed on his silk shirt. He was not pleased.

Nicholas was laughing out of control, his brothers watching from the rail pointed and laughed, which caught the attention of other passengers who joined in the hilarity.

The man was irate, "You're wearing it thin, kid," he ground out.

Christine came to his rescue, chuckling, then concealing her laughter, "Nicholas, let's go watch the dolphins." She led him down the steps and between the cars to the front of the ferry.

In the brilliant blue water, three dolphins swam swiftly in front and around them. At first Christine feared that the majestic creatures might be run over by the ferry. After watching them, she realized that the swimming mammals had everything under control. She forgot all about the grumpy drunks upstairs.

Peter and Jason, Nicholas' big brothers, had not forgotten. When they witnessed the man speaking to their little brother in a threatening manner, they metamorphosed from mean, to protective brothers. The man with long black hair had followed Christine and Nicholas downstairs. Peter and Jason followed him.

Christine turned from the front rail and found herself face to face with him.

The big teenage brothers were not far behind him.

He'd never met a woman that was less interested. She seemed annoyed. The man held out his hand to her. "I believe we had a bad start. My name is Demetrius B. Privette. Those who know and love me, call me Demetri. Everyone else calls me--Demetri."

She noticed he had cleaned most of the seagull feces off as she briefly accepted his hand. "Then I guess I have no choice, Demetri," she said politely, barely squeezing out a small smile that quickly disappeared.

Nicholas stepped between them. "What does the B. stand for? Blackbeard? Are you a pirate? Do you steal and kill people? How'd you get that earring? That's not much of a beard."

"Yeah, do you know what pirates do to little brats that ask too many questions?" He looked from Nicholas to Christine and knew that his uncontrolled response had just ruined everything.

When Demetri moved toward Nicholas, Peter pulled his little brother backward and stepped toward him, Jason at his side. Demetri apparently hadn't planned past frightening the kid. He stopped short, looking up at the giant teenagers. It would take more than a scowl and growl to frighten these two. How could kids be so big? One with dark hair and eyes, the other blond with blue eyes, both about six foot four and built like wrestlers. Unintimidated, but not in the mood to put the boys in their place, and even less to be civil, he threw a threatening glance their way and walked to his black pickup, spewing foul language more to himself than anyone else.

More than a little relieved, Christine knew they were near the end of their ferry ride and felt the need to return Nicholas safely to his parents. "Nicholas, where's your car?"